

Hijacker Remains In Cuba

Michael Finney
Talks of Exile

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A block from the imposing granite stairs of the Capitolio, on a narrow side street, in a vault-like old hotel — full of ghosts and peeling banister rails — lives The Man Without a Country.

1980s style.

The place is Havana.

The man is Michael Finney.

Slim, articulate Michael Finney has been a free-roaming resident of Havana for eight years, by his own estimate. For six weeks before that he sat in a Cuban jail cell — back in 1971 — in solitary confinement for interrogation purposes.

"I was very idealistic and very romantic," he says of that time a decade ago when he rather spectacularly disappeared from the U.S. "But not so much now. Time has a tendency to mellow one's ideals."

Former six-week prisoner, former youthful member of a radical black group in the U.S., Michael Finney is one of an undetermined number of enigmatic figures who made the phrase "Take me to Cuba!" a tired and tragic decade-long joke, and who then disappeared into Cuban anonymity.

MICHAEL FINNEY is an escaped hijacker.

"The charges against me [back in the U.S.] are very serious," he admits.

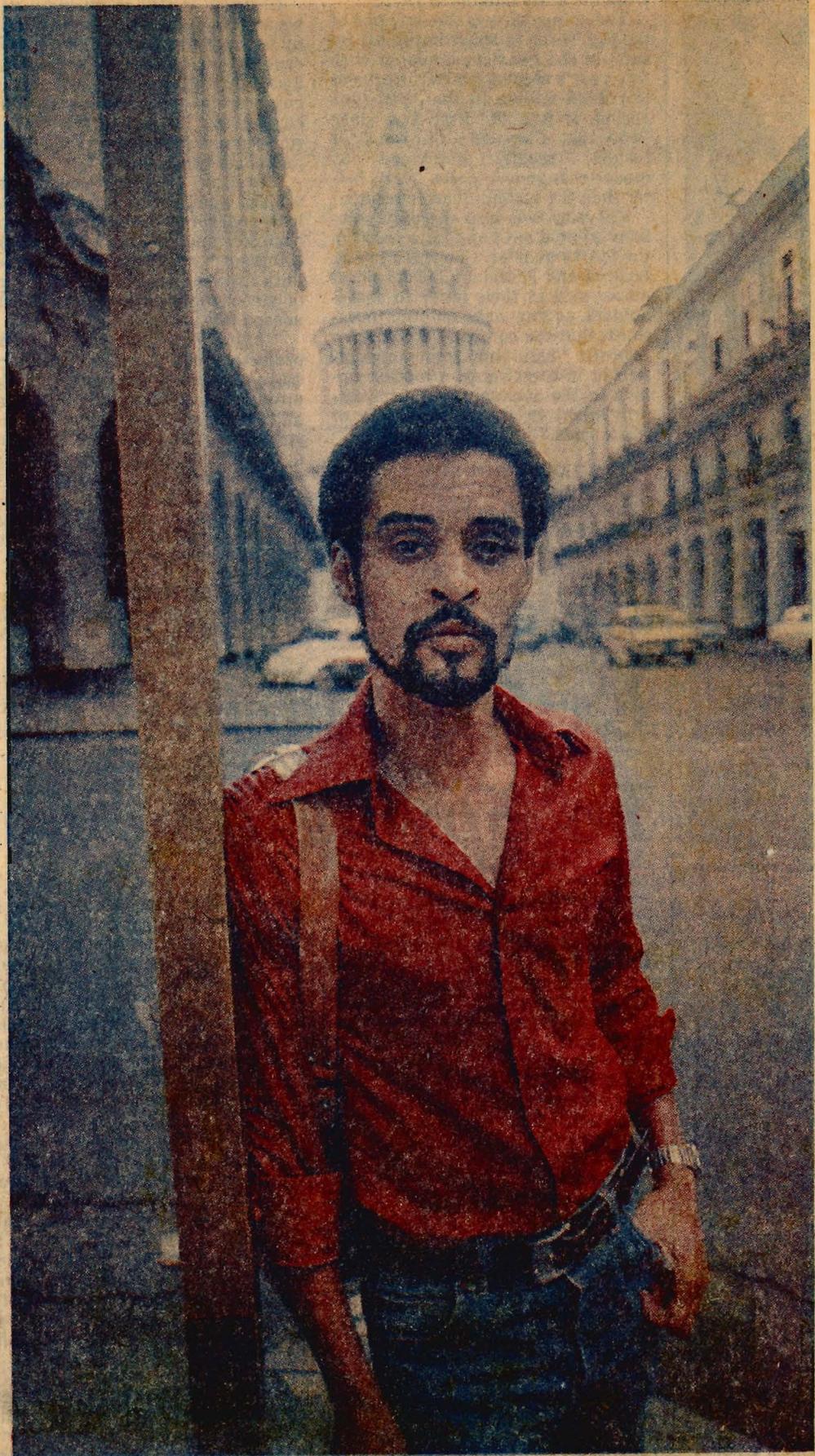
Finney, according to those charges, murdered a New Mexico state trooper before fleeing to Cuba in 1971.

Michael Finney did not return from Cuba with 30 American prisoners who were released to fly home Monday aboard a Justice Department-chartered Air Florida jet.

Nor was Finney one of the much-publicized three American prisoners who were also released Monday, but who chose not to return to their homeland.

Finney was on no published list of returnees or new releases.

As many as 75 or 80 hijackers



BRUCE GILBERT / Miami Herald Staff

Michael Finney Outside His Home in Havana

... faces air piracy, murder charges in United States

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are now living quietly inside Cuba. Some have studied at the university there. Some are married. At least one teaches in a Havana junior high school. One committed suicide by jumping from the roof of Havana's Hotel Nacional. One drowned.

Their only common thread is that they are hijackers.

There was the "family" of two men and two women who left a voodoo doll behind in their Detroit living room along with a scrawled message to "Fly Delta's Big Jets" — shortly before they hijacked a Delta flight into Cuban mystery.

There was the \$26,000-a-year Commerce Department executive who, professing Maoism, hijacked a jet to Cuba with his son and two other youths.

AND THERE WAS Tyrone Ellington Austin. On April 23, 1971, Austin was shot to death by police in a New York bank holdup. He had disappeared into Cuba two years before on an Eastern flight he hijacked with the help of his wife, Lynda. No word has surfaced as to how Austin got back to the United States.

They remain clothed in mystery — skyjackers swallowed up by time.

All have almost certainly served some time in Cuban prison, from a few weeks to more than 11 years.

According to Dorethea Hill, the mother of a hijacker who arrived with Michael Finney, Finney and his companions got light sentences in Cuba because members of the California-based Republic of New Africa flew to Havana in late 1971 or early 1972 to vouch for their revolutionary credentials.

* * *

A CERTAIN languor lies on the old stone buildings of Havana, clothing their chipped facades and weathered balustrades like the pink light of the sunset. It is still a voluptuous city, though the mansions that were raucous and manicured in the days of Batista and Meyer Lansky are now decrepit. The U.S. trade embargo keeps battered '56 Chevies and old British Hillmans on the streets.

Poor kids dream realistically of medical school, and long lines form in front of restaurants in a city where bureaucracy rises up like a great, invisible sigh. They legalized the black market last summer and installed capitalist incentives in salaries. Bright banners announcing the Soyuz flight of a Cuban-Russian cosmonaut team grace mildewed stucco.

Michael Finney lives here.

At sunset, pink light was blazing on the canyoned streets that flank the old hotel.

THREE WOMEN stood behind the battered counter in the lobby. Two other women — guests on vacation — rocked vigorously in high-backed chairs, and two men lounged before the ornate ironwork of the elevator door.

Did they know Michael Finney?

"Un negro?" asked one of the men. "Is he rather thin?"

The elevator groaned upward with the man, then returned. Out

Exile is probably one of the most difficult human conditions that exists. . . . You're always homeless. You're always in a place that's not yours.

— Michael Finney, hijacker

stepped a medium-height black man with a beard, wearing an old green flannel-like shirt.

"Michael Finney?"

"No, I'm Mohammed."

He was suspicious, uncertain, curious. Moving upstairs, into the shadows and high ceilings of the second-floor hallway, he paused.

Then he stopped almost as if paralyzed, said, "I better freeze on this, man," refused to talk more and, back down at the desk, helplessly tried to say in English to the uncomprehending people there that he wanted no more visitors.

"This man tryin' to set me up," he told them, adding in desperately simplified English, "He know I no Mike Finney. My name Mohammed. . . . I no say nothing."

Then, a thin young man stepped briskly from the elevator, widened his eyes, and said in concise general American English that whispered unmistakably of the upper middle class, "Oh, are you fellows from the States?"

THIS WAS Michael Finney. This was the mystery man. Anything but a sullen sociopath, he had the high, delicate forehead and the clipped, eloquent voice of a scholar. He wore blue jeans and jogging shoes. He studies history at the university, is engaged to a local girl, and works now in Havana on contract to the government making macrame purses.

But who, then, was the other guy?

"I think he jacked from Los Angeles," said Michael Finney, frowning his brow thoughtfully, helpfully, as he sat in the lobby, "about six or seven months ago."

Voluptuous old Havana, now turned dour, solemn and chaste, is full of mysteries.

* * *

THE WIND was cold and lonely just eight miles west of Albuquerque that night in November 1971, when New Mexico state trooper Robert Rosenbloom stopped a new Ford in which three young black men were approaching town along the desolation of I-40.

Michael Finney had rented the Ford in his home town of San Francisco. He and his two companions had their risk-filled orders, according to Dorethea Hill, the mother of one of the men.

The orders had come from an officer of the Republic of New Africa. The black radical group hoped to organize a new black nation — by using the ballot box and armed militia to stave off backlash — in the steamy American Southeast. The orders were to bring guns, lots of guns, and dynamite, to Jackson, Miss. And the young trio of Bay Area residents resentfully agreed to take the risk.

OFFICER Robert Rosenbloom radioed back that he had stopped an

eastbound California car — license number 24EDH. He demanded to search the car's trunk.

Dorethea Hill described it as her son Charles would later tell her — one side of the story: "When they opened the trunk, then they had these guns, and then one word led to another, and the policeman was shot. . . ."

Dorethea Hill was then living in Albuquerque, and Charles Hill knew the area well. Albuquerque went wild: roadblocks, bulletins, house-to-house searches. For 19 days the fugitives hid out in various houses, including the home of Johnny Vines, an Albuquerque airport employe.

Then they made their break. In a midnight ruse they faked an automobile breakdown, called a tow truck, and put a pistol to the driver's head.

ACTING ON what an FBI official later said was Vines' advice, the tow truck crashed through a runway fence, and the three fugitives, brandishing automatic weapons, dashed up the port-a-stairs behind the last passenger on TWA Flight 106.

Johnny Vines got five years for harboring fugitives. Michael R. Finney, Charles Hill and Ralph L. Goodwin landed once in Tampa for fuel, then went to Cuba.

Michael Finney left behind his studies at the University of California, his upper-middle-class parents, and his 1-year-old daughter, Malaika, with her mother in San Francisco. "Malaika" means "angel" in Swahili. Finney was 19 years old.

* * *

SO THERE were three.

Ralph Goodwin was 24 and the eldest of the three when the hijacking took place. Goodwin, like Finney, left behind an upper-middle-class background. His father was a California lawyer. At the time of the hijacking, Goodwin's father had just realized a lifetime dream: He had traveled to Africa. The elder Goodwin was slowly going blind, and he wanted just one glimpse of Africa before he was lost in night. Ralph Goodwin's sister had terminal cancer. Against this backdrop, that single .45-caliber gunshot in the New Mexico night rang out.

Four years passed. Ralph L. Goodwin was sunning on a Havana beach. He heard a cry for help. Goodwin swam out to save an unidentified bather. He drowned, according to the Swiss Embassy and the FBI.

So then there were two.

Charles Hill and Michael Finney.

HILL HAD been a rambler. From his boyhood home in New Mexico, he had gone up to Alaska to work in his favorite uncle's construction business. Then to California. Unlike Finney and Goodwin, he was not a member of the Republic of New Africa.

Though he was an unimprisoned Havana resident for eight years,

'Man Without a Country' Adjusts to Eight Years in Cuba

briefly studying electrical engineering at the university, he eventually wound up in prison again, on charges of having forged a currency document.

Hill was among the three prisoners released Monday who chose not to return. Hill said that he is "definitely going back to the United States" as soon as he can "get information."

That information has to do with the seriousness of charges that may be awaiting him. Hill's mother points out that the Albuquerque papers are full of the Cuban prisoner release, and that the local district attorney is making a reelection issue of getting tough with the hijackers who shot the cop.

"I DON'T think right now is the time for anybody to come back to New Mexico," Dorethea Hill said cautiously.

She also provided a glimpse of how Hill may hope to escape the most serious charge he faces. "Mama, I didn't even see it when he was shot," Hill told his mother over the phone from Cuba, she said. Dorethea Hill says she remembers a yellowed clipping in which one of the hijacked stewardesses said that Ralph Goodwin made a confession on the plane — that it was he who shot state policeman Rosenbloom.

When asked about the possibility that Hill and Finney could attribute the shooting to Goodwin, Albuquerque FBI special agent Ed Sauer said drily, "Goodwin's dead. I'd lay it on Goodwin."

★ ★ ★
SITTING IN the dingy lobby of the Havana Hotel, Michael Finney is alert, energetic. He listens carefully to the questions asked him, and when he sidesteps, he does it as neatly and inoffensively as a practiced politician.

Exile, he says, is "probably one of the most difficult human conditions that exists. . . . You're always homeless. You're always in a place that's not yours."

When Finney, Hill and Goodwin were first released from Cuban interrogation in 1971, they were provided with a monthly allowance of 40 pesos — a little less than \$40 — by the Cuban government.

Their lodging also was provided by the government — at first in a house at the outskirts of Havana, then in various hotels. Michael Finney says he has worked at a variety of jobs: cutting sugar cane, doing some teaching. Working or not, he got the same 40 pesos. Plus cigars.

AND HOW HAS it been, the reality of living under Cuban communism?

A very dangerous question for Michael Finney.

"I ran into many things that were difficult to understand," he says carefully, "from an ideological point of view, and from a political point of view."

He won't say what things. Again very carefully, he says, "My position is that I support the principles of the Cuban revolutionary movement."

Though, like the mysterious "Mohammed," he spoke no Spanish at all when he landed, Finney's Spanish is now "perfecto," as he curtly says. With hardly a trace of American accent, yet still with a hint of something not quite Cuban, Finney is often mistaken in Havana for a

Puerto Rican.

HE WAS JUST another face in the crowd in Havana. He had dinner one night with two American officials at the U.S. Interests Section. He met a young Cuban woman, and is now engaged.

Yes, he says, he would like to go back to the United States.

He still insists that the TWA hijacking "was never an idea. I hijacked a plane to save my life."

He writes long letters to Malaika, who lives with her mother in San Francisco. Maybe she will visit him in Havana next year. "She's going to school — very artistic, very intelligent." She's learning to play the flute. Next month she will be 10 years old.

Michael Finney will soon be 30. "For me to get back [to the states]," he says with neither visible bitterness nor apparent self-pity, "I think, is almost impossible."