

MAKING A KILLING

This voodoo doctor returned from the dead to run his own little shop of horrors in Britain

Papa Bernie Williams, Britain's only voodoo doctor, is sitting in front of two human skulls and a coffin for spirits in his voodoo surgery above Dark and Light, his occult shop. He is talking about the time when he murdered another doctor; how he himself was buried in the ground for 24 hours; how he has been accused of sexually propositioning his London clients; and how he exorcises, jinxes and heals people for fees of up to £40,000.

Williams, a 42-year-old Haitian, says he helps clients get jobs and pass exams. He claims to drive away evil spirits, says he cured cancer and helped the blind to see. He says that last year he charged

a client in America £40,000. "He was mentally crazy and the devil from hell was on him," explains Williams, in his staccato and practically impenetrable Creole accent. "I had to get the devil out. Nobody else could do it. It was a small price to pay, because he was very ill."

Four months ago, Williams took £29,400 for a job in Jamaica. "The man couldn't walk and was going down on the floor like a frog. I have to charge big money because it's a sacrifice and it helps you get well. I send some of the money to Haiti, some to the spirits for feasts, and I burn some. How much I burn depends on what the spirit wants. Sometimes it's half."

Williams doesn't look your stereotypical voodoo

doctor. He has a gold-edged tooth and wears medallions with his Harley-Davidson black leather jacket and jeans. His shop, which opened two years ago, sells everything from £150 crystal balls to "death incense burners" and wax effigies for pins. On his desk is a bottle of rum containing a snake from a banana tree. "If you're sick, you drink this and I know what's wrong with you."

Williams casts most of his spells in the basement. Chairs are arranged in a seance-like circle round a witches' symbol painted on the floor. There are silk-covered bottles containing people's spirits, a bull's heart in a jar, and ropes for cursing people. "To jinx someone, you measure his footprint in the street with twine, and then I fix him up for you. I can make him a cripple, give him a big foot, make his belly big or give him headaches."

Williams came to east London five years ago to help a nurse entrap her runaway husband. Currently he has numerous clients, charging from £35 for half an hour. As we talk, he touches the leather pocket in the sheath containing his voodoo knife. Suddenly, my tape recorder, containing new batteries and a new cassette, mangles the tape. Next, the recorder, with more new batteries and cassette, judders and eats the replacement tape. Then the photographer's camera breaks down.

Last month Williams conducted a voodoo marriage, the first of its kind in Britain. It took place on the landing outside his office, amidst the wholesale plastic tubs of jinx-removing solution. For the ceremony he had two live white pigeons, an altar bedecked with cake, rum and beer, and two diamond rings. He married a 38-year-old client to St Barbara, the patron saint of fireworks. "St Barbara only likes young men, and my client wanted protection from evil and the police," he



IAN BRADSHAW

Papa Bernie Williams with the skull of one of his business competitors. Note the bottle of rum with a snake in it

explains. "He'd been busted at home and found with £15,000-worth of drugs and £10,000 in cash. The case went to court but they threw it out because I helped him." He refuses to reveal more.

Recently Williams also claims he cured a bad back by making his client drink chicken's blood

and sleep for seven days on a Haitian straw mat by a coffin in his shop. "She was very possessed. But she got better. She couldn't walk before, and now she can." He charged her £4,500 and she accused him later (on Carlton TV's *The Investigators*) of sexually propositioning her. Not

true, counters Williams. "A lot of women like me, but I don't have sex with them." And why did he charge so much? "I burned £3,003," he says.

He claims he killed a man, another voodoo doctor, in Haiti 10 years ago. His skull sits on Williams's desk. "I won the fight so I won the head. I fought with him when he was alive, so now I own him. He had a knife. I had a knife and a saucepan of clear water. I called his soul into the water and that killed him. When he died, I gave him back his life and he became a zombie, one of the walking dead."

Williams, himself the seventh son of a seventh son, has nine children. He became aware of his powers while he was still a child. "I used to see dogs and horses walking on the walls." His mother died when he was nine months

old, and he was raised by a Mrs Humphries, who was blind. At 12, he started healing people. At 15, he left school to concentrate on voodoo.

As he grew older, he lost his "special ability" and had to be reborn. "Voodoo priests killed me in Haiti when I was 17, took my spirit from my body, put it in a bottle and buried my body in the ground for 24 hours." How did he breathe underground? "You don't. You're dead. Your spirit is still alive, so you can see everything and hear earth falling on top of you."

As I leave the Dark and Light shop, a man comes in and looks at a crucifix. "How much does this Jesus cost?" he asks.

HE MARRIED A CLIENT TO THE PATRON SAINT OF FIREWORKS

CAROLINE PHILLIPS 