

Dick Nolan

Clay Shaw Aftermath

In a bitter summing up of the Clay Shaw case, *Look* magazine cuts Big Jim Garrison, the New Orleans prosecutor, to less than pygmy size.

Clay Shaw, in case you have forgotten already, was accused by Garrison of having "conspired" with other shadowy figures in a fantastic plot leading to the assassination of President John F. Kennedy.

It was all moonshine, and just about everybody knew it, but Garrison persisted anyway to a farce of a trial in which it took the jury just minutes to find Shaw not guilty.

The *Look* article lays it out: It claims Shaw was chosen as a victim because he was a homosexual and thereby vulnerable; the "case" against him was concocted out of mishmash and nonsense; and Garrison proceeded to destroy Shaw merely as a bizarre circus performance to entertain the frequently bizarre Louisiana electorate.

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A COUPLE of things about this we should all note very carefully:

1. The free newspapers in Garrison's bailiwick obediently put themselves in muzzles. For two years, bowing to the legal profession's pressure against pre-trial publicity, Garrison was permitted to go about his way—all nods and becks and hints, unquestioned.

2. The systematic destruction of a victim, Clay Shaw, by an unscrupulous prosecutor, was carried out at no risk whatever to Garrison, who will never be called to account.

My own interest in the Clay Shaw case, the "local angle" if you will, was the involvement of Mort Sahl, the home-grown satirist who got his start here at the old hungry i. Sahl was up to his eyeballs in the Garrison investigation, at one time working as a certified sleuth out of Garrison's office.

Whenever you encountered Sahl here you got the same nods and becks and wretched smiles about the case—but not a single fact.

Wild tales of "possible" conspiracies, far-reaching plots, spies, counterspies,

mysteries, perils and secret corruptions: these were the subjects of the hints.

What bugged me most in talking with Sahl was his insistence that the American press wouldn't print these "facts" even if they had access to them.

Despairing of actually getting Fact One directly, I finally put it up to him. "You've been complaining about the press," I said. "Be my guest. Write whatever you want, put it under your own name, and you can have my column for a day."

After a lot of backing and filling, Mort finally wrote the guest column. It contained no facts at all, but consisted of a kind of generalized ramble about affairs—the sort of thing Sahl used to do in his comedy act, only out of focus and not especially funny. He didn't even make a reference to the Shaw case.

So if there was a shred or tatter of news that somehow "couldn't be printed" Sahl failed to produce it.

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IT WAS convincing enough to me that all the coffeehouse talk about the Garrison caper and the secret files was entirely spurious. To fulfill my own part of the bet I printed the Sahl column, and that was the end of it.

Invited to put up or shut up, Sahl did neither, but talked about everything else.

When the Shaw case finally got to trial, Sahl's friend Garrison popped out even more weakly.

What makes it all the more tragic for Shaw, however, is that Garrison—out of court—has still not had the grace to shut up. According to *Look*, the flamboyant politician still has the locals mesmerized.

Shaw, once comfortably well off, has had to sacrifice everything he owns just defending himself against Garrison's trumped-up charges. Even with the jury's quick verdict of "not guilty," Shaw is today a ruined man, while Garrison rides high as ever.

If Sahl pops into town again I wonder if he'll have the grace to admit he took part in a despicable charade, deceived—you have to assume—as Garrison's voters were and are.