



# American Desperado: My Life--From Mafia Soldier to Cocaine Cowboy to Secret Government Asset

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In 2008 veteran journalist Evan Wright, acclaimed for his *New York Times* bestselling book *Generation Kill* and co-writer of the Emmy-winning HBO series it spawned, began a series of conversations with super-criminal Jon Roberts, star of the fabulously successful documentary *Cocaine Cowboys*. Those conversations would last three years, during which time Wright came to realize that Roberts was much more than the de-facto “transportation chief” of the Medellin Cartel during the 1980s, much more than a facilitator of a national drug epidemic. As Wright’s tape recorder whirred and Roberts unburdened himself of *hundreds* of jaw-dropping tales, it became clear that perhaps no one in history had broken so many laws with such willful abandon.

Roberts, in fact, seemed to be a prodigy of criminality – but one with a remarkable self-awareness and a fierce desire to protect his son from following the same path.

*American Desperado* is Roberts’ no-holds-barred account of being born into Mafia royalty, witnessing his first murder at the age of seven, becoming a hunter-assassin in Vietnam, returning to New York to become -- at age 22 -- one of the city’s leading nightclub impresarios, then journeying to Miami where in a few short years he would rise to become the Medellin Cartel’s most effective smuggler.

But that’s just *half* the tale.

The roster of Roberts’ friends and acquaintances reads like a Who’s Who of the latter half of the 20th century and includes everyone from Jimi Hendrix, Richard Pryor, and O.J. Simpson to Carlo Gambino, Meyer Lansky, and Manuel Noriega.

Nothing if not colorful, Roberts surrounded himself with beautiful women, drove his souped-up street car at a top speed of 180 miles per hour, shared his bed with a 200-pound cougar, and employed a 6’6” professional wrestler called “The Thing” as his bodyguard. Ultimately, Roberts became so powerful that he attracted the attention of the Republican Party’s leadership, was wooed by them, and even was co-opted by the CIA for which he carried out its secret agenda.

Scrupulously documented and relentlessly propulsive, this collaboration between a bloodhound journalist and one of the most audacious criminals ever is like no other crime book you’ve ever read. Jon Roberts may be the only criminal who changed the course of American history.

## **American Desperado: My Life--From Mafia Soldier to Cocaine Cowboy to Secret Government Asset Details**

Date : Published November 1st 2011 by Crown (first published 2011)

ISBN : 9780307450425

Author : Jon Roberts , Evan Wright

Format : Hardcover 560 pages

Genre : Nonfiction, Mystery, Crime, True Crime, History, Biography

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## **From Reader Review American Desperado: My Life--From Mafia Soldier to Cocaine Cowboy to Secret Government Asset for online ebook**

### **Sherri Bergman says**

Wow. I read to discover worlds that don't touch mine. This was some eye opener.

Jon Roberts is a fascinating man. The action (and Wright's ability to facilitate but not get in the way of the story) makes this an easy, I'm embarrassed to say, entertaining, read, but it inspired increasingly difficult questions in my time away from the book. Despite what would be his protestations to the contrary, Roberts seems to have a moral code. The kneecapping, the trunk, the I knew he was a good guy. There's some notion of what good or, at least, loyal is. Trying to figure out the constants was fascinating. Roberts is evil, but his constant insistence that he's evil makes you wonder.

The book was useful. My arguments with my own children about drug use often focuses on the supply chain. Don't buy free trade organic village-women empowering chocolate and then blindly purchase weed from who knows where with no notion of who is getting hurt at the other end. This book provided plenty of fodder.

I'm curious as to Wright's views of the human condition. So much of his work has dealt with the ugliest corners of our lives - pornography, war, crime, extreme racism. His ability to find humanity in the places that most of us avoid is extraordinary. I hope Wright will someday write his own story. What draws him to these places? What keeps him there? What has he learned? Does he steam his asparagus?

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### **Tomasz says**

Greatly written book about life of a man who started as a soldier in Italian mafia and ended as a most influential American member of Colombian drug cartel.

Book contains everything a good action title need: murders (plenty), sex, bribes, smuggling, CIA, top secret government operations. It describes many anecdotes from live's of people who became very rich too quickly: putting gold teeth for beloved dog, sending favourite dish to friend using Air Forces aircraft or sailing a motorboat to another country to buy delicious bread.

It reads very fast and I've found it pretty difficult to put it away on the shelf so there were some sleep deficiencies during this reading :)

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### **Mark Bunch says**

Horrible story of an evil person who personifies the American criminal mastermind and socio-path. This guy is the real thing. It is a very interesting USA tale but it gives understanding how bad some people really are. This story has it all. The man was born in the blueblood of the criminal world. Once he moved from NYC to

Miami he made it big, huge.

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### **Jennifer says**

Wow. It actually disturbs me that people like this exist in the same world as I do. It made me feel a little bit better to find out Jon is now dead, but let's be honest. There are plenty of people just like him or worse floating around this world. Some of the things Jon recounted made me laugh out loud out of sheer disbelief. Teeing cherries off out of Playboy bunnies' ass cracks, snorting coke with well known celebrities (including members of the Steelers right before their Superbowl appearance), shoving a pistol entirely into a guy's mouth... I mean, seriously? Holy. Freakin'. Cow. My life is so boring. Of course, much that Jon says about himself and his private life needs to be taken with a grain of salt. How reliable is he? We rarely get input from others from his past, and when we do, they often contradict him. In reading up a bit about him after I finished reading, I see that he was arrested for stalking an ex-girlfriend, among other things. Would Jon have ever revealed that about himself? Unlikely. The arresting officer also stated that he found out Jon was some sort of informant, although Jon says in the book that he only gave info on Noriega and one murder for the huge cut in his sentencing. Even little me from Minnesota can say with some assurance that that story stinks. But of course he would cover his own ass. Who is going to admit to being an ongoing informant for the police in that sort of violent world? An idiot, that's who. No matter what also Jon may or may not be, he did not seem like an idiot.

This book also reveled a terrible depth of corruption in America. We think of Central American, African, or Asian countries as riddled with corruption, but not our government! Most of us would assume that those we elect to positions of leadership are mostly doing our duty to the country and to us, and when a story like that of Rod Blagojevich breaks, we are all shocked and make a lot of noise. However, Jon spoke of paying off cops, judges, Congressmen, etc. as if it were commonplace. And it probably is. But this book won't change anyone's mind about the War on Drugs or the power of government... people will see this is as book about one man's life as a "Cocaine Cowboy".

I recommend this book just for the sheer shock and entertainment value. If you are squeamish, or if you abhor violence and stories of violence, run away.

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### **Elias McClellan says**

American Desperado, Jon Roberts' autobiography with Evan Wright, is better than this type of book should be. Most true-crime books begin with a definition of terms or a humanization of the subject with lines like, "Fothermucker McGee speaks in the coarse language of the street which belies his inherent sensitivities and intelligence." If, however, the writer has no ties to the subject, he/she often will take the moral high ground with little or no objectivity. Mr. Wright does neither. His introduction is Jon Roberts' own assertions that he is evil and evil has supported him quite well.

It will come as no surprise to anyone who reads true crime books that there is considerable overlap between Roberts and prominent organized crime figures like Gambino and Gotti and Lansky--all of whom put in appearances as Jon Roberts progresses from broken-home punk to NYC street hood to Gambino soldier. It's only after the early establishment pages, that Mr. Wright gets out of his own way that we get to details of that life.

Even still, it's another 100 pages before Roberts gets to Miami--where the book really takes off--his first

forays into the cocaine business, and then his full-tilt ascent to the top of U.S. narco-trafficking. Sadly that means first third of the book is slow, bordering on tedium. However, if you read through, your patience is rewarded with a wealth of details and insight you can only get from someone with an immunity deal.

Is there BS here? It wouldn't be an as-told-to mafia memoir without a healthy cartload of BS. However, to Mr. Wright's credit, he never claims friendship, or sheds his objectivity, (as evidenced by extensive annotation of Roberts' claims). Further, there is a read-between-the-lines treasure hunt for any student of the '80s' cocaine empires, the associated criminal excesses, and the political chicanery that made it all possible.

If you read this book, do yourself a favor and also read *Cocaine Politics* by Peter Dale Scott as a companion. While the title would rightly suggest, Mr. Scott's book is a "dryer" read, the scholarly study is also an excellent supporting reference and balm for the numerous "Oh, you've got to be kidding me!" eyeballing aches that come from Mr. Wright's history of the cocaine cowboys and their wild Florida hijinks.

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### **Matt Peters says**

Awesome biography (about a horrible person) and portrait of the 1960s, 70s, and 80s underworld.

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### **Jeffrey says**

Very compelling biography of Jon Roberts.

Sometimes the writing is a bit boorish. I mean that even and above the fact that you are reading a book about a mafia/cartel drug smuggler.

I wish that all those half-talented military scifi authors who so disappoint me would read this book for descriptions at least the military sections, they attempt to create the feel that this guy (or Evan Wright's voice) and fail.

There's a journalistic conceit here that I love, where the author breaks out of the narrative occasionally to call Jon on his BS or to give additional information or sometimes correct the flawed tales. This information is almost always an excellent addition and worth breaking the narrative.

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### **Greg Cummings says**

Couldn't put it down. Carried the book around like a weapon for a week. It awoke something in me, as only a handful of other books have done.

Jon Roberts lays all his cards on the table, tells the brutal truth about a lifetime of violent crime, an unrepentant "wise wiseguy" who always learned from his mistakes and lived by two rules: crime does in fact pay and evil is more powerful than good. Still Even Wright, who co-authored the book, manages to show us a more vulnerable person than the one Roberts portrays. It wasn't just to avoid the heat after he murdered his business partner that he abandoned organised crime in New York City and moved to Miami in the mid-70s.

He had aspirations beyond the Mob, and he wanted to have fun in the sun. His arrival in South Florida coincided with a rising tsunami of Columbian cocaine that was about to engulf the US. Roberts made sure he rode the crest of the wave, earning hundreds of millions of dollars as a smuggler until his arrest.

Wright skilfully organises Robert's vivid recollections into a gripping narrative, giving full flow to his rapid wit and fast-flowing streams of consciousness. Robert's memory is like a newsreal, countless detailed observations of crime scenes in which he was usually the perpetrator. Wright seeks to corroborate stories he hears from Roberts, especially his more audacious and savage claims. Chillingly, he finds evidence to back most of them up.

American Desperado is a well-researched and touching profile of one of the most successful criminals who ever lived, a fascinating insight into the mind and the heart of a man you will not disagree is totally beyond redemption.

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### **Megan Tristao says**

I'm really not sure how to rate this one. It was full of despicable acts, misogyny, disgusting scenes and sordid activity. If I hadn't been reading it for my library's book club, I probably would not have finished. However, it is an "autobiography" (kind of), so if these tales are true, what else do you want him to say? Others may find it interesting, but it was too hedonistic and unrelenting for my tastes. I alternated between the eBook and eAudiobook in order to finish it in time, and I would actually recommend the audio version because the book is basically a compilation of transcripts, so the audio reads well.

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### **Austin says**

Wow, what a fascinating read. Jon (Riccobono) Roberts was the EVIL Forrest Gump. Roberts and Wright weave a narrative spanning many cultural eras that was as disturbing as entertaining. His insights into the life of a child of an old school gangster who witnesses his father casually commit murder grow into the life long criminal who is now trying to raise his son not to be like him is captivating. If you enjoyed Goodfellas, Platoon, French Connection, Miami Vice, or American Made this book has something for you.

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### **Nick Moran says**

Equal parts outlandish and gruesome, just like you'd expect, but what really sets it apart is the practical wisdom delivered in the style of Henry Hill from Goodfellas. Just got out of jail? Avoid associating with other criminals who might turn you in for a reward. Happen to get indicted? Don't panic because those indictments are always inflated. Leave a safety deposit box full of cash in a bank that's since closed down? Get ready for an IRS tax bill.

Between the housebroken jungle cat, the outrageous murders, and the dog with gold-plated teeth, I'm not even sure what my favorite part of this was. It's hard enough to narrow down my favorite University of Miami-adjacent moment: how Jon loaned cash to the guy who just paid for Miami's indoor practice facility, or how he used to cruise the campus passing out quaaludes. Griselda Blanco's boyfriend was a Hurricanes fan. Hell, even Ray Liotta, who played Henry Hill in Goodfellas, is a proud graduate.

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### **Przemysław Garczyński (3telnik.pl) says**

Pracuj dla mafii -> zostań baronem narkotykowym -> zarabiaj setki milionów dolarów -> wykiwaj organy prawa na wszystkie możliwe sposoby.

Czekam na przyszły rok i ekranizację pt. "Cocaine Cowboys"!

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### **Patrick O'Neil says**

Jon Roberts is not a nice person. But to describe him as pure evil? Hitler was definitely pure evil. Pol Pot was evil. Even a small time serial killer like Jeffrey Dahmer was evil. Jon Roberts? He was an egotistical sociopath. Not a nice guy. Not someone you want to hang with. Not anyone you could trust to not stab you in the back. But the pure evil moniker is just sensationalism. It sells books. Roberts hasn't done more evil than half the other mafia hit men of renown. And really, the "evil" of what he did do was import so much cocaine that millions of Americans' lives were destroyed by addiction. But really what I found most offensive about *American Desperado* was what I dislike about a lot of "tell all" memoirs from former Mafiosas. There's no redemption, no remorse, no introspection on what they did. And even though Evan Wright can put together a great book of interviews, the reader is ultimately left with the subject and here it's Jon Roberts who in the end is not very likable. In fact he is, as I have already stated, an egotistical sociopath and that's where the book left me. I can only read so much of the same bragging bravado without that person taking responsibility for what they have done. Although I found the early portion where Roberts ran a lot of the clubs in NYC during the '70's that I used to go to was the most interesting, somewhere around page 200 I just sort of gave up reading.

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### **Socraticgadfly says**

A very dirty book. Not in the sense of pornography, though Playboy Bunnies, as well as prostitutes, are on a few pages. But, rather, very "dirty" in the sense of the dirtiness of the Mafia's violence, the dirtiness of its involvement in drug trafficking, and the dirtiness of the government's "War on Drugs": corrupt cops, corrupt politicians, corrupt judges (at the state level, at least, due to most states electing them) and more. Ileana Ros-Lehtinen is in Congress today because her hubby, a Florida state DA, cut a "smelly" deal that kind of smeared her first Congressional opponent, for example.

Jon Roberts was long known as one of America's top "cocaine cowboys." You'll learn his part in getting Medellin Cartel cocaine distributed across the U.S. and more, along with other players such as pilot Barry Seal, killed after a double-cross; Ricky Prado, a Cuban-American hitman later to become a top CIA asset personally lauded by President George W. Bush for his part in the War on Terror and retiring as the CIA equivalent of a two-star general, and more.

Author Evan Wright is painstaking in trying to verify all claims of Roberts', no matter how outlandish, and usually succeeds.

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## Priscilla says

I don't know where Evan Wright finds these people. This is the most fascinating, heart-breaking and frightening book I have read this year.

I became interested in Mr. Wright's work through Generation Kill. This is totally different. American Desperado is the life of gangster, cocaine smuggler and all around dangerous dude Jon Roberts in his own words, but with Mr. Wright in the book, too, leading us through this man's life.

I received an advance copy of American Desperado three days ago from a friend who works at a book store. I could not put it down. I barely slept until I finished it...and when I did I had nightmares.

Jon Roberts has dedicated American Desperado to his young son, and Mr. Wright explores their relationship in a few of the chapters.

What will his son think of his father when he reads this book?

Early in the book Jon Roberts describes watching his own father--a New York mafioso--murder a man in front of him. This led to an amoral sense of the universe and a life of crime.

His life reads like a twisted version of American history--running with the Mafia at 17, then Vietnam, taking over New York discos for Carlo Gambino, hanging out with his friend Jimi Hendrix, giving LSD to Ed Sullivan, murdering various business associates, then onto Miami where he smuggled cocaine for Pablo Escobar and guns for the CIA--all while living with his fashion-model wife and commuting around town in his own helicopter.

Some of Jon Roberts's life was chronicled in the Cocaine Cowboys documentary (which I have only seen pieces of). In American Desperado he adds much more, and Mr. Wright adds copious footnotes documenting (or in a few places challenges) some of the most outrages stories.

What to make of this? Parts of this book made me angry. Roberts is an evil man, and throughout he has a pattern of getting away with everything. Roberts, who seems to admit to killing a half dozen or so people and was convicted of smuggling billions of dollars worth of cocaine, only served three years in federal prison. Go figure.

One of the things that disturbed me is that I came to sort of like Jon Roberts, and was rooting for him as he cut his path of destruction through the world.

I give this book a high rating because it was a great read, but also because it surprised me--not just with what happened in the pages, but with how I felt about Jon Roberts as I followed him through his world.

I am very worried about his son when he reads it some day.

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### **Cara says**

Well holy crap. This guy has had SOME life. I first learned about him from watching the documentary 'Cocaine Cowboys'; he pretty much single-handedly started the cocaine smuggling in the 70s and 80s that had a huge impact on the Miami culture. But his story is even more interesting than that- from a Mafia family, Vietnam vet, and crazy as all getout while also pretty freakin' brilliant. I was sad to finish this one...super interesting.

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### **Stephen says**

Very interesting book - reads like a Don Winslow drug/mafia novel, except that this one is all true ! Very scary stuff and quite revealing about the dodgy activities of famous people like James Caan,OJ Simpson and George Bush... Not for the faint hearted though - extreme violence throughout and description of his time in Vietnam (apparently US govt let violent criminals off their charges if they would go and fight in Vietnam) is particularly horrific.

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### **Kevin says**

This was a great book, but to truly enjoy it I think you first have to watch the documentary "Cocaine Cowboys". The documentary focuses on the cocaine trade in Miami in the early 80's and Jon Roberts is one of the central characters. The book is an autobiography that goes into more detail on his crime life before and after those events. Some of it is a bit over the top, but you can tell most of it is true and he pulls no punches. He really lays it out there in terms of a living a life of crime.

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### **Wanda Keith says**

This book is supposedly a true story about the son of a Mafia kingpin who turned from the Mafia to being a drug lord in Florida. The story is told to Evan Wright by Jon Roberts. Roberts is the drug lord and he tells some pretty amazing stories about his time in both the Mafia in New York and his drug dealing days in Florida. The stories he tells sound pretty far fetched and only some of them can be verified. However, if even half of these stories are true then this guy was a very bad dude. Roberts did serve some time in prison but the time was cut short due to his taking a deal. Interesting read.

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### **Michael Flanagan says**

There is so much I like about this book and much that did not sit well with me. Evan Wright tells us the story of the rise of the Cocaine Cowboys and the rise of Miami as the drug capitol of the USA. He tells this story mainly through the eyes of one of the original cowboys. The story is in two parts that run parallel with each other. We get an insight into the life of the cowboy post prison as the author spends a lot of time with Jon Roberts as he is told his tale. The second part is the life of ?Jon as a ruthless crime boss in which money is never a concern.

Both story arcs intertwined well together and told a highly interesting story of excess, greed, crime and violence. This book delivered the high quality of journalistic investigation that I have come to expect and love of Evan Wright. What I did not like about this book was how he let Roberts drift off on tangents and the right way to inflict pain on someone. The first one had some merit as it let you see just how much a sociopath he was. But after that all it did was to allow Roberts to stoke his own ego.

Overall Evan Wright has delivered another great book that lets you look into the other side of society. He has a great knack of bringing the reader into the world of the subject matter he is writing about. Apart from my earlier quibbles I would still recommend this book without hesitation.

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