

The Love of Money

Brother Against Brother in the King Case

By Mike Vinson

Probe welcomes Mike Vinson as a first-time contributor to our magazine. Vinson is a 44-year old author living in Tennessee. In the Spring of 1997, Vinson had a long, interesting conversation with a man in a local tavern. The conversation drifted to the assassination of Martin Luther King, and the man asked Vinson what he thought about the case, and more specifically, what he thought about James Earl Ray's guilt. Vinson said that he didn't know where the truth lay, but he felt we hadn't been told the whole truth about that event. His openness to finding the truth led his compadre to reveal his identity. Vinson had been talking to Jerry Ray, brother of James Earl Ray. Vinson has since published several articles on the case. He is also currently working on a biography of blues artist Lonnie Mack.

"I can solve the whole case right now. I don't care about James Earl Ray; he's dead. I don't care about the King family. I'm just interested in the money."
— John L. Ray, younger brother of James Earl Ray, the convicted but disputed assassin of Dr. Martin Luther King

Back on May 28, 1998, I attended the memorial service for James Earl Ray's cremated ashes, held at the Metropolitan Interdenominational Church in Nashville, Tennessee. After the service ended, I remember seeing, in the church's parking lot, a gentleman, mid-60s, milling amongst the abundant crowd, a mix of media personnel, those paying their respects, and curiosity-seekers. The thing that stood out about this man was that he was dressed in a loud shade of green. I remember thinking: this is a memorial service; St. Patrick's Day was back in March. Later that day I found out the "man in green" was none other than John Larry Ray, brother of James Earl and Jerry W. Ray.

I didn't give the name John Ray further thought until several days ago, when the news broke that he, for a monetary exchange, was willing to give up information detailing his brother's involvement in the King assassination. A few days ago, I spoke with Jerry Ray regarding John Ray's claims.

Jerry, what's up with this stuff your brother John is saying?

It's all lies, bullshit! There at the memorial for James, John told me he would go

whichever way would make him the most money, James guilty or not guilty in King's death. John never liked James, anyway, and John and I were never that close. I think he was jealous of James.

How so?

Because James was getting all the attention. See, John was locked up for all those years and nobody paid him any attention. And to beat all, John didn't see or talk to James from 1974 until he died this year.

What do you mean, didn't see or talk to him from 1974 until he died?

Okay, in 1974, James was granted a preliminary hearing in Memphis for a trial. John, myself and Attorney Arthur Hanes [James Earl Ray's original lead defense counsel in the King assassination] all testified at the preliminary. John was serving an 18-year sentence at the federal prison in Marion, Illinois for supposedly robbing a bank in St. Peters, Missouri. The only reason John saw James then was that he was subpoenaed and U.S. Marshals transported him from the prison in Marion to the Shelby County Jail in Memphis. He arrived at the jail one day before the hearing. James was transported from either the Brushy Mountain Prison or the Nashville Prison—can't remember which, it's been so long ago—and he also arrived at the Shelby County Jail a day before the hearing. John and James were placed in the same cellblock, and, for that one-day or so leading up to the preliminary, they were able to talk.

When did John start serving his sentence for allegedly robbing the bank in St. Peters, Missouri?

Around 1971, best I remember.

How long has John been out of prison?

Just a few years. Like I said, John received an 18-year sentence for robbing the bank in St. Peters. Ever so often, he'd make parole, then violate his parole and be sent back to Marion. Since this was a federal prison, his time out, while on parole, didn't count. So, when he went back his time started where it had stopped. That's the reason he went in 1971 and wasn't released until some time in the 90s.

Okay, what about the time from James' escape from the Missouri State Penitentiary, April 1967, until the preliminary hearing in 1974?

Well, between the time James escaped from the Missouri State prison, in April 1967, and the time James was picked up in London, En-

gland, June 1968, for King's murder, John and James, and myself, for that matter, were in each other's company a few times.

Go into it a little deeper.

Well, I'll only go so deep, but I'll tell you this: just a couple days after James escaped from the Missouri State Prison, late April 1967, John, James and I met at the Fairview Hotel in Chicago. John was living in St. Louis, and, well—let's just say he was with James and me at the Fairview this particular day. We spent the night at the Fairview. John and I each gave James \$100.00. The next morning we all checked out of the Fairview. John drove back to St. Louis; I caught a bus back to Northbrook [suburb of Chicago, approximately 25 miles away], and James rented a room somewhere nearby. A few days later, James relocated in Winnetka, near where I was employed and living—The Sportsman's Country Club—in Northbrook, Illinois. James got a job as a dishwasher at a restaurant in Winnetka. For a couple months or so, James and I met—about once a week—at a bar that was convenient for both of us. Sometime around July 1967, I met with James for the last time before the assassination. He told me he was leaving, and that from that time forward he would be known as "Eric Starvo Galt."

So, what you're saying is that from the time James escaped from the Missouri State Prison in April 1967 until he died in April 1998, James and John were in each other's company only a few times, right after the escape and the day before the preliminary hearing in Memphis in 1974?

That's close. Ah, best I remember, John did visit James two or three times in the Shelby County Jail, between 1968 and 1969. And, sometime around 1970, he visited him in the Nashville Prison, but that's about it. But to show you how much John knows about James' involvement in the King assassination, let me get back to him using the alias Eric Starvo Galt.

Let's hear it.

Like I just said, James—the night before he left Illinois, July of 1967—told me from that point onward he would be going by the alias Eric Starvo Galt. On April 4, 1968, I heard the news that King had been assassinated and the suspect was a white male named Eric Starvo Galt. Now, remember, John was living in St. Louis and hadn't talked to James in almost a year. So, I drove to St. Louis and told

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John Ray

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John the story about James using Eric Starvo Galt as an alias. John was completely surprised. He'd been listening to the news and no early idea that the Eric Starvo Galt wanted for murdering Martin Luther King was his brother. There's something I want to mention before we go any further.

Go for it.

One of the reasons John didn't visit James was that James didn't want him to. James knew John was driven by money and would say anything to get money.

Okay, Jerry, a man named Conrad 'Pete' Baetz was quoted as saying the following: "John Ray probably is the last living soul in this country that knows what happened to Martin Luther King." What do you know about Conrad Baetz?

He was—is—a patsy for the government. He'll say what they tell him to say. In fact, he once arrested John when he violated parole, and the House Select Committee on Assassinations, when they reviewed the King assassination in 1978, hired him as an investigator. If you dig into Conrad Baetz, you'll find some shady surroundings.

Writer's aside: In 1978, Conrad Baetz supposedly approached John Paul Spica, a man with known underworld ties, about James Earl Ray's involvement in the King assassination. Spica had been an inmate in the Missouri State Prison when James Earl was there. Word circulated that Spica had told James Earl of a \$50,000 bounty being offered to kill King. Being an investigator for the House Select Committee, this rumor was, no doubt, of interest to Baetz.

Spica claimed he met with Baetz, sitting in Baetz' car and covertly recording the exchange between them. He went on to claim that Baetz said the committee knew the public would never buy a story of one man—"a lone nut"—killing King just to be doing it, and the committee wanted to connect James Earl

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to the \$50,000 bounty. Baetz told Spica that he, Spica, needed to go before the committee and testify that he told James Earl about the bounty, and that James Earl appeared interested. In their next meeting, Spica claimed he gave Baetz a duplicate recording of their conversation and told Baetz to get lost.

Jerry Ray, hearing what had transpired between Spica and Baetz, approached Spica about acquiring a copy of the tape. Spica declined, saying the tape would be of no value once it got into the hands of a third party. If anybody was going to do any "blackmailing" it would be him, he roared.

On the morning of November 8, 1979, John Paul Spica left his home in Richmond Heights, St. Louis and climbed into his Cadillac. Seconds later, a powerful bomb exploded underneath the Cadillac, blowing off both legs. John Paul Spica was dead. [For more on Baetz's antics, see the previous issue of *Probe*. —Eds.]

Jerry, do you have any comment on what Shelby County District Attorney General Bill Gibbons recently said, that U.S. Attorney General Reno "should explore whether or not James Earl Ray's brothers were also involved in any way"?

I would like to commend Bill Gibbons for making an intelligent statement, for his benefit, at least. You see, if the investigation focuses on us then it will divert the attention from those who actually killed King. Look here, Gibbons is a government employee. Do you think, for one second, he's going to piss off those who can affect his career—FBI, Justice Department—for the sake of getting to the truth? Hell no, he ain't!

Well folks, there you have it, truth versus lie, brother verses brother. Does John Ray know something that will close the book on this historically altering event? Or is "the man in green" seeking green? Is the government genuinely interested in what he has to say or will it merely use him and turn its back on him once it has what it wants? ♦

"For the love of money is the root of all evil."

Timothy 6:10

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