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The Flip Side Of the Underworld

THE LAST MAFIOSO: The Treacherous World of Jimmy Fratianno. By Ovid Demaris. Times Books. 463 pp. \$15

By DAN E. MOLDEA

FIVE YEARS AGO, in a suburban Detroit hotel, a crime-connected Teamster official pulled a revolver with a six-inch barrel out of his coat and rammed it down my throat. For the next half-hour—while he watched with mixed emotions over what he had done to me—I could do little more than walk around the room, wiping tears from my eyes and spitting out blood and pieces of teeth. He later apologized, saying that he had been under enormous pressure and mistakenly thought I was there to betray him.

The incident occurred during my first interview with the man, who was convinced that his confederates were double-crossing him. As a result of his anguish and paranoia, he had started talking privately to government officials and reporters, telling of his associates' illicit deeds while simultaneously and willingly placing his life in jeopardy. Nevertheless, he continued to talk for the next two years, sometimes openly, and proved to be a reliable source of information. Even after his violent act against me, I couldn't help but admire him. He was a brave man and sincerely sorry for his own crimes against society. Few people were surprised when he was found shot to death in December 1977.

Government informants, particularly those who flip from the underworld, are rarely appreciated for the services they provide in the war against crime. They are damned by former friends, often taunted by the press, and are always in fear for their lives. Even if their cooperation is part of a plea-bargaining defense, they still usually supply investigators with valuable intelligence or even direct evidence which can help send more dangerous people to jail. Regardless of their motives for "turning"—self-serving or otherwise—informants deserve better treatment than being called "canaries" and "stool pigeons," particularly if their testimonies prove credible in court.

However, there are real dangers when an informant's personal opinions, based upon little or no evidence, are accepted as absolute truths.

Jimmy Fratianno, an unlikely government informant, is the central character in Ovid Demaris' latest book, *The Last Mafioso*. The mob's busiest assassin on the West Coast until 1977, and, for a short period of time, one of the most powerful crime chiefs in

ground and the Fratianno is in a difficult position. He is a mob operative who turns against his boss and should be examined in a more critical manner.

Although Fratianno lived by the sword, he refused to die by it, making his decision to turn state's evidence against fellow mobsters after underworld associates targeted him for contract killing. In return for his cooperation with the government—which has proven to be invaluable in several prosecutions—Fratianno has been given the opportunity to receive "safety and revenge."

Demaris has chronicled Fratianno's highly complicated, incredibly detailed saga with great literary style and organization. A crime reporter by profession and the author of two best-selling books on organized crime—*The Green Felt Jungle* (with Ed Reid) and *Captive City*—Demaris is on familiar turf writing about Fratianno's violent career.

Given that, Demaris must have wrestled with his own conscience while deciding how this murderer-turned-informant should be portrayed. Unfortunately, he chose to glamorize Fratianno and even to place him in a heroic context. That might play well with

those who have a romanticized impression of gangsters, but not with others who view organized crime as a serious threat to America's institutions.

To Demaris, Fratianno "was a complex human being: He was uneducated but intelligent enough to talk with you on just about any level you chose; he could talk like a hood or like a gentleman, like a punk or a lawyer." Although that seems to be a somewhat balanced observation of Demaris' subject, it is still high praise for a cold-blooded killer.

Despite Demaris' expertise on the mob, he was essentially at the mercy of Fratianno's memory—which the author insists was "absolutely phenomenal." When Fratianno told Demaris that he had made love to a woman five times in three hours while in his late sixties, Demaris writes it as fact—with no harm done in this instance.

However, when Fratianno told Demaris that "Operation MONGOOSE"—which directly involved both President Kennedy and Attorney General Robert Kennedy—was really the code name for the CIA-Mafia plots to assassinate Fidel Castro, that was damaging to historical truth and nothing less than irresponsible journalism when printed. Demaris should have known better. The Church Committee clearly stated that "Operation MONGOOSE" was designed in 1962 to infiltrate and organize the Cuban population to incite a counterrevolution; it had nothing to do with the CIA-Mafia plots against Castro—which began in 1960 under