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In Black And White: The Life Of Sammy Davis, Jr.



Synopsis

He was, for decades, one of the most recognizable figures in the cultural landscape, his image epitomizing a golden age of American show business. His career spanned a lifetime, but for years he has remained hidden behind the persona he so vigorously generated, and so fiercely protected. Now, in this surprising, illuminating, and compulsively readable biography, we are taken beyond the icon, into the extraordinary, singular life of Sammy Davis, Jr. In scrupulous detail and with stunning powers of evocation, Wil Haygood takes us back to the era of vaudeville, where it all began for four-year-old Sammy who ran out onstage one night and stole the show. From then on it was a motherless childhood on the road, singing and dancing his way across a segregated America with his father and the formidable showman Will Mastin, struggling together to survive the Depression and the demise of vaudeville itself. With an ambition honed by poverty and an obsessive need for applause, Sammy drove his way into the nightclub circuit of the 1940s and 1950s, when, his father and Mastin aging and out of style, he slowly began to make a name for himself, hustling his way to top billing and eventually to recording contracts. From there, he was to stake his claim on Broadway, in Hollywood, and, of course, in Las Vegas. Haygood brings Sammy's showbiz life into full relief against the backdrop of an America in the throes of racial change. Sammy grew up trapped between the worlds of blacks and whites, with so much invested in both. He made his living entertaining white people but was often denied service in the very venues he played. Drafted into a newly integrated U.S. Army in the 1940s, he saw up close the fierce tensions that seethed below the surface. Dragged into the civil rights movement, he witnessed a hatred that often erupted into violence. In his broad and varied friendships and alliances (with Frank Sinatra; Martin Luther King, Jr.; Richard Nixon; Sidney Poitier; Marilyn Monroe, to name just a few), not to mention his romances (his relationship with Kim Novak and his marriage to the blond beauty May Britt drew death threats), he forged uncharted paths across racial lines. Admired and reviled by both blacks and whites, he was tormented all his life by raging insecurities, and never quite came to terms with his own skin. Ultimately, his only true sense of his identity was as a performer. Based on painstaking research and more than 250 interviews, Wil Haygood brings us a sweeping and vivid cultural history of the twentieth century, chronicling black entertainment from its beginnings and the birth of popular culture as we know it. In Black and White transcends simple biography to become an important record, both celebratory and elegiacal, of a vanished America and its greatest entertainer. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

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Customer Reviews

I never liked Sammy Davis Jr. as a person. This book describes a man who was so desperate to be loved by his white audience, that it just reinforced my opinion of him. Having said that, Haygood does seem to "have it out" for Davis (and his last wife), but despite some weirdly placed interjections, he comes off fairly informative and accurate with good amounts of supporting interviews. Don't look to this book as a gossip rag. I'm pretty sure everyone already knows all the "dirt" on Davis.

Maybe the definitive biography of Sammy Davis Jr. can never be written. Or maybe it simply hasn't been done. This book is a mixed bag. The book filters the story of Sammy Davis Jr. through race, everything is either black or white. As a result, you do get some interesting concepts, that Davis did not want to "be" black, as if all blacks (or for that matter, all whites) had something in common. You do get extensive thoughts about his love for blonde women, and his affairs with Kim Novak is given a prominent amount of space. You also have a wonderful portrait of Will Mastin, a man who is ignored in every other book about Davis. But other things are glossed over, his drug and alcohol abuse, his Rat Pack days, even his marriage to May Britt. Oh, do not expect anything about his music in here, absolutely nothing about any of his records.

This was a frustrating read from front to back. Too much info on unimportant minute details... like repetition of the hairnets coming off last before going onstage. And repetition. Not much is said about the monumental drug/ alcohol abuse. Quite a bit about an affair with Kim Novak, which flatly

she denied on The Larry King Show. (I wonder why?) I would have liked more attention to his music, recorded or not. I think there's a better bio out now, am going to order it and will then review.

A quality read and investigation on Haygood's part. There are some other things I wished he had addressed...i.e. Sammy's insistence in having some of the vaudeville entertainers who helped raise him, be opening acts in Miami and Las Vegas in particular. His public announcement of being duped by Nixon was very manly.

Pleased with purchase.

The author takes you inside Sammy Davis Jr. - a performer who became almost a caricature to the public in his last two decades - with an incredibly-researched portrait. Even though the book is very harsh and truthful about Davis, the last chapters are still very moving and the humanity of the man is never lost.

Look in the Dictionary for the word "Joie de Vivre" and you will find a picture of Sammy Davis Jr. He was Tireless, Generous, Committed, at times Amoral -- but ANYTHING but petty. While you're at it, look up the word "Singular". A very good book - it is a synopsis of what was known about the great entertainer up to that point. You may find that you had harshly misjudged Sammy Davis Jr., as I did. Mr. Haygood lets us "walk a mile in his shoes", even through a spiritually sick period when Sammy delved into Satanism and Porn. This book is so rich with details of early Hollywood, and Jim Crow America, that you must have your own copy (not borrowed from the library) so you can mark it up. The bibliography is great. My only criticism is the Index. I found it frustratingly incomplete. But I notice that some publishing houses are starting to revise the meaning of "Index" and "Footnotes". This 486-page book could have done with a little better editing, because of quirky remarks and observations made here and there. This book is a must read if you want to understand one of the most talented, versatile and hard-driving entertainers of all time.

Sometimes when reading a biography, the author makes the mistake of idolizing the subject too much and thus leaves the reader with a rather distorted fazine in book form. This book starts off this way and I was tempted to put it down but then a third of the way into the author presents critical analysis of Mr. Davis and the storyline is much more engaging. I would have liked a few more photos other than from the Sammy Davis jr. or friends of Sammy Davis Junior collection to go beyond

a snapshot image of this subject. This book ends on a high note by the author when an excellent critique is made. A worthwhile read.

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