

Phil Ochs and the Crucifixion of President John F. Kennedy

by Edward Curtin / November 16th, 2018

They say they can't believe it, it's a sacrilegious shame
Now, who would want to hurt such a hero of the game?
But you know I predicted it; I knew he had to fall
How did it happen? I hope his suffering was small.
Tell me every detail, I've got to know it all,
And do you have a picture of the pain?

♫ Phil Ochs, "The Crucifixion"

You are aware of only one unrest;
Oh, never learn to know the other!
Two souls, alas, are dwelling in my breast,
And one is striving to forsake its brother.

♫ Goethe, Faust

President John Kennedy was assassinated by the U.S. national-security state, led by the C.I.A., on November 22, 1963 in Dallas, Texas. That is a fact beyond dispute, except for those who wish to engage in pseudo-debates to deny the obvious. I prefer not to, since there is nothing to debate.

But there is everything to mourn, even after fifty-five years, first, of course, for the man himself, then for those who have suffered and died for bearing witness to the truth about his assassination, and finally for the consequences of his murder, because it cut savagely into any pretense of American innocence and set the stage for the nihilistic tragedies that have followed, including the murders of Malcolm X, MLK, RFK, the September 11, 2001 attacks, and the ongoing "war on terror."

Today, JFK's killers have tightened their choke-hold on the country and on the throats of those wishing to tell the truth. Their penetration of the corporate mass media is wide and deep, and the narratives they spin can make an innocent soul's head spin. Everything is twisted to serve their interests. With a click of a finger, truth and falsehood rotate like spokes on a rapidly turning wheel - spooks turning spokes in a game of hide and seek meant to confuse and derange the public. Constant befuddlement is the name of this racket.

It's a melancholy task to contemplate the parts played, consciously or unconsciously, by various actors in this deadly game, not least because one's own naiveté prompts one sometimes to question or abandon those one once admired and to dive deeply into the twisted minds and hearts of fellow humans. What follows concerns one such man's strange story as told by another man, whose story is perhaps stranger, and what their relationships with U.S. intelligence, if any, might suggest about our situation today.

Oh I am just a student, Sir, and only want to learn
But it's hard to read through the risin' smoke of the books that you like to burn
So I'd like to make a promise and I'd like to make a vow
That when I got something to say, Sir, I'm gonna say it now

Those are the words of the folk singer, Phil Ochs, from his 1966 song "[I'm Going To Say It Now](#)."

Ochs wrote and performed passionate protest songs during the 1960s that inspired many to speak and act in opposition to the Vietnam War and many other injustices. He was a fiery, sardonic activist whose music, such as "[I Ain't Marching Any More](#)" induced many to refuse military induction and to burn their draft cards. He, not Bob Dylan, was the committed voice of the 1960s radical anti-war folk music world, singing at events and rallies across the country, culminating at the 1968 Democratic National Convention in Chicago when the Chicago police rioted and savagely beat anti-war protesters, and Yippies and Hippies gathered in Lincoln Park to listen to Ochs sing defiant songs to keep up their spirits. But Ochs's own spirit was broken that terrible year of so many deaths, which started his long descent into alcoholism and mental chaos that ended with his suicide in 1976.

I was one of those who was inspired by his music. I still am. Soulful and satiric, biting and beautiful, stirring and inspiring, it has a power few can equal. But I have come to a point where I feel compelled to broach a mysterious story involving Ochs, something that when I first heard it in passing shocked me terribly. No, I thought, that can't be true; it's impossible.

But the more I have researched it, the truer it seems - with emphasis on the word "seems" - for there is only one source for the story, a source I don't doubt but can't confirm.

But either way, I have come to see the story as emblematic of the treachery and confusion sown by the CIA, its Operation Mockingbird, and its so-called Mighty Wurlitzer that have played so many for fools through its control of the corporate mass media and the production of narratives that run like little movies too perfect to be true, but too true to be false - even when they are. Screens within screens within screens. Efforts to fuck up as many people as possible in operation chaos, to derange and cleave them into split personalities within and without, and to mystify as many minds as possible.

I think Phil Ochs was one so mystified. I am wondering if in life and death he was used and abused by radically evil forces, whomever they may be.

According to Phil's best friend from college at Ohio State, the man who taught him to play guitar, his singing partner, best man at his wedding, constant pal in their days in Greenwich Village, and life-long friend, Jim Glover, Ochs was in Dallas, Texas on November 22, 1963, standing outside the Dal-Tex building in Dealey Plaza when JFK was driven by to be killed. Glover says Phil told him he went there as a "national security observer."

I had read about this on some off-beat websites, but never in biographies of Ochs, or in the latest documentary about him, [There But for Fortune](#) . There seems to be an "official" ban on mentioning Glover's claim, even though Glover appears in the books and the documentary, has been interviewed by the authors and filmmaker, and is considered by them, as Phil's old and close friend, to be a reliable source.

Jim Glover, who was one half of the well-known folk duo, Jim and Jean, back in the 1960s, and is now an anti-war activist in Florida, says that he has told Ochs's siblings and biographers all the details, has also reported it recently and as far back as the early 1990s to the FBI, and has put these claims out on some internet sites and openly spoken about it. These disclosures have resulted in silence from Ochs's family and biographers. There have been no efforts to refute it, and so it circulates far outside the mainstream. Since Glover speaks of it openly and in great detail, and since it is a shocking claim with serious implications, one would think it worthy of response. But it is only greeted with silence. It seems perhaps like another example of what Thomas Merton called "the unspeakable" - "the void that contradicts everything that is spoken even before the words are said."

So I contacted Glover and asked him about it. He told me that Phil had told him months before the assassination that he was "working for National Security, something like the C.I.A." Then, he later told him he had gone to Dallas with one of the Gambino boys as "a national security observer" and had been standing in Dealey Plaza outside the Dal-Tex building where he was filmed when JFK was shot. Jim Glover has sent me photos that he discovered decades later that he says are photos of Phil in Dealey Plaza at the exact spot he mentioned and also in the movie theatre where Oswald was arrested. He thinks they are very conclusive, especially because of the Dealey Plaza location, despite their blurriness. While I think they are not dispositive, they do look like Ochs in a fuzzy sort of way.



The first two photos are outside the Dal-Tex building, after and before the assassination.



Inside the movie theatre where Oswald was captured and taken out the front door, while the second Oswald was led out the back door.



And the last is a photo of Ochs at Ohio State in 1961 for comparison purposes.

Whatever you think of the photos, they are one piece of a larger mystery, a tale stranger than fiction. They may or may not show Ochs, as Jim Glover is certain they do, but if Ochs's biographers trust him on other matters, why would they doubt him when he says Ochs told him he was in Dallas that day? He says they are afraid to entertain the possibility.

So we might ask the question: If Phil Ochs was in Dallas that day, what was he doing there?

Let me reiterate: The murder of President Kennedy is not a mystery, and I am not exploring it. We know he was killed in a coup carried out by the national security state led by the CIA. If you want to know why, and if you want to know why this Thanksgiving, November 22, we should give thanks for John Kennedy's life and witness, read [JFK and the Unspeakable](#) by James Douglass. It's the only book you need to read on the assassination.

Phil Ochs is the mystery in Glover's telling, and I am wondering about him (and Glover), what he thought he was doing getting tangled up with shadowy intelligence operatives, how that awakening knowledge subsequently affected him, how he responded, and what place guilt and fear played in his post-1963 life and death. I am proceeding as if Ochs went to Dallas at the naive age of 22 not to harm Kennedy, but as Glover said he said, to investigate the threats against Kennedy that he had heard of in NYC through V. T. Lee of the Fair Play for Cuba Committee (FPCC) and others. (This is the same V.T. Lee who received a letter from Lee Harvey Oswald, who was proposing a FPCC chapter for New Orleans in May 1963, where he was performing his theatrical stunts. Lee warned Oswald not to provoke "unnecessary incidents which frighten away prospective supporters" in a

place so hostile to Castro. But Oswald, of course, did the opposite to establish his fake support for Castro.)

Glover says he also knew of the plots against Kennedy that were widely circulating in leftist circles, and afterwards felt Phil and he were being set up to be implicated in the assassination in case the official cover story fell apart since he and Glover were sympathetic to Castro and Cuba. He says their phones were tapped and they were being surveilled. At this time Glover and his partner Jean were persuaded, against Ochs's advice, to go on a Hollywood Hootenanny Tour of southern college campuses, a surreal trip that made stops in Dallas and Houston and seemed clearly connected to the Kennedy assassination as strange people got off and on the multi-bus caravan, talking about Kennedy being killed. Glover says these included George and Barbara Bush and J. Edgar Hoover, who were picked up by the bus at the Houston airport late in the day of November 22.

You would have to have a fantastic imagination to make this stuff up. Why would he? Yet his tale is truly bizarre, revealing the intricate nature of the government conspiracy to kill Kennedy and to create multiple tales of plausible deniability when others failed.

He told me that he doesn't know who told Phil to go to Dallas, but he is unequivocal that he did. He said:

I don't have all the answers. All I know is what Phil told me to keep us both as safe as possible. He told me I'll never lie to you but there are things I can't tell you. Knowing I had a big mouth if he told me things you [me] are asking, I might not be alive. His purpose as I see it was to observe, and being set up if Oswald lived, he could have been used as, 'See a Castro sympathizer knew and was involved.' And that would apply to me also [learning what he did on the Hootenanny Tour] and they would stop at nothing to have us both silenced permanently if Oswald or Kennedy lived because we knew too much.

Once, he said, as an example of his big mouth, he was performing at the Gaslight in Greenwich Village and told the audience that Phil had been in Dallas as a national security observer. He thinks Ochs's manager, Al Grossman, and Bob Dylan heard it, "because Phil came over and said, 'Are you trying to get me killed?'"

Phil, he said, was a super patriot and would never have done anything to harm Kennedy, but was tricked into going to Dallas under the assumption that he was working with those trying to prevent the assassination by investigating the plot or trying to infiltrate it and perhaps stop it. But when Ochs returned to NYC later that day, according to Glover, he was devastated by Kennedy's assassination and at the realization that he had been used and was now compromised. That is why he cried so terribly that night and wanted to die. His youthful innocence had died.

Phil Ochs was a man of two minds and inclinations, not unusual for a coterie of musicians of that era who knew and associated with it each other, had military/intelligence family backgrounds, and were never drafted like so many young men not in college. Like so many of these musical icons - Jim Morrison, David Crosby, Frank Zappa, "Papa" John Philips, Stephen Stills, et al (as Dave McGowan chronicles in his book, *Weird Scenes Inside the Canyon*, where he questions their public personae and the strange ways they gathered from far distances at one time into Los Angeles's Laurel Canyon, at the heart which was a covert military film facility, Lookout Mountain Laboratory) - Ochs had a military background. He was a conservative rebel who suddenly transformed from a conservative to a radical at Ohio State in his last year, according to Glover. He attended Staunton Military Academy with Barry Goldwater's son and John Dean of Watergate fame and was a sergeant in the ROTC at Ohio State where at the least he was aware of military intelligence spying on radical students; he idolized John Wayne, James Dean, Marlon Brando and the American western film mythology of the cowboy and soldier; he loved John Kennedy; he sang

powerful anti-war songs and would jokingly say to his audience that now that they had listened to his anti-government songs he was turning them in to the government; he was a drama king who loved heroes and wanted to be one; he was a left-winger who mocked liberals; he was a folk singer who loved Elvis. In short, he was a man of many contradictions, of highs and lows, hope and despair, driven to stop war and injustice and to become a star in the superficial entertainment culture, etc. As he fell apart in his last years, it became easy to categorize him with the facile term "manic-depressive" or "bipolar."

I think that misses the heart of the matter, as if a term explains its reality, as if his paranoia had no basis outside his mind, as if he was just nuts to think the CIA was out to get him, as he did regularly and especially after he was attacked and choked while walking alone on a beach in Dar-es-Salaam, Tanzania, when his vocal cords were ruptured and his voice permanently damaged.

My guess is that he was driven by guilt and fear and that his suicide at age 35 was connected to being in Dallas on the day JFK was assassinated. I think he died that day too, and that the next 13 years of his life were courageous attempts to quell his guilt for being gulled into going to Dallas and fear that he might be killed for doing so by singing out his rebellious songs in the face of his ghosts. He was a haunted man, and produced haunting songs in response to exorcise his demons, including the songs "[The Crucifixion](#)" and "[That Was the President](#)", both about John Kennedy.

In his last years he said he was John Train (sometimes John Butler Train), not Phil Ochs, and that John Train had killed Phil Ochs in the Chelsea Hotel on the summer solstice in 1975, the solstice being a significant turning point. His biographers give various explanations for his adoption of this pseudonym, all of which, I believe, miss the mark. To say he took the name from his heroes John Wayne, John Ford, John Kennedy, and William Butler Yeats, avoids the key word: Train. It's as if the word is unimportant or unspeakable, or the name John Train is a common name that "crazy" Phil just made up.

As he was unravelling in fear and trembling, I believe he was referring to a real John Train, a CIA operative, when he metaphorically said "on the first day of summer 1975, Phil Ochs was murdered in the Chelsea Hotel by John Train....For the good of societies, public and secret, he needed to be gotten rid of." Train assassinates Ochs. Then the following spring Ochs assassinates Ochs by hanging himself.

Could it just be a coincidence that there is a real John Train who from the early 1950s onward was connected to the CIA and the covert state in various activities as an asset or an agent? This John Train, who was one of the founders and funders of The Paris Review, its first managing editor, who together with the CIA's Peter Matthiessen and George Plimpton started the magazine for the CIA under its propaganda front, The Congress for Cultural Freedom. This John Train, who ran cover corporations for the CIA and was connected to George Herbert Walker Bush through the CIA's Thomas Devine, who was involved in setting up Bush's company Zapata Offshore. This John Train, who was deeply involved with the CIA's activities in the early 1980s backing the CIA-supported mujahideen against the Soviets in Afghanistan. This John Train who... [1](#)

It is farfetched in the extreme to think that Phil Ochs just plucked the name John Train out of thin air. But the fact that this is asserted by his biographers makes sense when we realize that Jim Glover's claims are ignored by Ochs's family, his biographers, and the makers of the documentary about him. That there is a real CIA-affiliated John Train and that Glover insists Phil told him he was in Dallas on November 22, 1963 seem clearly connected. But these facts are unspeakable. I think they need to be explored.

Like Jim Glover, I don't have all the answers about Phil Ochs. My guess and my hope is that Phil

was used and was not complicit, that he naively thought by going to Dallas he was working with the good guys to protect the president from the killers, and when he witnessed the brutal murder, he felt compromised, and felt so overwhelmed with guilt and fear that life eventually became too unbearable for him. Clearly this is Glover's story. I think it is incumbent on those who don't believe it to explain why Glover would fabricate such an intricate tale that glorifies his friend as a true patriot, whom he claims was used by intelligence operatives and who therefore suffered for the rest of his life for trying to protect President Kennedy.

Whatever the truth in this age of "not knowing," I think his story is a parable for our times. Whenever you think you're getting the straight scoop, think again, and then again. The CIA's Operation Mockingbird is still singing its siren song to convince us that the crucifixion was a one-time event, when Phil knew otherwise, right from the start and right to the end. I think he tried to warn us and wouldn't be silenced, even in death.