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Legendary porn purveyor Jim Mitchell dies

By **John Simerman**
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Jim Mitchell, the Antioch High School graduate who teamed with his brother, Artie, to build a legendary porn empire that included San Francisco's O'Farrell Theatre and several revolutionary skin flicks -- and who in 1991 shot his brother dead -- died Thursday night at his Sonoma County ranch home, family and coroner's officials said.

He was 63.

Mitchell, half of the eccentric Mitchell Brothers duo that became perhaps the nation's best-known purveyors of dirty films during their heyday in the 1970's and '80s, lived in Petaluma with his wife, Lisa. He suffered a heart attack, said Merle Lane, a relative by marriage.

"He was sitting in his chair and doing something, I think watching TV, and he just, 'Ehhhh.' That was it. His heart quit him just like that," said Lane.

It was a quiet ending to what once was a wild life of sex, drugs, porn film-making, strip shows, scores of arrests for obscenity and, in 1991, a Cain-and-Abel-style killing that opened the courtroom curtain to their brash lifestyle and sent Jim Mitchell to prison for three years on a conviction for involuntary manslaughter.

Since their days growing up in a working class Antioch family, the brothers were close and watched out for each other. Jim was two years older, a staunch leftist and savvy businessman. Artie was the younger, crazier and sexually voracious brother, according to a 1992 biography, "X-Rated: The Mitchell Brothers -- A True Story of Sex, Money and Death," by David McCumber, a former

San Francisco journalist and poker buddy of the Mitchells.

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Prosecutors colored the shooting -- on a rainy night at Artie's home in Corte Madera -- as a cold-minded bid to control his younger brother. Jim Mitchell's lawyers claimed Artie, 45, was in an alcoholic

tailspin and threatened to kill Jim. They painted the shooting as a desperate attempt to convince Artie, who had fallen into a tailspin of alcohol and drugs, to seek treatment.

Jim Mitchell was armed with a rifle, a handgun, a knife and a box of ammunition when he entered the house and fired eight shots, three of them hitting his brother, the fatal shot in the head. When police arrested him as he walked from the home, he had a .22-caliber rifle stuffed down a pants leg and a revolver in a shoulder holster.

Revealing Mitchell's wide cast of friends in San Francisco, some of the city's political elite threw their support behind a lenient sentence for Jim, writing a ream of letters to the judge. But the judge likened him to Robert De Niro's crazed, driven killer in "Taxi Driver," saying: "You became Travis Bickle and as a result, Artie is dead. And despite his faults, Artie did not deserve to die."

Mitchell, who walked away from San Quentin State Prison in 1997, has since lived a quiet life, with horses on the ranch, said family members and friends.

"He seemed terrifically happy," said Jeannette Etheredge, owner of the Tosca Cafe in North Beach, where two decades ago the brothers often partied.

Mitchell was no longer involved in the day-to-day operations of the business, which includes a porn film operation and the theater. But a family member said he periodically checked in on the theater at O'Farrell and Polk streets that anchored his porn fame, and where deceased gonzo journalist Hunter S. Thompson once served as night manager.

A manager at the club declined to comment on Mitchell or his death, saying, "It just happened. We're just trying to take care of business." He declined to give his name.

Etheredge, who said she had spoken with Mitchell but hadn't seen him in years, fondly recalls "a lot of good times at my bar."

"It just all happened too quickly," she said of those days. "(They) were quite a pair. I always liked Jim. He was always the sweeter, kinder (brother), a genuinely good guy. Whenever we needed anything, for a film festival or charities, he would always step up to the plate."

The brothers' porno kingdom began modestly in Antioch, where Jim graduated from the high school in 1962. They sold nude photos to flesh magazines in San Francisco during the sex explosion of the late '60's.

Soon they were making small porn films. They reached cult status, fame and profit in 1972 with "Behind the Green Door," starring porn icon Marilyn Chambers, followed by "Resurrection of Eve" in 1973, "Sodom and Gomorrah: The Last 7 Days" in 1975 and several other now-cult films that were hailed for taking porn from the dark, dirty corners with higher production values, humor and social commentary.

In all, the brothers would produce hundreds of films, face and beat more than 100 arrests on obscenity charges and help pave the trail for what has become a multi-billion dollar adult movie industry.

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Artie Mitchell, left, with brother Jim, at their O'Farrell Theater in San Francisco in December...

1 2 »

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