

OLIVER STONE DISCUSSES JFK

Interview

Who? When?

INTERVIEWER: Why "JFK?"

STONE: Well, I guess there are two reasons. One would be that I thought it was a hell of a thriller. More of a "why-done-it" than a "who-done-it," with a small-town district attorney, Jim Garrison, following a small, microcosmic trail in New Orleans. When Jack Martin, played by Jack Lemmon, gets hit over the head by Guy Bannister, played by Ed Asner, on November 22, 1963, the night of the assassination - that little crime, that report of a pistol-whipping, leads Garrison to the realization that the crime has global consequences. And I think that has sort of an amazing Dashiell Hammett thriller-type feeling.

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*wasn't
a
crime
then?*

I suppose the second reason is that Kennedy, to me, was like the Godfather of my generation. He was a very important figure, a leader, and a prince, in a sense. And his murder marked the end of a dream, the end of a concept of an idealism that I associate with my youth, and that's the reason I particularly was plunged into betrayal and war--race war, Vietnam, Watergate. The whole laundry list of problems that have bedeviled America since his death...not that I'm saying he would have solved everything, like the King Arthur legend, but there's no question in my mind John Kennedy would never have committed combat troops to Vietnam. He refused to in 1961 and again in 1963, and he told several people he would

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withdraw them in '65 if he won the election.

So, you know, my life was shaped by his death, as was everybody's who's alive today of that age. I think the 1990s were very much determined by what happened in 1960. And I think we should all go back now and try to understand what went wrong in 1963 and if we can begin to understand the consequences of that day in November, it will shape the rest of our lives.

INTERVIEWER: How has it been for you? Having lived through this in a way that most Americans did, the reality of the assassination...and actually recreating it...

STONE: I think we're very privileged to be able to do that because we learned a lot. Staging that whole thing in Dealey Plaza, having various gunmen in various different hypothetical positions, hearing the shots, seeing the trajectories of the bullets, understanding how difficult it is to kill the President from the sixth floor depository through that tree in that time frame of six seconds...looking at the shot, lining it up from the grass, you know, from the fence... and seeing the facility of that shot. And then hearing the echoes, understanding the confusion...it was like reliving a combat scene in "Platoon."

The problem is that the whole Dealey Plaza is built like a canyon--a western canyon. We get echoes from the gunshots and sometimes in various pockets of the canyon you cannot hear the shots.

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For example, you'll hear the first shot sometimes and you'll hear the fourth shot, and you won't hear the second or third. And you won't hear the fifth. So it gets very tricky, and I can understand why on that particular day so many eye-witnesses had different interpretations of the shots, of the gunshots. Some people said they heard six, some people said they heard three, some people thought it was backfires, some people thought it was echoes.

*Does this date
it as in Dallas
when filming there?
see p. 7*

Doing this shooting this week has really opened our eyes to all the details of the assassination. No one has re-staged this assassination the way we are doing now. And as a result, what we're doing is we're sort of acting as detectives, like Sherlock Holmeses. We're sort of able to raise questions that the House Assassination Committee didn't even get close to. We fired out of the Daltex Building over there on the second floor, and we came up with some interesting conclusions about how to shoot somebody from that second floor. One thing we found out is that we couldn't make it work off that roof. The trajectory was not right. The angle of fire on the Kennedy car was not right. So we dropped the roof...but the fence is the place. That's the head shot. No question about it. It's also the throat shot.

It made me understand how difficult it is for one gunman to kill the President and how easy it was for three or...two or three gunmen to kill the President in Dealey Plaza, which is really structured like a perfect L-shaped ambush, which we used in Vietnam actually. There's no doubt in my mind that

that was a military-style ambush...

INTERVIEWER: The choice of actors that you have here. Can you tell us about the cast?

STONE: I knew that I'm dealing with very dense material, and I wanted the audience to keep looking at the movie, not to get bored. And I think that finding familiar faces that you trust helps you get through this material. In Kevin (Costner), I found somebody who has a sort of fundamental decency to him, and integrity, and I associate that with Jim Garrison. In spite of all the criticisms of Jim's character - and there are many, and many of them are valid - I do think that Jim is a real lawyer and a good man, and undertook something that very few sane people would undertake. Against long odds he fought against the government, he fought against many members of the press. Jimmy Stewart comes to mind, I kept thinking, or Gary Cooper...and I was thinking of Kevin in that mold. Sissy (Spacek), I thought, balanced...gave importance to the domestic side of Jim's life and the toll that that took on him, that made him a man, not just a symbol of this investigation. And people like Jack Lemmon and Walter Matthau and Donald Sutherland brought a viewer identification with an older generation of actors, and I think that all these actors, by participating, are saying that they agree with my script and these speculations.

I think we used a younger generation of actors with people like Gary Oldman and Tommy Lee Jones and Kevin Bacon because, to be honest, I think they fit their characters perfectly. Gary has got a quality of an anonymous everyman within

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a crowd, with a sense of danger. And he brings the enigmatic Lee Oswald into focus for me. Oswald's a fascinating character. You can make a movie almost apart from this movie, just about Lee.

Tommy Lee Jones is superb as Clay Shaw. He sort of looks like him with the same sort of strong facial bone structure. And Tommy Lee was very committed to making the movie.

Joe Pesci - also from a new generation of actors - perfect for me as David Ferrie - volatile, difficult to pin down. You never knew who David Ferrie really was, that's why his so-called suicide revealed a lot of things to the Garrison office.

Who else is in the movie? We have a fine group of actors playing members of Jim's staff. Laurie Metcalf had...I assigned to her some of the longest dialogue in the history of movies because she was so fast and intelligent and delivered all this information and made it interesting. She plays a woman D.A. on Jim's staff. She does a wonderful job.

Jay Sanders and Michael Rooker were terrific as his two main support men. Rooker was coming from "Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer," and Jay is solid and strong and a father figure.

Kevin Bacon learned the Southern accent and hung out in an Angolan prison where we shot the scene with him as Willie O'Keefe. He's a composite of several hustlers, male hustlers in the New Orleans underworld who met Clay Shaw and David Ferry and Lee Oswald.

INTERVIEWER: So far, all of the controversy and

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discussion of the film has been about this fact or that fact. And you've reminded people time and again that you're making a movie here. You're not doing a documentary. And as a movie, what kind of movie is "JFK?" In other words, when I spoke with Kevin, he said that this is going to be a great picture. He sees it as...I mean, what kind of movie is this? Should it be treated as a movie?

STONE: I think we're trying to create an alternate myth to the Warren Commission, to kind of explore the true meaning of the shooting in Dealey Plaza, what the murder of John Kennedy meant to his country, why he was killed. And the movie unfolds, I suppose, as a mystery, where you unravel layer after layer and you come out at the end with a very strong speculation as to what might have happened.

We don't say, this is exactly what happened and this is who did it. I wouldn't be that presumptuous, nor do I know. I have taken - I think as a good detective would - all the clues that have presented themselves, put them into one mosaic, followed the clues and come to some conclusions of my own, but as I say, I present them as speculation, not as a definite conclusion.

INTERVIEWER: Well, everybody's been sort of shooting at you, if you will, and a lot of people have been saying that this is Oliver Stone's distortion of history or Oliver Stone's re-assassination or what have you. I mean, you've read this kind of stuff. I'm not asking you to respond to it specifically, but what I'm getting at is, is this a...is the type of

an approach...legitimate approach?

STONE: I never claimed to have the answers to the Kennedy murder. I set out to - based on Garrison's book, which I loved - and also Jim Marrs' book, Crossfire, which added for me the research of the Seventies and the Eighties so that I was able to encompass in one movie all the most interesting facts about the murder. We use the work of Mark Lane, who found some witnesses. That was quite significant. Bob Grodin, who did some forensics and autopsy work, and Sylvia Meagher, who was very supportive of our analysis of the Warren Commission report, and Mary Farrell, a great researcher...the list is long of private citizens who have worked hard to research this case against the opposition of stagnating government bodies. Maybe the public learned some of it in one spot or another spot, but they never seemed to get it all at one time, and I tried to put it all into one...one giant jigsaw puzzle, if you might.

INTERVIEWER: What's the significance of shooting this here in New Orleans?

STONE: The movie is a tale of three cities. The killings were done in East Dallas. We think a lot of the behind-the-scenes activity happened here in New Orleans, which is not far from Dallas. And then we have Washington, D.C., which is also a behind-the-scenes city.

So we move between the three cities...Jim Garrison was the District Attorney here and was the only, as you know, person to prosecute somebody for the murder of John Kennedy,

so obviously we're shooting some of the stuff here. But the movie goes beyond his story. We try to incorporate a lot of research that came in during the last twenty years, after Jim's trial of Clay Shaw.

INTERVIEWER: In directing the actors here, in creating this...what's the challenge here on locations like this...?

STONE: Well, I think the biggest single challenge is the material, the research. I think we have a three, three and a half hour movie. I'm always concerned about the length, and keeping the momentum of the picture so that it doesn't become a dry research treatise that will become boring. Trying to keep the spine sharp so that it cuts through...it keeps moving. So you know we have that tension between the dry facts and dramatizing them, always. I'm always conscious of that and trying to make it work inside this time frame. Which means being ruthless sometimes and cutting out things that you'd like to dwell on. It means losing some of the biographical elements of Jim Garrison...we're not concentrating on him as much as a character as we are... as a protagonist to tell the story.

We also get into his family life quite a bit, and that takes time. Sissy Spacek is the wife and we have five kids, and we try to give them an individuality, to try to show the tensions that his family life is under.

But you know, I'm a dramatist. You do take dramatic license, hopefully not violating the spirit of the truth.

All the assumptions about Ferrie are assumptions, in

this movie. You know, we lay it out there...David Ferrie is an idiosyncratic character. He says strange things. You don't have to believe him. And he's inconsistent as a character, on purpose. He's not a fountain of information. He says things that are wild and then he says another thing and he contradicts himself...we try to show that in the movie.

INTERVIEWER: To show the complexity of this thing.

STONE: We try to, yeah.

INTERVIEWER: As a dramatist in a way...I mean art sometimes can find the way to truth even faster than journalism in a sense. Do you believe that?

STONE: I know it. But everything we say in the movie of a factual nature is correct...about the Oswald story. We take the Warren Commission material and we show where the Warren Commission contradicts itself. We're pretty solid on that.

We do make some speculations in the movie, but those are openly speculations. Jim Garrison says, it could be this or it could be that. You see him at the trial, he says...let me hypothesize this potential situation, so you know that that's a speculation. But the underlying facts that are quoted in the film I believe are correct. So the footnoters can come out all they want. The establishment journalists have been attacking this movie in a very heavy way...

I think there's no question that the American establishment press went to sleep on the Kennedy murder thirty years

ago. It's disgusting what happened in this country. Time magazine holding the Zapruder film for five years. Reversing the frames that were finally released to the public. Their attack...one-and-a-half page attack on this movie...on the first draft, stolen first draft of this movie. It's outrageous.

I just think a lot of the press has had an agenda here to go after this film. To review a first...a stolen first draft - and we are on our sixth draft - I'm not even shooting half the things in the first draft - has never been done in the history of movies. They're protecting something, they're protecting an old crime. You go to Europe, you go to France and England and Italy...they're still amazed at the naivete of the American people. That they bought this...this one single lone nut assassin with his magic bullet, that Lee Oswald did it alone. They laugh at America's naivete. And they know this was a political murder. They know it. And their press has always reflected that. And their press recently has been more supportive of our film, and saying that it's outrageous that TIME, The Washington Post and Chicago Tribune have attacked this film in this early stage.

You know, The Washington Post runs on and on and on about glasnost in the Soviet Union and how they're now exposing Stalin's crimes and yet The Washington Post will not discuss, will not even deal in an intelligent fashion with Kennedy's murder in our country.

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INTERVIEWER: Do you see this as sort of like a thriller in a way...?

STONE: Well, I think it is. I think it's a fascinating...it's a mythic who-done-it...and why-done-it...? Why did they kill Kennedy? I think...if you start to ask that question then you begin to understand the vastness of the crime... because, you know, people fool around with the scenery. Who was Oswald, how many shots, how many assassins...? And that always...that's like scenery, it's like a red herring. It does...it's interesting, it's like a parlor game. But it takes you away from the central issue, which was, what was Kennedy doing that was irritating people? What was he shaking, what boat was he rocking? What threat to power did he represent? And you come up with some very startling answers.

INTERVIEWER: You've done a lot of work about Vietnam in the body of your work and I guess in the body of your life, and this impacts on that, too, in a way that has not really been spoken about very much. Is that in your mind in making this film? If Kennedy lived, things might have been different?

STONE: There's a lot of evidence, a lot of evidence to the fact that Kennedy was...if he had been re-elected in 1964, - which I believe he would have, it looked like he was going to win -- would not ever have considered going into a war situation in Vietnam. He in fact said so to Mike Mansfield and Wayne Morse of the Senate. He said so to Roger Hillsman,

his Assistant Secretary of State, to Kenny O'Donnell...he was quoted numerous times and, in fact, he signed a document called the National Security Action Memorandum 263, which provided for the first withdrawal of American troops from Vietnam by December of 1963. It's a startling document and it was changed after he died, four days after, a new NSAM was signed by Lyndon Johnson and Henry Cabot Lodge...with Henry Cabot Lodge there. And it was a very subtle document, but it essentially reversed the 263 policy.

INTERVIEWER: What do you think it meant for our culture...this assassination?

STONE: It deeply scarred my generation and our culture. I think a lot of our problems - distrust of government started in 1963. I don't think we believed our leaders after that. Lyndon Johnson was a fraud and a liar. We found that out in Vietnam. Nixon, we found out to be a fraud and a liar. We're suspicious of Reagan with Iran/Contragate...Ford, Gerry Ford pardoned Nixon, and that was a joke. I mean, Jimmy Carter was the only one who had some kind of integrity in that whole group of presidents, and he lasted four years because of the hostage crisis, you know, and we have reasons to believe now that that hostage crisis could have been solved before the election, but that Reagan wanted to prolong it in order to win the election, so it's dirty pool - politics.

And I think the American people have become increasingly cynical. They don't vote. The young people don't vote.

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We've had race wars as a result of Kennedy...I think we've had the Martin Luther King killings and the Robert Kennedy killings. The country has really had a civil war, essentially. A very subtle civil war, but one nonetheless. Equal in its intensity and its impact to the Civil War in the 1860s. Until we come to a conclusion on the Kennedy killing, some kind of discovery of the truth, some kind of exorcism, America will never be real.

There was a fiction that occurred in 1960s and we have to get back and we have to solve it, and it's up to our generation to do something about it - to start to ask questions and to get these government files open, to get the CIA 201 Personnel file on Oswald opened without all the black lines knocking out everything. To get all the documents that have been hidden from the public out in the open. Get some people to talk. They're all dying now, they're all old men. Most of the guys are dead. But maybe we can still get some truth out of this thing.

INTERVIEWER: And Jim Garrison...you've said this is not just his story, yet he is a protagonist and he is a major figure in it. How do you feel about that?

STONE: I like Jim. I think he's made a lot of mistakes, but it was a very difficult trial for him to win. He was hounded by the Federal government, his witnesses were not extradited from other states, his subpoenas against the FBI and CIA were denied, evidence was stolen from his office, the files were stolen, he never really did get a fair trial. It

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did come out that Shaw was CIA many years later - Richard Helms swore to that. But at that time, at that point in time, in fact as it is now with the Iran/Contragate and the Oliver North trial, it is impossible to have an espionage trial in the light of day, because you cannot have access to certain information. So he was very hampered.

This man has been described by the Northern press, and even the Southern press, as a fraud and as a wide-eyed lunatic. In fact, he was a District Attorney elected three times in this city. He was loved by the people in the street - not by the establishment, by the people in the street - he became an Appellate Judge, he was an FBI agent. He served in the military for more than twenty years and he was a National Guard Second-In-Command of this region. What kind of flake is that? This man is a very serious man, and because he was saying some things that are dangerous, he was written up as a lunatic, which shows you the power of the press in this country to distort, and to lie.

In fact, the man - if you talk to him, and I hope that you will - you will find him to be a very articulate man, sensible, and although he's an old man now, he never gave up. He is, in my opinion, a Frank Capra character. He represents the best of the American traditions, which is honesty and a search for the truth.

INTERVIEWER: In taking on this story, you must have known that his enemies would become your enemies, in a way.

STONE: It seems they have.

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*Important interview
transcript - unscripted*

INTERVIEWER: And that there's a sort of another assassination going on, possibly.

STONE: Yeah. I'm sure that they'll come up with all of the dirty stories on me. But I'm hoping that if you make a good film, it'll speak for itself.

INTERVIEWER: And your sense of the film...of what you've done so far...is it exciting to you, I mean, when you look at it on the screen? How this is coming together?

STONE: Very exciting. I'm very pleased with it.

INTERVIEWER: What do you think the audience reaction will be?

STONE: I think in the Warren Commission, they smell a rat. I think they're going to like this movie, and I hope to God it will come to be seen by the young as an alternative explanation to JFK's death.

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