

Trial for 1987 slaying of Jimmy Casino to wrap up

Written by Administrator
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He was a smooth-talking swindler who operated Orange County's most notorious and lucrative strip club, the Mustang Topless Theater.

Born James Stockwell, he rebranded himself Jimmy Casino and lived the extravagant lifestyle of a character from an Elmore Leonard novel. Expensive cowboy couture. Luxury cars. Enemies who wanted him dead.

After years of staying a step ahead of the law and the people whom he owed money, Casino, 48, was ambushed at his Buena Park condo Jan. 2, 1987.

"We're getting paid to do this," one of the two gunmen allegedly said.

They raped Casino's 22-year-old girlfriend. Then they pumped three bullets into the back of his head with a silencer-equipped handgun before making off with credit cards, fur coats, jewelry and two of his cars.

For more than two decades, Casino's death remained one of Orange County's most intriguing unsolved crimes.

But investigators kept the heat on the cold case. In 2008, using DNA matching technology not available at the time of the shooting, they arrested 59-year-old Richard Morris Jr. in Hawaii, charging him with murder.

Now, a quarter of a century after Casino was gunned down, Morris' trial is set to wrap up this week in [Orange County Superior Court](#) with jurors deciding his fate. If convicted he faces life in prison without parole. A second suspect remains at large.

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These days, Morris looks like an aging biker — slightly pudgy with a droopy mustache and a long ponytail. But back in the day, prosecutors say, , he was a violent criminal and cold-blooded hired hand.

"He was a street thug and a [heroin](#) addict," Orange County Deputy Dist. Atty. Mike Murray said. "He was a nobody."

Casino's slaying was front-page news replete with the titillating elements of a pulp novel — mobsters, hit men, prostitution, extortion.

Morris' two-week murder trial, by contrast, has largely played out to an empty courtroom and the esoteric science of DNA matching — laboratory protocols, negative controls, electropherograms.

After one recess following a detailed cross-examination of a crime lab employee over data displayed on an overhead projector, Judge Francisco Briseno rhetorically asked jurors how they were holding up.

Morris' attorney, assistant public defender Martin Schwarz, argued to jurors that DNA collected from the rape victim was mishandled over the years and misinterpreted by the county's crime lab. Morris' DNA was obtained in Hawaii after he was picked up on suspicion of driving under the influence.

"Popular culture has shaped peoples' perception of DNA as being infallible," Schwarz said. "It's a powerful crime-fighting tool. but it's only as good as the evidence itself.... There's also a subjective component to DNA analysis."

Schwarz also placed into evidence what he described as a 2004 recorded confession by a man, now dead, who told investigators he was hired by one of Casino's business associates to kill him.

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Casino's death in 1987 was the opening salvo in a battle for control of the Mustang strip club in Santa Ana, which grossed \$150,000 a month and had ties to organized crime.

Over the next 15 months, a financial backer of the Mustang was shot and blinded by a Los Angeles mob underboss who was convicted of attempted murder. Mustang bouncer "Big" George Yudzevich — a 6-foot-7 slab of intimidation who also happened to be an [FBI](#) informant — was shot to death in an Irvine industrial park; no one was ever charged.

Who ordered Casino's murder may never be proven. He had served time for fraud, extortion and other crimes and made more than a few enemies. He also liked to insinuate to others that he had juice with the mob.

"There have been all kinds of theories," Murray said

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