

Assassin's work: The photograph above has often been misinterpreted as having been taken moments after the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. was shot. In fact, when the fatal shot was fired, Andrew Young (center) and the others were not on the balcony with King (the sprawled figure). The author maintains that the photo was taken some 10 minutes after the shooting. Young and the others are pointing toward the flophouse where police said James Earl Ray fired the shot.

WHO KILLED DR. KING?

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In April 1968, Earl Caldwell was a reporter on the staff of the *New York Times*. He was the only reporter in Memphis covering the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. at the time of the assassination. Some 30 years later, Caldwell is still troubled by questions about King's murder. Caldwell, who lives in New York City, is writing a book about the day Dr. King was killed. He is also the author of "Black American Witness, Reports From the Front," a collection of his



THOMAS A. FERRARA : SPECIAL TO THE SUN

newspaper columns, which appeared in the *New York Daily News* for 12 years.

By EARL CALDWELL

ON THAT EVENING in Memphis nearly 30 years ago, as twilight gathered over the string of faded pastel-colored buildings that made up the Lorraine Motel, I was one of those who was there at the moment the shot was fired that felled Martin Luther King Jr., snuffing out his life and launching a controversy that rages yet today.

Many questions remain unanswered. Was it a conspiracy? What was the motive? Who ordered the killing? And, most of all, who was the assassin?

The official story says that the killer was the escaped convict James Earl Ray and that he was acting alone. There was never a trial. After his arrest, Ray pleaded guilty when he was brought into a Memphis courtroom. But just days after he was given a 99-year prison sentence, Ray recanted. He portrayed himself as a patsy; he said another man pulled the trigger. And now, with Ray 70 years old, frail and ill with terminal liver disease, his lawyers are pressing for the trial that was never held. Meanwhile, on Friday, Memphis prosecutors said a new investigation found no evidence that anyone other than Ray had killed King.

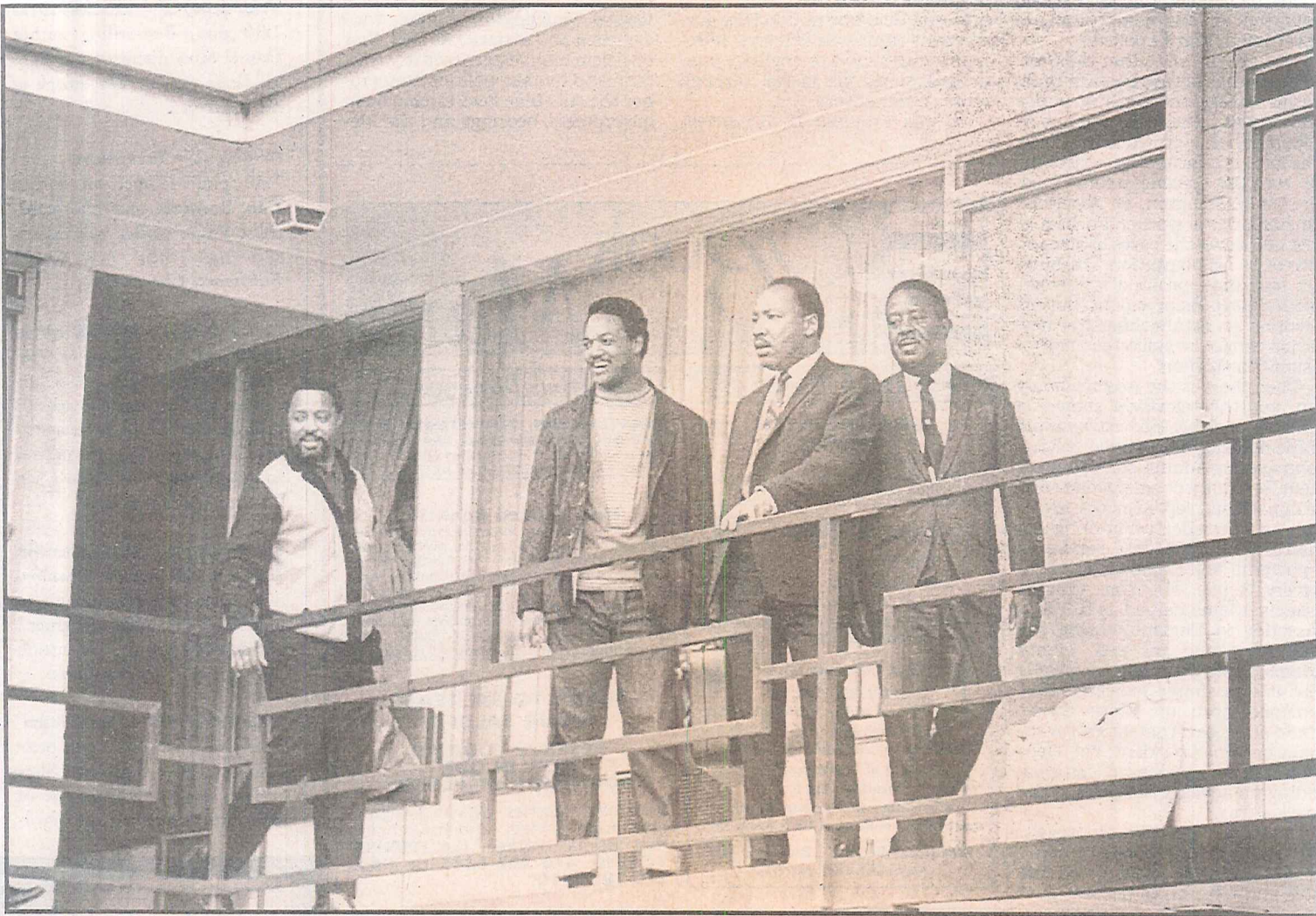
So much of the time, the mind plays

tricks. As the years pass, pictures fade. But for me, so much of what happened that night nearly three decades ago, still sits there in the front of my mind as though waiting to be understood.

I had spent the afternoon waiting to interview King, as I had done in his room the afternoon before. On this day though, it broke the other way. King had no time for an interview; his lawyers and strategists had spent a long day downtown in a courtroom, fighting an injunction that was issued to prevent him from leading a march on behalf of striking garbage collectors. King stayed in his room conferring by phone with the lawyers and taking care of other matters. He even had had lunch sent in, and he and his friend and partner, the Rev. Ralph Abernathy ate in the room.

After the proceedings at the courthouse ended, the lawyers and strategists returned to the Lorraine and met with King. They didn't have much time; dinner was being prepared for them at the home of the Rev. Billy Kyles, a Memphis minister. And later, there would be a rally to build support for the garbage collectors and for the march scheduled for Saturday.

It was nearing 6 o'clock on Thursday, April 4. King's room, No. 306, was on the balcony level of the motel. In the parking lot below, one by one, [See King, 6H]



King and his colleagues: Hosea Williams (left), the Rev. Jesse L. Jackson Jr. and the Rev. Ralph D. Abernathy (right) joined the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel on April 3, 1968. Several of King's aides were in the motel's parking lot below as King was gunned down as he stood on the balcony the following evening.

ASSOCIATED PRESS

[King, from Page 1H]

King's closest aides began to gather. They waited for "Doc" as they affectionately called him. None of them would leave until he was ready, and then they would go to dinner together. Waiting now were Andrew Young, Jesse Jackson, James Bevel, Hosea Williams and James Orange. King jokingly called them his "wild horses," because he said they had such strong personalities. With them was the lawyer Chauncey Eskridge, the musician Ben Branch and a few others.

And they were there huddled together when the door to Room 306 opened.

It was a few minutes before 6 p.m. Kyles stepped out, then Martin. Abernathy, not quite ready, lingered behind. King went to the railing at the balcony to greet those who waited below. Maybe because of the tension from the day, the mood turned playful. King joked with Jesse. And Jesse introduced Branch, a musician from Chicago, who had come to Memphis to perform that night at a rally.

"Oh, I know Ben," said Martin.

King had a request. He said he wanted Branch at the rally later to play "Precious Lord," a song that was a favorite.

Witnesses to murder

As King leaned on the balcony and the banter continued, they all had their eyes glued on him. And from somewhere across Mulberry Street, just beyond the motel grounds, an assassin was lying in wait, prepared to strike. Those who were the closest to King would see the killing as no others would see it. They actually witnessed the instant the bullet hit King, exploding with such force that it ripped a hole larger than a fist in his neck and jaw, hurling him onto his back, leaving him virtually dead on the balcony.

In the horror of the moment, those who watched stood frozen. Then, instinctively they jumped down, then back up and down again. And it continued that way.

For me, it was different. When the shot rang out, I was inside my room, No. 214, on the ground floor of the motel. The door was open; I had been pacing about inside trying to get a telephone line to get my story to New York in time to make a deadline. I did not see the bullet strike King. When the gunshot echoed through the motel yard, I did not know that an assassin had struck. But in two, perhaps three strides, I was in the doorway, looking to learn what had happened.

What was it, I wondered? Had a bomb exploded?

Off to my right, I saw King's aides in the parking lot. What happened? Directly across from the hotel, just above an embankment, I saw a figure rising from the thicket. He was coming from a crouched position. What was

he doing? His attention was trained on something, something at the motel. It appeared that he knew what had happened. He seemed to be twisting, doing something. He was a white man, and he appeared to be wearing coveralls.

Just then, a car roared up to near the doorway where I stood. It stopped, then backed up and then lurched forward again, this time stopping just outside my room. I recognized the driver. It was Solomon Jones. I had spoken to him earlier; he had been assigned by an undertaker to chauffeur King. He began to bang his head on the steering wheel.

"Oh no — oh no," he cried.

Dressed only in T-shirt and shorts, I ran to the car.

"What happened?" I screamed.

He did not answer, but suddenly, a mournful wailing sound rose from King's aides in the parking lot. Only then did I look to the balcony. I saw a man on his back. It was King.

I dashed back to my room, threw on trousers, shoes, a raincoat. Hustling out the door, I grabbed a sheath of

paper and a pen. I ran to join the men in the parking lot. The main part of the motel was L-shaped. King lay almost in the middle of the long upper section of the L. Just across the smaller section of the L was the office and next to that, an opening where cars entered the motel grounds. A phalanx of cops burst through that opening. They were on foot, weapons drawn, and they came running right at us.

Oh my God, I thought. It's the police, they're shooting at us.

One officer dashed directly at me. I was so sure he was going to shoot, I threw my arms to my face for protection.

"Where did that [the shot] come from?" he barked.

I was so frozen that I could not utter a single word. The cop ran on. I raced to a stairway at the end of the small L and sprinted up the steps to the balcony. When I reached King, Abernathy was there. He was cradling King's head in a towel. He whispered in his ear. My attention was fixed on the wound, how massive it was — the blood poured from his neck. I noticed his eyes. They were vacant, lifeless, muddled. I had never seen a person die, but I knew that King was dead.

Justice Department official

Immediately, my instincts as a reporter took over. On the paper I carried, I began to make notes. Earlier, in my

room, I had tried desperately to get a telephone line to call my newspaper. I couldn't get through because the motel's switchboard was tied up. Now, I remembered a pay phone down the alley that separated the motel's office from the units. I ran to that phone and called New York.

As I stood relating the details to Claude Sitton, then the editor of national news at the *New York Times*, I could hear distant voices shouting for someone to call an ambulance. A rather small young man, who was white, appeared and stood nearby, waiting for the phone.

"You better go find another phone," I told him. "This line is going to be tied up for the rest of the night."

He went into his pocket and pulled out identification. He was a U.S. Justice Department official.

"I need the phone," he said. "I have to call Washington." I surrendered the phone; he agreed that I would get it back once he was finished. I ran back to the balcony and began a long night of asking reporters' questions.

Looking in different directions

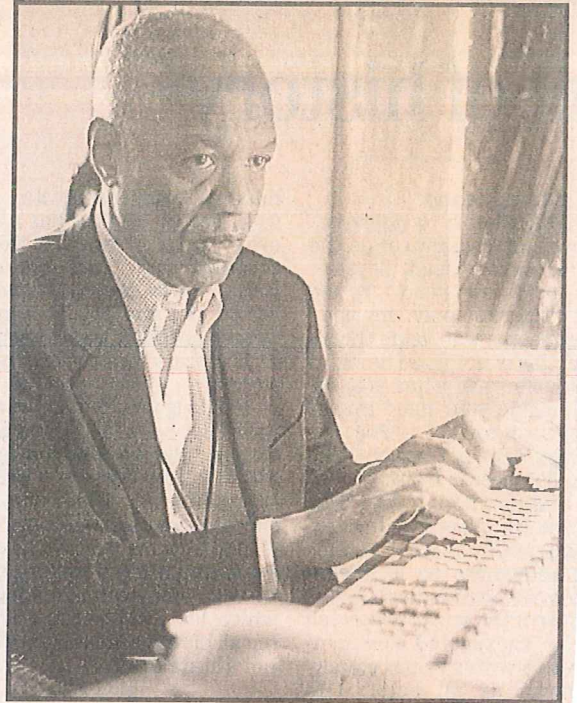
I did not put it together then; the moment was too crowded, too confused, but already, two stories had begun to emerge.

Those who were looking directly at King when he was struck told one story. Those who happened to be looking in a different direction — as I was — told another story.

In the *New York Times*, I quoted Jones; he had seen what I saw. When King came out from his room, Jones had gotten inside the car, a Cadillac, and moved it up close, parallel with the balcony, right next to a stairway near the middle of the L. He wanted to make it as convenient as possible for King. Once he had positioned the car to where he wanted it, he waited behind the steering wheel with the motor gently idling.

When the shot was fired, Jones could-

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Earl Caldwell, former *New York Times* reporter

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n't see King. He heard the gun blast, and right away, his head whipped toward the sound. He said that right away he saw the figure on the embankment peering up from the trees and undergrowth that made a dense thicket. He said the shot came from there. What he did not say was that once the shot was fired and he saw the man he believed had fired, his foot came down hard on the gas pedal and the car jumped forward. In the confusion, he slammed on the brakes and hit the gas pedal again and finally, he stopped the car near the door of my room.

Andrew Young, Jesse Jackson, Jim Bevel and Bernard Lee — none of them saw the figure in the bushes. I understand why. Once they saw the bullet explode in King's neck, they didn't see anything else — they couldn't be expected to see anything else.

Being there not enough

Being there when something important happens is an obsession with reporters. It comes from all the near misses — of arriving at an incident, only to be told, "Gee, you should have been here an hour ago." Or that morning or the night before. As a reporter, when you are not there, you have to try to piece together whatever it was that happened. A lot of the time though, it doesn't come out right out. And that is where the obsession of being there is born; if just once, you were there, then you would know and then you could say.

As a reporter, it was that way for me until that first Thursday in April of 1968, as dusk fell hard over the Lorraine Motel. Then it was my turn to come as close as a reporter ever does to being there. And then I was to learn that being there alone is not enough.

The official story of the assassination was an entirely different scenario from my impression of what happened. Looking out from the large part of the L at the Lorraine Motel, the view was of a walled-in yard (swimming pool and parking lot), then the embankment thick with trees and brush, and farther away, the dull rear ends of old flophouses.

The official story said that the shot that killed King was fired from the bathroom window of one of those flophouses and that the assassin was James Earl Ray, an escaped convict. Nobody who was there saw that; a number of witnesses saw the man in the thicket.

Ceola Shavers saw him. She was a housekeeper at the motel. She was crossing the balcony when the door to Room 306 opened. That was King's room, and she saw him emerge, resplendent in a black suit, and she was filled with excitement as she continued on her way. When the shot was fired, she was not looking at King. From her position near the office, she saw the figure in the bushes.

And there was the kid. A few days later, Martin Waldron, a *New York Times*

reporter, arrived in Memphis to ask questions. The kid told Waldron that he had been hanging out near the office when the shot was fired. He was looking away from the balcony; his eyes found the figure in the thicket.

Then, there was Harold "Cornbread" Carter. He went to authorities to report what he saw that evening. As he was to tell it, he and Dude Wheeler, a buddy, were in the brush sitting in cardboard boxes, where they

watched what they called "the big doings over at the Lorraine Motel." He said the two of them were drinking wine. When they ran out of drink, Carter said Wheeler went for another bottle. Carter said he subsequently heard somebody coming through the bushes; he believed it to be his buddy but instead it was another man, who did not notice him.

Carter told authorities that he saw the man fire the shot from there. He said the man fired from a stooped position and then rose and took the weapon. He said the man jumped off the embankment and walked away. The kid Waldron encountered also said the man jumped off the embankment. The official story branded Carter as a drunk — that was used to discount what he said.

Confident swagger

For me, Carter's story rang true. I was at the motel on the Wednesday morning when King and his party arrived. It was a big deal. Once King put a foot down on the premises of the Lorraine, everything stopped. Guests came out of their rooms. Housekeepers dropped all they were doing, and there was an impromptu celebration. They cheered and applauded. King had a huge smile on his face, and it was the same with the entourage of young, charismatic ministers who followed along with him — Jesse, Andy, Hosea, Jim Bevel, Jim Orange. Mostly they were in their 20s and early 30s, and they had a confident swagger about them as they strode across the balcony.

And part of it was that they were at the Lorraine Motel and not the fancy white-owned hotel over on the river where a lot of people said King would stay. No, he came to the Lorraine, around the corner from Beale Street, on the fringe of downtown. And so it was special. And it rang true when Carter explained his presence in the thicket, saying he was "watching the big doings" over at the Lorraine Motel.

Later that afternoon, I was in the motel office looking out of the window. Up the alley from the restaurant that was at the rear of the building came King. He was walking back to his room. He had no bodyguards. It was just him, by himself. If he worried about someone wanting to do him harm, it did not show.

Rainbow revolution

But there were threats. On the day he

left Atlanta en route to Memphis, his flight was delayed for hours after a bomb threat was telephoned to the airline. And the night before the assassination, he had given a speech at Clayborn Temple that some interpreted as a premonition of his death.

In that speech, he alluded to the threats. But he said, "It really doesn't matter with me now, because I have been to the mountaintop. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord."

For King, Memphis was a diversion. That spring he was planning what he called "a Poor People's Campaign." His idea was to gather thousands of poor people from across the country and bring them to Washington where he would lead a nonviolent campaign that he promised would continue until the government agreed to a policy that would guarantee the poor jobs or an income to eradicate poverty. The campaign was not to involve only blacks. King spoke of a "rainbow revolution" that would bring Native Americans, Mexican-Americans, Asians and whites together with blacks in Washington.

But the idea met with resistance. And that came not just from the government but from other civil rights leaders. The concern was that such a campaign would provoke violence. King had angered other civil rights leaders the year before when he broke with them by opposing the war in Vietnam. He not only denounced the war, he also took a leadership position in the anti-war movement. A few months earlier, he had spoken before a huge anti-war rally at the United Nations in New York. King's plate was full but still, in March, when he received a call from the striking garbage men in Memphis asking for his help, he did not turn them down.

King went to Memphis to participate in a march to support the strikers. That day, however, he was late arriving. The march had already begun, but when he got there, he was hustled to the front of the line. Shortly afterward, violence broke out. A teen-age boy was killed. Blame was put on King. "He can't control his people," critics charged. It did not matter that King's organization, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, was not the organizer of the event. So when King left Memphis, he was determined to return to prove he could lead a march that would be nonviolent.

He came back on Wednesday, April 3. The city got an injunction prohibiting another march. King's lawyers fought against it. King promised that he would march in the face of the injunction, which he characterized as illegal. Late that Wednesday afternoon, I interviewed King in his room at the Lorraine.

King was adamant. He said he would lead another march in Memphis. And he

was even stronger in his pledge to go ahead with the Poor People's Campaign. But he would not live to make good on his word. After we spoke, he walked me out onto the balcony. It was about 5 p.m. For a long time, we lingered there on the balcony, the two of us engaged in conversation. It would be the last time I would see him alive. The next evening, almost top of the hour, he was struck dead by an assassin's bullet.

On the morning after the assassination, King's body was taken to the airport, where a plane waited to carry him back home to Atlanta. His wife, Coretta, was on board, but she sent word ahead. She would not leave the plane; she did not want to set foot on the ground in Memphis.

A huge crowd had gathered at the airport. Overnight, the National Guard had been called in and at the airport, guardsmen stood in a long line and held back the crowd with bayonets fixed on their rifles. The crowd was made up almost entirely of blacks, and there was strong resentment at the presence of the soldiers. One woman burst through the line.

"All my life, I've been standing behind lines," she screamed. "I'm not standing behind any line today."

The tension of the moment was eased only when one of King's aides rushed down the ramp from the plane to comfort the woman. After talking with the police, the aide began running down the line behind the guardsmen.

"Where's that colored guy from the *New York Times*?" he yelled. "Where's that colored guy from the *New York Times*?"

I moved forward and identified myself. "They want you on the plane," he said. "They want a reporter to fly with them."

So I left Memphis that morning. I stayed in Atlanta that night and through the next day and then returned to Memphis and my room at the Lorraine Motel. On arrival, I stood in the doorway contemplating all that had happened. Something seemed different. What was it? What had changed? I looked out and then it struck me: over on the embankment, the bushes, the thicket, it was all gone. The brush had been cut to within a few inches of the ground.

As for me, only reporters ever came to ask what I had seen. Even though I was registered at the motel and even though my room faced the murder scene, no FBI agent or Memphis police officer or anyone investigating the assassination ever came to ask questions.

Not ever.