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BY DAVID DUDLEY

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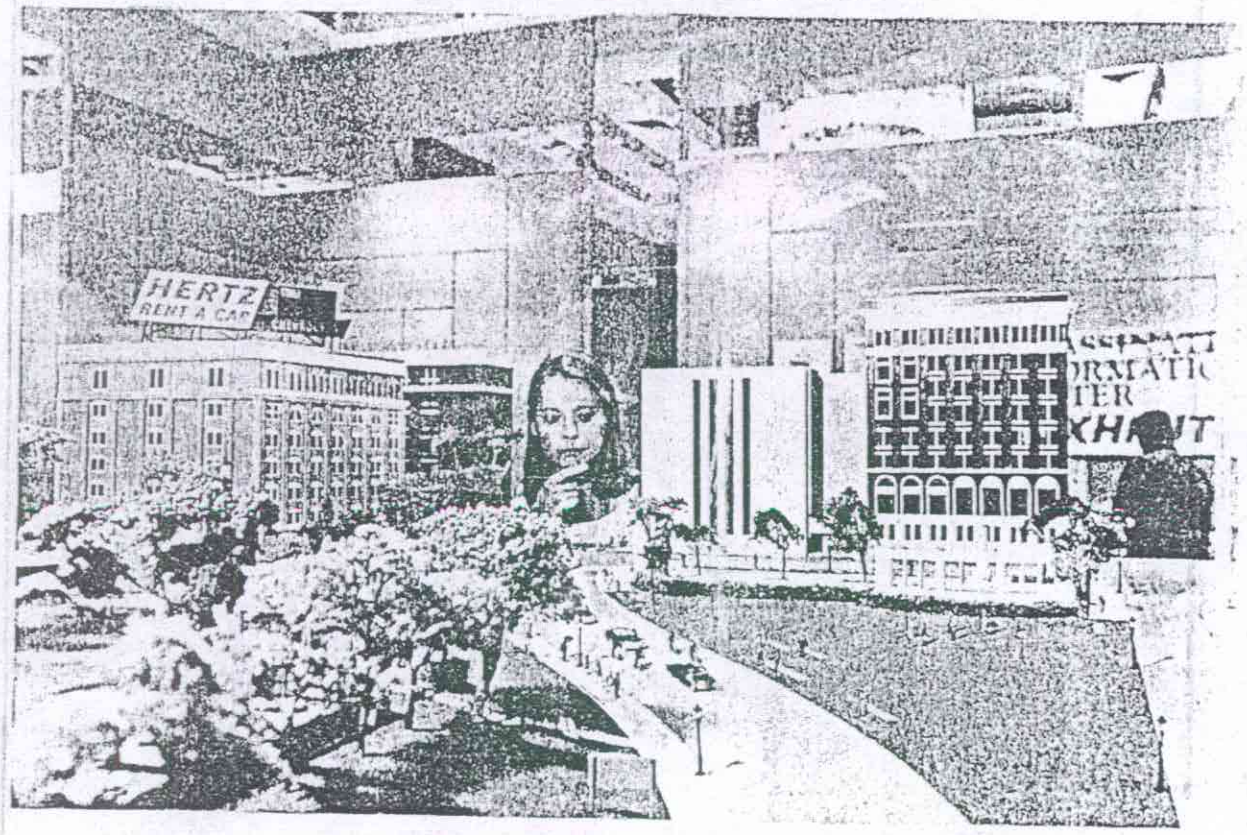


"The greatest enemy of the truth is very often not the lie ... but the myth." **John F. Kennedy**

The weather may not be particularly autumnal, but Dallas can be a spooky place during the week before Halloween.

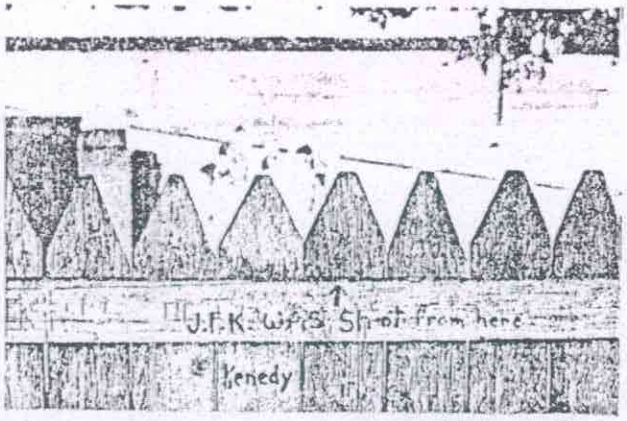
Far from the killing frost of the northeast, central Texas is high and dry and lolling in the high 80s on this Wednesday afternoon in late October. Down in Houston, there's terrible eye-watering smog, but on the arid scrub and blacktop around Dallas-Fort Worth Airport, you can wheel around and take in those vast dead-flat Big Sky vistas under a fairly clear blue. Except for the distant water towers dotting the horizon, there is little sign of civilization. Those ice-sculpture glass skyscrapers immortalized by the opening credits of the *Dallas* TV show are about 30 minutes by airport cab down Stemmons Freeway—past Texas Stadium, in Irving (home of the Cowboys), past Dallas' huge, ponderous World Trade Center, and past about a million car dealerships.

Before J.R. Ewing, before the Dallas Cowboys Cheerleaders, and before Ross Perot, the city of Dallas was indelibly associated, for better or worse, with one thing and one thing only—the Kennedy assassination. On November 22, 1963, Fort Worth hometown boy Lee Harvey Oswald pumped off three rounds from an old Italian WWII-surplus carbine, shooting at John F. Kennedy's Lincoln Continental as the presidential motorcade idled through Dealey Plaza in downtown Dallas. The president was killed; Texas Governor John Connally was seriously wounded. And the rest, as they say, is history.

But it really isn't, of course. At least, most Americans don't believe it's history. It's the cover-up, the put-on, the unlikely official story cooked up by LBJ's Warren Commission to sweep the Crime of the Century under history's rug. According to polls, 70 to 90 percent of the country thinks that Oswald didn't act alone, and with the huge hubbub raised by Oliver Stone's *JFK* last year, the number is rising.

Which brings us to the spooky part. There is an odd convention of sorts taking place here in Dallas this next-to-last week of October. Some 400 people are gathering for the second annual Assassination Symposium on John F. Kennedy (ASK for short), three days of panel discussions, workshops, events, and general intense kibitzing among the hard-core members of what might be called the Assassination Community. Everybody's here—the authors of the countless conspiracy bestsellers, the low-budget freelance researchers who pore over every shred of documentation and every frame of film, the bug-eyed youngsters who had their minds blown by the *JFK* film. And here and there, a smattering of the Witnesses ... the ones who saw—or say they saw—what *really* happened during those six or seven seconds 29 years ago.

And I am here too, sweating in the unexpected heat and lugging an overnight bag heavy with fat books full of muttered intrigue, gory photos, and breathless claims of conspiracy, all too long to read on a three-hour flight. Among them is Jim Garrison's 1988 *On the Trail of the Assassins*, a comparatively slim and readable volume that actually has a sort of narrative thread. Garrison, of course, is the flamboyant New Orleans district attorney who brought businessman Clay Shaw to trial in 1969 for his role in the conspiracy to murder Kennedy.



After 34 days of testimony, Shaw was acquitted in less than an hour, and Garrison was considered a bit of a laughingstock and a shameless publicity hound for his efforts. Until Oliver Stone cast him as the hero of his film.

Now Jim Garrison is Kevin Costner: Stone's courageous, speechifying surrogate; conspiracy buff as Hollywood stud. I liked the *JFK* movie okay—though both Stone's posturing and the media's drooling attacks were a little absurd—and found Garrison's *On the Trail*, which Stone used as a major source, to be a fairly well-written little JFK book. Garrison himself would not be at ASK '92, but he is a critical first-generation researcher and a recent redeemed star in the conspiracy-theory cosmos. So I read most of his book, sort of it on the plane, and I took it out again for the long hot cab ride into Dallas. The driver was listening to the news on the radio.

... who tried to prove a conspiracy in the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, is dead at the age of seventy. Garrison achieved fame as the ...

In what would be only the first of countless mysterious coincidences that would dominate the next few days, Jim Garrison died in his home in New Orleans on the day I arrived in Dallas.

Spooky?

Welcome to Texas

When you crack the spine on any one of the books purporting to detail the Real Story of the death of the 35th U.S. president, you might never come out. The sheer weight of the documentation, the intensity of the focus on the moment, the byzantine cross-referenced threads connecting the players together can be overwhelming. The nearly 30 years of poking around in the Dallas dirt have dug up an incredible cast of characters whose lives may take other lifetimes to understand. Don DeLillo, whose novel *Libra* is probably the best work of fiction on the subject, created the archetypal assassinologist in the character of aging basement researcher Nicholas Branch: "Frustrated, stuck, self-watching, looking for a means of connection, a way to break out.... He has abandoned his life to understanding that moment in Dallas, the seven seconds that broke the back of the American century."

Assassination researchers, almost to a person, distrust the press. Not only for the media's continued unspoken complicity in perpetuating the myths of the Warren Commission and other Establishment enemies, but for regularly dismissing those who question the official stories as "conspiracy buffs," harmless fringe elements, and borderline weirdos with nothing better to do than impose elaborate fantasy constructions upon the chaos of history.

There is great urgency and little pleasure in the theories that the theorists weave. Jim Garrison, who was garroted by the media and his legal colleagues for his "quixotic" pursuit of Kennedy's slayers, never stopped trying to press the issue. Here in my room at the Dallas Hyatt, on the day of Garrison's death, *Entertainment Tonight* is running a clip from what is believed to be his last interview. Filmed a few months ago, Garrison is lying on his deathbed, dying by degrees from heart disease, staring up with haunted eyes and talking about JFK. To the bitter end it was all that mattered.

Texas TV is full of strange characters. *ET* spends about twice Garrison's airtime on an extended obit for actress Shirley Booth, "the bossy but good-natured maid" from the 60s sitcom *Hazel*. She also died of natural causes. On the local news, authorities warn that a cougar appears to be loose in Fort Worth, Dallas' lesser twin city, located 30 miles away. It already has killed some pets. There's an update on the man up in Mountain Springs, Texas, who is still working on a giant ball of string. He now has enough string to stretch from Dallas to Kansas City.

"He must really like string," an anchorperson comments after the piece.

And here is the local take on the Garrison death, featuring an interview with Dallas assassination researcher and archivist Mary Ferrell. Now 70, Ferrell was a legal secretary who began collecting documents and material related to the JFK case almost immediately after the shooting. She worked with Garrison in the late 60s, and she has worked with practically every serious researcher since that time. But she is an archivist, not an author; she doesn't write books so much as shuffle and organize the massive shifting mountain of evidence that has piled up over the past 29 years. She is also a consultant for ASK and is slated to deliver the symposium's keynote address on Friday morning.

As a rule, she doesn't do interviews, but she seems to have made a concession for her old friend Jim. The TV piece begins with the usual biographical fluff, running through the sad circus of the Shaw trial and Garrison's subsequent fall from grace, then finishing with a few clips from the Stone film. Ferrell comes on and says how much they all believed in Jim, how he was really on to something, how he was going to bring the killers to justice....

"But today I'm not that certain," Ferrell says. "I *hope* that he was wrong."

And with that the voice-over announces that even though Mary Ferrell now believes the Warren Commission, she still has fond memories of ...

Whoa! Hold on! She didn't say that she *believed* the Warren Commission! She just said she *hopes* that Garrison was wrong! The way the piece has been put together, it appears as if Mary Ferrell, the grand old lady of assassinology herself, has given up and gone pro-Warren Commission. No wonder she doesn't give interviews. No wonder these people hate the media. There will be hell to pay for *this*.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY MICHAEL LYON/COVER PHOTOGRAPH BY CRAIG DANIELS

The Believers

I had planned on finishing *On the Trail of the Assassins* that first evening in Dallas, just for symmetry, but I already was experiencing the first twinges of JFK information overload. This would get much worse. I was determined, however, to grasp enough of the skeletal basics of the research literature to at least comprehend the speech patterns of the average ASK attendee. Curiously, the folks who put together this symposium don't seem to know a great deal more about the assassination than I do. The program lists as cosponsors the *Dallas Observer*—the local weekly—and the Assassination Archives and Research Center (AARC), a rambling repository of JFK-related literature and documents in downtown Washington, D.C., but the actual prime mover behind ASK is South By Southwest Incorporated (SXSW), an Austin-based corporation best known for putting together the annual South By Southwest music conference.

SXSW is a predominantly young, hip, funkily attired group of individuals used to dealing with drunken alternative-rock bands more than with resolutely serious, somewhat paranoid conspiracy theorists, and a certain amount of tension exists between the two camps.

"We weren't one of them," admits staffing coordinator Eve McArthur, who is in charge of holding things more or less together. "But we hoped that results in a more fair overall conference ... it allows us to evaluate with objectivity."

According to Jo Rae DiMenno, ASK's publicity coordinator, most of the SXSW people browsed through copies of Jim Marrs' *Crossfire*, a well-regarded sort of conspiracy theory encyclopedia that served as Oliver Stone's other major source for *JFK*. But these are by no means experts. "We're just a bunch of music freaks," she admits.

Thus, much of the shape and substance of the conference is dictated in part by consultants Mary Ferrell and Gary Shaw, both Dallas natives and de facto leaders of the local research community, which is sizable. Shaw cowrote *Cover-up*, a 1976 book now considered a classic in the genre, and the recent *JFK: Conspiracy of Silence*, which was cowritten with Dr. Charles Crenshaw, one of the Dallas doctors who treated Kennedy at Parkland Hospital after the shooting.

Unlike many of the big-name authors roaming around the Hyatt on Thursday, the first day of the symposium, the diminutive, elegantly dressed Shaw is a bit of a diplomat, and he seems to serve as a sort of cruise director for the whole show. He also has a significant say regarding who gets to speak on the panels and moderate the workshops. This will prove to be a source of some controversy.

But I am still blissfully unaware of the undercurrents presently building. Half of the Hyatt ballroom has been turned into a flea market of sorts, with exhibitors setting up tables of books and T-shirts and sundry JFK memorabilia. All Thursday afternoon, conference-goers trickle in, pick up their snappy laminated name tags, and then make the rounds. Old faces are remembered from last year and new contacts are made. For all their bluster about being tagged as conspiracy nuts and general weirdos, most ASK registrants are conspicuously normal, white, middle-class folks, although many appear to be trapped in unfortunate 1979 wardrobes. There are a couple of wired-looking characters wandering around in T-shirts that have "SKEPTIC" printed on them, but in most ways it just looks like any other convention: a bunch of middle-aged guys in name tags and bad suits. Nevertheless, strange forces are at work here.

I spot Harrison Livingstone, a researcher from Baltimore who has turned out two thick recent best-sellers: *High Treason* and *High Treason 2*. There's a copy of the first book somewhere upstairs in my luggage. He looks just like his book-flap photo: stout and bearded and faintly Hemingwayesque.

"I'm gonna break this case," he tells me by way of introduction.

"Really?"

"No." He stares at me, deadly serious. "I am going to break the case," he repeats. "Probably in the next few weeks."

Harry Livingstone doesn't kid around much. I wasn't expecting to see him here; he isn't a listed panelist. But he's here anyway, and it soon becomes apparent that he is a man with a mission.

"I'm trying to introduce some ethics into this community," he says. "The research community is being manipulated by the people who are covering up the murder. They're cooking the evidence."

Livingstone is the self-described *enfant terrible* of the assassination community. And while there are always a certain number of differences and disagreements among the various major authors when their theories clash, Livingstone courts confrontation, accusing other authors of perpetrating deliberate hoaxes and "de-objectifying the evidence," either for profit-mongering or to throw serious researchers further off the trail. He has nothing but seething contempt for the organizers of this conference, the Dallas research community, and probably quite a few of the people here.

"It's a racket," he says, scanning the room with palpable disdain. "It's a business. It's territorialism ... jealousy ... self-centeredness ... sensationalism ... commercialism ..."

But suddenly Mary Ferrell, the tiny white-haired grandma of the Dallas research community, appears before Livingstone's table and the two greet each other like old friends. With her gentle north Texas drawl, Ferrell is almost too sweet to be believed, but she's hopping mad about last night's TV interview. She couldn't believe what they said about her.

THE TRAJECTORY OF THE BULLETS, THE NATURE OF THE WOUNDS, THE ANGLE OF SPRAY OF BRAIN TISSUE—THE COVER-U IS ENDLESSLY MUTABLE.

"I thought it was such a beautiful story," she says about the piece, sounding hurt. "And then at the end they said I believed the Warren Report."

Livingstone is sympathetic, but he's got some other things on his mind.

"I'm trying to make an issue of ethics in this community," he tells her. "I'm putting my foot down. This community has to regulate itself."

Ferrell looks pained. "Now, Harrison," she tells him, "let's not get into this, darlin'. We owe these people the right to speak ..."

It goes on like this for a time, with Ferrell gently deflecting Livingstone's demands; she pleads politely for him to behave himself and not make a scene at the panel discussions. Meanwhile, Livingstone complains of unspecified persecution by various forces, the Dallas community in particular.

"See, you live in an authoritarian city and state, Mary. The rest of the country isn't *like* this!"

Ferrell ignores this.

"Now ... *I'm* speaking tomorrow," she says sweetly. "You wouldn't interrupt *me*?"

But Livingstone presses on. He'll do what it takes. "I've been mistreated and abused by the media!"

"Honey, you haven't been mistreated and abused," Ferrell sings back, sounding a bit fed up. If Livingstone is peeved about the lack of mainstream press coverage his work has been getting, she tells him she'll go fetch some reporters.

"Reporters are knocking me down," Ferrell says. "They're driving me crazy. And I don't *give* interviews!" That said, she marches off.

Livingstone is unappeased. "There are people here in the business of taking other people's research," he says. "There's a lot of criminality in this community.... What's coming out of this city is *[banging his fist on the table with every word]* one ... fraudulent ... story ... after ... another!"

Livingstone is no fan of the fine city of Dallas. He already has been here for a while, researching his upcoming *High Treason 3*, and for his previous two books he spent a great deal of time interviewing witnesses and medical personnel at Parkland Hospital. He says that he "can't wait to go home" to his Charles Village rowhouse.

"My life ain't worth a plug nickel in this town," he mutters, eying the conventioneers warily. "[In 1963,] Dallas was a cowb town. Vicious. Nowadays it's all sophisticated and elegant.... But you scratch the surface and it's vicious. They hate outsiders. And they have their own fucking laws here."

Mary Ferrell reemerges from the crowd with a young woman reporter from the *Fort Worth Star-Telegram* in tow for Livingstone to talk to. But before tangling with the mainstream media, he leaves me with a final comment.

"This whole thing is a stacked deck, and I am here to shake it up," he promises. "And stay out of jail."

The Dallas-Fort Worth metroplex is home to almost three million people. Which as anyone who watched Ross Perot's final infomercial knows is roughly the population of the entire state of Arkansas. But almost none of them live anywhere near downtown Dallas. This is home only to vast, oddly shaped corporate office towers and assassination landmarks. The Hyatt Regency Dallas, where ASK is holding court, is a typically monstrous mirrored-glass structure in Reunion Square, on the edge of the downtown business district, located across the street from Union Station and a stone's throw from infamous Dealey Plaza.

On the other side of the hotel is the Stemmons Freeway, which gives way to the muddy banks of the nearly dry Trinity River, and then to nothing at all for a few miles, except beige scrubland and still-green treetops. The vast suburban sprawl of the surrounding communities is out there somewhere, but it's a good hike without a car. In proper Texas style, Dallas is big. The city streets are wide—Cadillac wide—even downtown. Seems to take forever to cross them.

Midafternoon on Thursday, I make the short stroll from the hotel to Dealey Plaza. Considering the depth and intensity of the scrutiny placed on the historic events that unfolded here, the area itself seems dismayingly unspectacular. But to the properly informed JFK-head, the very earth itself

here resonates with meaning. Here is the Dallas County Criminal Courts building, where Jack Ruby hung out, shot the breeze with Dallas' finest, and eventually shot Lee Oswald on the Sunday after the assassination. And here is the Dal-Tex Building, where many believe a third shooter may have been peering out on the plaza.

And of course, here is the Texas School Book Depository itself. There was talk of demolishing the old office building after the assassination, but instead it has been preserved as a national historic monument. The sixth floor, the site of the alleged sniper's nest, is now called the Sixth Floor Museum, and it houses an exhibit chronicling Kennedy's life and death in deliberate, uncontroversial terms. The corner window area where Oswald is said to have taken his best shots has been walled up behind Plexiglas and reconstructed to look as it did on November 22, 1963, right down to the barricade of book boxes Oswald built around his self. The window is left permanently half-open, as it was then. You can't look through it, but you can look through the one next to it and mentally snipe away at traffic whizzing below on Elm Street.

Back down in the plaza, tourists gather beside the Grassy Knoll and take in the history. The Grassy Knoll, which is really just a wooded rise beside Elm Street, is one of those countless elements of assassination ephemera that has earned capitalization-worthy significance. Several witnesses claim they heard shots fired from behind the Picket Fence atop the Grassy Knoll; others saw suspicious-looking characters milling around there before the shooting. One man, a deaf-mute named Ed Hoffman who was standing on a nearby freeway overpass, claims to have actually seen a man with a rifle behind the fence, and there are a number of photographs, none particularly convincing, that purport to show a rifle muzzle poking out of the grainy background foliage.

Right now there is only a guy in a red T-shirt from the JFK Assassination Information Center, a local private organization that gathers JFK information and hawks assassination-related books and merchandise. He says his name is Tom Jones, and he's busily leeching onto a trio of tourists, trying to sell a few copies of *JFK Today*, a cheesy pseudonewspaper full of splashy pictures and a few sound-bite-size articles.

"Of course, here's the storm drain that the shooter used to escape over to Industrial Boulevard ... that's the best angle for the head shot," he says, leafing through the paper and keeping up a running rap.

"And of course this is the famous forged backyard photograph of Lee Oswald allegedly taken by his wife Marina.... You can see the crop marks here below the chin...."

Meanwhile, behind the stockade fence, a woman aims a Minox camera over the slats and shoots into oncoming traffic. The old weathered wood of the fence appears unchanged since 1963, and graffiti scars the side facing away from the plaza. Underneath an arrow, someone has written "JFK WAS SHOT FROM HERE" in black marker. Beneath that, "Bush knows." Then, in another hand, "Bush blows."

Mary Farrell

Tom Jones keeps up the hard sell.

"'Course you can see that the first shots would have been obscured by that oak tree had they been fired from the book depository.... 'Course that's where the Umbrella Man was standing ... perfectly sunny day, and man holding an umbrella opens and closes it for no apparent reason seconds before the first shot ... probably a signal. 'Course here's the autopsy photos of the head ... the technician who took the pictures says they've been tampered with ..."

I interrupt to ask Jones, a Dallas native, the inevitable JFK question: "Where were you?"

"Oh, I was her..." he says, and points to a picture of the motorcade at the front of the paper. "Way back here. I think that was my daddy's car."

"Wow," I say, not sure whether he's putting me on. "So what was it like?"

"Oh," he says, momentarily without words. "About what you'd expect, I guess."

Throughout the rest of the day, conventioneers are being shuttled around town on a $20-a-pop bus tour of big assassination hot spots—parts of the motorcade route, Oswald's rooming house, the murder scene of the unlucky Officer Tippit, and the Texas Theatre, from which Oswald was dragged away, screaming "I am not resisting arrest!"

Meanwhile, back in the Hyatt, Gary Shaw and two colleagues are struggling with their presentation "JFK 101," a sort of neophyte's guide to the case. For people who devote years of research and hundreds of pages to the most minute aspects of the

The Believers

story—Oswald's life in Russia (where he met his wife), the mysterious letter Oswald allegedly wrote to a "Mr. Hunt" before the assassination (was it CIA man E. Howard Hunt or Dallas oil magnate H.L. Hunt?), the police cruiser that honked its horn twice in front of Oswald's rooming house, Ruby at Parkland Hospital, whatever—it is sheer agony for them to condense the enormity of the field into a 90-minute outline, but they give it a go anyway.

All that information! The Warren Commission alone produced 26 fat volumes of documents, all nonindexed. Then there was the Rockefeller Report in 1975 and the House Select Committee on Assassinations (HSCA) findings in 1979. So many theories and countertheories, smoke screens, hoaxes, forgeries, tamperings—none of them jibing with each other. Documents are missing; photos have been seized; witnesses have died mysteriously; reports have been destroyed. Kennedy's brain, which was supposed to be somewhere in the National Archives, is just plain lost.

"It's an absolute quagmire of inconsistencies," Shaw finally blurts in frustration, in the midst of his outline of the Dallas Police reports.

And yet there is always the promise of progress. The 1979 HSCA investigation finally admitted that some kind of conspiracy was "likely." It cited acoustical evidence of a fourth shot—and thus at least one more shooter—and determined that it probably involved organized crime. Although HSCA didn't crack the case, it was a step up from the Warren Commission. A reopened investigation, with an independent prosecutor, might get the job done—that is, if the House of Representatives allows all the JFK files to be opened.

"There's a whole generation," Shaw says. "The old guard is passing away."

This is an ongoing theme this year. Yesterday, Jim Garrison joined the growing roll of first-generation researchers who did not live to see the truth that they fought so hard to expose. He was merely the most famous. But it underscored a point: as the first wave of critics fade away, so must the forces that still cling to the cover-up. The grip, whatever and whoever is behind it, is weakening. Despite differences of opinion on the *JFK* film (many were infuriated by Stone's slambang pastiche of fact and speculation, as well as his self-proclaimed intent to create an alternative "mythology" to counter the Warren Commission), all agree that it briefly has reignited public interest in the case. It is a race against time, they believe, to pry the truth loose before it's too late. Before there is no one to remember what it means.

"We can still correct our pasts," Shaw urges. "Even if we find that we have to knock down a few statues to do it."

Later that evening there is a reception in the hotel's enormous ballroom. Most of the big-name authors are here, sipping overpriced booze from the cash bar and entertaining loose flocks of fans clutching copies of their books to be signed. David Lifton, the author of 1980's megaselling *Best Evidence* is here, and he draws some of the more enthusiastic faithful. Harrison Livingstone is holding court at a table a good distance away. Because of the essential conflicts between the two basic theories their books espouse, Lifton and Livingstone have been cast as the two warring titans in the field of medical evidence, and Livingstone, at least, repeatedly has made it clear to all that he thinks Lifton's full of shit.

The case that *Best Evidence*, a hefty and unusually tedious tome, puts forth is that Kennedy's body was fooled around with physically sometime between the moment it left Dallas' Parkland Hospital and the moment it arrived in Bethesda for its official autopsy. The all-important head wounds were altered and dressed up to fool the autopsy camera, which would account for the apparent discrepancy between where the doctors in Dallas claimed the massive exit wound was (Dr. Charles Crenshaw testified that the wound was in the back of the head, indicating a frontal shot) and where the wounds actually are in the photos (closer to the top of the head and to the left). The x-ray photos, incidentally, seem to say something else entirely.

In general, this medical aspect of the case is a mind-bending can of worms that opens up some of the fiercest and grossest debates. The trajectory of the bullets, the nature of the wounds, the condition of the scalp fragments, the angle of the spray of brain tissue—everything remotely connected to the actual physical condition of the dying president raises another spasm of speculation. And no one seems to agree that anything is real. There's nowhere to stand. The cover-up is endlessly mutable.

Livingstone, for his part, thinks that the autopsy photos themselves, in addition to the famous Zapruder home-movie footage of the assassination, have all been doctored. An intact scalp was optically matted over the site of the real head wound; the Zapruder film has been altered physically, perhaps using animation. All this to throw off the researchers trying to make heads or tails of the endlessly conflictive evidence. And anyone who disagrees with Livingstone is either a fool or—maybe—a part of the conspiracy itself.

Lifton and Livingstone keep their distance tonight, but those who know of their differences are eager to see a little blood sport between the two. Livingstone also has an ugly feud going with his ex-collaborator, Robert Groden. Groden is a photographic expert who did early work with the Zapruder film when it was released. He coauthored *High Treason* with Livingstone; they since have split acrimoniously. Livingstone believes Groden guilty of "de-objectifying" the evidence—altering the film to fit his own evil agendas. Groden is here too—somewhere—but there has been no public scene between the two so far.

Over by the big model of Dealey Plaza, the same one used in the courtroom scenes in *JFK*, flashbulbs are popping and a crowd is gathering. It's Beverly Oliver, known to thousands as the Babushka Lady, and she is looking good. Oliver was a Dallas singer/showgirl who was a good friend of club owner Jack Ruby. She also claims to be the fabled Babushka Lady, the woman who can be seen in the Zapruder film standing in Dealey Plaza wearing a babushka and filming the motorcade as it cruised through the kill zone.

The identity of this pivotal witness was unknown for many years until Oliver stepped forward. She claims that her film and camera were taken by an FBI agent a few days after the assassination, and never seen again. Even more startling, she claims to have been introduced to Lee Oswald by none other than Jack Ruby, a few days before the shooting.

Not surprisingly, Oliver's too-perfect testimony, combined with her still-flamboyant platinum-blonde personality, have made her something of a star on the JFK witness circuit. At the moment, she is being mobbed by eager conventioneers, who hurl questions at her—"Why did you go to Dealey Plaza that day?" a man demands. "Well, I wanted to see the president, of course," she replies, in a tone of voice that screams *Why the hell else?*—beg her for autographs, and pose for pictures with her. She obliges them all, hugging strange men in name tags, kicking up one high-heeled foot demurely, and beaming for the cameras.

Meanwhile, the videographer for Flying Eagle, a Missouri-based production company that is filming a documentary here about the assassination community, is weaving through the crowd with his steadicam and interviewing anyone who will sit still. His name is Shawn, and when I catch up with him later, he's flush with the possibilities and drinking a Bud.

"You know what this is like?" he asks, surveying a room buzzing with some 400 conspiracy theories. "It's like that part in *Close Encounters*, when the government's trying to get rid of all those different people from around the world who show up in Wyoming to meet the spaceship? And that French guy says, like, hey, you can't do that—they were invited! That's who these people are! They were invited!"

FOR MANY, IT IS MARINA OSWALD—NOT JACKIE—WHO IS THE ULTIMATE TRAGIC HEROINE "YES," SHE SAYS SLOWLY, "I WANT TO GET ON WITH MY LIFE."

You know, we were up all night last night," a man tells his companion on the way down to the lobby early the next morning. "But we figured it out."

The lobby is full of amorphous knots of conventioneers, still talking, talking, talking, talking. Many indeed look as if they were up all night, trying gamely to figure it out once and for all.

Harry Livingstone, for one, had a pretty late night. Up in the cavernous glass courtyard of the Hyatt bar, Livingstone was having a few beers and railing against the ASK organizers to any and all who would listen. He was being persecuted, he said. A best-selling author! Silenced! Forbidden to speak by his own so-called colleagues! Other researchers were being denied press credentials, harassed by hotel employees, snubbed by Dallas research bigwigs and by a mainstream media interested more in conspiracy freak shows than in serious news. He'd had enough. When I turned in at 1 a.m., he was still going strong.

But groggy or not, everyone duly has been shepherded back into the ballroom at nine this Friday morning for the keynote speech. And soon after Mary Ferrell begins her address, everyone is wide awake. There is a surprise guest up on the podium.

"It's Marina!" someone beside me whispers.

She needs no other introduction. Marina Oswald Porter is, of course, the widow of Lee Oswald. She was once Marina Prusakova, when American defector Lee met her in Minsk. They married, and somehow, the treasonous Oswald and his Russian wife left the Soviet Union hassle-free, resettling in the Dallas-Fort Worth area. (This is considered mighty suspicious, to say the least, and may well indicate that Oswald was a CIA operative of some sort from the start.) Marina still lives just outside of Dallas, and she is still disarmingly beautiful. And mysterious. This is, in fact, her first official public appearance since just after the assassination.

She nervously takes the podium and in hesitant, heavily accented English, proceeds to offer her gratitude for the efforts of everyone involved.

"Thanks to you," she says. "I can walk a little straighter.... So many people have paid with their lives for what you are doing."

For many, it is Marina—not Jackie—who is the ultimate tragic heroine of the Kennedy story. Although her testimony against her slain husband was used by the Warren Commission to paint their picture of Oswald as a lone Marxist loony with a grudge against the president, assassinologists generally contend that she was manipulated to say the things she said, out of fear for her family back in Minsk. Additionally, her uncle was reputedly a member of the Soviet intelligence community, adding to Marina's curious aura of fatal misfortune.

"Yes, I want to get on with my life," she says, slowly. "But some things should not be swept under the rug."

With that, Marina sits down and Mary Ferrell resumes her speech, which is an emotional and deeply felt defense of the late Jim Garrison ("I think history will treat him rather kindly") and of the conspiracy theorists at large ("They call us nuts. Kooks. Profiteers. Charlatans. And all of the above"). She gets a little choked up at the end when she announces that "if this is really the land of the free and the home of the brave, we better damn well prove it now!"

But all eyes are on Marina, and when the panel breaks up and moves into the lobby, she is quickly surrounded. More so than almost anyone alive, Marina represents the truth. One way or another, *she knows*. She was there—really there, deeper than any roadside witness. And even if she was blackmailed into silence about what and who her husband did and didn't know, maybe if you can just get *close* enough, you can draw the truth out of her by sheer desperate force of will.

"Marina! Did you take the pictures! DID YOU TAKE THE PICTURES!"

The pictures, the backyard photos of Oswald posing with a rifle, a revolver, and copies of *The Militant* and *The Worker*, long have been criticized as fakes, a pasted-together stunt devised to indict Oswald in the minds of the nation. Some people here have based their whole research, their theories, their *lives* on the assumption that these pictures are hoaxed. And Marina was supposed to have taken the pictures.

"DID YOU TAKE THE PICTURES!"

A number of people are shouting at her now. Gary Shaw hangs over her and asks everyone to please give her some room. Marina says something, but only those standing right next to her can make it out.

"What did she say? What did she say?"

A ripple of muttered communication passes through the layers of the crowd.

"She says she took the pictures."

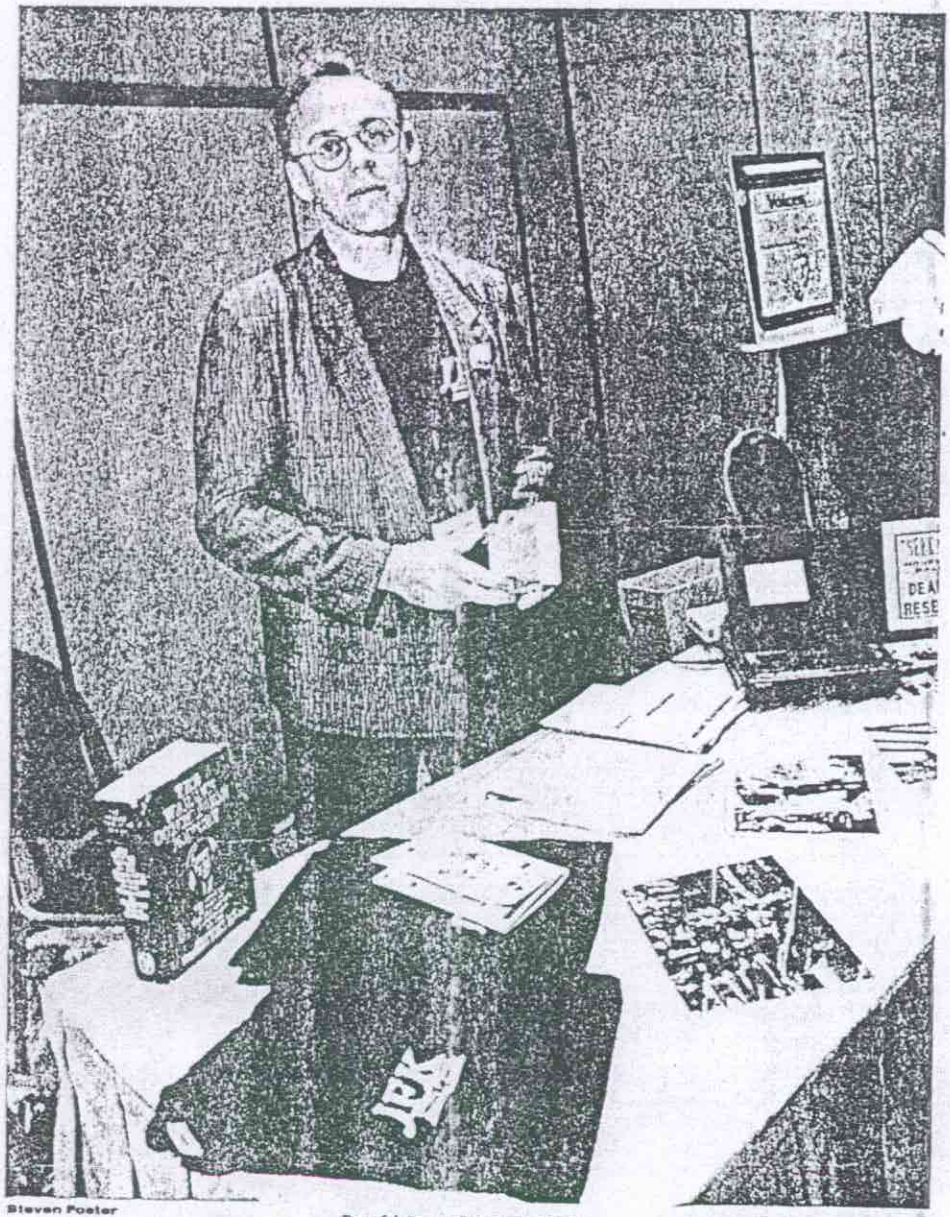
Instantly there is a shudder of counter-theorizing to account for this.

"She said she took *a* picture!"

"She was implying that it was part of the setup!"

"The fact that the photos are real doesn't meant anything! If he was being set up as a patsy, he might have been *ordered* to pose for the pictures!"

Sometime in the midst of all this, Marina Oswald slips away.



Steven Foster

This is the kind of atmosphere that dominates this conference. There are over 400 people here who have but one thing in common—a driving need to make sense of the Kennedy assassination. They speak in code, a frenetic shorthand of acronyms and idioms and technical non sequiturs. The secret jargon of their vocation. And they speak it with an urgency and an intensity that I have never experienced before.

Few of them actually are trained in the fields in which they specialize. There are perhaps a handful of physicians writing or researching the medical evidence, and even fewer ballistics experts analyzing the scalloping of the scalp fragments or the slight distortion at the base of the famous Magic Bullet. They are instead businessmen, schoolteachers, musicians, baseball-card dealers, and plumbers. There's a considerable smattering of lawyers and a few journalists. They're mostly white and mostly men. A precious few have parlayed their quest for the truth into a profitable career, and they are here too. Most talk of their day jobs, their families, their other lives only as they relate to the assassination. There is nothing else. They talk and talk of the death of John F. Kennedy, obsessively, endlessly, relieving the terrible shared burden of their knowledge. Some call it networking, but that is really a too cool and effete word for it.

Later in the morning, there is the panel of witnesses. Beverly Oliver is there, charming and funny and a bit more subdued as she relates her tale of meeting Lee Oswald in

The Believers

Jack Ruby's club. She wasn't impressed.

"[Oswald] said that he was CIA, but I was seventeen years old and didn't know what the CIA was," she reports. "I still don't."

This gets a big laugh.

Officer Jim Leavelle of the Dallas Police Department (DPD) is here, too, facing a somewhat hostile audience. The DPD reportedly questioned Oswald for 12 hours when he was brought in, yet no one seemed to have thought to take some notes. Leavelle says the accused didn't say anything worth writing down.

There is an incredulous murmur.

"As God is your witness," a ponytailed man with a terrifying Brooklyn accent says angrily, standing up, "Do you know more than you're telling?"

Leavelle is unflappable, in that laconic Texas lawman way: "Kinda hittin' below the belt, aren't you?"

In the afternoon there is the panel of medical experts, including David Lifton and Dr. Charles Crenshaw, the doctor who treated Kennedy. Crenshaw calls that afternoon at Parkland Hospital "the most horrible experience of my life." The president's head was so fatally mangled that there was very little the doctors could do for him. Just before the last rites of the Roman Catholic Church were given, Crenshaw says, a shaken Jackie Kennedy kissed her husband on his big toe.

There are autopsy pictures projected up on a big screen. Blood and brains and skull fragments everywhere. The worst is the one called "the State of Death" picture: Kennedy lying faceup on the gurney, a ragged tracheotomy hole in his throat, eyes fixed open, his lips pulled away in a sort of mysterious da Vinci smile.

Then there is much talk of the external occipital protubetance, the little lump at the back of the head that supposedly marked the site of the president's gaping exit hole, the one that none of the pictures show but that Dr. Crenshaw swears he saw. When the doctor explains where it is, everyone in the room reaches back and briefly fondles their own external occipital protuberances.

Lifton takes the microphone next. He looks something like Peter Boyle in *Young Frankenstein*, especially when raving about the still-missing presidential brain. When Lifton gets excited, his enormous forehead turns pink and seems to throb with urgency.

"You wouldn't do a tracheotomy on a man with no brain!" he shouts.

Lifton reappears later in the afternoon at the workshop on the Zapruder film, the all-important shred of 8 mm film that is still the best view of what really happened. The Z-film, as it is called, is probably the most popular subject of study, and the smaller conference room in which the workshop is being held is packed.

"Shoulda known anytime you show the Z-film you're gonna need more room," one standing-room-only neighbor comments bitterly.

But before the film is shown, Lifton holds forth for what seems like an eternity, reminiscing about his meeting with the much-despised Dan Rather ("It was like talking to a five-year-old") and detailing his various efforts to get a quality third-generation print of the film for researchers to study.

Harrison Livingstone

NO MATTER WHAT SPEED THE ZAPRUDER FILM IS SHOWN, IT ALWAYS ENDS THE SAME: JACKIE STARES INTO HER HUSBAND'S FACE AND HIS HEAD EXPLODES.

(The family of Abraham Zapruder, the Dallas businessman who shot the footage, still reserves all rights to the film and apparently has made a decent living off the thing.) Harry Livingstone, who has a seat up front but is not a workshop leader like Lifton, sits and stews quietly.

Then, at last, it's show time. They have a fancy computer-enhanced laser-disc copy of the Z-film, the same one used in a recent episode of the PBS series *Nova*, and it is a sight to behold. Again and again the footage rolls by, with the limo slowly negotiating the fatal turn from Houston Street onto Elm, and the brightly dressed onlookers waving. The camera jitters a bit, and Kennedy stops waving back. This, many believe, is the first shot, the miss, the one that strikes a curb and slightly wounds a man named James Tague with a shard of concrete. Then the car disappears behind the back of the Stemmons Freeway sign. When it reappears, swinging slowly past Abraham Zapruder's perch near the Grassy Knoll, things get complicated. Kennedy suddenly grips his neck with both hands, obviously hit. Jackie, in her soon-to-be-unforgettable pink hat, turns and leans toward him; Texas Governor John Connally, still holding his Stetson, looks back. The car crawls along at 10 miles per hour.

To the educated Z-film student, a thousand more things are happening—brake lights flashing; onlookers giving each other secret signals; the car's driver, Clint Hill, maybe taking both hands off the wheel to get in a few shots of his own. (This is a fairly controversial theory, to say the least, but it has its adherents.) To a room full of Z-

PHOTOGRAPH BY CRAIG DANIELS

film students, there seem to be a million things happening, a million things to shout out and demand everyone look at a bit more closely. We're somewhere around frame 237.

According to the Warren Commission, nothing is happening right now. The third shot, the one that takes Kennedy's head apart and throws him back into his seat, won't be coming along until frame 313. The indomitable second shot, the one that strikes Kennedy square in the back and somehow exits through his neck, is now making its way in and out of Connally's body, hitting him in the back, exiting near a nipple, then shattering his wrist, and finally lodging in his thigh, causing a total of seven separate wounds. The bullet is later found, nearly intact, on a stretcher (not Connally's) at Parkland Hospital. This is the so-called Magic Bullet Theory, or Single Bullet Theory, and it is considered a sheer arrogant fiction, the most breathtakingly unlikely of all the Warren Commission's myriad unlikelihoods. There just have to be more shots in here somewhere.

"Watch his wrist! Watch his wrist!"

The closeup is on Connally; supposedly, he already has been struck in the wrist. But he is still clinging to his Stetson.

"Look at his cheeks puff up! Look!"

Has the governor been struck here? Are his cheeks puffed out? At this magnification, and at this dead-slow frame-by-painstaking-frame speed, the Zapruder film resembles some shifting expressionist colorscape. But everyone here, many of whom now have abandoned their seats and are pressed up against the big-screen TV at the front of the room, seems to be able to draw meaning from the blurred patterns. Richard Goad, a gray-haired gentleman from Whittier, California, thinks he can see when Connally was shot, and he wants everyone to know.

"Watch him turn! Watch him turn! Watch him turn! Watch him turn! Watch him ..." Goad's voice rises with each repetition. Slowly, incrementally, the governor turns.

"Look at that!" Goad shouts triumphantly. "Look! He's in agony!"

There are mutters of disagreement. The governor faces forward again.

Inevitably, no matter what speed the film is shown or how tight the closeup, it always ends the same way. The big Lincoln drifts to the bottom of the frame, Jackie stares into her husband's pained face, and his head explodes. In closeup you almost seem to see the first flecks of middle-aged gray in JFK's hair, the look in the first lady's eyes. But everyone here probably has seen this hundreds or thousands of times. The shock long since has worn off. It's just another document, a few hundred frames of dubious evidence, a pattern of colors and shapes rendered abstract. A man is having his brains blown onto his wife's lap, again and again and again. But no one in this room is seeing it anymore.

Hardly any civilians had seen the Zapruder film in its gruesome entirety until D.A. Jim Garrison finally wrested it from the government to show at the Clay Shaw trial in 1969. It wasn't shown on television until 1975. Many critics, such as Harry Livingstone, claim that this would have given conspirators more than ample time to screw with the evidence: black out incriminating details; edit select frames to alter the timing or make it appear that the car never came to a full stop (as some witnesses said that it did); move the wounds around to further confound the plucky researchers. The head shot itself—the heart-stopping pink blast of blood and brains that seems too comic-book horrible to comprehend intellectually—might just be some tricky animation.

"Wait a minute," says Hank Sienzant, from New Jersey. He's not buying any of this. Livingstone has been detailing some of his opinions on the possible Z-film tampering, and Sienzant's not willing to believe that the conspirators could have enlisted the aid of all those photographic technicians and animators back in '63 and not had *someone* come forward and spill the beans in the last 29 years.

"All those people in the conspiracy.... Doesn't it get a little unwieldy?" he asks.

"Not if you kill 'em," Livingstone replies matter-of-factly. "Texas is littered with bodies."

At this point, somebody notices that Sienzant seems to have been questioning a lot of things here.

"Who do you think was involved?" a voice asks.

"I'm pro-Warren Commission," Sienzant answers, with a touch of combative pride. He's serious.

Now, in the interest of fair play, a number of Warren Commission supporters have been invited to ASK this year. They even invited Arlen Specter, the oily Pennsylvania senator of Hill/Thomas Hearings fame who served as counsel to the Warren Commission back when he was just an oily young lawyer. (He single-handedly came up with the Single Bullet Theory, among other things.) Specter declined to attend. However, Jim Moore, a conspiracy theorist-turned Warren-supporter who wrote a book called *Conspiracy of One*, braved the tides of public opinion and appeared on a panel at last year's conference. He also declined to show up this year.

But Sienzant just has admitted that *he's* pro-Warren Commission. And he's paid the $125 registration fee, plus hotel, airfare, et cetera, just to spend three days with 400 people who have devoted big chunks of their lives to proving people such as him wrong. And those who have been hanging around Sienzant know that he knows his stuff, conspiracy-wise. He can hold his own in any company, whether they're talking CIA connections, Z-film frame numbers, or skull fragments. Mind-boggling!

"You believe the Single Bullet Theory?!" someone jeers. "Ha! And the Earth is round!"

Others just seem confused.

"Why did you spend all this time? Why are you here?"

Sienzant shrugs. "I just wanted to talk to you people," he says.

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The Believers

Peggy (left) and Kit Walton

For a brief moment, the rabble gathered around the screen is almost quiet. They're thinking that over. Silently, John F. Kennedy's head blows up again.

At six o'clock, the crowd from the Z-film workshop slowly, reluctantly pulls away and heads off to find some dinner. Lifton and Livingstone linger, both surrounded by separate orbital clusters of people hurling yet more questions and comments back and forth. When Livingstone tries to pull out and make his way down the hall, a dozen or so eager assassinologists dog him all the way.

"Do you believe there was anyone on the sixth floor at all?"

"How do you account for the switched coffin that Paul O'Connor testified to?"

"Is Lifton lying?"

Livingstone pauses repeatedly to address some question, and the whole assembly stops and noisily clots up the narrow hallway. I'm trying to ask him about the document that he has been handing to everyone today, a Xerox copy of a handwritten manifesto of sorts. Last night at the Hyatt bar, after I had turned in, Livingstone had been busy.

The paper, signed by Harrison E. Livingstone, announces the formation of something called "The Association of Assassination Researchers." They will meet "this time next year in Washington, D.C., where our voices can be heard," it says. "There will be no further reporting from Dallas."

Apparently, this manifesto is the result of Livingstone's vow to shake things up.

"In view of the massive amounts of hoaxes, misrepresentation, and fraud in our field, we will attempt to control & discipline such behavior.... Meetings will no longer be conducted along authoritarian lines or by commercial corporations feeding on us. We'll meet in barrakes [sic] if necessary. I've had it folks."

He goes on to say, "I have been criminally assaulted by the managers, and repeatedly threatened with arrest."

The announcement, which also has been posted on the big bulletin board in the ballroom, has caused a bit of a buzz among the ASK-goers throughout the day: *Livingstone's up to something.*

But right now, Livingstone is tired and hungry and a little dishevele after a long day of defending his work and tangling with the establishment. He heads for one of the Hyatt's three pricey restaurants, gathering up a small table's worth of fellow conventioneers along the way. Included are Ron Schuster, an amiable, well-dressed businessman from Missouri, and Kit and Peggy Walton, a formidable mother-daughter research team from Gainesville, Florida. They all just met today, but these strangers are never at a loss for things to talk about.

"... they say that the Umbrella Man is a CIA plant ..."

"... so if Johnson wasn't in on it, why did he duck *before* the first shot? He sure as hell didn't drop his cuff link!"

"Well, maybe I'm just the world's most paranoid guy, but why does ...?"

The restaurant is full of this banter, a casual, low-level hum of friendly conspiracy chat. It's a more-social, less-intense variation on the fierce debates that rattle the halls after the workshops. Or maybe it is just the calming influence of Kit Walton, the friendly and blessedly soft-spoken mom who has managed to pass her JFK fascination on to her 21-year-old daughter Peggy, now a college junior. Peggy's having a great time so far, despite being one of the very few women here, and one of the even fewer who is under 30. But the insularity of the all-consuming Hyatt environment is getting to her a bit.

"I haven't been out of the fucking hotel yet," she complains. "And I've never been to Texas before!"

Her mother's story is a familiar one. She says she was "an idealistic college student" when Kennedy was cut down, left shaken and demoralized by the apparent meaninglessness of the assassination. But when she picked up Josiah Thompson's early Warren Commission critique, *Six Seconds in Dallas*, a few years later, "it was like a revelation."

Somehow Kit instilled this into Peggy, who admits that "most people [my age] don't give a shit. And they never will." Though she is enthusiastic about the conference so far, she is a little put off by the male-dominated research community—all the macho posturing and testosterone-fueled infighting.

"Unless all these middle-aged male researchers do something to inspire the youth, their case is dead," she warns.

Ron Schuster seems to hold out little hope for the generation born after 1963 anyway. It is too late for them.

"You can't expect them to care as much as we do," Schuster says. "They don't bring the same urgency. They don't have the same dreams."

Harry Livingstone has been uncharacteristically quiet throughout dinner, concentrating fairly intently on deconstructing his Texas-size mesquite-grilled rib eye. But now he looks up from his steak.

"My God, to be young today would be terrifying," he offers. "Afraid to screw, afraid to get naked."

Peggy titters a bit but then rises to defend her generation. "We grew up with corruption in the government," she says. "So sure we don't have the same dreams.... But it's not like we all just play video games and get high."

Schuster thinks that doesn't really sound all that bad. Unlike many here, he doesn't quite fit the mold of the idealistic Kennedy generation. "I voted for Nixon," he admits.

Schuster also maintains that, although the attendees here will vote overwhelmingly against George Bush in two weeks, conspiracy theories don't necessarily follow party lines. Bush, who was appointed to head the CIA by ex-Warren Commission member Gerald Ford in 1975, is widely assumed to be an enemy of the truth, a faithful company man who is aiding the cover-up (even if he didn't actively participate in it). But there are still Republicans here. Like Schuster, for instance, who has a typically Republican take on the assassination.

"I don't mind if politicians all kill each other off," he says, grumbling. "But they're doing it with my tax money."

Meanwhile, Harry Livingstone gulps down coffee and prepares to return to the fray. This isn't some high-spirited "conspiracy convention," as Kit Walton jokingly had referred to the symposium a little earlier in the meal. This is a fraud, a deadly serious campaign of misinformation designed to keep the truth bottled up forever, and he has places to go. I ask him about these handwritten announcements he has been distributing, with their claims of "criminal assault."

"Oh, you mean the fight last night?"

"You got in a fight?"

But he's vague, evasive. Or maybe just tired of talking.

"Yeah, yeah. There's gonna be lawsuits."

"What about this Association of Assassination Researchers thing?"

"Yeah, well, I'm not much of an organizer. I'm too busy for that stuff."

"It's going to be in Washington, though? You're not coming back here next year?"

"Yeah. This is rigged," he says, gesturing around the vast echoing courtyard atrium of the Hyatt at the city lights outside the glass. "The whole thing is rigged. Dallas has always been rigged. It's part of the cover-up."

He gets up to go, but first Peggy wants an autograph in her copy of *High Treason*. And a photograph. She pulls out a camera and aims at a grinning Livingstone. "Say *conspiracy*."

Click.

The New York Knicks are here. I spotted a few of the players riding up the great glass elevators earlier in the afternoon. No one seemed to know if these tall, well-dressed black men were supposed to be famous or not. But now, this evening, I run into Jo Rae DiMenno, ASK publicity coordinator, and she confirms that the Knicks, with their flamboyant coach Pat Riley, are indeed stay-

ing here at the Hyatt for their pre-season skirmish with the Dallas Mavericks tonight.

DiMenno says that she's a big Pat Riley fan, so she gave all the Knicks an open invitation to the symposium. None of them showed up, but she just ran into Riley on his way out of the lobby and repeated the offer. The team, however, would be busy.

"We're gonna go assassinate the Mavericks tonight," Riley said.

While DiMenno and I chat, Harry Livingstone appears again. He strides up to us.

"You people are getting a lawsuit," he says to DiMenno, and marches off again.

She calls after him, in a sort of third-grade singsong, "Yeah, like I'm really scared."

Relations between Livingstone and the ASK organizers seem to have broken down. But DiMenno doesn't appear alarmed. "Well, he's not gonna hit me," she says philosophically. "And I'm not gonna hit him."

That's about all anyone can hope for at this point. Earlier in the evening, Livingstone confronted forensic artist Lois Gibson, a Houston police artist who believes that she's proven the identity of the mysterious Three Tramps, the trio of suspiciously well-groomed hobos removed from a freight train stopped next to Dealey Plaza and arrested by Dallas Police soon after the assassination. The three men were photographed by a local news photographer as cops marched them across the plaza, but there is no police record of the incident.

Some researchers claim that one of the tramps was Watergate burglar and pulp spy novel author E. Howard Hunt; others have been variously identified as CIA operatives, mob hit men, and—occasionally—actual bums.

For her part, Gibson makes the case that the tallest tramp is Charles Harrelson, a convicted hit man presently doing hard time for the murder of a judge. At one point, Harrelson claimed that, sure, he killed JFK, but he since has recanted. Incidentally, Harrelson is also the father of Woody Harrelson, the lovable bartender from TV's *Cheers*. When Gibson displayed a mug shot of the younger Charles Harrelson, there was a gasp of collective recognition.

"It's Woody!" everyone thought simultaneously.

Livingstone, however, was unimpressed, and when the floor opened up for questions, he quickly attacked Gibson.

"Houston seems to be in competition with Dallas for number of hoaxes perpetrated on us," he snarled.

Gibson, who gave an irreverent, crowd-pleasing presentation and has one of those irresistible Texas accents, sang back, "Well, we're all jest strugglin' for the truth, sir."

Livingstone was not charmed by this.

"Yeah, bullshit," he said into the microphone, and sat back down.

The rest of the presentation, the last of the day, passed without further incident, and most conventioneers have now fanned out around the lobby or set up shop in the bar. Marina Oswald was here for a time earlier; she sat calmly on a couch in the lobby while 20 or 30 others clustered quietly around her, hanging on every hesitant word.

The scene upstairs at the bar tends to get a little tense when the liquor starts flowing and the theories start flying. Here at the Hyatt bar, the ASK convention has its own official mixed drink—the Whodunit, actually just a Tequila Sunrise. Last year, the official drink was the somewhat more imaginatively named Motorcade ("Were there three shots or four?"), reportedly black in color.

Jo Rae DiMenno and I decide to get the hell out of this gargantuan hotel for a little while. On the way out, we pass a group of men who have stationed themselves, rather inconveniently, at the base of the escalator for their VERY IMPORTANT debate on Officer Tippit, the Dallas Police officer that Oswald may or may not have shot and killed while on the lam after the assassination. Other guests step around them; they talk on, oblivious. It's almost midnight.

The only place to get a drink in downtown Dallas is called the West End District—a few blocks of quaint old warehouses renovated and turned into a sort of shopping/eating/drinking tourist trap. No one goes there except visitors from the big downtown hotels, and young, well-to-do, college-age suburban kids, and on a Friday night there are plenty of both. The more bohemian Dallasites hang out in Deep Ellum, a six-block strip of Elm Street (hence the bastardized spelling) out beyond the freeway that used to be in the heart of Dallas' black community. Now the storefronts and tire shops and garages of Deep Ellum have been turned into rock clubs and underground art galleries, and the black community has been shunted off to the mean streets of South Dallas.

In the West End, though, there's nothing but these big drinking factories full of loud, sharp-dressed youths. Like L.A., Dallas is loaded with rich, vapid kids with nothing to do but spend their parents' money on nice clothes and hair supplies. And on the weekends they drive in from the suburban deserts to cruise the West End in greasy black low-rider minipickups while throwing bottles of Lone Star in the streets. There's a band playing terrible country-rock covers at the bar we're at, and someone just poured a Shiner Bock down my shirt. But the beer is cheaper than at the Hyatt, and no one here is talking about John F. Kennedy. I will count my blessings.

Dallas in the 60s, according to all the assassination literature, was a seething pit of ultra-right-wing hatred. On the day JFK was killed, there was a full page ad in the *Dallas Morning-Times* attacking him; earlier in that week, the city was covered in mock "Wanted" posters charging the president with treason. It was always, and still is, a conservative town, but with some curious undertones. Dallas County had a serious

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The Believers

puritanical streak. Some parts, such as the Oak Cliff area, where Lee Harvey Oswald lived, were designated as dry: no bars, no booze. But a mile away, down by the brackish waters of the Trinity River, there were some of the rowdiest strip shacks and meanest cowboy dives known to Western man. And of course there were also the higher-class downtown strip clubs—such as Jack Ruby's own Carousel Club, where members of the local police department mingled with mob figures and, supposedly, such shadowy CIA operatives as David Ferrie and Lee Oswald. Even today Big D is famous, in certain circles, for its still-sleazy strip scene, at such old war-horses as the Cabaret Royale and the Circle.

But you won't find them in the Hyatt guidebook. Which is probably just as well. Dallas doesn't seem to have quite settled into its fancy new duds yet. There is this glassy sheen of high-finance elegance on the skyline, but down on the streets it still smells like a cow town. That may just be from the horse-and-carriage rides that the tourists can take along Houston Street, past Dealey Plaza, back to the hotel. Or it may just be me.

At last call we forgo the carriage and walk back to the Hyatt. Dealey Plaza is more impressive, more mysterious, in the middle of the night. There's no traffic roaring around it, and the fake newspaper vendors have gone home. But there are still people wandering in the darkness on the Grassy Knoll, picking their way through the holes in the old picket fence as a big freight train moans over the triple underpass. At times such as these, for a moment, the mythology works.

The mythic aspects of the Kennedy case have nothing to do with this, the researchers are quick to point out. They deal only in hard evidence. All the facts are there; one must only connect the dots in the right patterns. But the case is greater than the mere sum of all the millions of pages of documentation and billions of hours of research. It is a symbol for all that is scary and incomprehensible about our government and our world, an all-consuming mythology so vivid and multifaceted it seems alive. And here, on the very earth and asphalt where whatever happened happened, one might easily become one of those who has given over his/her life to understand it. Understand *this*, the conspiracy dares, and you understand everything. No cover-up is too vast and terrifying. No speculation is too paranoid. Nothing is impossible. Anything could have happened.

Back in the hotel lobby, in front of the escalators, two good hours later, the debate rages on. No one has moved.

Saturday morning, at prime cartoon time, it's back to the conference rooms for another hour of talk about severed brainstems and ballistics. This is the medical-evidence workshop, and it promises to be a lively affair. Harrison Livingstone told me yesterday that, at last, he was going to be able to speak here. He had wheedled some time at the end of this morning workshop, which was ostensibly to be led by longtime medical researcher Wallace Milam. There's a big, sprawling panel presentation on Mafia/CIA/Cuban connections to the assassination going on at the same time, but it will have to be skipped. Livingstone had said that this opportunity to speak was a victory of some kind, though he was concerned that the trials of the past few days—whatever they were, specifically—had taken a lot out of him.

"I've just gotten the shit kicked out of me, emotionally," he confessed the previous evening.

As the *High Treason* books show, Livingstone indeed has done an enormous amount of work researching the medical evidence, obtaining key testimony from Dallas witnesses and Bethesda autopsists alike, and Milam acknowledges this as he passes the baton over to Livingstone about 30 minutes into the workshop. But Livingstone's conclusions are as controversial as his personality, and under his hand the workshop assumes something of an edgy Al Haig-takeover atmosphere. He begins by apologizing for his somewhat disheveled mental state.

"It's unfortunate that every time I come out with some new development I have to go through this softening up," he says, pacing back and forth along the conference room. "It's almost as though someone is aware of my research...."

A few people exchange glances at this.

"People are being run by the conspiracy," he continues. "This city is being run by the conspiracy. We could have solved this case years ago if we could have cut through the crap."

He reiterates his distrust of the ASK organizers, rails against "this authoritarian fascist state," and complains about the phenomenon of what he calls "professional witnesses"—many of whom are here at the symposium—selling their testimony to the highest bidder and irreparably mucking up the case. Along the way, he gets around to discussing his research and his conclusions that the autopsy photos and x-rays have been doctored.

But the natives are getting restless. Livingstone isn't just saying a few words, he's taking over. Milam, the workshop leader, has long since left the room, and Livingstone's manner is rubbing some people the wrong way.

"They said he could speak," a man in

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front of me whispers to his neighbor. "They didn't say he could take over."

At one point a man stands up and asks, "How many people would like to hear another speaker?" Applause fills the room.

But Livingstone presses on, brave or oblivious. A few people walk out. Among them is Paul O'Connor, an ex-Navy technician who saw the president's body arrive in Bethesda from Dallas. O'Connor's testimony that the casket he saw in Bethesda was clearly not the one photographed going up the ramp of Air Force One in Dallas is the backbone of many a conspiracy theory, including David Lifton's body-tampering theory. But it conflicts with Livingstone's. As soon as O'Connor walks out, someone is dispatched to fetch him again, and he returns to the room.

"Was it the same casket?" he is asked.

"Absolutely not," O'Connor states emphatically, visibly peeved.

But Livingstone says it was. It has to be for his theory to work. This is what they want to see! Battling experts! The crowd smells blood.

"Let's get Lifton in here!" someone suggests.

But even better, Livingstone's erstwhile collaborator Robert Groden has materialized at the rear of the room and is scowling at the proceedings. A couple of the young South By Southwest people have appeared as well, and they are poised nervously by the door. The workshop is going over its scheduled time. And it's getting ugly.

Someone asks Livingstone when he believes the Zapruder film was tampered with. Almost before he can reply, someone standing next to Groden raises his voice.

"Just so everyone knows," he says rather loudly. "The Zapruder film wasn't tampered with. He wouldn't know an f-stop from a bus stop."

Tense moment. Could be violence.

"Well, everybody's entitled to their opinion," Livingstone mutters. Another question, this one from Hank Sienzant, the Warren Commission apologist. He wants to know why these conspirators would take the time and trouble to tamper so painstakingly with the Zapruder film, when so many other valuable things have been learned from it. Why wouldn't they just destroy it?

"Well, the name of the game here is what we call de-objectifying the evidence," Livingstone says. "Which is what Groden does—"

He gets no farther than that.

"FUCK YOUR ASS! YOU PHONEY!" Groden shouts. Suddenly, it's rumble time on the school playground. A couple of Groden's retainers spring up to restrain him in case violence erupts.

"Hey hey hey! There's no need for that!"

"Lighten up! Lighten up!"

"Come on, Bob. You owe the man an apology."

Groden allows himself to be restrained.

"I'm sorry," he says. "I can't sit here and listen to this."

Adding to the chaos, one of the long-suffering South By Southwest staffers jumps into the fray and announces that they have to clear the room. The next workshop is coming in, but everyone is welcome to continue this out in the hall.

"Oh shut up," a woman sneers into his face. "You're just *staff*." She pronounces the last word as if it's a particularly vile and unspeakable curse.

But amid much eye-rolling and nervous laughter, the room starts to clear out. Bob Groden continues busily apologizing for his outburst to anyone who will still listen to him.

"For giving him any degree of credibility through the years," he says, "I apologize."

Everyone is a little giddy, a little drunk from the mean little spectacle that just flared up here. The guy sitting next to me chuckles a bit.

"Well, I liked Livingstone's books," he says. "But he's an asshole."

Harry Livingstone flies back to Baltimore later that Saturday, having made good on his promise to shake things up. But what's the point? This was like an academic conference of angry cokehead professors. The infighting. The back stabbing. The vindictiveness. The outright paranoid weirdness. The petty squabbles between big, dangerous egos. Everyone seemed to have something terrible to say (off the record, usually) about one of their colleagues. David Lifton was a "pompous jerk" who refused to share information. Bob Groden, according to one of the organizing parties, "is the smarmiest lying son of a bitch in the world," the kind of guy who whined that his kids would go hungry unless ASK paid for his airfare and hotel room for the symposium. And then he showed up with an entourage and demanded an extra room for them too.

As for Harrison Livingstone, perhaps the most controversial figure in attendance? Even after his Saturday departure, he cast a long shadow over the remainder of the proceedings, with authors and anonymous conference-goers alike buzzing about his antics. Few doubted the man's sincerity, or his single-minded devotion to the cause. But certain terms kept reappearing: *Self-aggrandizing. Persecution complex. Pit bull.* Or in the words of a psychiatrist who happened to be in attendance, Harry Livingstone was just "a man who had come loose from his cognitive moorings."

How do these people ever expect to crack this case?

And in the end, do they even want to?

That's what Steven Foster would like to know too. He runs something he calls the Dealey Plaza Research Team, and unlike most of the people hanging around the

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The Believers

ASK Mart in the main ballroom, he isn't here to sell anything. Well, maybe just a few T-shirts.

"I thought this was about solving the Crime of the Century," he says. "Not selling books and videos and everything.... Everybody's got their own book to sell and we've sorta lost the spirit of 'Seek the Truth.'"

Foster cheerfully admits that the research community is full of "fragmentation and hostility," and he's not surprised that they are so often labeled as conspiracy nuts.

"It *is* a bunch of nuts," he argues. "We bring that on ourselves." He gestures around the ballroom full of people hawking their homemade conspiracy monographs and Magic Bullet paperweights.

"I mean, walk around this room [with a press pass] and you're likely to get blown away by someone. Then it's like, hey, you've just reinforced the idea that we're kooks!"

Foster would like to see a little more cooperation among the various factions, and an acknowledgment that "this is an ongoing investigation" and no one person is likely to break it.

"I guess we're just passionate," he says. "But we're really too busy being offensive to be passionate."

Beverly Oliver

Later in the afternoon I finally speak to Gary Shaw, the embattled cruise director trying to build some kind of constructive consensus and keep the ship afloat. Shaw began the conference with a stern warning about interruptions and disruptions, and what the State of Texas had to say about them, from a legal standpoint.

"You will be asked to leave," he had said. "And if you don't, you will be escorted out."

Now I ask him about Harry Livingstone's repeated assertions that ASK was unfairly authoritarian and had tried to silence him.

"Well, there's a reason we haven't given him a forum," Shaw says quietly. "And that was expressed dramatically this morning," he adds, referring to the dustup at the medical workshop.

"Remember, this was a guy who called us and *demanded* to be the keynote speaker."

The ASK organizers also mention this—that Livingstone merely was acting out his grudge against ASK for their refusal to let him be the keynote speaker. But was the Dallas research community censoring him? He did, after all, sell a whole heap of books. Who else was being locked out?

Well, Shaw admits, some people were not invited to participate in ASK. Among them was the truly out-there theorist William Cooper, who believes, among many other things, that Kennedy was shot by the limo driver and that the hit was arranged by the Illuminati, the mythical Bavarian secret society that is notorious for hating

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Catholics. Cooper also believes that Kennedy was killed because he was threatening to reveal the truth about UFOs. Similarly, Bonar Menninger, who posits in his book *Fatal Error* that a Secret Service man shot the president by mistake, was not asked to make an appearance. Shaw is interested in getting some points of agreement here, a firm place to stand when they make their case to the powers that be.

And despite some high-profile scuffling between a few major authors, he is optimistic that it can be done.

"We want to create a sense of urgency," he says. "We can do a lot. The only thing that politicians bow to is public pressure."

Beverly Oliver, the Babushka Lady, wanders up with an urgent question: "What should I sing tonight, Gary?"

She starts singing: "A good ma-a-a-n is ha-a-ard to fi-i-nd...."

Luckily, Oliver is still in good voice. Later, there will be a bit of imaginative recreation here on the last night of the conference. The ballroom is being turned into a loose replica of Jack Ruby's old Carousel Club, and Beverly Oliver, ex-showgirl, is going to sing.

The band, a bunch of Austin hipsters called the Naughty Ones, are setting up now. Oliver is chatting with the goateed lead singer, trying to work up a short set list.

"Do you know 'Summertime'?"

As night falls, the assassinologists gather again. There's a high school homecoming dance in another part of the Hyatt, and Texas teens in glittery formalwear mingle uncomfortably with the ASK crowd. The big look for guys here in Dallas is Clint Black: black tuxedo with black Stetson.

The ASK-goers have dressed up a little too. Some of them have tried awkwardly to dude themselves up with string ties and the like. All the South By Southwest staffers are wearing vintage 60s clothing. There's a certain magic in the air.

Inside the ballroom, a strange transformation has taken place. Most people are still seated in their usual rows of chairs, staring at the stage, but there's a cash bar and a big TV at the back of the room showing some circa-1960s stag films. And on the stage, the Naughty Ones are bumping and grinding out a set of loud, funky lounge rock. They have two girls in black lingerie and feather boas dancing through the crowd and sitting on guys' laps. Most of the audience is absolutely petrified.

"I don't see what *this* has to do with John F. Kennedy!" one older man harrumphs as he stomps out, apparently unaware of the irony.

Some people are getting into it, though, loosening up after a fairly tense few days. Kit and Peggy Walton are here, giggling a little nervously at the scantily clad dancers and the leering crowd. Peggy is pretending to be offended by it all, but she's laughing, and soon she gets up and hits the dance floor herself.

In the back there's a healthy line at the bar and a ring of curiosity-seekers around the stag film, in which a well-endowed young blonde is clambering around on some rocks, nude. A young boy of around eight stands transfixed in front of the screen. After days of tagging along behind his father and listening to a bunch of boring speeches, *this* is interesting.

"This film has been tampered with!" one guy proclaims. "I think those breasts have been pasted on!"

"It must be some kind of animation or optical enhancement!" another offers.

Up near the stage, conventioneer Robert Malleck is poised with his 8 mm video camera, waiting for Beverly Oliver to make her promised singing appearance. He is not disappointed.

Around 9:30, the band announces that they have a special guest. And Beverly Oliver, key witness to the Crime of the Century, takes the stage in a skintight black minidress, with fringe, and begins to sing "The Twist." She's so does the Twist, of course, not badly.

Robert Malleck is agog. Following the action in his viewfinder, he is beside himself.

"This is hilarious," he says. "It's like something out of a Fellini movie."

Periodically, Oliver leaps into the crowd to snatch some terrified assassinologist and make him do the Twist with her.

"This is the funniest thing I have ever seen," Malleck says.

Meanwhile, on the other side of the sliding wall that separates the ballroom, another crowd has gathered. Even with the once-in-a-lifetime spectacle taking place next door, they just can't drag themselves away from the case. It's just too important. There are still so many questions to ask. And so little time. A few dozen people crowd around a huge book of autopsy photographs. Brains, jagged throat wounds, black blood, Kennedy's lifeless eyes. They're all talking at once, all trying to flip the pictures at the same time. The crowd grows. The thin sliding wall shudders to the music rumbling over from the other side.

Come on baby, let's do the Twist!
Come on bay-bere, let's do the Twist!

Nobody listens. Nobody is doing the Twist. ■

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