Book Review: 'Photo by Sammy Davis Jr.'

by David_Elliott

"Photo by Sammy Davis Jr." by Burt Boyer; Regan; 350 pages; $50.

Celebrity withers, fame forgets its name, even immortality pales (remember the immortal Al Jolson?). It is ironic that singer and actor Sammy Davis Jr., who in his own star time grabbed Jolson's crown as Mr. Entertainment, has gained and extra flash of fame as a writer and, now, photographer.

His "Yes, I Can" is one of the more engrossing showbiz memoirs, egotistical (of course) but the ego bleeds so humanly. Later came a worthy sequel, and now posthumously (Sammy left in 1990, much the worse for wear) a big book of Sammy's photos - courtesy of widow Altovise, organized and lovingly scripted by Davis' friend and memoir partner Burt Boyar.

WHAM OF SAM - 'Photo by Sammy Davis, Jr.' is an engaging collection of a celeb enthralled by celebrities. CNS Photo.

Other stars have been gifted snappers, such as Yul Brynner and Gina Lollobrigida. But Davis' trove has unusual heft. Here is inside radar on the so public but also private life of a celeb enthralled by celebrities, not only "pallies" like Frank Sinatra, Dean Martin, Tony Curtis, Jerry Lewis (who gave Davis his first classy camera), but larger heroes (Dr. Martin Luther King, Robert F. Kennedy, Humphrey Bogart), elder partners (the Will Mastin Trio), ex-wife May Britt and kids (the children a living rebuke to racists everywhere).

Boyar is hip that Davis used his camera to seize, keep and even suck-up a bit. And also as a shield: "Nobody interrupts a man taking a picture to ask 'fan' questions, or worse: 'What's that nigger doin' in here?'"

By nature an addictive man, the little photoholic must have been an antic fly in the room, grabbing Lewis in early fame under a framed, naughty joke linking Dean Martin to Louella Parsons, or catching the Rat Pack backstage in tuxed tension, or intimately seeing Britt as the most gorgeous blonde a man could want (or a racist hate).

There is also love in the shots of Davis' bodyguards asleep on a bus, fans merrily holding up new platters in a record shop, black boys probably more excited by Davis' camera than by Davis, and warmly admiring views of mentor Nat King Cole. There is, if less warmly, Davis "adviser" Sam "Momo" Giancana.

And Dick Nixon, whom Davis notably hugged (to his cost with many blacks), is fondly recalled. Is it really hard to see that a one-eyed black man scarred by racism should delight, courtesy of RN, to sleep in the Lincoln bedroom?

There are many "unidentified" persons, once so shmoozingly close to fame, now stuck in luminous oblivion. More iffy is a stream of nameless beauties, camera subjects who underscore how much women were, in the Davis world, attachable objects: fame booty.

If some of Davis' views are scrapbookish, even dull, the gems are many: Lee Marvin grinning in the glow of his rather late-won stardom; Mickey Rooney still dreaming of a fairly youthful comeback; Liz and Dick in quite visible love; Kim Novak (Davis' studio-hexed love) as absolute knockout; the Chicago Theater as temple of Yes-I-Can; Lauren Bacall buzzing girl talk with Marilyn Monroe and Betty Grable; Davis himself, still very "Jr.," radiantly next to a rose.

An artist? Yes, he could.

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