

# Greetings from the Dutch underworld

## An interview with ex- gangster Steve Brown

Now that the ‘trial of the century’ is hanging above the alleged criminal organisation of Willem Holleeder like the sword of Damocles, the Dutch underworld finally has a face. Sparked by the insatiable appetite of the public for clarity and juicy details on the deepest undercrofts of society, the crime media are thriving. But how reliable is the picture the media present us with? One man claims to have literally seen it all and to know better. In his best-selling book *Killing Fields Amsterdam. Portraits of infamous liquidations*, the native American ex-criminal Steve Brown (52) relates his insider’s version of fifteen killings in Amsterdam’s criminal circuit. Exposing misconceptions in the crime reports that appear daily, Brown settles an account with the media that, he claims, have tried to break him. A position as a crown witness in a murder case, four publications, two assassination attempts and fifteen arrests later, he comes to the conclusion that the ‘upper world’ is inevitably intertwined in the underworld. In an interview with *The Times*, Brown talks about his past, his war with crime reporter Peter R. de Vries and the (im)possibility of leaving a criminal life behind.

By Lula Ahrens and Tristan van Rijn

Upon entering the lobby of the chic Amstel Hotel, Steve Brown makes a somewhat nervous impression. He immediately hands over a copy of his newest book and two posters to promote it. Then he sits down and tries to relax. Before we know it, he is chatting away about his past life of crime, sex, drugs and rock ‘n roll as if in a bar, talking to a good old friend. He seems an easygoing, funny, almost fatherly guy despite the puzzling, sometimes fierce look in his, dark eyes.

The first thing Brown starts talking about as he sips his coffee on a comfortable couch and smokes one cigarette after another, is the false distinction between the upper and underworld: “What are the similarities between a drug baron and an industrial baron? I wrote a piece on it on my web log on *Witheet.nl* [a crime website], kind of tongue-in-cheek. If you write that down, you can see

how many resemblances there are. Not in the line of work, but in the behaviour: they buy the same clothes, stay in the same hotels, visit the same bars and sex houses, have the same income and both groups (especially the expatriates) hardly pay taxes.”

**So, if you are a successful businessman in the Netherlands, you automatically get to know the underworld as well?**

“Yes, they visit the same spots, go to the same holiday addresses, both travel first or business class. That is quite funny; it is also why I chose this hotel [for the interview]. But, there is a cardinal difference: when an international CEO gets in trouble with the law, he chooses an international lawyer’s office: Stibbe, Nauta Dutilh, etcetera. The uneducated drug baron, on the other hand, steps into the trap of the media lawyer; they win a case or two, but the drug baron does end up in jail.”

**Tell us about your youth.**

“I was born in [Amsterdam city district] De Pijp. That was pure poverty. Half-size houses, that’s what the people had. Ten people to an apartment and one toilet for two families. The apartments in De Pijp, which are small anyway, were split in two halves. Can you imagine? No TV, no shower. Once a week the entire family went to the bath house for a dime or a nickel. Aged 12 or 13, children started working; they were expected to be grown up. My parents owned a snack bar, so we had a fair amount of money. Instead of playing the piano or tennis, you learned –just as in the American ghettos– to fight. When we were fourteen we entered the street life of De Pijp, much to the sorrow of my mother. We could stand our ground quite well, my brother and I. We had to, of course, because we were outsiders.”

**At what age did you start dealing hash?**

“When I started I was 15, 16 years old. When I was 28, 29, It had toughened.”

**Did you regret that things had changed?**

“Yes, well, you grow along. Of course, at a certain moment, you wake up with a shock. But you grow along and you transform in your behaviour. That is how it usually goes. Unless, of course, if you grow up in China or Italy and your father is a mobster. Then you are part of it from the start. But the most people of my age that I know have started with a small hippie colony like Goya [a small hippie island in front of the Indian coast], starting with 5 kilos of stuff, which they smoked themselves until they found out that they had some left, you know?”

**What is the goal of your publications?**

“There is no goal. I have noticed that the media are the best selling drug for the people, in accordance with Karl Marx’ ‘opium for the people’. Just look at the craziness –I call this the era of imbecility and horniness– of [Talpa television programme] *De Gouden Kooi* and Paris Hilton; you can make a lot of money by doing nothing in the media. I am not a moralist, I just want to make a career or, in other words, make a lot of money.

“We have had contact with two well-known talk shows in the US, by Cleerhouse Publishing. We have made an appointment about the film version of two of my books. In September, my publisher will issue a press release in which it is stated that I have received the largest advance ever for my newest book, which is only to be released in April. [*Killing Fields*] is again a bestseller.

A total of 26 thousand issues have been printed within 4 weeks, which is unheard of in the Netherlands. And you should not forget: I am an American in origin. America is very nationalistic. If you are not an American, you may massacre half of Cambodia but you will still not get any attention. Because I am an American I have a certain market value. If you make your breakthrough in the media there –well, you can't really earn that much in the drug scene.”

**Books on this topic are very popular now, with the Holleeder trial coming up.**

“That is not entirely true. Most of the books published by well-known crime reporters do not get a second print. An average book of a crime reporter is always based on hear-say and they use second or third hand information. What I write is straight from the horse's mouth.”

**Is it not risky to dig it all up again?**

“Underworld, upper world. There is only one world to me. I don't give a damn whether I am in the news positively or negatively. Risky? If you've read my book properly, you can see that I don't mention the things that can put other people at risk. I call them X or A. When I mention a person fully, that person has been murdered for sure. If I use names of people that are still alive, then their case has become superannuated, the information is already known or it is improvable. I am not a journalist in the classical sense, so I don't intend to write down a story of facts.

“The meaning behind this book is to have the average Dutchman look over my shoulder and see what I see: What actually happens behind all those news reports? How does someone talk, how does he behave? If you read an article of a crime reporter, you'll read: there was a murder there and there... But how did the preparations go, what really happened, what kind of people do that? Those questions often remain unanswered. So I give a face to the actors: how sloppily it is done sometimes and what kind of imbeciles are behind it.

“A good example is the story of a British drug dealer who was found dead in the Vinkeveen lake district. The average Dutchman may think: 'this is a very professional assassination'. But it really was an escalated robbery by three lunatics. You will never read that, not even in a court report. Because there is no-one who tells the court or a journalist what the suspect told me, because I've known that bloke for more than twenty years. Plus, people who talk to journalists all have a certain interest to uphold.”

## **‘If you're a non-American you can massacre half of Cambodia and still get no attention from the US media’**

**You wrote that all crime reporters have an interest in the underworld.**

“No, not all. Two of them rise above the rest: Bas van Hout [RTL network] and Peter R. de Vries [SBS]. They are what I call 'mafia journalists'. The confusing thing is that you call them journalists, because that is the way they are depicted by themselves and in the media, which is very hard to battle. In 1992, there was a court decision, *Het Parool* versus De Vries, in which the considerations were as clear as daylight: 'De Vries has a profitable relationship with [the criminal organisation led by Klaas]

Bruinsma and does several jobs for the Bruinsma clan'. Consequentially, it is clear that we are dealing with a member of a mafia clan.

"The internationally renowned media sociologist Manuel Castel has written a very thick book on the tentacles of the international mafia. A mafia member is not necessarily someone who walks around with a gun in his trousers, a chalk-line suit and a Rolex, but can just as well be a director of Shell, Philips or Endemol. You can call that mafia, too.

"I have never heard a journalist talk about the fact that someone like Peter R. de Vries, with the 1992 court decision in his pocket, can weekly act on television like he is the largest hero! If something like this becomes public about De Vries or even [President George W.] Bush, their story is over! There is a different culture in the Netherlands, where those things go unnoticed. I blame journalism for that. It is a large societal mishap that someone like De Vries still receives legitimacy from you. Not from the viewer, because they don't know better, they just watch what they get to see. Opium for the people, nothing more. I'm talking about you two and with you the entire 'loyal' press."

**Was your aggravation over that the reason to publish your books?**

"Partly. Not the last book. I am working on a book about the family of mafia journalists. That will be the real story, which will settle an account with them. It is a disgrace for you that a non-journalist with my background has to write such a book. Journalists are dumb and follow blindly."

**Do you have children?**

"Yes, four. One of my sons is doing a study of Marketing and Law. My other son is 16 and he has left to play ice hockey at a Philadelphia prep school, as a preparation for college. He is seen as a great talent in America and Canada and certainly in the Netherlands. He will certainly get a scholarship, and possibly for an Ivy League university. I'm very proud of him. Of all my children, by the way. Even when they do nothing."

**Have your children ever become victim of the publicity surrounding you?**

"When the first publicity wave came, my oldest two children, they were aged 9 and 10, were in a snobbish school in Amsterdam. We had managed to network ourselves into that scene, we lived across from the Hilton Hotel. Everybody thought I was a real estate agent or something. One acquaintance of mine was a professor at a university, another was the head of orthopaedic surgery in the academic hospital in Utrecht, their children mixed with our children. So, we had squeezed ourselves into that world and then hell broke loose regarding the Hoogland case [in which Brown was the crown witness]. We immediately moved with our children to Florida. Immediately! They knew nothing, we told them nothing. We've always kept that separate. I know families where children know from their second birthday onwards what papa does. But in my house, there is no drinking or smoking and no underworld figure comes in!

"When we returned, we deliberately went to live in Eindhoven. Again, we managed to network ourselves into the middle class. That went well for two years. Then Mr. Van Hout put letters about me and my home address in the letterboxes of my neighbours, causing a riot on the front page in Eindhoven. After that, Peter R. de Vries came up with his broadcasts in which they tried to entrap me. [...] They set me up and that also affected my children. It was the worst period of my life. That is why I will never

forget him [...] When I gave him that little kick up his ass, he was lucky because there were so many media present. I call that a little kick from the past.

“De Vries deliberately made a broadcast in order to get to my family and my children. He used a good friend of mine, a junkie called Rony, to call me. Rony said had hired a sex house at [red light district] De Wallen. On television, people were made to believe that I would be lured by that. In other words: Brown is a curb crawler. While I never visited De Wallen at all! I don’t even know the way. If I asked Rony on the telephone whether to go left or right, it was cut out and not published. Rony had a would-be relationship with a Columbian prostitute. They wanted to sell me five kilos of coke. It was all taped by a secret camera: they offered ten thousand euros under the market price, it would have cost me eight years in prison, but it was entrapment, so I can live with that. Rony told me: ‘my Columbian friend is celebrating her birthday, we are sitting there with four of her whore friends from South America, we have a mirror of coke on the table and two bottles of whisky. Join us!’ With eighteen hidden cameras in the building, which was, by the way, owned by Etienne U., the right hand of Holland’s best known mafia godfather, Klaas Bruinsma!

“I said, no thanks, I don’t feel like it. I must have had a guardian angel on my shoulder. But imagine that if I had come! Maybe not you, but 99 percent of the gentlemen at such a party would have, as a figure of speech, the women’s suspenders all over them within ten minutes. Do you get the picture? A little bit of arts and crafts with the video tape and you can wave goodbye to your family. So I was lucky that I said no, but it will never be forgotten. I will serve two years if necessary.

Originally, I wanted to rip off [De Vries’] upper lip. He would be like ‘mmmwwaaaohah’ during the show –perfect for the seal’s network. It will never be forgotten, until I am done with him. And he also knows, the coward. The image that is being sold about him, is the stout crime fighter. That is Peter R. de Vries fake. Reality is, that if I say ‘hey!’, he will sh\*t and p\*ss in his pants. That is the real Peter.”

#### **What was De Vries trying to achieve according to you?**

“It was for the Hoogland group. The Supreme Court decided that De Vries aimed to clear Hoogland [from the murder on Tony Hijzelendoorn]. To depict me as an unreliable witness. The Supreme Court ruled: ‘the images presented by De Vries prove nothing. Brown is still a reliable witness’. As soon as I notice that a journalist writes an article about me, not because he thinks that it’s the truth, but because he has to do so for a criminal group, I do not consider him a journalist anymore. In that case, he is part of a crime group and will be treated as one. To say in your terms: then you will descend to the ‘underworld’.

‘He can call me now, I will come at once [...] Because this is true: I am not a fake, I am from De Pijp. I fought a few times a week, like everybody did in De Pijp. I have had a knife-thrust here and a blow with an axe there. He has got nothing, that fatso. But this is starting to become a bit of a silly story, because my wife gets angry when I talk like this. That I talk like a macho. She thinks that it is stupid, she will get very mad when I talk like this. Then she says I am too old for that.”

#### **Why did you go to law school?**

“Well, I thought: knowledge is power, you know? I have heard so many court decisions against me, all the lawyers are useless and it costs too much money, so I started writing my own pleads and my lawyer just signs it. That’s why.”

**Was there a specific moment when you decided to quit?**

“Yes, that was in 1992. Then, I exaggerate a little, about thirty of my acquaintances were shot dead in one year. In that year, my best friend [Tony Hijzelendoorn, after whose murder Brown acted as the crown witness against suspect Martin Hoogland] was murdered –or tortured to death, to be exact. That’s when I thought: ‘I don’t feel like this anymore’”

## ‘When I’m eighty, I’ll still watch the door’

**In 1992, you served as a witness.**

“Yes, I testified. After that, I survived an assassination attempt. I had already quit then, I was following courses at the [University of Amsterdam]. I took an exam three weeks after the attack. The people of my class asked me to come. So there I was, completely in plaster. Well, that was a strange view, of course. I got a B.”

**Weren’t you scared to death in that period?**

“No, we are never scared to death. Or else I would have had more than twenty traumas already, as a figure of speech. If you grow up in Baghdad, as a child these days. Or as a child slave in Congo. Have you seen that programme? Boys in Congo are declared bewitched by the village elders and then repudiated. Well, you don’t believe it. Others are forced into prostitution, aged eleven, or eight [...] That makes me think: what are we talking about?”

**If you look back now, would you have done things differently?**

“No, I wouldn’t have wanted to miss a thing. But on the other side, I wouldn’t have said no to being born in Paleis Soestdijk [the Queen’s residence] either. I read in the newspaper that the budget of that little family is 130 million euros per year. They still live like Louis XIV, the Sun King. Plus, I think that Prince Bernhard didn’t behave any better than any pimp in De Pijp. The only difference is that he did it on the State’s payroll – and above the law!

But I do not regret anything. We were rich in poverty, because no-one had anything. We had no television set, so no-one realised that there was a world outside De Pijp. We had great fun with nothing. But you don’t stay backward. For me, things changed when I entered high school, the Montessori Lyceum. There, for the first time ever, I realised that people actually had a garden. I would visit my class mates, and they had a garden! I thought: what the hell is going on here? That’s when I saw the difference. We used to think: if you have a tonne, you are more or less like Donald Trump. I remember thinking ‘what’s going on?’ while visiting people with a piano worth 20 grand.”

**Does it not matter to you how you achieve that richness?**

“What do you mean by that? Do you want to tell me that a top CEO who owns some kind of chemical factory in any kind of exotic place has fewer scruples than a hit-man, to put it sharply? In a place where three thousand people died because he deliberately tried to earn 20, 30, 40 million euros more but did not consider extra security measures?”

**So no-one earns his money in an honest fashion, is that what you mean?**

“That is what I think, certainly. I’m not saying this to plead myself free. Take [Development Cooperation Minister Bert] Koenders, he is the prototype of a real salonsocialist [a Dutch expression for a socialist politician who expresses a leftist opinion to gain votes, but fills his pockets by profiting from capitalism on the right]”.

**Do you ever feel homesick for the excitement of your past?**

“Well, there’s still enough excitement going on, don’t get me wrong!”.

**Do you still feel unsafe nowadays?**

“Yes, I do. Can’t you see that? Besides, who is really safe?”

**You are continuously watching the door, for example.**

“Yes, I’ve been doing that for thirty years. It has become a part of me. I even do that in Toronto, ha ha! That won’t change anymore. When I’m eighty, I will still watch the door. Maybe a nice anecdote: I used to have friend from a very infamous family in the North [of Amsterdam]. He always said: ‘When I’m walking the dog in the street, even he looks over his shoulder! Ha ha! Good one, isn’t it, I always like that one. And if I’m at home with my cat, the cat always sits in front of the window like this! [he moves his head slowly from the left to the right] Ha ha!”

**To what extent can you actually leave a criminal past behind you?**

“If you really want to, you can. I’ve done it many times. We lived in Toronto for four years. If you really want to, if you want to break with your old life and start a new one, you can be untraceable. Look: here [in the Netherlands] it is easy because people can find you. But the trick is to adapt to your new environment. If you go and live somewhere and you behave like a normal, social person, then you don’t catch the eye! But if you go and live in an upper-class neighbourhood and you come home at six am every night in a very large Mercedes and with four, five trumpy-looking types surrounding you every other day, well, then they will talk about you! A lot of people in Toronto would be scared to death if they knew who I am!”

*The ideas and opinions put forward by the interviewed should not be considered an opinion of The Hagu/ Amsterdam/ Rotterdam Times. The Times editorial staff has repeatedly tried to hear the other side of the argument by contacting Peter R. de Vries, but he was not available for comment.*