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A Hot Tour Of Chicago's Mobster Hit Spots

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By Bert Shanas, FOR THE INQUIRER
 POSTED: October 11, 1992

CHICAGO — The Roaring Twenties jazz music fades, as the bus makes its turn from Webster onto Clark and grinds to a stop. Dixie, looking every bit the mobster

from natty fedora to Bond Street spats, removes the stogie stuffed in his mouth and begins telling the story of the St. Valentine's Day Massacre as if he had been there:

" . . . So Bugs Moran sees da squad car, which wuz parked right over dere, and decides to wait in a restaurant on dat corna. Four guys pretendin' to be cops get outter da car, two in uniform, two plaincloze. Dey walk tru da front door of da SMC Cartage Garage which was right about dere. Dey line da seven up against da wall which was ova dere, frisk 'em and take two pistols from 'em. Den da two fellas in plaincloze, dey reach down under dere frock coats. Each one pulls outta Thompson submachine gun, and for da next 11 seconds . . ."

Suddenly, the 22 spellbound passengers jump in their seats as a barrage of recorded machine-gun fire blasts through the bus: Rat-tat-tat-tat!

No, it's not 1929. This is Chicago, 1992, and Dixie (Don Fielding) and his tour-guide partner in crime, Southside (Craig Alton), are taking a group of tourists on one of this city's most unusual and fastest-growing adventures: a two-hour trip through what were once the hot spots and hit spots of gangland Chicago.

By the time the trip is completed, Fielding and Alton's guests will have visited places the average tourist won't get near, everywhere from the movie theater where John Dillinger was gunned down to the alley where Al Capone shot one of his first Chicagoans. But what really makes this tour unique are Fielding and Alton themselves. Obviously having a lot of fun in the process, the combination tour guide/actors throw themselves into their mobster roles with a technique worthy of Broadway.

"This is really like a production that takes place on a bus," says Alton, a 37-year-old former children's radio show host. "When we came up with the idea for the Untouchable Tours about five years ago, we were shocked to see that nobody else was doing this. But we realized that once we got started, if the idea caught on, then any of the big Chicago tour companies could take people around to the gangland spots. So we had to do something they couldn't, and we decided to do it theatrical-style."

For six months, Alton and his brother-in-law Fielding, a 45-year-old former social worker, researched every aspect of Chicago's notorious gangland history, poring over old newspapers, records and books. At the same time, they studied the entire history of the city, so that they could explain the mobster era in its proper context. Then they developed their gangland accents, and their visual and sound effects, finally taking their show on the road in 1988. Instant hit. Not only with tourists, but with Chicagoans.

To date, "Dixie and Southside" (now with the help of four local actors they trained so they could give themselves an occasional break) have taken 25,000 people through gangland Chicago, about 10,000 of them last year alone.

From the moment guests board the converted 1974 school bus, it's clear that this is not going to be the standard tourist experience. Women are greeted by the two guides with a terse "Hiya, babe" or "Hello, doll." Everyone is handed a carnation, which was frequently used as a passport into the Prohibition-era speakeasies. Alton (Southside) is first up at the wheel, and Dixie begins:

"Now I'm kind of a historian. I like to study da history of crime and politics. In Chicago you can study dem bot at the same time cause dere ain't dat much difference. . . ."

From then on it's a continuous flow of gangland stories and sites, often laced with hilarious shtick, as the two (alternating between driver and narrator) regale their charges with tales of Chicago's underground history.

Careful to point out that Italians were by no means the only mobsters in town, they make one of the first stops in front of a parking lot at 738 N. State St., once the site of the flower shop owned by Dion "Deannie" O'Bannion, known as "the florist bootlegger." O'Bannion, it is explained, sells Capone a brewery in 1924 for half a million dollars, then sends in a Prohibition agent to raid the

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