

King's Family Wants a Trial

Ray pleaded guilty, but conspiracy questions linger

By Rick Bragg
New York Times

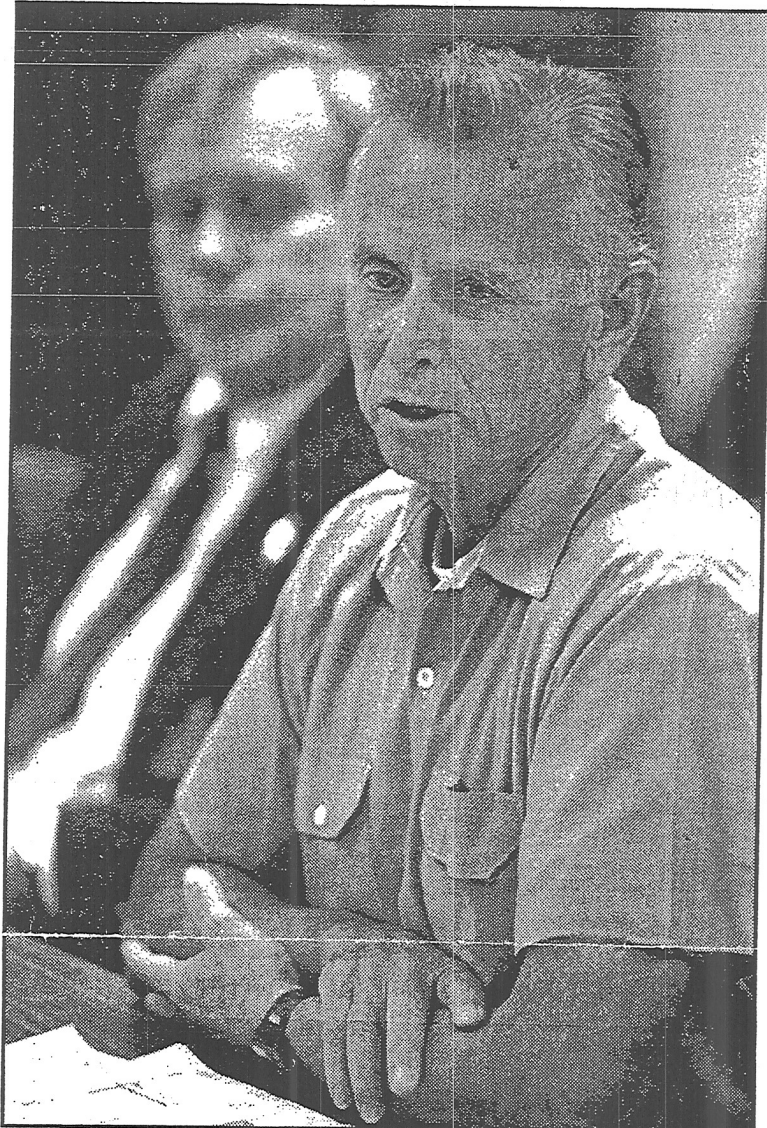
Atlanta

James Earl Ray, the man who went to prison for the assassination of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., is slowly dying in a Nashville prison from cirrhosis of the liver. Three times since December, he has been in critical condition. Each time he rallied, to live on a little longer.

The King family has been silent on the assassination and Ray's involvement from the beginning, in part because it was so painful. Now, the family wants Ray to have the trial he has begged for, for almost three decades, since he confessed to the killing, pleaded guilty during a short court hearing and, days later, recanted his confession. (As a result of his guilty plea, Ray was sentenced to 99 years in prison.)

"In the name of truth and justice, our family is calling for a trial, a trial James Earl Ray never had," said Dexter King, a son of King. Dexter King said that he and others in the family have no way of knowing whether a trial will answer the many questions surrounding his father's death, but they believe it will air any new information that has emerged.

"I don't think his trial — if he is granted a trial — will necessarily give us the unequivocal proof," King said, "but at least in regards to new evidence, we will



BY ASSOCIATED PRESS/1994

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know more than we do now."

There is also the simple fact that it is the humane thing to do, King said, "especially in light of the fact he is on his deathbed."

The chances that the 68-year-old Ray will be granted a new trial in a killing that occurred in 1968 are extremely slim. It is even uncertain whether Ray, who is once again in fair condition but failing a little more each day, could survive long enough to see a trial through.

But his approaching death has lent a sense of urgency to an unexpected coalition of King's family, Ray's younger brother and several old civil rights advocates, to reopen the case. They hope a new trial will resolve whether Ray was the killer and settle the many conspiracy theories — some involving the FBI and other agents of the U.S. government — that have swirled around the assassination for three decades.

"If there is something worth knowing, it is important for history," King said. "It is important for peace of mind. It will not bring my father back, certainly."

Several of King's oldest friends and associates have long supported Ray's crusade for a

trial, never believing that he acted alone. Ray was a small-time escapee from a Missouri prison who had bungled some of his petty crimes,

"Even if Ray pulled the trigger, he was the tool of other people," said the Rev. Joseph Lowery, president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and an old associate of King. "He never demonstrated that he had the intelligence or the resources to plot and carry it out. He was a tool, a patsy, as much a victim of the violence and hatred as Dr. King."

Ray has talked to reporters off and on for decades and even played himself in a mock trial on HBO. But he has never answered the specific questions about his involvement to the satisfaction of anyone. Old friends of King and family members hope it would be different in a trial.

Lawyers for Ray, in a hearing set for February 20, plan to ask for a ballistics test on the rifle that is believed to be the murder weapon, hoping that contention will be proved wrong.

Sometime before that hearing, the King family plans to hold a news conference to support Ray's plea for a trial, said

Phillip Jones, chairman and chief executive officer of Intellectual Properties Management, which manages the King estate.

Getting at the truth in the case has been hard, at least in part because there are so many theories, and because of the circuslike atmosphere that has surrounded it. Ray has had countless lawyers. And his own credibility is an issue.

He has offered conflicting and inconsistent stories over the years as to where he was on the late afternoon of April 4, 1968, when King was killed on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel in Memphis. But he has long maintained that he was used by others.

"Our hope is he may implicate others," Lowery said.

In 1979, the House Select Committee on Assassinations concluded that Ray killed King but that he may have had conspirators.

"There are those who feel the FBI had complicity in his death," Lowery said. "I do not know if that is true, but I do know that the FBI had to know King was being stalked and his life was in danger."