

Former Mafia bosses, enforcers and grasses lay bare their lives in Sir Trevor McDonald's new documentary series. And they make some very surprising confessions...

Sir Trevor McDonald has come face to face with some rum characters over the years. Dictators, warlords, unrepentant criminals, as he puts it he's 'seen a lot of nasty people'. Yet few of them left quite the same imprint as the chaps he encountered in his latest television endeavour. 'I certainly don't remember, in my long career, anyone talking to me in such a matter-of-fact way about pointing a gun and shooting someone in the back of the head, or breaking someone's eye socket,' he says.

But then the men Sir Trevor was talking to were members of the Mafia. It's a world we have seen depicted countless times in films and television series from *The Godfather* to *The Sopranos* – but which in real life has remained largely inaccessible to documentary cameras. Now however, in a two-part series for ITV, the former news presenter is shining a light into this brutal, unforgiving hierarchy and breaking bread with some of the most ruthless members of the American mob.

Among them are a former crime syndicate boss, an 'enforcer' and even a mobster-turned-government informant, the memorably named Mikey Scars, who's currently enrolled in a witness protection programme after ratting on the crime family of which he was formerly a member. His evidence placed 80 people behind bars and kept him out of jail but in fear of his life.

Mikey Scars, of course, sounds like he has walked straight out of the pages of a film script – but Sir Trevor is anxious to emphasise that when it comes to his documentaries that's where any resemblance to *The Godfather* ends. Without wishing to denigrate films like *The Godfather*, if there is any element

of glamour in the Mafia those films do tend to portray that side,' he says. 'We did something different – we just pointed the camera at people who had done the most horrendous things and had them talk about it.'

It's little surprise, given the underground nature of Mafia business, that it took months of negotiation to get to this point – once on camera, the men Sir Trevor spoke to proved astonishingly candid. Like John Alite, a former 'enforcer' who worked for late, infamous New York mobster John Gotti, and who

usually discusses the injuries he's suffered in the course of his 'work' as if they were talking about his weekly shop at the supermarket. Or Ralph Natale, the former head of the Philadelphia mob in the 90s, who shrugs that he can't keep count' when asked by Sir Trevor how many people he has killed. It was extraordinary he could say such things with such a conspicuous lack of emotion,' says Sir Trevor. 'But that is what makes these men interesting –

INSIDE THE MOB



Sir Trevor and ex-mobster Ralph Natale

you ask questions and out come these horrendous answers. You don't have to like them.'

There were surreal moments too: like the point when, once the cameras turned off, Natale talked about his affection for – of all things – the gentle ITV drama *Doc Martin*. Or the moment when, given a tour of a former mob enforcer's mansion, Sir Trevor realised he had chosen to put the gun

closet next to his teenage daughter's bedroom. 'It's a bit macabre but there's this hint of humour there,' he says.

Then there was the occasion early on during filming when the crew had arranged to rendezvous with a couple of mobsters in a local hotel. 'One of the guys walked in and said, "I know this hotel, we were involved in the building of it." And the way he said it, you knew there was a history there. And I had two large glasses of red wine very quickly,' he smiles.

Because, of course, even if you're a respected ITV documentary crew, you don't want to upset these people. 'I am under no illusion that the Mafia is utterly without humanity,' Sir Trevor says. And never more so than with their own. 'One recurring theme with those I spoke to was their sense of betrayal when things went wrong,' he recalls. 'You do a hit for the mob, you go to jail for it – and they leave your family without a penny. And that has been the

source of a lot of subsequent betrayal: when you succeed everyone is there to applaud you and when you go in the slammer they don't want to know. Another way of putting it is that they just ditch their mates.'

Not, he emphasises, that he thinks it is his role to moralise. 'Of course I was shocked by some of the things these men told me, but I'm wary of people who go around judging others. I know what I think is right and wrong – I certainly know it's not right to go and shoot people in the back of the head. But I'm one guy, not a judge, and it's not for me to put my judgements on people.'

It is a style he hopes runs through all his documentary work. 'What I don't like about television is what I call "attitudinising", or adopting a stance. I frequently think we make this mistake of underrating an audience – the people who watch these things are intelligent and they are capable of making up their own minds. There's great benefit to be

Marlon Brando in *The Godfather*

gained from not interrupting and letting people speak for themselves. It has certainly proved a winning formula so far: since retiring from *News At Ten* in 2008 Sir Trevor has made documentaries which have pulled in both viewers and industry plaudits, among them a series on the residents of America's Death Row and its follow-up *Women Behind Bars*, in which he visited some of the most dangerous female criminals in the United States.

Aside from his gentle meander down the Mississippi River in 2013, he is edgy stuff – deliberately as it turns out. 'Most of my working life I have talked to people who know the art of careful phrasing – politicians, leaders. They know how to put things and some of it becomes predictable. But when you talk to some of these damaged people what you get is as close to emotional purity as you are going to find. It's confronting the amazing range of human emotions and the amazing spread of humanity, what people are capable of.'

He is palpably proud of the *Death Row* series, citing it numerous times during our chat. So proud, in fact, he is confident enough to compare what some see as the ultimate portrait of prison on film, *The Shawshank Redemption*, which starred Morgan Freeman. 'I got to know Morgan while filming the Mississippi program,' he reveals. 'We spent a really nice time together – a couple of vodkas, and it was really lovely. I had thought that *The Shawshank Redemption* is one of the greatest films ever but after we made the *Death Row* programmes I sent Morgan a message, mutual friend to tell him I think our programme are better,' he says.

Still, now he's in his mid-seventies Sir Trevor turns 76 later this year, wonder if it isn't time for him to back a bit. A few more green miles and a bit less Green Mile? 'I'm not sure I find it more and more diminished the mental images I take from making these programmes, perhaps that's because I'm getting older,' he confesses. 'It doesn't take me to think about it and I'm not that way. Journalists by nature are restless of spirit that they get onto the next job without remembering what you did before. But with me – well I can't quite get rid of it.'

It is less of a shadow, however, than the one his Mafia men cast under. 'It is almost a cliché that the Mafia does never leave them. You get out. There was one line in *Women Behind Bars* where Mikey Scars talks about his brother-in-law says, "He worked in the Mafia, he killed him." And I wonder what the Mafia is all about.'

The Mafia With Trevor McDonald Monday 23 March, 9pm

It's Mother's Day tomorrow – in Serbia it's the mothers who give presents to their children on this special day