

On the Confusing Trail of Jack Ruby

Reviewed by
Bob Katz

The reviewer is a writer, and director
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Seth Kantor is the only working journalist in the establishment media to pursue seriously, with the tools of his trade, some of the unanswered questions in the John Kennedy assassination. Why the national press, for all its sound and fury about countless sleuthing into high and sensitive places, has failed to do real investigative legwork into the mysteries of Dallas is a subject too complicated to go into. However, the reason why Seth Kantor chose to probe the enigma of Jack Ruby (who shot Lee Harvey Oswald before the eyes of millions of startled television viewers) is as simple as the survival instinct: The Warren Report was telling him he was crazy.

As a correspondent for Scripps-Howard newspapers, Kantor was present at Parkland Hospital while last rites were being administered to John Kennedy. At about 1:30 p.m. on Nov. 22, 1963, while in the frantic waiting room at Parkland, Kantor was nervously approached by an old Dallas acquaintance, nightclub owner Ruby. In the midst of the commotion, Ruby wanted to know if, in light of the tragedy, he should close his clubs.

Kantor nodded affirmatively, then hurried on to cover the official announcement of the president's death.

For the Warren Commission, this presented manifold problems. What was Ruby doing at Parkland? Could this suggest for Ruby a sinister connection to events two full days before his Nov. 24 debut on national TV? And why did Ruby himself steadfastly deny being at the hospital? The Warren Report offered an expedient solution: "Kantor probably did not see Ruby at Parkland Hospital in the few minutes before or after 1:30 p.m., the only time it would have been possible for Kantor to have done so."

It is the kind of dilemma that forces one to dig in or submit to madness, Kantor wrote a book.

Ruby is described here as a feisty, edgy, pugnacious manic-depressive—a Terry Malloy minus Brandt's grandeur—who just doesn't know what to do with himself if he's not setting up a scam, making a connection, tugging frenetically on his own bootstraps. As a youth, Kantor tells us Ruby ran numbers, graduated to thuggery on behalf of the Chicago Scrap Iron Workers Union, and dabbled in futile entrepreneurship.

In 1947, Ruby, then 36 years old, moved to Dallas. There he became a spider suspended in his own web. He presided over a nightclub, the Silver

Book World

WHO WAS JACK RUBY? By Seth

Kantor

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Spur, dressed in Cowboy attire, cultivating cops as friends and customers, but mostly as protectors. His strippers were not unfamiliar with prostitution. There was a suggestion of drug dealing. Connections breed opportunity. Opportunity breeds insecurity. Insecurity breeds action. It is the American dream in blacklight, only the eerie parts showing.

In 1959, Ruby was apparently entrusted with a mob assignment which was weightier than any of his previous responsibilities. Though Kantor fails to shed any light on the reasons behind this promotion, the record he compiles indicates that Ruby was connected by Vegas gamblers to be a go-between in efforts to spring underworld prisoners from the jails of Cuba's new Castro regime, that he became involved with gun-running operations to Cuba, that he traveled twice to Cuba (once for a stay of only 24 hours), and that in Cuba he might have visited with the imprisoned former overload of Cuban gambling, Santo Trafficante Jr.

Moreover, it was during this time period that Ruby was regarded by the

FBI as a "Potential Criminal Informant." Kantor suggests that Ruby's meetings with FBI agent Charles Flynn (nine times altogether) probably had more to do with Cuban activities than with gambling and narcotics information, the latter being the Warren Commission's interpretation of the FBI contacts. Suddenly, like the twist of a kaleidoscope that brings new colors into focus, the myriad conspiracy possibilities are visible. FBI, CIA, Castro, organized crime. Ruby is on the road to that weekend in November.

Ruby certainly seems to have been someone's puppet. But the big question—would he have sacrificed himself for a conspiracy that allowed him to languish and die in the Dallas jail?—is no more answered by Kantor than by the Warren Report. How did Ruby get into the police basement? Who tipped him about the time of Oswald's transfer? What, precisely, was his status in the underworld? Light is shed on all of these; still, darkness remains.

"Who Was Jack Ruby?" is written in a clean, direct, reportorial style. There are no cosmic insights. As a biography, it is limited by its cursory treatment of Ruby's early years, but as an antidote to the crude stick-figure caricatures drawn of Oswald's killer by a host of textbook historians Kantor's book is a welcome service.