

Conspiracy Addict

At Memphis International Airport, United Flight 537 for Los Angeles was getting set to depart. TV lights flashed on in the boarding area as a lanky man with owlish eyes and a black-and-silver beard walked up. Ignoring the lights and TV crew, he reached into his pocket and handed his boarding pass to the flight attendant. "Welcome aboard, Mr. Ferguson," she said politely, glancing down at the name on the ticket. Then she chuckled as she watched the familiar figure duck aboard the plane: attorney Mark Lane, 51, whose latest cause is telling the world about Jim Jones's cult and whose newest client is Terri Buford, 26, a top lieutenant of Jones in Jonestown.



Leonard Atkins—Commercial Appeal

Lane: A knack for headlines

Lane's flights and fantasies over the past fifteen years have made him the country's most controversial legal gadfly. His clients have run from Jane Fonda to James Earl Ray. He has made his way from the grassy knoll in Dallas to the Lorraine Motel in Memphis to the jungles of Guyana in a self-promoted quest for the truth about John F. Kennedy, Martin Luther King Jr., and the Rev. Jim Jones. His critics call him "a vulture" and "the chief ghoul of American assassinations." Some of his legal colleagues wonder whether his behavior deserves disbarment. And his rivals say he's a riddle they find hard to understand. "He's a very able man," says investigator Harold Weisberg, another assassinator buff. "But he's totally amoral."

Lane's foes charge that, as the Peoples Temple's lawyer, he misrepresented Jonestown as a pearl of socialism when he knew all along about Jones's guns, drugs and suicide drills; that he failed to warn Congressman Leo Ryan properly; that he is now out to make a bundle off the best-seller lists. Lane replies angrily that several defectors warned the FBI, CIA and State Department about the potential for trouble at Jonestown but that they did nothing—and were unlikely to heed his warnings either. He says he is now trying to warn people about the possibility of still more violence to come. As Lane tells it, from information apparently provided by Buford, Jones had a plan, called "The Last Stand," to kill defectors, American officials and hostile newsmen. Mark Lane, in short, has a new conspiracy theory.

Ping Pong: Lane has been a professional outsider most of his life. Born in the Bronx and raised in Brooklyn, he got his law degree from Brooklyn Law School, where he developed an interest in social issues. One night over the law school



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personal direction of J. Edgar Hoover murdered King. "He will make any charge, call into question any person's character and crassly exploit any situation in pursuit of his own ends," exploded Rep. Walter Fauntroy of the House Assassinations Committee, after Lane accused him of sitting on evidence supporting the Hoover-did-it theory.

'Unethical': Lane has won few friends on the committee. One day, a staffer said, Lane demanded a two-hour lunch break to read documents, only to turn up on a TV talk show. He was ejected from a session when he tried to represent Jerry Ray, James Earl's brother. (Committee rules bar a lawyer from representing more than one witness if a conflict of interest seems likely.) "He's just been totally unprincipled and unethical," says one committee source. Lane is equally critical. "You have violated ordinary standards of decent behavior," he told the committee recently.

Lane's assorted views did catch the eye of one admirer: the Rev. Jim Jones. Last September, he hired Lane to file a Freedom of Information suit designed to smoke out government spies in Jonestown. Lane also worked up a ten-page public-relations "counteroffensive." It recommended that the commune set up a Jonestown embassy in Washington, to be run out of Lane's own shop, to sell Jonestown's good points and to report some government plots against the commune. Lane claimed that the FCC disrupted Jonestown's radio communications, that the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms had stopped a shipment of medicine, and the U.S. Postal Service had, for a time, cut off a flow of social-security checks. For these services, Lane says his office received at least \$10,000.

Kool-Aid: Lane may now have a conspiracy closer to home to worry about: that someone out there might be after *him*. The night after the murder-suicides in Jonestown, his office in Washington was burgled. Four half-empty packets of Kool-Aid also turned up on the steps of the \$37,000 house he shares in Memphis with a friend named April Ferguson. Police tested them but found no cyanide. Lane now has a burglar-alarm system, floodlights and a German shepherd.

Lane does not intend to let any threats deter him. He gave 200 lectures in 1976 (some free of charge, others for fees of \$1,500 or higher), and poured most of the \$80,000 he earned into his Washington-based citizen's committee. He will undoubtedly keep on pushing his Jonestown conspiracy theory. But unless Lane can produce solid documentary evidence, he is unlikely to persuade Federal authorities. In their view, Mark Lane has simply cried wolf too often before.

—TOM MATHEWS with CHRIS J. HARPER in Memphis, SUSAN AGREST in New York and DIANE CAMPER in Washington

Lane on the wing: In London at a mock-up of JFK's shooting, in court with Jane Fonda, in Congress with Ray

UPI



law conviction. Still, he developed a political following of young liberals. "To prove it wasn't an elitist campaign, he'd turn the first crank on the Ditto machine, then the rest of us would spend the whole night

finishing the chores," complains feminist Susan Brownmiller, a former aide.

Lane was arguing a case in court the day JFK was shot. As he left the courthouse, he recalls, a judge happened to say to him: "I don't think Lee Harvey Oswald could have done it; the doctor said Kennedy was shot in the throat from the front, but Oswald was behind him." Lane went home that night and started phoning eyewitnesses. He set up the Citizens Committee of Inquiry; he became the lawyer for Oswald's mother, Marguerite; he hit the lecture circuit with a rifle in his hand arguing that Oswald had been framed. And he wrote "Rush to Judgment," a scattershot attack on the Warren Commission that stayed on the best-seller list for months.

A year ago, Lane turned up with a startling new client: James Earl Ray, confessed assassin of Martin Luther King Jr. Ray's former lawyer, James Lesar, said last week that, without consulting him, Lane went to Brushy Mountain State Prison in Tennessee in 1977 to talk to Ray about filing a Freedom of Information Act suit against the government. Lane's pet theory in the King case is that a squad of off-duty FBI agents under the



AP photos

Ping Pong table he played Kenny Harris, a black with a clubfoot. Lane poured on the heat anyway—and lost. "You're the only person who treated me as an equal," Harris told him. Influenced by Harris, Lane set up a storefront law office in Spanish Harlem. "Mark took the cases that would make headlines," recalls former law partner Seymour Ostrow. "He was a hustler who got very self-righteous when you would call him on it."

Some of Lane's early headlines were impressive—some a bit embarrassing. He won a seat in the New York State Assembly in 1960 and promptly launched a futile and brash campaign accusing GOP Assembly Speaker Joseph Carlino of conflict of interest. During the Freedom Rides in the South, he accompanied the then NAACP official Percy Sutton, a black, through the door of the white men's room in Jackson, Miss., and was arrested.

Sex Fling: Lane made a bid for Congress in 1962 as a social reformer, only to run afoul of a steamy rumor: that he had been photographed during a sex fling with two prostitutes (a story he still denies). He also denied receiving nineteen traffic tickets, only to be hit with a \$415 scuff-