



Joseph Bonanno Sr., 1936

IN 1971 GAY TALESE PUBLISHED "HONOR THY FATHER." THE product of six years spent with mafioso Bill Bonanno as he evaded police and sidestepped rivals fighting for control of the powerful New York Mafia family founded by his father, Joseph (Joe Bananas) Bonanno, Talese's book was the first work of nonfiction to break omertà, the code of silence, and capture the strange combination of the menacing and the mundane that defines the life of the modern mafioso. Bonanno could be violent, charming, selfish or thoughtful—but he was always human. The next year, "The Godfather" arrived in theaters. Grand and operatic, it went on, with its 1974 sequel, to win nine Oscars. But Francis Ford Coppola's story wasn't true. Talese's was.

Now, three and a half decades later, audiences have been infatuated with the story of another fictional Mafia clan, the Sopranos—and Talese has again persuaded their real-life counterparts to talk. Like "Honor Thy Father," "The Sopranos"—which just concluded its six-season run—is a domestic drama that emphasizes characters over crimes, grit over glamour, family over "the family." In its final episodes (especially the shocking—and inconclusive—series finale) the show focused on the question at the heart of Talese's book: born with Mafia blood and a Mafia name, what kind of life can a Bonanno (or Soprano) hope to lead? Following the success of "Honor Thy Father," Talese diverted the profits into an educational trust designed to pay for any higher education the children of Bill and Rosalie Bonanno chose to pursue. For those looking for closure on one Mafia tale, in this NEWSWEEK exclusive, Talese returns to the Bonanno home in Tucson, Ariz., and reports on how Charles, Joseph, Felippa and Salvatore, now in their 40s, have grappled with being children of the Cosa Nostra at the start of the 21st century.

Tony Soprano's Mafia family was fictional. Joe Bonanno's was not. Gay Talese reveals what happened to the next generation of the American mob.

Honor Thy Family



BY GAY TALESE

I FIRST MET CHARLES BONANNO IN NEW YORK IN THE mid-1960s when he was a timid and often terrified adolescent living in a Mafia household where the sofas and floors were regularly occupied at night by snoring bodyguards whose outstretched legs Charles often tripped over in the morning on his way to school, once splitting open his head on a piece of furniture and leaving a trail of blood along the rug.

This was a time of martial law within the Mafia, and the 450-man Bonanno organization was central to the conflict. In 1964, when Charles was 6, his Sicilian-born grandfather, Joseph Bo-



THEN AND NOW: Left, the Bonanno family, from New York, in 1970; left to right: Charles, Salvatore, Rosalie (mother), Felippa, Bill (father) and Joseph; above, members of the Bonanno family together again in Arizona in 2007

nanno—a leading mafioso in America since the 1930s era of Prohibition—was suddenly overtaken one night by armed gunmen on Park Avenue South in Manhattan and driven off toward what the next day's tabloids would speculate was his final destination. More than a year later, with still no public evidence of the existence of Joseph Bonanno—he was still in hiding—Charles's 31-year-old father, Bill Bonanno, while en route to negotiate a settlement with quarreling factions, was nearly killed in a late-night ambush in which 20 bullets ricocheted off the sidewalks and brick buildings in a area of Brooklyn that the Bonanno leadership had long seen as friendly territory.

Bill Bonanno remained in hiding for several days while his wife, Rosalie, dwelled with her four children—and the bodyguards—behind the lowered shades of her suburban home in East Meadow, on Long Island. Police cars cruised regularly along their street, and sometimes members of the press gathered along the sidewalk taking pictures and approaching the Bonanno children as they walked together toward the nearby school: "Where's your grandfather?" they asked, usually directing the question to the eldest one, Charles, who had recently turned 8, and unhesitating-

ly assumed the role of the senior family spokesman. "We don't know," he said. "And what about your father?" "We don't know," he repeated, continuing to lead his siblings at a steady pace toward the school.

I actually knew where their father was during this time, for Bill had rung the doorbell of my apartment in Manhattan shortly after he had been set up to be killed in Brooklyn. I had met him a year earlier, in 1965, during my final year as a staff writer on *The New York Times*, having covered the story of his being subpoenaed by federal authorities in New York demanding to know the whereabouts of his father, Joseph, the patriarch of the clan. Bill told them that he did not know, a response that would earn him five months in jail for civil contempt. While after his release I pursued Bonanno often for interviews, always without success, he did agree from time to time to see me "off the record" and have dinner in certain New York restaurants where he never needed a reservation. And during the winter of 1966 I gained not only his confidence but visitation rights to his home on Long Island, where I gradually came to know his wife and four children: the green-eyed adopted Charles (obtained at 18 months from a cocktail waitress in San Diego who had been abandoned by a U.S. Navy man), and Charles's brown-eyed Bonanno kinsmen: 5-year-old Joseph (who was frail and sickly), 3-year-old Salvatore (who was pugnacious and liked wrestling with the bodyguards) and 2-year-old Felippa (who was spoiled and whose pierced ears held tiny diamond earrings).

I sometimes wondered what would happen to these children in later years. Would they inhabit homes without bodyguards?

