



# WHAT REALLY HAPPENED TO RONNI CHASEN?

SIX YEARS AFTER THE PUBLICIST WAS FATALLY SHOT IN BEVERLY HILLS, HER BEST FRIENDS STILL FEEL NO SENSE OF CLOSURE. NOW NEWLY RELEASED DOCUMENTS RAISE SERIOUS QUESTIONS ABOUT A FLAWED INVESTIGATION **BY GARY BAUM**

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On the morning after Chasen's murder in November 2010, her Mercedes, which took down a light pole on Whittier Drive, still was part of an active crime scene.

Six years ago, Hollywood learned that Ronni Chasen, one of its grande dame film publicists, had been gunned down while driving along a leafy stretch of Sunset Boulevard in Beverly Hills just after midnight. On Nov. 16, 2010, she had been heading home from the afterparty at the W Hollywood hotel for the premiere of *Burlesque*. Chasen represented producer Donald De Line and lighting designer Peggy Eisenhauer as well as

songwriter Diane Warren, whose tune, "You Haven't Seen the Last of Me," was sung in the film by Cher. "She and Ronni were so excited," Warren told *THR* days later. "It was just the funnest night." Added De Line: "She was being her usual mother-hen self. It was so not anything out of the ordinary. Just like a hundred other nights. She was loving it." Hollywood Foreign Press Association member Elisabeth Sereda recalls Chasen working the room. It was the crucial period before

Golden Globe ballots were to be sent out at the beginning of December. "She'd corner you and not let you get away," she says. "Ronni would say, 'Don't you love my client?'" Exactly what happened after Chasen, then 64, left the W valet for home in her black 2010 Mercedes-Benz E350 remains unknown. This much is clear: At about 12:28 a.m., four shots were fired through the vehicle's front passenger window as it likely slowed or stopped in the left-hand turn lane heading west on Sunset to make the

turn south on to Whittier Drive, a residential street where homes cost as much as \$25 million. According to the autopsy report, two bullets hit her chest without causing immediate catastrophic damage. Another hit her right upper arm. A fourth, the most rapidly fatal, entered through her right shoulder and struck her heart. No shell casings, live rounds or weapon were recovered at the intersection. Despite her dire injuries, Chasen glided one-fourth of a mile down curving Whittier

CRASH: COURTESY OF BEVERLY HILLS POLICE DEPARTMENT; CHASEN, ERIC CHARBONNEAU; INQUIRY IMAGES; SMITH: COURTESY OF JACKSON COUNTY, OREGON, JAIL

Drive before the Mercedes knocked over a concrete light pole, crushing the front right end of the vehicle and deploying the driver-side airbag. A couple driving past found her within minutes, followed by Beverly Hills Police Department patrol officers, who'd been alerted to the sound of gunfire by neighbors.



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Police files indicate officers found Chasen slumped forward with blood dripping from her nose, a gurgling sound emanating from her mouth, eyes wide open but not blinking. They were unable to locate her pulse. She was transported to nearby Cedars-Sinai Medical Center and pronounced dead at 1:12 a.m. In the following days, nobody knew who had done it or why it happened. Rumors spread of dark links to gambling debts, art deals and shady film finance. Even former LAPD Chief William Bratton, then working in private security, got into the guessing game, speculating everything from road rage to



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**2**  
Chasen shown in April 2010 holding an Oscar earned for *The Hurt Locker*, one of seven best pictures for which she ran publicity campaigns.

**3**  
An earlier booking photo for Smith, the man the Beverly Hills Police Department says murdered Chasen while acting alone.

a random drive-by. "A crime of passion, somebody who knew her," he told CBS News. "They have not determined, to the best of my knowledge, as to whether there was possibly somebody else in the car."

Crime scene photos released by the BHPD show that Chasen's shoes — satin leopard-print kitten heel Manolo Blahnik pumps — remained by the gas pedal. Her Prada purse sat on the passenger seat amid glass shards and nail polish bottles. Paperwork on the floor indicated more hustling to be done for the ongoing awards season: pursuing coverage with NPR's *Morning Edition* and *All Things Considered* for Trent Reznor and Atticus Ross' composer contributions to *The Social Network*. "I don't think any of us know what happened," says producer Lili Fini Zanuck, a longtime friend. "That she was in pain in her final moments is more than I can handle. It breaks my heart."

For an inside look at the investigation of the Chasen case, go to [THR.COM/VIDEO](http://THR.COM/VIDEO)

Eight months after the shocking shooting, the BHPD announced it had closed the case, insisting that impoverished ex-convict Harold Smith, who'd fatally shot himself when confronted at his Hollywood flophouse two weeks after the incident, had acted alone in a robbery attempt gone wrong.

Yet everyone in town wondered immediately: Was this the full truth?

Now, years later, previously unreleased pieces of the BHPD's Chasen murder investigation file have been reviewed. An examination of this material and other evidence by *THR* raises questions about the department's core findings. This reporting appears to leave in doubt whether the department — which never was required to present evidence to a prosecutor, much less amass proof to demonstrate it had fingered the right culprit beyond a reasonable doubt to a jury — knows how the murder

was committed and whether multiple individuals were potentially involved.

Despite the BHPD's assurances, justice may not have been attained. No known evidence places Smith at the scene. Or backs up a robbery motive. Or confirms that he didn't have assistance. Ballistics don't prove he shot her. The department has publicly offered only that this African-American man, with a prior record for robbery in the area, was known to be in financial straits before he raised the suspicions of an *America's Most Wanted* tipster (who speaks for the first time, under his real name, to *THR*).

While BHPD leadership has changed since 2010, its blue wall of silence persists. Faced with questions for this report, the department would not address its effort to pursue Chasen's killer or how it closed the case on Smith, a man whom their detectives were unable to apprehend before he committed suicide in front of them. It's just one

“THIS IS A F—ING HOMICIDE, GUYS. THIS ISN’T A LITTLE SHOPLIFTING. THIS HAS TO HAVE ALL OF YOUR UNDIVIDED ATTENTION.”

MYRL STEBENS, FORMER POLICE INVESTIGATOR

more mystery, as no information about the handling of that event has been released, either.

The BHPD has few chances to practice its homicide investigation skills, as murders rarely occur in its jurisdiction. There have been none since 2011 and five in the half-decade before Chasen’s death. All were solved (two were straightforward spousal in-home killings), except for the 2008 shooting of actor Mark Ruffalo’s brother Scott, a local hairdresser.

“Doing investigative work on homicides takes a lot of skill and experience,” says Phyllis B. Gerstenfeld, chair of criminal justice at California State University, Stanislaus. “A lot of smaller towns know they’re inexperienced and ask other jurisdictions for help. But some don’t.”

On Dec. 8, 2010, the BHPD held a news conference in front of its headquarters. Chief David Snowden announced the department had that day received a preliminary ballistics result from the L.A. Sheriff’s County

Department Firearms Section crime lab indicating a match between Smith’s weapon and the one used in Chasen’s killing. He noted that a “complete match” was expected within two weeks and that, while the investigation still was ongoing (moments later, the detective in charge, Michael Publicker, would describe the inquiry as 60 to 70 percent complete), “We believe that Mr. Smith acted alone.” This confident position was taken at the media gathering three weeks after Chasen’s murder, even though case documents indicate that the department had yet to review her bank statements, hard drive and cellphone records. The BHPD would not seek such potentially relevant evidence until the following March.

The assembled reporters expressed skepticism that Smith, an ex-convict with a record for robbery whose mode of transport was known to be a bicycle, could have acted alone and peppered the chief and detective with an onslaught of questions about motive and method. “Through the interviews and

the information we received, it leaves us to believe that [Smith] was at a desperate point in his life and was reaching out and doing desperate measures,” explained Publicker, adding, “We do not believe he was a paid hit man.”

Soon, Snowden had had enough. “We’ve answered all of the questions we can,” he said. “The purpose of this was to tell you it was a match. Again, the firearm that was used to commit suicide in Harold Martin Smith was the same firearm that was used to kill Ronni Chasen.”

The BHPD was more definitive in a news release issued the following July, indicating it had “completed the exhaustive investigation” and “without a doubt, it is the conclusion of Robbery Homicide Detectives that the sole perpetrator of this most heinous crime was Harold Martin Smith.”

But *THR*’s review of the newly available BHPD case files may undermine such certainty. There is no definite ballistics match in the released files, only



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an inconclusive report that states the “fired bullet jacket could have been fired from” Smith’s gun “as they exhibit similar general rifling characteristics and some agreement of individual characters, but [are] insufficient for an identification.” It goes on to observe that while the fired bullet core is consistent with 38 Special/357 Magnum caliber ammunition, it “offered no comparison value.” In plain English, “forensically there’s no value there; there wasn’t enough to say it came from the same source,” says Mark Songer, a former FBI agent and forensic examiner contacted by *THR*. Multiple experts who were shown the report came to similar conclusions.

*THR*’s study of the materials offers other windows into the handling of the investigation, including the fact that there’s no record in the released files that her car was dusted for fingerprints on its passenger side (the direction from which the shots came).

The BHPD and its current chief, Sandra Spagnoli, who started in March and was the subject of a gauzy *Vogue* profile in August, declined to



2

1 From left: At a news conference in December 2010, Snowden, Publicker and then-Beverly Hills Mayor Jimmy Delshad insisted that the effort to solve the case was nearly closed.

2 Two weeks after Chasen’s murder, Smith shot himself in a Hollywood flophouse when Beverly Hills Police detectives attempted to question him. Although ballistics evidence appears inconclusive, the BHPD insists this was the same gun used to kill Chasen.

the conversation, that “my investigators will review your questions and take a look at it from an investigative standpoint.”

Criminology experts consulted by *THR* were alternately troubled and mystified by the BHPD’s apparent handling of the investigation, based on available information. “There are a lot of unanswered questions,” says Chris Hopkins, director of the Forensic Science Graduate Program at UC Davis. Some decisions, such as not fully fingerprinting the vehicle, were inexplicable. “It’s really strange,” says Craig Fries, head of Precision Simulations, a firm that specializes in crime scene reconstruction and ballistics trajectory analysis. “Why would you only do a portion of it?” (The BHPD declined to answer any questions about fingerprinting or other evidence collection.)

“This was not a very well-investigated homicide, and it’s easiest to point a finger at the most vulnerable people in town,” says Myrl Stebens, a California-based Police Science Institute instructor and former police

investigator who specializes in crime-scene processing and has 45 years of homicide experience. After closely examining the case documents, he raised substantive questions about whether the BHPD had been sloppy in the way it collected and managed evidence: “This is a f—ing homicide, guys. This isn’t a little shoplifting. This has to have all of your undivided attention.”

T.T. Williams Jr., a retired LAPD homicide detective often called to testify about police procedure, questioned the apparent absence of video footage “memorializing” Smith near the crime. “There has to be some security cameras in that neighborhood that would’ve caught him,” he says. “I mean, Beverly Hills? Give me a break. You have a black man, supposedly on a bike, in the middle of the night. He’d be stopped 15 times. He would’ve stood out like a sore thumb.”

**INDEPENDENT DOCUMENTARIAN** Ryan Katzenbach, 41, knew nothing of Chasen when she was alive. He initially sparked to the case when he saw it on cable TV news broadcasts because he also often took Whittier as a shortcut (before Waze, it was a relative secret). His interest would pique when he ran up against resistance when he filed — first as little more than a lark — a routine Public Records Act request related to the case, including for Chasen’s autopsy, which had been on a special indefinite hold. When the BHPD declined to turn anything over, a documentary project was born.

Eventually, Katzenbach sued the department in late 2013 in Los Angeles Superior Court for full access to the murder file in his pursuit of making his planned Chasen project 6:38, in reference to the time that elapsed between her final cellphone call (to her office voicemail) and the arrival of police on Whittier. He argued that

respond to nearly two dozen questions regarding the department’s work on the case. These included whether Snowden may have misinformed the public about ballistics findings, whether the department collected video footage that might establish Smith’s presence in the vicinity on the night of the murder and why several of Chasen’s friends and associates, some of whom were with her that night, never were interviewed by police.

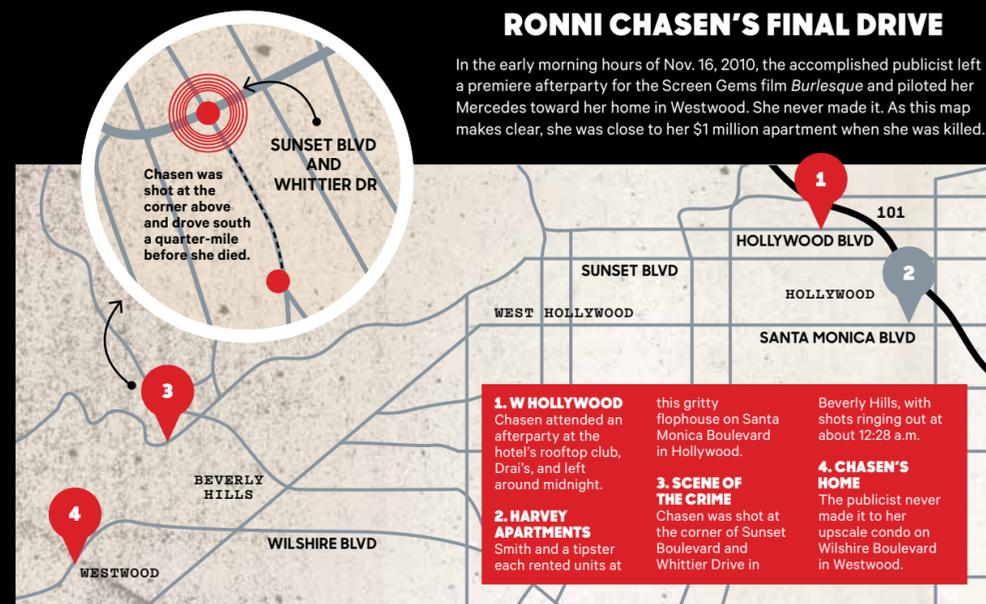
Lt. Lincoln Hoshino, a BHPD spokesman, reiterates: “We believe this is a closed case. We have no plans to ever reopen it.” He also sought

to distance Spagnoli from continued Chasen-related scrutiny. “She wasn’t here at the time,” he says. “She doesn’t know anything about this case.”

After *THR* later pursued comment about Spagnoli’s silence from Beverly Hills Mayor John Mirisch as well as city councilmembers (they never replied), she surfaced, stating in a phone interview she initiated: “My understanding is that this was investigated with care and diligence by our staff. Our evidence, including ballistics, matched. It was convincing and conclusive.” Spagnoli also promised, in

## RONNI CHASEN’S FINAL DRIVE

In the early morning hours of Nov. 16, 2010, the accomplished publicist left a premiere afterparty for the Screen Gems film *Burlesque* and piloted her Mercedes toward her home in Westwood. She never made it. As this map makes clear, she was close to her \$1 million apartment when she was killed.



- 1. W HOLLYWOOD** Chasen attended an afterparty at the hotel’s rooftop club, Drai’s, and left around midnight.
- 2. HARVEY APARTMENTS** Smith and a tipster each rented units at this gritty flophouse on Santa Monica Boulevard in Hollywood.
- 3. SCENE OF THE CRIME** Chasen was shot at the corner of Sunset Boulevard and Whittier Drive in
- 4. CHASEN’S HOME** The publicist never made it to her upscale condo on Wilshire Boulevard in Westwood.

the department forfeited its standard right to nondisclosure when Snowden allowed BHPD senior forensic specialist Clark Fogg, who worked on the case, to draw from the materials for his own 2012 small-press book, *Beverly Hills Confidential*, which contended that continued questions about the crime were driven by “conspiracy theorists.”

A year later, Katzenbach, acting as his own counsel, lost on a technicality. In his comments from the bench, the judge all but suggested he refile. To avoid another lawsuit, BHPD attorney T. Peter Pierce turned over a portion of the requested documentation in November 2015, months after Snowden retired. It numbered 120 semiredacted pages, including witness reports, call records and evidence logs. He shared all of this material with *THR*. (Katzenbach says he intends to pursue the rest, in court if necessary. Fogg’s book presumably was written with access to the full file.)

The filmmaker, in Chrome Hearts sweatshirts and worn-in Converse, has waged his war against the BHPD from a raisin farm four hours away in Madera, an agricultural community near Fresno. He rents his place — a 1960s adobe brick house on the property he shares with his rescues, a Chihuahua named Hitchcock and Bear, a lab-terrier mix — from the owner of one of the regional auto dealerships who’s kept him flush enough in direct-mail advertising work to pursue filmmaking. (Katzenbach moved to the area with his family from Ohio when he was 17.) “I don’t mind being out here,” he says. “It’s a good place to focus; it’s quiet.”

The chain-smoking Katzenbach has been kicking around Hollywood since 1998, when FX greenlighted *The King Is Dead*, a TV movie he was set to produce about the frenetic planning effort surrounding Elvis Presley’s



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Memphis funeral. It went nowhere, and he spent years on another true-life passion project: excavating the real story behind the legendary 1974 Amityville mass killings on Long Island, obscured for decades by a murk of horror film exploitation. While directing the resulting documentary, *Shattered Hopes*, which aired in 2014 on Reelz, he discovered the second gun belonging to the convicted murderer in that case, Ronald DeFeo — missing for four decades — by hiring a water-surveying firm to dredge a portion of a nearby canal he’d pinpointed based on an old crime scene photograph.

In November, he’s releasing *Titanic: Sinking the Myths* on Reelz, which questions century-old assumptions about how exactly the ship struck the iceberg and who should be assigned blame (White Star Line owner J.P. Morgan comes in for a drubbing). “My hope with these projects is to find the story, or the part of the story, that no one has heard before, the one that’s been glazed over for all perpetuity,” he says.

Snowden retired as BHPD chief in June 2015 amid a scandal in which he’d been ousted for entering into a financial arrangement with a private security contractor hired by the Beverly Hills Unified School District. He earned \$428,305 in his final

year. (By comparison, LAPD Chief Charlie Beck received \$372,715 in the same period.) Soon he was hired as an adviser at the downtown L.A. publicity firm Englander Knabe & Allen, part of its law enforcement practice, with a specialization in crisis management and media training.

Reached for comment on the Chasen case by phone at his office, Snowden, with his characteristic frank folksiness, sticks firm. “It was an attempted robbery that went south,” he says. “There’s nothing more to it than was in the initial investigation — period.” Pressed on the apparent absence of hard evidence pointing to robbery or even Smith’s involvement gathered by the BHPD under his command, he derides what he considers undue speculation, comparing it to the “conspiracy theories” surrounding the deaths of Elvis and John F. Kennedy. He adds, “Mr. Katzenbach is way off on the wrong trail.” Still, Snowden declined to respond to any follow-up inquiries about his own actions overseeing the case.

Stan Kephart, a former police chief in Arizona who often serves as an expert witness in cases involving law enforcement operational standards, notes of the Chasen saga: “It’s not what you think about a suspect, it’s what you can prove. It



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1 Before she became a well-known publicist, Chasen acted in several television soap operas during the 1970s, when this headshot was taken.

2 Oprah Winfrey and Chasen.

appears that there’s room for doubt that Harold Smith is the perpetrator.”

**CHASEN WAS BORN IN KINGSTON, N.Y.**, in 1946 (as Veronica Cohen; she supposedly took her last name as a nod to the since-shuttered Hollywood hotspot Chasen’s). She was raised in the Riverdale neighborhood of the Bronx and the Washington Heights section of Manhattan before moving to L.A. in the 1970s, initially to pursue acting, having already appeared on *Guiding Light* and *The Patty Duke Show*.

The petite blonde with the perpetual blow-out found her way into PR, working at Rogers & Cowan — producer Allan Carr was a client — and then, briefly, as the head of publicity at MGM/UA. “She knew everyone, and everyone knew her,” says publicist Vivian Mayer, who worked for



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Chasen at MGM/UA. “She had that rare encyclopedic knowledge of the industry. She could hold the whole equation in her head.”

Clients at her boutique firm Chasen & Co. included a mix of producers (De Line), directors (Jim Sheridan) and the previously anonymous niche she pioneered into public renown: composers (Hans Zimmer) and songwriters (Warren, who dedicated the Golden Globe she won the following January for “You Haven’t Seen the Last of Me” to Chasen from the stage). The firm began specializing in handling Oscar campaigns for studios. When she died, clients had netted at least 150 nominations, and seven had won best picture, including a three-peat between 2008 and 2010: *No Country for Old Men*, *Slumdog Millionaire* and *The Hurt Locker*. “The *Driving Miss Daisy* campaign — all Ronni,” says Zanuck, who produced that best-picture winner with her late husband, Richard Zanuck. “That’s why I thanked her twice at the Oscars.”

As Hollywood PR has evolved into an amorphous field of communication

strategy, its habitat centrally digital, Chasen was a throwback, still seeing herself as a press agent, sticking Post-It Notes everywhere, dictating her e-mails, preferring her research stacks sent to reporters via postal mail, leaving multiple to-do-list voicemails late into each night on the office line.

She was old school in many ways. “Someone asked me in a meeting with Ronni how long we’d known each other,” says New York-based publicist Kathie Berlin. “I said, ‘35 years.’ She pipes up, ‘20!’ She was very private about her age. She thought it could affect your work, that people wouldn’t hire you.”

Chasen was known in the industry, and particularly by awards voters and journalists, for her relentlessness — speaking rapid-fire, delivery forever blunt. She was unapologetically pushy, whether over the phone or buttonholing on red carpets in her trademark cream-colored Armani suits. “I used to laugh because I’d say she got half her pieces placed because people would say, ‘Enough already! OK!’” says Berlin. “She had chutzpah.”

Indeed, Chasen never was afraid to speak her mind, no matter what the topic. Her friend and onetime acting client Candy Clark (*American Graffiti*) recalls how she approached Spago designer Barbara Lazaroff not too long before she died to tell her the iconic Beverly Hills restaurant needed an update, particularly the private room frequently booked for events. “She said, ‘It’s tired-looking!’ So nervy. Barbara, as it happened, was actually pretty agreeable.” (Wolfgang Puck closed Spago for a revamp two years after Chasen’s death.)

Her brassiness knew few bounds. But intimates insist even its excesses bore hidden depths of humanity. For instance, she acquired a reputation for requesting doggie bags at fancy Hollywood events. “People would call her chintzy or silly, but she was misunderstood,” says Mayer. “She wasn’t eating it. She was bringing it to her mother, who lived up the street and whom she’d visit at the end of the night to tell her about what happened. She wanted her mother to experience the evening with her.” (Chasen’s mother died in 2000.)



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3 Chasen with John Travolta, with whom she worked following his success on *Welcome Back Kotter*.

4 Chasen posed with Morgan Freeman. The two became friends after she consulted on the campaign for *Driving Miss Daisy*.

Other than a brief marriage in her 20s, Chasen was single and had no children. She did maintain an inner circle of nearly a dozen dear friends, mostly women close in age, many of whom she had worked with over the years. Chasen also dated a series of high-powered paramours, including composer John Williams and an East Coast publishing executive. “She dated a lot of interesting men, but she never wanted to close the deal,” says Zanuck. “And then at a certain age, you don’t want the responsibility.” While Jewish and a regular at producer Irwin Winkler’s Passover seders, she liked to throw Christmas parties at her high-rise unit in a door-man building along Wilshire Boulevard’s condo corridor between Century City and Westwood that was filled with all-white furniture, fine art prints and flowering trees (she didn’t like cut flowers, preferring blooms that lived to those that died).

Chasen’s estate was worth \$6.1 million at the time of her death. Nearly all of it after taxes and legal fees — excluding gifts to a charities like the American Film Institute, Paul Newman’s Hole in the Wall Gang and the Gilda Radner Hereditary Cancer Program — went to her favored niece, Melissa Cohen. She’s the daughter of Chasen’s older brother Larry Cohen, 75, a writer-director of low-budget genre movies (he wrote 2002’s *Phone Booth*, in which Colin Farrell plays an obnoxious publicist targeted by a deranged shooter). Another Cohen daughter was, in the words of the will, “intentionally and with full knowledge of the consequences” given \$10.

The will, written in 1994, requested that Williams write a piece of music for her funeral “if possible” (it didn’t transpire), while publicity giant Warren Cowan, with whom she at one time had carried on a semi-open affair, “write the release to the trades, and that no mention

“SHE KNEW EVERYONE, AND EVERYONE KNEW HER. SHE HAD THAT RARE ENCYCLOPEDIA KNOWLEDGE OF THE INDUSTRY. SHE COULD HOLD THE WHOLE EQUATION IN HER HEAD.” **VIVIAN MAYER, PUBLICIST**

be made of my age.” (Cowan died two years before she did.)

Chasen was buried at Hillside Memorial Park, a Jewish cemetery in Culver City filled with such Hollywood heavyweights as Lew Wasserman, Al Jolson, Aaron Spelling and Milton Berle. The standing-room-only service was attended by upward of 1,000 people, including then-Sony Pictures head Amy Pascal and astronaut Buzz Aldrin. In his speech, Cohen, who declined to speak with *THR*, reminisced about the siblings’ New York childhood, when Chasen was the girls’ Duncan Yo-Yo champion of Morningside Heights, and Mayer recalled a recent dream in which her mentor appeared to her “pissed as hell,” declaring, “Now you get me a free Armani outfit?”

Chasen had been looking forward to the summer of 2011. She had hip-replacement surgery that she’d anxiously delayed for years — multiple calls with former Univision head Jerry Perenchio about the specialist he had used convinced her to move ahead — and secured a Paris apartment on the Left Bank for two months. Friends would join her in succession a few weeks at a time. Says Berlin, “I just remember thinking when she told me, ‘What a good time she’ll have!’”

**UNTIL NOW, THE IDENTITY OF THE *America’s Most Wanted* tipster who fingered Smith has been a mystery. It’s Laramie Beckay, a disabled punk musician living on government assistance who resided a few doors away from Smith on the third floor of the dingy 177-unit Harvey Apartments a few blocks northeast of the Paramount lot in Hollywood. He’s come forward to *THR* now because “after six years, I’ve felt forgotten, and I want credit. Due to my assistance, the Ronni Chasen case was solved and closed.” He once reached out to Katzenbach but had a falling-out with the documentarian.**



DISCUSSING HIS FALLING-OUT WITH BECKAY, KATZENBACH JOKES, “I WANT TO STRANGLE HIM, BUT I’M GOING TO DO IT IN BEVERLY HILLS, WHERE I’LL NEVER GET CAUGHT.”

Beckay describes the Harvey as a nexus of the struggling where “everybody was in their own world, often on drugs. Some people had schizophrenia. There were actors and writers and musicians, along with families of five in 140-square-foot units.” Units cost about \$650 a month at the time.

Yet “nobody had a problem with Harold,” whom Beckay describes as “one of the politest, most sensitive individuals” in the building. “I never saw him do a drug, smoke, even drink coffee. I never heard him swear.”

Still, Beckay says the two weren’t that close except for sharing food bank provisions (“he liked raisins and apple juice”), though Smith — who grew up in New York state, possessed a rap sheet for robbery and burglary and had spent much of two decades in prison — would lament how being a two-strike felon made it tough to find employment. He was convicted of purse-snatching in a 1998 incident involving a woman outside

her Beverly Hills apartment on Doheny Drive. In a separate robbery that resulted in a sizable sentence, the female victim resisted, and he broke her jaw. “Harold Smith was no choir boy, that’s for sure,” notes Katzenbach.

Says Beckay: “Harold would speak of not having money, not having a job, not being able to pay his rent. He was always talking about suicide.”

Beckay contacted *America’s Most Wanted* after growing suspicious of Smith, who he says was evicted from the Harvey six days after the murder for nonpayment. He had allowed Smith, then 43, to store two boxes and a duffel bag. Beckay says Smith, who sporadically returned to the building in the following weeks, knocked on his door 90 minutes after the killing. “He goes, ‘Have the police been here? Has there been anything on TV?’ He goes, ‘We haven’t had this conversation.’ The next morning at 11 a.m., he’s knocking at my door, saying, ‘Do you have a dollar that I can borrow?’

↑ Katzenbach, photographed Oct. 18 at the corner of Sunset and Whittier in Beverly Hills, where Chasen was murdered. The black SUV behind him is in the exact spot where she was shot.

He says, ‘I need to go get my bicycle.’ I say, ‘Where is it?’ He says, ‘It’s in Beverly Hills.’ I was at a loss for words. I knew what [this] was.”

Beckay waited two weeks before calling in his tip. “He had two strikes and was African-American,” he says. “We didn’t speak about the murder. He became super paranoid. He was losing it. He said, ‘If I’m not back by Thursday, take my things because I’ll be resting in peace.’ This was a week after the murder.”

According to Smith’s autopsy report, at 5:30 p.m. on Dec. 1, BHPD detectives intercepted their suspect — dressed in a Hawaiian shirt, Levi’s and a Pacific Trail green jacket — in the Harvey’s small lobby. He allegedly responded by brandishing a stainless steel .38 caliber Smith & Wesson Model 67 revolver in his right hand (later determined to have been reported stolen three years earlier by a retired LAPD officer from his home in exurban Santa Clarita) and

shooting himself through the brain, in the right temple and out the upper left side of the head, the bullet banking off a row of metal mailboxes before coming to a rest on the linoleum floor several feet beyond his mountain bike.

No suicide note was found. Documents retrieved from his body indicate he may have been looking for work and housing. According to crime scene photos, he carried a flyer advertising \$100-a-week lodging “conveniently located in Hollywood close to bus lines” and a folded paper with numbers indicating a job coach in Pasadena, warehouse labor in West L.A. and a forklift operator business in Santa Fe Springs.

The shooting likely was captured on the lobby’s security camera system. Katzenbach requested the footage as well as other information about the incident in 2013 from the BHPD. He never has received it.

Later, upstairs in his room, Beckay recalls a BHPD detective placing Smith’s belongings on his bed: “He goes, ‘Holy f—, there’s four empty shell casings.’ That was the first box they looked in.”

Stebens lists his doubts about Beckay and the BHPD’s narrative to explain Smith’s guilt: wondering why Smith wouldn’t have ridden his bike from the scene, why a man with a “snatch-and-grab” history would commit an ambush, why a suicide is being seen as an admission of guilt. “Guilt by association is not what our Constitution calls for,” he says. “Do they

know for a fact that the gun was in his possession on Nov. 16? How do they know the motive was robbery? When you start assigning blame and purpose, you better be able to support it.”

Stebens questions how the BHPD vetted the details Beckay provided and scrutinized his interests in turning in Smith. (Harold Matzner, chairman of the Palm Springs Film Festival and a longtime client of Chasen’s, announced a \$100,000 reward after she was killed.)

Katzenbach, too, questions whether Beckay is a reliable narrator, noting, for example, that it would’ve been impossible for him to have seen, as Beckay claims, Chasen reported as murdered on TV news immediately after he spoke with Smith since she wouldn’t be identified as the victim until long after the sun rose on Nov. 16. Still, the documentarian contends he doesn’t necessarily believe Smith is innocent — just that he hasn’t been suitably proved guilty. “I am all over the board on Harold Smith,” he says. Indeed, Katzenbach shares an elaborate chart he’s established of tantalizing if murky connections between Smith and Chasen that *THR* can’t publish without drawing a defamation-by-implication claim. It’s a circumstantial constellation of film ties, troubled relationships, criminal records and money issues. All of it centers on one person long known to the publicist who several of her best friends (some never interviewed

by the police) suggested in interviews with *THR* could have played a key role in a hit.

Beckay told his story on camera to Katzenbach in 2013 (only willing to do so with his face shadowed, voice altered and name withheld). But he later soured on collaborating with the filmmaker after learning that Katzenbach had taken on Matzner as a financier to complete the project. Matzner had declined to pay out the reward money to Beckay, arguing the case still was unsolved. A subsequent lawsuit led to a settlement in which Beckay received an undisclosed partial payment, which he used to purchase a limited-edition 2011 bright green manual transmission Camaro. “I had to use the money within a year or else I’d lose my disability and supplemental benefits,” he claims. “I see a psychiatrist to this day. Tipping isn’t making one phone call and getting money. Every day I think, ‘I’m getting into my car because a lovely lady died.’ I have PTSD from this case; L.A. combat, not war combat.”

Matzner, long a skeptic that the case should’ve been closed, asserts he encouraged a lawsuit over the reward specifically to force the BHPD to open up its investigative records through the discovery process. “I just felt there was never enough definitive evidence that this crime has been solved,” he says.

Still embittered over the legal ordeal, Beckay recently finished a punk song (“The Hills Are Bleeding”) inspired by Chasen. He calls Katzenbach “diabolical; Ryan doesn’t want to make a movie anymore — he wants to solve a case. He wants to have an alternative ending because he has a hard-on for fame.” For his part, Katzenbach jokes, “I want to strangle him, but I’m going to do it in Beverly Hills, where I’ll never get caught.”

“SOMEONE BRINGS UP RONNI’S name to me at least once a month,” says friend Madelyn

Hammond, an entertainment marketing consultant. “Always the same question: Do you know what really happened? Nobody feels a sense of closure. It was as though there was a fissure, a crack in our universe. It took over a year for me to get in my car without checking my back-seat. I’ve never driven down Whittier since.”

Notes Berlin: “Ronni would have pushed for details. She wouldn’t have let it go so easily. If this had happened to anyone else, she would have been outraged and wouldn’t have stopped. She would have called [then Gov.] Arnold Schwarzenegger and asked, ‘Why aren’t you doing anything?’”

Other friends agree. “Ronni would want justice,” says Clark, holding a white gold pinky ring she inherited from her friend in her fingers. (She thought the jewelry, which Chasen had been wearing when she died, was rose gold until a cleaning revealed it had been coated in a layer of blood.) “She was a truth-teller.” Adds Zanuck: “Nobody asked any hard questions. She’d be surprised that there hasn’t been more curiosity. She spent her life supporting a community of imagination, and there’s been little imagination here.”

After the police arrived six years ago and paramedics removed Chasen, it was time to chronicle the crime scene. Jefferson Airplane’s psychedelic-rock “White Rabbit” was playing on the still-running Mercedes’ stereo, the hazard lights blinking on Whittier, just yards from the living room of the Spanish mansion where Bugsy Siegel was executed in 1947 by a salvo of .30-caliber military M1 carbine fire in the BHPD’s most infamous unsolved case. “When logic and proportion have fallen sloppy dead,” Grace Slick intoned out of the car, across the darkness, “remember what the dormouse said. Feed your head. Feed your head.” **THR**

↓ Smith and tipster Beckay lived at this hard-luck building on Santa Monica Boulevard in Hollywood, where Smith took his life.



Photographed by Damon Casarez