

The Skies Are Red

Richie Narvaez

C*riminal Takedown: Climate Change Cops: An Oral History*

Exclusive to *Hollywood Variety Magazine*

Although Criminal Takedown went ballistic in the ratings from the start, not even an Internal Affairs investigation could have foreseen the show becoming such a behemoth, a hit that would be on the air for four decades and launch twenty-seven spinoffs.

The original show and all of its spinoffs became wildly successful—and many have had their own spinoffs (including the current number one TV show, Criminal Takedown: White Heat)—with one glaring exception: Criminal Takedown: Climate Change Cops.

The logline for the show read, “Each episode features gripping climate crime cases and cutting-edge science. At the heart of every story is a tenant of the planet seeking justice.” The show followed an elite group of detectives who battle climate change crimes all over America. Three episodes were filmed. None were ever aired.

Rumors circled that there were tempestuous on-set arguments and that the studio was not happy with dailies. Then, on July 12, 2019, the show’s star, longtime TV veteran Sal Cassady died under bizarre circumstances. That was it. The axe fell.

What really killed CT: CCC? Was it a victim of internal storms, a dark cloud of tragedy, or changing political winds? In recent

months, Hollywood Variety Magazine has spoken with many of the people involved—producers, writers, and cast members—in separate interviews, for an in-depth look at the never-seen series.

Jerry Melker (owner, Melker Entertainment, exec producer):

Listen, *Criminal Takedown* is a juggernaut. A juggernaut! We could do *Criminal Takedown: Clown Car* and it would make ducats. Hold on, that's not bad. Let me make a note. Just kidding. Or am I? Anyway, so Sal comes to me with this idea. My father worked with him in the Sixties, so I figure I owe him a listen. For me, it wasn't about the politics of it. I mean, can you really believe scientists? But we'd just had another show cancelled, *Criminal Takedown: Fed Reserve*, and I wanted to fill that slot before the network dumped another eighties reboot in there. So I said, "Yeah, why not?" And to this day I think we could've had another hit if not for what happened to my dear friend Sal.

Rollo Ansen (co-producer/head writer): I used to hang at Sal's house in the Palisades. Huge, rambling place, bought it when he was starring in hippy movies back in the day. Half the place was banged out of recycled material and everything he ate was organic and grown in his yard. We were always pitching his eco ideas, but nothing anyone wanted to buy. So I said to him, "What if we take our idea and tie it to a known franchise?" I mentioned *Criminal Takedown*, which to be clear he was no fan of. "Fuckin' fascist copaganda," he called it.

Melker: Sal's house is nice, really nice. But to eat—everything has fucking bean sprouts on it.

Edith Cassady (Sal Cassady's widow): Sal was a big man with big ideas. Sweetheart, when he talked people paid attention because what he said was smart, was eloquent. He loved this planet, loved all the creatures who live and breathe here. He went to every protest, testified before Congress. When he talked, people listened. And it didn't hurt that my darling was as tall as a redwood and had biceps like boulders.

Sophia Volpe (co-star, "Gina O'Hara"): I loved the concept of the show. It's so timely. I mean, there was something on the news today, I think. What I really loved about *Climate Cops* was that I'd get

to save the planet—and shoot people! What could be more fun than that?

I played the half-Italian, half-Irish second in command. I was the love interest for Sal's character. It wasn't in the script, but that's how I saw it, that's how I played it. Sal loved it, and he said he was going to have it written into the show. I said I hoped his wife wouldn't mind!

Dave Diaz (co-star "Federico"): So, the show bible said I was a newbie detective and that I was ethnic. And that was it—that was all they had for the character. I didn't even have a last name because they wanted me to cover a bunch of groups, I guess. But I didn't care—it was my first TV job!

Hanna Goode (co-star "Ariel Jade"): Well, I played Ariel, the geeky misfit technician. I had, like, four lines in each episode, and it was the same four lines, "Guys, check this out," "And then I found this!" "You're right, chief. How did I miss that?" and, last but not least, "Anyone up for a coffee run?"

Thing is, I truly believed in the idea of the show. I knew it was going to be filtered through all these cop drama tropes, but there had to be some way to crack the zeitgeist. When you think about what people watch all the time—besides fake news and reality TV—it's crime dramas. So it was kind of a brilliant idea. That was, of course, before everything went south—in more ways than one.

Could we have made a difference? I don't know. I mean, there's a wildfire headed for my area right now. That's the third time this year.

Mel Norris (co-star "Steve Remington"): It was a job. I'd played cops before. I've played them since. I'm an ex-linebacker. I got that look.

Cassady: I want to say, what happened to my sweet Sal is still hard to talk about, and I'll never believe what the coroner concluded. Never.

Ansen: Sal basically had a board covered with hundreds of environmental issues, and he would tell me, "Pick one and write an episode," and he'd add in research later. That's all the direction I got. There were a ridiculous amount of choices on that board.

Illegal deforestation. Illegal mining. Illegal dumping. Overfishing. Greenwashing. Methane leaks. On and on and on.

I came back with some pitches, and basically he said, "So each week it's some exec or his assistant who gets the blame?" I said, "Yeah." He goes, "Isn't that a bit repetitive?" I said, "Have you not seen the other *CT* shows?" He goes, "Don't you think wildfires, food insecurity, and superstorms can make the point for us?" I told him it hasn't yet.

Volpe: Everybody was lovely to work with. What a joy it is to work with people who care about the craft. I still see everyone all the time.

Diaz: I don't think she knows my real name. That's okay. I had been warned about her. Widowed three times. Went through men like a shark through chum.

Goode: Sophia and I had lunch. The one time.

Norris: There might've been some hiccups on set. It's been overplayed in the trades.

Goode: First day on set was brutal. We didn't even get through a scene before Mel waddles out of his trailer saying we can't say climate change is real. And I'm thinking, *Did you not read the script before today?* So Sal asks him, "Why the hell did you sign on for something called *Climate Change Cops* if you're gonna keep your head up your ass?" Mel gets right up in Sal's face and gives him this stare. Total deadeye. Then these two big guys get chest to chest like silverbacks. Mel finally says, "Fuck you!" and stomps away. Rollo had to go over and talk him down. Well, we did the scene without him, and they edited his stuff in later.

Norris: Bullshit. Never happened. Nope. What happened was we had a discussion. What I said was that we should focus on is entertainment, not preaching on a soapbox. People turn on their TVs so they don't have to think. I do remember Rollo promising me I'd get to shoot at least two people per episode if I did the scene Sal's way. [Makes double-clicking sound]

Diaz: Oh yeah. It was one screaming match after another. Norris has that violent reputation, you know. And Sal was like a quiet volcano that you never want to see erupt. So, that pilot episode—it

was something about a megachurch committing carbon emissions fraud—

Hollywood Variety Magazine: “Carbon Footprints in the Sand.”

Diaz: Yeah, that was it—and Sal had all this environmental technobabble he had to say. He needed it to explain the concepts, which I guess has a lot of what they call “nuance.” Ergo, he had a lot of lines. Like, *a lot a lot*. You could see Mel getting pissed about it, but he didn’t say squat. But when I had a small scene with him the next day, just him and me on a stakeout, he ad-libbed this whole ten-minute speech about how global warming was a hoax and that weather was weather.

Ansen: He didn’t ad-lib that speech. He had two of his own writers on speed dial.

Norris: Marc and Akiva are my go-to script guys. They’re always there when I need to punch up a script, you know? I get a scene where I have to shoot a guy in the head, and I give it to them and tell them to make it more Mel, and that’s how I got my famous line in *Lethal Business*. “Bullet points . . . made!” Yeah! “Bullet points . . . made!”

Volpe: Okay, okay, there were some quarrels. But Rollo always did whatever it took to get the shot in the can. He’s a pro. The business is in his blood. Oh—here it is on the news. There *is* supposed to be another wildfire. Well, I do hope everyone stays safe. My doggos get so frightened. They can sense when people get upset.

Ansen: Sal had his brand and his style, and Mel has his brand and his style, and never the twain shall meet. Gasoline and a match, they were—I mean, oil and water. But the most important thing was the show, and they both knew that.

Norris: That old hippy got in my face every goddamn day. Evidence this . . . Future that . . . Yadda yadda yadda. I was like, “Go back to your trailer and smoke a spliff and then come out and watch me shoot someone.”

Diaz: Matter of fact, I lived through the fires in 2020. I stayed put, pretty much hiding in my bathtub. I know, I know, that’s for

earthquakes. Lucky I survived then, I guess. But now, shit, it's looking like I'm going to have to evacuate. I can smell smoke everywhere, even with the doors and windows closed.

Cassady: I don't think my darling was happy. I mean, who would be? He was co-writing the stories, he was practically directing every episode, and he was in almost every scene. The man was just exhausted.

Volpe: We were filming the second episode, and the script called for Sal's character to pick me up at my house. I said, "Listen, why don't you just have me waking up at *his* house and we can save money on a set?" I even came up with this great bit. His line was something something sustainability. So I ad-lib, "You never have any problems sustaining." But for some reason they decided not to use it. Sal's wife probably complained. She knew she had to keep such a robust man on a short leash.

Ansen: Sophia's whole thing was to get more screentime at any cost. She basically wanted to turn her character into Sal's gal pal, and in front of everyone he told her their characters were not going to hook up. She threw her lemon water at his head. She looked ready to kill him.

Diaz: She was weird on the set after that. Smiling to your face, but it was like a switch had been flipped. When she wasn't on call, she was locked in her trailer, wouldn't even eat with us.

Norris: Okay, first of all, everything was fucking organic on the craft table. Like lentils and tofu and beans and shit. C'mon, I need protein! I need meat!

Goode: Well, by episode two, Mel was having Six Guys burgers delivered every day. You could smell the salt and the grease. I gotta tell you it's really hard to appreciate hummus when you're smelling that! The burgers made Sal apoplectic.

Melker: I remember watching the dailies of the second episode, "Always and Forever Chemicals," with one of the network execs and some of the lawyers. In one scene Sal had done this speech about PSAs—PFAs?—is it PDFs? Hah! Anyway, it was a good speech, gave the scene flavor. Real flavor! But one of the lawyers turns to me and

says, “You can’t use this. DooPont is one of the network’s biggest advertisers.” I knew it was going to be a headache telling Sal.

Ansen: Yeah, so Jerry calls me in and tells me I have to tell Sal to tone things down. You don’t tell a guy like Sal to tone anything down. But we sat down in his office and had a long heart-to-heart and, you know, a few hours later we were on the same page.

Cassady: DooPont? No, I never heard any of that. My darling Sal told me everything, and he would have told me if they told him to tone it down. He would never have stood for it. The environment was too important to him. He knew he was finally going to get to a popular stage to say what needed to be said.

Diaz: I remember it was at this point that Mel’s movie *Black Pill* came out and it blew up in the theaters. I mean, blockbuster with a capital B. So he started coming to the lot like a cock on the walk.

Goode: The dynamic on the set totally changed by the time we were filming the third episode.

Volpe: It was called “Frak This.” Can you believe it? What’s not to love?

Ansen: That was basically my idea, the title. Mel loved it. Sal did not. Matter of fact, he fired me because of it. Said I was being too glib. I said, people don’t like taking serious things too seriously. He basically said I had it all wrong, said he would let me finish episode three. All in all, a very shitty time in my life for that to happen.

Melker: After they worked on the third episode, it was clear that Sal and Mel were not getting along, and I was going to have to do something drastic. One of them was going to have to go. I mean, there were millions of dollars on the line.

Diaz: Can we talk about the fight? I want to talk about the fight. Because it was nasty.

Volpe: It’s sad when sad things happen, isn’t it?

Melker: I’d rather talk about some of the new shows we have coming up. Lots of new stuff.

Goode: It started with Mel picking on poor Dave. Dave flubbed a line, and Mel exploded. I don’t know what was going on with him.

[Cough] Anabolic steroids [Cough]. Mel turns to the director—Craig Kolakowski, who has since passed—and tells him to start the scene from scratch, to which Craig balks, understandably, and Mel screams at him, “I’m in command now!” Which then makes Dave start giggling uncontrollably.

Diaz: I giggle when I’m nervous. It’s a weird habit.

Goode: Then Mel turns and slams Dave against a brick wall.

Ansen: Oh, I was there for the fight, all right. That was basically my last day on set. Next day I was going to have to start looking for work all over again. At my goddamn age.

So, yeah, Mel has Dave by the throat, and Sal runs out of his trailer and pulls him off. Mel then throws a massive punch that gets Sal in the face. Sal flies back and hits the push bar on the technocrane. Basically, I thought he’d snapped his neck. But then he pops right back at Mel and suddenly punches are flying everywhere.

Volpe: I grabbed Rollo’s arm and said, “Rollo, go do something!” He’s got lovely, thick arms.

Ansen: Before I could do anything, Sal tackled Mel and pinned him to the ground.

Norris: It wasn’t a fight. Just some shoving. Guys being guys.

Diaz: And next morning, yep, they found Sal in his trailer. Single gunshot to the head, the gun there next to him.

Volpe: The poor man. What he must have been going through to do that to himself.

Goode: I heard the angle was all wrong. I heard they found . . . Never mind. It’s all just rumors, right? The police declared it a suicide. End of story.

Norris: Let me say this. I was sad as anyone about what happened to Sal. Sadder. He was a good friend and colleague. I still think about him every day.

Cassady: Now, with time past, I wonder if the networks and the producers—I wonder if they never intended for the love of my life’s point of view to make it on the air. I’m not sure it wasn’t just a tax write-off for Jerry.

Melker: Absolute bullshit. Total BS. *Criminal Takedown* is a billion-dollar franchise, a gift that keeps on giving, a hydra that keeps on living. Even the cancelled stuff, like, *Criminal Takedown: ICE*, which premiered to fantastic ratings in 2021 and then there was all this kerfuffle. Now we're reviving it.

Hollywood Variety Magazine: Are there any plans to revive *Criminal Takedown: Climate Change Cops*?

Melker: Not at the present moment.

Ansen: Sal was the heart, soul, brains, balls of the show. Without him the whole thing would fall apart. And it did. And, oh my god, after all that, two days later, Jerry calls me into his office and asks me to take over *Criminal Takedown: Blue Lives Matter*. The irony.

Goode: I have to say, what is the deal with all these cop and murder shows? They're, like, the same show, and yet there's not one single program, not one single piece of news about saving the environment. Maybe Sal knew this was coming, see? He saw the writing on the wall. And things have only gotten worse since Herr Chancellor got elected.

I mean, yeah, Sal's death does seem suspicious. And if someone wanted to do something to him, we all had the opportunity, right? Let's face it, a lot of us had a motive. Not me, but a lot of us. Though if I had a motive, I certainly wouldn't say I had a motive! Eesh! But then—what if he really saw what was happening to his vision and he couldn't stand it. There's always tha—wait. Let the sirens pass. I've been hearing them all morning. It's fucking scary.

I'm looking outside right now. The hills are on fire. Fuck, the skies are red. Red as blood. If there were a god, this is what his angry wrath would look like, terrible and merciless and swift. It's basically the wrath of the planet, isn't it? Mother Earth. And she's coming for all of us. Oh shit, I gotta go before I miss Fire and Rescue. I gotta—

Given the devastation of the 2026 wildfires, a month after our initial interviews, Hollywood Variety Magazine contacted all of the participants to catch up with them. Unfortunately, co-producer Rollo Ansen died of lung damage caused by prolonged exposure to smoke from the wildfires and so was not able to participate.

Cassady: Everything is gone. The whole house, the garden. Everything my darling built with his own hands, it's gone.

Melker: No comment. Absolutely no comment.

Diaz: Yeah, I'm currently unhoused, living back with my moms in Humboldt Park. I just got my real estate license. Acting wasn't going so well anyway.

Volpe: My thoughts and prayers go out to everyone whose lost their homes. Me and the doggos are fine, but it was so upsetting to watch on TV, my husband and I flew our private jet halfway around the world just to get some healthy distance from it. The doggos love Norway.

Norris: Shit. Yeah. My house got toasted. It's kind of devastating. It's emotional. I've been relieved from the burden of my stuff since it's all cinders. But that's just the Santa Anas. You win some, you lose some. I'm not going to buy into the big con game to get us to send our money overseas and bail out all these third world countries that supposedly suffer.

Goode: I actually evacuated right after we last talked, so I'm all right, sort of. I have friends who lost everything. It was so sad about Rollo. I'm glad Dave's all right.

You know, I've been thinking a lot about *Climate Cops*, and I wonder if our show would have made any fucking difference even if it had gotten on the air. We could have convinced every viewer that climate change was a bad thing, but that wouldn't stop it. Because we could never change the heart of a corporation. You can't stop something that doesn't have a heart.

It feels like such a lost chance. I mean, the people on the news don't even say climate change anymore. Did you notice that? Are they not allowed to? Holy shit, can I even say it? Are they going to Silkwood me now?



Update 3/15/26: Actor Mel Norris will be headlining the latest *Criminal Takedown* spinoff—*Criminal Takedown: Campus Crackdown*.

Tragically, less than a week after this article was posted, actor Hanna Goode was killed in a car accident. Her body was found in her car in a ditch on the side of the road.



Update 3/16/26. This article has been removed.