

"Tales From The Sidewalks Of New York" a must-read

by Stan Fischler 9/9/2012

ENCORES don't come easy after you've hit a grand slam.

Likewise, it's a heck of a challenge if you're an author expected to produce another gem after you've penned what I consider the best book ever written about boxing, Brooklyn and Jewish mobsters.

But that's precisely what Ron Ross has done with his latest literary gem, "Tales From The Sidewalks Of New York," a collection of short stories about The Big Apple.

His original was "Bummy Davis vs. Murder, Inc -- The Rise And Fall Of The Jewish Mafia And An Ill-Fated Prize Fighter."

How good was that? Well, the harshest critic I know in Ulster County, Nancy Schuckman of Krumville, loved it and Nancy comes from the same Brownsville-East New York neighborhood that bred boxer Bummy Davis.

ME? I've already read "Bummy" six times. That said, if you haven't got a copy I suggest you go online -- or whatever -- and grab one.

It covers the 1926-1946 Era when Prohibition came and went while Jewish boxers such as Benny Leonard were sprinkled over every conceivable fight card.

What separated Albert Davidoff -- later to become Bummy Davis --

was his enigmatic personality. He had the softest of hearts and the hardest of fists. His father and mother innocently ran a mom-and-pop candy store while his older brother Willie -- alias Big Gangy -- was a terrifying East New York hood who, ironically, adored and nurtured Albert -- or Avrum in Yiddish.

The street-smart kids took the label Avrum and turned it into "Boomy," which was fine. But when he started winning big fight cards promoters decided that Davis was better than Davidoff and -- much to Albert's chagrin -- Bummy was what a fighter's nickname was all about.

Still, the name Bummy connotes bum and, if anything, Albert was as straight arrow as Big Gangy was trouble, although Willie never belonged to the appropriately named Jewish mob, Murder, Inc.

Unfortunately, Big Gangy's rep spilled over to the Manhattan fight writers including the then-dean of boxing columnists, Daily Mirror sports editor Dan Parker.

"In those days," Ross explains, "a sportswriter's word was taken as almost gospel, especially a high profile guy like Parker. Thanks to some of Parker's stuff -- and other reporters -- Bummy was cast as a villain. He was the fighter fans came to boo -- except for the East New Yorkers; they knew him for what he was."

Bummy was hurt by the press rips but punished his foes a lot more, beating some of the best in the fight game. That, however, aroused some of the biggies in Murder, Inc. Shortly before a big fight at St. Nicholas Arena with an equally tough Jewish fighter named Mickey Farber, the gangsters approached Davis. They were putting big money

on Farber and wanted Bummy to dump.

Ross: "Bummy wouldn't even look them in the eye. He refused to answer them and they figured he'd throw the fight. At that time nobody messed with Murder, Inc."

That is, nobody but Davis. Scorning a possible rubout, Bummy beat the beehozis out of Farber, costing Abe (Kid Twist) Reles and his fellow mobsters a lot of moolah. The next day as Bummy walked out of his second home, Beecher's Gym, a big Packard pulled up and out piled Murder Inc.'s most feared hitmen.

"There was a crowd of shoppers on the street when the mob confronted Bummy," Ross recalls, "but they quickly melted into the shadows of the building. Knowing Reles and his killer sidekick, Pittsburgh Phil Strauss, they figured that this was 'it' for Bummy. Then it happened.

"Bummy dropped his gym bag and put up his fists. 'You wanna take me? C'mon, now.' Instead, the four tough guys turned around, got back in the car and drove off. That's when word got around Brooklyn, in fact the world, about Bummy's courage."

What's more: "His ability to stand up and confront them gave others the courage to do the same thing."

Unfortunately -- as fierce a fighter as he was -- Davis was victimized by an overzealous boxing commissioner who painted Davis with his brother's reputation, and was never given the opportunity to fight for the title. Eventually, he met a tragic but Bummy-style end -- but I don't want to give that away.

For all his heroic exploits Bummy -- in time -- became a forgotten fighter and he would have remained so had Ross not become intrigued by this complex athlete and the curious collection of hoods around him.

Ross told my associate, Allyson Gronowitz, that his initial interest in Davis was sparked by an encounter between Bummy and Ron's cousin at Beecher's Gym, in Brownsville. "I had a cousin, Irwin Kaye Kaplan, who was a ranking lightweight contender from California. He came East to fight at Madison Square Garden and make his mark on the boxing world," Ross remembers. "Bummy came over to my cousin, shook his hand, and said, 'Don't worry, kid. Anything you need, I'll take care of.'

"Just the thought that someone would extend an offer like that impressed him so much, and if it impressed him, in my eyes -- the eyes of a seven-year-old kid -- it made Davis seem 10 feet tall."

Over the years, Bummy "became an idol" to Ross. But when he caught wind of the foul media odor surrounding Bummy, he resolved to uncover the real Al "Bummy" Davis.

His journey began after speaking with Irving Rudd, a fight publicist for Madison Square Garden. "Irving Rudd came to me when I was writing the book," Ross explains, "And he said to me, 'Ron, I hope you can finish the job that I started: Bringing out the true image of Bummy.'"

Most importantly, however, was the influence of the President of the Metropolitan Amateur Boxing Association and Ron's dear friend, Vic Zimet. Ross showed his friend the story he had written about Davis

and Vic -- to Ron's great surprise -- immediately shot him down.

"Vic said, 'Maybe you don't know this, but I was the original trainer of Al Davis.' I almost fell over!" Ross marvels. "I never knew this about him." Vic opened the door to the world of Bummy Davis to Ross, introducing him to Bummy's friends, relatives, and even a few slippery mobsters. Ron concludes: "It was through Vic Zimet that the book made a complete turnaround."

As a boxer himself in his youth, 80-year-old Ross was inducted into the Florida Boxing Hall of Fame in June. Even better, Davis was posthumously inducted into the Jewish Sports Hall of Fame earlier this year and it was Ross who presented the award to Davis' grandson, Jeffrey.

"It was one of the most gratifying moments of my life, to have been a motivator in bringing this about," reminisces Ross. "Now, Al 'Bummy' Davis has turned from a mock-villain into a true, true hero -- which he was."

Only 25 years old when he was murdered, Bummy never really got to know his son. Charlie was raised by maternal grandparents who despised Big Gangy and weren't too crazy about Bummy either. Charlie grew up in Florida never really knowing the truth about his dad. That is, until Ross' book was published and Ron in Florida lecturing about it.

"One after another people came up to Charlie telling the deeds of Bummy Davis," Ross remembers. "Charlie sat there crying, his Adam's apple going up and down. Now Charlie's whole life has been turned around."

Your literary life will equally be turned around after reading "Bummy" and "Tales From The Sidewalks Of New York." I'm happy to report that three stories in Ron's new book are about A Kid Called Boomy.

You could cry reading this stuff; and I unashamedly admit that I did!