

# Jim Garrison: Far-Fetched

Jim Garrison, who fits New Orleans so well that he is still its district attorney, has his coy moments.

Once, he even declined to set down his theories about the assassination of President John F. Kennedy for publication in extenso. "I don't really feel I can be a bellwether or prophet, warning of the dangers facing our country," he said. "That would be like dropping a BB in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean."

The DA's resolve, unfortunately, did not last. Jim Garrison has dropped his BB. It is, appropriately enough, entitled *A Heritage of Stone*.

In brief, Garrison claims, President Kennedy's death was a coup d'etat carried out by the Central Intelligence Agency, "an execution" ordered by the military-industrial complex, which felt threatened by the peace-loving President. The assertions are as far-fetched as the alleged evidence backing them up. Even LBJ's Tonkin Gulf resolution is dragged in as part of the script. "Dealey Plaza," the prosecutor writes, "should be recognized as a highly effective assault on civilian control over the military . . . the assassination and the [Warren Commission] inquiry are best recognized for what they were: a military takeover of the United States. It was nothing less."

What makes his book so incredible is that not once does Garrison mention businessman Clay Shaw, whom he prosecuted so noisily and so unsuccessfully for con-

*A HERITAGE OF STONE. By Jim Garrison*

(Putnam, 283 pp., \$6.95)

*AMERICAN GROTESQUE: An Account of the Clay Shaw-Jim Garrison Affair in the City of New Orleans. By James Kirkwood.*

(Simon and Schuster, 669 pp., illustrated, \$11.95)

Reviewed by George Lardner Jr.

The reviewer, a member of the national staff of The Washington Post, covered District Attorney Garrison's investigation of the assassination of President Kennedy.

spiracy in the assassination at Dallas. The flamboyant prosecutor's star witness, Perry Russo, the hypnotized salesman who said he heard freelance pilot David Ferrie mastermind a plot for Kennedy's death in the company of Shaw and Lee Harvey Oswald, is relegated to a footnote.

Novelist James Kirkwood, who found himself intrigued by the case after a chance meeting with Shaw, has done a much better job with that sorry episode in American jurisprudence. He began with a pre-trial piece on Shaw for Esquire magazine and wound up covering the trial on an assignment from Playboy, producing an article—"P' Shaw, A Farce in Three Acts"—that was never printed. Playboy was sympathetic toward Garrison and Kirkwood's editor on the magazine had advised him, in vain, to take it easy on the DA.

*American Grotesque* chronicles the Shaw trial with its baroque cast in painstaking detail. It is a highly personalized account, at times too personalized.

Yet it captures the flavor and the flimsiness, the mad-cap, Alice-in-Wonderland,

pinch-me mood of the trial where the key witnesses were a footloose salesman arrested this year on burglary charges (Russo), a self-admitted heroin addict (Vernon Bundy), and a balding accountant who once filed a \$16 million lawsuit accusing the New York City Police Department, among others, of hypnotizing and harrasing him (Charles I. Spiesel). It took the jurors less than an hour to find Shaw not guilty. As one of them recalled when asked what he thought was the weakest part of Garrison's case: "Well, the whole thing . . . After it was all over, it was like—wow, what happened? What? That's it?"

Still, the DA's capriciousness continues. Acquitted of conspiracy, Shaw was abruptly charged with perjury, a charge that remains hanging over his head.

In *American Grotesque*, Kirkwood makes no secret of what he thought of the trial, or of the district attorney whom he considers infected with a "deadly brand of megalomania." Yet in reporting so much from the courtroom, the author at times reports too little. To take just one example, Mrs.

Jessie Garner, Oswald's landlady in New Orleans in the summer of 1963, is quoted from the witness stand as saying that Ferrie had stopped by her home shortly after the assassination. Kirkwood calls it a "morsel," possibly "a whole new can of peas" that the prosecution failed to pursue and then leaves it at that himself.

Jim Garrison has had his day in court and he fell on his face. Only after he announced to the world that he had "solved" the assassination did he stumble onto a "witness" (Russo) and, even then, it took repeated and highly suggestive prodding from a hypnotist to get his story down pat. It didn't wash.

Beyond the harm done to individuals, Garrison, as Kirkwood points out, "has performed a great disservice to any further investigation into the assassination of President Kennedy." The DA, at least, deserves to be ignored. Yet here he is again, in book-length form, complaining along the way of the "smears" that he, Jim Garrison, has undergone. The prosecutor, who claims he can see conspiracies in Dallas and Washington but no organized crime in New Orleans, protests that, in his recent re-election campaign, "I was accused of everything from being connected to the Mafia to slapping my wife in public . . ." Both charges are at least as believable as the machinations alleged in *A Heritage of Stone*.