

GRAND JURY TARGET LAWYER'S ALLEGED DRUG USE

Detroit Free Press (MI) - Monday, November 10, 1986

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A federal grand jury wants to investigate possible drug use by Detroit criminal defense lawyer **W. Otis Culpepper**, according to federal court files. But **Culpepper**'s former law partner, Domnick Sorise -- facing a possible prison term for contempt of court -- is refusing to answer the grand jury's questions on that subject.

Sorise's silence is based on an immunity agreement with the U.S. Attorney's Office to testify only about bookkeeping and some financial matters while ruling out drug-use inquiries, according to a legal memorandum filed by Sorise's lawyer, Richard Lustig.

The grand jurors' questions are delving into the prohibited area, Lustig's memorandum said. Lustig also said questions beyond finances might violate rules of secrecy governing attorney-client relations for Sorise, who represented **Culpepper** in a divorce.

The U.S. Attorney's Office has asked that Sorise answer the grand jurors' questions or face possible imprisonment for contempt of court.

A hearing is scheduled Nov. 21 before U.S. District Judge Avern Cohn to determine if Sorise must choose between answering or being jailed for contempt.

The legal memorandum and other documents do not specify what type of drug-use the grand jury wants to probe.

CULPEPPER -- WHO GAINED prominence for his high-profile defense of Detroit area drug-ring figures and murder defendants -- is the target of a grand jury investigation.

Sorise's friends and associates said the threat of prison is unlikely to force Sorise to testify against **Culpepper**.

"Domnick's a stand-up Italian kid from the east side of Detroit," said a close associate who spoke on condition of anonymity. "He can't testify against someone, no matter that they've had a parting."

Although the focus of the probe is possible income tax violations, the grand jury's proposed line of questions about possible drug use appears to confirm earlier speculation by **Culpepper**'s lawyer that the investigation had other goals.

While declining to comment on the most recent development, Dennis Hayes, **Culpepper**'s lawyer, previously likened the income tax probe to the first movements in "the dance of the seven veils."

Hayes, in earlier interviews, said some law enforcement tactics seem "to be trying to drive a wedge between alleged felons and their seeking legal help and representation."

He also said the federal officials have "mere suspicions" of wrongdoing about **Culpepper** .

CULPEPPER HAS BEEN the subject of persistent speculation about the extent of his relationship with members of the Young Boys Inc. drug ring, whom he defended in criminal cases.

Culpepper , declining to comment on the current grand jury investigation, has said courthouse and police gossip naming him the YBI corporation counsel is "ridiculous,"

People familiar with some aspects of the grand jury probe said authorities want to find what happened to millions of dollars YBI supposedly amassed before being dismantled by a federal sweep in 1982 and 1983.

Assistant U.S. Attorney Jeffrey Foran declined to comment, citing stringent secrecy rules governing grand jury proceedings.

In seeking Sorise's answers to the grand jury's probe into possible drug use by **Culpepper** , the U.S. Attorney's Office contends that the grand jury is an independent body free to question witnesses on its own without being bound by prosecutor's agreements.

The grand jury investigation covers **Culpepper** 's income tax returns from 1979 through 1982, during and after his partnership with Sorise, according to court records.

In a deal struck between the U.S. Attorney's Office and Lustig, Sorise agreed to discuss only "bookkeeping and procedural questions" about money handling by the partnership, according to an exchange of letters between Lustig and the U.S. Attorney's Office.

The agreement said Sorise would not be questioned by the U.S. Attorney's Office "about the use of drugs by clients and or Mr. **Culpepper** ," Lustig said in his legal memorandum.

Lustig argued that a grand jury's independence is limited in matters of immunity because only the U.S. Attorney's Office has the power to grant it.

THE GRAND JURY, Lustig argued, cannot investigate areas foreclosed by the U.S. Attorney's Office immunity agreement.

Culpepper 's evolving personal style -- and courtroom success -- has chafed some law enforcement personnel.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, **Culpepper** 's courtroom wardrobe often was a collage of corduroy coats, cowboy boots and patched jeans.

By the mid-1980s, **Culpepper** 's symbols of success included a Rolls-Royce, a Mercedes-Benz, tailored suits and Brooks Brothers shirts. They were offset somewhat by his braided hair and baseball and Greek fisherman caps.

He has since given up the luxury cars for a compact Japanese pickup truck.

Sorise and **Culpepper** were law partners in the late 1970s and early 1980s. As partners -- Sorise doing the legal bookwork and **Culpepper** handling the courtroom duties -- they established a successful criminal defense practice, including winning the dismissal of murder charges against a high school basketball coach accused of a highly publicized series of prostitute slayings.

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W. Otis Culpepper

Caption: Photo

Edition: METRO FINAL

Section: NWS

Page: 3A;

Index Terms: INVESTIGATION ; COURT ; ABUSE ; DRUG ; W. OTIS CULPEPPER;
YOUNG BOYS ; INC

Record Number: 8602200939

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