

King Assassination:

FBI ignored its Miami informer

Told of information uncovered in our investigation, a Justice Department attorney — obviously taken aback — called the previously unpublished police memo 'as interesting a piece of information as I've ever heard'

By Dan Christensen

At 6:01 p.m. on April 4, 1968, a single shot rang out in Memphis, Tennessee. In that moment, the civil rights movement lost its greatest leader.

The assassin(s) who struck was not alone in knowing that Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was destined for violent death. A Miami police/FBI informer had learned of a plot and warned his superiors the previous day.

This astonishing revelation is one of several previously unpublished facts contained in a series of 1968 Miami Police Department memoranda obtained by Miami Magazine in its probe of Dade County's link to the assassinations of President John F. Kennedy and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

Last month Miami Magazine exposed new evidence and raised new questions concerning the Kennedy killing. Much of our information came from materials provided to law enforcement agencies by professional informant and two-bit union organizer, Willie Augustus Somerset. In this

report on King, Somerset, who died in 1970, is again the chief provider.

Copies of Somerset's debriefings, contained in police memos on King, were furnished us, almost as an afterthought, by Dade Circuit Judge Seymour Gelber while he was aiding our investigation of the Kennedy assassination. The Dade State Attorney's office cannot find its files on the matter, despite an exhaustive search undertaken several months ago at Miami Magazine's request. Miami police, through a public information officer, would only say, "We don't have any files on that subject at all. I don't know if it was destroyed or what."

Martin Luther King Jr. first went to Memphis in March, 1968 to help organize the 1,300 mostly black sanitation workers who had been striking since Feb. 12 for higher wages and better working conditions. While there, he led a parade on behalf of the strikers, represented by Local 1733 of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees.



Illustration: Martin Kekeli

Courtesy of Miller & King Gallery

Violence flared and one black youth was killed, 60 were injured and 200 arrested. Deeply disturbed, King suspended his activities, but promised to return to Memphis when the situation calmed.

Somersett's dour prediction in Miami came in a confidential memorandum dated April 25, 1968, written by former police Lt. Charles H. Sapp and addressed to Miami's late Chief of Police Walter E. Headley.

The memo begins:

"On Wednesday, April 17, 1968, informant '88' (Somersett's police code name) went to Atlanta, Ga. in an effort to find more information concerning the death of Martin Luther King. This informant remained in Atlanta until April 22 and returned to Miami on April 23, 1968. Informant contacted me (Lt. Sapp) and we met in the downtown area of Miami. This informant states that on April 1, 1968 he was in Washington, D.C., attending a (National) Labor Relations Board meeting, and when it adjourned he overheard a conversation between members of the Longshoremen's Union and the Sanitation Workers' Union in which they discussed the sanitation workers' predicament in Memphis, (the crisis that brought King to Memphis). One spokesman stated that 'when Martin Luther King returns to Memphis, we don't have any alternative but to kill him. He has stopped being a preacher and is interfering as a labor organizer and has caused one riot in Memphis and one man's death and that he is hurting the labor cause rather than helping it.'

"When the informant returned to Miami on April 4, he heard by the news media that Martin Luther King had in fact returned to Memphis and was going to lead a parade the following day. This informant feared that he might be a suspect and questioned concerning anything that might

Richard Gerstein: big assist

happen to Martin Luther King. He went to a filling station and garage operated by Mr. Frank Love, on the corner of NE 1st Avenue and 10th Street, and during a conversation, told him that he believed that Martin Luther King would be assassinated that night and stated his reasons for believing so. This statement was allegedly made in front of Frank Love (now dead) and two or three of his Negro employees at the garage. This occurred at approximately 4 p.m., after which King was murdered at approximately 7 p.m. (EST).

"On April 25 this reporter (Lt. Sapp) contacted Frank Love at his place of business and Mr. Love reluctantly verified the statements made by the informant. Also, one of the Negro employees, at this time known only as George, verified the informant's statement (George remains unidentified today)."

What Sapp doesn't say in the memo, but told me when I asked him was that Somersett had made the same

Seymour Gelber: initial leads

prediction to him, as well, the day prior to the murder.

"He called me at my home the night before King was killed to let me know that if something happened he didn't want to be connected to it," Sapp recalled. (Apparently, Somersett feared his background as a KKK member and blatant racist made him a suspect.)

"I don't think that I told the FBI before Martin Luther King was assassinated because the information he gave me was so vague," Sapp continued, "but I know I definitely did (tell them) after. We also passed on all subsequent information developed."

Did Willie Somersett, a veteran FBI undercover informant, give the news directly to the FBI prior to the shooting? Says Sapp, "I couldn't even guess if he did . . . but he certainly was working for the FBI during that time, as well as with us."

Martin Luther King Jr. returned to Memphis on April 3, 1968, and along with his entourage, checked into the Lorraine Motel.

That night, in a fiery speech before 2,000 followers, King seemed to know what fate awaited him: "It really doesn't matter with me now," he shouted, "because I've been to the mountaintop! And I don't mind. Like anybody I would like to live a long life; longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will! And he's allowed me to go up to the mountaintop, and I've looked over and I've seen the promised land . . . So I'm happy tonight; I'm not

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Sen. Kennedy's name pops up, too

An interesting sidelight appears in the April 25 memo in which Willie Somersett's prediction of Martin Luther King's assassination is recorded. In the fifth and final paragraph of that memo, Somersett speaks of another person who would soon be cut down by gunfire, Robert F. Kennedy.

The memo states: "Informant also learned that for some reason Senator Robert Kennedy is being 'guarded' by members of the KKK at all of his public appearances throughout his presidential campaign. At this time it is not known if Senator Kennedy is under surveillance for his own protection or for other motives."

Kennedy was shot to death on June 5, 1968, in the pantry of the Ambassador Hotel in Los Angeles.

Continued from page 31

worried about anything; I'm not fearing any man!"

Within 22 hours this Nobel Peace Prize winner would be killed on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel by a sniper's bullet that would rip into his neck and jaw and sever his spinal column. He would die instantly.

Two months later, after an international manhunt, James Earl Ray — habitual criminal, penny-ante hood and escapee from the Missouri State Penitentiary — was captured at London's Heathrow Airport. On March 10, 1969, he pleaded guilty to first-degree murder in Dr. King's death and was sentenced to 99 years in jail. In what has come to be called his 'mini-trial,' Ray hinted of a conspiracy.

By 1968, Willie A. Somerset's relationship with the FBI had been a long and enduring one. Independent accounts given by his brother, Rufus, and Miami Detective Sgt. Sapp, indicate the relationship began in the early 1950s while Somerset served time for white slavery in a federal prison in Atlanta. In return for his good works as a stool pigeon on the inside, he was released early and continued to sing for the federals whenever they called. He later expanded his clientele to include the Miami PD, ostensibly, says Sapp, because he feared and mistrusted the Bureau.

Perhaps his most important role came on Nov. 9, 1963 when he and right-wing extremist Joseph A. Milteer were tape-recorded by Miami police undercover agents as Milteer described President Kennedy's impending murder in Dallas. Almost incidentally during that conversation, Milteer spoke of an earlier plot to kill King in Atlanta by one Jack Brown, a Klan member who reportedly died in 1965.

After King's death in 1968, this 1963 tape-recording would help trigger the Miami PD and Dade State Attorney's investigation into his death. Judge Gelber, then an assistant attorney general for Florida, says another reason was a similar threat made in May, 1964 by a former Miami housepainter, (name withheld), who Somerset reported, planned to kill King on May 17, 1964 in Mobile, Ala.

In a letter dated April 9, 1968 Gelber wrote then-U.S. Attorney General Ramsey Clark, telling him of these threats. A reply, sent the following week by one of Clark's aides, indicated the FBI had been informed of Gelber's statements. Gelber, however,

never heard from either Clark or the FBI again.

Throughout the spring and summer of 1968, at the State of Florida's expense, Somerset continued to explore the King assassination in trips around the South. In the additional memos we have obtained (dated April 30, June 11, July 3, July 8 and August 29) no mention is ever again made of Somerset's prediction. The proposal for Somerset's undercover investigations, contained in the April 30 memo written by Sgts. Everett Kay and E.W. McCracken, simply refers to the 1963 Milteer tape as the basis for action.

"Informant '88' feels that by contacting such persons as the above (Milteer and Brown) information will be gained as to what extent these people, if any, are involved in this assassination."

The use of "concealed electronic devices" to tape-record Somerset's conversations also was suggested.

It appears that Somerset, out of contact with Milteer and Brown since the Kennedy assassination when they began to suspect he was an informant, did not know of Brown's death in 1965. Despite using the tape-recording as a rationale for investigating, there is no real indication that Somerset ever contacted Milteer on the Martin Luther King Jr. matter.

According to former Miami Police Sgt. Everett Kay, surreptitious taping was tried only once, in Atlanta, and failed to produce any results. No memorandum on this particular incident was ever located.

Perhaps Somerset's suspicions about Milteer were valid. In a trip to Milteer's home in Quitman, Ga., in late July, I found a letter dated April 19, 1968 written to Milteer by Woody Kerns, his close friend and political ally (they both belonged to the right-wing Constitution Party).

In the first paragraph, Kerns, a West Virginian, makes a cryptic reference, apparently to the King assassination.

"Looks as though you (Milteer) and the hunted suspect were in the capital area about the same time. They found a car there — they say." Kerns evidently was referring to Atlanta, where the FBI had recovered a car that purportedly belonged to King's killer.

That brief statement is the only reference to King's death found amid the detailed correspondence Milteer kept. More might have been expected because Milteer hated King. But no gloating . . . nothing.

Getting back to Somerset, the



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June 11 memo describes trips he made to South Carolina, New Orleans and Alabama. In South Carolina, Somersett met with Belton Mims, whom he called the first assistant to the Grand Dragon of the South Carolina Klan. The memo indicates Mims said nothing of King, but did say a plot to kill the late Congressman Adam Clayton Powell was in the works, and suggested Somersett see Leander Perez, an extreme racist and political boss in Louisiana, while he was in New Orleans. When Perez, who died in 1969, couldn't be found, Willie Somersett moved on to Mobile, Ala., where he talked with the former Miami housepainter referred to earlier.

The painter didn't speak of King either, at this time, but did describe to Somersett some terrorist acts he claimed to have participated in recently. He also told Somersett plans were being formulated to kill Charles Evers, brother of the slain civil rights leader Medgar Evers.

In the July 3 memo, events turn once again to Martin Luther King Jr.'s killing. In it, "88" states that he traveled again as an agent of the Miami PD to Memphis on June 21 "and began circulating around in order to obtain information in regards to the assassination of Martin Luther King."

"After getting settled in (a) room, I went to the neighborhood where King was killed and made friends with a number of people, both Negro and white, and had a few drinks with them and began discussing this incident along with other racial matters. I was introduced to a man by the name of Charles O. Stevens (sic) at Jim's Club... who said that he had been questioned with regards to the killing of Martin Luther King and he had lied to the police and FBI, saying he knew something about it, whereas he did not."

Charles Q. Stephens, to whom Somersett apparently referred, was one of the State of Tennessee's chief witnesses against James Earl Ray. Harvey Gipson, Stephens' lawyer, claims, "He is the only witness who can directly connect Ray to the crime. They couldn't have extradited Ray (from England) without Stephens' identification."

Somersett's statement severely impeaches Stephens' credibility, which has already been under attack by many critics because of his excessive drinking. If Stephens truly perjured himself, the already shaky case against James Earl Ray is further damaged. (As a result of his testimony, Stephens is currently fighting a legal

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battle to collect assorted reward monies offered in this case totalling \$100,000.)

In the same July 3 memo, Willie Somerset also tells of side trips he made to Whitehaven, Tenn. and Southaven, Miss., suburbs of Memphis.

"I attempted to locate a fellow (name withheld) who works as a private detective and ham radio operator in Whitehaven, Tenn. and is supposed to be racially involved. I could not locate him, but my conversation with people around there made insinuations to the fact that this (man) and an unknown deputy sheriff may have been involved in jamming the radio somewhere in the Martin Luther King case."

Somerset was confused about this incident. The CB radios were not jammed after the shooting, rather false broadcasts were sent out which drew attention away from the south side of the city, where, Ray claims, he fled during his escape from the scene. (Perhaps it should be noted here that Ray, who has long since renounced his guilty plea, does not deny having been at the site of the crime. He contends that he was simply an unwitting accomplice and that he was later coerced by his attorney, the famed Percy Foreman (whom Miamians will recall from the sensational Candy Mossler murder trial here) to plead guilty. Ray's latest efforts to win a new trial have been quashed, and he has stopped appealing.)

Returning to the memos, we find that on the morning of July 8, 1968, Somerset received a call from the previously mentioned Miami housepainter. The painter spoke of his rage at the death of a young schoolteacher, Kathy Ainsworth, who was shot by police as she allegedly participated in an attempt to blow up the home of a prominent Jewish citizen in Meridian, Miss. Her companion, Thomas Albert Tarrants III, was wounded. "X (the housepainter) said that they are going to set up things in Mississippi and he is going to kill all the Jews, niggers and the policemen if they interfere. . . 'We will burn Mississippi if necessary,' " X raved. Tarrants is now serving a 30-year sentence in Mississippi.

In the final memo of August 29 Somerset describes a meeting with X in Mobile during which the Ainsworth-Tarrants incident was discussed. According to X, not only was Tarrants being held in the Mississippi bombing attempt, he also was being investigated in connection with the



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King murder. "X says that the car that was used to jam the police cars on relaying messages of the killing of King on Aug. 4 (sic) was a car used by Thomas Tarrants. X says that they have information from the police that Tarrants is talking to the FBI and it looks as if several people may be indicted by the federal government in connection with a bank robbery and murder in the state(s) of Mississippi and Tennessee, including himself, X, who allowed Tarrants to stay at his home a week or ten days after the killing of Martin Luther King." Miami Magazine has been unable to determine if X's information proved true.

In that same memo of August 29, Somersett also tells of a meeting with representatives of Jim Garrison, the New Orleans district attorney who gained notoriety for his sensational JFK murder conspiracy trial. Garrison's people were eager to obtain the fruits of Somersett's 1963 labors, but there is no indication that he ever cooperated with them.

As in the case in Miami Magazine's story last month on President Kennedy's assassination, we can only speculate on the real significance of all this. The list of specific questions raised is practically endless, but revolves around one central issue: What did the FBI do about this information?

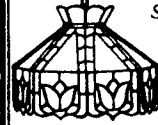
There is no evidence, on the record or off, to indicate the FBI did anything, for no mention of these incidents has ever been made publicly before. When given the opportunity to comment on our findings, the FBI refused.

Thomas L. Wiseman, FBI special agent in Washington, "assigned in a supervisory capacity to the Freedom of Information-Privacy Acts section of the Records and Management Division," says, in an affidavit filed in response to a Freedom of Information lawsuit by assassination researcher Harold Weisberg, that "the only suspect in the Martin Luther King assassination was Eric Starvo Galt, subsequently identified as James Earl Ray."

How can this be? Willie Somersett was a long-time FBI informant and, according to declassified FBI documents, the G-men considered him "reliable." If so, how could FBI agents simply ignore the bombshells he was dropping in their collective laps? They must have had more suspects if, as they

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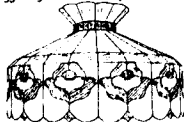
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claim, they conducted a thorough investigation. They must also have had grave doubts about the reliability of star witness Charles Stephens.

No one has been as accurate as Willie Somerset in predicting political assassinations since the Soothsayer warned Caesar to "beware the Ides of March" two millenia ago. The FBI knew this, but apparently did nothing about it.

Motivation for this non-action by the Bureau may have come from the late J. Edgar Hoover. It is no secret that Hoover despised King and used all the power in his command to try and thwart King.

This climate was hardly one in which to conduct an impartial investigation.

Because of the revelation of the attempts to harass Dr. King, the Department of Justice has been reviewing the files compiled on King both before and after his assassination. Until now, Justice officials have been saying that nothing has been uncovered which would suggest that the FBI's investigation of the assassination was less than thorough. Told of Miami Magazine's findings, most specifically about Somerset's prediction, Michael Shaheen Jr., the Department of Justice attorney in charge of internal investigations in Washington, was stunned.

"This is as interesting a piece of information as any I've ever heard," he said. "I am very interested in receiving it."

There are also other people who feel, for these and other reasons, that the King case should be fully and publicly reopened. The Rev. Bernard Lee, executive vice president of Dr. King's Southern Christian Leadership Conference, said, "We believe Ray is not the lone assassin and that Dr. King was the victim of a well thought-out conspiracy. We had hoped Ray would get a new trial, but that did not materialize. There should be some kind of new investigation."

Judge Gelber believes, "All the avenues haven't been explored in the King assassination. The investigation was cut short by Ray's guilty plea. There was no Warren Commission to publicly air the facts. What is necessary is a legislative investigation to satisfy the public that everything has been looked into."

Finally, State Attorney Richard Gerstein, who has spent several hours aiding us in our dual investigations, noted wryly, "I don't believe any person with even minimal intelligence believes Ray acted alone or without help."

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