

## For twenty years, Anthony Pellicano was Hollywood's Fixer. Then, a few months ago, things turned strange.

by Kim Masters

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"SWEETIE, THE REASON I'm calling you is because you're a friend."

That's how Anthony Pellicano, private eye to the stars, explains why he's returning my call. Pellicano--whose clients have included Michael Jackson, Roseanne, Kevin Costner, Farrah Fawcett, and even Ed McMahon--is in trouble with the law. In December, he was indicted for allegedly keeping enough illegal explosives in his office on Sunset Boulevard to supply an Al Qaeda cell. So it is a surprise to hear back from him. Not quite as surprising, perhaps, as the reason that he's giving for making the call, since our entire relationship consists of one brief conversation. On the phone. In 1996.

But this is Hollywood, sweetie.

Whatever happens in court, Hollywood's leading tough-guy private investigator--a balding, fifty-eight-year-old high school dropout has already gotten the one kind of press he doesn't want. Whether he can ever get his professional life back, even if he's exonerated, seems doubtful. "If I needed a detective, he would have been my go-to guy," says a prominent producer. "I wouldn't want to be associated with him now."

A few days after the call, Pellicano stands outside the courtroom in a black mock turtleneck and gray jacket, awaiting his arraignment. He says he was thinking of retiring in three years anyway. Maybe sooner now. "One sin too many," he muses with a slight shake of the head.

He pleads not guilty. And outside the courtroom, his attorney, Donald Re, expresses outrage that a "responsible person" like Pellicano has been charged with a felony in this matter. He promises that a "legitimate" reason for the presence of the weapons will be forthcoming. But not today.

Pellicano is far from friendless. Among those supporting him is heavy-hitting attorney Bert Fields, whose clients include Tom Cruise, John Travolta, Warren Beatty, and Dustin Hoffman. That's a source of considerable comfort to Pellicano.

As is the memory of a picture that his mother hung on his bedroom wall when he was a child. It showed a little girl standing under an umbrella in the rain. The caption read,

"Come what may."

The trouble that's come Pellicano's way began when federal agents searched his office in November. They had already arrested Alexander Proctor, a dubious ex-con who was suspected of vandalizing a Los Angeles Times reporter's car last summer. Apparently the idea was to discourage her from writing about an alleged Gambino-crime-family extortion plot against fading action star Steven Seagal. In recorded conversations with an informant, Proctor claimed that Pellicano had hired him to harass the reporter at Seagal's behest. When federal agents searched Pellicano's office, they found a cache of weapons and slapped on the cuffs.

So far, Pellicano has been charged only in connection with the explosives; authorities have not formally linked him to the threat against the reporter. The U. S. attorney's office declines to say whether it is pursuing such a link.

Our close friendship notwithstanding, Pellicano tells me he can't really talk about his case. Nonetheless, a few ideas are communicated: He's prepared to go to prison, which is just as well, since the charges carry a maximum of eleven years; he's no friend of Seagal's; and he isn't going to tell his clients' secrets or flip on anyone--unlike that squealer Seagal, who talked to the reds during their investigation of the alleged extortion plot (in which Seagal himself has not been charged with wrongdoing). Since Pellicano is a repository of dark secrets, his resolution to maintain his silence is undoubtedly consoling to an unknown number of the rich and famous.

Pellicano has impressed many of those clients with a hard-boiled shtick that now seems to be biting him in the rear. He has long portrayed himself as someone who would go to bat--maybe literally--on behalf of a famous client. He liked to flash around a Louisville Slugger and has claimed that he's used it off the field of play. In 1992, he told journalist Peter Wilkinson that with martial arts he could "really maim" someone. "I don't want to," he said. "I have and I don't want to."

As he once put it, he was a kid from the streets of Cicero, Illinois, who "could have been a criminal just as easily" as ... whatever it is that he has turned out to be.

Since Pellicano's rendition of Pellicano is so broad as to border on self-parody, it's been hard to tell whether he is more evil than ridiculous or the other way around. Even some of those who helped make his career have never

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been sure how much to believe. "He's an odd, quirky personality, and you really don't know if he is who he pretends to be," says Howard Weitzman, who introduced Pellicano to Hollywood when he hired him to work on his successful defense of automaker and accused drug dealer John De Lorean in 1983.

But Hollywood wasn't put off. Pellicano appealed to the community's appetite for power--especially the exotic, possibly extralegal kind--as well as its relentless paranoia. "In this town, everybody is so afraid of everything, and there's so much shit--sex and drugs and rock `n` roll--that if anybody has the least bit of information, they can blackmail you," says a leading agent who's familiar with Pellicano. "You would pay a guy fifty grand to take care of [a problem] even if it doesn't exist."

But even those who now say they never took him that seriously say Pellicano wasn't just about style. He is considered one of the nation's leading experts in "forensic audio"--his own term for authenticating and enhancing sound on tape. He has worked as a technical expert for attorneys all over the country and, he lets it be known, also for various government agencies, including the FBI and the Los Angeles Police Department. While the LAPD says there's no record of him actually doing so, retired robbery-homicide detective Turn Lange, who came to fame during the O. J. Simpson trial, says Pellicano did act as an unofficial, unpaid consultant to the department.

"I can work on dead bodies all day, but I don't know a damn thing about electronic surveillance," Lange says. "He had some equipment that was better than what we had." What did Pellicano get in return for this help? Nothing, Lange says, not even a willingness to look the other way if the cops suspected him of crossing the line. But he acknowledges that he never thought of Pellicano as a Boy Scout. "You never really know what's going on with folks involved in that type of work, if you get my drift," Lange says. "Anthony--he seemed to be on the edge a lot."

Pellicano claims that he mostly used his powers for good. When he took one of his children to the dentist recently, he told friends, the doctor's eyes filled with tears as she thanked him for what he did "for those kids down in Birmingham." Turns out it was Pellicano who sweetened the muffled old tapes that recently helped convict Thomas Blanton Jr. and Bobby Frank Cherry of the church bombing in Birmingham, Alabama, that killed four little girls forty years ago.

Through his various methods, Pellicano also had a knack for digging up dirt that discouraged those who, in one way or another, plagued his clients. Sometimes, as rumor has

it, he could manufacture brand-new dirt if necessary. If an unhappy wife wanted out of a marriage, the stories go, her husband might suddenly find that he was irresistible to a stunning young woman who happened to be a paid professional. It's called a "honey trap."

Pellicano started out inauspiciously in the sixties, working for the collections department at Spiegel Inc. After a stint at a now-defunct private-investigation firm, he started his own business under the stagy name of Tony Fortune. In 1974, he filed for bankruptcy, listing among his creditors one Paul DeLucia, son of a reputed mobster and godfather to Pellicano's daughter. He subsequently had to resign from the Illinois Law Enforcement Commission.

But after the De Lorean trial helped establish him in Los Angeles, Pellicano went on to cut such a dramatic figure that director Michael Mann discussed a television series based on him. Through Mann, Pellicano met producer Jerry Bruckheimer already on the A-list with pictures like *Top Gun* and *Beverly Hills Cop*. At the time, Bruckheimer's debauched partner, Don Simpson, was facing a suit from a former office worker named Monica Harmon who alleged all sorts of bad behavior in which Simpson--now long dead from drugs--certainly engaged, from ingesting cocaine in the office to making Harmon deal with hookers.

Pellicano was dispatched to discredit Harmon, and the suit eventually evaporated. Simpson, in the meantime, became positively infatuated with Pellicano. Simpson's lawyer, Bert Fields, also became a devoted Pellicano fan. Fields acknowledges that Pellicano has been involved in "dozens of cases" for his firm. Pellicano always had a gift for making his clients feel that they were in capable hands.

At least, such was the case until last June. That's when federal prosecutors in New York arrested Seagal's former producing partner, Jules Nasso, in connection with the alleged mob extortion scheme against Seagal. Two reporters for the Los Angeles Times, Paul Lieberman and Anita Busch, started to cover the story.

A few weeks later, Busch found her windshield smashed. There was a dead fish and a rose, and a sign saying, "Stop." Busch went into hiding and stopped working on the story. The New York-based Lieberman, on the other hand, was never threatened and continued to write about the case.

Many believed that the attack on a journalist seemed inconsistent with mob methods, especially given the theatrical details and the fact that no one in New York--home of the Gambinos--was threatened. Some of Busch's fellow journalists were skeptical about her story.

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But in October, Alexander Proctor was formally charged in her case; he pleaded not guilty, but he's been sitting in prison ever since. His trial is set for February 18.

An informant--himself under indictment for conspiracy, fraud, and other transgressions--had led the police to Proctor. He claimed Proctor was a busy runner of hard drugs who had asked the informant to manufacture Ecstasy. He also said Proctor had confided to him that a detective agency had hired Proctor to "blow up" a reporter's car. Police sent the informant back to Proctor wearing a wire. In recorded conversations, federal agents say, Proctor claimed that Pellicano had hired him to "set fire to" Busch's car. Worried about being seen by her wakeful neighbor, he opted instead for the fish and the rose.

Proctor also is alleged to have said on the tape that Seagal had hired Pellicano for the job but that Proctor was supposed to make it look like "Italians" were responsible. Proctor told the informant that he had owed Pellicano \$14,000--for what is unclear--but he'd wiped out the debt with his work on this matter. Pellicano's lawyer flatly denies any involvement by Pellicano in the Busch case (as does Seagal's attorney on behalf of his client).

Soon after federal authorities arrested Proctor, they searched Pellicano's office. When they asked him if there were any weapons on the premises, he mentioned two guns in his desk drawer. The agents found them--both loaded. Then they checked two office safes. There they discovered more than fifteen bundles of cash, most bearing \$10,000 wrappers; two dummy hand grenades altered to render them lethal; and more than a quarter of a pound of C-4 plastic explosives, enough to bring down an airliner. Pellicano was jailed but then released on \$400,000 bail.

According to a federal affidavit, Pellicano told an agent during the search that these items were from an old case and that he had forgotten about them. But the government affidavit said an FBI expert found that the plastic explosives seemed "significantly fresher than the C-4 that he generally encounters." The government also pointed out that the plastic explosives had been stored adjacent to ablating cap "in a position that could cause sympathetic detonation." That could have sparked an explosion that would, as the affidavit said, "kill anyone in Pellicano's offices" and possibly the neighbors, too.

The news created a sensation in Hollywood, where people began to ask: Is Pellicano more dangerous than anyone suspected? Or is Pellicano, who has boasted of belonging to Mensa, in danger of having his membership revoked?

Pellicano's public statements suggest that he's not averse to violent methods. And he also has a suggestive history when it comes to harassing reporters. One such was Rod Lurie, a former journalist who is now a film director (*The Contender*). In 1989, Lurie was researching an article about *The National Enquirer* when he got hold of a confidential list of the paper's paid tipsters. A short time later, Pellicano called Lurie, who said the detective became "very threatening [and] told me in no uncertain terms that he was working for the *Enquirer* and he was being paid a lot of money to get this file back."

The threats were never specific, Lurie explains. "I recall one phrase: 'Your life is going to change in ways you never previously would have imagined,'" Lurie says. "I don't recall him promising harm would come to my person," Nancy Griffin, the editor who was assigned to the story (and a former colleague of mine), remembers a call from Pellicano warning, "Bad things can happen to nice lady editors."

Meanwhile, Lurie says, "all sorts of weird things" happened to him. He found that a diamond store in San Jose with which he had never done business had run a credit check on him. Finding that he had "credit issues," Lurie adds, Pellicano offered sympathy. But Pellicano made it clear that he knew things Lurie had said in conversations with others. "What he was very good at was raising the specter of paranoia," Lurie says. "This was a guy who really has an ability to unnerve you."

In the midst of it all, in March 1990, Lurie was knocked from his bike by a hit-and-run driver, breaking some bones. He doesn't claim that Pellicano was somehow involved in the accident, but Lurie says Pellicano may have wanted him to think so when Pellicano called him shortly afterward. "Pellicano knew about it awfully fast," he says. "But that could be drama-queen stuff--on his part or mine."

In the end, Lurie's story on the *Enquirer* was published despite Pellicano's vow that it would never see the light of day. "He tried blackmail, bribery, the works," Lurie says. "But the story went ahead."

So how dangerous is Pellicano? It's going to be hard for him to come up with a good explanation for possessing the weapons. The most benign hypothetical, offered by a prominent producer, is that Pellicano might have been keeping toys for pampered Hollywood twits who want to play war games in the desert. No doubt that would strike the court as an excellent excuse.

Former Los Angeles detective Mark Fuhrman, who once

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retained Pellicano and came away a satisfied customer, is dumbfounded by the charges. "The last time I saw hand grenades and C-4 was 1975, when I was getting out of the Marine Corps," he marvels. "I mean, there's a lot of things people can get busted for, but--jeez."

Weitzman says he, too, is stunned by the allegations. "I've never heard of Anthony physically assaulting somebody," he says. "You just had the feeling that he might. It would be surprising to me that he did it. Even that he would order somebody to do it.... He would set a trap for you with honey. That's inconsistent with a broken windshield and a dead fish."

Fields is standing by his man. When the prosecutor opposed bail, Fields wrote a letter to the federal court urging his release. He says he has never known Pellicano to break the law. "Not for me," Fields says. "He always carefully says he's acting within the law."

And what of Seagal's role? His attorney, Martin Pollner, says it's his understanding that Seagal and Pellicano are not even on speaking terms. He says Seagal told him Pellicano had been deployed against Seagal in an unrelated lawsuit. Pollner declines to identify that case, but it turns out to be a suit by Gorry Meyer & Rudd, a Los Angeles law firm, which alleges that Seagal failed to pay it more than \$250,000 in legal fees.

A rival private detective, William Pavelic, says he met with Seagal several months ago in connection with this marten "He felt intimidated by a civil attorney that retained Anthony Pellicano as his investigator," Pavelic says. "Not only was he intimidated, he was worried about his house being bugged, his car being bugged." Pavelic opted not to take the case.

As the tale becomes ever more convoluted, the only thing everyone seems to agree on is that Pellicano and Seagal don't like each other much. And to be sure, it's hard to imagine that Pellicano, having been retained to investigate Seagal, would then go to work for him. But this is a strange case in a strange town.

Meanwhile, the investigation of the vandalizing of Busch's car continues. For his part, Seagal is talking to federal prosecutors about the mob extortion case in New York. And Pellicano waits, lips conspicuously sealed, to find out his own fate.

It all brings to mind Kurt Vonnegut's admonition: Be careful what you pretend to be.