

Dr. King slaying— will it be solved?



By HARRIET VAN HORNE

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Certain statistics linger in the mind because they sound so absurd. Such an absurdity is this one, syntax and figures by the respected Dr. Gallup. "Fewer than one American in five believes the official (or FBI) version of the killing of Martin Luther King."

Do you see that fraction of a man, barely there, but trying to impose reason upon the chaos of history, as he mutters, "Yes, James Earl Ray did it. He shot Dr. King from the bathroom window of a rooming house in Memphis. With a deer rifle."

"Then Ray tore off to Canada in his white Mustang, leaving his rifle on the sidewalk wrapped in a bedspread. (Yes, that is kinda funny . . .). Well, Scotland Yard finally nabbed Ray in England . . . Was he tried? Well, no, not really. He pled guilty and now he's doing 99 years at Brushy Mountain Penitentiary in Tennessee."

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The less-than-a-man who believes this story strikes some of us as having less than normal capacity for critical thinking. And he's clearly not a reader. For the past year has seen an impressive flow of books, press reports and TV programs suggesting that the official version of King's death is wildly wrong.

What may jar the nation to its very marrow some day is the increasing possibility that Martin Luther King's death may have been "arranged" by the "get-King squad" that plotted within the FBI, always with the tender blessing of J. Edgar Hoover.

When CBS correspondent Dan Rather visited James Earl Ray at his prison quarters this past winter, Ray—though evasive at times—made it clear that he had not acted alone.

In the magazine New Times for April 1, a well-documented piece by Jeff Cohen and David S. Lifton argues that the mysterious "Raoul"—source of Ray's on-the-lam funds and his "instructions"—is Ray's brother, Jerry.

Jerry Ray is described as somewhat unbalanced in his rancor against Negroes and Jews. He is also said to be a follower of the neo-Nazi, J. B. Stoner, whose National States' Rights Party flaunts a swastika emblem.

Did the FBI set up Dr. King for a paid killer with a deer rifle? If such a plot is ever established beyond a doubt, they can begin chipping J. Edgar Hoover's name from the facade of that hideous new FBI Building.

A book, "Code Name 'Zorro'—The Murder of Martin Luther King" due to be published in a few weeks, makes a powerful case for assassination by the FBI.

At first glance, the book does not impress. Neither of the collaborating authors—Mark Lane and Dick Gregory—enjoys a reputation for scholarship or modesty. Both have been called opportunists. I opened this book with misgivings—and closed it deeply moved and, in most respects, persuaded.

Wisely, the publisher (Prentice-Hall) has bisected the book, with Gregory, a comedian turned political activist, writing a memoir of Dr. King, and attorney Lane, longtime champion of unpopular causes—and the publicity they generate—has written a vivid account of the shooting.

His emphasis is on Ray's equivocal role, the conduct of the FBI and the suppressed evidence. The taped interviews with police and witnesses read like TV drama.

There's hardly room here to set forth all the reasons Lane adduces for an "arranged" hit by the FBI. In brief, these are some of the vital points:

On the day Dr. King was shot, Memphis police, on orders from Washington, reduced the security detail guarding the civil rights leader from ten men to two.

Two black firemen, stationed across the street and devoted to King, were transferred to a distant fire company. A respected black detective, Ed Redditt, who had been guarding King, was suddenly summoned to headquarters and told that "there was a contract out on his life." He was sent home with a police escort. Word of the contract had been brought to Memphis personally, the police chief said, by a Secret Service agent.

Subsequent inquiry showed that the Secret Service had known of no threats against this obscure Tennessee policeman, and that no agent had been dispatched to Memphis on that April day. The police chief, Frank Holloman, now retired, is rather vague about the story. What isn't vague is that the chief worked for 25 years in Hoover's office and was a trusted confidante.

Ed Redditt is still bitter. "I was the one who knew the people, the cars, the license numbers . . . I was the one who could spot the trouble," he told Mark Lane.

Was there another killer? Grace Stephens, who lived in the rooming house where Ray stayed, said there was. She saw him and described him vividly to the press. Memphis police took her into protective custody, then sent her to a mental hospital. A psychiatrist recommended her release soon thereafter, but she is still confined, heavily sedated. "I remember who I saw run away," she told Lane, "That's why I am here . . ."

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Lane strongly implies that Percy Foreman, Ray's attorney, was ordered to plead his client guilty and avoid trial. The trial would have brought out too many "relevant facts," he says. The state never proved that the death slug came from Ray's rifle. It was never demonstrated that the fingerprints in the rooming house bathroom were actually Ray's. And nobody has ever explained how Ray happened to have four aliases, all Canadians, three of whom bore a striking resemblance to him.