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The Tortuous Story Behind a PrimeTime Story

By EDWARD FELSENTHAL
Staff Reporter of The Wall Street Journal

A recent ABC "PrimeTime Live" story suggesting that Martin Luther King may have been assassinated by the mob had been rejected earlier by several other television programs because they said it was too difficult to prove. PrimeTime's decision to broadcast the story has renewed concerns within the industry about whether unproven stories are being aired because of increasingly intense competition among television newsmagazines.

ABC's King story, which aired Dec. 16, featured an exclusive interview with Lloyd Jowers, a former Memphis, Tenn., tavern owner. With his lawyer and an alleged accomplice by his side, Mr. Jowers disclosed that at the request of a grocer with reputed mob connections, he had hired a hit man—someone other than the confessed assassin James Earl Ray—to kill Dr. King in April 1968.

The four major networks already have nine weekly newsmagazines, and CBS, NBC and ABC each have another one in the works. Because they are all competing for provocative material, it is "easier than it was and easier than it ought to be" for people to get their allegations on the air, says Frederick Schauer, a professor at Harvard University's Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy. In the season to date, PrimeTime ranks 15th among all prime-time shows and third among newsmagazines, behind "60 Minutes" and "20/20."

"PrimeTime Live" didn't try to verify the King assassination tale, only to make sure that it wasn't impossible, according to Sam Donaldson, the co-anchor who did the story. "The story to me sounds very improbable," he says. But "the story was there," he adds. "It was hot. I thought it was responsible to say, 'Here's a story this guy wants to tell.'"

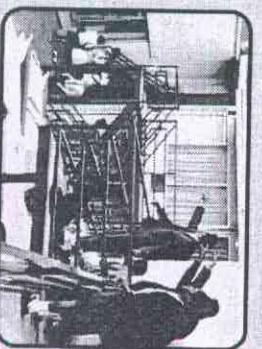
But by airing the piece, PrimeTime turned Mr. Jowers's 15 minutes of fame into a media frenzy. A Nashville, Tenn., paper set out to track down the gunman. A Memphis television station invited PrimeTime viewers to call in and found that 80% believed the story. The Rev. Joseph Lowery, president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, the civil-rights group that Dr. King once headed, has demanded

an official investigation. Before the interview with Mr. Jowers, Mr. Donaldson noted that some people already had labeled his story a hoax and warned viewers that the new allegations, 25 years after the assassination, must be greeted with skepticism.

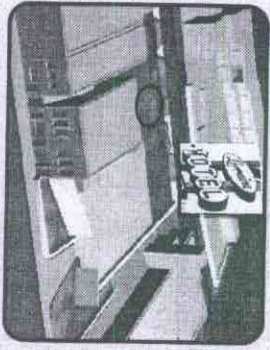
Scenes From the Show



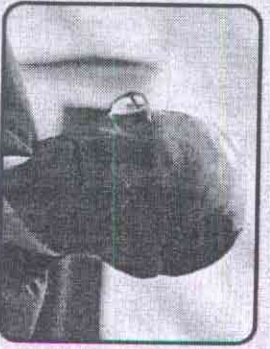
Sam Donaldson begins PrimeTime Live, which aired on Thursday, Dec. 16, with a startling story of a conspiracy to kill Dr. Martin Luther King.



According to Lloyd Jowers, the man who asked him to help in the assassination (the aftermath shown above) was a now-deceased Memphis produce dealer.



Behind Jim's Grill (owned and operated by Jowers) was a vacant lot that was where Dr. King was killed.



When Jowers was asked if he found someone to do the killing, he replied yes, before his lawyer could advise him not to answer the question.

client hadn't pursued any deals to sell the rights to the story, according to Ira Rosen, a PrimeTime senior producer. Nevertheless, a number of people involved seem to have some kind of stake in the story. William Pepper, Mr. Ray's lawyer since 1968, is writing a book based on the conspiracy theory and has talked with Oliver Stone about making a movie. Mr. Stone's publicist confirmed, although no such movie is currently in development. Mr. Pepper, who isn't charging for his work on the Ray case, says he simply wants to get the truth out. "The whole purpose [of going to the media] was to try to shed some public attention on the inactivity of the...prosecutor," he says.

As for Mr. Jowers, former U.S. attorney W. Hickman Ewing, who participated in a fictional trial of Mr. Ray on cable television last April, says the former bar owner offered to put a "different slant" on his testimony for the right price. Mr. Jowers, however, stands by his story and denies that he sought anything but his expenses in the televised trial, he says he might eventually consider selling his story but only if local authorities grant his request for immunity from prosecution, according to his lawyer, Lewis Garrison.

Memphis officials also claim to have a tape-recorded phone conversation in which one of Mr. Jowers's former employees, who is corroborating the tale, says she was offered money—it isn't clear by whom—for her story.

A story similar to PrimeTime's, but one that left out the identity of Mr. Jowers, came to light several months ago when a variety of people began shopping the conspiracy theory around to reporters. Gordon Freedman, a Hollywood producer with ties to Mr. Stone, helped rev the engine by sending Mr. Pepper to "60 Minutes" with the word that Mr. Stone was interested. The lawyer had come to Mr. Stone. Mr. Freedman says, because "Oliver is a way station for anybody doing

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How a Far-Out Conspiracy Theory Found Its Way Onto 'PrimeTime'

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Evening News," which, after talking with Mr. Pepper, went to Memphis to check it out but found "no material evidence to corroborate it," says producer Michael Singer. The story was also investigated by Jack Chesnutt, a producer for the NBC program "NOW," who says he was concerned about the lack of physical evidence, but hasn't ruled out a future broadcast. "This story is still unfolding," he says.

The story was also pitched to two separate producers at ABC's own "20/20." Each looked into the story independently, and each rejected it when they couldn't find enough evidence to back it up.

PrimeTime points out that it didn't first learn about the story from either Mr. Pepper or Mr. Jowers. Part of the story broke earlier this month when The London Observer published an article describing the allegations without naming Mr. Jowers, and other newspapers followed up. Messrs. Donaldson and Rosen say ABC picked up the tale from these news reports and was led to Mr. Jowers by Jack Saltman, a consultant whom ABC paid to help track down the story. Mr. Saltman knew the territory because he had produced the earlier televised mock trial on HBO.

Now infighting has broken out at the network over PrimeTime's decision to run the story. Bitter memos have circulated, some written by PrimeTime employees who objected to the piece, according to people who have seen the memos. But Mr. Rosen says Mr. Jowers's confession was

legitimate news: "The difference between us and everyone else is that nobody else had Jowers on the record saying what he said."

What of Mr. Jowers's story? He claims that the gunman — instead of firing from the window of the rooming house where Mr. Ray was staying — shot Dr. King from behind the brush on some sloping ground nearby. Skeptics have christened this area "the brushy knoll," an allusion to the grassy knoll in Dallas that figures in versions of the JFK assassination.

The money for the hit allegedly came from Frank Liberto, a deceased Memphis grocer with alleged ties to New Orleans mob boss Carlos Marcello, who is also dead. Although Mr. Jowers hasn't explained the mob's motive, Mr. Pepper and others involved in the case have attempted to do so. In some versions, the Mafia did the job as a favor to Dr. King's archenemy, Federal Bureau of Investigation chief J. Edgar Hoover. Others contend that the Central Intelligence Agency and the Green Berets had a role in the plot.

"I love the deal about the mob," says John Pierotti, a Memphis prosecutor who's convinced the whole affair is a hoax. "If organized crime people really are involved in this, Brother Jowers isn't going on television to say all this stuff because Brother Jowers is going to be pushing up daisies."

Despite prosecutor Pierotti's skepticism, the hype surrounding the story has forced his hand. Reluctantly, he says, he has now launched an investigation.