

## RING MAGAZINE May 2004

Until now, if you wanted to find out about Al “Bummy” Davis, a ferocious lightweight contender of the late 1930’s and early 40’s, who knocked out Bob Montgomery in one round and engaged in an infamous foul-fest with welterweight champion Fritz Zivic, your best bet was “Brownsville Bum”, the much-anthologized piece by W.C. Heinz praised by Jimmy Breslin as the best sports feature ever written.

Now comes a worthy companion to the Heinz piece in *Bummy Davis Vs. Murder, Inc.: The Rise and Fall of the Jewish Mafia and an Ill-Fated Prizefighter* (St. Martin’s Press, 418 pages, hardcover, \$26.95), a thoroughly captivating, entertaining, and expertly-layered account of the life, career and death of a man author Ron Ross portrays as one of the most misunderstood and misrepresented boxers of all time. It’s also a biography of the two-and-a-half miles called Brownsville itself—“Everyone’s poor relation, everyone’s invitation from the spider to the fly”—the spawning ground not only of great fighters, but also the Jewish Mafia, whose leading local gonif, Abe “Kid Twist” Reles, didn’t scare the boxer Albert Davidoff a whit. In fact, according to Ross, *Murder, Inc.’s* stranglehold on Brownsville was broken, at least in spirit, by the chutzpah of the Brownsville Bum, a misnomer apparently on a par with “Honest (insert any politician’s name here).”

Ross’ book reads like a novel, and when you read in the Author’s Note in back that he “invented much of (the characters’) dialogue,” there is the worry that maybe a little too much license was taken to de-Tysonize someone whose own brother was one of Brownsville’s most feared denizens. But Ross spent nine years doing research and interviewing everybody he could find who knew Davis personally and knew about him, and the result is convincing and impressive enough to even overcome my personal aversion for the use of exclamation points as punctuation except in quotations. A “Glossary of Yiddish Words and Phrases” in the back is helpful and fun, as well. Bummy Davis never wore a championship belt, but there are probably a few who have, who would trade theirs to be the subject of such an enthralling and skillful book.

By Pete Ehrmann