





ANTIHERO  ON THE EVE OF THE RELEASE OF OLIVER STONE'S CONTROVERSIAL NEW FILM, JFK, MICHAEL PAKENHAM INTERVIEWS HIM ABOUT DEATH, THE MOVIES, AND ROCK'N'ROLL. 

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He was a Roman Catholic and none had ever reached the White House. At 43, he was young enough to scare old men—the powerful. He faced Richard Nixon, smart, tough, older, floating high on the sweet, easy years of Eisenhower.  John Fitzgerald Kennedy was elected by one of the narrowest margins in U.S. political history. Then everything changed.  He stepped

out of business. There's a lot of music out here that deserves an ear, and there are only 24 hours a day. We can't break every band in the country, but we do play a lot more new music than radio does. People at MTV would program a lot hipper if they had their way. We tried it with VH-1 last year for nine months; we went from Julia Fordham into k.d. lang and a lot of hip stuff for the older audience, and ratings collapsed by two-thirds. At MTV, we can't be purely left of center and survive economically. We play a certain amount of mass-appeal hits, but we do have a commitment to the alternative. We may not be as extreme as a college radio station, but I don't think there's a commercial radio station in the U.S. that's as eclectic as MTV, where you can see Public Enemy, Paul Simon, Slaughter, the Cure, Sonic Youth, and Chris Isaak all on one station. We're not in the business of being a cult thing. We're a business and want to appeal to a lot of people.

SPIN: I wonder what you think about a lot of the stuff that gets on your channel.

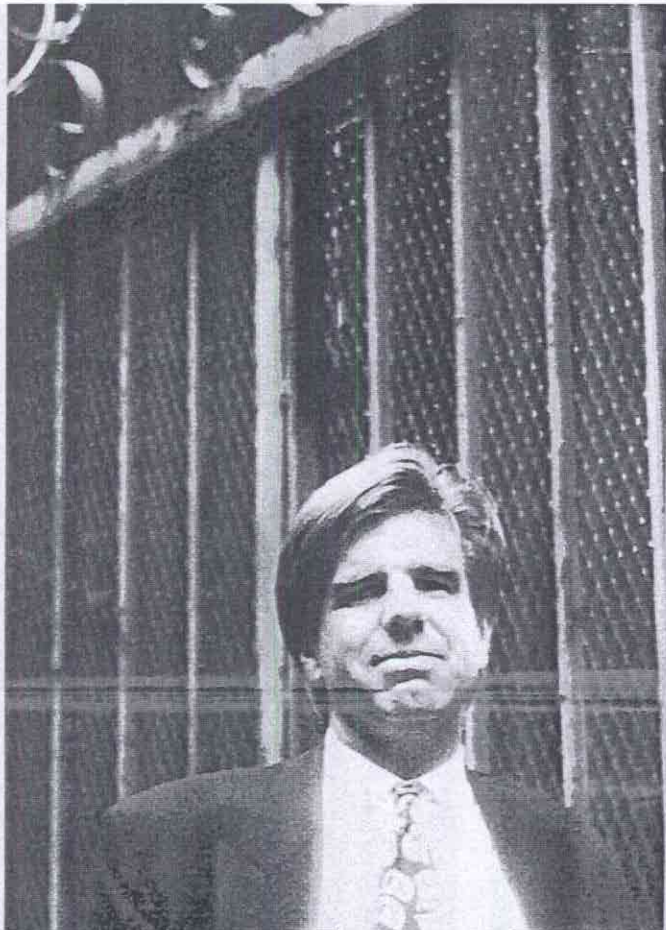
Freston: Oh, I'm way beyond that—you know, my personal taste. Any good programmer anywhere—you've got to use your personal taste to some extent, but if you're a good programmer, you've got a gut that says, Hey, this isn't my personal taste but, man, I know this is a hit.

SPIN: Still, you have a lot to answer for: Milli Vanilli, M.C. Hammer, Vanilla Ice.

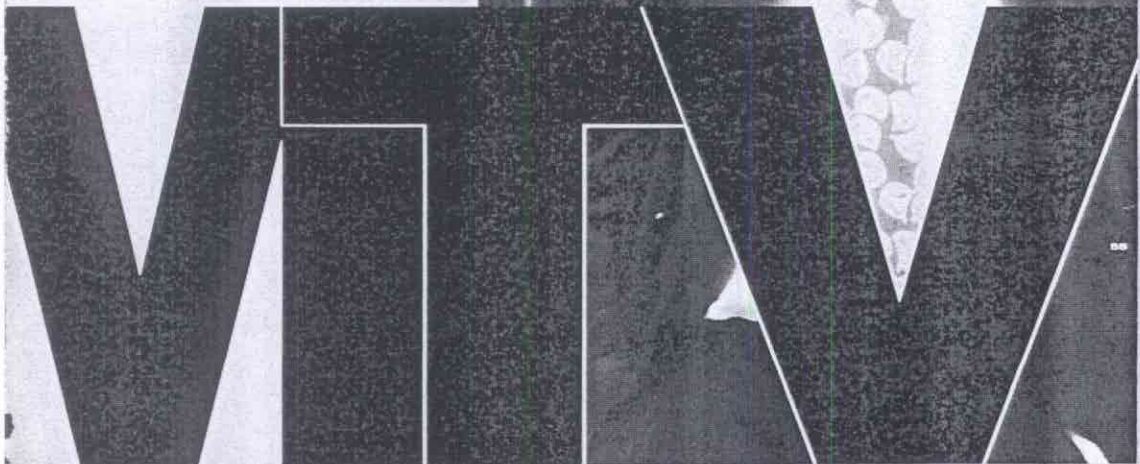
Freston: As far as Milli Vanilli is concerned—look, Phil Spector used to record songs with people who ultimately didn't go on tour and sing them. Milli Vanilli were sort of a novelty act, sort of a cartoon act. I love when they said they were going to be bigger than Bob Dylan. I love their choice—they'd be more important than Bob Dylan. As for M.C. Hammer and Vanilla Ice, we tried for the longest time not to play Vanilla Ice, and when we did, the phones just lit up like crazy. M.C. Hammer—I think one out of every three households in the country bought that record. How can we afford to not play something that popular?

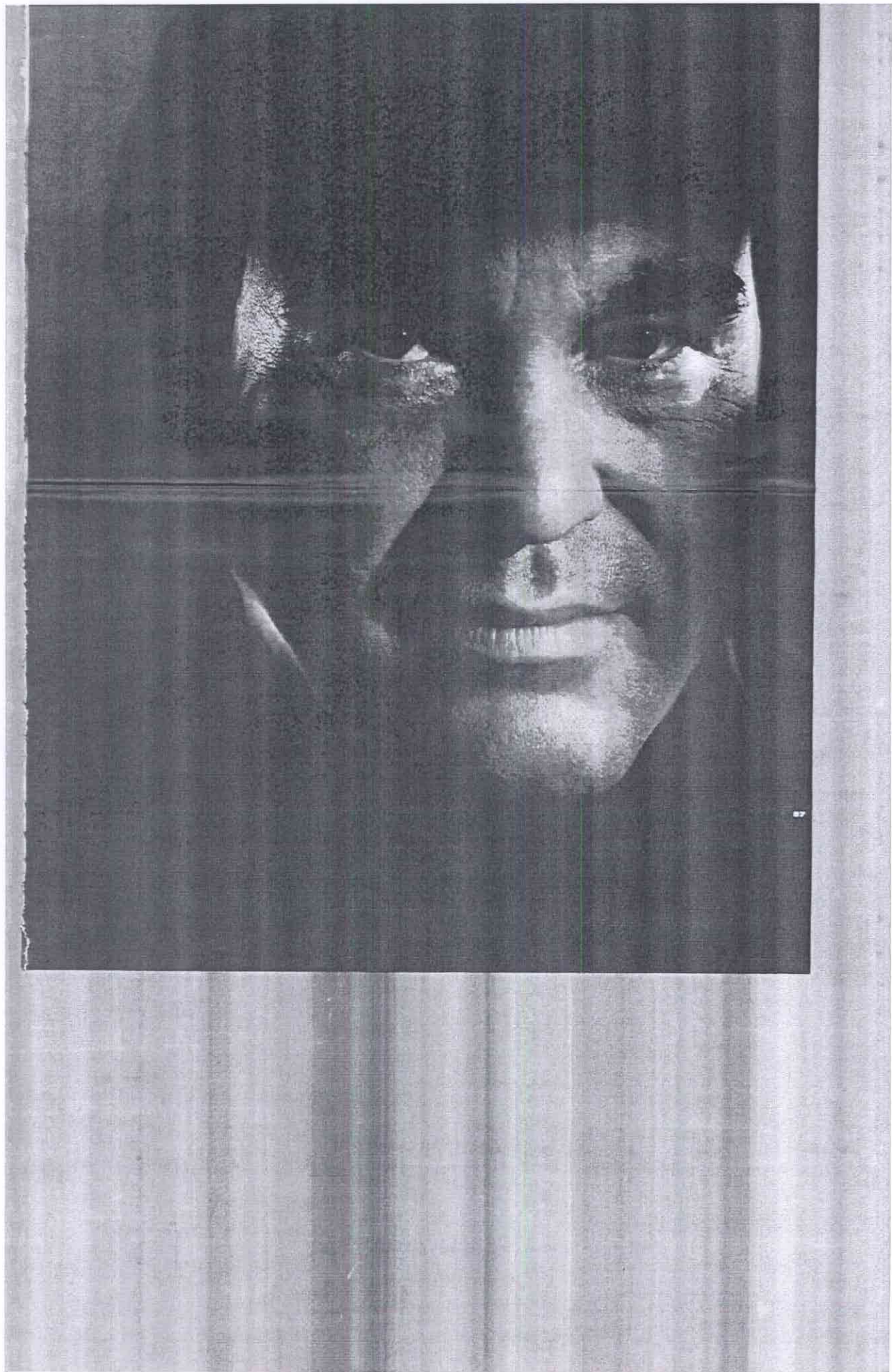
SPIN: How about your banning of Madonna's "Justify My Love" video?

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into the presidency the way a sharp breeze can freshen a mid-August day in Georgia. America's air seemed cleaner, clearer. He was funny. He bubbled with energy and decency. There was a joy in him that got footsore men and women walking just about two-and-a-half inches above the pavement. A hard-rough politician, he insisted that public service is the noblest of all lives. He got angry with people who abandoned hope. Every one of you, he taunted America and peoples beyond, every one of you can make this world a finer, fairer, more beautiful place—and have a delicious time doing it. And they came to believe him, with a pent-up passion. This was a springtime for civilization.

Then, at 30 minutes after high noon on November 22, 1963, at a spot called Dealey Plaza, John Kennedy was shot dead while he made love to a crowd from an open car.

He was mourned as very few have been. All over earth, in packed public squares and into very lonely pillows, tears flowed and would not stop. More streets, schools, and sons were named for him than probably any body ever save the Christian holy family.

To solve John Kennedy's murder, President Lyndon Johnson appointed a commission of the nation's most senior public figures, under the chairmanship of Chief Justice Earl Warren, the man who, more than any other, had made modern American law liberal.

After ten months of taking and studying evidence, the commission concluded that the sole, lone assassin was Lee Harvey Oswald, a complicated, pathetic character who, while in custody and still denying he killed Kennedy, had been shot dead, two days after the assassination, in full public view, by a sleazy nightclub operator named Jack Ruby, who himself died soon after in prison. For a wounded, bereft nation, the Oswald solution was comfortable. Life went on. The Johnson presidency soared, until, long later, it slipped and ultimately drowned in the swamps of Vietnam.

Gradually, the doubts about Kennedy's death grew. The earliest were dismissed as the whinnings of political opportunists or the yowlings of paranoids. But slowly, the misgivings became more elaborate, better substantiated. Hundreds of serious people, a major committee investigation by the U.S. Congress, prosecutors, scholars, "buffs"—came to reject the Warren Commission's conclusion. A controversial, volatile district attorney in New Orleans, Jim Garrison, put together a prosecution on a theory of conspiracy involving dozens of people, with deep roots in government and power. There was one trial, of a man named Clay Shaw, who was swiftly acquitted.

That is the context of the release of *JFK*, a film written and directed by Oliver Stone. At press

time, the movie was already a bitter controversy, although nobody but Stone and a handful of aides knew what was in it. Previously, Stone won an Academy Award for writing the screenplay for *Midnight Express* and two more Oscars for directing *Platoon* and *Dorn on the Fourth of July*.

SPIN Executive Editor Michael Pakenham, who covered Kennedy as a Washington correspondent, went to Santa Monica, California, to talk with Stone. They met in a small, undecorated conference room amid a sprawl of unmarked offices that were the editing facilities for *JFK*.



Kevin Costner as conspiracy theorist Jim Garrison, and Sissy Spacek, playing his wife.

SPIN: Where were you when Kennedy was shot?

Oliver Stone: I was in Pottstown, Pennsylvania, at the Hill School. I was a senior, and to me that whole day was like the movie *Fall Safe*. We'll always remember the hum-drum. They dropped the bomb and then they cut to all these shots of New York City and all the people just sort of walking around feeding pigeons. Just doing the

normal mundane things. And then the world stops. I was sitting in a chair, reading a book between classes. A kid comes in. It's somewhat like in the movie when [Kevin] Costner hears it. The kid comes in and he's in the doorway and he says, "The President's been shot. Dallas. Five, ten minutes ago." "Why? What happened? Is he dead?" "No. He's not dead. He was hit in the head but it's serious, you know." It was something like that. We were all shocked. And then when I was in Texas I heard the opposite stories down South. That kids in schools, in classrooms—this was told to me—why, one woman said she was the only one in the classroom that was disgusted and everybody else in her class in Texas cheered when he died.

SPIN: You're still editing *JFK*. What will it contain?

Stone: We're coming out on December 20. It will be a long film. It's the Garrison story. It's the Washington, D.C., military-industrial-complex story. It's got the beginnings of the Vietnam War. It's going to be entwined with all these stories paralleling each other.

SPIN: The majority of SPIN's readers weren't born when Kennedy was killed. Why should a history movie about his death be more important

than, say, his brother's assassination, or Malcolm X's—or President McKinley's, for that matter?

Stone: Well, I think Jack Kennedy was the first in a line of progressive leaders that were killed in the 1960s. Martin Luther King, Jr., and Robert Kennedy followed and there is a pattern there. These people were not killed by lone nuts. One has to trace the underlying pattern. And if one does, one begins to understand the '60s was the seminal decade for the '90s, what's going on now. If our leaders hadn't been killed we would be in a different world now. For example, I don't believe we would have been in Vietnam. Jack Kennedy would never have sent combat troops to Nam. And Vietnam led to Nixon. It led to repression and fear. It led to a breakdown of law and order in this country. It led to economic recession, poverty. It led to the eruptions of the '70s. It led to the fear that gave us Reagan in the '80s. It all ties back from the '90s to the '60s. You have to realize that Dan Quayle, who is my age, is now coming into power. And he will be a leader. He may very well be our next President. And his thinking was shaped in the '60s. So the '60s is not McKinley's era. It is not a pure history. It is very real. It is the basis for our thinking in the '90s.

SPIN: What's a young person with considerable ignorance to the Kennedy story going to take from the film *JFK*?

Stone: A search for the truth. The spirit of search for the truth. We can't bring Kennedy back. I'm not going to say that Kennedy was totally the Camelot warrior pictured. He was a tough bastard in politics, and he fought dirty. He had a side life, a sordid side life. Not sordid, but romantic, romantic affairs and liaisons. He had Mafia connections through his father. And he was a back-door fighter. He was targeting voting districts for dollars, for defense dollars, just like any other President does. He was accused of stealing the election in West Virginia and in Illinois. You know, you can't idealize him and simplify him. You've got to look through the surfaces of the official myth that he was killed by one lone nut in Dallas as given to us by the Warren Commission. What we've learned, through my era, is that we can't trust the government. We did trust the government in the 1950s. When Eisenhower spoke to us, we trusted him. We trusted his speeches and

what he had to say. Right up until 1963, I think, that was the day that we started to switch off.

SPIN: So what is an engaged young American who's almost totally ignorant of the facts going to take from this film?

Stone: To search for the truth. To think for himself. And not to trust the official body of knowledge that's passed on in school. Right now in the primary texts in school, they mention the Kennedy assassination in two paragraphs, with Earl Warren, Jack Kennedy, Jackie, Lee Oswald, and Lyndon Johnson. That's



Garrison believes that the assassination of JFK was a governmental coup.

all they get. It's easy to believe it was just a tragic accident like a man being hit in a car accident or a lightning bolt. This is not true. Politics is power. There was a coup d'état. This happened in this country. And they have to know why. They have to understand what the American government really is. What the political process really is. What the establishment really is. I hope this movie does that, I hope it explains some of it. It can't explain all of it, but we can start.

SPIN: Your films often seem to be about you. How is *JFK* about you, and what did President Kennedy mean to you as a personal experience?

Stone: To me, he was the godfather of my generation. He was the most stirring figure. We were coming of age. We were all between fourteen and twenty, I guess, or twelve and twenty. We were the baby boom generation and he was of us, he was young. After ten years of Eisenhower and Truman—the old men. Everybody in government seemed to be old—mustaches and white hair. So Jack Kennedy with his beautiful wife was the New Man. A symbol of freedom. He didn't wear a hat, his hair was blowing in the wind. He had beautiful hair. Great smile. Great Irish delivery. Great rhetoric. Great speaker.

SPIN: There was, after the assassination, a sense of an apocalyptic fall from grace. If nothing else, a lot of evil followed—the other assassinations and then Vietnam and then Watergate. Do you see this sequence of essentially evil acts and facts in the U.S. as part of a fabric growing from the assassination?

Stone: The most sinister thing that happened was that on the day of the funeral, [President Lyndon] Johnson met with [U.S. ambassador to South Vietnam Henry Cabot] Lodge. While this was going on, he went inside and had a meeting with the generals and with Lodge, who had just come back from Vietnam, and they talked about the policy. And he left no doubt whatsoever that he was not going to take one man out of there. He said, I'm not going to let Vietnam go the way of China, which was escalating war talk. Kennedy never used that kind of talk. Suddenly we are involved in covert ops, which means basically CIA's back at their old ball game, sending men into North Vietnam and setting the stage for the Gulf of Tonkin incident in 1964—which was this wholly staged evil incident. A lie was told to the American public saying that that ship was attacked by North Vietnamese. It was not. We know that now.

Then that got the vote of Congress. And you know the rest; I mean, that set up the whole war. I think that there was a conspiracy to war in Southeast Asia from 1961 on. And I think that they were very pissed when Kennedy did not let them go into Laos on April 17, 1961. There's a lot of money involved here. Ultimately five thousand helicopters were made for Vietnam, by Bell Helicopter, which was near bankruptcy. There was the whole issue of the F-4 fighter contract, which was a scandal apparently. The moment Johnson came into office, the investigation was stalled.

SPIN: Your suggestion is that these people were interested in developing war essentially for profit. Is it simple or are the motivations really deeper or more complex than that?

Stone: Yeah, it's not a bunch of bankers saying,

"Well, we're going to pick a war here." It doesn't work quite that way, but they're intertwined. Bankers are intertwined with military men and have been for generations.

SPIN: What do you estimate the chances are that the Kennedy assassination puzzle will ever be definitively and incontrovertibly solved? Or do you think it has been?

Stone: Well, I think a lot of the facts were pretty solid back when they first happened, in that nobody ever really put it together into one crossword puzzle. We had facts from the left and from the right. But I've never seen it all come together, really, in one format. I've tried in the movie to put together as many of the theories and facts that I could. I don't know it will be solved as to who and how. I think we can ask why and I think we can come up with some pretty good answers. Kennedy was really moving to end the cold war and sign a nuclear treaty with the Soviets; he would not have gone to war in Southeast Asia. He was starting a backdoor negotiation with Castro. I just basically go to see if I can figure out why [Kennedy was assassinated]. I think that's as far as we're going to get at this stage. Unless, unless, certain people come forth and talk that are still alive, if they're alive.

Everybody in government seemed to be old—mustaches and white hair. So Jack Kennedy with his beautiful wife was the New Man. A symbol of freedom. He didn't wear a hat, his hair was blowing in the wind.

SPIN: They dug up Zachary Taylor this year, to settle forever a chemical hypothesis about the cause of his death—in 1850. He was not one of our major Presidents. Why is there still so much conflict over the evidence in finding out how and why John Kennedy died?

Stone: Because if the government killed him, you'd want to know why. You'd want to know it's your own government, wouldn't you? I mean this is a major thing. It's not just like a bunch of



"You have a reformer who is killed by the establishment because he seeks change. And then you have an ordinary citizen, as Jim Garrison was."

gangsters got together, Mafia guys, and killed him, or Castro killed him, or Khrushchev killed him. If in fact it was our government or part of our government or establishment, then it becomes significant.

SPIN: You speak often of film as history and as affecting the understanding of history. If you could have your choice, what effect would this film have on the conventional perceptions of history in a broader sense?

Stone: Well, it would show the first coup d'état in America, that's for sure. I think that in Europe they got this right away. I think the foreign press was much more alert to the possibilities of the change and transference of political power in this country than was the American press.

What's historically important about a coup d'état? It shows the nature of political power. It shows the people of the world the nature of the American government, the nature of the establishment, what it stands for, what it's fighting to protect. Why it would kill a man who's President, why it would feel threatened by a young President, to what degree did he threaten. What would he have taken from them?

SPIN: Isn't there a danger in seeing John Kennedy in romantic retrospect, as a sort of messiah figure in an America that was in need of a messiah? A kind of a secular Jesus?

Stone: I don't see him that way at all. Like I said earlier, I saw him as a savvy political animal. Fighting dirty, unheroic in many aspects. Who's fighting with his brother Robert. His early moves against Castro are not particularly those of a pragmatic man that wants to get rid of an enemy. I mean he's not this Sir Galahad figure at all. I see him as the son of Joe Kennedy, who was a Mafia-oriented thief from the 1920s who wanted to get his son elected. But I do see Kennedy as changing in office and maturing—a bit like Gorbachev—and growing into more of a statesman than when he started and wanting to change things. And I

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Jerry Richardson, the Football Club coach sentenced to death for the murder of Stompie Seckel, consistently refused to shed any of the burden of guilt on Winnie. In Winnie's own trial this year, the judge convicted her largely on the basis of his own belief that the Football Club boys would not have acted without her blessing—indeed, when the appeal comes up next year her lawyers are planning their strategy precisely around what they have called this “inferential reasoning.”

All in all, perhaps it is in the age-old concept of the matriarch that her power is best understood. A matriarch who can manipulate and control for good or ill. When Winnie herself emerged from court on the evening of May 13, having just been pronounced guilty by Justice Stegmann, she wore a broad smile of triumph, her fist raised in a black power salute in response to the muted crowd of barely 100 supporters. It had to have been the most miserable moment of her life but you would not have guessed it to see her. Nelson Mandela, who had loyally taken the day off from tending to the nation's affairs to be by his wife's side, looked as if his mother had just died.

The contrast—he in white raincoat, she in black suit—said much about this most ill-matched of couples, about the difference in their perceptions of reality. This tragic spectacle, on the coldest day of the year in Johannesburg, offered a reminder of just how tenuous, how fantastic, her grip on reality had become.

IF THE AFRICAN NATIONAL CONGRESS AS A WHOLE has tended to inhabit a mythological revolutionary world, full of the motifs of “armed struggle” and “popular insurrection,” no one has presented a more caricatural spectacle than Winnie Mandela. All fire and bombast, her political image in recent years has rested on appealing to the crudest, most facile instincts of the adolescents who provide the ANC with much of its energy but so little useful thought.

Always in impeccably pressed military fatigues and matching cap and boots, her custom has been to stand up on platforms and talk of war, of overthrowing the Boers—forever bordering on the antiwhite racism that ANC principle abhors. She has ranted and postured while her grave husband—the very personification of the ANC with all its present troubles and its worthy principles of old—attempts to wrestle with the complex nitty gritty of political life in South Africa. Never before could a 73-year-old man who has spent nearly half his life in prison have had to bear so impossibly heavy a political burden.

But he dotes on his wife. She stood by him, as he sees it, during his long imprisonment, and she can do no wrong. He has suspended his reason and, blinded by love, has ignored the howls of protest from within his own movement.

Today he may be paying the price. The ANC's top leadership, radically restructured after a big national congress in July, has sought to diminish Mr. Mandela's power and influence. It would be premature to write him off but, having reigned almost supreme in the ANC since his release from prison in February 1990, the indications are that he will increasingly as-

sume a ceremonial role in the organization. It would be wrong to say that this is happening solely on account of his wife—that he is a Samson brought low by his Delilah—for he has also been perceived within the ANC as being uncomfortably autocratic in his leadership style.

AND WHAT OF WINNIE'S OWN POLITICAL FORTUNES? She remains a player, for the myth does still endure. Or rather it endures longer the farther away one gets from Soweto. Indeed in the Johannesburg area at large, where the Football Club's impact has been felt directly, she has few friends. This was the main reason why at the congress of the ANC Women's League in April 1991 she was roundly defeated in the presidential election. But in July she was elected to the ANC's 87-member National Executive Committee, despite furious lobbying against her by the Johannesburg contingent.

She is not a powerful figure in the NEC, but she does have position. There are those who argue that this is as it should be, that she merits a place in the honor roll of South Africa's black liberation struggle. Those who argue this most strongly are those who knew her best in the '60s and '70s and have not been close to her in recent years, have not met the victims of her Football Club's violence. Nelson Mandela himself falls squarely in this category.

He derived critical strength from her during his 26-year ordeal in prison. As he wrote to her in May 1979, “Had it not been for your visits, wonderful letters, and your love, I would have fallen apart many years ago.” He was also aware of the courage she had to show during many years of continual persecution by the police, her own jailings, and the banishment to Brandfort. It was after she returned to Soweto from Brandfort, in 1985, that the first signs emerged that something inside her had cracked. She delivered a speech in which she urged her supporters to take their marchboxes and their “necklaces”—car tires filled with gasoline, placed around a victim's neck, and set afire—into the white suburbs. A year later she started the Football Club.

Her transgressions since 1986 have caused great harm to the ANC, for which many will never forgive her. But some will. The British writer Anthony Sampson, who knew the Mandelas well in the fifties, wrote this on the day after Winnie's trial ended: “There remains some connection between her present ignominy and her past glory. The world's admiration had put her on an isolated peak, crediting her with impossible virtue; while her sense of immunity made her a law unto herself and broke her own self-control, without the one man who could have restrained her.”

Fine sentiments, and not without some truth. But Mr. Sampson and other apologists of Winnie's might change their tune were they to come face to face with Mr. Sono, Mrs. Msoni, or Mrs. Chibi. Mrs. Chibi believes that the only reason Winnie retains some degree of preeminence and esteem is, simply and exclusively, because she is the wife of the of the ANC leader. “Alone, an ordinary person deprived of his reflected glory,” Mrs. Chibi says, “no one would have any time for her at all.”

Tom Freston

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Freston: It was a tough call. In the end, it's a great marketing ploy to get banned by MTV if you're famous, because you can sell a lot of tapes and it creates controversy. We probably could have played it, but I still think it was a reasonable decision given who we are and where we are. We played it in Europe, we played it in Brazil, but the United States has a big hang-up about sex. There isn't a week that goes by where there isn't some community somewhere in this country actively seeking to remove MTV from its cable service.

SPIN: They can change the channel.

Freston: Right, change the channel, but unfortunately, a lot of these groups are more, like, change the channel lineup. Madonna thought that it was a video that would've been suitable for MTV; but we'd never aired a video with any nudity in it before. People think of cable, they think of Showtime and HBO. Those are cable services that people pay extra for to get into their house. A lot of people didn't get cable to get MTV; MTV goes into a lot of people's homes who bought cable to get the Christian Broadcast Network.

SPIN: Is there any censorship you regret?

Freston: Neil Young's video [“This Note's for You”]. Ultimately, it was a decision I approved, but it wasn't because of censorship. We had this thing about not showing products on videos, because advertisers were trying to sneak things in; they were offering record companies fifty thousand dollars to pay for the video if they'd let them put their product in it. So, it was in keeping with our no-product-placement policy. But it was stupid, because everyone thought, “Oh, they censored Neil Young, the rock'n'roll hero, those uptight MTV corporate pigs,” and we got killed. But we deserved to get killed. Anyway, it won Best Video of the Year the next year.

SPIN: How often do you have to tell people to edit things out of videos, and how do you feel about it?

Freston: We do as little of it as possible, and it's the thing we probably like to do the least. Here's the thing: on radio, if a disc jockey wants to say *shit* when he's very excited, and it's a colloquial term, the station will lose its FCC license. The bottom line is nobody in his audience is going to be offended, but it's a violation of the law. The radio station may feel bad about it, but they adhere to it in order to stay on the air. And the fact of the matter is, in order for us to stay on the air, we have to adhere to local television standards. We can't show nudity or have profanity and stay in business.

SPIN: What would it take for a brand-new act to get its video on MTV if there wasn't a big record company push?

Freston: We always think we don't know what we want until we see it, or hear it. The bottom line is, we can only play eighty-five videos a week in any meaningful way; we change about twenty-five of them a week. So we're perfectly capable of making mistakes from time to time and missing some. But the Black Crowes are a good example: They came in here basically with a good video, they didn't do any kind of incredible promotion with us, and everyone just fell in love with it. We

Tom Freston

put it on, and the audience loved it.

SPIN: Have there been any payola attempts with MTV?

Freston: Basically we've set up a system that's very complicated. Most people in the record business don't know who to talk to to get a video on MTV, and it's been purposely set up that way. You would have to pay off a lot of people simultaneously for a long period of time, and it's never happened.

SPIN: How do you think the record companies have attempted to manipulate MTV?

Freston: Maybe with banks of professional demon phone dialers. Or there's been a lot of suspicious fan mail for certain videos, but maybe that's fan club directed. It's hard to tell. I don't know if we get manipulated, but each record company has a department whose job it is to deal almost solely with MTV, so we get promoted a lot. The good news is that they cancel each other out.

SPIN: Madonna, Paula Abdul, Janet Jackson, M.C. Hammer, et cetera. Do you think you created these stars? Or do you think they're just stars and they help you stay in business?

Freston: I think they're stars that help us stay in business—we need them, we need to make new stars. People are going to turn on MTV mostly 'cause they want to see stars. If people are attached to people, they turn on MTV in the hope that they'll see Paula Abdul or Janet Jackson. They basically aren't turning it on, believe it or not, to see a new band, other than those who are trying to stay on top of things.

SPIN: What's it been like doing this with virtually no competition?

Freston: We never looked at it that way. Our competition is ABC, NBC, HBO—somebody sitting there with this remote control is like, *bang*, one frame they don't like, they're gone.

SPIN: What is MTV's biggest problem?

Freston: Sometimes it lends rock 'n' roll a quality of caricature. There's a danger that with a lot of videos if just one more thing was wrong, you could have a great song with a bad video. With all popular entertainment, as soon as something's successful everybody copies it, and in video there has been a lot of sameness. Video goes through periods of ups and downs in its creativity; with the hairbands and the women, and then it's all black-and-white, and then all color videos. That's not a problem just with MTV, that's a problem of popular culture.

SPIN: Do you worry MTV is visually identified with the '80s and could soon look very dated?

Freston: Only because that's the time period it has existed in to date. In 1960, you would have said that about rock 'n' roll, because it had just started. I think MTV is associated with modern television, which means a lot of channels and remote control; I get control over my TV set and when I want to watch something, whatever I want to watch, I push this button and it's there. In 1995, we're going to have a hundred channels in the home, and they'll be pay-per-view channels on demand, with a TV set we're hardly going to recognize.

SPIN: Is it possible to be a star without MTV? Do you think that video killed the radio star?

Freston: No, that would give MTV too much

credit. People have wonderful careers today without even putting records out. They may not be making fortunes, but Jimmy Buffett, and Steve Miller and the Grateful Dead were among the biggest touring acts of the summer—they packed them in, and they've got a good fan base and in their fans' eyes those people are stars. It depends on how high you want to go. If you want to be a superstar and be on everybody's lips, then being on television and MTV is not a bad thing.

SPIN: How do you feel about the emergence of alternative music as part of the mainstream—as witnessed by the success of the Lollapalooza tour, or Metallica?

Freston: This is a time of major, fundamental change in the music industry. I think a lot of people don't even know how big the change is that's coming. We've had almost a twenty-five-year ride on a certain kind of music, and the appeal of that music has started to wane for the first time. Particularly with people under twenty-four who want their own artists, who don't relate that well to artists of prior generations. And the emergence of alternative bands and rap is really healthy. It's not that a lot of major acts will disappear, but they'll wane in popularity because it's a changing of the guard. People can relate to a twenty-three-year-old kid playing a guitar on tour rather than someone who's sitting in Malibu. It shouldn't be an unexpected surprise. If rock 'n' roll is about words and poetry and meaning something in your life, a lot of times you'll take it from someone who's not a millionaire. ☐

Oliver Stone

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think he became a threat to the republic.

SPIN: If, indeed, John Kennedy was killed, as you are suggesting, by evil forces and evil men in order to prevent him from doing good things, doesn't this leave him as kind of a messiah figure?

Stone: If one sets up the idea that society can be saved by its government, I'm not so sure that it can. Individuals have to do it. But, why couldn't he have become a great, great President? There was something destined about him, and he certainly had a compassion. He seemed to have a love of people and a love of laughter. You say, yeah, he could have been a great President and he could have done things that would have significantly altered the destiny of this country. We might be richer now. More people might be alive, less people might be dead in foreign countries and maybe we'd be a more prosperous society right now with more racial integration. If you call that a savior, yeah, call it a savior. That's your word, not mine. It seems John Kennedy was too early for his time and it was a shame.

The 1960s, my generation, had this tremendous surge of hope and idealism for a better world—a "Peace Corps World," let's call it, for want of simplification. Then it just kind of caved in so quick. Bobby Kennedy went down in the bizarrest of assassinations. Martin Luther King, Jr., again in the same year, 1968. I was in Vietnam at that time. All the blacks in my unit were so upset when King was killed, and they said, "Never

again! Don't trust whitey!" And it was over. You could just feel the '60s clattering down on top of you, you know? It was a nightmare. And then we took drugs and dropped out, and then Nixon came in on this tremendous fear and everyone was so scared in 1968 that the world was going crazy with all these killings and assassinations. He was a face from the past and he came in and presented, like Hitler did, the concept of law and order to cure disorder. What did he give us? He promised us peace and he gave us four more years of war. He promised us order and gave us chaos. He gave us Watergate.

SPIN: To a lot of observers, your films are assertive moral parables. It's been suggested that in *The Doors*, your choice of Jim Morrison was an expression of the human quality of individual integrity. That it said: Come what may, hell or high water, whatever, integrity is a moral value in itself. Certainly, *Wall Street* is a pretty clear story of good and evil, a moral lesson. Is there a direct moral lesson in *JFK*?

Stone: Well, you have a reformer who is killed by the bad guys, by the establishment, because he seeks change. And then you have another man, an ordinary citizen, a sort of Capraesque prosecutor with a naive idealism and belief in the country, a true believer, as Jim Garrison was. Hardly the kook pictured by the press at the time. And he was truly a patriot. He had no love of John Kennedy particularly. He was if anything on the conservative side. A reformer on his own. In New Orleans, he cleaned up the vice dens in Bourbon Street, and he, in this, parallels, in a sense, the Kennedy story, too, because in the course of investigating his death, Garrison begins to doubt his own government and begins to doubt everything around him. He's fired from the National Guard. He's offered a bribe, he's offered a judgeship. His offices are bugged, his witnesses die. His family starts to turn on him. He's attacked by NBC [*The Case of Jim Garrison*, broadcast in June 1967], it completely devastates him. It tells the public before the trial who his witnesses are, and that he's bribed his witnesses. All these horror things, like the story of Job, happened to this poor man, and in the process he sort of goes, I suppose, undergoes this transference; that we all have, and that I get from making movies. He begins to really understand John Kennedy from the inside out. What he must have gone through in those years of change from 1961 to 1963. And Jim Garrison becomes, in a sense, John Kennedy. In my thinking. And makes a noble effort, almost a doomed effort, to bring the case to trial. And loses, as you know. But there is an optimistic note in this movie. Clay Shaw may go free, but the jury in New Orleans said there is no question in their mind that he had proved that there was a conspiracy in Dealey Plaza. And he says, "This war may take 30 more years, but at least I will have fired the opening round."

SPIN: *Time* magazine, George Lardner in the *Washington Post*, and a bunch of others have bitterly attacked the JFK film, without having seen a single frame of it. Are there institutional pressures or alliances at work against you? Is that part of a grand scheme?

Stone: I don't think it's part of a grand scheme. I think these are veterans who followed the case for years, and they hated Garrison for years for various reasons and they've all come together to at-

tick the film because they see it as a vindication of Garrison.

SPIN: Going back again to the meaning of these people of the '60s—were Jim Morrison and John Kennedy of the same spirit?

Stone: Sure they were. They were both carousers, they were both Irish, Jim Garrison, too. Garrison and Morrison both loved to tell tall tales, both loved to party, loved women, loved booze, loved to laugh. They were gentle in some fundamental way, they had respect for life. Jim Morrison was anarchic, much more so than Jack, but Jack had an anarchic side, you know. But Morrison was never a politically responsible person, but in one sense was a kindred soul. I think that they are both handsome, heroic men.

SPIN: Is your role as a filmmaker the most effectively influential possible one for you in the modern world? Is this the best way to influence the good minds and hearts?

level. There was a singular lack of protection for Kennedy in Dallas, given the nature of the fact that Adlai Stevenson (the Democratic candidate opposite Eisenhower in the '52 and '56 elections) had been spit on a month before. And that Dallas had a simmering reputation for hatred for Kennedy. And there had been several assassination attempts, in Miami and in the South, where he was supposed to be hit. It was sort of a thread of evidence boiling beneath the surface in the last few months before he was killed—of him being hit—I would say like twenty-five to thirty of these weird coincidences start to happen. Any rational mind is going to start to reach out and wonder.

SPIN: You are saying that methodical review of incontrovertible fact finally led you not to believe the conventional conclusions?

Stone: That's right.

SPIN: Are all your heroes victims?

Stone: In part. I hate the word as a whole, be-

his poetry, and he paid the price that he sought to pay. He knew he was flirting with death.

SPIN: So he got to the other side?

Stone: Yeah, but once he got there he was ready for it. He united with his death. His death was a part of him from day one. The very first scene in the movie, the child in a car. He's attracted to it, reaching for it. The roadside accident. The whole movie is really about his coming to terms with it.

SPIN: But surely you wouldn't argue that, conventionally and universally, the quest for death is a very positive way to go about viewing the hope of a society?

Stone: Jim Morrison was a Romantic poet, in the sense of Rimbaud and Bandelaire and Apollinaire. They all died young. Keats, Byron, Shelley. It's a tradition of Romantic poetry. You aren't supposed to live long, because you're supposed to represent something. You're a symbolic poet, a symbolist poet. He did his job, Jim. It

"The 1960s, my generation, had this tremendous surge of hope and idealism for a better world. Then it just kind of caved in. You could feel the '60s clattering down on you."

Stone: No, I think this thing can be fought on many fronts: as a writer, a journalist, a doctor. I would encourage people to follow their potentials. Not to make movies, particularly. You have to have a certain nature to make movies. You have to be extremely tenacious and practical. You have to fight so many battles to make a picture.

SPIN: I have asked some young Jim Morrison enthusiasts, some very hip kids, about John Kennedy and they say: "Well, what the hell, John Kennedy was just a smarter, younger Ronald Reagan." Part of the same fabric?

Stone: Wow! I would say that whoever thinks that is ultimately utterly cynical as to the political system. There is a huge difference between John Kennedy and Ronald Reagan. One is a closed man, and the other was an open man. One was young, and one was old. And it's sad to hear that commentary. If it's true, it is only coming from the result of Kennedy's murder to begin with, because it has desensitized the American public and taught them to lose faith in their government through the years. And by now, thirty years later, twenty-eight years after his death, it is clear that we truly are a deadhead society. We're into heavy metal, and nothing matters anymore. There is no right or wrong.

SPIN: How did you come to the conclusion of conspiracy? Through study, or by some emotional metamorphosis?

Stone: Like Sherlock Holmes, in analyzing the case you come up against some pretty hard questions as to who could cover up the case. Why would it be covered up? Who benefited? Why was Kennedy killed? When you lead back from those questions, then you see the broader implications of it, and it leads to the conspiracy at the highest

cause it implies victimization as if you want that to happen to you. But I think you become a victim of yourself as much as you do of outside forces too. You have personality traits that get you into a mess. You know, like I got into a mess in Vietnam. Or Billy Hayes got into a mess in *Midnight Express*. Or Garrison maybe had some victimization in him that pushed him to this place where he was abandoned, isolated and cut off. But I think of it more as living out your destiny. Victimization sounds weak to me.

SPIN: Is it inevitable that a person with force and integrity, a good person, of historic proportions, is going to ultimately succumb to misery and agony? All of the principal, positive characters in Oliver Stone films tend to be men who end somehow in misery or horror.

Stone: Who go through misery and horror. But don't necessarily end in it. At the end of *Platoon*, Charlie Sheen is reunited with his country, in a different sense. And in *Born on the Fourth of July*, Ron Kovic goes through horror but I think emerges in a heroic fashion. You go through hell. The Garrison character in a sense is chastened, but he wins his soul at the end because he's fought for it. And although he may have lost, he won. I see Morrison as a very optimistic story. I think people misunderstood that movie. The superficial aspect is, yeah, he has success, and then like the typical rock star he slides into oblivion, through drug usage and drinking. That's not the way I made that movie. I see him as coming to terms with his death, through the whole movie. At the end of the film you see a smile on his face when he's in the bathtub in Paris. He knew where he was going. He was half in love with death all his life. He wrote about it beautifully, eloquently in

wasn't like a slide into death. He was more lucid at the end in many ways than he ever was in the beginning. And some of his poetry at the end is great. The whole film is framed as the *American Prayer* album, which is the last thing he ever recorded—alone one night in December, after he had done the "Riders on the Storm" album [*L.A. Woman*, 1971], which I think has some terrific—some of his best music. But he did *American Prayer* by himself, and it's a great album. It's well worth listening to. It was his confession. And I used a lot of it in the movie. A man who is falling apart is not going to be that lucid, the way he was. The words, he reminds me of Dylan Thomas. Dylan Thomas was—correct me if I'm wrong—writing some very good stuff on the edge of his death.

SPIN: And not unaffirmative. But there are some people of integrity and force who are not defeated. You just said that. But there's a question of what would a truly affirmative Oliver Stone story be, and I think you have answered by saying Oliver Stone's stories are affirmative. If in a rather black way.

Stone: I'm subject to change, you know. I'm only forty-five right now, and one can't make the same movie over again. I haven't. I feel like each one has been a growth for me. But who knows what direction it's going to go. I could see it coming—I would like to make a movie about a woman protagonist. In fact I developed one, which I'm working on. I'd like to move in other directions. More tender, a little softer. I can see that when I am older. While I have some energy as a young man, I would like to put that energy where it belongs, into what I feel. But I think that energy changes through time, and it's going to soften. ☐

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