

Assassination 'Plot' Probe Fits the Bill

New Orleans Likes Its Rumors Wild

By George Lardner Jr. 3/12/67
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NEW ORLEANS—There is a definite link, as A. J. Liebling once observed, "between Louisiana and the rest of the Arab world."

It likes coffee hot, politics exotic, plots thick and rumors wild.

An incomparable blend is being mixed during District Attorney Jim Garrison's investigation of the assassination of President Kennedy. New Orleans is charming, gracious and at the moment also very much like a large, open-air loony bin.

Interrogations last week were enlivened by a 52-year-old entertainer who said he sang for Jack Ruby and an Orleans Parish prisoner who reportedly claims that he knew both Ruby and Lee Harvey Oswald in Illinois.

The singer, Clyde Limbaugh 52, soft-shoed into the D.A.'s office uninvited, then came out to tell an unenthusiastic press all about it.

"I think it's a queer ring," he rasped. Ruby, he asserted, was one of them. Limbaugh also declared that he saw Ruby in the hospital "four days before he died," though it is fairly certain



Garrison Shaw

... "when the time is right"

that he could have seen the tightly guarded Ruby then only in his dreams.

At this point, William Gurvich, the dapper private detective overseeing much of the investigation as Garrison's special aide, happened into the corridor.

"This sort of thing makes a mockery of our investigation," Gurvich moaned. "This man is totally unreliable."

Garrison's critics are suggesting as

much of the DA's own, so-far anonymous informants. Yet the towering, 6-foot-8 District Attorney continues to insist quite confidently that he will prove the late President's death was the result of a plot, or more precisely several plots, that flowered here.

Anyone who bets against him, Garrison says, will lose, and having repeated himself, again and again, he has made a world still troubled by the assassination and dissatisfied with the Warren Commission's report sit up and take notice.

The consensus in New Orleans' political circles — roughly defined as any place where you can buy a drink, a cup of coffee or a cab ride—seems to be that Garrison may be able to come out on top, whether he wins any convictions or not.

At the Fontainebleau Motel, gruff, gray-haired Pershing Gervais, who was Garrison's top investigator for several years and now hangs out in the coffee shop there, summed up this viewpoint. "Sure I think he'll come out on top," he said. "So what if everybody's found not guilty? That doesn't disprove any-

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thing. Garrison's the kind of guy who'll bet on a million-to-one shot and be happy if he comes up with a dime."

Garrison relied heavily on Gervais, an old Army buddy and one-time police sergeant, until Gervais became a political issue in the 1965 campaign and quit to take the heat off his boss.

Once in the 1950s Gervais made headlines by making off with "graft pay-offs" at his police station: "the captain's office is deserted and on his desk, what's this? I see the box of graft envelopes, so I take 'em". The D.A. still calls on Gervais frequently for advice, but Gervais says he has resisted suggestions that he involve himself more fully.

"This isn't my kind of investigation," he says with an engaging smile. "I'm strictly a door-crasher and head-knocker." But if the price were right, Pershing allows, he could have solved the assassination long ago.

"Tell me what you want to prove," he said. "I'll come up with a mountain of affidavits. I'll prove anything you want. What's more, if you change your mind, just gimme seven days' notice and I'll turn it around."

But Garrison, Gervais says, is "more scrupulous than I would be." And while

Pershing believes in "nothing — absolutely nothing," the D.A. seems convinced in his own mind that he has the assassination "solved."

That "solution" has yet to be unfolded, and Garrison is still working hard at leads. He has already accused New Orleans businessman Clay Shaw — whose private life, friends say, left him at ease in New Orleans' homosexual circles—of taking part, in the flat of free-lance pilot David W. Ferrie in September, 1963, in "a conspiracy to murder John F. Kennedy." Among the "others" present at the meetings, Garrison says, was Lee Harvey Oswald, the man the Warren Commission says acted alone in assassinating the late President.

More arrests, Garrison has said, will be made "when the time is right."

Even if the investigation fizzles it may very well splash mud on the Warren Commission and the FBI. Garrison, for example, has accused Shaw of being "Clay Bertrand," a mysterious figure who, the Warren Commission was told by one witness, sought legal help for "gay kids" and for Oswald in the year of the assassination.

The FBI never found Bertrand and the Warren Commission suggested that he never existed. Now sources in the

Justice Department are suggesting that the FBI never really tried to find Bertrand because it concluded that he had nothing to do with the assassination anyway. That may very well be true, but if Garrison can show that Shaw is Bertrand—which Shaw had vehemently denied—he will have cast one more nagging doubt about the Warren Commission's work.

Meanwhile, the incredibilia keep piling up:

Reporters, just for kicks, have been giving out wryly unbelievable rumors — and getting them backs as "tips" days later. One jokingly suggested last week that Garrison and Gervais had a "suicide pact" going if the investigation didn't work out. This week he was told all about it at City Hall.

Even the Garrison home has been affected. His wife, a blonde mother of five, says she heard a rumor over a radio station the other night that "he'd been shot." "I just went to pieces," said Mrs. Garrison, until he came in about 20 minutes later. The District Attorney, she added, sometimes used to forget the gun he wears stuck in his waistband, "but not any more."

Suggestions that Sen. Robert F. Kennedy (D-N.Y.) is watching closely and

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even encouraging Garrison in his pursuit are being dropped around town, apparently by lawyer Sam Monk Zelden. Zelden represents Dean Adams Andrews Jr., the attorney who told the Warren Commission about "Clay Bertrand." Zelden, so the story goes, is supposed to have seen some White House aides in Washington recently (there is no record of it) to alert the President. In turn, Zelden has been asking rhetorically "who do ya think planted" a recent column by Jack Anderson suggesting that RFK "may have approved" a CIA plot to assassinate Cuban Premier Fidel Castro, resulting in a Castro counterplot to kill President Kennedy. Asked about all this, Zelden simply plays coy.

The only rational response to this and more must be to pinch yourself daily. Garrison already has a ready-made fall guy, which is, quite simply, the press. The D.A. has maintained that he would still be steadily, quietly pursuing his investigation, sans uproar, sans rumors, if the New Orleans States-Item had not been so irresponsible as to publish the fact Feb. 17 that he was hard at work.

At a press conference two days later, Garrison complained of the "premature

publicity" and declared: "Anyone who says I had seen that story before it was published is a liar."

A States-Item reporter says Garrison was shown a copy of it the previous day, looked at the first page and refused to go any further.

"Garrison," the States-Item additionally reported, "did not ask that the story be withheld, did not say that it would damage his investigation."

The newspaper added that Garrison was then told the States-Item planned to publish the story and quoted the District Attorney as responding "go ahead."

Since then, the D.A. has had much to say, to reporters from around the world. He has clearly hinted that the conspiracy he is tracking down was first directed at Castro, perhaps botched by Oswald when he failed in his attempts to get to Havana and then re-directed at President Kennedy in retribution for the failure of the Bay of Pigs invasion. But Garrison's public pronouncements are much more cryptic than this. They sound like Alice-in-the-Casbah.

"It's like 'through the looking glass'" he has said. "Black is white and white is black."

In such a world anything is possible:

Oswald seems to have been the real assassin, therefore he wasn't. Oswald seems to have been a Communist. Therefore he wasn't.

Oswald seems to have acted alone. Therefore he was somehow tied with homosexuals and Cuban freedom fighters who in turn may have been linked up with anyone and everyone from the CIA to the Mafia to Jack Ruby. (The Warren Commission investigated rumors that both Oswald and Ruby might have been homosexuals but said "no evidence has been uncovered to support the rumors (and) the closest acquaintances of both men emphatically deny them.")

Whatever happens, scholarly dissertations will be written about it a hundred years hence.

In "The Gret Stet of Loosiana," though, Jim Garrison may already be home free.

When Huey Long was assassinated in Baton Rouge, there was a story current that wealthy Republicans had given him a secret million-dollar campaign fund to attack President Roosevelt in the 1936 campaign.

The money was never found, a dark circumstance which in Great State political circles shows that it must have existed.