



## Shaw, Clay (1913-1974)

by Roberts Batson

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People around the world know Clay Shaw as the only person ever tried for the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. Most, however, do not know that he was a highly decorated war hero, a prominent New Orleans businessman, a French Quarter preservationist, a valued civic leader, and, from age sixteen, a successful playwright.

He was also a homosexual in a time and a place that viewed homosexuality as abhorrent, immoral, and criminal. In that society, gay people, particularly prominent citizens like Clay Shaw, were compelled to remain closeted and were extremely vulnerable.

Born on March 17, 1913 into a respected family in the small Louisiana town of Kentwood, Clay Laverne Shaw was named for his grandfather, Thomas Clay Shaw, Kentwood's Town Marshal. When he was five he and his family moved to New Orleans.

At Warren Easton High School, Shaw's one-act play "Submerged," which he wrote with a classmate, won a state playwriting contest. Seventy-five years later, it was still being produced by high school drama clubs.

After graduation from high school, Shaw moved to New York where he managed a Western Union office, took classes at Columbia University, and, later, was booking manager for a lecture bureau, representing luminaries such as poet John Masefield, actor Maurice Evans, and first lady Eleanor Roosevelt.

When World War II began, Shaw enlisted as a private in the medical corps. Soon commissioned a 2nd Lieutenant, he was appointed to the staff of Brigadier General Charles O. Thrasher, directing supplies for the million men who crossed the English Channel in the D-Day invasion.

For his role in liberating France from the Nazi occupation, Shaw was awarded the Bronze Star and the Legion of Merit by the United States Army and the Croix de Guerre by the government of France.

Discharged from the Army in 1946, Major Shaw returned to New Orleans, his home for the remainder of his life. Within months Shaw was hired to launch the International Trade Mart, whose dual objectives were to sell American products abroad and to increase foreign trade into the Port of New Orleans. His army experience in transportation and shipping, along with a fluency in both Spanish and French, made him the ideal person for the job.

In a world still recovering from the horrors of war, Shaw saw international trade as more than just a matter of economics. He told a local newspaper, "People who are doing business with each other don't often get into a fight. Nobody shoots a good customer, and countries who have friendly relations aren't going to start a war."

While serving as Managing Director of the International Trade Mart, Shaw also became a pioneer preservationist, renovating French Quarter buildings.

All of these activities left little time to write, so Shaw decided to retire from the ITM once he could afford to do so. That point came in 1965. At his retirement, the City of New Orleans awarded him its highest honor, the International Order of Merit, in appreciation of his many contributions to the city.

But the social and political turbulence of the 1960s made a quiet retirement for the aspiring writer impossible. On November 22, 1963, President John F. Kennedy was assassinated in Dallas. President Lyndon B. Johnson appointed a blue-ribbon committee to investigate the assassination and to report its findings to the American people. Headed by Supreme Court Chief Justice Earl Warren, it became known as the Warren Commission. The Commission concluded that Lee Harvey Oswald was the lone assassin, but a large portion of the population felt that they had not presented the whole story.

New Orleans District Attorney Jim Garrison was one such skeptic. Brilliant, ruthless, and politically ambitious, Garrison saw in the Kennedy assassination his opportunity for fame. He announced that the Warren Commission had deliberately lied to the American people, purposefully covering up a conspiracy. Reveling in the international attention he received, Garrison proposed variously that the conspiracy was hatched by the C. I. A., the F. B. I., the military-industrial complex, Cuban Communists, and Lyndon Johnson and Texas oil barons.

But Garrison needed a theory that allowed him jurisdiction to prosecute, so he came up with the idea that the conspiracy was planned in New Orleans, and the assassination was a "homosexual thrill killing." He told a journalist, "They had the same motive as Loeb and Leopold when they murdered Bobbie Franks in Chicago."

On March 1, 1967, Jim Garrison arrested Clay Shaw and charged him with conspiring to assassinate President Kennedy. Garrison knew Shaw was gay, but the general public did not, though soon Shaw's homosexuality was exposed. The discreetly gay Shaw was soon described as a sadist as well as a homosexual.

Exactly how Garrison originally intended to proceed against Shaw is still not clear, although he told reporters that he did not need to develop a case against the businessman because he expected Shaw to commit suicide before he could bring him to trial.

In the pre-Stonewall era, suicide was often the expected course for gay people, to avoid suffering the humiliation of being publicly identified as a degenerate. This was particularly true for prominent figures like Clay Shaw.

Months passed, however, and Shaw had not obliged Garrison by killing himself. Garrison then was forced to bring Shaw to trial.

The trial finally began in early 1969. Garrison produced witnesses who swore that they saw Shaw plotting to kill the President. As the trial progressed, however, it became clear these witnesses were nothing more than an odd assortment of crackpots and toadies whose stories were incompatible with each other.

The jury took less than an hour of deliberation to return with a verdict of not guilty. The date was March 1, 1969, exactly two years after Shaw's arrest.

Two days later Garrison re-arrested Shaw, this time charging him with perjury. It took another two years, and the last of Shaw's retirement savings, finally to get the United States Supreme Court to order Garrison to stop persecuting Clay Shaw. By this time Shaw's resources were depleted, and he had to return to work.

The strain of the five-year ordeal took its toll on Shaw's health. He died of lung cancer on August 14, 1974. He was 61 years old.

To honor him, friends erected a plaque on one of the French Quarter buildings he had restored. They hoped that with time the public would come to know what they knew, that Shaw was a fine and decent man.

They did not anticipate that Oliver Stone would make a film called *JFK*, which made the unscrupulous Garrison into a hero and portrayed Shaw as a slimy underworld figure. Millions of people around the world who have seen the film presume it tells the truth.

Instead, however, the truth is on the plaque: "Clay Shaw was a patron of the humanities and lived his life with the utmost grace; an invaluable citizen, he was respected, admired, and loved by many."

The experience of Shaw is a telling reminder of the vulnerability of closeted gay men and lesbians in the pre-Stonewall era. Precisely because of his homosexuality, Shaw made an inviting target for the machinations of a ruthless politician.

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### **About the Author**

**Roberts Batson** received undergraduate and graduate degrees from the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill. In addition to professional achievement in theatrical and academic spheres, he has been a longtime gay community activist. The author of over 200 articles on New Orleans history and contemporary culture, he has been awarded Sigma Delta Chi and Vice Versa awards. In 1994 he created an acclaimed New Orleans Gay Heritage Tour, which he continues to conduct, and in 2002 began performing a one-man theatrical show, *Amazing Place, this New Orleans*. Batson is currently working on a book on New Orleans gay history.