

Just when you think you've
read everything about JFK...

Too Many Kooks Spoil the Broth

A Three-Day Descent Into Unchecked Paranoia.

by Dave Parker

photography by Michael Herzmark

We were about a 100 miles out of Dallas when I noticed the smell. I turned to my photographer, Herzmark. "Hey, you smell that?" He sniffed the air. "Yeah, I sure do." "Ya recognize it?" I asked.

Herzmark, not being totally unfamiliar with the effects of illicit drugs, nodded. "Yup, I sure do. That's the skittish, oily stench of paranoia."

I stared at him. "What? Paranoia? Nah, I just farted."

DALLAS: THE HYATT REGENCY AT DEALEY PLAZA

It took 24 hours, but we were finally here. An entire day of one monotonous stretch of highway. The tedium broken up only by Herzmark's newfound sport of roadrunner population control. Everytime a roadrunner dared to cross our path, Herzmark insisted on hurling an empty Jagermeister bottle at the poor creature, usually with a strangely uncanny accuracy.

"That's one for Mr. Wile E. Coyote, ya speedy little shit!" he'd

snarl at the downed bird.

To make the monotony even worse, I had gotten ill the morning of the trip and by the time we reached Dallas, I had a full-on, raging fever. Hence the presence of Jagermeister.

"Keep drinking that stuff," Herzmark urged. "It'll cure whatever ails ya... plus I need the ammo."

Little did we know that the real sickness was just beginning. We were about to attend a three-day symposium on the assassination of John F. Kennedy.

Q: What are the three words guaranteed to piss off a JFK assassination researcher?

A: Oswald acted alone.

DAY ONE

Over 300 people are gathered here at the Hyatt to shoot the shit and figure out just who shot JFK. They call themselves *researchers*. It sounds a whole lot better than "guys who talk incessantly about a dead president." These people are incredibly happy.

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The Hands of Justice

Undoubtedly, the most interesting guy at the whole symposium was Carl Lee Justice III, otherwise known as *The Hands of Justice*. This dapper gentleman has spent almost 30 years amassing a collection of Kennedy pictures spanning JFK's entire life.

How many pictures are in your collection?
I have 75 pictures. I started collecting them in 1959. I just found them all over the place. Flea markets, garage sales, stuff like that.

Tell me about the centerpiece?
The centerpiece is a handcarved piece of leather measuring 6X6'. It depicts a few selected scenes from Kennedy's life. It took me ten years to handcarve. I also carved the wood frame. It weighs over a hundred pounds.

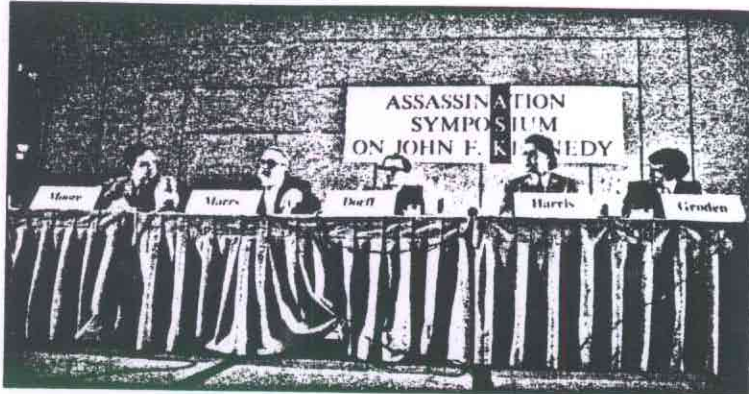
Have you had any offers for it?
Oh, yeah. Once I was offered \$100,000 for the leather piece. And another time, some guy wanted to give me \$250,000 for the entire collection. But this is my own personal collection. I just want people to see it. I enjoy putting Kennedy back into the hearts and minds of the people.

You're crazy not to go for it!
Nah. I'm financially secure, so I don't really need the money. I don't want to sell it to someone so they can lock it away. I want people to see it. The Smithsonian is interested, though. I might give it to them someday.

Who do you think shot Kennedy?
I don't really think about that. I have my opinions, but I keep them to myself. I'm just here to show my collection.

Do you think this symposium is gonna do any good?
Answer me this—if there's so many damn experts here, how come they can't tell me who did it?

Robert Groden and Jim Moore stare at each other with libelous intent, completely ignoring the experts between them.



The distinguished Hands of Justice with his leather artwork.

For once in their lives, they can talk about the assassination all they want without someone saying, "Shut the hell up already about that crap, will ya?"

We quickly learn that there are two types of researchers. On one hand, you have the Conspiracy Theorists. These are the guys who carefully and intelligently study the facts of the assassination until arriving at a conclusion as to what might have really happened.

Unfortunately, they are hopelessly outnumbered by the Conspiracy. "I know everything about the assassination down to the minutest detail and will stare at you like you're from the CIA if you don't agree with my theory"

nutcases. These guys act and look just like Trekkies, but without the lame nylon uniforms. It's obvious that they don't think about getting laid a lot.

"Women? How can I think about something so trivial as sex when a President of the United States was murdered in broad daylight by our own government?"

And speaking of women: Where the hell were they? Besides our lovely press liaison, Jo-Rae, there was hardly a woman in sight. God, stuck in the Hyatt Hotel for three days with a crazy, sober pack of former high-school Chess Club champions.

Herzmark tries to cheer me

up. "Hey, at least we'll get to see Kennedy's head vaporize on the large screen!"

Since this is the first day, there's nothing to really do until 7:00, when there's a kind of a get-acquainted-with-the-experts-and-each-other cocktail party. An *expert* being anyone who has actually had a book published on the subject.

So, Herzmark and I get on one of the bus tours that promises to show us sights of interest, like Jack Ruby's apartment and the actual murder scene itself, Dealey Plaza. The tour costs us \$38, while I notice that two weasels

from the *Los Angeles Times* get to go for free. I see to it that they get 5 a.m. wake-up calls for the duration of the event.

The tour is a bust; thanks to the sudden appearance of rain and the attitude of the know-it-alls, who consistently try to catch Bob, the friendly bus driver, in a wrong response.

Half the tour ends up being called off, when Bob dumps us off at the Texas School Book Depository and speeds away to pick up another load—leaving us to fend for ourselves.

The sixth floor of the Depository is now a museum that con-

tains all sorts of really boring texts hanging on the walls. It does serve one purpose, however, and that is to show if Oswald really did act alone, then he was one helluva shot. Conversely, the grassy knoll, where most *researchers* believe some shots were fired from, is a stone's throw from where the motorcade passed. Stone's throw? Hell, you could spit from the knoll and probably hit a slow-moving car.

After a few hours, the first event begins, the meet-the-authors reception/book fair. Here our worst fears are realized with two simple words: cash bar. Jo-Rae confirms that our press passes won't get us loaded for free. In fact, our passes aren't really good for anything. We quickly run up to the room, fortifying ourselves with Jagermeister.

It's truly amazing how many books there are on the Kennedy assassination. Most of them are the standard theories we've all heard before. But two authors and their works stand out.

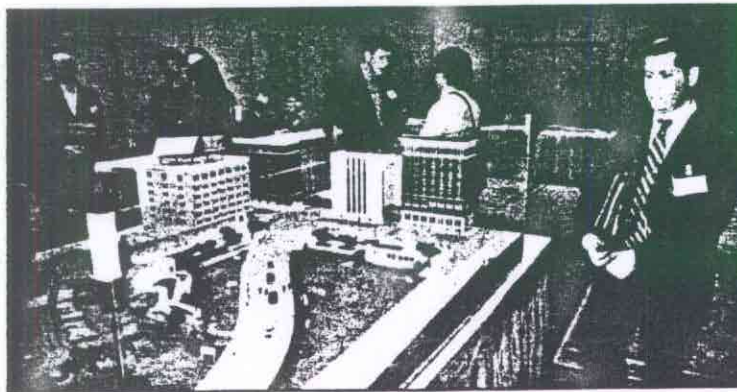
Monte Evans claims that Dan Rather holds the key to the assassination and that every assassination of the last 30 years, including John Lennon's, is connected. Evidently, even the *researchers* know where to draw the line, as Mr. Evans is basically ostracized.

The other author is Jim Moore, who actually has the balls, or more likely, stupidity, to hawk a book suggesting Oswald acted alone. The theorists flock around him like crazed dogs waiting to attack a helpless kitten. I immediately like him for adding a little energy to an otherwise boring event, so I try to make friends.

"How's it feel to know that everyone here wants to beat the shit out of you?" I ask.

"I welcome the challenge," he replies, his hands shakily betraying his words. "I stand by my facts and I hope I can change some minds."

Way-cool pictures from the autopsy. They were even cooler when projected on the big screen.



The actual scale model of Dealey Plaza before I moved some of the pieces around. People were not amused.

This picture has not been altered in any way. We actually had to buy our own beer! Our friendly bartender serves us motorcade cocktails. Hey, does it have three shots or four?



The first casual sip is followed. . . by a violent headsnap backwards.

Yeah, right. The *researchers* aren't buying his spiel. They are, however, buying his book. And Monte Evans' book. In fact, they're buying every book in sight.

Before going up to our room, I take with me the sight of an assassination witness autographing pictures of where he was standing when Kennedy's head

exploded.

Q: How many conspiracy theorists does it take to screw in a lightbulb?

A: Ten. One to screw it in and nine to write books on who really did it.

DAY TWO

The day begins with a panel of

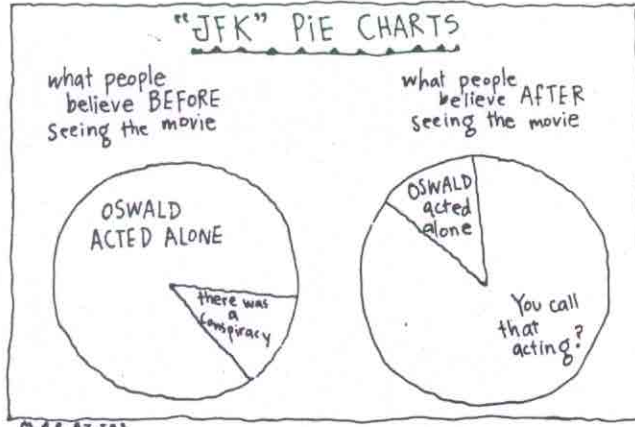
eyewitnesses who talk about where they were and what they saw. It's pretty boring to me, but the crowd is very excited. Here are all the stars gathered in the same room at the same time! Something to tell the grandkids about for sure!

Next is a panel of *experts* discussing Dealey Plaza. Fortunately, Jim Moore is one of them, so

it's not a complete drag.

We also get the first hint of infighting that will be a consistent presence for the duration of the symposium. During Moore's presentation, Dr. Cyril Wecht, another *expert*, turns to me and says, "I don't know why they invited this asshole." Robert Groden, another member of the panel and the most rational of the bunch, glares often at Moore. We find out later that he's actually suing Moore for libel.

The next panel, concerning



Conspiracy-A-Go-Go

When the rumored appearance of Dan Rather didn't happen—good thing, since most of the people consider him part of the conspiracy—that left John Slate as the only bona fide celebrity in attendance. Yes, the John Slate who outshined everyone in the best film of 1991, *SLACKER*. He played the Kennedy assassination buff. But was he really acting?

So, how much of the part did you write?

Only a little. Most of it came from Rick's [director Richard Linklater's] journals. He did ask me to add some of my favorite theories, though.

Like that "startling new evidence about Jack Ruby's dogs?"

Oh, yeah. That's true. There's some really bizarre stuff in the Warren Commission testimony about Ruby's strange attraction to his dogs. Kind of like a bestial attraction.

No way!

Oh, yeah. In fact, the Warren Commission testimony



Michael Herzmark (left) and Dave Parker (right) with the only true celebrity in attendance, John Slate from *SLACKER*.



The coauthors of *Conspiracy A-Go-Go* reenact the Oswald shooting.

contains some of the most lurid questions you could ever read. There's a great part about Ruby stripping down to his underwear at a bar, jumping on the table and yelling, "C'mon, I'll take anyone on! Man or woman!"

So, you're really into this Kennedy stuff aren't you?

A little bit, yeah. I actually did coauthor a book called *Conspiracy-A-Go-Go*.

Really? What's it about?

It's a tour guide to selected sites having to do with the Kennedy assassination with a great cover that I code-signed. We were going to title it with a combination of titles from actual books. Something like, *Forgive My Rush to Headsnap*, but we figured it wouldn't sell with that kind of title.

So, the important question is: Have you seen any cash from the success of *Slacker*?

Yeah, I've seen a little. I've got a piece of it. First, all the investors and such need to get paid off. But, this is the week *Slacker* hits the million mark! So, we're pretty happy.

Review

David Lifton's *BEST EVIDENCE: The Book and Videotape* (Available from Rhino Video)



David Lifton has the honor of being the first guy to print the actual photographs of the JFK autopsy. Thanks to him, the public gets to see what the inside of Kennedy's head

looked like. He believes that JFK's wounds were altered between the time it left Dallas and the time it arrived in Bethesda. The book's got a lot of technical stuff, but seems plausible enough. The video consists of Lifton interviewing a couple of guys who handled the body. Their comments seem to support his theory. Unfortunately, most of the researchers don't seem to buy it. Daniel Henning, a conspiracy theorist from Los Angeles, explains why:

In 1966, Lifton decided that Kennedy's head wounds had been altered. So, he basically adapted the facts to fit his conclusion. The major problem with his whole theory is that there just wasn't any time to alter the wounds. We're talking about some major surgery here.

But those wounds certainly looked like someone played around with them. How can you explain that?

Did you ever stop to think that maybe it was the photos that were altered and not the head wounds? It certainly would be a lot easier.

So, you don't buy any of his so-called "best evidence?"

It's all supposition based on recollections. I will give him credit for coming up with 900 pages of research, but that's about it.

So, there you are. Another theory shot to shit. But, if the inside of Kennedy's head interests you, get ahold of this book/tape. It's worth it just for the pictures. Even if they were altered.

Oswald, is largely taken up by the verbiage of expert Mark Lane. Lane, who wrote the first book questioning the findings of the Warren Commission, comes across as a sleazy grandstander who will do anything for a buck. He leaves a sour taste in our mouths, so we go up to the bar for a special drink that was prepared just for the researchers—a motorcade cocktail.

At the bar, we run into Bob, our friendly bus driver. He apologizes about the short tour, making up some crap about too many people wanting to go at one time. At least he springs for drinks.

A couple of cocktails later, and Bob gives us his take on the symposium.

"Look, Kennedy got screwed. I know that, but I don't dwell on it. These researchers are spending a ton of money to be here this weekend, paying a hundred dollars a night to stay here, buying food that's twice as expensive as the finest restaurants, and when it comes Christmas time, they don't have enough money to buy their damn kids presents!"

"Hey," I laugh. "Our room overlooks Dealey Plaza. Do you think we should charge these guys five bucks to come up and take a picture?"

"Five bucks? Hell, they'd

even pay 50!"

The last panel of the night is supposed to show us some amazing new evidence. Even the weasels from the L.A. Times stop kissing the ass of CBS's Kathleen Sullivan, and pay attention.

Unfortunately, the presentation isn't amazing. It consists of pictures that are so computer-enhanced they resemble photos of the Milky Way. The expert, Tom Wilson, claims the pictures show the true assassins and, if they were a little clearer, he would be able to read the name on the badge of one of the gunmen. No one points out that if the pictures were clear, there would be no need for enhancement.

The theorists are definitely not impressed. "I don't buy it," says Gus, a level-headed theorist from Baltimore. "I'll go out and stand in some bushes with my name tag on and have someone take a picture. If he can read what it says, I'll give him \$50,000."

Herzmark claims that his head is reeling and goes to bed. I opt for alcohol and three hours later find myself pasting a note on Mark Lane's door with a Jagermeister label. It reads:

Get off the C.I.A. . . or else!

Thank God, there's only one more day to go.



Writer Dave Parker in Dallas: When conspiracy and fashion collide.



Q: What's the difference between JFK and Dan Quayle?

A: At least JFK had a brain once.

THE THIRD & FINAL DAY

Having had so much fun the night before, I pin another note up. This time on the message board for all to see:


Please DO NOT talk to the reporters from the L.A. Times. They are actually with the C.I.A. and are here to keep tabs on us.

But my note is not as good as the one next to it. It states that the producers of the *Maury Povich Show* are "looking for people who are still so upset by the assassination after 28 years, that they will break down on camera."

Today's schedule is just like yesterday's. Except today's topics concern Jack Ruby, the single-bullet theory, medical evidence and the motives, means and opportunities. There are only two highlights. The first is during the medical evidence panel when we get to see autopsy pictures of JFK with his brains hanging out. The other is when Robert Sam Anson, author of a recent *Esquire* article on the Stone film, tries to pin down Mark Lane on how big a scumbag he actually is. The argument spills

over to the lobby, where the two combatants circle each other warily. Unfortunately, they never come to blows.

The last panel again promises startling new evidence. Some chick from the Houston Police Department claims to have identified the three tramps who were arrested the day of the assassination. Although I don't have a problem buying the I.D.s, nearly everyone in the crowd does. Everyone leaves the symposium, complaining bitterly.

What did we learn from all this? Well, I'm pretty sure that JFK is dead and that Oswald didn't do it alone. I also figured out that the *experts* model themselves after the Democratic Party—lots of infighting with no singular platform that they can present to the American people. Everyone has their own idea as to who did it. The theorists are willing to listen to other opinions. The nutcases, on the other hand, are so sure they're right, that if someone today were to confess to the crime, these guys just wouldn't accept it. It's because of these people that *researchers* will always be known as a fringe group. That and the fact they believe in cash bars. 

Things Actually Overheard at the Symposium

"Oh, boy, the guy who drove the ambulance is here!"

"I hope we find a smoking gun."

"I know a guy who saw LBJ jump out of his car and take a shot at JFK."

"Ya wanna make some money? Spend a couple of bucks and dub off a copy of the Zapruder film. Then turn around and sell it to these idiots for \$19.95."

"I was in prison serving a 15-year sentence when Kennedy was shot. Can I have your business card?"

"Hey, it's Jimi Hendrix!" (Actually, I said this when a computer-enhanced photo of the grassy knoll purported to show the real assassin.)

"There's a rumour that Dan Rather is supposed to show. I can't wait to take him apart! He's part of the conspiracy, you know."