

# The life and hard times of a Harlem drug kingpin

The documentary 'Mr. Untouchable' recalls the impact of Nicky Barnes

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Leroy "Nicky" Barnes sits alone at the head of a long table surrounded by empty leather chairs, the chairman of a board with no members. The onetime Al Capone of Harlem is backlit, his face obscured. He aimlessly tosses a mound of white powder back and forth between two playing cards — just props now — and twirls a cigar in his fingers as he quotes from Shakespeare and Machiavelli.

Oh, how the mighty have fallen. He can't be shown on camera because there's still a \$1 million contract on his life, and he lives anonymously at age 74 in the federal Witness Protection Program. Gone are the stacks of cash, the flashy clothes and the gorgeous women.

Marc Levin's documentary "Mr. Untouchable," about Barnes' life and times, comes just a week before "American Gangster," a much higher profile feature film starring Denzel Washington as Frank Lucas, one of Barnes' chief rivals in the Harlem heroin trade. Was this film's release date a coincidence? That's doubtful. The documentary wouldn't have had the same impact after "Gangster" hit the street.

Levin, a veteran New York filmmaker, skillfully mixes the Barnes interviews with news clippings, 1970s street scenes and the recollections of Mr. Untouchable's former associates, as well as those who helped put him behind bars — "for life, with no parole" — in a 1977 conspiracy trial.

The New York Times Magazine

'MISTER UNTOUCHABLE'

This Is Nicky Barnes. The Police Say He May Be Harlem's Biggest Drug Dealer. But Can They Prove It?



Nicky Barnes became famous after this New York Times story ran.

There's even the obligatory view of the New York skyline, the Empire State Building looking like a giant hypodermic needle as Curtis Mayfield's "Superfly" wails in the background. But this story takes place across 110th Street, in the days when Harlem was flooded with smack, thanks to a handful of savvy entrepreneurs from the underbelly of urban America who took what the system let them. Barnes changed the face of the drug trade by forcing the mob to deal through his syndicate, using a corporate structure he called the Council that insulated him from direct involvement.

Lucas is mentioned only fleetingly as the dealer who snuck

heroin into America in the caskets of GIs being shipped home from Vietnam. In the eyes of Barnes' lieutenants, Lucas and his "country boys" from South Carolina dressed like peasants, were ill-mannered and generally gave African-American gangsters a black eye.

The film points to a 1977 cover story on Barnes in the New York Times Magazine as a turning point for this Black Godfather of Harlem. When President Jimmy Carter saw Mr. Untouchable staring defiantly back at him over his Sunday morning grits, he ordered his Justice Department to get Barnes.

There are many questions left unanswered in the documentary,

## 'MR. UNTOUCHABLE'

★★★

With Nicky Barnes, Thelma Grant (a.k.a. Mrs. Nicky Barnes), Joseph "Jazz" Hayden, Leon "Scrap" Batts and Robert Geronimo.

Magnolia Pictures presents a documentary produced and directed by Marc Levin. Running time: 92 minutes. Rated R (for pervasive drug content, strong language, some violent images and brief scenes of nudity). Opening today at local theaters.

but it would have been valuable to have a high-ranking official in Attorney General Griffin Bell's Justice Department confirm the existence of a government campaign to put Barnes behind bars, fair trial be damned.

The trial itself, we're told, was the first in American history to have a totally anonymous jury. Was this the result of previous threats and intimidation? And was it really unprecedented? Only Barnes' lawyer weighs in on this matter, not a more unbiased legal scholar.

Barnes flipped while in prison, testifying at a 1984 congressional hearing while clad in a black hood, his face obscured, except for eye slits that revealed tears of remorse over the betrayal of his former trusted allies. Revenge was his motive, after reports reached him that Council members had turned on him. And yet, he's a free man today, while those he betrayed are still locked up.

But Barnes didn't get off scot-free. As John Gotti said about Sammy Gravano, he has to wake up every morning to the rat in the mirror. And that empty boardroom.