

NO ONE IS INNOCENT: THE RONNIE BIGGS STORY

From small-time crook to family man to the world's most famous punk-rocking, beach-basking fugitive, this brash Brit captured the heart of a nation...and drew the ire of Scotland Yard.

A NARCHY IN THE U.K.

The greatest train robbery in British history was not orchestrated by Ronnie Biggs, nor did he have a big part in the heist. In fact, shortly before it took place—coincidentally on the night of Biggs's 34th birthday in August 1963—he had all but given up a life of crime.

Born in 1929 to a poor family living in a poor section of South London, Ronald Arthur Biggs had been in trouble with the law since he was a teenager. Prone to stealing anything that wasn't nailed down—pencils, pills, cars—he was caught as often as he was not, and spent much of his early adulthood behind bars. It was there that Biggs learned a trade, house-painting, and by his 30s, he had decided to go legit. Biggs married, had two sons, and tried to make an honest living as a painter. It turned out that he wasn't a very good painter, either, and he was having trouble paying the bills. So he phoned a friend.

AN OFFER HE COULDN'T REFUSE

When Biggs called Bruce Reynolds, an old prison buddy, in 1963 to ask for a loan of £500 to “tide him over,” Reynolds offered Biggs something better—a job. And not just any job, but a role in a train robbery the likes of which had never been seen in the U.K. Biggs's answer: No. He couldn't risk losing his family to more prison time. But Reynolds pressed on, promising Biggs a payday of at least £40,000 for one night's work. And Biggs wouldn't even have to do the actual thieving. All he had to do was recruit a friend of his who could operate a train and then keep the actual train driver quiet while more experienced criminals did the hard stuff. Reluctantly, Biggs signed on. He told his wife he had an out-of-town painting job that would take a few weeks. Then he and Reynolds headed for the English countryside to meet up with the rest of the gang.

Moby Dick author Herman Melville was once imprisoned in Tahiti. His crime: mutiny.

TRAINSPOTTING

There were 16 men in on the job, a joint venture of two South London gangs. Some were responsible for obtaining vehicles, others for arranging hideouts, one to follow train schedules, and Biggs's friend to drive the train. The plan: Stop the Glasgow-to-London mail train in remote Buckinghamshire in the middle of the night, break in, drive the locomotive and the money car to a bridge, and then steal the load of used bills that were on their way to London to be destroyed.

Working from a rented farmhouse, and relying on information provided by British mobsters, the job went down at 3:30 a.m. on August 8. One of the men tampered with a signal to stop the train. Then the strong-arms, posing as rail workers, overtook the mail crew, beating the driver senseless. One problem: Biggs's friend couldn't get the train to start back up, and it needed to get to a bridge where a truck was waiting. So they revived the injured driver and made him do it. Then the men formed a human chain to carry the 120 bags of money to the truck. It wasn't pretty, but the job was over in 40 minutes. When the gang got back to the farm, they realized their haul was *huge*: £2.6 million (\$3.8 million U.S.). It was Biggs's 34th birthday, and a happy one at that.

PRINTS OF DARKNESS

But their celebration was short-lived. Although the job was successful, they weren't too adept at covering their tracks. The initial plan was to burn down the farmhouse and with it all of the evidence—money bags and everything else they touched, including beer bottles and Monopoly game pieces. But the investigation by Scotland Yard was unprecedented in its size and scope, and within a day, the gang learned that the police were honing in on the farm, so they abandoned it, not wanting to start a big summer fire and give away their position. Reynolds hired a man to clean up the incriminating evidence, but instead the “cleaner” took his payment and ran, making it easy for the cops to lift fingerprints and track down most of the 16 train robbers, including Biggs. Little of the money was recovered. Biggs had hidden his share, a whopping £147,000.

The press coverage—like the loot—was also bigger than they had expected. Their names were plastered over papers worldwide, and Biggs, though he played only a small part, became famous. Wanting to make an example of Biggs, the judge sentenced him to 30 years at Wandsworth Prison in London. The day he arrived, Biggs started planning his escape.

Until President Kennedy was killed, it wasn't a federal crime to assassinate the President.

RUN, RONNIE, RUN

In 1965, after barely a year and a half in prison, Biggs and six other inmates used a homemade rope to climb a wall and jump into a waiting lorry. While Biggs fled to the countryside, the embarrassed British police force launched a massive manhunt all over the U.K. But Biggs was gone. He made it to Paris, where he received a painful round of reconstructive surgery. With a false identity and altered face, one “Terrence Furringer” quietly boarded a flight bound for Australia.

There, Biggs met up with his wife and two sons in Melbourne, and they were able to live quietly for a few years under the radar. But as the other escapees were rounded up, Biggs became the only member of Britain’s Great Train Robbery still on the lam. That made him among the most wanted men in the world. When tipsters steered the police to Australia, Biggs knew he had to run again. He said good-bye to his family and caught a flight for South America, first landing in Bolivia and then spending time in Argentina and Venezuela. By this point, however, his loot had all but run out and he was once again making an honest living as a construction worker. He was careful not to break the law for fear of extradition back to England, where a maximum-security cell was waiting for him. With a decade gone by since the Great Train Robbery and his daring escape, Biggs faded out of the public eye...for a while.

THE UNABASHED BANDIT

In 1974, through a ruse by London’s *Daily Express* offering Biggs £50,000 for an exclusive interview, British police tracked him down in Rio de Janeiro. Word of the capture got out, and Biggs’s name once again made headlines. Scotland Yard officials, patting themselves on the back for a job well done, were preparing to extradite him back to Britain. But then Biggs caught a huge break: He’d taken a mistress in Rio (one of several, actually), and she was pregnant with his baby. According to Brazilian law, he could not be deported if he was the sole source of income for his family. And just like that, Ronnie Biggs got to stay in Rio.

His status as antihero skyrocketed in England. Not only was he part of the fabled Great Train Robbery, but he escaped from prison *and* outsmarted Britain’s top cops. But the real kicker was that Biggs was allowed to live in paradise...in plain sight. That’s about as big as an “up yours” as anyone could give to Scotland Yard, and rowdy British youth took notice.

John Dillinger was known to offer cab fare home to his hostages when he released them.

CRIME DOES PAY

In 1978, after Johnny Rotten left the Sex Pistols, the remaining two members of the seminal punk rock band went to Rio and tracked down Biggs. They set up a recording studio in a church, procured a lot of booze, and Biggs—wrinkled and gray—belted out the lead vocals on the Sex Pistols' single "No One Is Innocent." Here's a verse:

God save politicians! God save our friends the pigs!
 God save Idi Amin and God save Ronald Biggs!
 God save all us sinners! God save your blackest sheep!
 God save the Good Samaritan and God save the worthless creep!

Biggs was more than a fugitive, he was a hero—and a tourist attraction to boot. Not allowed to take a real job in Brazil because of his legal status, he took to charging tourists to spend time with him. "If you can't live off the money you stole," he said, "at least live off your reputation as a thief." For \$60, visitors could indulge in "The Ronnie Biggs Experience" at his small villa. They'd enjoy a pleasant meal, a poolside party, and the star attraction: listening to Ronnie Biggs make fun of the Scotland Yard detectives who couldn't have him. However, he was trying to support *two* families, so he wrote a book telling his version of events called *Odd Man Out*. (The Rio tourist industry made out okay as well, selling Ronnie Biggs T-shirts and coffee mugs in souvenir shops.)

But the Brits kept the pressure on. In 1981 he was actually kidnapped by bounty hunters and loaded into a sack on a yacht bound for England. He was freed in Barbados and went straight back to Rio.

LONDON CALLING

By 2000, Biggs was 71 years old and wanted to go home to England. He hoped his age and poor health would keep him out of prison, but officers were waiting when his plane landed at Heathrow Airport, and they took him straight to his prison cell. Biggs's fans were incensed at the inhumane treatment; his critics wanted him to rot in there. After several rejected appeals, Biggs was finally freed in 2009 after a stroke had left him unable to move or speak. But the old man, reputed to be "dead within days," thumbed his nose one more time at Scotland Yard. How? He got better. As of 2011, Ronnie Biggs, 82, is still kicking. "There's a difference between criminals and crooks," he says. "Crooks steal. Criminals blow some bloke's brains out. I was a crook."

The last stagecoach robbery in America took place in Nevada (1916).

Whi