



The Murder of Sonny Liston: Las Vegas, Heroin, and Heavyweights

Shaun Assael

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A daring investigation into the mysterious death of Heavyweight Champion Sonny Liston, set against the dawn of the 1970s, when the mob was fighting to keep control of the Las Vegas Strip, Richard Nixon was launching America's first war on heroin, and boxing was in its glory days.

Las Vegas, 1970: Elvis Presley is playing two shows a night at the International. Howard Hughes is running his empire from the penthouse suite of the Desert Inn. And middle-America is flocking to The Strip, transforming it from an exclusive playground for the mob to a mecca for corporate dollars. But the city is also rotting from within. Heroin is pouring over the border from Mexico and the segregated Westside is on the cusp of a race war. The cops, brutally violent, are barely holding it together.

Driving through town with the top of his pink Cadillac down, Sonny Liston is the one celebrity who's unafraid to bridge both worlds. Cashing in on his fading notoriety in the casinos, he is also dealing drugs, working as an enforcer for a crime syndicate, and trying to break into Hollywood as an action star. Along the way, he has a boxer's faith that he can duck any threat, slip any punch. Heroin addiction is the only knockout punch he doesn't see coming.

On January 5, 1971, Liston was found dead in his home, with heroin in his blood, from what Las Vegas police speculated was a drug overdose. But Liston's closest friends never believed that he accidentally OD'd. They believed he was murdered. In the decades since, a cottage industry of theories has hung over his death. But none have been substantiated.

By digging deep into the life Liston tried hard to hide, investigative journalist Shaun Assael treats Liston's death as a cold case. The result is a page-turning whodunit that evokes a glorious and grimy era of Las Vegas, based on police records and original interviews with cops and politicians who worked in Vegas at the time--including a key suspect who was accused of killing Liston, and who offers up his own theory about who did it. *The Murder of Sonny Liston* takes a fresh look at the legendary boxer, and the town he called home, getting to the bottom of one of America's most enduring mysteries.

From the Hardcover edition.

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