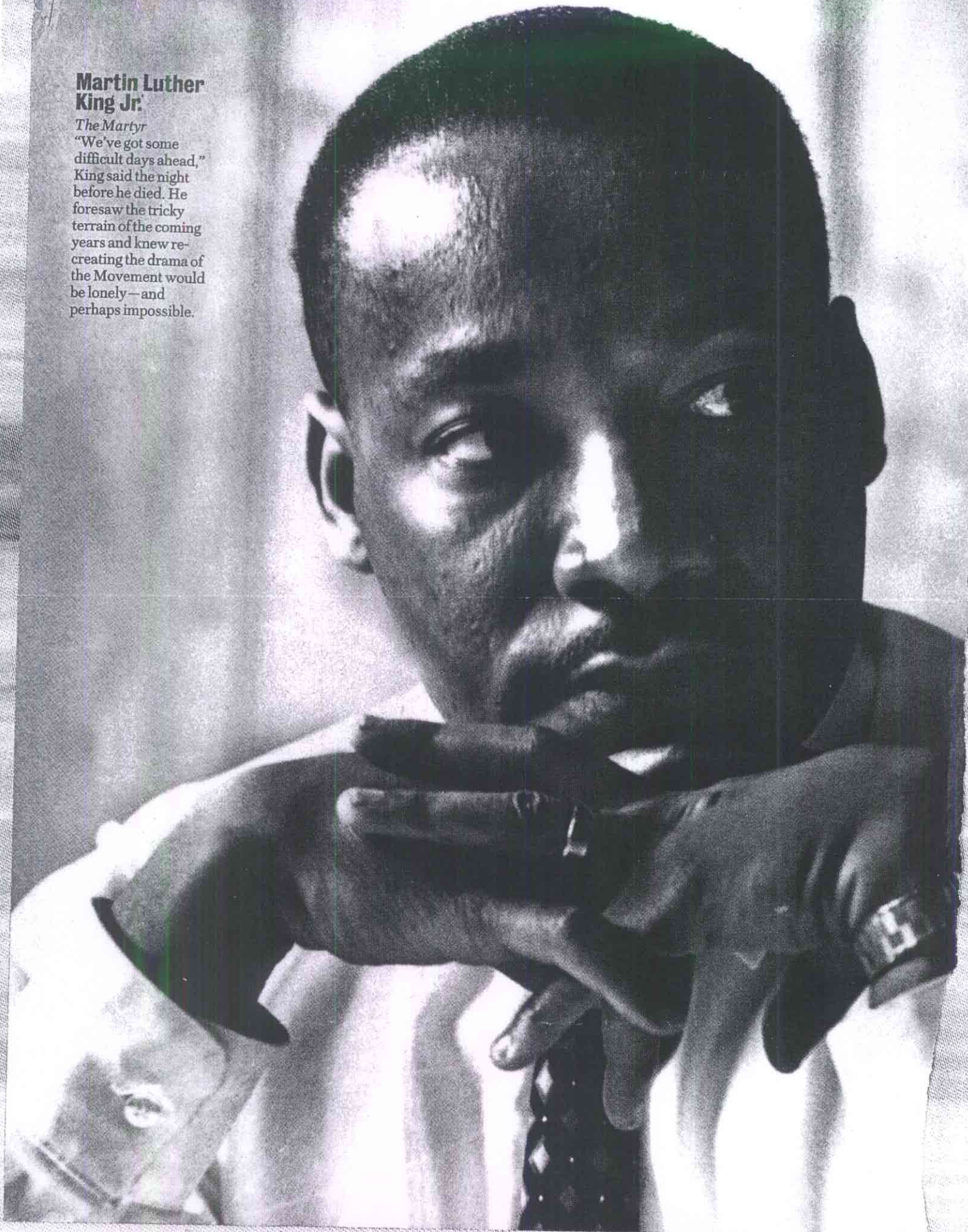


## Martin Luther King Jr.

### *The Martyr*

"We've got some difficult days ahead," King said the night before he died. He foresaw the tricky terrain of the coming years and knew re-creating the drama of the Movement would be lonely—and perhaps impossible.





Thirty years ago, on the eve of his murder, Martin Luther King Jr.'s Dream was turning dark. Worried about poverty and Vietnam, he was growing more radical—and that, his family says, is why he was killed. Was the real King a saint, a subversive—or both? BY VERN E. SMITH AND JON MEACHAM

# THE WAR OVER KING'S LEGACY

**T**HE SUN WAS ABOUT TO SET. On Thursday, April 4, 1968, Martin Luther King Jr. had retreated to room 306 of the Lorraine Motel, worrying about a sanitation strike in Memphis and working on his sermon for Sunday. Its title: "Why America May Go to Hell." For King, whose focus had shifted from civil rights to antiwar agitation and populist economics, the Dream was turning dark. He had been depressed, sleeping little and suffering from migraines. In Washington, his plans for a massive Poor People's Campaign were in disarray. In

Memphis, King's first march with striking garbage men had degenerated into riot when young black radicals—not, as in the glory days, angry state troopers—broke King's nonviolent ranks. By 5 p.m. he was hungry and looked forward to a soul-food supper. Always fastidious—a prince of the church—King shaved, splashed on cologne and stepped onto the balcony. He paused; a .30-06 rifle shot slammed King back against the wall, his arms stretched out to his sides as if he were being crucified.

The Passion was complete. As he lay dying, the popular beatification was already underway: Martin Luther King



Jr., general and martyr to the greatest moral crusade on the nation's racial battlefield. For most Americans the story seems so straightforward. He was a prophet, our own Gandhi, who led the nation out of the darkness of Jim Crow. His Promised Land was the one he conjured on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in 1963, a place where his "four little children ... will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character."

Now, 30 years after his assassination, that legend is under fresh assault—from King's own family and many of his aging lieutenants. His widow, Coretta, and his heirs are on the front lines of a quiet but pitched battle over the manner of his death and the meaning of his life. They believe James Earl Ray, King's convicted assassin, is innocent and that history has forgotten the real Martin Luther King.

To his family, King was murdered because he was no longer the King of the March on Washington, simply asking for the WHITES ONLY signs to come down. He had grown radical: the King of 1968 was trying to build an interracial coalition to end the war in Vietnam and force major economic reforms—starting with guaranteed annual incomes for all. They charge that the government, probably with Lyndon Johnson's knowledge, feared King might topple the "power structure" and had him assassinated. "The economic movement was why he was killed, frankly," Martin Luther King III told NEWSWEEK. "That was frightening to the powers that be." They allege there were political reasons, too. "RFK was considering him as a vice presidential candidate," says Dexter, King's third child. "It's not widely known or discussed, [but] obviously those surveilling him knew of it. They [Kennedy and King] were both considered powerful and influential in terms of bringing together a multiracial coalition."

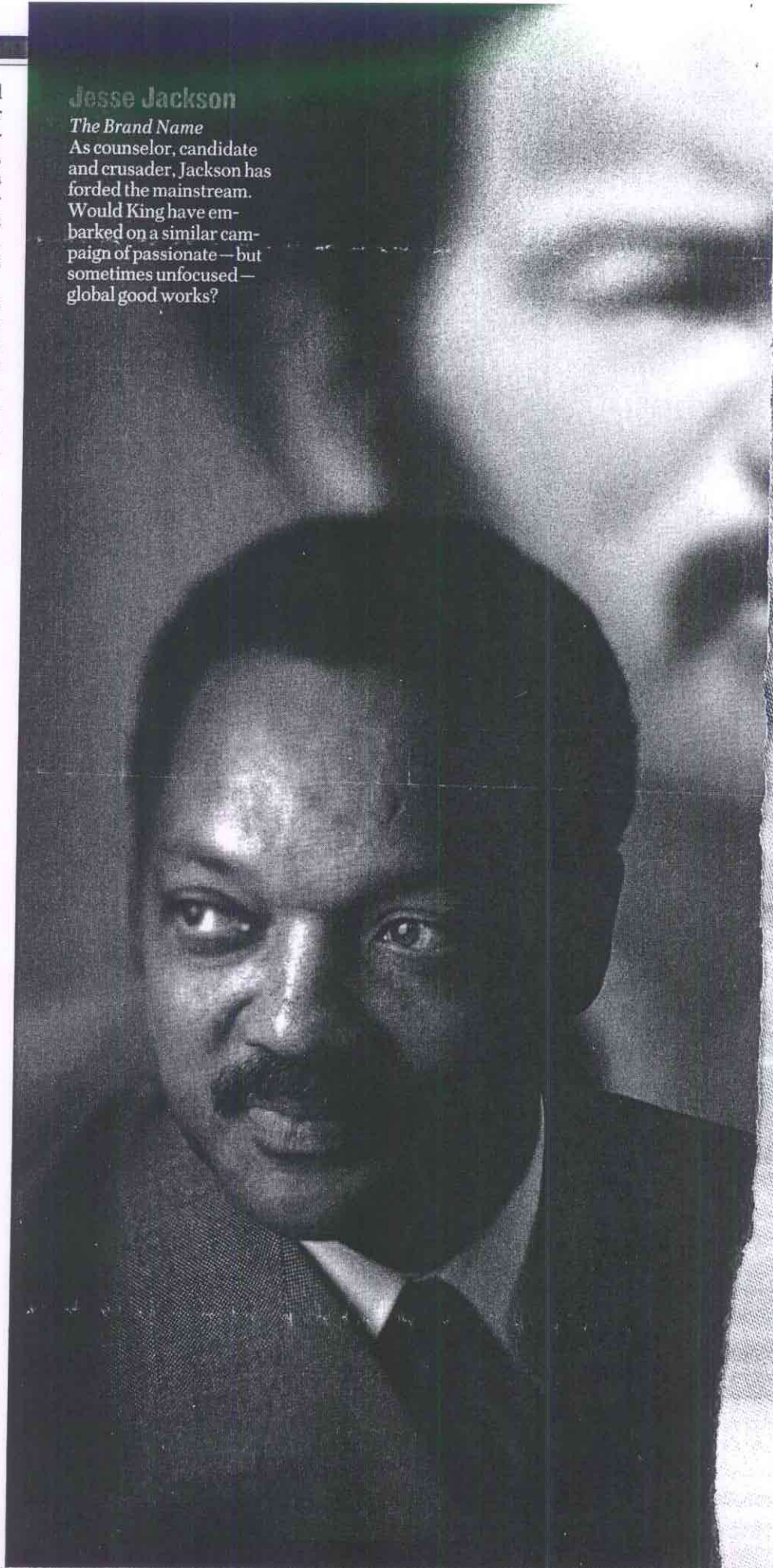
So who was the real Martin Luther King Jr.—the integrationist preacher of the summer of 1963 or the leftist activist of the spring of 1968? The question is not just academic. Its competing answers shed light on enduring—and urgent—tensions between white and black America over race, class and conspiracy. Most whites want King to be a warm civic memory, an example of the triumph of good over evil. For many African-Americans, however, the sanitizing of King's legacy, and suspicions about a plot to kill him, are yet another example of how larger forces—including the government that so long enslaved them—hijack their history and conspire against them. In a strange way, the war over King's legacy is a sepia-toned O.J. trial, and what you believe depends on who you are.

The Kings, a family still struggling to find its footing personally and politically, are understandably attracted to the grander theories about King's life and death. A government conspiracy to kill a revolutionary on the rise is more commensurate with the greatness of the target than a hater hitting a leader who may have been on the cool side of the mountain. The

## Jesse Jackson

### *The Brand Name*

As counselor, candidate and crusader, Jackson has forded the mainstream. Would King have embarked on a similar campaign of passionate—but sometimes unfocused—global good works?







**Hosea Williams**

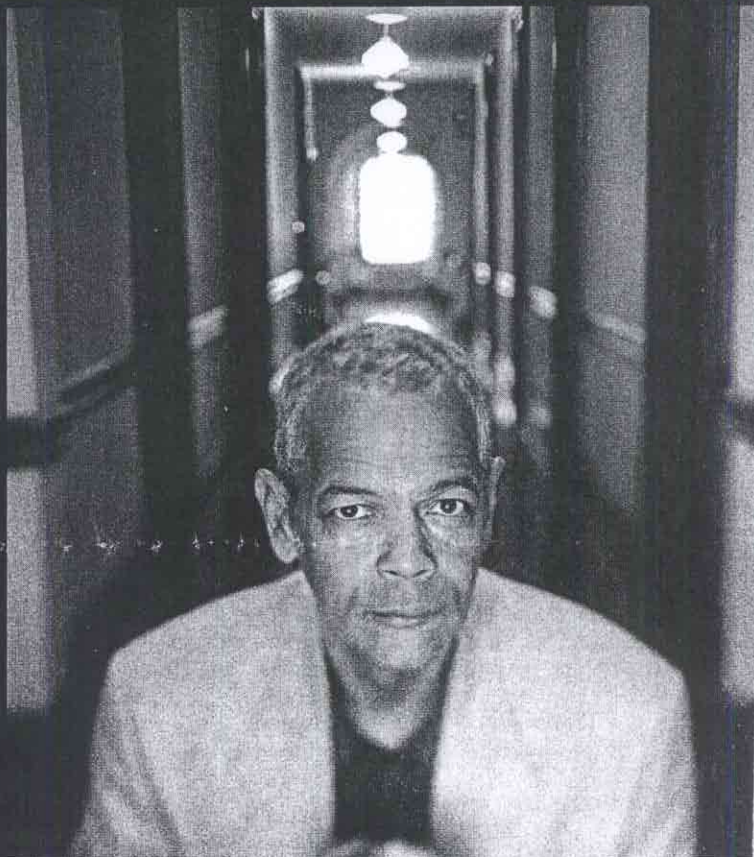
*The Firebrand*

As field lieutenant and march organizer, Williams was arrested more than anyone else in King's circle — and is proud of it. After years in local Georgia politics, he's now back to working with King's last constituency: the urban poor.

**Julian Bond**

*The Historian*

SNCC leader, Georgia legislator, lecturer, professor — when Julian Bond speaks, people listen. As the new board chairman at the NAACP, he will face the challenge of making the country pay attention to its oldest civil-rights organization.





truth, as always, is more complicated than legend. People who were around Robert Kennedy say it is highly unlikely that there was serious consideration of an RFK-King ticket. "I never heard Kennedy talk about any vice presidential possibilities," says historian Arthur Schlesinger Jr., a Kennedy aide. And though there was almost certainly some kind of small-time plot to kill King, 30 years of speculation and investigation has produced no convincing proof that James Earl Ray was part of a government-led conspiracy.

The real King was in fact both radical and pragmatist, prophet and pol. He understood that the clarity of Birmingham and Selma was gone forever, and sensed the tricky racial and political terrain ahead. He knew the country was embarking on a long twilight struggle against poverty and violence—necessarily more diffuse, and more arduous, than the fight against Jim Crow. Jealousies among reformers, always high, would grow even worse; once the target shifted to poverty, it would be tough to replicate the drama that had led to the Civil Rights and Voting Rights Acts in 1964 and '65. "We've got some difficult days ahead," he preached the night before he died.

King was an unlikely martyr to begin with. On Dec. 1, 1955, Rosa Parks declined to give up her seat to a white passenger on a Montgomery bus. King was not quite 27; Coretta had just given birth to their first child, Yolanda. E. D. Nixon, another Montgomery pastor, wanted to host a boycott meeting at King's Dexter Avenue Baptist Church—not because of King but because the church was closest to downtown. When the session ran long, a frustrated minister got up to leave, whispering to King, "This is going to fizzle out. I'm going." King replied, "I would like to go, too, but it's in my church."

He took up the burden, however, and his greatness emerged. He led waves of courageous ordinary people on the streets of the South, from the bus boycott to the Freedom Rides. Behind his public dignity, King was roiled by contradictions and self-doubts. He wasn't interested in money, yet favored silk suits; he summoned a nation to moral

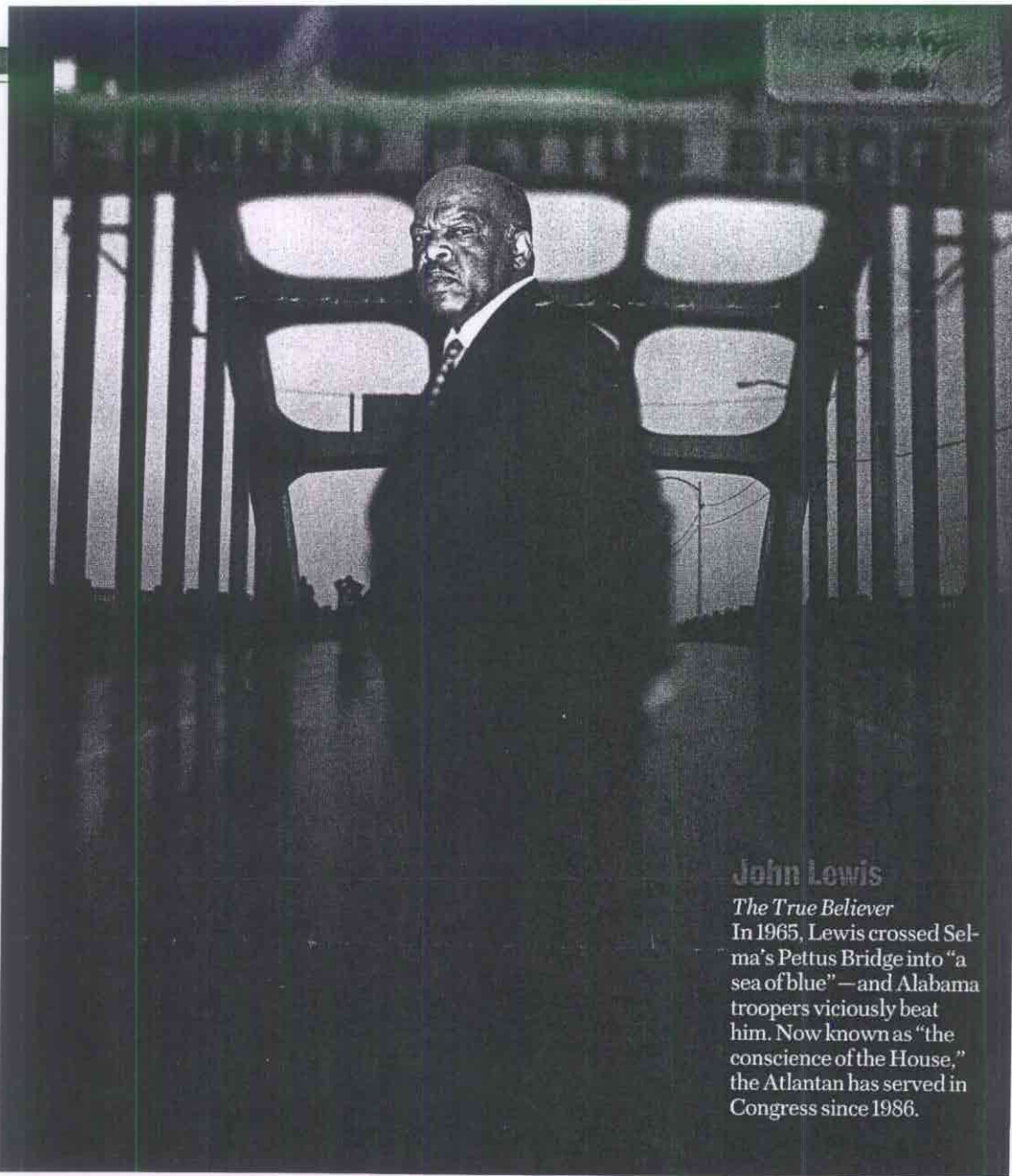
reckoning, yet had a weakness for women. He made powerful enemies: J. Edgar Hoover obsessed over King. The FBI, worried that he was under communist influence, wiretapped and harassed the preacher from 1962 until his death.

**H**OOVER MAY HAVE BEEN overestimating his foe, particularly after 1965. On the streets, the black-power movement thought King's philosophy of nonviolence was out of date. Within the system King fared little better. "The years before '68 were a time when people in Detroit would call us to march for civil rights—come to Chicago, come to L.A.," Jesse Jackson says. "But by the '70s, you had mayors who were doing the work every day." King felt this chill wind in Cleveland, when he campaigned for Carl Stokes, the city's first successful black mayoral candidate. The night Stokes won, King

waited in a hotel room for the invitation to join the celebrations. The call never came.

King took the change in climate hard. He told his congregation that "life is a continual story of shattered dreams." "Dr. King kept saying," John Lewis recalls, "Where do we go? How do we get there?" According to David J. Garrow's Pulitzer Prize-winning King biography, "Bearing the Cross," he had found one answer while reading Ramparts magazine at lunch one day in 1967. Coming across photos of napalmed Vietnamese kids, King pushed away his plate of food: "Nothing will ever taste any good for me until I do everything I can to end that war."

Look at this from the eyes of King's family. He is attacking the war and poverty. He is planning to "dislocate" daily life in the capital by bringing the nation's impoverished to camp out in Washington. "He was about to wreck this country," says Hosea Williams, "and they realized they couldn't stop him, and they killed him." But it did not seem that way to Williams—or to King—in real time.



### John Lewis

#### *The True Believer*

In 1965, Lewis crossed Selma's Pettus Bridge into "a sea of blue"—and Alabama troopers viciously beat him. Now known as "the conscience of the House," the Atlantan has served in Congress since 1986.





### Joseph Lowery

#### *The Old Guard*

As the longest-serving president of the SCLC, Lowery had to face intractable questions that King didn't live to answer: how to combat crack, AIDS and urban family breakdown.

### Andrew Young

#### *The Diplomat*

After the demonstrations were over, King would send Young in to negotiate with city leaders. He has continued to work within the system, first as Carter's ambassador to the United Nations, later as mayor of Atlanta.

The Poor People's Campaign was having so much trouble turning out marchers that one organizer, James Gibson, wrote Williams a terse memo just two weeks before King was to die. "If this is to be a progress report," Gibson told Williams, "I can stop now; there has been none!" The march was to be a model for multiethnic protest—a forerunner to the Rainbow Coalition. The early returns—and King knew this—were not good. The Southern Christian Leadership Conference was riven as the calculus changed. "I do not think I am at the point where a Mexican can sit in and call strategy on a Steering Committee," one SCLC aide said.

What would have become of King? His lieutenants do not believe he could have kept up the emotional and physical pace of the previous 13 years. They doubt he would have run for office despite speculation about RFK or a presidential bid with Benjamin Spock. Nor do they think he would have pulled a Gandhi and gone to live with the poor. ("Martin would give you anything, but

he liked nice things," says one King hand. "He would not have put on sackcloth.")

A more likely fate: pastoring Ebenezer Baptist Church and using his Nobel platform to speak out—on war and peace, the inner cities, apartheid. King would have stood by liberalism: conservatives who use his words to fight affirmative action are almost certainly wrong. "At the end of his life," says Julian Bond, "King was saying that a nation that has done something to the Negro for hundreds of years must now do something for him." Had he lived, King might have been the only man with the standing to frame the issue of the ghettos in moral terms. On the other hand, he might have become a man out of time, frustrated by preaching about poverty to a prosperous country.

The fight over King's legacy resonates beyond the small circles of family and historians. To the Malcolm X-saturated hip-hop generation, "by any means necessary" is a better rap beat than "I have a dream." "For

kids outside the system, King has no relevancy," says Andre Green, a freshman at Simon's Rock College in Massachusetts. "But for the upwardly mobile, assimilated black youth, King is a hero because he opened the doors." That is true of older African-Americans as well, though there is a rethinking of integration, too. Some black mayors now oppose busing even if it means largely all-African-American schools.

On the last Saturday of his life, sitting in his study at Ebenezer, King fretted and contemplated a fast—a genuine sacrifice for a man who joked about how his collars were growing tighter. He mused about getting out of the full-time movement, maybe becoming president of Morehouse College. Then his spirits started to rise. "He preached himself out of the gloom," says Jackson. "We must turn a minus into a plus," King said, "a stumbling block into a steppingstone—we must go on anyhow." Three decades later, he would want all of us to do the same.

With VERONICA CHAMBERS



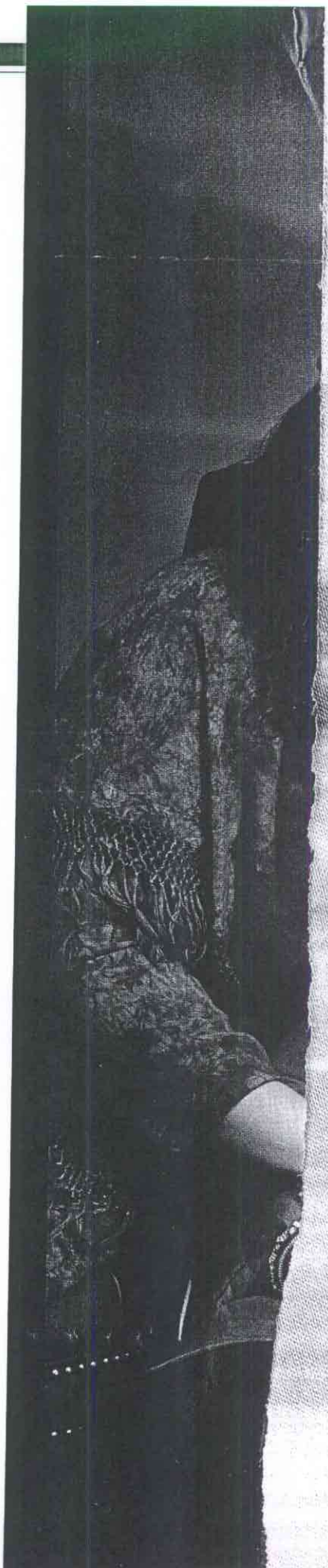
When the nation lost its modern-day prophet, they lost their dad. Burdened by a famous name, they've struggled to find themselves in a world where everyone else thinks they know who the Kings should be. Behind Martin Luther King Inc. BY VERN E. SMITH AND JOHN LELAND

# THE CHILDREN WHO WOULD BE KING

**A**S HIS FATHER DID, Dexter Scott King has a dream. On a March afternoon Dexter, 37, gazes out from the second-story window of the Martin Luther King Jr. Center for Nonviolent Social Change in Atlanta, and does not like what he sees. There is history in his vision: next door sits Ebenezer Baptist Church, where Dexter's father and grandfather preached; a few doors back, at 501 Auburn Avenue, is the tidy Queen Anne-style house where his father grew up. But there is also, in Dexter's eye, a frustratingly untapped field of commercial possibilities — of shops and restaurants, of *gentrification*, he says, in the same susurrant tones with which his father invoked justice or equality. The center is of red brick, clean and airy, but

like the sites of many King family gatherings these days, it can quickly feel like a fortress against a disappointing outside world. Dexter's dream, he says, is thwarted not primarily by racism but by the recalcitrance and criticism of his civil-rights elders. "They don't want to do anything," he says, "unless they can control it themselves."

The battles are seldom far outside the walls. Since succeeding his mother as president of the nonprofit King Center in 1994, Dexter — the younger son, named after his father's first pulpit in Montgomery, Ala. — has steered the family ship according to his own entrepreneurial instincts, provoking resentments both ideological and generational. "They have done unquestionable harm to Dr. King's legacy," says Hosea Williams, King's old march







**The King Family**

*Heirs to the Dream*  
The children say it was Coretta who steadied their lives; she never allowed fear in her house. Now they're carrying on her work. Around her, clockwise: Martin Luther King III, Dexter, Bernice and Yolanda.



organizer, who now runs a local program to feed the hungry. "They are peddling him."

Dexter has established control with a heavy hand. Spurning the sentimentality of his elders, he turned to representatives of Graceland for advice. Along with college friend Phillip Jones, he has formed a multimedia joint venture with Time Warner and boldly predicts he'll bring the family \$30 million to \$50 million for the rights to Dr. King's old writings as well as new books by Dexter and his mother, Coretta Scott King. He and Jones have vigorously policed the family copyrights, suing news organizations for using the "I have a dream" speech. As Dexter lobbies to reopen the case of James Earl Ray, shaking Ray's hand on CNN, he has made a deal with Oliver Stone to provide materials for a film about King's last years.

To cut the center's mushrooming deficits, Dexter has taken steps that rattled both the local community and civil-rights veterans. Declaring that the center was never a civil-rights organization, Dexter slashed its staff and programs. Its archives are currently closed to historians. He purged the center's contentious board, ousted some of his father's old comrades and angered his neighbors by trying to block an Auburn Avenue visitors center that eventually brought \$11 million into a poor neighborhood. Now he wants to sell the King Center property and donate Dr. King's crypt, hallowed ground of the Movement, to the National Park Service—a sanctuary of nonviolent resistance to government, handed over to the Feds.

For 30 years the children of Dr. King have grown up in his light, the First Family of black America. They are heirs to his dream, but also to the nightmare of the post-King era: four kids raised fatherless, in a home torn by violence (six years after their father's death, their grandmother was murdered while playing the organ at Ebenezer). Unlike the Kennedys, they have scarcely been seen outside close circles.

## 'I have kept loved ones at bay,' says Dexter. 'It's the burden of the legacy.'



Generations of Kings: Martin Luther King Sr. (known as 'Daddy King'), grandmother Alberta, Coretta and Martin with the children out for a stroll in Atlanta in 1964; with Dexter, age 3 (left)



When the children and Coretta all agreed to lengthy interviews for this story, it was a first in their memory.

In the center's elegantly appointed conference room, a rich foothold in the mostly impoverished Sweet Auburn neighborhood, Dexter's three siblings—Yolanda, 42; Martin III, 40, and Bernice, 35—defer by habit to their brother. The four of them are trying to call up a family story, their own piece of their father's legacy. *What was that song Daddy used to mess with at the piano, one asks, just the first half of it?* No one can remember—Bernice and Dexter were so young when their father died, just 5 and 7, respectively—and the fragment of memory slips away. Like many adult siblings, they tellingly fall into familiar roles. Yolanda, the only one who moved from Atlanta, remembers back when she used to sneak smokes as a teenager (not too young, she says with a laugh: "After all, I was a preacher's daughter") and Dexter caught her out. "I would have told on you," confesses Martin III. Dexter took a differ-

ent tack. "I cut a deal with you, Yolanda," he remembers. "I wouldn't tell, as long as you would drive me around."

**N**OW IN THEIR 30S AND EARLY 40s, the youngest past the age at which their father led the March on Washington, they have emerged respectably, if unspectacularly, accomplished, still seeking to make their own mark. "Most people spend their life trying to be special," says Yolanda; "I spen[t] my time trying to be like everyone else." Yolanda is an actress, working often with Malcolm X's daughter Attallah Shabazz. Martin III, after a fizzled stint in Fulton County politics, recently took over his father's old organization, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, or SCLC, which has waned since the King years. (When Ralph Abernathy resigned as SCLC president in 1977, he said the organization's problem was that it had to compete for funds with the King Center.) The Reverend Bernice—they all call her Bunny—is an associate minister at the Greater Rising Star Baptist Church. Dexter, who closely resembles their father, runs the family's affairs.

As children they attended public and private schools, and except for Yolanda, who went to Smith College, they followed their



father at the historically black colleges of Atlanta. All keep steady public-speaking schedules. All have been in therapy over the years, according to Yolanda. Like the four children of the late Malcolm X, none has married. "It's the heavy burden of the legacy," says Dexter. "I know I have kept loved ones at bay, potential mates, not wanting to bring them into an unsettled environment. I don't have a lot of friends because friendships require nurturing. That's a luxury to me. I frankly have a lot of appreciation for those who have tolerated me."

Even more than the Kennedys, they have grown up bearing heavy expectations, because their father died with his mission so far from complete. Who better than they to relaunch a stalled movement? "Everybody imposes their idea of what it must be like," says Martin Luther King III, who called himself Marty through college, in part out of self-defense. "I didn't want special treatment, and I didn't want to be put in the position of having to lead until I was ready to." Strangers, meeting one of the four for the first time, often begin their introductions, *I remember where I was when your daddy was assassinated*. The youngest of the siblings barely knew their father; even the oldest struggle to see past his enshrined image. "I hear his speeches all the time," says Yolanda, "and all the buildings and streets named after him. I've learned to separate Martin Luther King Jr. from Daddy. They're two different people."

In her modest brick house in Atlanta's Vine City neighborhood, Coretta Scott King takes unapologetic stock of the King legacy since her husband's death. "I kept making speeches that nonviolence can transform South Africa, nonviolence can bring democracy to the Soviet Union," she says, her feet elevated to relieve her phlebitis. "A few years later, all this was just dismantled." She has faith that there will be another movement in the United States, seeded in part by the teachings of the King Center. "We've put a lot of stuff out there; a lot of people have gone forth. I'm very pleased with what I have done in terms of being faithful to the legacy."

Mrs. King is, on this morning, characteristically regal, impeccably made up (friends once said that the 1965 march to Selma was the first time they ever saw her in flat shoes) and formidably direct. She believes she has never gotten credit for her quiet successes: scores of acolytes trained in nonviolence, a model housing-redevelopment project in Sweet Auburn. "I hear people talk about how the Kings were so elevated in Atlanta. We've never been elevated in Atlanta. Martin Luther King was never elevated in Atlanta. He couldn't get a movement off the ground here."

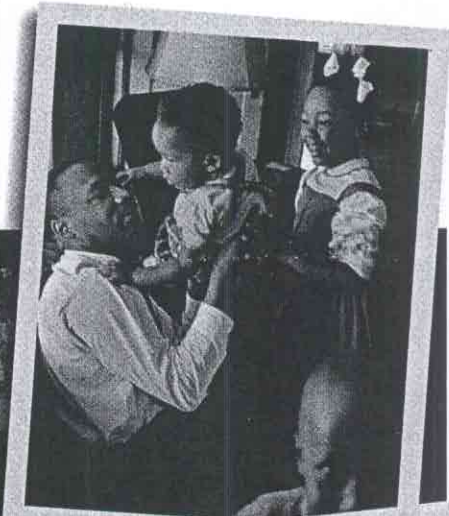
She has lived in this house since 1965, when Dr. King thought the family should dwell among the city's poor. The old furni-

ture, some of it in plastic slipcovers, is still in place, awaiting the day she gives the house up as a museum. The effect, compounded by all the plaques and statues, is of a home stuck in a tragic time. Though she dated after 1968, she never remarried. "We didn't care for the [men] who came around," says Yolanda. None of the family friends emerged as a father figure to the children. Martin III lives here with his mother, and an Atlanta police officer accompanies her when she appears in public. Though she knew the dangers, she says she was never scared in the Movement; after two recent break-ins, however, she is ready to give up this house. One of the burglars was later arrested for killing elderly women in the area.

**A**T 70, SHE HAS GIVEN MUCH OF her adult life to raising money for the King Center, which gets about two thirds of its \$3 million budget from private sources. For all her efforts, it was running a \$700,000 deficit before Dexter took over; according to documents reviewed by NEWSWEEK, in 1995 the center's own accountants warned that it was on the brink of insolvency. (Dexter, who draws a salary of \$130,000, has since reduced the deficit to \$300,000, he says.)

With some ambivalence, Mrs. King seems relieved to have handed the responsibilities to her son. "I think of a woman like Dorothy Height," she says, referring to the president of the National Council of Negro Women, "and that woman is at least 88 years old, and she is still trying to get that organization on a footing. I feel for her ... She can't turn it loose because there's nobody she can turn it over to."

Even before her husband died, Mrs. King was always the disciplinarian in the family. She says she never sheltered her children from following their father, even toward possible martyrdom. "It's like the position Dexter is taking now [in support of James Earl Ray]. I've thought about what might happen to him and just said, 'OK, Dexter, you've got to be careful, because this is dangerous stuff you're dealing with.'" The children all credit her with making their lives relatively normal, both before and after Dr. King's death. When kids teased them that



Under the gaze of Gandhi: Raising Dexter, with Yolanda and Marty standing by, 1962; with Ralph Abernathy, 1965; a family dinner, 1964. King allotted each kid his or her own 'sugar spot' to kiss on his face.



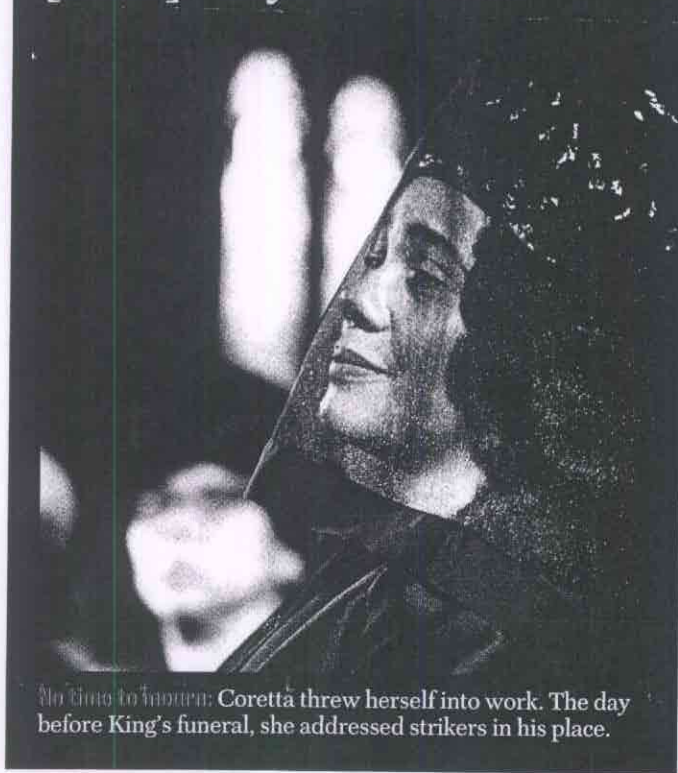
their father was a "jailbird," they took it in stride: "Uncle Andy," "Uncle Ralph" and the rest were in jail as well. Martin III, who in 1964 marched with his father in St. Augustine, Fla., facing hecklers in white hoods, later remembered thinking the ordeal a "family experience ... I didn't know it was for a cause." On the night her husband was killed, Mrs. King allowed one of the adults in the house to sleep in Martin III's room to comfort him, but she quickly muscled the family back to routine. "We went back to school immediately," Yolanda recalls. "I didn't mourn until I was 30."

The children all faced different challenges. Yolanda, born three weeks before the Montgomery bus boycott, always wanted to act, a calling her father considered frivolous and she herself later fretted was "unworthy." She entered the city's first integrated children's drama program, taught by Julia Roberts's parents, and escaped into roles: later, at Smith College, when goaded to defend her father against Seven Sisters Malcolmites, she realized, "I didn't have enough information to defend him, because I hadn't read the books. You just kind of think you know, 'cause you were there."

Martin III, the first son, felt daunted by his older sister's sharp mind and the booming expectations of his grandfather Daddy King. Soft in features and manner, Marty labored to become the man of the house, the enforcer. "They hated me," he says mildly of his siblings. "I hated myself, now that I think of it." Bernice, the youngest, followed her father into the ministry, but also got a law degree in order to have an identity of her own "that won't be overshadowed by Martin Luther King Jr." Always a quiet kid, she remembers at 16 suddenly welling with rage after seeing documentary footage of her father. Angry at God, she rejected the church and contemplated suicide. Now she realizes that "what probably triggered it was that I had a boyfriend, and I just needed a father's advice about relationships: 'I need my dad now!'"

Of his younger son, Dexter, Dr. King once said, "He doesn't have the ... virtue of quietness." Dexter is the "visionary" among Coretta's children, the most driven, the son who "used to ask a million questions," she says. As a kid, he used to take things apart to see how they worked; later, at Morehouse College, as a deejay and sound engineer, he specialized in putting things together. His

## When Mrs. King dated, 'we didn't care for the [men],' says Yolanda



No time to mourn: Coretta threw herself into work. The day before King's funeral, she addressed strikers in his place.

mother had been a classically trained singer before her marriage; he was determined to have the musical career she sacrificed. Friends called him the Count because of the Dracula hours he kept, not all of them spinning music. Phillip Jones remembers how he met Dexter: "I had a girlfriend at Spelman College, and Dexter seemed to be going over there when I wasn't there. We ended up becoming best friends."

**W**HEN DEXTER TOOK OVER the King Center in 1994 (he'd been named president in 1989 but resigned after four months, in frustration with either the board or his mother), his siblings were relieved, says Coretta. "They saw me working all the time, struggling. They all said, 'Not me, not me.'" And Jones, whose Intellectual Properties Management, Inc., represents both the King Center and the family estate, rose in the family with him. Their regime has been nothing short of revolutionary. "Dexter understands the new paradigm," says Jones. "Let me tell you something: the next phase of Dr. King's nonviolent social change is economic empowerment. Dexter's focusing on

that." This is the new incantatory language of MLK Inc.

In Dr. King's travails in the American legal system, the case of *King v. Mister Maestro, Inc.* is not one of the most luminous. But as the family defends itself against charges of un-King-like profiteering, the case has become a primary exhibit. In 1963 Dr. King litigated to prevent 20th Century Records from releasing the "I have a dream" address. Instead, he struck a deal with Berry Gordy at Motown to produce his major speeches. "Dexter and his family are doing nothing [outside] the template that King created for himself," says Jones. "Dr. King, when he was alive, had a record deal, he had a literary agent, he had a publishing deal, he earned royalties." The first book under the Time Warner deal, "A Knock at Midnight," a collection of Dr. King's sermons, is just out. Memoirs by Dexter and Coretta are in the works, as is a King "autobiography," compiled by Stanford historian Clayborne Carson. Dexter and Jones imagine a \$50 million, interactive King Dream Center, brought to you by sponsors like Pepsi and Microsoft. "In this new media paradigm," says Jones, "the only

way to get [King's message] out there is to do a business deal, where people in the publishing community can package it, put millions of dollars in to market it and make money off it. That's how it works now."

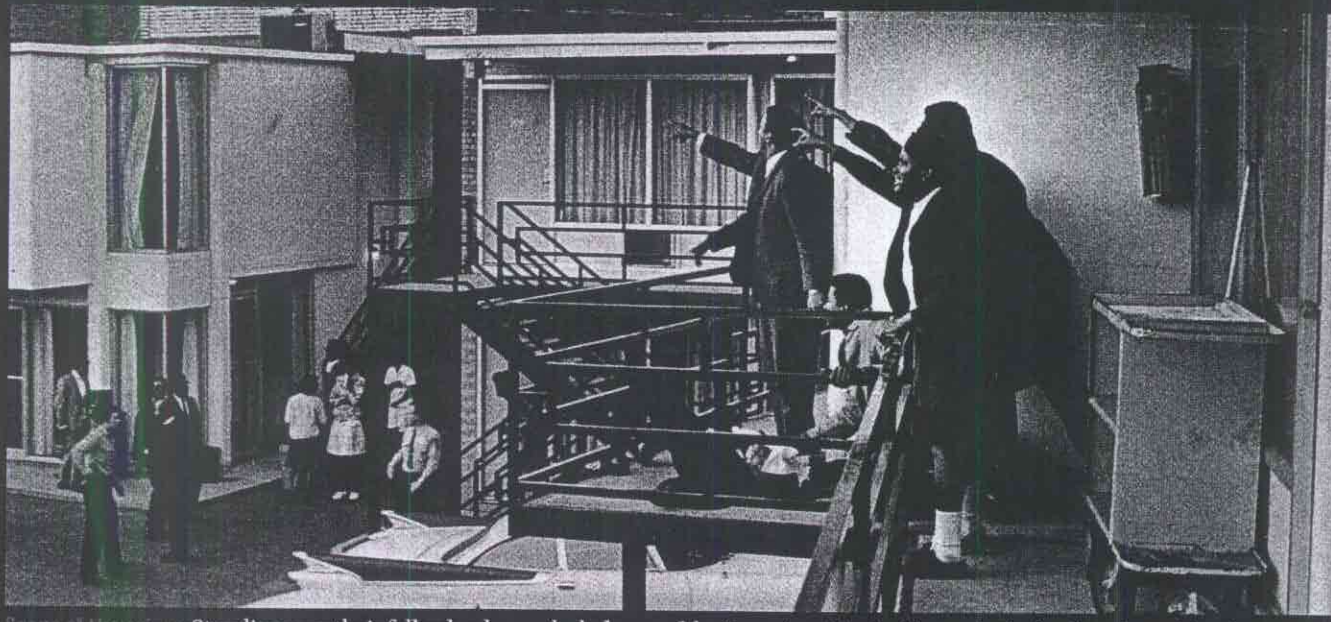
This can seem a pale agenda for the King legacy: too unquestioningly megacorporate, too apolitical. Yet in their own way, the four children all keep alive different pieces of their father. Dexter recalls the young Martin who ruthlessly overhauled the financial fiefdoms at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, challenging the deacons, just as Daddy King had grabbed authority at Ebenezer; Yolanda evokes the theatrical performer; Bernice, the minister walking beside doubt, and Martin III, the pensive King with the overpowering father. As Bernice says, "His blood is in me—that means part of who he is in me, it's in Dexter. When you bring all of us together, you get close to who he is."

Thirty years after his death, they are the embodiment of his legacy, reminders of what he accomplished, as well as the challenges he left. "We're not perfect, we've made our mistakes," says Bernice. "But we're not crazy, we're not locked up, we're not doped out." They are the beneficiaries of the dream. And they are also its test.

With MARK HOSENBALL



The conspiracy theories are tantalizing—but wrong. In an exclusive excerpt from the largest private re-examination of the case in 30 years, the real story of James Earl Ray. BY GERALD POSNER



Scene of the crime: Standing over their fallen leader on the balcony of the Lorraine, King's aides point in the direction of the shot

JOSEPH LOUW—LIFE MAGAZINE © TIME INC.

# THE TRUTH ABOUT MEMPHIS

**O**NE YEAR AGO THIS WEEK, IN A Tennessee state prison, Dexter King, the youngest son of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., met with his father's confessed assassin, James Earl Ray, and announced that he believed Ray was innocent. Dexter then led a King family media blitz arguing that Ray, whose 1969 guilty plea resulted in a 99-year sentence, be given a new trial.

What prompted the King family's decision to back the convicted assassin's bid for freedom? Ray's latest lawyer, William Pepper, had persuaded them that recent "breakthroughs" proved the assassination was part of a massive government-led conspira-

cy and that Ray—whose fingerprints were on the murder weapon—was a mere patsy.

Three primary issues moved the Kings. First Pepper claimed he had located the mysterious Raoul, Ray's long-standing alibi. Second was Pepper's report that he had found witnesses who confirmed the 1993 TV "confession" by Loyd Jowers, a former Memphis restaurant owner who said he had been paid to kill King. And third was Pepper's tale that a team of green beret snipers from a covert unit called Alpha 184 had been tracking King and actually had him in their sights when someone else killed him. My research into the conspiracy nether world disproves each of these three contentions—and shows that James Earl Ray, a canny career criminal with racist sympathies and a hunger for cash, is the assassin.

**Searching for Raoul:** At the time of the assassination, Ray was a fugitive; he had es-

caped nearly a year earlier while serving a 20-year sentence for armed robbery (his fourth conviction). After his arrest for the King murder, Ray spun an intricate tale in which he claimed that he had met a Latin he knew only by the name Raoul. It was Raoul, Ray said, who directed him to purchase the .30-06 Remington rifle found at the murder scene. According to Ray, Raoul

took the gun the night before the assassination and ordered Ray to rent a room at the Memphis flophouse. Raoul, or someone with Raoul's assistance, then shot King from there—and the real killer left the rifle with Ray's prints at the scene.

Ray's lawyer assured the Kings that new investigators had finally located the real Raoul, and that he was living in New York State. Their primary source was 53-year-old Glenda Grabow of Booneville, Tenn. She had come forward to say she had known a Raoul as a youngster, and that he had later bragged to her that he had killed King. Most important, Ray himself confirmed—from a 1960s-era photo—that the New York Raoul was the man he had known.

Grabow actually turns out to have spun a wild and inherently contradictory story. I obtained a video of a two-hour interview the Ray team conducted with Grabow.

From "Killing the Dream: James Earl Ray and the Assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr." Copyright © 1998 by Gerald L. Posner. Published by Random House, Inc.



Among many startling assertions, Grabow says that Raoul also killed JFK: "He was upstairs with Oswald. He was shooting the gun, not Oswald." Her Raoul was also a friend of Jack Ruby, the Dallas nightclub owner who later shot Oswald. But on Nov. 22, 1963, there was no one on the sixth floor of the Texas School Book Depository except Oswald, and Jack Ruby was never in Houston, the city where Grabow claimed he knew Raoul. But the Ray investigators relied on her lead and searched telephone directories for someone with the first name Raoul, and the surname of someone she claimed was a Raoul relative in Houston. In a stunning coincidence—something anathema to conspiracy buffs—they found two matches. The one in New York fit the age of the Raoul described by Grabow. (The unlikelihood of the killer of Kennedy and King listing his name in the phone book did not give the Ray team pause.)

That happenstance changed the life of a retired autoworker who was living quietly in a New York suburb with his wife and one of his children. (Because of fears for his own safety, I have not published his last name.) The Ray team spent two years harassing him with video and camera surveillance and repeated telephone calls to his home. They even named him in a lawsuit that was eventually dismissed. I have had the first on the record interview with the New York Raoul, and have examined his work and immigration records. After immigrating to the United States from Portugal in 1961, he worked for the same auto company for nearly 30 years. He was at work at the time of both the Kennedy and King assassinations. He has never been to Texas or Tennessee. He has never met Glenda Grabow. He has no connection to the case—a fact that Memphis prosecutors confirmed in a report released last week. Also last week, Ray's lawyer produced an ex-FBI agent who claimed to have documents proving Raoul's existence. Within 24 hours, the FBI had dismissed the allegation as "a total fabrication."

**The TV Confession:** What about restaurant-owner Loyd Jowers and his confession? Confidential files maintained by the Memphis prosecutor's office indicate that Jowers's likely motivation was to sell his story for \$300,000. Memphis prosecutors interviewed the two sisters whom Pepper claimed had worked in Jowers's restaurant and had corroborated his story. Both recanted. Moreover, in a telephone conversation between the sisters, taped by authorities, the main witness for Jowers admitted that the entire story was false. When asked why she had lied to support his tale, she did not hesitate: "Because he [Jowers] can, they can make it into a movie, he'll get paid ... That's why Loyd doing this here. He'll get paid \$300,000 if he had somebody back this statement up ... I was trying to get some

'I'm going to kill that ... King,' Ray told his brothers. 'That's something that's been on my mind.'

End of the road: Ray, who confessed to the killing, was a canny criminal



money for my, to pay my income tax ..."

**The Military Mystery:** A careful examination reveals the theory that a covert team of snipers—a squad called Alpha 184—tracked King is spurious. Among Pepper's critical errors: there was no Alpha 184 unit in existence in 1968. Pepper named two sources for his military scenario: two soldiers identified only as Warren and Murphy. But nobody fit the service records and career details set forth for Warren and Murphy, who were supposedly former special forces soldiers on the team—which suggests they either do not exist or are con men who sold Pepper a phony story. A copy of military orders Pepper used to prove the existence of the special unit and the operation against King are a forgery. And a soldier that Pepper thought was killed as part of the government cover-up is alive—and has sued Pepper for libel since learning of the attorney's allegations. While military intelligence did, at the request of the Johnson administration, monitor King, there was no covert group of snipers that followed him from city to city.

No Raoul, no new paper trail, no legitimate confession from Loyd Jowers, no secret military sniper team. If the new information developed by the Ray defense team is bogus, then who killed King, and why? Based on my review of thousands of government and private documents, as well as

many interviews, I have concluded that the answers lie with James Earl Ray.

Born into a dirt-poor family with a century-long history of run-ins with the law, James Earl Ray grew up in tough river towns in Illinois and Missouri. A breeding ground for the KKK, the area was dubbed "Little Dixie." Eventually all eight Ray children were removed from Ray's alcoholic mother and placed in foster care. His father abandoned the family. But the terrible upbringing brought Ray close to his brothers John and Jerry. They trusted and relied on one another.

When he was 17, Ray joined the Army. He became infatuated with Adolf Hitler through the influence of a close German friend, and asked to be stationed in Germany. He got kicked out of the Army, and in the following years was convicted of increasingly serious crimes.

Early in his prison career, he refused to accept a transfer to the prison's integrated honor farm—Ray, who had never lived or worked with blacks, was not about to start. In 1960, Ray, who was then in the Missouri State Penitentiary after a 23-month sojourn in the outside world, began boasting that there was money to be made in killing black leaders like

H. Rap Brown, Stokely Carmichael, and King. This talk could easily have brought Ray to the attention of those in the prison who wanted King dead.

During the 1960s, there were dozens of threats against King and standing bounties on his life. Several had filtered into the Missouri State Penitentiary, and one that might have reached Ray came from John Sutherland, a lawyer and segregationist in St. Louis, who offered \$50,000 to anyone who killed King. Some who learned of Sutherland's offer had friends and associates in the same sections of the prison where Ray was incarcerated. There is a distinct possibility that Ray learned of this \$50,000 bounty by late 1966, or early 1967. Ray's brothers, who deny any involvement in the King assassination, could also have heard about the bounty and passed the news to James. On April 23, 1967—one day after a visit from his brother John—Ray broke out of prison.

**N**OW ON THE LAM, RAY LANDED a dishwasher's job in a Chicago suburb, only 10 miles away from where his brother Jerry worked. By mid-May he had called Jerry, and they began meeting. Soon, they reached John, and the three brothers held a summit in Chicago's crumbling Atlantic Hotel sometime near the end of May. The



BURSTING  
with nutrition  
and taste.



With 100% of your daily requirements of ten essential vitamins and minerals, Multi-Grain Cheerios Plus is the smart way to start your day. And with four whole grains and a touch of brown sugar, those delicious toasted O's taste better than ever.

**Multi-Grain  
Cheerios Plus:  
Delicious plus  
Nutritious  
all in one.**

©1998 General Mills Inc.

## SOCIETY

brothers discussed ways to earn money, including by kidnapping the governor of Illinois, or even a local star radio host. They also toyed with going into the porn business. Then James shocked his brothers. "I'm going to kill that n— King," he calmly said. "That's something that's been on my mind. That's something I've been working on."

**J**AMES LEFT HIS DISHWASHING job in late June. The day after a July bank robbery in Alton, Ill., for which the Ray brothers were never charged—despite circumstantial evidence that they may have pulled the heist—James fled to Canada. When he returned to the States in mid-August, the first person he visited was his brother Jerry.

By early October, Ray set out for Mexico. There, for the next five weeks, he led an indolent life, mainly in the then backwater town of Puerto Vallarta. His only problem in Mexico was a fracas that he got into one night with some black sailors whom he thought had made a pass at the prostitute whom he was with. But by mid-November, he returned to the United States, this time picking Los Angeles as home.

His only break from Los Angeles was a two-day trip to New Orleans in mid-December 1967. A cocktail waitress he had met asked him to pick up her two children there. Ray agreed, so long as the waitress, her brother, and one of her friends all signed petitions for George Wallace, who was then trying to get on the California ballot as a third party candidate. Once that was done, Ray drove to New Orleans. He told several acquaintances that he was going to Louisiana to see a brother. Though he later claimed he met the fictitious Raoul in New Orleans, it now seems likely that if he met anyone, it was one of his brothers. When he returned to L.A., he had plastic surgery to correct a too prominent nose, something a seasoned criminal like Ray would want to eliminate before becoming the target of a manhunt.

On March 17, Ray left for Atlanta. He had been nomadic during his first 10 months on the run; now he turned more deliberate, as though he had finally made the decision to go after King and whatever money it might bring. On the way to Atlanta, Ray stopped in Selma, Ala., on March 22. King was supposed to stop there that day, but never got closer than 30 miles away. Ray moved on to Atlanta, King's hometown. A map found in the room he rented there had circles drawn near King's former home, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference headquarters, Ebenezer Baptist Church and the Capitol Homes Housing Project, where Ray abandoned his Mustang after the assassination. Ray also visited several gun stores in the Birming-

ham area. There he bought a Remington .30-06 pump-action rifle with a premier 2x7 power Redfield scope. He purchased the gun in the name Lowmeyer. A decade earlier, John Ray had served with an inmate with that name.

On April 1 there were press reports that King intended to visit Memphis later that week. On April 3 Ray arrived in Memphis. Radio and TV announced that King, who had also arrived in Memphis that day, was staying at the Lorraine. One bulletin mentioned King's room number. On Thursday, April 4, Ray reconnoitered the Lorraine. He picked his perch, a rundown rooming house, the rear of which overlooked King's room. Ray had rejected the first room he was offered—it didn't have a view of the Lorraine. Shortly before 6 p.m., King stepped outside. Ray, who had been monitoring King's door from the flophouse, moved with his rifle to a communal bathroom at the very rear of the rooming house. There, standing in a cast iron tub, he had an unobstructed view of the Lorraine's second floor. At one minute past six, James Earl Ray fired the single shot that ended King's life.

Ray would probably have gotten away with the crime if he had not panicked. But when he left the rooming house, he saw two police cars parked in a nearby fire station. Ray then threw a bundle containing the rifle against a store entrance. Its discovery within minutes was critical in identifying Ray as the shooter. Yet Ray, who was accustomed to international travel, still almost got away with the crime. He eluded authorities for 65 days, fleeing first to Canada.

Ray hoped to reach segregationist Rhodesia—but he never made it. He visited Portugal but did not have the time or money to reach white Africa. Frustrated by the language problem in Portugal, he returned to England. There, too, he ran low on funds, finally robbing a bank in early June. On June 8, as he was about to board a plane for Brussels, he was arrested at Heathrow airport.

What motivated Ray? A lust for quick cash (the \$50,000) and his dismissive view of blacks (the refusal to go to the integrated honor farm, his bar fights in Mexico) are most likely. If there was ultimately a conspiracy behind King's death, a crude family plot seems more likely than an elaborate conspiracy involving the Mafia or the government. That Ray has lived 30 years after the murder is persuasive evidence that professionals were not involved. If they had been, they would have disposed of Ray long ago—as long as he was alive, he could have turned on them. If, however, the conspirators included family members, he would have an incentive to stay silent—or to invent phantoms like "Raoul." The truth is often painful—and in this case, a four-time loser with a gun changed history. ■