

**MADELINE
STILL
WEBB
1912-1980**



**1942
NEW
YORK
MURDER**

In the 1940s, actress Madeline Webb dreamed of stardom but achieved only fleeting notoriety, followed by years in prison. She got off easy. It might have been worse. She could have ended up in Sing Sing's electric chair like her two male partners in crime.

Madeline Still Webb was born in June 1912 in Stillwater. After graduating from Oklahoma A&M College in 1933, she headed to Hollywood to become a Powers model. Her strict Baptist mother was dead-set against it but her father, who had always spoiled his only daughter, helped subsidize her career but eventually she lost hope. In 1938 she scraped together enough money to head to Broadway.

She didn't have much success in New York either, just some minor pin-up modeling, and performing in a peep-show at the 1939 World's Fair. After her father died, and her mother stopped sending her money, Madeline was determined to carry on. She told her mother that the big city scared her to death, where people would do anything for money.

Madeline abandoned her plans to come home when she fell in love with petty criminal – and failed singer – Eli Shonbrun. While working with his Uncle Murray Hirschl in the jewelry business, Eli was caught stealing the money he collected on jewelry, and was arrested for larceny. He turned to theft with his partner John Cullen, specializing in extorting jewels from rich women.

Then he met the beautiful Madeline. They lived together in inexpensive hotels, skipping out when they ran out of money. Madeline claimed she didn't know Eli was a thief but she did know he had abandoned his wife and child. When they landed at the Sutton Hotel, Eli presented Madeline with diamond engagement ring which was stolen. Eli would introduce her as his “bride”.

On March 21, 1942, 52-year-old wealthy Polish refugee Susan Reich, who was known to wear flashy jewelry, was invited by a caller who said she was “the actress Madeline Webb” to come to the Sutton Hotel to meet her new husband. They had met recently in the Woodrow Hotel where Susan lived. Two days later, Reich entered the apartment and was never seen alive again.

The next day, hotel employees found her dead on the bedroom floor in the apartment witnesses said belonged to Eli and Madeline. Adhesive tape had been plastered as a gag over her face and her head wound up in a flowered scarf and Paisley muffler. A \$1,500 ring was cut from her finger. Police rounded up Eli, Madeline and Cullen after the three-carat diamond was found separate from its settings in the shoddy Bronx hotel where they were hiding. Uncle Murray fingered Eli and Cullen for the murder and Madeline for setting up the meeting. Shonbrun claimed Webb was not involved – and Murray was the mastermind.

The sensational trial included an audience full of women and an all-male jury, with Madeline repeatedly yelling at the district attorney and constantly embracing Shonbrun. Showing mercy, Madeline was sentenced to life without parole. Cullen and Shonbrun were sentenced to death – and executed in April 1943 at Sing-Sing Prison, with both proclaiming their innocence. Madeline would spend the next 25 years teaching literacy and managing the prison library.

In 1966, with help from some Hollywood friends, Madeline was paroled and returned to Stillwater to live with her elderly mother, doing community service for a variety of local organizations. She died in February 1980 at age 67 of cancer. To hear Madeline tell her story, view the podcast “Murder Me a Little”.