



Memphis businessman admits to

Exclusive

Andrew Billen

A RETIRED American businessman has confessed to hiring the assassin of civil rights leader Martin Luther King. The businessman, from Memphis, Tennessee, has applied for immunity from prosecution in return for naming the gunman and others behind the killing, 25 years ago.

His testimony and that of four other witnesses also seeking im-

munity apparently exonerates James Earl Ray, who is serving a 99-year sentence for the crime. Ray has long fought to prove his innocence. Although there has been much circumstantial evidence pointing to a conspiracy, this is the first time a principal participant has confessed.

King was killed on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel in Memphis on 4 April 1968. Ray, who was on the run from jail and had rented a room in a boarding house opposite the motel, was jailed after a two-and-a-half hour

hearing in 1969. The prosecution claimed he acted alone — the 'lone white racist' explanation.

The evidence of the five 'conspirators' — two men and three women — claims:

■ The killer was not Ray;

■ The shot that killed King came from the shrub area facing the Lorraine, not from Ray's rooming house, as alleged by the prosecution in 1969;

■ The man who hired the killer was paid in 'volumes of large bills' and retrieved the murder weapon after the shooting;

■ The hirer was assured that a 'decoy' (presumably Ray) had been arranged who would take the blame for the killing.

According to the businessman, who is white, the gunman was a local man with a reputation as a shot. He received \$10,000. It is not known if he is still alive.

The conspirator owned a business near the Lorraine. He went on to become a multi-millionaire, building his empire on the \$100,000 reward for organising King's assassination. He claims he was contracted by two men,

hiring Martin Luther King's assassin

one, now dead, a prominent local entrepreneur associated with New Orleans, and another still living in Tennessee. 'New Orleans' can be read as a synonym for the Mafia.

Two of the other four now seeking immunity were black women who worked for the businessman. A fourth witness, also a black woman, was his lover. She says she saw him breathlessly enter his premises holding the rifle after the shooting. The fifth witness, a black male, says he was approached later by the business-

man to 'take care' of people 'who knew too much'.

The five came forward only reluctantly. It seems they became convinced that a 16-year investigation by Dr Bill Pepper, Ray's lawyer, would sooner or later lead to their prosecution. They prefer to volunteer the truth in return for immunity.

The fact of their application has been confirmed by their lawyer, Lewis Garrison, who has videotaped their statements. The five have also been interviewed by a private detective who has

spoken at length to *The Observer*.

Dr Pepper, who has represented Ray since 1988, believes the new evidence will clear his client. He has become frustrated, however, by the reluctance of John Pierotti, the District Attorney-General in Memphis, to consider the immunity requests submitted to him in June.

Last Wednesday, Wayne Chastain, a local attorney acting on Dr Pepper's instructions, applied for a hearing before a Grand Jury in Tennessee in which he will name the five and put on

record their confessions. He is asking for the witnesses to be subpoenaed to give evidence in return for immunity.

Dr Pepper said: 'I believe the trail ultimately leads back to the FBI director, J. Edgar Hoover, and particular associates of his in the business and intelligence communities. I am convinced that in the not too distant future the world will have a very good idea of who was really behind Dr King's assassination.'

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The conspirator

Startling evidence has emerged on who really murdered Martin Luther King, writes **Andrew Billen**.

AT one minute past six on 4 April 1968, Dr Martin Luther King walked on to the balcony of the Lorraine Motel in Memphis, Tennessee, and smelt the evening air for the last time. A second later, a high-velocity bullet struck his jaw, severed his spine and made a hole big enough, said a civil rights colleague, for a fist. He was 39.

It was almost a year before the United States could believe King's killer had been found and jailed. A Memphis court heard the following March that the assassin was a southern lowlife called James Earl Ray, 40, a habitual criminal who had been on the run from jail at the time of the killing.

The motive alleged was simple: Ray was a racist, who was planning to emigrate to racially segregated Rhodesia. He pleaded guilty and was sentenced to 99 years in jail.

Even in 1969, 88 per cent of Americans were not convinced King was killed by an assassin working alone. Nine years later, the House Select Committee on Assassinations concluded Ray had been hired by 'conspirators unknown'.

Evidence has now come before a Grand Jury in Shelby County, Tennessee, suggesting the committee was both right and wrong: a conspiracy, yes, but one that involved Ray only in the role of patsy.

What distinguishes the new information from the evidence which regularly emerges from America's conspiracy machine is that it contains confessions. No one, after all, has ever admitted arranging the murder of John F. Kennedy. In Memphis, however, a successful businessman has signed an affidavit, videotaped in front of his lawyer, in which he admits hiring the gunman, standing near him when he fired and disposing of the gun.

Three other witnesses say they were close by when the

shot was fired. A fourth was hired to 'take care' of people who 'knew too much'.

The official version of King's killing has Ray arriving in Memphis the night before the shooting armed with a rifle he had bought in Birmingham, Alabama, on 30 March.

Reading in the local paper that King was staying at the Lorraine, he rented a room in a boarding house opposite the motel on the day of the shooting. He shot King from a bathroom window, fled and, in his panic, dropped his belongings, including the rifle.

The prosecution's only eyewitness was Charlie Stephens, the tenant staying next door to Ray, who claimed he heard the shot, and saw Ray turn at the end of the corridor and disappear down the stairs. A taxi driver has since testified that

confesses

Stephens was so drunk that afternoon that, when he arrived to pick him up shortly before the shooting, Stephens he was too far gone to get off his bed.

James Earl Ray is now 65 and has spent nearly 25 years in jail. He has long maintained that the only reason he was in Memphis was to buy a large-bore, deer-hunting rifle for a man he knew as 'Raoul', who was to meet him there. They had met in Montreal the previous summer and Ray had accepted money from him in return for smuggling across the US-Canadian border.

By March, says Ray, Raoul was interested in smuggling guns into Mexico. He asked Ray to bring a sample to Memphis, where Raoul was to meet buyers. He handed over the gun on 3 April and they met the next day at Ray's lodgings. Ray left Raoul there at about 5.15pm. When Ray returned shortly afterwards the place was awash with police. He fled.

The evidence of the five new witnesses supports Ray's version in the sense that it leaves him out. The only reference is to a 'decoy' to lead the man-hunt in the wrong direction. It also corroborates, for the first time, the existence of Raoul.

The five are seeking immunity from prosecution and cannot be named. But by talking to their lawyer, and the investigator and lawyer working for Dr William Pepper, the London-based barrister and US attorney representing Ray, we have sketchy portraits. In the request for immunity now with the District Attorney-General in Memphis, the five are referred to as colours.

The first, Witness Green, the principal in the story, is white, a semi-retired millionaire living outside Memphis. In 1968, he owned commercial premises near the Lorraine. He had close contacts with the Memphis police and was thought to have links with criminals. Witness Brown is black and was once Green's lover. At the time of the shooting, she worked for him, as did Witnesses Black

and Grey, also black women. The last is Witness White. He is black, a convicted murderer. In 1968 he already had a reputation as a hitman.

Each was traced in a 16-year hunt led by Dr Pepper. A key investigator is Kenneth Herman, 56, a southerner with a liking for alligator-skin boots. He spoke to *The Observer* last week. The story of the shooting now emerging is as follows:



James Earl Ray: Has long maintained his innocence.

Shortly before King visited Memphis, two local businessmen approached Green and told him his business was ideally located for an attempt to kill King. He was told that individuals in New Orleans would pay him \$100,000 to arrange the murder. (New Orleans is a virtual synonym for the Mafia.) A weapon would be provided.

At a later meeting, one of the 'contractors' was joined by a Hispanic-looking man, who assured Green that a decoy would be provided to ensure 'there would be no reason to suspect him or any of the other participants' in the assassination. Green, in a videotaped interview with his lawyer, said he understood this man to be the 'overseer' of the operation. He was called 'Raoul' — or 'Royall' in his pronunciation.

Green says he found his gunman in a local odd-jobber, a black man, rumoured to be educationally subnormal but who was a crack shot. Green hired him for \$10,000.

On 4 April, Green's gunman hid in tall shrubs facing the Lorraine. Green was nearby. Just after 6pm, Brown, Black and Grey, at work in Green's premises, heard the shot. Soon afterwards, Brown saw Green rush into the building carrying the rifle, which he disassembled and wrapped up. Later that day he boasted to Black that he had 'found' the gun that had killed King, but would hand it to the police.

Soon afterwards, Green became nervous of what he had told his staff and what Brown had seen. He sought out White, who, in his time, has been convicted of four killings. In his

affidavit, White says he was 'offered an amount to 'make certain that certain persons were not around to testify'.

Nothing, it seems, came of this until 1983 when Green asked White to kill his former lover. Shots were fired but Brown escaped. Later, Brown and White became lovers.

The five were advised to apply for immunity by Lewis Garrison, Green's lawyer. Garrison — who is no relation to Jim Garrison, the New Orleans District Attorney involved in the investigation into the Kennedy assassination — applied for immunity to John Pierotti, the District Attorney-General, in June. A summary of the information the five would give was delivered on 22 June. Pierotti says he will not act until the US government grants immunity.

Pepper, acting independently of Garrison, is now attempting to get the Memphis Grand Jury to subpoena the witnesses. The Grand Jury can also issue immunities.

Last week, Garrison confirmed he would apply for federal immunity for his clients: 'Without a doubt there has been a major miscarriage of justice. I would love now for the truth to come out but without immunity we may still be a very long way from justice.'

Like many Americans, Pepper believes the trail leads to FBI director J. Edgar Hoover and his business and intelligence associates. If he frees Ray, his next, larger task, will be to name those he believes conspired in back rooms, government offices and boardrooms far from Memphis.



Martin Luther King: Killed in 1969 by a single high-velocity bullet as he stood on a motel balcony in Memphis, Tennessee./Photograph by Leonard Freed.