



HER KILLER THINKS HE GOT AWAY WITH IT 30 YEARS AGO

This bunny girl's brutal murder was one of the most sensational unsolved crimes of the 1970s. Now, three decades on, is the net finally closing in on her killer? David James Smith investigates

They are a close and protective community, the old bunny girls from the Playboy Club in Park Lane. They post images of themselves as they once were – wire ears, pompom tails and all – on Playboy-staff reunion websites, using their old bunny names, reminding themselves of their lost world of glamour.

The club closed 27 years ago, and they are not “girls” any more, not that they were, of course, even then. If they still have their costumes, they can mostly no longer fit into them. Bunny Barbara, for instance, keeps hers in a cardboard box, which she produces for me. She holds it up – a marvellous boned corset in a pop-art pattern with a tiny waist – as if amazed she ever fitted into it. She will be 60 this year, and her birthday party will be a gathering for many of her former colleagues. Victor and Marilyn will be there, Bunny Rosemary, Bunny Serena, and many others.

The more it becomes apparent how great their bond is, the more poignant it seems that Eve Stratford missed the chance to “hang up her ears”, as the women put it, and grow old with them. Eve – Bunny Ava – would have turned 55 last Christmas, had she lived, and would no doubt ➤➤➤



Eve Stratford, found dead in her flat with horrific knife injuries on March 18, 1975. Inset: a Sun report on her murder

have amassed a lifetime's experience of triumph, disaster and routine, like all the other bunnies. Instead, Eve is frozen in time: she will be 21 for ever, even if, as everyone hopes, the agony of her unsolved murder can now finally be laid to rest.

There is no doubt the waves of grief and trauma that flowed from Eve's killing scarred or ruined many lives. If Eve had lived, her mother would not have died of a broken heart; her father might not have lost his health; and her older brother, Bert, might not have died an alcoholic's death at 50.

Overwhelmingly, however, for everyone who knew Eve, the man who took her from them on March 18, 1975, has never faced justice. Who was he? What happened to him? Who else did he kill or harm? The police now know he carried out at least one other murder, and are open to the possibility that he may have been responsible for others. As the investigating officer Detective Inspector Colin Wetherill told me, the mantra from the by-gone age of policing still holds good. ABC: Assume nothing; Believe nobody; Check everything.

That's as true now as it was in the 1970s, when detectives from Leyton CID in east London first investigated Eve's murder. They spent a year on it before winding the inquiry down and putting the paperwork and exhibits into storage. There they would sit for the next 32 years, all the while retaining a clue to the perpetrator's identity that those old officers could never have imagined. Just as they could never have imagined that another unsolved murder on the other side of London, that of the 16-year-old schoolgirl Lynne Weedon later that same year, a murder apparently unconnected to Eve's, might one day be inextricably linked.

The clue is DNA, of course. It has changed the face of detection, and the police are optimistic it may yet lead them to the man who killed Eve and Lynne. Spurred on by the discovery of the same DNA in both cases, the police have been active in recent weeks trawling the old files, re-examining the evidence, re-interviewing witnesses, tracing and eliminating potential suspects through DNA.

They are using the latest genetic technology — familial DNA — which has significantly broadened the ways in which suspects can be linked to crime scenes. They are particularly interested in the case of Lynda Farrow, killed in 1979, in circumstances very similar to Eve. Nobody is yet saying there is a serial killer, but that possibility is there too.

Eve's father, Albert, now in his late seventies, the last surviving member of his nuclear family, is full of praise for the 2009 detectives. They have been smashing, he says. He has a family liaison officer, Mick Jones, who keeps in contact and tells him what's happening. He could have done with one of those 34 years ago.

Albert last saw his daughter alive at the start of 1975. Eve had celebrated her 21st birthday at her parents' home in Warrington before Christmas. Many of her friends, including her boyfriend, Tony, had travelled up from London with Eve for the



Far left: the actor Sid James with four bunny girls in 1975, including Eve (second from right)

Left: as Miss March in Mayfair magazine in 1975



to one of the most famous of all the old bunnies, Marilyn Cole Lownes, Roxy Music album cover girl and Playboy magazine centrefold.

The club employed over 270 young women and rotated them in daytime and evening shifts as primarily either cocktail bunnies or croupier bunnies. The croupiers were trained at Stocks, Lownes's out-of-town mansion, where there were often sexual antics between consenting unmarried adults. When questions were raised in the early 1980s about the conduct of some of the women, Victor tried to explain the "no-dating" rule that was supposed to apply between the bunnies and the members. He said it was hard to enforce: "You can't really stop it. I can't tuck all 270 bunnies into bed every night." He certainly tucked in a fair few, however, even if he can no longer remember them all. When I mentioned a name to him, he said it sounded familiar, but couldn't place her. He called to his wife, Marilyn: "Who was that girl?" "You dated her," came the reply.

One bunny recalled sleeping with Victor's son, Val, on her first night of croupier training at Stocks, and then joining him again with another trainee for a threesome a few nights later. Bunny Serena, who was the club press officer by the time Eve joined, said that the no-dating rule was intended to avoid any suggestion of prostitution. The women were watched over by a bunny mother and an assistant bunny mother — ex-bunnies themselves. It can be no coincidence that women often stayed with the club over many years.

Bunny Rosemary was the assistant bunny mother in the mid-1970s. All the women would present themselves for inspection at the start of every shift. They would be expected to be bunny perfect: nails, hair, shoes, make-up and costume. Eve was a cocktail bunny — I don't think she ever

EVE WAS LYING FACE DOWN ON HER BEDROOM FLOOR. HER HANDS WERE TIED BEHIND HER BACK. HER THROAT HAD BEEN CUT WITH A LARGE KNIFE

second stocking was tied round one of her ankles. Her throat had been cut at least eight and up to a dozen times with a large knife, the cuts so deep her head had nearly been severed. There was evidence that sex had taken place, and the police thought it likely she had been raped, though could not rule out the possibility the sex had been consensual, implying her killer was someone Eve knew. There was no sign of a break-in or struggle. Her body had been found by Tony Priest and his fellow tenant, arriving back from their shifts as fork-lift-truck drivers around 5.30pm.

Priest moved to Amsterdam soon after and still lives and works there as a prison warden. Neither he nor the flatmate wanted to talk to me for this article, though both are among the 53 men the police have eliminated through voluntary DNA sampling in the course of the new inquiry.

Eve's brief career of glamour appears to have begun in autumn 1973, when she was 19. She had a friend who was already working at the Playboy club and casino as a hairdresser, and it seems that through her, Eve applied and was taken on. The club had opened over five floors at 45 Park Lane in Mayfair in 1966, and was at the heart of the Swinging Sixties, presided over by Hugh Hefner's London emissary, the sharp-witted Victor Lownes, who is now in his eighties and married

party. Eve had stayed on for Christmas and New Year with Albert, her brother, Bert, and her mother, Liza, who was German. Eve's parents had met in Germany in the late 1940s while Albert was stationed there as a medic for the Royal Army Medical Corps. The family moved around with Albert's various postings, settling for much of Eve's school days in Singapore. They then returned to the army town of Aldershot for Albert's final years of service, but Eve stayed down south when her parents moved north to Warrington. She had begun dating Tony Priest in Aldershot, and in 1972 they moved to Lyndhurst Drive, Leyton, and began living together in a room in a rented upstairs maisonette with a mattress on the floor for a bed. Eve's mum liked Tony, but her dad was less impressed, seeing him as one of those long-haired yobs who were throwing away their education on music. The flat had four bedrooms and each was occupied for a while by members of Tony's band, Vineyard, originally from Cornwall, where it had begun life as Onyx. The band had been popular in the West Country, but struggled to make the transition to a wider audience. One band member and his girlfriend had moved out of the flat in

early 1974, and the band had finally split around the time of Eve's 21st. Tony and one of the others began working as fork-lift-truck drivers, while the third remaining tenant joined another band.

Eve's dad, meanwhile, left the army only to find more overseas postings as a medic with the construction company George Wimpey. In January 1975 he was heading for the Congo. He travelled down from Warrington on the train with Eve and said goodbye to her for the last time at Euston: she returning to Leyton and the Playboy Club, he off to Heathrow to catch a plane to Kinshasa.

About 10 weeks later he received an urgent message in Africa that his daughter had been injured in an accident and he needed to return home immediately. Wimpey sent a car to meet him at Heathrow, and there on the back seat when he got in was a tabloid newspaper — The Sun, he thinks — with a report of his daughter's murder, three days earlier, on the front page. There was no police family liaison in those days and, as he later discovered, the paper had been put there deliberately, as nobody at Wimpey knew how to break it to him that Eve had been murdered. There too, of course, was the "sensational" story of Eve's

appearance as "Miss March" cover girl and full-frontal nude centrefold — "Spring Bonanza Issue, the most classic blonde we've ever uncovered" — in that month's edition, volume 10, number 3, of Mayfair magazine. Eve had appeared more-or-less naked across nine pages, with just a few hundred words of accompanying text intended to tease and arouse the 462,841 readers of that issue. The police were soon wondering if the words might have teased and aroused her murderer too... among many other lines of inquiry.

When I spoke to him 34 years later, the first detective at the scene of Eve's death could still remember the terrible irony of the message that took him there. A call had come through to the front desk at Leyton police station in the late afternoon of the 18th. It was a report of a "suspicious death" and Detective Constable Derek Carruthers happened to be the officer on duty in CID. A "suspicious death"? Well, they certainly did not come much more suspicious than that.

Eve was lying face down on her bedroom floor, beside the mattress, wearing a dressing gown over her underwear. Her hands were tied behind her back with a stocking and a dressing-gown belt. A



Playboy's Victor Lownes and his wife, Marilyn Cole Lownes, an ex-bunny girl

because she was too blonde and lustrous and the trend was for a more "girl-next-door" look.

Bunnies were not supposed to bring the Playboy name into disrepute, and were certainly not supposed to appear in rival magazines, such as Mayfair. Bunny Barbara could recall hearing Victor screaming at a bunny who had posed for Mayfair. Eve must have been ambitious for more than being a bunny. She, too, agreed to a photo session for Mayfair, and also signed up with an agent, Annie Walker, who was then sending young women out for "glamour work". Annie had been a pin-up model herself before starting her agency in 1966. She had initial financial help from her then boyfriend, a photographer, Ed Alexander. Ed later went off with one of Annie's models. He is still alive, aged 80 and married to that model.

Annie cannot recall if she sent Eve to Ed Alexander for the Mayfair session or if Ed found Eve and sent her to Annie. In any event, the session took place and, clearly anticipating a new career, Eve asked for and was about to begin a leave of absence from Playboy to begin modelling.

It was the Mayfair features editor David Brenner who wrote the text that went with Eve's photographs. The interview took place over the phone, so he never met Eve face to face. As he explained, the pictures would have been sent to his editor, Kenneth Bound, who would have bought

and was still working when the magazine came out in late February 1975. It soon reached the bunny mother's office, and Bunny Rosemary was sent down to the first floor where Eve was working to fetch her. Confronted with the magazine, she broke into tears and seemed devastated. She complained then, and later, that the quotes were not her words. The photographs were as lurid as the text. She suggested the full-frontal pictures had been taken without her realising. Rosemary believed her, but she still had to be punished. Serena remembers talk of her being told to clear her locker and go, straight away, but instead she was suspended, and seems to have still been suspended when she was murdered some days later.

Annie Walker thought of Eve as a great modelling prospect, and sent her to the photographer Peter Pugh-Cook a couple of weeks before her murder to take some "nude pin-up" photographs for a magazine in South Africa.

Eve returned to Pugh-Cook shortly before she died. This time the shoot was for a crime-fiction cover for Sphere books. Eve had to show some cleavage and look terrified as a knife was held to her throat. During the session, the Sphere art director, Ken Simms, took a fancy to Eve and asked for her phone number. She refused, but said she would take his name and number instead and call him if she felt like it. She wrote his details in her

diary, where they were found by the police. He was held overnight and questioned. Simms told Pugh-Cook how unnerving it was, just as Pugh-Cook found it unnerving that he had anticipated the manner of Eve's death in his images.

Pugh-Cook remembers trying to persuade Simms, after Eve's throat had been cut, that it would be tasteless of Sphere to go ahead and use the cover photo. He recalls that they used the image anyway, saying nobody would recognise her.

On the day of her death, Eve went to Camden at lunch time to see Annie Walker and then to Bayswater to meet a publisher about some work. She bought some dried flowers at Whiteleys and

carried them with her on the journey back to Leyton. The police were able to track Eve's journey through witnesses who had seen her right down to the last 100 yards before her home. There was no sign of her being accompanied or followed. The woman who lived downstairs heard the voices of a man and woman coming from Eve's flat around 4.30pm. The voices were not loud and there was no sign of an argument. There was a bump that sounded to the neighbour like a chair falling over. The police think that this may have been the moment of Eve's death.

In an unpublished memoir, the officer who led the first investigation, Detective Superintendent John McFadzean, described the case as having the biggest murder squad and the longest inquiry he ever conducted. "Three men from different walks of life and parts of London confessed to the murder. Such confessions were easily proved to be false... An admission of strangulation when death is caused by stabbing speaks for itself."

The 1975 police found it hard to accept that David Brenner had not met Eve, and gave him a hard time on the suspicion he could be lying. He was asked if he felt his words might have contributed to Eve's death. There is no doubt, over 30 years later, he is still troubled by that thought and would be profoundly relieved to hear that the killer had never seen the words and pictures in Mayfair.

The police were not the only ones who gave Brenner a hard time. His colleague, the photographer Ed Alexander, blamed his text for contributing to Eve's death. "He would have ripped my head off if he'd been allowed," Brenner told me. "But let's not forget he had been in a much more intimate situation with her than I was, and maybe he felt some of that responsibility himself and was transferring that anger onto me."

As DI Wetherill said, of course it was possible that the killer had been incited by the magazine. It had a circulation of more than 450,000. Even now, that possibility offers potential leads, though both Brenner and Alexander have given DNA samples and been eliminated.

The retired detective Derek Carruthers had always thought the original inquiry in which he took part was distracted by Eve's work as a bunny and model, and believed the answer was more likely to be found nearer home. He never forgot Eve's death nor his own suspicions regarding a man who lived nearby, a single man still living with his mother. When he read in the late 1980s of the development of DNA, he wrote to the Met suggesting they look again at Eve's case.

The Met more recently formed a Murder Review Group that would consider unsolved homicides and look for cases where there might

Feature

Feature

Right: the murdered 16-year-old Lynne Weedon

Below: the mother Lynda Farrow, killed in 1979

be scope to find new evidence from DNA and other advances. They looked at the January 1979 case of Lynda Farrow, who had also been murdered in her home. She too was an attractive young woman and had been working in the West End of London as a croupier. Her daughters came home from school to find her lying in the hallway with her throat cut. Lynda had not been sexually assaulted, and in their reinvestigation the police have been unable to find a DNA trace of her killer.

That case led to a comparison with Eve's death and the decision to reinvestigate her murder. It took some time to locate the paperwork and the exhibits, but the effort was repaid when they were able to raise the DNA profile. It was loaded onto the DNA database, but there was no match to an offender or another crime scene. There is no evidence to connect Eve's death to that of Lynda Farrow, but the police still consider it a possibility that the same man killed them both.

Sometime later the review group also put forward the west-London murder of the schoolgirl Lynne Weedon. She had been attacked while walking home at night along a dark pathway. She had been hit over the head with a blunt object and had also been raped.

There, too, a DNA profile was found and loaded onto the database, where it instantly produced a match with the DNA in Eve's case. This was a considerable breakthrough for both inquiries and they were now brought together under one team of detectives. Even so, it was puzzling, as there was no apparent similarity between the two cases. If you had not established the link you would never have thought it likely.

The original inquiry into Lynne Weedon's murder had taken a different direction from Eve's investigation and focused more on the likelihood of it being someone unknown or barely known to the victim. The police had produced and examined hundreds of criminal records of convicted sex offenders and then gone out and interviewed them.

In Eve's case the police had been more intent on considering the men she had met or known. One man, a well-known member of the Playboy Club, had been high on the suspect list in 1975 and put under considerable pressure by the police. Abdul Khawaja was a familiar character to the club's staff and nicknamed Little Abdul. He was Lebanese of origin and visited the club every day for lunch and a game of backgammon with Victor Lownes. He liked being with the bunnies and had socialised with Eve and her mother, though apparently he and Eve had never formally dated.

Bunny Serena — Serena Williams — recalled Little Abdul breaking down in tears as they sat talking one lunch time in the club after Eve's death.



He complained of being hounded by the police, of them following him, talking to all his friends and telling everyone he was a suspect. "I don't know how much longer I can take it, Serena," he said.

That suspicion lingered. Bunny Rosemary told me that one consequence of Eve's death being unsolved was that some people — such as Abdul — could never shake off the suspicion, and in some cases it had ruined lives. Abdul died a few years ago, but he has now been cleared — the police took DNA from his son and it did not match the DNA profile from the crime.

The police wonder why the profile found no match on the database. A man who has murdered twice may well have killed again or carried out other serious sexual assaults or committed other

LYNNE WEEDON WAS KILLED SIX MONTHS AFTER EVE. SHE HAD BEEN ATTACKED WALKING HOME AT NIGHT, HIT OVER THE HEAD WITH A BLUNT OBJECT

crimes. Has he died, has he been in prison all this time, has he moved abroad? Or did he just stop?

In an effort to extend the range of possible matches, the police have accepted the support of a new police initiative, Operation Stealth, which uses familial DNA as an investigative tool.

Meanwhile, the police remain determined and optimistic. As DI Wetherill said to me, after 34 years, though they may be looking for a needle in a haystack, they have a full investigation team, the benefit of the methodical work of their predecessors and all the advances of science and technology in their favour.

In the aftermath of his daughter's murder, Albert Stratford tried to carry out his own inquiries, visiting the Playboy Club to talk to Eve's old colleagues about her friend and associates, and even trying to find associations with the 1970s underworld. He tells me he went to visit Reggie Kray in prison. Reggie was really nice and helpful, but nothing came of it.

Albert told me his wife, Liza, never recovered from Eve's death. She turned their home into a shrine with photographs everywhere, visited her daughter's grave every day, and would often just begin crying, distracted by the thought of her daughter and especially tormented by what had been going through her daughter's mind in the moments before her death. Liza used to run a dress shop in Warrington, but gave it up because she couldn't bear to see young women coming in, full of life.

So far as Albert knew, Liza never had any professional help with her bereavement, but she received some support from the detectives investigating her daughter's murder. She used to speak to officers by phone and also wrote them letters talking about her "Angel", as she referred to Eve. She was bitter and angry at those in the modelling world who might have exploited Eve. "My beautiful daughter was so good herself," she wrote in one letter, "she thought everybody was good and trustful. How very much she was deceived. I have not accepted yet that I will NEVER see my baby again, NEVER hear her sweet voice again... She was exquisite in every way... Oh my God, my grief is inhumanly deep."

Liza sent photographs of her daughter's grave to several men, whom she either directly suspected or blamed for exploiting her. In the late 1970s she appeared at the local magistrates' court and admitted a charge of shoplifting. According to Albert, she took several dog bowls and absently put them in her bag despite having £60 in cash in her purse.

Albert continued to work abroad after Eve's death. During a trip home in 1986 he went out to

the shops and came home to find his wife had died suddenly. There was no doubt in his mind she had died of a broken heart.

Albert burned all the photographs of Eve that had been on display around the house, and keeps just one photo-booth image of Eve, with her boyfriend Tony, in his wallet. On the back, Eve's mother has written: RIP ■

The Metropolitan police would like to hear from anyone with any information. They can be contacted at the Incident Room, Belgravia police station, on 020 7521 7228 or anonymously via Crimestoppers on 0800 555 111