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ENTERTAINMENT GUIDE

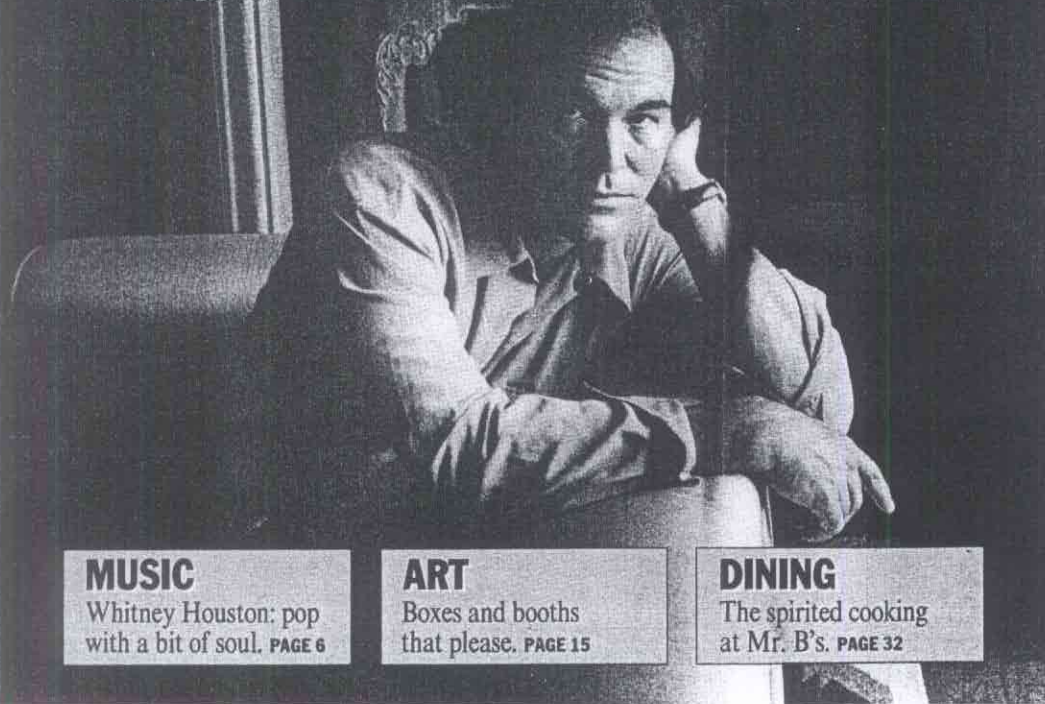
# Lagniappe

A CONVERSATION WITH

## Oliver Stone

The director of 'JFK' talks about the movie that is bound to open old wounds, spark new controversies and put New Orleans in the spotlight

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### MUSIC

Whitney Houston: pop with a bit of soul. PAGE 6

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Boxes and booths that please. PAGE 15

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The spirited cooking at Mr. B's. PAGE 32



**COVER  
STORY**

**“The killing of Kennedy has been an official myth, an official story, for 30 years. Garrison is the antidote to that.”**

—Oliver Stone



# Oliver's story

Stories by David Baron  
Movie writer

*Slinging a tote bag over his shoulder, a casually dressed Oliver Stone saunters through a hotel lobby en route to the lounge. Easing his rangy frame onto a banquette, the 44-year-old director orders drinks and swaps introductory small talk with the reporter who's come to discuss "JFK," the film Stone will start shooting two days later. His now-familiar face — earnest, open, unassertively handsome — betrays fatigue, but Stone is otherwise in buoyant spirits. He gazes appreciatively at a sweeping view of the Mississippi River many stories below, and recalls his first visit to the Big Easy.*



Photo by Roland Neveu  
Director Oliver Stone will be in town through July filming 'JFK,' a movie he calls 'a tale of two cities.'

"I was in New Orleans in 1963, and this is a bizarre story. I was about 16 years old, 17, I had a few bucks in my pocket and I was between classes in spring break. I was in Chicago and I came down here, and I hung out in New Orleans, and it just was a very strange town... I was alone. I didn't know anybody, I was walking the streets, going into strip joints, being sort of like Holden Caulfield in New Orleans, and feeling very alienated. And I thought many years later that Lee Harvey Oswald was here that same summer, (when) so much happened here, and that it's bizarre that I was here as a kid. I may have crossed him on the street."



Most people, when they think of the Kennedy assassination, think of Dallas. The lion's share of your story though, takes place in New Orleans. Why was it important to come here to recreate as exactly as possible the milieu of New Orleans in '63, and how does New Orleans fit into people's "cosmic consciousness" of that event?



Well that's a big question. ... I love the river here, that's why I came. It reminds me of the Mekong River that flows through Saigon. It's a very strong river, broad strokes, like a python, winding down to the sea, just like the Mekong. I look out the window of my hotel room, and it brings back many memories, the river; it has a very powerful effect on this city. (But) that's an aside. In terms of color and mood, I see the movie as a tale of two cities, Dallas and New Orleans, and

there's such a contrast, visually and emotionally and also texturally. I think Dallas is much starker, in some ways, and more austere — my designer, Victor Kempster, calls it "negative space" — and he sees New Orleans in much more burnt umber, hot, choking colors. So you have an aesthetic contrast, which is important to a movie like this, to feel that New Orleans was really an appendage — Dallas was the killing zone, the ambush ground.

But New Orleans provided the only insight, at that time, that we could get — the only hook into the assassination — because Jim Garrison was the only person ever to bring official charges in the case, thereby throwing a hook of doubt into the official Warren Commission explanation. He was the only person to do that. Other researchers were there — Mark Lane and those people — and they did a good job. But they never could get that publicity and that national attention that Garrison got when he brought official charges. And the fact is that the case never went away: Here I am, 28 years later, saying, "Pay attention to what Garrison was saying. He uncovered some truth; he was on the trail of something that was overlooked." I'm paying him homage by coming to this city, and saying, "You did right, 28 years ago. You opened up the floorboards, you let the light in, into a very dark subject that people wanted closed, like the Vietnam War."

We did not want to talk about it. The killing of Kennedy has been an official myth, an official story, for 30 years. Garrison is the antidote to that.

**Q.** What was your reaction to the assassination when it happened, and how has that reaction changed over the years?

**A.** I had no idea in 1963 that this would be as important as it became. No idea. I was a young Goldwater Republican-type boy, 16, still in school: I had no concept of the depths to which it would change our society. Those questions have become clearer to me with time and hindsight, and that's one of the things I'm trying to illuminate in the movie: Why he was killed, and what happened after he was killed. I think the country definitely took a turn, a fork in the road, with Vietnam; I've said this publicly before. I think that Kennedy would never have gone to Vietnam the way that Johnson went, no question about it — I believe we have very strong factual evidence of that — and that basically our society wouldn't be shaped the way it is now if we hadn't gone to Viet-

nam. We'd be in a wholly different pattern. Everything that's going on now, in the '90s, is essentially a reflection of what happened to America in the '60s and '70s. Dan Quayle went through the same '60s you and I went through — his attitudes, all his reflexive actions and his reflexive thinking, were shaped by the '60s — and he may very well be the next president, in the year 2000. Think about that.

**Q.** Are you offended by the so-called "revisionist" treatment of the '60s in much of the media these days?

**A.** The '60s were the seminal decade for our generation, and we're coming into power now, and we're gonna have a choice. We must realize what happened to us in the '60s; we can't run from it.

I don't believe a lot of the clips in the media that try to treat the '60s as just some kind of hippie thing, that was just sort of a passing fad, like a fashion magazine. They miss the point; they miss the roots of all these things, and it trivializes and simplifies it. The '60s was not just about hippies.

They ran down "The Doors" for this and this and this; George Will was going on about it, and (he) debased the '60s as some kind of freaky side show in a circus. It wasn't that, at all. People try to say, "It's in the past, it's gone, why is Stone going back to the '60s?" But it's not history, it's the frontier.

**Q.** How did the idea for "JFK" evolve?

**A.** I read Jim's book ("On the Trail of the Assassins") three years ago, and loved it and saw the possibilities in it right away as a thriller. But I want to emphasize — and Jim knows this — that we moved beyond the book.

We're not shooting a film called "On the Trail of the Assassins." We used Jim's idea — and Jim's opening penetration — as a device on which to make a dramatic film. We added the researches of about 28 years on top of Jim, so I cannot say — I do not say — that this is a true story.

A lot of the evidence that the character of Jim, as played by Kevin Costner, uncovers in the movie is not evidence that Jim (himself) uncovered: It's evidence that we have composed. In other words, we've made Jim Garrison one researcher, as opposed to (depicting) 12 researchers. It's tough to define, because we're dealing with facts that have been unearthed, but I would say that

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## Films of Oliver Stone

- 1981 *The Hand*
- 1986 *Salvador*
- 1986 *Platoon*
- 1987 *Wall Street*
- 1988 *Talk Radio*
- 1989 *Born on the 4th of July*
- 1991 *The Doors*



Val Kilmer starred as Jim Morrison in 'The Doors'; he's back for an encore in 'JFK.'

Though Oliver Stone is justifiably known as America's foremost cinematic chronicler of the 1960s, his issue-oriented films have touched on a wide variety of controversial subjects from both the '60s and the '90s.

Stone directed his first picture in 1981 — the horror thriller "The Hand," starring Michael Caine — but didn't come to prominence until five years later when "Platoon," an anti-war tale set in Vietnam (where Stone fought from 1967-68), won the Academy Award for Best Picture and Best Director. Stone's film served notice to a wide audience that a radical reassessment of the



Tom Cruise played Vietnam vet Ron Kovic in Stone's 'Born on the Fourth of July.'

American legacy in Southeast Asia was overdue.

Earlier that same year, Stone had released "Salvador," a drama of Central American politics (with an Oscar-nominated performance by James Woods) that confirmed the filmmaker's abiding preoccupation with matters of personal and governmental morality.

The ethics of the yuppie generation that made a killing in hostile takeovers on "Wall Street" was the target of Stone's pre-Craah 1987 film of the same name, which won Michael Douglas an Oscar and created a phrase — "greed is good" — that instantly attained household-word status. "Talk Radio," released in 1988, focused on the burgeoning increase in hate crimes as it

examined the murder of a radio talk show host much like slain Denver broadcaster Alan Berg.

Stone's most successful recent project, "Born on the Fourth of July," won the movie-maker his second Oscar for directing. Fast-rising star Tom Cruise headlined as paralyzed Vietnam veteran Ron Kovic, and Stone took America bitterly to task for its callous treatment of those who served in that unpopular conflict.

Earlier this year, Stone's "The Doors" looked into the troubled life of visionary rock 'n' roller Jim Morrison — one of the director's early idols — as it found the admittedly obsessed filmmaker once again focusing on the watershed decade of the '60s.

Along with his directorial credits, Stone has penned the screenplays for "Scarface," "Midnight Express," "Conan the Barbarian" and "Year of the Dragon," and has recently launched an additional career as co-producer, with "Reversal of Fortune" topping his resume in that capacity.



Eric Bogosian and Leslie Hope appeared in 'Talk Radio,' a film about a hate crime.

## Stone

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done, and who did it? Which is a larger issue than Jim Garrison's mistakes.

As Garrison himself said to Johnny Carson, or whatever, "You can make me the issue or you can make Kennedy the issue." And (I'm afraid) all the Garrison-bashers and all the CIA agent-journalists — like George Lardner, who's now writing a book bashing Garrison, and *The Washington Post*, (which) is gonna attack him, and me, and the movie — will wheel out its old, conservative George Will to smash Garrison again and try to keep the lie going. At the end of the day, it's gonna be a bunch of dead pharaohs in tombs guarding the secrets of Kennedy's grave. In 2039, when (all the statutes of limitation run out and) we get in, they'll have absconded with all the secrets anyway, as they already have with the brain.

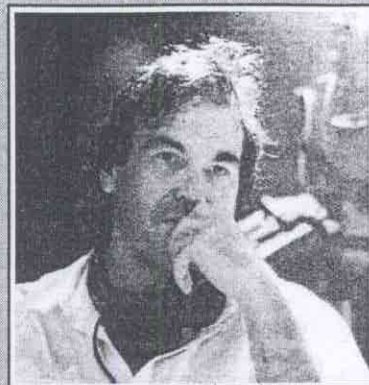
**Q.** Do you feel that Garrison's vilification in much of the media suggests that the American press isn't exactly a beacon of independent judgment?

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## Outtake . . .

In the midst of a conversation with a reporter, a group of female fans — some of them teen-agers — approach Oliver Stone with a polite but urgent plea for a photo opportunity. Dutifully, Stone obliges. When he rejoins the reporter, he explains why.

"It means more to have a 14-year-old kid say that she loves your work, because a seed is planted in her mind, you know, and that lasts through time, never changes. There's a loyalty there, I find. For example, when I was 14, I loved certain filmmakers. And I don't care what happened in the next 30 or 40 years, I still — because they gave me that pleasure or that enlightenment when I was 12 or 14 — I'll remember it for the rest of my life."



And whoe were some of those filmmakers?

"At that time? Let's see, there was David Lean and Fellini . . . those two stand out. And Kubrick."

**a.** I think you've certainly hit a main thread of the film on the head. I think Paddy Chayevsky was saying it with "Network" — one of my favorite movies — and I think you can't say it strongly

enough. What the hell happened to the American media? They went to sleep for 28 f---ing years. Who owns the media? . . . Ask yourself that. It's scary.

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## Stone

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**Q.** To turn the tables for a moment, what about the issue some critics have raised as to the distortion of history in films — “Mississippi Burning,” for instance — dealing with incendiary events. Do you foresee that being a bone of contention when “JFK” is released?

**a.** I told Alan Parker that I felt “Mississippi Burning” was a distortion. I really did. I felt it at the time because I knew about the case. I mean, when you give the credit to the FBI when they had a shoddy civil rights record during the Mississippi era, that’s wrong. And Gene Hackman and Dafoe should have known better, no question about it. Alan happens still to be a very fine filmmaker, and I respect him, believe it or not, because he created a great mood for a film; he knows how to shoot. But that was a mistake, in my opinion: If I were a black person in Mississippi I would be offended, because those FBI (expletive deleted) never did a thing to

solve that case. They paid an informant 50 bucks, or whatever. . . . But I don’t see how you can accuse me of that (kind of distortion).

**Q.** You’ve had a chance to revisit New Orleans four or five times, recently, on location-scouting trips and to hold auditions. What’s your assessment of the place?

**a.** I like New Orleans. Besides, you’re pretty straight here. It reminds me of New York, a bit. I think people here are very smart, very sophisticated — there’s no jive. It’s a tough city. There’s a lot of feeling, though, about that (Shaw) trial and all.

**Q.** Obviously, there are people in this area who are more sensitive to your film than people elsewhere, either because they knew Clay Shaw or because they had strong feelings for or against Garrison. What would you say to those New Orleanians, who are fearful either of reputations being besmirched or of Garrison

being newly “legitimized?”

**a.** My answer to that is that this is an emotional issue — a very emotional issue — and that ultimately it’s a bit like (the question of) the Kennedy family’s sensitivities in the matter. There’s a much larger story here than the Kennedy family’s personal grief about John, or New Orleans’ personal grief about being embarrassed about Clay Shaw, or Dallas’ personal grief about being the ambush site, or about having a strange police force that acted in a strange manner.

It’s beyond those three personal issues: It’s a universal problem that stretches into the ’90s, and goes to the foundations of our society. As far as I’m concerned, that’s much more important than the microscopic issues of New Orleans and Dallas and the Kennedys.