

# HBO gives Ray his day in court

By Brian Donlon  
USA TODAY

James Earl Ray hopes HBO's *Guilt or Innocence: The Trial of James Earl Ray* gives him a chance at freedom.

Ray gets a mock trial on HBO Sunday at 8 p.m. ET/PT, something his lawyer sought when legal efforts failed.

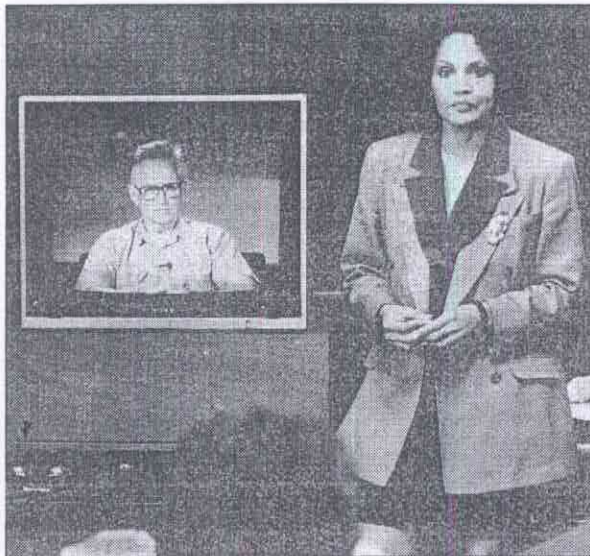
Jailed the past 24 years for the 1968 assassination of civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr., Ray says he pleaded guilty on the advice of his then-attorney, but changed his mind. He was denied a trial.

Ray doesn't know the outcome of the TV trial — HBO isn't revealing it ahead of time — and he won't be able to watch because Nashville's Riverbend Maximum Security Institution does not get HBO. Ray says his lawyer, William Pepper, "will watch it on a motel in town and come out and tell me what it is."

Ray hopes it will lead to a real trial, "But if this doesn't result in a not guilty verdict, at least it will all be on the record."

Although HBO says that Ray's then-lawyer Percy Foreman suggested the plea because Ray faced the death sentence, Ray says that's not true.

"The electric chair was never an issue. (Foreman) did mention it but he (also) said my father might go to jail, because he escaped from prison in 1924." There was also an im-



By Craig Blankenhorn, HBO  
**TRIAL BY TV:** Charlayne Hunter-Gault hosts 'Guilt or Innocence' on HBO; defendant James Earl Ray participates via TV monitor.

plication that Ray's brother would be indicted on a conspiracy charge. Ray says "to a certain extent" he pleaded guilty to spare his family.

The 10-day mock trial at Memphis' Shelby County Courthouse in January was edited to three hours. Ray testified via satellite from prison.

The jurors, lawyers and judge were paid for their services, but Ray was not. Producer Jack Saltman would not comment on the budget, but

the co-venture of Great Britain's Channel 4, Thames Television and HBO is said to have cost \$3 million.

The trial raises doubts that the bullet that killed King came from Ray's gun.

Says Ray, "(Attorney General) Janet Reno, all she has to do is to get a big wheelbarrow, get all of the (case's) classified documents and dump them on the floor."

► Did he do it? 10A

## Putting focus on King's killing

Although the assassination of John F. Kennedy has been examined in countless publications, TV documentaries and even movies, Martin Luther King Jr.'s death has drawn less attention.

"The difference between it and the Kennedy killing is that it has not been put under the microscope," says Jack Saltman, who produced HBO's *Guilt or Innocence*.

Saltman produced a documentary on the King assassination for Britain's Thames

Television in 1978. Last year, Ray's attorney, William Pepper, approached Saltman with the idea of a televised mock trial.

Four years ago, Showtime aired the trial of Kennedy assassin Lee Harvey Oswald; he was found guilty.

Saltman won't divulge the Ray verdict, but says this trial is different. "We have the defendant in court, albeit on the end of a television camera." Oswald was killed in 1963 before he could stand trial.

### TV PREVIEW

MATT ROUSH

## A trial without conviction

**Guilt or Innocence: The Trial of James Earl Ray**  
HBO  
Sunday, 8 p.m. ET/PT  
(★½ out of four)

If Oliver Stone ran Court TV, the result might look like *Guilt or Innocence: The Trial of James Earl Ray*, a turgid, conspiracy-laden "effort to probe the mystery" of Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination.

This three-hour distillation of a mock trial will be of greatest interest to those who thrive on "what ifs," and are dissatisfied with the cheesy likes of *Unsolved Mysteries*, which aired its own take this week.

As if "reality TV" needed another hybrid, HBO has come up with this doc-simulation of a day in court that never was — with Ray himself observing via monitor, like a wry Max Headroom.

The special comes up short because nothing really is at stake, other than giving Ray another chance to promote his sketchy scenarios.

Occasionally, a witness stands out, like the former FBI agent who took part in the agency's surveillance of King. What, though, does that have to do with the murder? The defense can't really pull it all together.

But that's just my opinion. Maybe the jury will differ.

HBO didn't include the verdict with its preview, and to its credit, I'll tune in late Sunday to get the word.