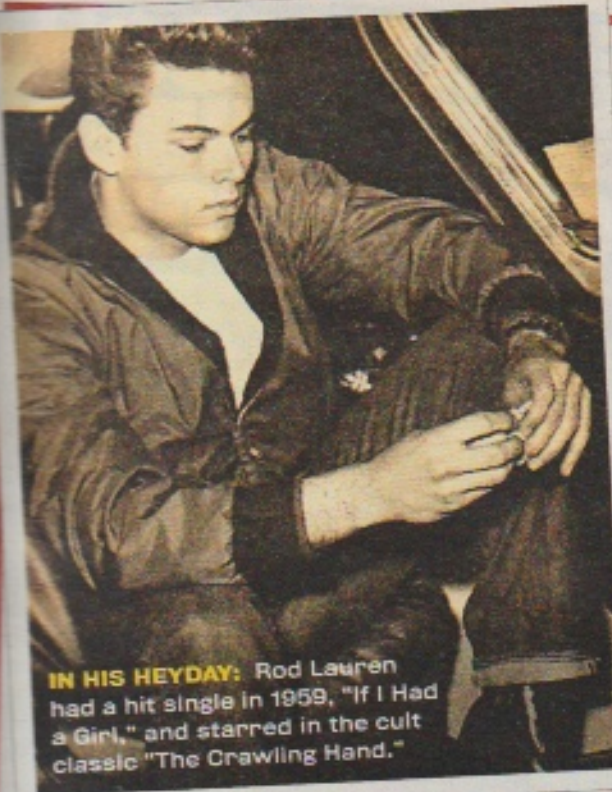


'60s TEEN IDOL WANTED FOR WIFE'S MURDER LIVING FREE IN CALIFORNIA



IN HIS HEYDAY: Rod Lauren had a hit single in 1959, "If I Had a Girl," and starred in the cult classic "The Crawling Hand."



DEATH OF AN ICON: Rod Lauren comforts his mother-in-law Inocencia beside coffin of his Filipina movie star wife Nida Blanca, shown in a 1964 portrait (left).

SIXTIES teen idol Rod Lauren is wanted for the brutal murder of his lovely wife — a Philippine movie star found stabbed to death in the back-seat of her car.

The shocking crime has become known as the O.J. Simpson case of the Philippines — but despite the best efforts of the Philippine justice dept., Lauren is living as a free man in California.

The 63-year-old entertainer — who lived with wife Nida Blanca for 22 years in her native country — returned to the United States after her brutal death in 2001, amid accusations by the Philippine government that he arranged her murder.

Lauren scored a hit single in 1959 with "If I Had a Girl." He starred in a string of low-budget movies, including 1963's cult sci-fi classic "The Crawling Hand," and guested on numerous TV shows including "Alfred Hitchcock Presents" and "Gomer Pyle, U.S.M.C."

"I've known Rod for many, many years, and it's impossible to imagine him committing a murder," a friend told *THE ENQUIRER*. "Then again, he was very reserved, and you never really knew what was going on in his mind. He seemed like he had a lot of secrets."

As a singer, Lauren (real name Roger Lawrence Strunk) ended up a one-hit wonder, and his acting career was over by the mid-'60s. But his last movie, "Once Before I Die," was filmed in the Philippines where he met Nida in 1964.

When Lauren married the national icon, he stepped into a life of luxury. The couple attended presidential inaugurations and even sang at birthday parties for Ferdinand and Imelda Marcos.

Nida — a devoted Catholic who

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went to Holy Mass every Sunday — was one of her nation's most revered cultural figures. Her grisly murder shook the country.

"The world ground to a halt when she was killed," said Gerry Liriom, city editor of the Philippine Daily Inquirer, which has had a team of reporters assigned to the story for the last two years.

"She was so nice, so sweet. She was everybody's mother. Even the president issued public statements asking for a probe."

A convicted kidnapper, believed by officials to be the hit man, came forward more than a week after the murder to charge that Lauren masterminded the killing — but he later recanted in a televised hearing, sobbing that he was tortured into claiming Lauren's guilt.

Prosecutors also ran into a problem amassing physical evidence.

No blood, hair or fibers could be linked to Lauren.

And Lauren himself declared: "I am not involved. There's no fingerprints, no blood, no DNA, no nothing."

But Nida's daughter Kay describes him as "irresponsible, lazy, extravagant, and fond of drinking" — and claims that her mother was planning to divorce him.

And the Philippine justice dept. charges that Lauren had been fighting with his wealthy wife over money.

But Lauren's friend counters, "Rod really loved Nida. He thought she was the most beautiful thing he had ever seen. And their relationship lasted more than two decades — far longer than most Hollywood marriages."

Accusations of a bungled investigation were flying in the

Philippines when two months after the murder Lauren returned to his hometown of Tracy, Calif., an hour east of San Francisco.

Last May, federal marshals arrested him as he sat on his front porch. But after he spent six months in jail, a U.S. court ruled that the evidence against him failed to meet probable cause, and he was released.

This past November, a federal magistrate rejected a request from the Philippine justice dept. to return Lauren to that country for trial. But the Philippine government vows it will keep fighting to get him extradited.

Lauren spends his days visiting with friends, volunteering and attending services at his neighborhood church. He also joined the board of the Tracy Civic Theatre, and takes roles in its productions.

Concludes his friend: "I don't know what happened to Nida — but I just can't believe that Rod is an evil man."

— ROBIN MIZRAHI