

It was Morocco's 'Argo' — but with drug smugglers making the film

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Scott Stevenson, a Downey native who now lives in Florida, talks about the hidden reason for making the 1972 short film "Medina." Daniel Miller Los Angeles Times.

There are parts of Scott Stevenson's time in the 1970s as a drug smuggler he'd like to forget. Especially toward the end of the run, when the operation led by his older brother began selling cocaine and things turned sinister.

But the Downey native remembers the fun of it too, when he was a hippie teenager flirting with pretty girls in the belly-dancing bars of Fez and cruising the crowded streets of the Moroccan city in a Mercedes-Benz.

And he's still perversely proud of the idea he says he came up with to make it easier to move hundreds of pounds of hashish out of Morocco, an outlandish scheme with a Hollywood sheen: He and his brother Ron would make a film in the North African country as a front to cover up their illicit drug trade.

"The idea was that the movie would be a diversion if the feds or customs in Morocco" got suspicious, Stevenson said of the filming of the 1972 experimental short film "Medina."

"We wanted to always have a reason why we were there," said Stevenson, 61. "The whole point was to smuggle hash."

The "Medina" scheme — with a plot twist that was part "Easy Rider," part "Argo" — might seem hard to believe if everyone involved weren't so willing to admit their roles in the caper now, more than 40 years later.

"Yes, the movie was a front," said Rodney Stair, who worked with the Stevensons on the "Medina" operation.

William "Oley" Henrickson, who served time in prison in the 1980s on drug charges, makes no bones about his involvement in the Moroccan venture.

"I did what I did, and I'm not ashamed of it," Henrickson said. "That wasn't no big thing."

Erika Linn, who was married to Henrickson at the time, said she heard many conversations about the caper.

"They were being flamboyant about it," Linn said. "I remember them yapping about it."

The prequel

Stevenson says he was ushered into the criminal trade by his brother Ron, who in the late 1960s had fallen in with the Orange County drug gang called the Brotherhood of Eternal Love — the "Hippie Mafia."

(Ron, who was later accused by federal prosecutors of masterminding a \$300-million Sonoma County-based drug ring that spanned four continents, hasn't been seen since 1982 and is presumed dead.)

In 1969, at the urging of his brother, Stevenson headed to Hawaii, where he met a producer who was there to make the Jimi Hendrix documentary "Rainbow Bridge" for Warner Bros.

Stevenson, then 16, got a job providing food to the film's crew. (He is listed as a production assistant in the movie's credits.) The film, released in 1972 to poor reviews, centered on the world of the occult and concluded with a Hendrix concert. "That was one of the greatest times of my life," said Stevenson, who now suffers from Parkinson's disease and lives in Florida. "We had psychics ... we had clairvoyants from South America, we had tai chi people, we had yoga people, we had astrologers."

Drug use was rampant during production, but the imprimatur of Warner Bros. gave things a professional aura, and authorities left the filmmakers alone, Stevenson said.

When he returned to California, he mentioned this to Ron, whose drug business was flourishing, Stevenson said. Ron had by then parted ways with the Hippie Mafia and was expanding his own drug operation. Eventually, he enlisted his father, Theodore, who became involved in the management of the enterprise's money matters, according to Stevenson and a newspaper account from the era. What if the brothers moved the business closer to the lucrative cannabis fields of Morocco?

The shoot

"Medina," shot over the course of four meandering months in 1971, was a trippy documentary short directed by the late Scott Bartlett, who by all accounts had no knowledge of any drug smuggling.

Ron Stevenson is listed as a producer in the opening credits; Scott Stevenson was a boom operator.

"I held the mike a lot," Scott said of his role in making the film, which appears on YouTube in a low-quality, unauthorized version. But his main job was to oversee the cannabis fields, where he lived in a mud hut without electricity. There, the drugs were prepared for shipment and packed into the secret compartments of two Volkswagen Westfalia buses.

Stevenson said that each vehicle, which did double-duty carrying the movie equipment, could hold 250 pounds of hash. "My job was to pack it into the vehicles and do quality control. It was pretty well hidden." The drug-packed buses were destined for the U.S. via Europe, he said.

Henrickson, who had first smuggled drugs with Ron in 1969, said he was the one who prepared the two Volkswagens used in the "Medina" venture.

"We used the filmmaking as a front for the smuggling operation," said Henrickson, who now lives on a ranch in Lake County in California. "I was operating the smuggling end of the situation."

He said that he outfitted the Volkswagens with custom-made fiberglass containers that were inserted into cavities in the vehicles' floors, boasting, "I never lost a load."

Stair, who had met Ron in 1968 and says he soon became a member of the Stevensons' drug-smuggling team, was conscripted to drive one of the buses and expected to receive \$25,000 for the job.

But he ended up not driving a bus; instead, he was then called into action on another adventure, this one in Afghanistan. He went with the flow of things.

"We were laid-back guys," said Stair, who served prison time in the 1980s on drug charges and now lives in the Coachella Valley. "Most of us didn't think we were doing anything that wrong."

In 2013, Stevenson self-published "Scoundrels in Paradise," a louche look at his family's illegal operation. Laced with outrageous tales of money foolishly spent, wild drug use and travel to far-flung locales, the book has been optioned by reality television producer Jeff Singer, whose credits include "Top Chef" and "Blind Date."

"We ate at the best restaurants, bought the best clothes," Stevenson said. "I had seven gold Buddhas around my neck and a 75-gram gold chain. I once bought a pocketful of diamond, ruby and sapphire rings — they were \$700 or \$800 apiece — and I'd give them out if I met a girl I liked."

The unsuspecting

Despite the flash, even those close to the brothers were unaware of their exploits. Mark Stevenson, 56, was a middle-schooler when he visited his older brothers in Morocco while they were making "Medina," which was shown at the San Francisco International Film Festival in 1972. He wasn't aware of the smuggling operation. But he had his suspicions.

"I saw my brothers smoking herb with all their friends," said Mark, who now lives in Sebastopol and wasn't involved in the drug-smuggling ring. "I kind of knew something was up."

Stevenson's older sister, Teddi Bush, said that her brothers told her that they were in Morocco to make movies.

"Obviously, they lied to me," said Bush, who also was not involved in the drug operation led by Ron, who authorities believe was killed in Mexico, noted a 1995 article in the Press Democrat of Santa Rosa, Calif.

Bush said she eventually realized something illegal was going on when she visited her brothers in Northern California in the early 1970s.

"I walked in and they showed me a whole suitcase full of money," she said. "Then I went, now I know what they do."

Several people involved in the scheme, including Stevenson and Stair, said filmmaker Bartlett, who died in 1990, was unaware of the drug-smuggling operation.

"There was no reason to tell him," Stair said. "These [buses] would be at another site, being filled. I don't think he had a clue."

Bartlett's son, Adam Elon Bartlett, said he was unaware of the Stevensons' illegal business.

"My dad never told me that he had any knowledge of that — and he was pretty open about his drug use," said the younger Bartlett, an Oakland-based chiropractor.

Eventually, however, the Stevenson ring would make headlines.

Going bust

A Los Angeles Times article about the 1987 indictment of Ron and 12 other members of the Stevenson ring said that it was alleged to have "imported marijuana, hashish and cocaine worth more than \$300 million in street value from Mexico, Morocco, Colombia and Thailand."

Scott, who was no longer working with his brother Ron at the time of his disappearance, said he isn't concerned about being targeted by law enforcement now.

"I have no worry about the feds bothering me," said Stevenson, who wasn't named in the indictment and believes the statute of limitations on his participation in Ron's drug conspiracy has passed.

(The statute of limitations for a criminal conspiracy extends five years from "the last act by any co-conspirator," said Loyola Law School professor Laurie Levenson, a former assistant U.S. attorney. "If there is any branch or tentacle of the conspiracy that has operated within as many as five years, he may still be on the hook. But it wouldn't be easy for the government to bring this argument. In the real world, I would guess that the statute has run.")

Looking back on his time as a drug smuggler, Stevenson has few misgivings.

"Regrets? I regret not ever finishing high school or university, but I never regret doing what I did as far as the pot goes," he said. "I never, ever felt guilty."

Among Stevenson's fondest memories are his times in Morocco. He remembers sleeping in the grimy hut near acres of cannabis. He remembers packing the buses with drugs. And he remembers a ride in a Mercedes through Fez on a moonlit evening.

"I'll never forget: I was sitting on top of the car, and we were driving through Fez and all these kids started crowding around," Stevenson said. "Not 20, 30.

Hundreds of them. And they asked, 'Where are you from?'

"I pointed to the moon."

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