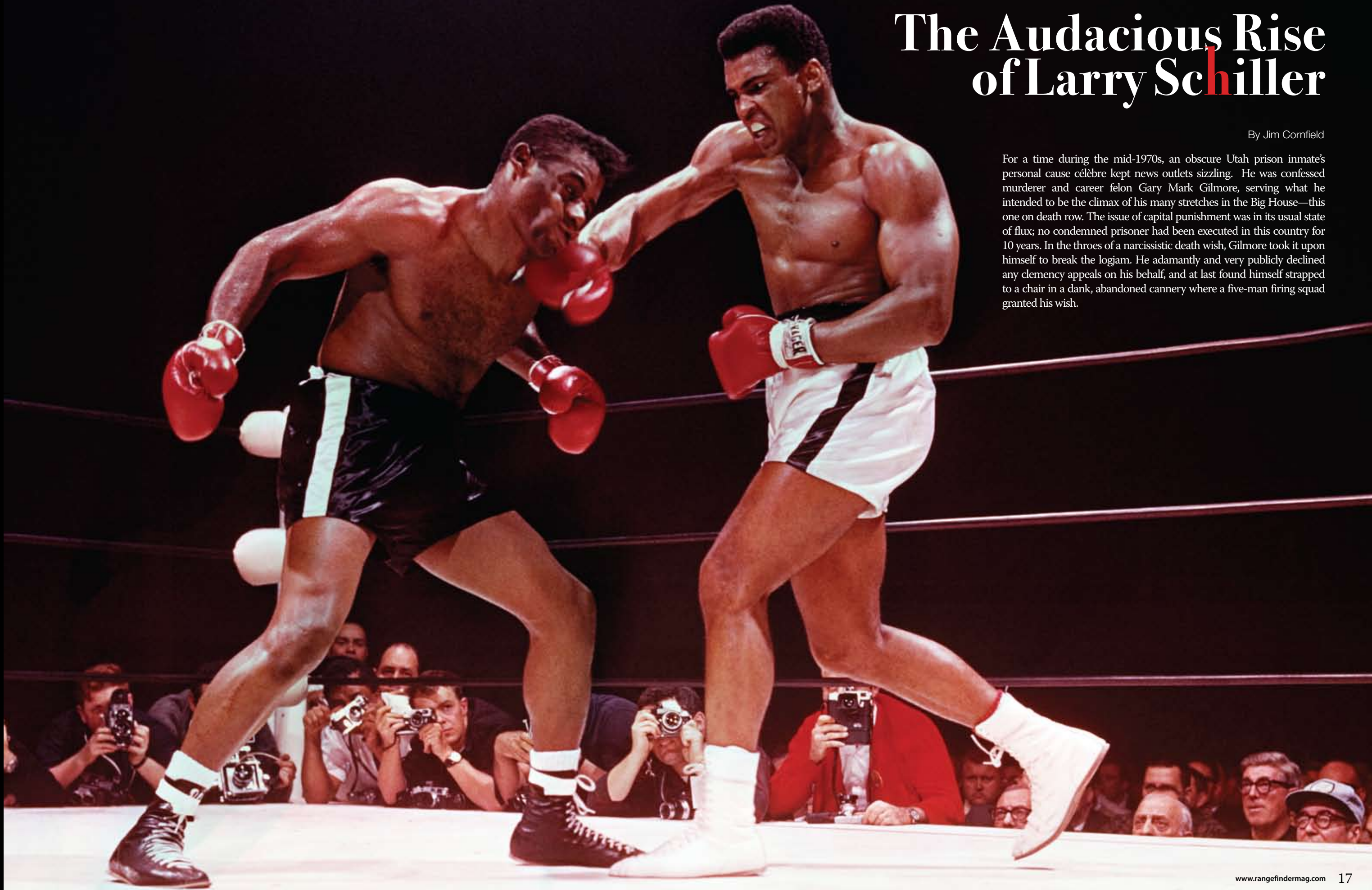


# The Audacious Rise of Larry Schiller

By Jim Cornfield

For a time during the mid-1970s, an obscure Utah prison inmate's personal cause célèbre kept news outlets sizzling. He was confessed murderer and career felon Gary Mark Gilmore, serving what he intended to be the climax of his many stretches in the Big House—this one on death row. The issue of capital punishment was in its usual state of flux; no condemned prisoner had been executed in this country for 10 years. In the throes of a narcissistic death wish, Gilmore took it upon himself to break the logjam. He adamantly and very publicly declined any clemency appeals on his behalf, and at last found himself strapped to a chair in a dank, abandoned cannery where a five-man firing squad granted his wish.





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Gilmore's showmanship throughout this episode promised his survivors a fruitful aftermath, in television, book and movie deals. Offers for rights to his life story tumbled in from the tabloids and networks. Polished talk show host David Susskind ponied up a then exorbitant \$100,000. But when Gilmore's family concluded their macabre auction, the winning bidder was a California photojournalist turned book publisher turned filmmaker they'd never even heard of—Lawrence Schiller. Schiller trumped Susskind partly by ingratiating himself with the relatives, and partly by promising Gilmore a posthumous article in *Playboy*. Susskind was indignant. He huffed some wisecrack that likened himself to the Dallas Cowboys, and Schiller to a high school football team.

Back then, as now, practically everyone in the publishing, broadcasting and motion picture businesses—from the mailroom up to the top floor—knew that Larry Schiller was anything but a high school football team. He was a multifaceted artist-cum-high-stakes dealmaker, already receiving the ultimate accolade among insiders:

"Anybody who is anybody in this town has a Larry Schiller story."

Schiller is a Brooklyn native, raised and schooled in Southern California. At 74, he still retains his bi-coastal credentials, commuting between the media hot zones of New York and L.A. as president of the Norman Mailer Center and Writer's Colony. That, at least, is his current iteration, in a resumé that dates back 60 years. One writer labeled Schiller's career "the most hyphenated" in media history. He's a photographer, a writer, a doggedly thorough researcher, a publisher, a film producer and a gifted director. But the key word here is photographer. That's where the real Larry Schiller story begins.

### Maximized Assets

Short of taking pictures in the crib, Schiller comes close to the definition of a photographic prodigy. "A Pro at Sixteen," as proclaimed in a 1953 issue of *US Camera Magazine*, Schiller photographed the funeral of A-bomb spies Julius and Ethel Rosenberg when he was still a kid. By the time he was 20, he'd been published in the

*Saturday Evening Post* and *LIFE* magazine. At 22, he photographed his first Playmate-of-the-Month, Joan Staley and, at the age of 25, he won a best picture award from the National Press Photographers Association.

As a shooter, Schiller went on to create an eclectic anthology of moments from the watershed 1960s. Some of his best samples from that period are shown on these pages. While he was developing the assertive style of photojournalism you see among these images, he was acquiring other skills—one, a precocious aptitude for monetizing creative work, "maximizing your assets," he calls it—by controlling the usage rights. He began to do this almost from the beginning of his career, sometimes rejecting plum offers for staff positions during the golden age of picture magazines so he could retain the copyrights to his work. "I learned about this early on," he recalls, "hearing an interview with comedienne Lucille Ball. Before the days of videotape, Ball negotiated to own all rights to the kinescopes—the film dubs—of her television shows. It made her and her husband millionaires." In 1962, Schiller was



photographing Marilyn Monroe during a moderately racy skinny dipping scene for the film *Something's Got to Give*. He knew the value of these pictures for future sales, but noticed another photographer, William Read Woodfield, on set covering the same sequence. He suggested to Woodfield that

they combine both takes under a joint copyright to protect their value. Not long after, *Playboy* publisher Hugh Hefner put up \$25,000 for one frame from this shoot. At the time, it was the highest fee ever paid for a single editorial image.

To dispel any mutterings about greed,

it's important to point out that Woodfield wasn't the only other photographer during that era to benefit from Schiller's creative business acumen. Within minutes of the November 1963 assassination of John F. Kennedy, Schiller had been sent to Dallas by the *Saturday Evening Post* to cover the President's death. Leica in hand, Schiller was present in the Dallas Police Station on the ill-fated Sunday morning when local nightclub owner Jack Ruby shot the ac-

**Opening spread:** Heavyweight champion Muhammad Ali and contender Floyd Patterson in Las Vegas, 1965, an assignment for *Sport Magazine*. Schiller credits his early love of sports photography with giving him the ability to anticipate a subject's actions in any shooting situation.

**Opposite:** Schiller had many photo sessions with iconic American beauty Marilyn Monroe, including two covers of *LIFE* magazine. Years later he produced the lavish illustrated biography, *Marilyn*, authored by Norman Mailer.

**Above:** Silent film great Buster Keaton in a *LIFE*-assigned image was poignant to Schiller—an old man at the nadir of his life and career, costumed for the last time on the MGM backlot where he'd done his antic performances so many years before. He was a compliant subject, and to Schiller seemed to understand the melancholy moment between them.

**Left:** Clint Eastwood was at the opposite end of his career arc, and Schiller let him act out the remote, haughty persona of the film roles that had defined him.



Suspected presidential assassin, Lee Harvey Oswald, in the Dallas City Jail on Saturday November 23, 1963. The Mannlicher-Carcano rifle used in the killing of President Kennedy is held aloft for reporters (above). Schiller was dispatched to Dallas to cover the aftermath of the assassination for the Saturday Evening Post.

cused assassin Lee Harvey Oswald in full view of a nationwide television audience. “There was a cop standing between me and Ruby,” Schiller recalls, “so I missed the picture, but I knew someone had to have gotten it.” That “someone,” turned out to be photographer Robert Jackson of the *Dallas Morning News*. Schiller followed Jackson back to the darkroom, and, as the only known still photograph of Oswald’s death came out off the print dryer, Schiller offered Jackson’s newspaper \$10,000 on the spot for the magazine rights. “I didn’t have that kind of money,” says Schiller, “but I did it on behalf of Curtis Publishing. They covered my offer with no complaints.” Before he left the lab, Schiller turned the print over and wrote on the back “Photograph © 1963, Robert Jackson.” The next year, that

picture won Jackson a Pulitzer Prize. Schiller’s standing among his other peers, though, hasn’t always been as virtuous. Before long, his fixation with dark side subject matter—from Lee Harvey Oswald to Gilmore to O.J. Simpson and JonBenet Ramsey—spawned his reputation as a kind of journalistic ghoul. One magazine story looking back over Schiller’s morbid oeuvre referred to him as “hell’s agent.” But more often, it’s his audacious hustle that’s drawn the most fire. He grins a little malevolently when he tells the story of joining up with a group of journalists who chartered a plane to cover the 1964 Alaska earthquake. “We landed in Anchorage,” he recalls, “and there were several helicopters on the field. I rented them, took one for myself, and turned the others over to relief agencies



that had just arrived.” The other newsmen, he says, were left looking for the closest car rental agency.

Schiller parlayed most of the business skills he’d gleaned from the photography world into his other ventures, motion pictures in particular. His films have won an Oscar and seven Emmys. “I own the copyrights to almost every film I’ve made,” he says, “just like my photographs, even when I had to relinquish upfront fees as a director or producer. Now, instead of director’s royalties down the line, I’m paid as owner of the material. It’s been a much better arrangement.”

### “You Owe It to History”

Photo assignments early in his career also helped Schiller master the dynamics of gaining trust from subjects. His self-effacing manner and the illusion of vulnerability he creates don’t hurt; they resonate especially well with film stars, all sleek and elegant but often somehow plagued by their own insecurities—Marilyn Monroe, Barbra Streisand, Paul Newman, Clint Eastwood. Once, Bette Davis capped her photo shoot with a maternal counseling

**Above:** Barbra Streisand for LIFE: Schiller understood the regal aura that some megastars project. Barbra had that. He remembers one occasion: “She phoned my room at the Plaza Hotel around 3:00 a.m.—with a command. ‘I feel beautiful. Come get the picture.’ I dutifully grabbed a camera and strobe unit and dashed over.” **Top right and below:** From *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, a major milestone in Schiller’s career. The simulated antique look of this advertising portrait set the style for the film’s color palette. **Below:** The familiar fast-paced Act Two still montage shot, directed and edited by Schiller became his entrée into motion picture directing.





Rounding the pylon at the Reno Air Races.

session for the distraught Schiller, who was, at the time, in the middle of a domestic problem with his first wife. But in most situations, it's been Schiller who assumed the voice of authority. "You've got to tell your story," he'd tell a reluctant subject, "You owe it to history." For one of his landmark photographs—a dramatic POV image during the annual Reno Air Races—Schiller approached a pilot who probably spent 364 days a year fine-tuning and pampering his cherished racing plane for this one event. Schiller convinced the guy to drill a hole in the fuselage of his precious airplane so a remote-controlled camera could be mounted over the engine cowling. "It was a longshot," Schiller remembers, "the guy was so fussy about that plane. I saw all the other photographers setting up in the usual vantage points on the ground, and I wanted something completely different. I took a chance with this particular pilot, and finally got him to cooperate in making a historic action shot."

The same approach would work time after time for Schiller, as his interests edged away from photojournalism and into other media. On one occasion he found himself back in Dallas, again trailing in the long wake of the Kennedy assassination. This time, he was making audio documentaries for Capitol Records and without telling the record company he decided to get the last interview with Jack Ruby, who was dying of cancer. The family, everyone knew, would

require some serious prodding to give their permission. They wanted to protect Jack's privacy in his final hours, had spurned other offers and weren't taking calls from the press. Schiller brushed up on his Yiddish and managed to speak persuasively to Ruby's sister. Jack was a part of history, he insisted. Again he said, "This family owes it to history." The family finally relented, and Schiller recorded Ruby's only deathbed interview.

### Legendary Larry

By now, the modus operandi that Schiller developed during his years as a photojournalist is the stuff of legend. Despite his relative anonymity among the general public, his list of achievements is so astonishing it often reads like fiction. But it's not. Witness a few more of the notches in Schiller's cane:

- An exclusive copyrighted jailhouse interview with Susan Atkins, one of the confessed Charles Manson disciples who participated in Los Angeles' infamous Tate-LaBianca murders.
- *Ladies and Gentleman, Lenny Bruce*, a biography of the celebrated heroin-addicted comedian and satirist, co-written with Albert Goldman.
- *American Dreamer*, a ground-breaking documentary feature film about actor and filmmaker Dennis Hopper.
- An Academy-Award winning documentary, *The Man Who Skied Down Everest*.

- With Pulitzer-Prize winning novelist Norman Mailer, the book *Marilyn*, illustrated with images by 24 of the world's top photographers. The book was a *New York Times* best seller followed by an exhibit that traveled around the world. (One Japanese department store paid the landmark fee of \$400,000 to mount this show).

- *Minamata*, W. Eugene Smith's shocking book-length photographic essay on Japanese victims of mercury poisoning—the first major photographic work on industrial pollution.

- *The Executioner's Song*, also in collaboration with Norman Mailer, who garnered his second Pulitzer Prize. The book became a *New York Times* best seller. Schiller later directed *The Executioner's Song* as an Emmy Award-winning television miniseries starring Tommy Lee Jones.

- *American Tragedy*, a book detailing the inside story of O. J. Simpson's murder defense. The book made the number one slot on *The New York Times* Best Seller list.

- *Perfect Murder, Perfect Town*, a *New York Times* best seller about the JonBenet Ramsey case.

- As producer/director three major miniseries for CBS Television, including *Master Spy: The Robert Hanssen Story* with William Hurt.

Schiller's not likely to call a wrap on this epic anytime soon. His current passion is preserving the legacy of his friend and most celebrated collaborator, Mailer, whose feisty cachet and remarkable versatility were traits he and Schiller shared. As a non-profit enterprise The Norman Mailer Center and Writers Colony was, for Schiller, yet another exercise in re-inventing himself. "I knew less about non-profits when I started this, than I did about film directing when I started that." Engaged full time with the Center and its pedigreed roster of associates—among them Gunter Grass, Joan Didion, Gay Talese and Doris Kearns Goodwin—doesn't promise to allow Schiller much time for pulling off another of his extravaganzas. But you never know. "I like to keep them guessing," he says, with a hint of that Alaska earthquake-story grin, "what's Larry Schiller gonna do next?"



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