

Gang: 'Best Friends' were enemies of organized society in Detroit

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For Brown, the May 1992 slayings were business as usual, authorities say. As the head of "Best Friends," Brown and his younger brother, Terence "Boogaloo" Brown, carved an imposing niche with bullets, dope and fear. Authorities say the duo, along with two older brothers and other gang members, murdered as many as 80 people in the 1980s and early 1990s, making them Detroit's most ruthless murder-for-hire drug gang.

Now the life of the 27-year-old Reggie is on the line. If convicted, he and four cohorts could become the first Michiganders ever sentenced to death under a 1988 federal law that allows capital punishment in drug-related slayings. Their trials begin early next year.

Brother Terence, 25, also faced similar charges, but last August, while on the run from the law, he was found dead in Atlanta with a bullet in his head.

"If all of the charges are true, they are clearly the most dangerous, violent group that I've ever observed in my 28-year career with DEA," said William Conroy, who retired from the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration in Detroit to join the Arizona Alliance Narcotic Planning Committee.

"If they're convicted, they deserve the death penalty."

Drug world

In the drug world, it's a given: "Dopers" often get gunned down or do time.

The Browns were no exception. Three of the four Brown brothers — Terence, Gregory and Ezra — were murdered. Only Reggie survives, sitting in federal prison in Milan, near Ann Arbor, awaiting trial. In all, 26 Best Friends members, including two of Brown's sisters, face federal charges ranging from drug trafficking to money laundering.

Nothing telegraphed the Browns' ascension into the upper echelon of Detroit's drug world. They came from a stable family of nine children. Their father, Ezra Sr., worked 32 years at Chrysler Corp., and both parents regularly attended the Zion Hope Missionary Baptist Church, not far from their modest, well-kept Detroit home in the area of Grotz and Interstate 94.

But Reggie and Terence began straying as young teens. Both were discipline problems, and were bumped from school to school before finally dropping out of high school.

Reggie was placed on probation at 14 for carrying a revolver. Terence, said one staff member at Butzel Middle School, was a "constant behavioral problem."

Reggie's serious criminal history started at age 16, when he spent a year in the W.J. Maxey Training School near Ann Arbor for shooting a 27-year-old man in the foot with a shotgun.

Death penalty

In 1988, President Reagan signed a bill into law that allows drug traffickers to be executed if convicted of killing someone to promote their business. It applies equally in Michigan, which has no death penalty. So far, six people nationwide have been sentenced to death, though none have been executed. Under the law:

- Jurors must decide unanimously to issue the death penalty.
- Both the conviction and the death penalty decision can be appealed.
- If the sentence is upheld, those convicted would be executed by lethal injection at the federal penitentiary in Terre Haute, Ind.

People who know the Browns say their parents tried disciplining the children, apparently to no avail. "They were very family oriented; the husband and wife appeared to be very close," said Shirley Conley, secretary of the Zion Hope Missionary Baptist Church in Detroit. "The kids must have moved away from the family and gotten off on the wrong track."

Their mother, Geneva, and father declined interviews with The Detroit News, as did Reggie. The parents also had few answers for the law. When federal agents questioned the father about Reggie's whereabouts, Ezra remarked he had given up trying to get through to Reggie.

"I disowned him," he told agents. "He's not my son anymore."

The rise

By 1983, teen-agers Reggie and Terence had made clear career choices.

They sold dope and acted as enforcers for gangs that needed debts collected in their eastside neighborhood, federal authorities say. If someone needed to be punished, the Brown brothers volunteered to deliver the blows or bullets, according to court records. Reggie did some short stints in jail for assault and heroin possession.

The Brown brothers began prospering in 1984 after they hooked up with James "Big" Lamar, a major Detroit dealer.

Lamar liked their style. They were tough, eager and doing quite well running a crack house for him, according to federal law enforcement officials.

In short time, Reggie and Terence formed their own sub-gang, recruiting their older brothers Gregory and Ezra and close friends in the neighborhood, federal court records say. The Browns would gather the profits

and give a cut to Lamar.

In 1985, when Reggie was 19, Lamar bought him a Jeep to show his gratitude.

But the Brown brothers, growing in confidence and allies, began to turn on their boss. They stopped giving him a cut of the profits, and even started ripping off his men and dope houses.

To expand business, they hooked up with another dope dealer, Rick "Maserati Rick" Carter in 1986. Their reputation began to take hold, and the organization flourished.

Maserati Rick eventually introduced them to Colombian suppliers, and soon they broke off on their own, according to the federal indictment.

"Almost everyone out there would know about them," said imprisoned drug trafficker Billie Joe Chambers, serving 27 years in prison. "It just seemed like they came up overnight."

The murders, authorities charged, were used to eliminate competition or traffickers who failed to pay debts. Sometimes the executions were orchestrated to eliminate witnesses or soothe a ruffled ego. And other times they offered their services to rival gangs. A contract killing ran between \$10,000 and \$30,000, according to former Best Friends associates and competitors.

The violence set even veteran dealers on edge. "When everyone (in the drug trade) was trying to get each other they would go further — and go after your family," Chambers said to Pontiac, Benton Harbor, Ohio and Kentucky. Best Friends, associates and all, well exceeded 100 people, authorities said.

For pleasure, they went to clubs on the east side, including Radio Lounge on Harper and UBQ on Van Dyke, Climax on Mt. Elliot and Jefferson, and Pat's Lounge on Grotz.

They ordered \$90 to \$125 bottles of Piper or Dom Perignon champagne, and drove Jeeps, Mercedes and BMWs.

People who saw them at clubs said they dressed in full-length fur coats and lots of jewelry. Terence had the name "Terry" sewn inside his furs and had plenty of shoes. When federal agents raided his rented West Bloomfield condo last year, they found more than 100 pairs.

"Once I heard their names, you didn't stop hearing about them," said Chambers, now serving prison time for heading the Detroit Chambers

Brothers crack-cocaine drug gang in the 1980s.

The slaying of Kimberly "Chemico" Tumpkins helped define Best Friends' violent nature.

In the mid-1980s, Tumpkins, Terence Brown, "Maserati Rick" and others in the dope trade were having dinner at a Chinese restaurant on Harper, on the city's east side, according to a police report. Carter began teasing Brown for sitting at the same table with Tumpkins, who owed Brown \$20,000 for dope.

To save face, Brown put out a hit, according to a police report. The next day, Tumpkins' bullet-ridden body was found inside a 1986 Mercedes Benz on the shoulder of Interstate 75 in Hamtramck.

The downfall

Competing dealers, tired of being robbed and having gang members killed, put word out on the streets: Kill the Browns. Federal agents say one dealer passed out photos to his crew, if by chance, they had the opportunity to kill a family member.

On Dec. 20, 1986, someone seized the opportunity. As Terence and his brother Ezra were driving on Detroit's east side, a car pulled up and someone opened fire. Ezra Brown was dead.

A week later, another brother, Gregory "The Ghost" Brown was gunned down outside of Pat's Lounge on Grotz.

Rockin' Reggie's luck was starting to turn too. In 1987, he was charged with three murders. He was acquitted on two, but convicted on the third, a hit on Stephen Rousell, a lieutenant for White Boy Rick.

Reggie, then 22, went off to prison to serve a life sentence, leaving behind his four-month-old baby and 35-year-old girlfriend, court records show.

Terence, then 20, continued to run the gang, never losing a step, often bragging about the gang's executions, federal law enforcement authorities said.

Still, Terence remained cautious. An acquaintance of his said Brown never let down his guard.

"(Terence) always carried two guns," the acquaintance said. "If he'd come into your house, he'd never sit down. He'd always stand near the door. He wasn't being rude, just really cautious."

Despite the measures, a law enforcement net fell on Terence in 1989. He was charged with murdering his old boss, James Lamar. In March 1989, Terence pulled next to Lamar at a red light a block south of the General Motor's headquarters, and began firing his Uzi, according to court testimony.

But there were glitches in the testimony. Terence was acquitted, and he walked out of Recorder's Court ready to resume business.

In 1992, Reggie joined him once more. Holed up in various state prisons for the past four years, Brown was freed when Detroit Recorder's

Judge George Crockett III ruled that he had given the wrong jury instructions on one charge in the Stephen Rousell murder case.

In January 1992, Crockett overturned the entire case and released Brown on a \$7,500 cash bond pending a new trial.

The Court of Appeals reinstated the conviction, but by then, Reggie had vanished.

Feds moving in

In May 1992, rumors circulated that Best Friend's member Alfred "Chip" Austin was busted on federal gun charges in Kentucky and was thinking of cooperating. Family members later denied he planned to cooperate.

But in the drug world, little distinction is made between hood and rumor. So Reggie, wearing the hooded sweatshirt, shot Austin, Austin's 3-year-old cousin and two others on the porch, authorities charged.

The Brown brothers continued to keep a low profile, often running the business on the fly from Atlanta, Chicago and New York, with the assistance of phones and beepers, authorities said.

Meanwhile, the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration, the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms, and the IRS were moving closer to indicting Reggie, Terence and the gang.

"They were extremely difficult to investigate by conventional methods," said James Carter, group supervisor of ATF's Organized Crime Drug Enforcement Task Force.

"They never let down their guard, 24 hours a day. They never knew if they were going to be killed by other elements in the drug community or monitored by law enforcement."

In December 1992, federal prosecutors William F. Soisson and E. James King gathered enough evidence, and a Detroit federal grand jury secretly issued an indictment calling for six of the 29 defendants to face federal death penalty charges.

A nationwide hunt was under way. In mid-June, a horde of drug agents from Michigan and New York closed in on a BMW dealership in mid-town Manhattan in New York and arrested Reggie and fellow gang member William Wilkes, 21. Terence hopped on a motorcycle, knocked someone over with it, then ran to a subway, where he escaped.

A few months later, he'd be found shot dead in Atlanta. Clad in underwear and a Shaquille O'Neal basketball T-shirt, he was wrapped in a garbage bag and a green Ralph Lauren bed sheet and stuffed in the back of a late model GMC Yukon. He left behind three children from two girlfriends.

On July 2, Reggie and Wilkes appeared for arraignment in Detroit's federal court. Their defiance for the law was unrelenting.

Sitting in white T-shirt, khaki prison pants and gym shoes, Reggie turned to one of the Detroit drug

Where are they?

Here are some of the participants in the Best Friends saga, and where they are now:

■ Richard "White Boy Rick" Wershe Jr., 24, is in an undisclosed prison under federal protection, serving a life sentence for drug trafficking.

■ Billie Joe Chambers, 31, is in a federal prison serving a 27-year sentence for helping head the Chambers brothers crack-cocaine organization.

■ Rick "Maserati" Carter, a one-time boss of Reggie and Terence Brown, was murdered on Sept. 12, 1988 in Mt. Carmel Mercy Hospital in Detroit as he was recovering from a gunshot wound to the stomach.

■ James Lamar, 30, also a one-time boss of Reggie and Terence Brown, was murdered in March 1989 as he drove near the General Motors Building in Detroit.

agents who arrested him in New York and blurted out: "Bitch."

Wilkes then appeared before U.S. Magistrate Judge Paul J. Kovines. Wilkes' mother also had been indicted with her son for allegedly helping launder drug money.

After the proceedings, as a drug agent was walking out the door, Wilkes yelled: "Hey Tony. You (mess) with my momma, I'll (mess) with yours."

Law enforcement may have dismantled the foundation of Best Friends, but some gang members remain on the loose. The gang's legacy lives on for victims, relatives, and the city.

"The results (of drug violence) have been devastating," says N. Charles Anderson, president of the Detroit Urban League. "People have become addicted, homes have been broken up. The violence itself has contributed to the problems we've had in the community; it's brought a lot of fear, not only to residents, but also people who would do business in the city."

"Getting involved in this particular activity usually ends quickly and violently. I think it's just extremely dangerous and risky when young people do that."

For Brown, it could be lethal. "This organization had little or no regard for human life," said prosecutor E. James King, an ex-DEA agent. "If their goal was to take somebody out, they'd kill everybody and anybody around. Their reign of terror put the entire community — rivals and innocent people alike — in constant fear."

■ Detroit News Staff Writer Corey Williams contributed to this report.

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