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Doug Moe: Joe McBride goes public with private obsession about Kennedy assassination



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The Joe McBride I know is a former Wisconsin State Journal reporter who fell in love with movies on the UW-Madison campus, chased his film dream to California, and, more than most, actually caught a piece of it.

McBride, 65, can tell stories of drinking with Sam Peckinpah and being cast in a film by Orson Welles. He co-wrote a cult movie, “Rock ‘n’ Roll High School,” and authored several acclaimed

books on film. In 2000, he took a teaching position at San Francisco State University and recently was made a full professor.

I have spoken to McBride several times, mostly about film, and occasionally about newspapers and Madison lore. It was always enjoyable. Not once did he mention John F. Kennedy, the president assassinated in Dallas 50 years ago this November. That seems worth noting since it turns out that while film may be McBride's passion, the Kennedy assassination is his obsession. He was quiet about it for a long time.

“You risk a certain amount of ridicule and abuse,” McBride said last week by phone from California. Some people are always going to roll their eyes at the suggestion anyone besides Lee Harvey Oswald shot and killed Kennedy, and McBride most certainly believes it wasn't Oswald.

McBride kept his off-and-on research of the case — which began almost immediately after Kennedy's death and intensified later, with trips to Texas and extensive interviewing — largely to himself. Investigative reporters McBride respected told him wading into the assassination quagmire was inviting career suicide.

Now, with the 50th anniversary fast approaching, McBride has put himself front and center, in full view of the eye-rollers as well as the conspiracy advocates, with publication of his latest book, “Into the Nightmare: My Search for the Killers of President John F. Kennedy and Officer J.D. Tippit.”

Say this for McBride: He comes by his obsession honestly. He met Kennedy, shook his hand, spoke with him, snapped a close-up photo during the 1960 Wisconsin primary campaign, and subsequently received a note from the charismatic candidate.

McBride's mother, Marian McBride, was a Milwaukee newspaper reporter, and in 1960 was vice chairwoman of the Wisconsin Democratic Party (future governor Pat Lucey was chairman). Both Marian and Lucey backed Kennedy against Hubert Humphrey in the Wisconsin Democratic primary.

Joe McBride was 12 years old in 1960, and, through his mother, a member of Wisconsin Volunteers for Kennedy. That March — the Wisconsin primary was in April — McBride went door to door in his Wauwatosa neighborhood handing out reprints of the noted journalist John Hersey's magazine piece on Kennedy's wartime command of a torpedo boat.

McBride was there on March 31, 1960, when Kennedy appeared at a noon "Kids for Kennedy" rally at the Wauwatosa Civic Center. Madison Mayor Ivan Nestingen introduced him. Kennedy arrived without an entourage and there were only about 100 people, mostly children and their mothers, in the room. Kennedy spoke about his book, "Profiles in Courage," which the young McBride had recently read. From the lectern Kennedy asked if anyone could name, from the book, the men he identified as "the three most gifted parliamentary leaders in American history."

McBride's hand shot up, and Kennedy pointed at him.

"Webster, Clay and Calhoun," McBride said.

Kennedy grinned. "I hope I don't have to run against you in 1964," he said.

That experience, which included meeting the candidate in a receiving line, forged a bond in the 12-year-old's mind. The following January, McBride ran home from school to watch Kennedy's inaugural address on television. Less than three years later, he ran from school to a nearby drugstore, where he knew

there was a working radio, when he heard Kennedy had been shot in Dallas. Yet that day, as hours passed and the news accounts of the shooting began to change and conflict in their details, McBride grew skeptical. What really happened in Dallas? These scenes are related in “Into the Nightmare,” and McBride’s deeply felt personal anguish as a boy lays a convincing groundwork for what is to come.

By December 1966, McBride was attending UW-Madison and wrote a letter, published in The Capital Times, expressing doubt about the findings in the Warren Report. It was his first public statement on the assassination.

McBride read the growing body of work by others who doubted the official version of events. He assesses the relative value of many of those authors and their books in “Into the Nightmare.”

Even as his film writing career grew, McBride continued his probe. He went to Dallas in November 1983, on the 20th anniversary of the assassination, and again a decade later. He did interviews, including some with witnesses or their families who had never talked before. Increasingly, McBride began to focus on J.D. Tippit, the Dallas police officer who, in the official version, was shot by Oswald the same day Kennedy was shot. McBride doesn’t think Oswald killed either Kennedy or Tippit.

His reasons make up the balance of “Into the Nightmare,” a personal, exhaustive investigation into the assassination and its aftermath. I have to say, McBride lost me a few times during our long telephone interview last week. I wonder if all the thought and work he put into it, in the end, was worth it. I suppose the 12-year-old reading “Profiles in Courage” would say yes.

Doug Moe



Doug Moe writes about Madison and the people who make it a unique place. His column runs Mondays, Wednesdays, Fridays and Sundays in the State Journal.

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