

GOD TOLD ME TO:

OBSESSION AND MADNESS, BOTH REAL AND IMAGINED

BY MARK BURGER



"Larry Cohen films are always taut, brisk, off-center and original, often provocative and fearless before the outrageous." — Kevin Thomas, Los Angeles Times film critic (1962-2012)

Few filmmakers can lay claim to so many cult classics as Larry Cohen: *Black Caesar* (1972) and its sequel *Hell Up in Harlem* (1973), the *It's Alive* trilogy (1974, '78 and '87), *The Private Files of J. Edgar Hoover* (1977), *Q: The Winged Serpent* (1982), *The Stuff* (1985) and *Original Gangstas* (1996). He directed Bette Davis' last movie, *Wicked Stepmother* (1988), memorably recounted in his July/August 2012 article for *Film Comment* called "I Killed Bette Davis." A prolific playwright and screenwriter, Cohen created

the television series' "Branded" (1965-'66) and "The Invaders" (1967-'68), and penned episodes of "Arrest and Trial," "The Fugitive," "The Defenders," "Rat Patrol," "Columbo" and "NYPD Blue." Among his best-known scripts: *Return of the Seven*, the 1966 sequel to *The Magnificent Seven* (1960); *Best Seller* (1987), *Maniac Cop* (1988), *Guilty as Sin* (1993), *Phone Booth* (2002) and *Cellular* (2003).

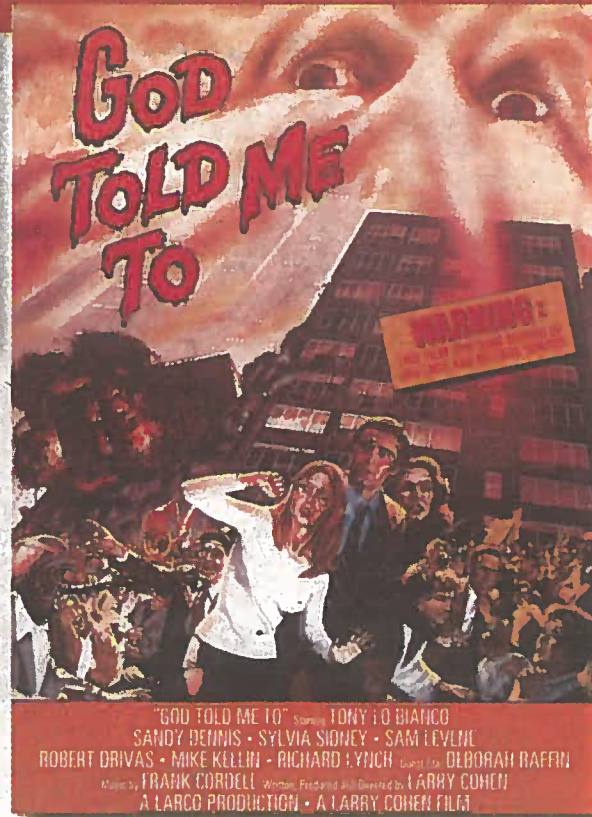
Cohen's fifth feature as director, *God Told Me To* was produced in 1975, released in 1976, and remains one of his most fascinating, challenging works. The film was reflective of a time — not unlike this one — when religious cults and extremist factions dominated headlines, violence ran rampant, and moral decay seemed to permeate the very

fabric of society.

The film opens on a sunny day in New York City, as a young man (Tony Award winner Sammy Williams in his screen debut) takes position on a water tower with a high-powered rifle and begins shooting random passers-by. Shortly thereafter, a clean-cut father (Robert Drivas) murders his wife and children with a hunting rifle in their midtown apartment. Then a uniformed cop (Andy Kaufman, in his screen debut) opens fire on the crowd during the St. Patrick's Day parade.

Each of them offers the same chilling explanation for their crimes: "God told me to."

Peter Nicholas (Tony Lo Bianco), the investigating detective, learns that the perpetrators have encountered



the mysterious Bernard Phillips (Richard Lynch). Not only does Nicholas discover that Phillips was a virgin birth but that he's also under the protection of a cadre of businessmen and bureaucrats who believe he is the messiah. They're as willing to die for him as kill for him.

The city is gripped by paranoia, Nicholas is yanked off the case, but the deeply religious and emotionally conflicted detective is forced to face his own inner demons — indicated in his troubled relationships with girlfriend Casey (Deborah Raffin) and ex-wife Martha (Sandy Dennis) — only to discover secrets about his own identity that lead him down a tortured path ... but to salvation or damnation?

Blue Underground has released a special-edition Blu-ray of *God Told Me To* (see review, Page 27), boasting extensive special features including audio commentary with Cohen, retrospective interviews with Cohen, star Tony Lo Bianco, and special effects artist Steve Neill, and more.

Cohen, a plain-spoken and refreshingly unpretentious raconteur, was pleased to share memories of the film ("I'm happy to do it — maybe we can sell a few more Blu-rays!"), even when discussing sometimes disturbing parallels between fantasy and reality.

CONCEPTION AND PRODUCTION

Cohen said the seeds of inspiration were planted when he visited art museums throughout the world and observed that "religious imagery has fostered some of the most violent images — the sheer bloodthirstiness of the artwork.

"It's hardly surprising, as the Church sponsored many of the great artists and painters," he says, noting that inevitably they would be inspired by the most vivid and dramatic imagery. "There is nothing more violent than paintings based on Biblical materials. They depict rape, sacrifice, murder, war, images of torture ... they make for very powerful images."

Rosemary's Baby (1968) and *The Exorcist* (1973) had kicked off Hollywood's "demonology" cycle, depicting satanic forces at work in the modern world. Cohen's concept offered a twist in posing the question: Why would seemingly normal people suddenly kill or die in the name of a deity?

Cohen raised the issue within the framework of a supernatural/science-fiction horror film, yet it also reflects history, which is rife with despots, dictators, religious fanatics and serial killers, whose true evil often isn't realized until it's too late.

"The danger of the unknown is always scary," says Tony Lo Bianco, "and when random killings take place without explanation, it's even scarier — as is ISIS and what's going on with them. So, on that level, the film certainly holds up as witness to its longevity and that people are still inter-

ested in it. I also think the guerrilla filmmaking aspect of this film, when people work hard and put things together, is always attractive. I've had a similar experience in the other cult movie I did, *Honeymoon Killers* (1969). It is a cult classic which is still tremendously popular, with the unnatural act of these two lovers (Lo Bianco and Shirley Stoler) who go around killing people for a living."

Cohen indulged his penchant for nostalgia by casting Hollywood veterans Sylvia Sidney (*You Only Live Once*), Sam Levene (*Crossfire*), Mason Adams ("Lou Grant") and Mike Kellin (*The Boston Strangler*) in smaller roles.

Originally, Cohen signed Robert Forster (later an Oscar nominee for Quentin Tarantino's *Jackie Brown*) to play Peter Nicholas, but creative differences led to Forster's departure.

First week of shooting, no leading man.

By happy coincidence, Lo Bianco was appearing on the New York stage and previously starred in Cohen's 1970 play *Nature of the Crime*. "We did the play, it was a good experience, and we worked well together," Cohen says.

"It was a quick jump into the project," Lo Bianco confirms. "I was doing *Yanks 3 Detroit 0 Top of the Seventh* at the American Place Theater when Larry came to me and asked me if I would do the movie.

"Obviously, I had very little time, but it had an attractive cast, too. Having worked with Larry before and knowing how productive he is and the fact that I was doing the play that I could work during the days and do the play during the evening. So I ended up doing the play and the movie at the same time, which was difficult."

But, Lo Bianco says, "I love the moments that are difficult, because that is the measure of what you have to improve yourself. To overcome difficulty is creative, and a challenge. As if our business isn't a challenge enough, I like it even harder! So I measure myself against the more impossible difficulties."

By 1975, Lo Bianco had only made a handful of films, including the aforementioned *Honeymoon Killers*, begun by Martin Scorsese then completed by screenwriter Leonard Kastle.

His next film, however, was a smash across the board. *The French Connection* (1971) won five Academy Awards (including Best Picture) and rave reviews for his turn as Sal Boca, a low-level drug dealer whose arrangement to bring the largest shipment of heroin into New York makes him the target of dogged detectives Gene Hackman (who won the Oscar for Best Actor) and Roy Scheider (who earned a nomination as Best Supporting Actor).

Lo Bianco and Scheider were reunited with *French Connection* producer Philip D'Antoni (also directing) for *The Seven-Ups* (1973), an unofficial follow-up of sorts that elevated Scheider to the lead and Lo Bianco to second lead, as a mob-connected undertaker and police informant who tries to play both ends against the middle.

The role of Peter Nicholas in *God Told Me To* would be one of his few feature leads, although he's had a durable career in character roles, with John Sayles' *City of Hope* (1991) perhaps his best screen performance ever.

"It's funny how careers go," Cohen muses. "Tony really had potential. Tony was very sure he would be another De Niro or Pacino, and a lot of people felt the same way, that he would be in that same league. But then he got caught up in gangster roles. Not that he didn't play them well, but I think he got caught in a rut. He does the occasional movie, usually in supporting parts ... and almost always as a gangster."

Nevertheless, "he's a wonderful actor and he tours with his acclaimed one-man show about the life of Fiorello La Guardia." (Originally titled *Hizzoner!*, Lo Bianco himself has reworked the play as *The Little Flower*.)

God Told Me To features such familiar Gotham locations as Bloomingdale's, the Waldorf-Astoria, the Federal Courthouse, and Cohen also filmed both the San Gennaro Festival and the St. Patrick's Day parade — although, for the latter, he also incorporated parade scenes shot in Los Angeles. Cohen is renowned for his speed and efficiency, and his tendency to "steal shots" — filming without permits. The "run-and-gun" approach creates more spontaneity, more scope ... and it's easier on a film's budget.

"I was happy to be working in that way because it's creative — and Larry was always being creative," Lo Bianco says. "It's rough when you shoot in places you don't have a permit for and you have to be very flexible in terms of 'Uh-oh, we have to move out of here — there come the cops!' So that was the experience and I enjoyed every moment of it."

Cohen recalls the film's budget as \$425,000. "We had no production manager, no office — I was the office. We had no board, no production schedule — it was all in my head."