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30 years later, TV re-embraces JFK

Medium that made Camelot cashes in

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For 30 years, the question has gnawed at the country's conscience. Who shot John F. Kennedy? For the next seven days, television viewers will get a video-land, cable-ready answer:

Everyone with a production budget, a bankable script and access to the Abraham Zapruder parade-routte assassination footage has now shot a JFK retrospective.

Beginning today and continuing through next Monday, the 30th anniversary of Kennedy's death, Ameri-

ca's ongoing JFK love fest becomes a full-fledged JFK film fest, as much of that old Camelot magic — and heartache — is recaptured for a contemporary audience in documentary, docudrama and miniseries form. All told, more than a dozen Kennedy-related specials will air during this time period, including at least seven major new prime-time offerings.

What will be found all over the TV dial are images that simulateously deify and debunk the memory of our 35th president, in ways that may surprise even the most jaundiced viewer. Rarely glimpsed footage of Kennedy the charismatic

JFK, Page 8



Lee Harvey Oswald after his capture.



John F. Kennedy on campaign trail.

■ JFK

Continued from Page 1

politician and consummate family man will blend ceaselessly, if not always seamlessly, with big-bucks Hollywood recreations and soap-opera scenes. The impact of the Kennedy family on American tastes and sensibilities, never mind JFK's influence on the political landscape, will be recalled with every zap of the remote control.

Television, the medium that loved Jack Kennedy, helped make his political fortunes possible and finally laid him to rest before a grief-stricken nation, is going deep on JFK one more (and probably not last) time. Like those fabled touch-football games in Hyannis Port, it's everybody-out-for-a-pass time. Grab yourself a piece of glory, a quick score or both. Once Camelot wove its mystical spell of yore. Now it just sells. And sells. And sells some more.

America cannot get enough of its adopted royal family, it seems, even the nearly half of us born since November 22, 1963. Two new books about JFK — one focusing on his presidency, the other on his assassination — are among the big events of the publishing season. President Clinton's appearance last month at the JFK Museum dedication seemed calculated to polish his profile as a Kennedyesque torchbearer for the 1990s.

John Jr. has gone from saluting soldiers to dating starlets in the wink of an eye, or so the prying media make us believe. When "60 Minutes" correspondents were polled on whom they most regret not interviewing, the answer was unanimous: Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis. Nobody is shooting miniseries on the life and times of Gerald Ford, Jimmy Carter or George Bush. Previously unseen footage of the Johnsons or Reagans relaxing at home on the ranch is likely to remain just that, unseen.

Among modern presidents only Richard Nixon, the anti-Kennedy, continues to fascinate a new generation of Americans to anything like the same degree, perhaps because the contrast between these two old

political rivals is so dramatic. A brooding Nixon played piano at his own birthday parties. A bubbly Marilyn Monroe crooned to JFK at his birthday party. Nixon swapped jokes with Hollywood's Rat Pack. JFK swapped girlfriends. Enough said.

When it comes to reminding the Kennedy legacy, there is always more to say. Yet does this glut of sweeps-month programming meaningfully advance our understanding of the Kennedy era and its tragic ending? Or does it merely feed the same appetite for nostalgia that brings us Brady Bunch reunion shows and baby-boomer memoirs of lost innocence? Where does history cross the line into hagiography? Historical drama into self-parody? Like the single-bullet theory, satisfactory answers may never be found, nor the weird trajectory of popular culture fully plotted.

Latest conspiracy theory

Best supporting roles this week are assured for Jackie O., the glamorous widow, and Lee Harvey Oswald, the enigmatic assassin. Viewers will seldom be more than (an Oli-

ver) stone's throw away from the latest in conspiracy theory and autopsy analysis, while talk-show hosts summon celebrities out of the greenroom to ask "Where were you...?" with damp-eyed reverie.

From Marina Oswald ("Fatal Deception," NBC) to Inga Arvad ("JFK: Reckless Youth," ABC), the bedroom partners of LHO and JFK will be given MPTE: Maximum Prime-Time Exposure. In the best and most ambitious of the upcoming offerings, at least some conscientious effort is made to enlighten as well as entertain. The worst stray into mawkishness and titillation. Just when you think you've seen enough of the Zapruder film to last a lifetime come endless slow-mo shots of the president's skull exploding in Dealey Plaza, all freshly sickening if strangely compelling.

A standout in regard to its seriousness of purpose is a three-hour "Frontline" investigation titled "Who Was Lee Harvey Oswald?" Capitalizing on the breakup of the Soviet Union and the release of previously

classified CIA files, "Frontline" probes deeper into the Oswald saga than any film before it.

Among its discoveries are important new information on Oswald's dealings with the CIA and KGB, his relationship with David Ferrie (a favorite Stone villain in the film "JFK") and fresh evidence connecting Oswald to the rifle that killed Kennedy. Conspicuous among the field guides to Oswald's twisted life is Gerald Posner, author of "Case Closed," a new book that lends impressive support to the Warren Commission's lone-gunner theory.

CBS' sixth foray

Posner also surfaces prominently on CBS' "Who Killed JFK: The Final Chapter?," the network's sixth major investigation into the assassination. By now Dan Rather's presence in the anchor position on these shows is less a guarantee of hard-hitting journalism than a puckish reminder that he too was in Dallas that fateful day, making his network reputation. That quibble aside, Rather and Posner's analysis of eyewitness testimony and the Zapruder sequence is valuable — more valuable than the recycled history lesson that precedes it, certainly.

There is far more to quibble about, moreover, when it comes to rivals ABC's and NBC's entries into the JFK prime-time sweepstakes. At least the ABC miniseries "Reckless Youth" has the virtue of being based on a book (by Nigel Hamilton) that takes a scholarly approach to the seamier side of JFK's pre-congressional career. The production values are impressive and the acting above-average for this sort of fare, but the script swings such a heavy cudgel against patriarch Joe and matriarch Rose that it often plays like an extended episode of "All My (Dysfunctional) Children."

As for the Marina Oswald story on NBC tonight, well, any movie that purports to equate her with Jackie — both sudden widows, both with two young kids, both searching for answers, get it? — is in trouble before the first commercial.

All in all it adds up to a memorable week of JFK-inspired memories. That, and the nagging suspicion that in the not too distant future, with 500 channels available, broadcasting may introduce its first all-Kennedy network.

Don't laugh. When Americans cannot seem to get enough of something, history suggests, they usually wind up getting more than they bargained for.

TV offers a full week on JFK

The following is a sample of upcoming, prime-time Kennedy programming. Check times and local listings. Some cable offerings repeat. Many other shows airing this week have been previously broadcast.

"Fatal Deception: Mrs. Lee Harvey Oswald" (NBC, Nov. 15): Helena Bonham Carter stars as the befuddled wife of US history's most notorious assassin - or pat-sy. Ask not what your husband did to you, ask how you can cash in on your husband.

"Who Was Lee Harvey Oswald?" (PBS, Nov. 16): A "Frontline" investigation into the life of JFK's killer that boldly goes where no documentary film has gone before.

"Jack" (CBS, Nov. 17): Producer Peter Davis aims for the heart of the Kennedy mystique - wit, wealth, smarts, sexiness - and scores a direct hit. Sometimes sappy, always satisfying.

"The Kennedy Years in Words and Music" (PBS, Nov. 17): Photographer Jacques Lowe captures the glory of a political era that was also put to music as no presidency has been since.

"Jackie Onassis - An Intimate Portrait" (Lifetime, Nov. 17): Brought to you by Clairol, who ought to know.

"Who Killed JFK: The Final Chapter?" (CBS, Nov. 19): Use of computer technology makes the single-shooter case neither

as definitively as CBS hoped nor as ambiguously as the title suggests. Grassy knoll gets a good re-mowing, though.

"The End of Camelot" (Discovery Channel, Nov. 21): Two more hours on the tragedy in Dallas. Not available for preview but many of the usual suspects listed as interviewees.

"JFK: Reckless Youth" (ABC, Nov. 21 & 22): Nigel Hamilton's tell-all bio of randy young JFK and his power-obsessed father gets lavish Hollywood treatment - and higher marks for its production values and acting than for its tawdry pop psychology.

"November 22, 1963: Where Were You" (TNT, Nov. 21): Larry King asks Margaret Thatcher, the Clintons, Harry Belafonte, Barbra Streisand, Chubby Checker and many others to recall where they were when they heard The News that day. Oh boy.

"With the President" (Disney Channel, Nov. 22): Ex-White House photographer Cecil Stoughton shares sentimental memories and portraits from those fabled Thousand Days. Two hankies, minimum.

"Dear Jackie" (Arts & Entertainment, Nov. 22): Excerpts from some of the 2 million letters that poured into the White House after JFK's death, read by the mourners who wrote them.

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