His hands hit switch on electric chair

Baton Rouge native's done 18 executions

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Sam Jones, an alias used by Louisiana's executioner, makes no apologies for the grisly task he has performed 18 times since 1983.

Jones methodically sends alternating 2,000- and 500-volt shocks into the bodies of men condemned to death. The 2,000-volt surges last 10 seconds. Each 500-volt surge lasts 20 seconds. A second man, called the timer, stands behind Jones, stopwatch in hand. The timer taps Jones on the shoulder when time is up.

It takes one minute to kill a man. No woman has been put to death in Louisiana in modern times. He'd have no problem executing a woman, Jones said.

Jones is paid $400 an execution, plus $150 a day and travel expenses for time away from his usual job as a master electrician.

Jones' sideline has generated a macabre fame for the 48-year-old Baton Rouge native. Talk show hosts request interviews. He has appeared on an Australian television show, numerous late-night news shows, in an interview printed in Playboy and in an upcoming People magazine story.

Jones talked to Mike Wallace of CBS' "60 Minutes" Tuesday night, not two days before convicted killer Dalton Prejean was to die in Louisiana's electric chair.

"That's supposed to be shown in January, I think," Jones said.

The Advocate first interviewed Jones in January 1985, just hours after he electrocuted convicted killer David Dene Martin. That time, Jones used his alias and would not be photographed. He has "gone public," so to speak, and now allows on-camera interviews and photographs. Yet, he declines to use his real name "because you never know about those weirdos out on the streets."

Jones was interviewed and photographed Thursday morning at the home of friends. He said he had cooled off from the night before when he was called by Louisiana State Penitentiary officials and told his services wouldn't be needed after all.

For the second time, convicted cop killer Prejean had been granted a stay of execution by the U.S. Supreme Court just hours before his appointment with Jones. Jones was angry about the delay.

"How many more years does he get?" Jones said. "Prejean admitted he killed (State Police Trooper Donald) Cleveland, and that was the second time he killed somebody."

Prejean's new claims of brain damage stemming from alleged child abuse don't impress Jones.

"The brain damage is on the part of the Pardon Board, and you can quote me on that," he said, referring to the board's recommendation of commuting Prejean's death sentence to a life sentence.

Jones said he hasn't been criticized by state Department of Corrections officials for his public discussions of the death penalty. He has never been recognized in public, Jones said.

Predictably, interviewers always want to know what things Jones says.

"Do I wear a mask or a hood and do I have nightmares or have trouble sleeping at night? No, I don't wear a mask and I don't have nightmares or see ghosts. They do make the convict 'sneak,' I think that's too easy for him. I know he's cool and he's dead. The victims aren't that lucky."

Descriptions of Jones have been "interesting" in some interviews, he said.

"One guy with an Orlean newspaper described me as having 'cold steel-blue eyes and red hair,'" he said, laughing. "Hell, my eyes are patriotic some mornings — red, white and blue from the night before."

Jones does have blue eyes and red hair, "but I only have one head."

There is nothing in his background that makes him enjoy "eliminating people," he said, rubbing the toe of a reptile-skin western boot with a finger.

Jones was a policeman for a short time and served four years in the U.S. Air Force. He has been an electrician for 28 years. Divorced, he has a son, daughter-in-law and a grandson.

Jones is a member of a local electricians' union, likes photography, hates sports, drives a pickup truck with 116,000 miles on it, once got a trophy for being a good pinball player, drinks beer and can't do without strong coffee.

Several years ago, his brother saw an ad in a newspaper for a civil service position requiring a master electrician. The state needed an executioner and Jones fit the bill.

"I think I was the only applicant," he said.

Jones had no experience as an executioner. He knew what it would take to kill — but not burn — a man. He practiced on a bucket of brine water "which is supposed to duplicate the density of a body."

His first execution was shortly after midnight Dec. 14, 1983, with Robert Wayne Williams strapped into the large oak chair dubbed "Old Hickory" or "Old Smoky."

"I remember it was cold and wet and the road to Angola was all muddy," Jones said, remembering the first execution. "They had the S.W.A.T. team out in the cold. It was the first execution (in Louisiana in 22 years) and they were nervous."

Jones was nervous but never doubted he could push the green and red, start-stop buttons that delivered the lethal voltage to electrodes attached to Williams. Jones said.

Jones believes, "100 percent," in the death penalty.

"I feel like I'm the only thing the victims have got left," Jones said. "When I walk in and push that green button, I do it for the Officer Cleveland who was shot and killed. I don't feel any pity for those killers."

"Hell, I was brought up the hard way, dragged all over the place and dirt poor, but I didn't go out and rob and kill anybody. I'm sick of hearing that crap. I figure by the time they get to me it's not my concern. They've had years to get there."

He feels no compassion for the families of the 18 men he has executed. Jones said. His sympathy, he said, lies with the families of the victims.

"You know, I wonder what we're telling kids out there when they see on TV a convicted killer at a Pardon Board hearing being hugged and kissed on? What message is that sending out about a convicted cop killer or rapist?" Jones said.

"If you don't eliminate these people, it's always possible they can get out and kill again. And whose child is he going to kill? If we killed these convicts, others would think twice about walking into a convenience store and shooting some girl. ... Some people are just trash and no good. We've got to end it and the only way to do that is to execute these people."

Jones dismisses rehabilitation as an alternative to the death penalty. He believes criminals convicted of felonies such as murder, rape and armed robbery cannot be rehabilitated.

"A leopard can't change his spots," he said. "Rehabilitation comes when you stick 'em in that chair."

Jones is concerned, however, about "flaws" in the judicial system.

It is possible, he said, that death sentences are more often meted to those unable to pay for high-priced attorneys who are able to persuade juries to be merciful. Still, he doesn't think he has executed — or will execute — an innocent man.

"That's why I think there should be mandatory penalties for crimes," he said. "You commit first-degree murder, you go to the chair. Period. X penalty for X crime. And none of these appeals crap. When there's a death sentence, we should have an immediate appeal right then to a panel of judges and then get on with it (execution). It gives me a total case of the reds when I read about all those appeals. Convicts have got too many rights. Once the victim falls, his rights are gone."

Executions are scheduled for Dec. 13 and Dec. 20 at Angola. Jones doesn't know the names of the men remaining on death row, other than Prejean.

If his services are needed, he will be there.

Jones is the state executioner. Somebody has to do it. Jones doesn't mind being that somebody, he said, no matter how cold it may seem.

"One time we were fooling around around with this guy. I guess you could say his elevator didn't go all the way to the top, you know? I stuck my hand in an Igloo full of ice, nearly froze it off. This guy came in and I was the state executioner, and I reached out and grabbed his hand."

"You never saw such an expression. He just sat back and stared at me."