

**A TRUE-LIFE
1970s Hollywood epic ...**



...starring a
cocaine-addled producer,
BERT SCHNEIDER,
the revolutionary leader
of the Black Panthers,
HUEY NEWTON,
and their wild scheme to smuggle
"the Package" to Castro's Cuba

The Big Cigar

Written By JOSHUA BEARMAN

INT. A HOUSE IN THE HOLLYWOOD HILLS—NIGHT

It's quiet at this long, low ranch house up in Benedict Canyon even though it's Saturday night. The year is 1974, and the decor reflects the era's aesthetic: zebra rug, mod wallpaper and suede sofas facing a mirrored bar. This is a modern bachelor pad, a hilltop roost with a pool, sauna and stunning view of Los Angeles. In the bedroom, a partially clothed BERT SCHNEIDER smokes a joint with a lithe teenage girl. Bert is tall, handsome



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and self-assured, a Hollywood producer on top of the world. He hears a knock and looks up to see his teenage son, JEFFREY, fling the door open.

“There are two black ladies outside,” Jeffrey said. “And one of them is very pushy.” Bert put on a shirt and headed for the entry. There he found the two women, but on closer examination he realized the pushy one was not a woman at all but a man, bewigged and squeezed into a dress. Bert smiled and asked, “Huey?”

The man in drag was Huey Newton, the 35-year-old leader of the Black Panther Party. Huey was a major cultural figure, a street- and book-smart kid from Oakland who had become an icon of the black power movement. Huey’s public displays of firearms, meant to protect the black community from overzealous police, had brimmed over into shoot-outs, including his own deadly encounter with Oakland police officer John Frey, for which Huey was convicted in 1968 of voluntary manslaughter. (He claimed he was unconscious during the shooting, and his conviction was overturned in 1970.) Now Huey told Bert he was in trouble again. “Bert,” Huey said, “you gotta help us.”

Bert and Huey had been tight for a few years, ever since Bert started raising money for the Panthers in Hollywood. Bert was a *macher*, as he would say, a producer at the vanguard of the New Hollywood movement that had changed American cinema; his credits included *Easy Rider*, *Five Easy Pieces* and *The Last Picture Show*, and he was working on *Hearts and Minds*, the Vietnam



Top left: Huey Newton, head of the Black Panthers, at a rally in Oakland. Above: Newton with Panthers in 1970. Top right: Hollywood powerhouse Bert Schneider with girlfriend Candice Bergen in 1972.

documentary for which he would win an Oscar. He had embraced the radical politics of the era, supporting activists including Abbie Hoffman, Daniel Ellsberg and the Black Panthers. He called Huey his “comrade and best friend.”

“I’m in trouble,” Huey said. Huey was always agitated—his intensity captivated Bert—but this was different. “You’re the only one I can trust.”

They went to Jeffrey’s room, where Huey told Bert that things were falling apart in Oakland, the Panthers’ headquarters. Huey had been arrested for several crimes, including a murder charge. The police, he told Bert, were trying to frame him and finally bring down the party.

“They’re sharpening the ax,” Bert said.

Huey had been in prison before. “I’m not going back,” he said.

Huey had to fly the coop, pronto, and not just out of town but out of the country. He told Bert, “I need you to get me

to Cuba.”

Bert figured Huey would be on the FBI’s most wanted list by morning, but he didn’t hesitate to help. Within five minutes, Bert was hatching a plan. His only question was “Were you followed?”

Bert looked out the window. The FBI had been interested in him for years. He was so actively involved in left-wing politics that at times field agents reported on Bert’s movements every four hours. He would eventually see his own file, which described him as “tall, manly, wears long hair, mod clothing and has an outspoken nature”—just about right, Bert thought, except for the hair, which the FBI thought was dyed blond but was really a naturally sun-kissed corona of curls.

“I think we’re clean,” Huey said.

It was, in fact, the first time in months the FBI hadn’t known Huey’s whereabouts—but one of the first places the FBI would look was where they were standing. Bert wanted to get Huey and Huey’s girlfriend, Gwen Fountaine, over to his producing partner Steve Blauner’s house. He *(continued on page 181)*

BIG CIGAR

(continued from page 66)

delegated the dirty work, asking Jeffrey to handle the drive. Bert stayed behind.

Jeffrey knew and liked Huey—but Jeffrey had only a learner's permit, so the teenage girl from Bert's bedroom took the wheel. They piled into Bert's BMW 3.0 coupe. Bert's young girlfriend was a skittish get-away driver, eyes in the rearview, looking for headlights. Jeffrey knew the hills, and he navigated a back route to Steve's home without drawing any attention.

The coupe pulled up the long, steep driveway to Steve's dramatic Bel Air house. The place was beautiful, redwood inside and out; it had been built for the Kim Novak film *Strangers When We Meet*. Huey walked into the forecourt, past the waterfall, between a pair of enormous Chinese Foo dogs.

"I didn't know I was having company," Steve said when he opened the door.

Steve too was close with Huey and had hosted him many times. Steve knew Huey was armed—Huey had become a household name by facing policemen on the streets of Oakland with shotguns—and demanded he turn over his weapon. "House rules," he said. "The pistol, please." Huey handed over his gun.

As soon as he found some privacy, Steve called Bert. "How are we gonna do this?" he asked.

"I'm working on it," Bert said.

This was the era of skyjacking—the favored mode of emigrating to Cuba by hijacking airliners and forcing them to land in Havana—but Huey thought that was too dangerous, not to mention déclassé for a revolutionary of his stature. Instead, Bert and Steve and a trusted core of their Hollywood cohorts would throw together an underground railroad and smuggle Huey to Cuba. It would turn into a big production but with real-life stakes. Like their films, this project had a title. Bert called it "The Big Cigar."

INT. ITALIAN AMERICAN SOCIAL CLUB, WHITE PLAINS, NEW YORK, 1949—DAY

This is the kind of "social club" where you look both ways before you ring the buzzer to go inside and place bets with Jimmie Knuckles—and you better be good for it. Two teenagers—young BERT SCHNEIDER and STEVE BLAUNER—arrive, clearly skipping school. They seem out of place but look comfortable as they nod at everyone while buying cigarettes and cruising for action.

Bert and Steve weren't always Hollywood honchos. They'd grown up together in Westchester County, New York, and although they were two Jewish kids from the tonier suburban zip codes—Bert in particular felt no shame in acknowledging the size of his silver spoon—they always had a nose for excitement. "From an early age," Steve recalls, "we were always in just over our heads."

In high school they liked to hang out at bookie joints, like the Italian American Social Club in White Plains. Steve was big for his age, a bit of a tough guy already. Bert was

tall but skinny and couldn't fight his way out of a paper bag, so instead he projected extreme confidence. Sometimes they'd play cards in the back with bona fide wiseguys—Apples, Cootie, Willy the Whip—and when Bert would win a hand with a brazen bluff, Johnny the Gator would light a smoke and hand over the money: "Well, fellas, it looks like the calf got the butcher."

Bert liked that line, even though it was the kind of attitude that got him kicked out of Cornell in 1953. Bert was probably destined to go into the family business anyhow. His father, Abraham Schneider, was president of Columbia Pictures. Bert started working at Screen Gems, a television subsidiary of the studio, working his way up to vice president and treasurer.

Steve, in the meantime, went into the music business. He wound up managing a young kid named Bobby Darin. Steve preferred standards but saw something in this rock-and-roll thing, and soon Bobby Darin was a star. They were making a killing, and Steve was staying at Sammy Davis Jr.'s house, palling around Vegas with Frank Sinatra.

In 1965 Bert formed his own production company with Bob Rafelson, a young director. Steve was already in Los Angeles, and the trio struck gold when they imagined a serialized *Hard Day's Night* for television and manufactured a boy band, the Monkees, for a TV show of the same name.

The Monkees were a cash cow. Because Steve knew the music business, he made sure Bert owned it all: the publishing, the appearances, the dolls, the whole kit and caboodle. The show was on for only two seasons, from 1966 to 1968, but it made a fortune—so much money that Bert wondered, What the fuck am I gonna do with it all?

"It's not just a biker movie," Dennis Hopper exclaimed, wide-eyed and wild. "It's gonna be the story of our time."

Hopper showed up in Bert's office one day with Peter Fonda. They had this idea about two bikers who score a big drug deal and take to the road. It was 1968. A lot had changed in the few years since Bert bought his house in Beverly Hills: the Summer of Love, Vietnam, Martin Luther King Jr., Bobby Kennedy. The Monkees were done. Bert wanted to be in the movie business. And here were Hopper and Fonda, grimy and stoned, asking for \$360,000. Neither had ever directed or produced a movie before. Bert wrote a check on the spot.

The resulting film, *Easy Rider*, became a phenomenon. The anti-establishment portrayal of disaffection with American society touched a nerve when it appeared in 1969, the high-water mark of the counterculture. *Easy Rider*, a film that opened with a coke deal, was nominated for two Academy Awards, made Jack Nicholson a star and earned \$35 million.

That's 100 times the budget, an astonishing figure that led Columbia Pictures to give BBS Productions—Bert, Bob and Steve's company—an unprecedented six-picture deal for inexpensive, director-driven films. It was the late 1960s, when Hollywood was full of graying executives who were losing lots of money on big-budget flops like *Hello,*

Dolly! and *Paint Your Wagon*. *Easy Rider* paved the way for a revolution in American cinema.

For Bert, the success was a middle finger at the establishment. He was admired, despised, revered and feared, sometimes by the same people. But everyone agreed he was a great producer. "Usually producers get in the way," says Peter Bogdanovich, director of *The Last Picture Show*. "But Bert was the opposite. He encouraged us to do something that we felt attached to as artists."

Creative integrity was paramount. The 1970s would turn out to be a miraculous (and brief) union between art and commerce, producing some of the great films of all time.

The barbarians were inside the gates—and they were piling up money. It was the first time producers, directors and actors shared film profits, often earning millions. BBS moved from the Columbia lot at Sunset Boulevard and Gower Street to a building on La Brea Avenue that Bert bought and renovated to include a screening room, cutting room and, naturally, a cedar sauna. In Bert's office you could play billiards beneath a white Tiffany chandelier facing a picture window with a view of the Hollywood sign. From here Bert cultivated a reputation as the dynamic center of a glamorous and successful avant-garde. He was 36 years old.

Ever since summer camp, Steve had called Bert "Rulebook" Schneider because he always learned the rules—so he could break them. Now Steve sat down the hall from Bert as they upended Hollywood with their moneymaking masterpieces. Bert the rabble-rouser was also a brilliant businessman. "I always wanted to change the world," he said at the time. "And make a few dollars in the process."

Friends sometimes joked that Bert was "king of the Jews," but when Bert plainly referred to his own Christ complex, he wasn't kidding. "I want to be like Jesus Christ," he'd say without apparent irony, "but with better participation."

Bert acted like a star. As Linda Weaver, his longtime secretary, put it, "Those big, blue Paul Newman eyes of his could be warm and friendly, or turn ice-cold.... He was pretty good at getting whatever he wanted." And he loved flaunting his ability to buck the system. "He'd fire up a joint in Columbia's executive offices," Steve says. "Just because he could."

When Bert first arrived in Los Angeles, he was relatively straight—he had come of age in the 1950s, had a wife, kids and a house in Westchester. But like so many East Coast Jewish boys heading west for the pictures, Bert changed. He let his hair grow long, grew a beard, exchanged his coat and tie for patterns and velvet and dove into the drug culture. He embraced the sexual revolution with gusto. The 1970s were like a second adolescence for him. He considered himself a sex object, as did most women. By early 1971 Bert was en route to divorce, moving from the flatlands to the hills, where the scene at his house often resembled the party at the end of *Shampoo*. On any given evening you might find Lauren Hutton, Jack Nicholson, Warren Beatty, in and out of the pool, mingling with guests who were high out of their minds and pontificating about the future of cinema while surrounded by starlets, including Bert's new girlfriend, Candice Bergen (whom everyone called Candy).

Bert's drug-fueled parties doubled as an active political salon. This was, after all, the springtide of radical chic. Whereas most people settle from zealous youth into cautious middle age, Bert did the opposite and turned revolutionary.

Starting with the Chicago Seven, Bert entertained lefty activists of all stripes: Jane Fonda and her soon-to-be beau Tom Hayden, Timothy Leary and Daniel Ellsberg, whose legal defense Bert supported through the Pentagon Papers Peace Project. Bert championed Charlie Chaplin, who had been hounded out of the country by the House Un-American Activities Council 20 years earlier, buying the rights to Chaplin's film catalog and engineering his stirring return for an honorary Oscar in 1972.

Candice Bergen shot the cover of *Life* magazine featuring Chaplin for the occasion. "It was a very romantic time," she says. Candice had given up the Chanel suits of her patrician upbringing in favor of the Nehru jackets and love beads of hippiedom and had fallen into Bert's orbit.

"Bert was a romantic figure," she remembers. "He made big expansive gestures, like chartering a jet to Aspen or Martha's

Vineyard spontaneously, or unflinchingly supporting the politics of people he believed in." That's how Bert's house came to be, as Bergen describes it, a "party full of outlaws." Candice would sit by the pool as Bert strategized with Abbie Hoffman, or "discoursed into the night about the dialectic with a half-naked Huey Newton."

Bert had met Huey in September 1970. Bert had been involved politically—and romantically—with Elaine Brown, a dedicated member of the Black Panther Party. She introduced them after Huey was released that summer from his stint in prison.

Like Bert, Huey was charismatic and egomaniacal, a political celebrity ever since his Panthers showed up at the California statehouse armed with berets, shotguns and matching leather.

"He was mesmerizing," says Steve, who met Huey when Bert brought him to Martha's Vineyard. "There were three times in my life when I met someone and instantly recognized a star," Steve says. "Bobby Darin, Jack Nicholson and Huey."

Steve and Bert were both taken with Huey's looks, admiring his prison-toned

body and "movie star face." Indeed, after Huey's dramatic release from prison to a throng of supporters on national television, he was solicited by a talent agent who wrote that Huey had "star quality."

Bert provided direct entrée to Hollywood. Almost immediately, the two were thick as thieves. "It was like what we now call a man-crush," Bergen says. "Bert would get tears in his eyes. It was like a man in love." Bert idolized Huey's dedication to his politics. He saw them as kindred spirits: Bert had overturned the Hollywood system, and Huey had his sights set on the world. Bert said at one time that Huey "has probably had the most profound effect on my life of anyone I have ever known." Bert and Huey loved their mutually manic intellectualizing, each getting drunk on the contrarian rhapsodies of the other.

"Their bond was incredible," says Brown. Bert often had Huey at his side, on vacation, at his house, at premieres. A big gold Black Panther ring appeared on Bert's finger. Behind Bert's desk now hung a framed picture: Bert and Huey, side by side, beaming.

INT. ABBY MANN RESIDENCE, SANTA MONICA—NIGHT

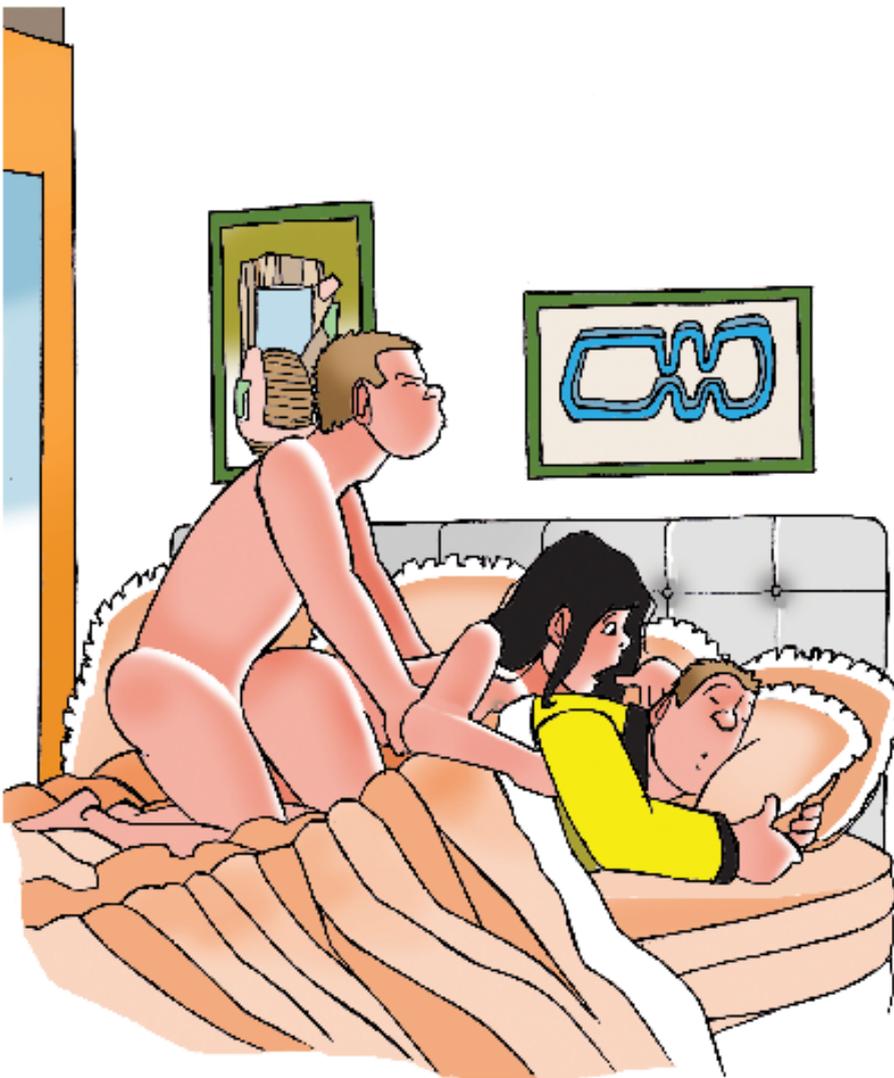
A swank fund-raiser for the Black Panther Party at the plush home of ABBY MANN, née Abraham Goodman, a socially conscious screenwriter. Food is being served to Hollywood's elite. On the mantel is a familiar golden statuette, an Oscar for one of Abby's screenplays, *Judgment at Nuremberg*. BERT watches with a satisfied grin.

Huey was popular in Tinseltown. Jean Seberg was a supporter, along with Mia Farrow, Shirley MacLaine and Barbra Streisand. Such luminaries were surprised to discover Huey's refined, gentle manner. Even Huey's fiercest critics acknowledged his seductive quality, how he was never angry in their presence—despite his reputation for violence.

People would visit Bert's house and find Huey by the pool, wearing fitted silk shirts, reading Nietzsche. High in Benedict Canyon there was no trace of Huey's street roots, the "crazy Huey" from hard-edged Oakland, the man accused of killing policeman John Frey. Instead, Huey talked about retooling the party after a protracted war with the authorities, eschewing violence and overheated bolshevism in favor of a reform program of community action. Even old-guard Hollywood royalty like Liz Taylor and Richard Burton wrote checks to the Panthers. But Bert's checks were always the biggest.

Bert started sending Huey checks for tens of thousands of dollars, personally bankrolling much of the Panthers' activities, from community programs to Huey's new penthouse above Lake Merritt in Oakland, from which Huey ran the party like a super-stylish political boss. In 1972 Bert forked over more than \$250,000 for an enormous Panther outreach campaign called the Black Community Survival Conferences.

By now the FBI knew a lot about Bert. The feds tracked his calls to BBS offices, to a restaurant, to his veterinarian. At times FBI field agents' reports sounded like items



"Jack! I'm seeing someone else!"

from *Variety*. (The Monkees were, according to one report, “an overnight sensation and a multimillion dollar project.”)

Huey and Bert both understood the theater of politics and the politics of the theater, and they often talked about film as a social weapon. “Man, we need to get our own production going,” Huey would tell Bert. That’s how they would show some revolutionary truth. Just like *The Battle of Algiers*.

Hollywood had come fashionably late to the 1960s (arriving, essentially, in the 1970s), and it was tempting to chalk up the entertainment industry’s new radical politics to atonement—an overcompensation for its silence during the McCarthy era. Some contemporaries thought it was all about pussy and drugs. Others said Bert’s obsession with Huey was a way to ward off accusations of privilege.

Bert knew he was a hypocrite, a radical elitist who talked about the “working class getting off its fucking ass” from his million-dollar offices. “I get high on the contradictions,” Bert said at the time, about the tension between his lifestyle and politics. As Candice Bergen drily noted, the Nehru jackets were custom-made and the “love beads were from Tiffany.”

But Bert didn’t care. He relished using square money from the Monkees—a sanitized rip-off of the Beatles—to fund the countercultural bombshell *Easy Rider*. Bert liked to say he had to “close this next deal to be rich enough to support the revolution.”

“Bert never did the minimum,” Steve recalls. Whereas writing a few checks might assuage other people’s consciences, Bert always went further. “His heart was in the right place,” Candice says. “If Bert saw an injustice, he would try to do something about it. And he could.”

INT. HUEY’S PENTHOUSE—DAY

HUEY is holed up in his well-appointed high-rise Oakland redoubt. From the 25th floor, he can see the sun dance on Lake Merritt. But Huey’s not happy. He seems wired, pacing back and forth while his entourage watches uneasily. Jimmy Cliff plays on the hi-fi—“The Harder They Come.” Huey pours a drink as the chorus comes: “The harder they come, the harder they fall...”

It was a mean season for the Black Panthers, who descended into chaos as Huey became tyrannical and erratic. It turns out maintaining revolutionary focus is difficult when surrounded by drugs and easy money. Huey was a real intellectual—he led his followers in serious discussions about existentialism and free will—but, as often happens with political idealism, a gulf widened between theory and praxis. Huey had eschewed his title of “supreme commander,” yet he acted ever more like a messiah gone astray. He donned white suits and fedoras, surrounded himself with an elite security team called “the Squad” and had a valet trail him as he roamed his penthouse, which he called “the Throne.”

The Panthers were developing a reputation as thugs dressed up in Marxist rhetoric and three-piece suits, with Huey as the kingpin. Part of Huey’s program had been to politicize the street, but some people thought

he had brought the street to politics instead. To outsiders—and some insiders—it looked as though Huey was falling back on the criminal instincts of his youth.

The FBI was close behind. Agents had even rented the apartment next door, always looking for Huey to slip up. The pressure was on for the embattled leader—there were court trials, shoot-outs, internal splits. The SWAT team was essentially invented to combat the Panthers. Huey lightened the weight of the crown with cocaine and Courvoisier, or as fellow Panther David Hilliard called it, “the cognac of Napoleon Bonaparte.”

Huey became frenzied and sometimes unintelligible. Candice Bergen remembers him pacing the room at Bert’s house one night wearing only a sheet, “wrapped up like Caesar” as he delivered a four-hour rant. Later, Huey positioned his six-foot-eight bodyguard outside Bert’s house, worried that agents of Eldridge Cleaver, who had fled to Algeria and was now fighting Huey for power, were coming to kill him.

Such tension was typical of the thorny politics of the left, which became increasingly factional as the 1970s unfolded and the revolution had not yet materialized. Former comrades excommunicated one another over

It was mean season for the Black Panthers. The FBI was close behind their embattled leader, Huey Newton. He lightened the weight with cocaine and Courvoisier.

the tiniest evidence of ideological heterodoxy. In Oakland, Huey was purging the Panthers, booting longtime loyalists. Trying to get into the movie business didn’t help: As Huey and Bobby Seale worked one night on their anti-blaxploitation epic in which Bobby was to star, the two Black Panther co-founders locked horns so dramatically that Huey, amped on cocaine, kicked Bobby out of the party (and, according to Elaine Brown, had him lashed with a bullwhip). Bobby Seale fled Oakland the next day.

Whether it was caused by drugs or grim reality, Huey’s paranoia kept him mostly holed up in the Throne, where he scrutinized visitors’ faces via the lobby’s state-of-the-art security camera. He slept all day and by night prowled bars, including the Fox Lounge and the party’s own hangout, the Lamp Post. Huey was at the Fox Lounge with his bodyguard on July 30, 1974, when he was arrested after a supposed scuffle with two cops. Six days later, a 17-year-old prostitute was shot by a man riding in a Continental Mark IV. Three other prostitutes identified Huey as the shooter.

Huey was facing another murder rap, this time with few allies. Using a telescope in his penthouse, he could look right into the windows of the Alameda County courthouse

building—the district attorney’s office—where the case against him was being assembled. He was convinced a fair trial would be impossible. On another floor was the holding cell where he had waited to be tried in 1967 and the solitary pen where he spent several weeks, called the Soul Breaker.

He didn’t want to see those rooms again. Time was running out. Years earlier, a crowd of thousands had massed outside the courthouse, chanting, “Free Huey!” Now Huey stared out the window, pondering his fate, listening to Isaac Hayes’s “I Stand Accused,” ice clinking in a lowball glass. Up in the Throne, Huey liked to pour Coke and two fingers of Bacardi over cubes, then add a healthy squeeze of lime juice for what had become a very appropriate drink—the Cuba libre.

Steve took a strange route south, making odd turns, always using his turn signals and sticking to the speed limit as he wound his way to Mexico. He drove his Renault convertible. He loved that car. The woman next to him was Huey’s girlfriend, and Huey, from the backseat, was helping adjust her wig.

They had holed up at Steve’s house while Bert strategized. Steve gave Huey his bedroom and slept in the projection room. But Huey was going stir-crazy. The only time they left the house was when Steve disguised Huey and took him to see the *Dirty Harry* sequel *Magnum Force*. “He wanted to see some action,” Steve recalled. “Other than that we just sat tight.”

Eventually, Benny Shapiro showed up with further instructions. Benny was a longtime friend of Bert and Steve’s, a well-known figure in the Los Angeles music scene; he had been manager for Miles Davis, worked with Bob Dylan and was a promoter of the Monterey International Pop Festival. Benny was a guy you called when you had a problem: He knew everyone, from the downtown judges to the Hell’s Angels. Los Angeles had been his playground until he bought a jungle retreat in the village of Yelapa, Mexico and decamped there permanently in the wake of Nixon’s presidential election. When Huey needed a safe haven, Benny happened to be in town and offered his place.

“I’m going to miss you,” Bert said, tears in his eyes, before Huey got in Steve’s car. “Me too, comrade,” Huey replied.

Bert never even asked Huey what happened in Oakland, and neither did Steve as they drove to Mexico. Right or wrong, Steve would go to the mat for his friend, godfather to his second child. He figured Huey was being persecuted. After all, J. Edgar Hoover had declared the Black Panthers the greatest threat to the country’s internal security in 1968 and had since declared war on the party. “In the politics of the time,” Steve recalls, “the FBI and the police were the enemy, plain and simple.”

They crossed the border at San Ysidro and reached the Tijuana airport, where a flight to Puerto Vallarta—about 55 miles from Yelapa—awaited. Huey was running on adrenaline, acting wild; Steve worried he’d give them away. “Just take a deep breath,” Steve said, “and get on the plane.” When Huey and Gwen climbed the stairs and the doors closed behind them, Steve turned back for the border. “I was flying so high from the danger,” Steve recalls. “And

probably from the cocaine too.”

After the plane took off, Steve snorted some blow. The drive home was exhilarating. At one point he pulled over to a pay phone and called his estranged wife. “Listen,” he told her, “I think we can solve this. Let’s meet up tomorrow. Bring your boyfriend. We’ll all drop acid and figure this out.” Steve’s wife was not convinced.

When Steve got home, Bert called. This had just been the preproduction, Bert said. “We’ve got work to do.”

Bert and Steve assumed their phones were tapped. They referred to their venture as the Movie. Benny was the Jew. Bert’s protégé, Artie Ross, was the Babysitter. Huey was the Package, the Leading Man or the Star. And Bert would talk about how “our Movie starts Friday night.” All we need is “transportation” for “the Star” to the “location.”

It was Benny who came up with the idea to fly Huey from Mexico to Cuba in a small plane, under the radar. He knew someone who knew a guy who said he could arrange it. The guy’s name was Niné; he was a friend of Benny’s coke dealer. Niné had revolutionary bona fides, having been in the mountains with Che Guevara. Bert gave Niné money to build a clandestine airstrip and find a willing pilot for a mercenary sortie.

Homespun cloak-and-dagger was new for Bert’s Hollywood clique. Before driving to Mexico, Steve had called his bookmaker and placed bets so there would be a record that he was in town. Now Bert made calls from pay phones, bribed a notary to forge Huey’s fake

documents and kept quiet, not even filling in Jack Nicholson—and Bert kept nothing from Jack. Bert paid for everything in cash. To avoid making a large bank withdrawal, he called one of his former mistresses, Toni Stern, now Carole King’s co-lyricist, and asked for a favor. She delivered a bundle of bills in a paper bag—the bursary for the Big Cigar.

“If we ever get caught,” Bert joked to Steve, “we’ll be the Beverly Hills Seven.”

“More like the Over-the-Hill Jewish Gang,” Steve said.

Benny funneled Bert’s cash to “the Cuban,” as he called Niné, who kept promising imminent covert air service to Havana. Niné was also supposed to secure permission from the Castro government for Huey’s arrival. Down in Yelapa, Huey thought this was important. He didn’t want to show up unannounced; he wanted a proper exile—and soon. Huey didn’t want to wait too long in Mexico, where the federal authorities, having put down the 1968 student uprising, were not sympathetic to leftist refugees. At Benny’s jungle refuge there were no phones; messages were sent with people going to Puerto Vallarta who would then call California. Huey sent several messages to Bert, impatient about the status of the Movie.

Bert wanted to know what was going on too. Niné was stalling, saying that the pilot he’d hired had disappeared with their down payment. Niné asked for more money. Bert had already supplied him with \$50,000 and was getting suspicious. Bert made some calls and realized Niné was hustling everybody around town for money. It became clear

there was no airstrip. There probably was no pilot. Maybe this fucking guy had never even met Che. “This Cuban is full of shit,” Bert said. “How much has this guy taken me for?”

Bert, Steve and Benny organized a meeting between Benny and Niné at Canter’s, a 24-hour deli on Fairfax Avenue. Bert called Oakland and had two Panther foot soldiers sent down as muscle. The meeting was set for 2:30 P.M. The Panthers stood at the counter as Benny ordered matzoh-ball soup and waited for Niné, who walked in, sat down in a booth, made small talk and then pulled out a gun and started shooting.

Miraculously, Benny was uninjured. Niné fled. The Panthers didn’t shoot back; they weren’t “dressed,” meaning armed, as they later told Bert, because they hadn’t figured on a shoot-out in Canter’s.

Neither had Bert. For the first time, he felt in over his head. “What kind of tsuris did we get into with this guy?” he asked Steve. Niné wasn’t some studio executive Bert could bully into submission.

“That’s when Bert decided to get a gun himself,” Steve recalls. Bert sent his son, Jeffrey, to live with his ex-wife. “He’s not safe with me,” Bert said. Then he went to Steve’s place and called a liquor store on Sunset Boulevard known for making “special deliveries” to the Hills. That night, a delivery boy rang Steve’s doorbell holding a bag that included a couple of bottles of cognac—and a pistol.

Bert and Benny were sitting on the edge of Steve’s double-king-size bed, fiddling with the weapon. “Like this?” Bert asked—and the gun suddenly went off, blowing a hole in Steve’s bedroom wall. Huey might have been prepared to shoot, but Bert was not. He got rid of the gun and holed up in a friend of a friend’s house in the Valley.

“Were you followed?” Bert asked Steve when he visited the hideaway. Bert was looking nervously through the blinds. He couldn’t even go to the office. His secretary, Linda, was getting threatening calls there. Don’t worry, Steve said. This is Hollywood. No one would look for you in the Valley.



INT. DAN TANA’S RESTAURANT, WEST HOLLYWOOD—NIGHT

Dan Tana’s is swinging, as usual. An Italian joint with checkered tablecloths and dim lighting hanging over the leather booths, it is the era’s signature Hollywood hangout, where you can line up coke on the bar and get laid in the wine room. Bert has a regular booth. There, a group is huddled over drinks watching ARTIE ROSS, a young upstart in Bert’s circle, sketch details on a napkin.



“So the boat is in Miami,” Artie said, “in dry dock.” Artie was taking the lead on logistics for take two of the Big Cigar. He looked around the booth. “She’ll need some repairs if we’re going to do this.”

Bert was Artie’s mentor. Their families had been close back East. Artie left New York for Berkeley around the same time Bert moved to Beverly Hills. Artie was a raffish hippie-in-training. After college he’d spent a year in Marin County with a carpenter friend, building by hand a boat they called the *Maya*—the



“Me too!”

trimaran Bert wanted to press into service.

Artie was not political. In fact he was scared of Huey, whom he'd seen descend into plenty of paranoid scuffles. But Artie adored Bert. He came to Hollywood looking for an identity and thought he found it in Bert's ego-driven scene.

As Hollywood's elite rubbed elbows in Dan Tana's, Artie thought about seasonal airstreams and currents and how to chart a fugitive's wind-borne course over the Caribbean.

Artie had brought along a lawyer friend to vet any legal questions. She pointed out that the entire enterprise was illegal. "I was worried," she recalls. "These guys made movies for a living. They created fiction." This was nonfiction, and she wondered if they could tell the difference.

"It was real life," she says. "And it was dangerous."

Bert was still in hiding, quarterbacking the Big Cigar from his safe house in the Valley. Like Huey, he felt trapped. Not only was his underground railroad off the tracks, but there was trouble afoot in Hollywood. BBS was in peril. The company had produced a few flops and Columbia was nearly bankrupt; after a regime change, the studio tried to cancel Bert's deal.

Then Candice left him. Bert's personality was so large, Candice felt she was disappearing. She no longer wanted to play Galatea to Bert's power-hungry Pygmalion. "I finally had to escape from him," she says. "I just couldn't survive it."

Bert was heartbroken. He careened between women and tried to focus on finishing *Hearts and Minds*. Columbia was unhappy about the idea of a Vietnam documentary, but the movie was under budget—some consolation, as Bert always personally guaranteed overages. That was Bert's way, putting his ass on the line—and his house on the block—every time they made a film. He was fearless, an all-in player.

For all Bert's faults, he put his money where his mouth was, in movies and in politics. Even people who took a dim view of Bert's Panther obsession thought there was something to be said for a guy with that much to lose sticking his neck out for a friend. "Bert was fighting the good fight, at great personal jeopardy," Steve says. "How many other Hollywood producers would risk anything the way Bert did?"

It took Artie several weeks to ready the *Maya*. He traded up from the gasoline putt-putt-putt to a diesel outboard motor. He installed sonar and radar. When the boat was done, he called Bert and said he was ready.

Artie set sail for Mexico to pick up Huey. On the boat was a friend named Little John. It was one of those blue-sky, light-air days in Florida, the kind that make for easy sailing. Heading south from the Fort Lauderdale harbor, Artie left Little John on watch. But Little John wasn't a sailor. And it started to get dark.

As they passed John Pennekamp Coral Reef State Park, the *Maya* lurched suddenly. They'd hit something. Little John had taken the wrong side of a buoy and run the boat against a giant underwater statue

of Jesus—the nine-foot bronze *Christ of the Deep*, a beloved local snorkeling attraction.

Artie made the difficult decision to abandon ship. They swam to shore, where they discovered they were on Key Largo. Still wet, they hitchhiked back to Miami. Artie called Bert and explained about the underwater Jesus snafu. "Looks like Huey will have to wait," he said. Artie never sent a distress call or called the Coast Guard. He didn't want to answer any questions. He let that beautiful boat he built himself sink to the seafloor, near the bronze savior's outstretched arms.

EXT. A SEASIDE VILLA IN YELAPA—DAY

A cluster of beachside houses sit along the edge of a remote peninsula in tropical Mexico. The roofs are thatched, and hammocks hang on posts. From the open-air rooms you can see 180 degrees of deep blue Pacific. HUEY watches the horizon nervously, eyeing the boats coming from the mainland.

Benny's Yelapa compound was, in the literal sense, the end of the road. And that's precisely what alarmed Huey. Boats were the only way in—or out. He could get trapped down here by the "counterrevolutionary" *Federales*.

Huey felt vulnerable and imprisoned. Back when he'd served real time, often in solitary, Huey had learned to turn inward with meditation. But the Zen-like Huey was long gone. He kept trying to hire local fishermen to take him to Cuba, even though Yelapa was on the Pacific.

"Huey's going to blow everyone's cover," Bert told Steve. "I need to get down there."

Bert met Huey and Gwen in Mexico City, where he had moved them to an apartment. Bert stayed at the Camino Real, in Zona Rosa, the shopping and nightlife center of the city. Bert visited Abbie Hoffman, who was living there underground in elaborate disguise. Huey didn't want to wind up like that. He was sick of hiding.

"Then give yourself up," Bert told Huey. "The worst that can happen is you'll do time. They won't execute you."

Huey didn't like that answer. But he got the point and stopped complaining. "Let me handle it," Bert said. "You'll be singing 'La Bayamesa' soon enough."

Then came the phone call. It was from Artie's uncle Charlie. "I found a captain crazy enough for you," Charlie said. This guy had his own boat, lived in Colombia and made regular runs to the States. Charlie didn't ask the captain's business but suspected "he wasn't sightseeing." The captain was Scandinavian and apolitical. This job was for the money, \$15,000, and he wanted a guarantee he'd be reimbursed if his boat was confiscated.

Bert agreed and asked the captain's name. Charlie didn't know and didn't want to know. Charlie told Bert he called him what everyone called him: the Pirate.

EXT. THE PIRATE'S 40-FOOT CLIPPER—DAY

THE PIRATE stands topside, looking the part, a leathery seaman offering a hand to HUEY and GWEN as they step aboard. Huey is clearly out of place on the boat.

Forty feet doesn't sound so big when you head for the ocean. The Pirate unties the lines and starts raising the sails.

Huey and Gwen set sail on Thanksgiving eve, 1974. After months of delays, they flew to Cozumel and waited, as instructed, for the Pirate. Bert had gone back to Los Angeles; he and Steve crossed their fingers when they got word that the Pirate's ship was under way.

It was late fall in the Caribbean, and the boat hit serious swells. Huey and Gwen, unaccustomed to boating, got seasick. They slept topside and ate crackers. As the skies cleared, the trip became pleasant. The Pirate sat in the cockpit with his guitar and sang Jamaican songs. They saw schools of flying fish breaking free into the air. Gwen thought the Pirate, whose skin was parched and scaly, looked like a fish who had escaped the depths.

When land appeared on the horizon, the Pirate considered the options for the final leg of Huey and Gwen's voyage. They had planned to head to shore alone in a Zodiac—an inflatable motorized craft—so the Pirate could stay out of Cuban waters. But the Pirate reckoned that Cuba was still 15 miles off, with rough seas in between. Huey had no idea how to pilot a small craft in those waters. It would be even more challenging at night, since they planned to come in under cover of darkness. But he insisted.

"We've come this far," Huey said. "We have no choice." The Pirate joked that he'd wait offshore to collect their bodies.

They inflated the Zodiac. Huey and Gwen boarded uneasily in difficult waves and immediately lost an oar. They had five gallons of gas and the remaining oar if the gas ran out. Gwen brought her suitcase, packed with their clothes, cosmetics and a letter in Spanish explaining their identities and revolutionary solidarity. The Pirate wished them luck as Huey started the little nine-horsepower motor and turned the nose to shore.

The only landmark was a lighthouse, flashing twice every 15 seconds. For hours, the motor whined as Huey tried to keep the boat steady. The waves had grown to five feet, and they nearly capsized. After 11 hours, daylight revealed they were near shore but even nearer to a churning reef. By then Huey had realized they had no life preservers. They were out of gas, paddling with one oar.

The reef raised roaring waves that broke over volcanic rocks. Huey tried to steer, but the water was in control. He was a long way from Oakland and Beverly Hills. When he'd titled his autobiography *Revolutionary Suicide*, this wasn't what he had in mind.

On the shore, onlookers had gathered. The Zodiac overturned a few hundred yards out. Huey and Gwen clung to each other and slowly made it to shore. The two were soaking wet, exhausted and cut by the rocks when they walked ashore and got picked up by the local Committee for the Defense of the Revolution. Despite all the fuss about official introduction to the Castro regime, no one knew who they were. It took Huey several hours to convince them he was a famous revolutionary from California who was here to join Fidel. When Huey pointed out they had been invited, the local

gendarme responded, "Well, we didn't shoot you, did we?"

Back in Los Angeles, Bert and the rest of the Beverly Hills Seven quietly celebrated Huey's successful escape. He wound up living in exile, cutting sugarcane and repairing trucks for a few years. Bert visited Cuba several times, with Candice Bergen, Francis Ford Coppola, Terrence Malick and others in tow.

Huey read a script by Artie Ross based on the Big Cigar. He liked it, and Bert tried shopping it around town. Warner Bros. was interested. Richard Dreyfuss was attached and added some of his own dialogue. Candice Bergen wanted to play the starlet, the character that was based on herself. So did Julie Christie, and she was attached instead.

The film was never made. Warner Bros. backed off and Bert was distracted. The times were changing. By late 1974, the writing was on the wall for the New Hollywood era. *Jaws* was just around the corner and with it would come the blockbuster mentality, opening weekend grosses, franchises. Bert had finished *Hearts and Minds*, but Columbia didn't want to release it. The last vestiges of 1960s idealism were giving way to the apathy of the 1970s.

If the revolutionary vision had disappeared, it was partly the fault of the revolutionaries, many of whom lost their way, often in the wilds of sex and drugs. Bert had introduced cocaine to American culture with *Easy Rider*, and he became an addict himself. Like many of the New Hollywood titans, Bert's candle burned bright and fast. He liked to say he was good at tactics but bad at strategy, and he was unprepared for the long game in Hollywood. Some people from that era didn't survive long: Artie died tragically in 1975 while administering an unwise dose of laughing gas to himself straight from the tank. After BBS fell apart, Steve mostly retired. Bert found himself in a kind of exile. The last real production effort under the banner of BBS was the caper they called the Big Cigar.

Bert did manage one last radical act in Hollywood. He bought back *Hearts and Minds* and saved it from oblivion in Columbia's vault. Released in 1974, it won an Academy Award for best documentary. When Bert appeared onstage to accept the Oscar in a white, three-piece tuxedo, he offered "greetings of friendship to all American people" from the North Vietnamese government.

As usual, Bert relished the stir. It will just help the movie, Bert told the papers, and that helps the message. *Hearts and Minds* was a success, just as Bert had hoped. He brought politics to the people and made a few bucks to boot.

When Bert started producing *Hearts and Minds*, he asked the director, Peter Davis, what he thought the film was about. Peter waxed academic about interrogating the American soul on the verge of empire.

"What do you want to see?" Peter asked Bert.

"What I always want to see," Bert replied. "Lines around the block."

