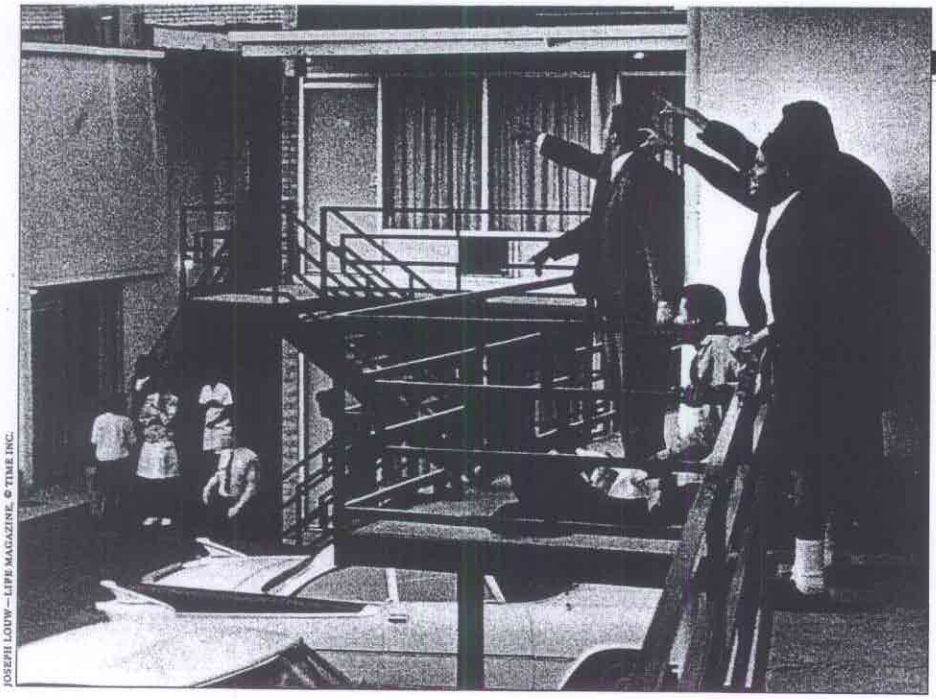


JOSEPH LOUW—LIFE MAGAZINE, © TIME INC.

Echoes of Memphis: *The Lorraine in '68 (left), Dexter meets Ray in '97 (below)*

RACE

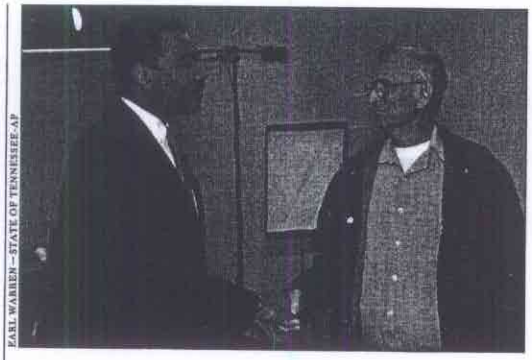
Death of an Assassin

James Earl Ray, Martin Luther King Jr.'s confessed killer, finally dies—but the conspiracy theories will live on

By Evan Thomas

James Earl Ray, small-time criminal and big-time hater, won't be much missed. But his death last week, of liver disease at the age of 70, is a boon for conspiracy theorists. Sentenced to 99 years in prison after pleading guilty to killing Martin Luther King Jr. in 1968, Ray recanted and claimed that he was a patsy in a larger plot. Ray's revised story was embraced by King's family and many of the preacher's lieutenants—figures eager to prove that King had been martyred by the federal government. Suspected culprits: the military and the FBI. In 1997 King's son Dexter shook hands with Ray and professed the King family's belief in Ray's innocence.

The assassination of the great civil-rights leader by the U.S. government would be a shocking scandal and sounds like a thrilling Oliver Stone movie (in fact, the family has sold Stone the rights to make a film about King). But it almost surely did not happen. If Ray conspired with others, it is more likely the plotters were relatives or obscure racists than top federal officials. To the King family this explanation falls short. In their view, the civil-rights leader was murdered because he had grown radical. By 1968 King no longer simply wanted to abolish Jim Crow; he was trying to end the war in Vietnam and force major economic reforms. The "power structure" allegedly sensed this and, fearing revolution, had King killed. But Ray's true story says more about life at the bottom of society in the civil-rights era than it does about high crimes in Washington.



EARL WARREN—STATE OF TENNESSEE-AP

Ray was a reasonably clever sociopath. He had grown up in poor river towns in Missouri and Illinois; the region was called "Little Dixie" because of its ties to the Ku Klux Klan. As a young man he was fascinated by Hitler, and in prison refused a transfer to more comfortable quarters. The reason? The "honor farm" was integrated. In April 1967 he escaped from the Missouri state pen. According to Gerald Posner's new book "Killing the Dream," Ray may have heard of a $50,000 bounty on King's head while he was in prison. Posner reports that just weeks after the jailbreak, Ray told his brothers, "I'm going to kill that n—— King."

He began stalking the civil-rights champion, following King to Memphis in April 1968. Ray checked into a boardinghouse looking out on the Lorraine Motel. He rejected the first room he was offered: it didn't have a view of King's lodgings. The second one did.

"Like anybody, I would like to live a long life," King had preached the night before. "But I'm not concerned about that now. I'm not fearing any man. I have been to the mountaintop." On April 4, as he lingered on the Lorraine's balcony, a bullet smashed through his cheek. Ray's fingerprints were on a .30-06 rifle found outside the boardinghouse. He tried to escape to Rhodesia, at the time a white sanctuary, but the law caught up with him in London. To save Ray from the death penalty, his well-known criminal lawyer, Percy Foreman, recommended a guilty plea—a deal the King family could have vetoed. Three days after Ray had been sentenced, he said he had been framed—he was just a "legman," he insisted, recruited by a mysterious drug dealer named Raoul. (No one fitting Ray's description of Raoul has ever been found.)

King loyalists quickly suspected the FBI. J. Edgar Hoover, to be sure, hated King, whom he wiretapped and harassed for years. But in 1978 a painstaking probe by a congressional committee concluded there was no evidence of any federal involvement in King's death. If there was a con-

spiracy, it was more likely a small-time plot. Ray could have learned about a bounty for King while he was in prison. There is another possibility: in his book, Posner suggests that Ray's brothers may have played some role (they have adamantly denied it, and have never been charged). The Grapevine Tavern, a St. Louis saloon run by one of Ray's brothers, was a center of pro-George Wallace sentiment, and John Sutherland, the man who offered a price for King's life, was a key Wallace supporter in the state. "The Grapevine," writes Posner, "was a place where a bounty on King could be comfortably discussed."

Ray was a canny convict. In Tennessee prisons after his plea, he broke out three times. Ray died demanding a trial; the Kings supported his bid and have lobbied the president to reinvestigate the murder. But most witnesses are dead, and the ones who have come forward are flawed (a woman championed by the Ray team says "Raoul" also killed JFK). Still, the Kings' attraction to the larger theories about the fallen leader's death is not hard to fathom. A federal conspiracy seems more commensurate with the genuine greatness of the target than the sad truth that a hater lucked into the shot of a lifetime. ■

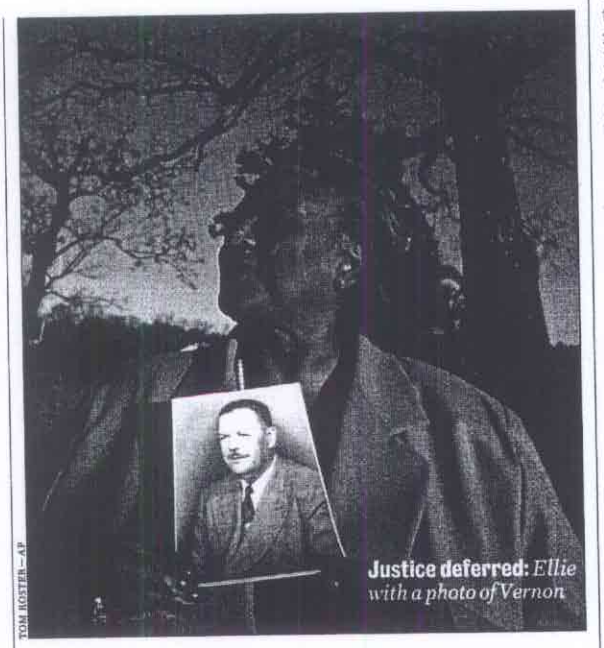
Mississippi Reckoning

Prosecutors ponder reopening another '60s murder

By Vern E. Smith

By 1966, Mississippi NAACP leader Vernon Dahmer and his wife, Ellie, were used to sleeping in shifts. After their children turned in, one parent would sit quietly and listen for the Ku Klux Klan—shotgun in hand, curtains drawn tightly to make it harder for nightriders to see inside. But both were asleep the night of Jan. 10, perhaps tired after a long day at the country store where Vernon urged fellow blacks to pay their $2 poll tax and register to vote. The family woke to the sound of gas jugs and a torch being hurled through the windows. As flames consumed the Hattiesburg farmhouse, Vernon handed daughter Bettie, 10, out to Ellie. The next day Dahmer died of smoke inhalation. His own voter card wouldn't arrive in the mail until after his funeral.

More than 30 years later, the Dahmers are still waiting for the nightmare to be over. Four whites charged in connection with Dahmer's death were the first Klansmen ever convicted for crimes against a black man in Mississippi, but none was jailed for more than a few years. Billy Roy Pitts, who dropped his gun at the crime scene and later turned state's evidence, served just three years on his federal sentence—and no one ever went looking when he didn't show up for his longer state term. Worst of all, Sam Bowers, Imperial Wizard of the White Knights of the KKK and the man many believe ordered the attack, was tried four times without success.



TOM HOSTER—AP

Justice deferred: *Ellie with a photo of Vernon*

Sam Bowers is now a reclusive septuagenarian living in nearby Laurel, Miss.—a Baptist Sunday-school teacher who owns a pinball-machine company called Sambo Amusements. But according to the FBI, Bowers's Klan group is responsible for the killing of 10 civil-rights activists, including Dahmer, and bombings or beatings of 300 others. Bowers was convicted only once, for federal civil-rights violations in the 1964 "Mississippi Burning" case of three workers murdered in Neshoba County. But Bowers's four trials for murder, arson and violation of civil rights in the Dahmer case all ended in hung juries. Bowers's lawyer, Lawrence Arrington, maintains that Bowers will never go to jail because he wasn't in Hattiesburg on Jan. 10, 1966. "They can't put him any closer than 30 miles away," he says. (Bowers pleaded not guilty in each of his trials.)

But Billy Roy Pitts has testified under oath that Bowers ordered Dahmer's execution. After the Jackson Clarion-Ledger ran a story on Pitts in February, he turned himself in—and said he'd testify again. New evidence also suggests there may be grounds for reopening the case on the question of whether the Klan tampered with the juries back in the '60s. After the Dahmers appeared on local television in 1994, Vernon Jr. got a call from a man with Klan ties who said, "I've been thinking about it over the years, how wrong it was, and I just decided to do something about it." By 1997, the caller and several others had agreed to cooperate with the D.A.'s office.

Prosecutors say that meetings last summer between the new informants, Bowers and his friend Roy Wilson confirmed some of their suspicions: Wilson said Bowers was afraid he might finally be convicted "because he didn't have the contacts he once had, that a lot of them had died." Soon after, decades-old FBI notes pointing to Klan jury tampering surfaced. Another new witness came forward, saying he was there at a meeting when Bowers discussed the plan to kill Dahmer. Investigators have subpoenaed files from the state's anti-integration Sovereignty Commission on the men known to have been at that meeting or at Dahmer's farm the night of the murder. And a judge has ruled that any incriminating statements Bowers might have given to state historians in a confidential 1983 interview can be used as evidence at a future trial. All this has prosecutors estimating that they may soon be able to arrest Bowers. Three decades after the fire, the Dahmers may finally get some answers.

With Sarah Van Boven