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Plot thickens: Garrison may shine in movie

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He fed a nation hungry for a better explanation of the assassination of President John F. Kennedy.

There were headlines, magazine covers and even a guest spot on "The Tonight Show" for former New Orleans District Attorney Jim Garrison after he

stunned the nation in 1967 with claims that he had uncovered a conspiracy to kill the president.

Before it was over, though, many friends and colleagues turned on Garrison, branding him irresponsible, paranoid and out of control, and soon even Garrison said he realized that his national image had become one of "a fool or a madman."

But now one of the most



Garrison and Costner DA in '66; actor in '90



Influential directors in Hollywood is working on a movie that could paint an entirely different picture of Garrison.

Writer-director Oliver Stone has quietly slipped in and out of New Orleans for the past two years researching a movie project shrouded in secrecy, but that apparently will have Garrison as its central character.

Stone is tight-lipped about the

project, but recent Stone movies such as "Platoon," "Wall Street" and "Born on the Fourth of July" indicate that the safe, establishment point of view is not for him.

That Stone may cast Garrison in a heroic light became even more plausible when People magazine and USA Today both recently reported that Kevin Costner, the sensitive young star of "Dances With Wolves," is all

but signed to play Garrison.

As movie-goers may now think of Earl K. Long as a lovable scoundrel who looks like Paul Newman, thanks to the movie "Blaze," Costner's boyish earnestness may become the nation's lasting image of Garrison.

"Costner is such a wide-eyed all-American boy. Garrison never

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Garrison

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had the goody two-shoes aura about him," said Rosemary James, a former reporter for The New Orleans States-Item, who helped break the story of Garrison's investigation in 1967.

Elected district attorney in 1962, Garrison was a popular, colorful politician who made national headlines when he went public with his investigation into the Kennedy assassination.

According to Garrison, Lee Harvey Oswald — whom the Warren Commission identified as Kennedy's lone assassin — was one of several red herrings introduced by a faction of the CIA working with anti-Castro Cuban exiles. Garrison has written several books on the subject, and film rights to the most recent, the 1989 "On the Trail of the Assassins — My Investigation and Prosecution of the Murder of President Kennedy," were bought by Stone's production company.

Last week, a spokeswoman at Stone's office in Hollywood wouldn't comment on the project. But Kristina Hare conceded that New Orleans locations are being

scouted and local actors are being cast in small roles.

According to several sources, filming will begin in New Orleans in May or June. Dallas will be another location.

Apparently only a select few have seen the screenplay by Stone, who won an Academy Award for the Vietnam War drama "Platoon."

"They call it 'Project X,'" said a local crew member, who said he would be fired if his name was used.

One New Orleansian who says he has read the screenplay is Garrison, 69, now a judge on the 4th Circuit Court of Appeal.

Even he can't say much. When Garrison told Stone the rights to his book, he signed a contract prohibiting him from talking about the movie.

He's not happy about that "because I'm not really great at keeping a secret, especially about something as exciting as this, especially coming out in your own home town."

But Garrison is not entirely closed-mouthed.

Yes, he said, it's his understanding that Costner would portray him ("a first-class selection," said Garrison) and that he would be the central character. But he said it is wrong to say,

as some have, that the movie will focus on the late Clay Shaw, director of the International Trade Mart, whom Garrison unsuccessfully prosecuted for conspiring to kill Kennedy.

"It's bigger than that," Garrison said. "The subject is the murder of Jack Kennedy."

Garrison said he has met with Stone three or four times a year for two years. He called the finished screenplay "a beautiful job."

Garrison said Stone also pursued rights to several other books about the assassination, mainly as a hedge against lawsuits. In addition to Garrison's book, he said one other book, the 1989 "Crossfire — The Plot That Killed Kennedy" by William Marrs, would receive screen credit as a source. That book is a review of conspiracy theories.

Does the screenplay closely follow the conspiracy theories that Garrison promotes in his book? "I couldn't say that without violating the contract," he said. But he would say that it "closely follows" his book.

And it's no violation for him to say just how much he likes it. "I'm happy with the script, not so much because it builds me up in any particular way, because I think it's more objective than

that. I'm happy with the script because it's a magnificent job and to be associated with a guy of this caliber is a real experience. It's like having a Eugene O'Neill write it."

But others who recall Garrison's investigation say they hope Stone takes a critical approach.

"Clay Shaw was a decent human being and a lot of us felt his life was ruined by someone who was rather irresponsible," James said.

No matter which side of the fence people found themselves on during the controversy, most agree that the story could be the meat of a fascinating movie.

"I think if they show a district attorney working against almost impossible odds, and they show Garrison's strengths as well as his weaknesses, someone who went off the deep end at times, I think it can be an excellent production," said William Alford Jr., who was fresh out of law school when he joined Garrison's office as an assistant during the conspiracy investigation.

"But if they just go in with Garrison on a white horse, and that's what I thought when I heard about it, it's going to be a fairy tale."

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