

Our Fearless Correspondent

Who Killed Mort Sahl?

Charles McCabe

MORT SAHL? Well, I don't really blame you for not remembering him. He was that skinny kid with the red sweater and the open white Brooks Brothers shirt who was so well known not so many years ago.

He was a bright, bitter, bumptious, gutter-smart boy who let fly in all directions. He hit real good. He was what I guess you would call a political satirist.



He's still around, in a way; but he's another bag of nails, somehow. As his popularity has declined, his ego has swollen. He told a Chron reporter recently how he saw himself.

"I am," he said, "the permanent opposition to the Establishment, since there is no opposition politically any more. I have become everyone's conscience, through some weird set of circumstances."

"I have become, ironically enough, a positive force. It isn't that I've changed, it's that America is so hell bent on suicide that I'm in the unlikely position of standing at the edge of the cliff and saying — 'Wait a minute, have you thought this over?'"

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ANYBODY who views himself thus needs help. Mr. Sahl's decline in popularity (for inscrutable reasons of public taste, like maybe he became a bore) began around the time of the death of President Kennedy, and coincided with Mr. Sahl's passionate advocacy of the view that there was a conspiracy about that death which he felt he must unravel.

At the same time, and in the same Chron interview, Sahl virtually named the Kennedy family as the cause of his professional difficulties — "whoever made the original phone call from Washington to Hollywood telling people not to hire me."

The Kennedy death has created some mighty strange political bedfellows. Said Sahl: "Kennedy's few remaining friends. Look at them. Mark Lane, a lawyer who doesn't practice; Mort Sahl, a comedian who doesn't comedie, Jim Garrison, a DA in the south who never met him."

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THESE Kennedy "friends" have this in common. They are building modest careers (especially in Europe, where everybody seems to want the conspiratorial theory) out of clamoring that the "truth" about the assassination has never been told.

It never will be told. It's amazing how many seemingly rational people will not accept that the murder of John F. Kennedy is a permanently insoluble matter. Or puzzle, if you are all that skeptical.

It is insoluble because the obvious suspect and defendant was killed before he could come to trial.

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THE Warren Commission set itself an impossible task, or was given it. It set out to prove a negative, which any high school logician will tell you is impossible. The committee could not prove that Oswald was either guilty or innocent, because he wasn't there. The English common law was.

Before I die, I expect to read of more than one "confession" of guilt, by some kook or other, here or abroad. I expect the confession will be taken with all due solemnity. When Mr. Kennedy died, a hero died, and in a sense we all died. We crave a supernatural explanation. We are not going to get one.

Mr. Sahl isn't the last guy who will shore up a sagging career on Mr. Kennedy's bones. Messrs. Lane and Garrison are not the last who will try to make big men out of small men through the same squalid device. Sad.