

*Man of a Million Fragments: The True Story of Clay Shaw*  
Donald H. Carpenter  
Donald H. Carpenter LLC. 669 pp. \$35.99

**Clay Shaw:**  
**The Man Jim Garrison Tormented**

*By Stephen Roy*

The torrent of words and images about the John F. Kennedy assassination, especially the investigation by former New Orleans District Attorney [Jim Garrison](#), makes it easy to accept superficial profiles of the accused, while losing sight of who they really were.

Clay Lavergne Shaw is a prominent example of this phenomenon, second only, perhaps, to [Lee Harvey Oswald](#). Arrested by Garrison in 1967 and charged with conspiracy to assassinate President Kennedy, Shaw was tried in 1969 and acquitted by a jury after less than one hour of deliberations.

Most people “know” Shaw from [Oliver Stone’s 1991 film “JFK”](#). Tommy Lee Jones portrayed Shaw as a flamboyantly gay secret warrior, adroitly if not infuriatingly dodging Jim Garrison’s probing questions. Stone’s simplistic portrayal of Shaw created a one-dimensional, if not cartoon-like, image of a nuanced individual. Melodramatic and inaccurate, it left movie-goers to believe that Shaw had successfully concealed his role in Kennedy’s assassination.

Now, Louisiana-born accountant and author Donald H. Carpenter has righted that portrait in the first full-scale biography of Clay Shaw. Carpenter has spent years scouring the documentary record for the “million fragments” of Shaw’s life, and supplemented the paper trial with interviews with many people who knew or interacted with Shaw. Earlier attempts to trace Shaw’s life and career focused on the controversy

over his role in the Garrison investigation, either “bad Shaw/good Garrison” or “good Shaw/bad Garrison,” depending on the writer’s bias. Carpenter has his biases, but they are understated in favor of a Facts on File-style chronological recitation of the fragments of Shaw’s life. He stops short of making a sweeping judgment of Garrison’s case, but a savvy reader can easily detect that he doesn’t find it impressive.

*[Man of a Million Fragments](#)* is not an assassination book: it is a biography. There is no in-depth discussion of the mechanics of the assassination or Oswald’s life. Carpenter focuses on Clay Shaw the man. But because Shaw’s life was forever changed by Garrison’s prosecution, Carpenter traces it in detail, and recognizes its fundamental legal weaknesses.

Much of the debate about Shaw goes not to an actual assassination conspiracy, but to four secondary matters: Did he ever associate with [David Ferrie](#) and Lee Harvey Oswald? Did he ever use the alias Clay Bertrand? [Did he ever work for the Central Intelligence Agency](#)? Did he commit perjury in testimony about these matters?

The evidence for or against them is debatable, even today, but their significance is directly related to the alleged assassination conspiracy. If Shaw did conspire to assassinate JFK, they are highly significant. If Shaw did not conspire to assassinate JFK, their significance is greatly diminished. If Shaw concealed a relationship with Ferrie or Oswald, it might not necessarily relate to an assassination plot—a homosexual relationship being just one example. If Shaw concealed his alleged use of the Bertrand alias, this, too, might not have any bearing on an assassination plot. Some in New Orleans thought it might be a gay pseudonym. If Shaw concealed an operational relationship to the CIA, as opposed to being a more casual source of information on foreign trade or personalities, this too might not relate to any assassination plot.

The quality of evidence supporting (or contradicting) the alleged assassination plot, then, is crucial to a realistic appraisal of the four secondary matters. Yet most assassination books devote page after page to the secondary matters and very little to the alleged assassination conspiracy. In fact, no book has added much of anything to the murder conspiracy evidence since Garrison’s investigation. The evidence hinges on the credibility of just two witnesses, [Perry Raymond Russo](#) and [Charles I. Spiesel](#), and neither was a very believable witness.

Over the course of many interviews and testimonies, Russo’s story changed dramatically. Ultimately he made a near-complete retraction of his allegations and strongly implied that he had been talked into them by one of Garrison’s assistant DAs. Spiesel is even easier to dismiss: he said crazy things on cross-examination that might have gotten him committed to a state psychiatric ward, had it been a mental competency hearing. One cannot overemphasize the import of the weaknesses of these two witnesses. Without their testimony, there is no evidence of a conspiracy involving Shaw, and the whole character of the Garrison/Shaw encounter becomes open to different interpretations.

In this light, the personal writings of Shaw presented in Carpenter's *Man of a Million Fragments* are riveting. Is this a guilty man, pretending to be horrified, or is this an innocent man expressing a justified horror at his situation? Shaw's perspectives about how his life had been destroyed are both poignant and cautionary—insight into how the sloppy and ideological pursuit of justice can cause more harm than good.

Carpenter's careful, objective presentation of evidence offers new insights. The real Clay Shaw, for example, simply does not emerge as the Kennedy-hater some have suspected he was. The real Shaw appears not to have had any motive to kill President Kennedy. Most important, in his meticulous research Carpenter was unable to unearth any evidence that Shaw ever conspired to assassinate JFK.

One of the great ironies of Jim Garrison's case is that, while the New Orleans suspects he fingered were not "the" conspirators who allegedly killed JFK, quite a few of them were, indeed, the cold-warriors that Garrison suspected they were, at least in the 1960-1961 time frame. Several of them had the ear of the CIA to one extent or another. As Shaw was the manager of a large international trade group, he had contacts of interest to the CIA's overt [Domestic Contact Service](#) in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Author Carpenter explores this area in useful detail.

It is said that New Orleans was like a big "small-town" in the sixties, that everybody knew everybody else, and this is evident in *Man of a Million Fragments*. Many familiar names from the literature on the Garrison case make early appearances in the life of Clay Shaw. In February 1958, one of Shaw's associates in the New Orleans branch of the Foreign Policy Association was Dr. Mary S. Sherman, later the subject of a highly speculative conspiracy theory. Around the same time, Shaw negotiated a new rental arrangement for International House tenant William G. Gaudet, who would later make conspiratorial claims about the assassination.

Carpenter explores Shaw's gay orientation with finesse and sensitivity, eliciting from his former associates a rarely seen side of Shaw. Unlike the portrayal by Tommy Lee Jones in Stone's *JFK*, the real Shaw was discreetly "in the closet," revealing his personal tastes to only a select few. Garrison knew this, and the thread of homosexuality runs throughout his case.

I originally read this book in its [Kindle version](#), but found it cumbersome to flag pages and mark text, although that text is easy to search. The physical version of the book, despite the lack of an index, is much easier to research. There is also something about holding a physical book in your hand that is satisfying on a primal level, especially one like *Man of a Million Fragments*. It is not just another derivative book on the market, cobbled together from other works that were not fact-checked. Rather, it is a rare example of original research from primary sources, making it invaluable for anyone interested in the Garrison debacle. As a specialist on [David Ferrie](#), I found that Carpenter had unearthed new details of Ferrie's life and developed new sources of information.

## Washington Decoded

A few observers of the Garrison/Shaw case have argued that despite Shaw's swift acquittal, evidence that has emerged since 1969 raises serious new questions. But anyone who reads Donald Carpenter's book will find there was no room in Shaw's life for the conspiracy that Garrison (and his film disciple, Oliver Stone) alleged. Carpenter has provided a detailed and nuanced examination of the context of Shaw's life. The results are surprising. [\*Man of a Million Fragments\*](#) now stands as the standard reference source on the life of Clay Shaw.

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