

DAN MOLDEA'S LONELY BEAT



The free-lance journalist
set out to show that
Sirhan Sirhan didn't kill
RFK and wound up with
an even tougher task:
proving that he did

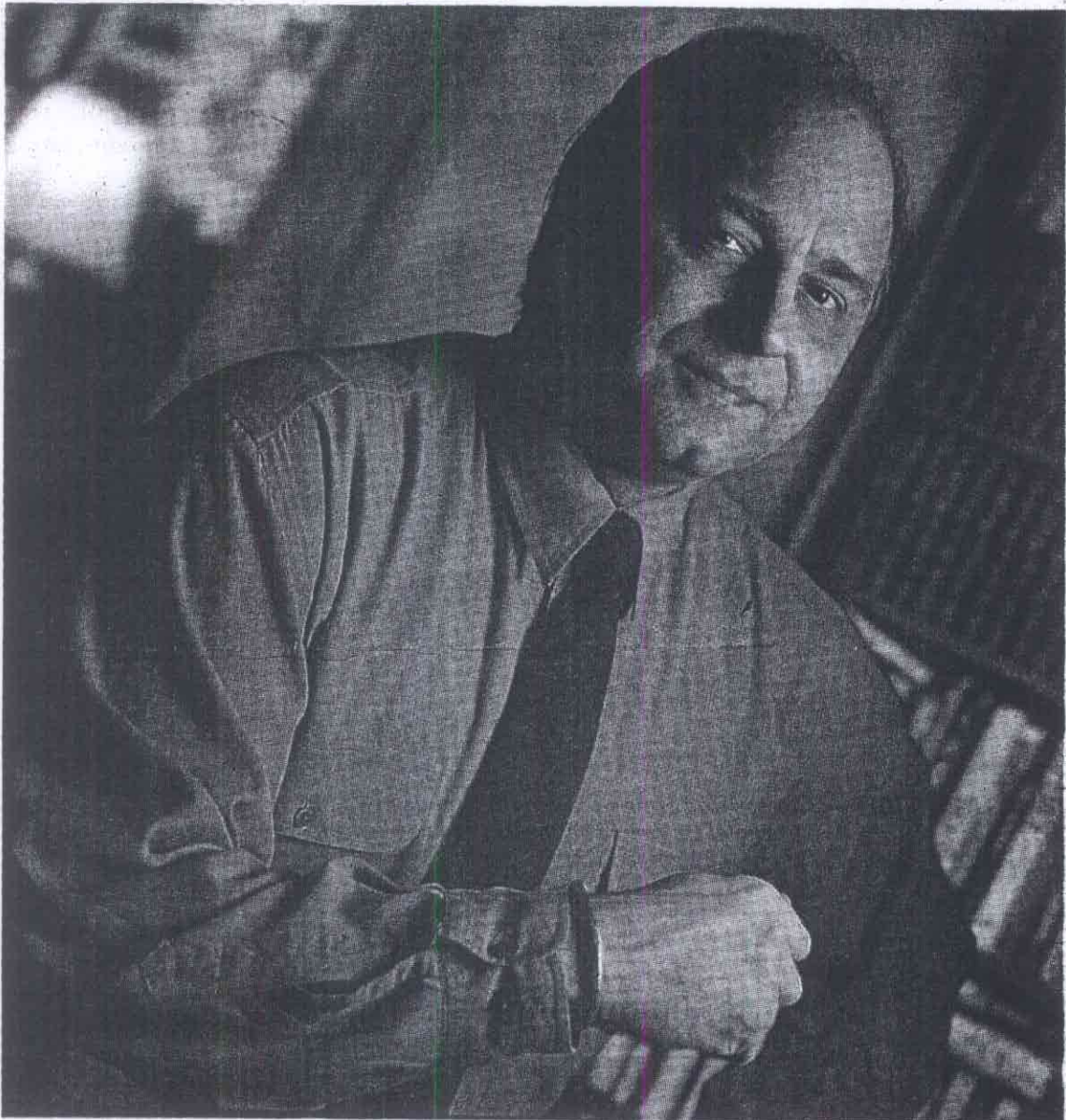
By John Aloysius Farrell
GLOBE STAFF

WASHINGTON - Dan Moldea may qualify as a Last Angry Man. A tough guy. A rough and rugged knight-errant in a world of corporations and computers.

Moldea has spent a lifetime as a free-lance investigative reporter, hanging out with Teamster types, infiltrating Mafia bars, challenging the official version of John F. Kennedy's assassination and chronicling the Mob's relationship with such American icons as Jimmy Hoffa, Ronald Reagan and the National Football League.

The literary world is filled with gripes and braggadocio, but it was Moldea who sued The New York Times Book Review and, shrugging off the reprobation of newspaper editorialists and other protectors of the First Amendment, carried his case to the US Supreme Court.

Not a great career move: taking on the bible of book reviews. Pretty nervy for a free-lance writer.



GLOBE PHOTO / KATHERINE LAMBERT

"When I started in this project the evidence I saw indicated to me that there was something else going on," says the author.

"I'd like to think I clank a little bit when I walk," says Moldea.

So perhaps the editors at W. W. Norton & Co. should have seen it coming when, in the spring of 1994, Moldea informed them of a change of course.

Norton had given Moldea a contract and a \$75,000 advance for a book to show that someone other than

Sirhan Sirhan shot and killed Sen. Robert F. Kennedy in a pantry of the Ambassador Hotel in Los Angeles on June 5, 1968.

The writer had delivered 27 chapters to Norton, painstakingly building the case that a security guard named Thane (Gene) Cesar had, inadvertently or

MOLDEA, Page 58

■ MOLDEA

Continued from Page 53

deliberately, fired the fatal shots.

"But then I'm at the American booksellers' convention in Los Angeles and I see my editor, Sturling Lawrence, from Norton," says Moldea. "And we are standing outside the convention center and Star says, 'I just read the 27 chapters. Fantastic. I'm a believer, man. There were two guns in the room.'"

"And I go, 'Um . . . well . . . listen

"And he goes, 'Oh no. Oh no,'" Moldea recalls.

Full circle

To Lawrence's dismay, Moldea informed him that, after 10 years of striving to show that someone other than Sirhan had shot Kennedy, his investigation had come full circle. In a series of jailhouse confrontations with Sirhan, Moldea reached the inescapable conclusion that, in the words that end his book: "Sirhan Bishara Sirhan consciously and knowingly murdered Senator Robert Kennedy, and he acted alone."

"I walked out of that last Sirhan interview and I had myself a problem," Moldea says. "From a publishing point of view, I am telling society something they already know."

That Moldea could carry off such a trick is a testament to his skill as a writer and investigator. "The Killing of Robert F. Kennedy: An Investigation of Motive, Means, and Opportunity" has been met by generally favorable reviews, including two in the pages of his old adversary, The New York Times.

Resisting the temptation to trade in today's hot market for conspiracy, Moldea crafted instead a nonfiction version of a "Columbo" movie, in which the murderer is known from the opening scene and the grip of the story comes from the twists and

turns of his investigation: a howdunit more than whodunit.

"The adventure is not so much the destination," Moldea says, "but rather the trip to get there."

Along the way — in these days of fear and paranoia — Moldea performs a public service. His book is, above all else, an anatomy of conspiracy theory: a dissection of how blundering public officials, in trying to cover up their own quite human mistakes, can fuel wilder suspicions and doubts. Though Kennedy died in 1968, the lessons of Moldea's book are as relevant as today's headlines about Whitewater, Waco or Ruby Ridge.

"When the police conceal evidence that should be made public it does nothing more than bring about the conspiracy theorists," says Moldea. "Especially in this case: You have the police concealing the files for years, you have them destroying evidence, misrepresenting key facts. Does this embolden us to have confidence in their work? Of course not."

Moldea speaks as a true believer. He did groundbreaking work on the Mafia's potential involvement in the assassination of John F. Kennedy (and still believes that Hoffa and the Mob played a role), and in the last 10 years kept questioning about the Robert Kennedy case alive, working to spring the release of thousands of pages of official records.

Of all the writers who have challenged the official verdict on the Kennedy assassinations, his careful and low-key work won the quiet respect, if never the public endorsement, of the Kennedy family's aides and advisers. He has dedicated his latest book to the memory of Robert Kennedy's own star investigator, the late Walter Sheridan.

"Let me tell you. When I started in this project the evidence I saw indicated to me that there was something else going on. I was a believer.



GLOBE PHOTO / AMY TOENSING

"As far as me and my future and my credibility . . . the jury is out on me right now," says the author of "The Killing of Robert F. Kennedy."

I believed there were two guns in the room," Moldea says, munching on the incongruous combination of mussels Provençal and French fries at a Washington saloon one afternoon.

"I believed that the security guard may have fired the bullets that actually hit Bobby Kennedy. I didn't know if it was intentional or accidental or in retaliation to the fact that he was under fire. But I believed that there was something else that had gone on," Moldea says.

Kennedy's autopsy, for example, concluded that the senator was shot at point-blank range, but of the dozen eyewitnesses to the murder, none saw Sirhan get that close. Though the autopsy showed that the senator was shot in the back of the head, the witnesses said Sirhan was face-to-face with Kennedy.

An FBI report of the crime scene offered another riddle: Though Sirhan's gun was an eight-shot revolver, and seven bullets were recovered

from the bodies of his dead and wounded victims, FBI agents identified and photographed four "bullet holes" in the pantry door frames behind Kennedy. Where did the extra bullets come from?

And when a court-ordered firearms panel test-fired Sirhan's gun in 1975, the grooves and markings left on the test bullets did not match those of the slugs removed from Kennedy and the others in 1968.

...

Tracking down a suspect

Cesar, the armed security guard who was standing directly behind Kennedy when the senator was shot, was thought by the authorities to be dead when Moldea found him, alive and well, in California in 1987.

"He had worked for George Wallace. He was a big right-winger . . . hard-core . . . predicting race wars and stuff like that. He loved guns and he hated Kennedy," said Moldea.

"I thought I was going to make history that day. I had three tape recorders on. I thought I was going to get him to confess," says Moldea. "But he was not unnerved by me, looked me straight in the eye, never refused to answer a question, never went off the record."

Puzzled but undeterred, Moldea spent years winning Cesar's confidence and finally convinced him to take a polygraph exam. The guard passed the lie detector test, leaving Moldea to wonder: "Then who really did kill Senator Kennedy?"

For Moldea, the question was more than academic. The flap over his libel suit against the Times — which he filed after reviewer Gerald Eskenazi accused him of "sloppy journalism" in the book on organized crime's influence on pro football, and which ended with the US Supreme Court refusing to review the case — raised the stakes for his Kennedy book.

"As far as me and my future and my credibility . . . the jury is out on me right now," said Moldea. "I have a woman who's been with me off and on for seven years now. She's been very supportive. But I don't have a family: I have forsaken that until I can establish who I am. It's been 21 years now and five books and I'm still trying to establish who I am. I'm 45 now and I'm getting tired."

With the zeal with which he confronted Cesar and the Times, Moldea directed his efforts at prying documents and testimony on the RFK murder from the California authorities. He got records made public, and talked to cops who had never been interviewed. The police solved the crime in 1968, Moldea says, but he solved the mystery in 1995.

How does Moldea explain the puzzling discrepancies that once drove him to suspect a second gun?

Moldea concludes that the Los

Angeles Police Department got the sequence of shots wrong when it concluded that Robert Kennedy was hit by Sirhan's first shot. He contends that the first shot missed Kennedy but caused the senator to turn and raise his arm, exposing his side and the back of his head to Sirhan's muzzle, into which Kennedy was fatally pushed by the crowd in the resultant turmoil.

Souvenir bullets

As for the mismatched markings on the bullets from Sirhan's gun, Moldea discovered that police investigators, eager for souvenirs, had fired dozens of test bullets from the revolver without cleaning the barrel. The buildup of lead and other residue would have changed the characteristic grooves left on the bullets fired by the court-appointed panel in 1975.

And when it came to the four extra "bullet holes," Moldea tracked down most of the police officers who claim to have seen the holes, and found that they generally were relating second-hand information from a single, untrained sheriff's deputy. (Though there is one FBI agent who claims to have actually seen lead slugs in two of the bullet holes that night.)

In the end, Moldea chose journalistic integrity over the commercial possibilities of a fresh conspiracy theory. He produced a book that stands as a companion to "Case Closed," author Gerald Posner's debunking of JFK assassination tales.

Now Moldea awaits the book industry's verdict.

"Like I said, the jury is out on me," Moldea says. "I love the work. I love the investigations, the reporting, the colleagues. I love everything I do except the business. The business is something I've never been good at."