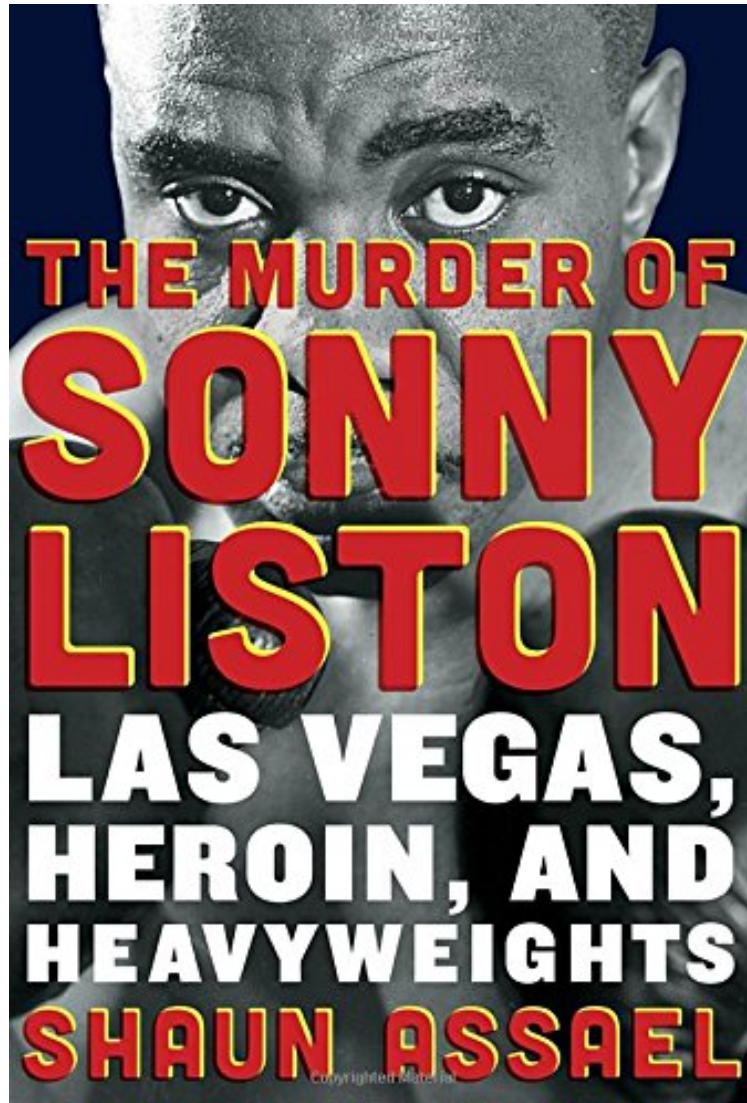


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The Murder of Sonny Liston: Las Vegas, Heroin, and Heavyweights

Shaun Assael

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Shaun Assael : The Murder of Sonny Liston: Las Vegas, Heroin, and Heavyweights before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The Murder of Sonny Liston: Las Vegas, Heroin, and Heavyweights:

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Liston book interesting but little substnaceBy Robert AmbergIt is a very interesting saga. I was not aware of much of it. I felt the writing was somewhat disjointed and not always easy to follow. Mostly speculation with little hard evidence. Seems more gossip than history. The Las Vegas neighborhood

stuff was good.0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Five StarsBy Mark SmithAwesome product, great customer service!0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Two StarsBy Randall FeeCould have been a magazine article.

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. On January 5, 1971, Sonny Liston was found dead in his home—of an apparent heroin overdose. But no one close to Liston believed that his death was accidental. Digging deep into a life that Liston tried hard to hide, investigative journalist Shaun Assael treats the boxer's death as a cold case. The result is a page-turning who-dunit that evokes a glorious and grimy era of Las Vegas. Elvis Presley was playing two shows a night at the International. Howard Hughes was running his empire from the penthouse suite of the Desert Inn. And middle America was flocking to the Strip, transforming it from an exclusive playground for the mob to a mecca for corporate dollars. But the city was also rotting from within. Heroin was pouring over the border from Mexico, and the segregated Westside was on the cusp of a race war. The cops, brutally violent, were barely holding it together. Driving through town with the top of his pink Cadillac down, Sonny Liston was the one celebrity who was unafraid to bridge the two sides of Las Vegas. Cashing in on his fading notoriety in the casinos, he was dealing drugs, working for a crime syndicate, and trying to break into Hollywood—all with a boxer's faith that he could duck any threat, slip any punch. Heroin addiction was the only knockout blow he didn't see coming. *The Murder of Sonny Liston* takes a fresh look at the legendary boxer, the town he called home, and one of America's most enduring mysteries.

Selected among the Best Books of 2016: "Assael's account of Liston's life in a city full of racial tensions, mob connections, and heroin is illuminating, though not conclusive, regarding the heavyweight champ's last days and mysterious overdose death." —Bill Littlefield, *The Boston Globe*"Shaun Assael delves into Las Vegas at the turn of the '70s and uncovers a thrilling mystery. Leave it to Sonny Liston to emerge as its larger-than-life antihero." —Nicholas Pileggi, author of *Wiseguy* and *Casino* "As tough and pounding as its subject, this is the send-off Sonny Liston deserved. Read it only if you're interested in crime, Vegas, and boxing, or the complications of being human." —Robert Lipsyte, author of *The Contender* and *An Accidental Sportswriter* "A classic of the genre . . . a fast-paced thriller rich in drama and intrigue." —London's *Daily Mail* "A hard-boiled portrait of Las Vegas in the 1960s. It is a story of bent cops and compromised lowlife, illuminated at the edges by stars such as Frank Sinatra, Howard Hughes and J. Edgar Hoover. Readers of James Ellroy's *Underworld USA* Trilogy will feel very much at home." —Dan Jones, *The Sunday Times of London*"The reporting Assael weaves together takes us back into the windowless rooms that smell of Vaseline, sweat and leather where fighters hands are taped before gloves are pulled over their fists." —Frank Miniter, *Forbes*"Absolutely compelling . . . a crime thriller laced with stories of corruption, mountains of cash, extreme violence, illegal gambling, the FBI, Hollywood, organised crime and tons of heroin. At times, it reads like the perfect follow-up to the Sopranos." —*The Leader*"Shaun Assael has written the book I've been waiting for . . . a masterpiece of research. He took all the known facts and dug up unknown facts. This is the first book where you can sort of understand who Liston was and the world he inhabited. . . . Assael's book will hook you in and leave you wanting more." —Dave Wahlman, *Crimespree Magazine* "Drugs, booze, gambling, fixed fights. Casino moguls, crooked cops, mob bosses. *The Murder of Sonny Liston* has it all. . . . It's part *The Wire*, part Chinatown, part *The Professional*—but unlike those works of fiction, it's all remarkably true." —Stefan Fatsis, author of *Word Freak* and *A Few Seconds of Panic*"Shaun Assael has delved deeper into Liston's mysterious death than anybody and come up with sensational results. Investigative reporting at its finest." —Nigel Collins, former editor in chief of *The Ring* magazine, and 2015 inductee into the International Boxing Hall of Fame "A compelling new book . . . Assael has reopened the case, [and] pieced together the most forensic investigation yet . . . like an Elmore Leonard novel." —Dave Hannigan, *The Irish Times*"Writing with the flair of a mystery writer and the attention to detail of an investigative journalist . . . Assael dissects the suspicious death of former heavyweight boxing champion Sonny Liston. . . . The engrossing depiction of Sin City's corrupt cops, malevolent mobsters, and drug dens follows in the footsteps of Nick Tosches's *The Devil and Sonny Liston*. . . . Assael's journey into the seedy underworld of Las Vegas's past is worth the ride." —*Publishers Weekly*"The value in this book, and it is very well worth reading, is in tracing Sonny Liston's final days. . . . Sonny's life is like a mystery novel with the final page torn out." —Bobby Franklin, *Boston Post-Gazette* "[Shaun Assael] offers a vivid look at America's adults-only playground in the later 20th century, creating an engaging read for fans of boxing history." —*Library Journal*"[Shaun] Assael isn't the first to raise the specter of foul play in the mysterious 1970 death of former heavyweight boxing champion Sonny Liston; nor is he the first to explore the seamy, Mob-driven underside of Las Vegas in which Liston circulated, but [he] is the first to assert unambiguously that Liston was murdered. . . . [Assael] discourses authoritatively on Vegas politics (perhaps a factor in Liston's death), on local crime and cops (another possibility), and, especially, on the fight game . . . there is much here that will appeal to anyone interested in the intersection of crime and boxing." —*Booklist*"Assael has pulled back the glamorous veneer

of Las Vegas to reveal its sordid, seamier side. It's a fascinating read." —Bob D'Angelo, *The Sports Bookie*"Assael's racy chronicle, fueled by the dubious palaver of seedy interviewees, is a wildly entertaining look at a crass underworld, piling up intrigue, information, and even pathos about an enduring whodunit of the fight world." —David Curcio, *The Arts Fuse*About the AuthorShaun Assael, who has been with ESPN The Magazine since its launch in 1998, is a member of ESPN's investigations unit and a regular contributor to the show *Outside the Lines*. He is also the author of three books: *Wide Open: Days and Nights on the NASCAR Tour*; *Sex, Lies, and Headlocks*, a New York Times best seller; and *Steroid Nation*, a definitive account of the steroid era.Excerpt. © Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved.***This excerpt is from an advance uncorrected copy proof*** Copyright © 2016 Shaun AssaelINTRODUCTION On January 9, 1971, Geraldine Liston watched an over- flow crowd at the Palm Mortuary pass by her husband's steel casket. The crowd comprised the business end of Las Vegas: showgirls, card dealers, casino execs, mob associates. Geraldine, her brown eyes hooded but sharp, studied their faces.Some were there for the show. Stan Armstrong, a documentary filmmaker, would recall walking a mile from his house at the age of fourteen because he knew the funeral of Sonny Liston would be a piece of history. Others were there simply to be seen. Ed Sullivan, Ella Fitzgerald, and Doris Day sat in the front row and sang mournfully as the Ink Spots did a special rendition of the 1966 hit "Sunny."The last time Geraldine saw her husband alive, she was rushing to the airport to take their adopted son, Daniel, on a family visit to St. Louis. Even closing on fifty, Sonny still looked like he was meant for only one thing. He was built like a mushroom cloud with coal eyes that had dead reckoning in them and monstrous hands that punched with the force of a government crash test.When she returned home from her trip, Geraldine expected to find her husband planning his next fight or maybe playing craps with his best friend, Joe Louis. Instead, she followed the smell of rotting flesh to her bedroom, where she found his corpse slumped backward over their bed. So much methane was escaping up his legs that his penis was fully engorged and his testicles were the size of pool balls.There was an era when Sonny terrified God-fearing whites by carrying the mantle of the angriest black man in America. But that time was long gone. Since the Beatles put him on the cover of Sgt. Pepper and the Monkees put him in a movie, he'd receded into a kind of genteel notoriety. Around Vegas, the restaurants comped him, the hookers waved as he passed by, and cops offered him rides home when he was drunk. He returned the favor by handing out preprinted business cards with his sig- nature to tourists.During his time in the spotlight, Sonny made it perfectly clear that he was willing to cheat on Geraldine whenever he had the chance. When a waitress presented them with a child that Sonny had fathered a few years before, Geraldine adopted the boy as her own, hoping he might finally give her the family she always wanted. Sonny never became an ideal father, but his frag- ile fidelity always did lead him back home to her. And for that Geraldine remained his biggest defender. "He acts like he loves me, whether he does or not," she said. "He takes care of his home and that's all you can ask of a man."On the night she found him, Geraldine let the police who were called to investigate do their work without helping too much. They walked past the stuffed bear in the living room that had Sonny's title belt wrapped around it and into the den where he kept his prized photos: the framed portrait with his arm around Lyndon Johnson; the one of him laughing it up with Sammy Davis Jr.; the sepia-toned keepsake of him mugging with Louis when he first took the crown from Floyd Patterson in 1962. They rubbernecked, taking photos of themselves in front of the photos.For all of its sophistication, Las Vegas was an unforgiving place in the early 1960s and it took a mean and unapologetic police force to hold it together. At the Greyhound station, plain-clothes officers kept their eyes on the two-bit con men who rode in from wherever their last bit of luck had run out. As one dep- uty would say, "We had a blue binder book that had pictures of all the known career criminals. The sheriff used to tell us, 'If you kick their ass enough or throw them in jail enough, they'll leave town.' So whenever we saw somebody in that book, we found a way to kick their ass."The town was deeply segregated, too. "If you were black and walking down the Strip just looking at the buildings and taking pictures, the sheriff 's department would take you to jail," recalls Wilbur Jackson, one of the first African-American cops in the city when he was hired in 1958. "On the booking sheet, they'd write NOS." It stood for Nigger on the Strip.In response, the residents of the Westside built their own shadow Strip along Jackson Street and filled it with rollicking jazz and bebop joints. But by 1970, Jackson Street had become a tapped-out vein running through the redlined heart of a ghetto. Riots and civic neglect transformed the area into a badland where few without business dared to go. Sonny, of course, feared no one, and consequently made the Westside's best-known lounge, the Town Tavern, his home away from home.On Christmas Day 1970, Sonny walked into the tavern with a white showgirl on each arm and ran into Clyde "Rabbit" Watkins, a former pool hustler who worked as a bellman at Caesars Palace. Watkins had met Sonny when he moved to town in 1966 and quickly became part of his entourage, jumping into Sonny's pink Cadillac when he wanted company and keeping an eye out when strangers started to get on the big man's nerves.Watkins tipped the brim of his hat and wished his friend a Merry Christmas."What you doing later?" he asked."Coming to your house to eat," Sonny answered, laying his huge hands on Watkins's back.To Watkins and all who saw Sonny that day, the champ was still a force of nature. Eight Christmases before, he had posed for the cover of *Esquire* in a red Santa Claus cap, looking every bit like an overgrown prison elf ready to shiv a reindeer. And as far as Watkins was concerned, little had changed. He remained a menacing slab of manhood. Immutable. Impervious. Impossible. As a writer for *Sports Illustrated* once observed, "If [a] ship were going down, I would look at Sonny Liston to tell me what to do." So Watkins was shocked when he was

working the night shift at Caesars and heard that the police were reporting that Sonny was dead. He grabbed Joe Louis and Sonny's former manager, Ash Resnick, both of whom were on the casino floor, and ran red lights until they reached 2058 Ottawa Drive. Geraldine was not happy to see Watkins. She wasn't blind to what her husband did, but she was old-fashioned enough to think that whatever it was should stay on the other side of town. Nor was she thrilled to see Resnick. He'd guided Sonny through his first fight against Muhammad Ali and it turned out to be the costliest loss of his career. Resnick was a player, and as far as Geraldine was concerned, Resnick had played them out of their retirement. But what could she say about Louis? Joe had always been generous to Sonny and was probably his best friend in Las Vegas. The problem was he'd also just been treated in a psychiatric hospital for a heroin addiction that made him delusional. They were a triangle without a steady side. They also entered just in time to watch two medical examiners struggling to load Sonny into a body bag. He was just six-foot-one but he was thick, and the rigor mortis made him hard to lift. The coroners got him as far as the stairs when one of them slipped and sent the corpse sliding. It landed on the living room floor with a thud. The Three Amigos stood over the body, slightly stunned. And as the house filled with cops, the last thing they needed to do was answer questions, especially after a sheriff's sergeant found a balloon of heroin on the kitchen table, below a wall phone. So they left. The discovery of heroin led to a flurry of queries for Geraldine. What did she know about the drugs? Why had she waited three hours after walking through the door to report his death? What exactly did she find when she first got home? Was there any evidence of a struggle? She waved off the questions, making it clear that she had nothing more to add that night. "Due to Mrs. Liston's apparent shock over the death of her husband," one officer wrote, "we were unable to interview her for further information." She would keep whatever suspicions she had to herself until her death. As Sonny's funeral wore on, Geraldine was consumed not only by who showed up but by who didn't. Her husband kept a large swath of his life a secret, and the people he kept in the shadows weren't about to show their faces now. That included a well-known trumpeter who ran a drug gang and had hired Sonny to do collections for him with a .38 strapped to his ankle. The bandleader had a long track record with the cops and knew that they liked him for some part of Sonny's death, even if they didn't know what part yet. And there was the beautician who dealt drugs out of the hair salon he ran across the tracks. He and Sonny did business together before they had a falling-out. Word on the street was that the beautician was looking for a piece of Sonny's scalp. Even stranger was a milky alliance between a hero cop and an alcoholic grifter who became enmeshed in the darkest secret of Sonny's career: the circumstances of his first-round surrender to Muhammad Ali in 1965. The Nation of Islam, meanwhile, lurked in the shadows, as worrisome an influence as it had been during that fight when rumors surfaced that its founder threatened to assassinate Sonny if he didn't take a dive. Ali was preparing to fight Joe Frazier for the biggest paycheck in the history of the sport, and Sonny was making noises that Ali owed him a piece of that purse as payment for taking a dive in '65, although that seemed to be news to Ali. The Nation's leaders had as much reason as anyone to make sure Sonny kept his mouth shut. These were powerful people with means and connections, and they had all worried that Sonny was spiraling out of control. In her own way, Geraldine pleaded with him to slow down, enjoy life, and focus on raising their adopted son, who was all of seven. But whether it was because he was facing a midlife crisis or he simply thought no one could hurt him, Sonny couldn't take his foot off the gas. He'd always had a girl or four on the side, but he was risking more than usual this time around. He'd fallen in love with a buxom cocktail waitress who'd turned him on to heroin. In what might have been the biggest threat of all, the feds were beginning to look into the source of the drugs he was buying and selling. An undercover agent had already met with him about doing a drug deal and there was every indication that Sonny was going to fall for the trap. There was no telling what he would do if he had to start wearing a wire on his friends. But it was hard to imagine anyone in Las Vegas who had a larger or more varied group of people who already wished him ill. That's why those close to Sonny were skeptical when the coroner of Clark County issued a report that attributed his death to natural causes—specifically fluid on the lungs. It wasn't an uncommon way for a man of roughly fifty to die, especially since the underlying cause was ruled to be a lack of blood flow to the heart, a common affliction for people with hardened arteries. But Sonny was no ordinary man. As recently as his last fight in June of 1970, his body looked fifteen years younger than his face, still massive and muscular. Nine of his fifty-four fights ended in the first round and twenty-five others failed to go halfway. "I knew the mortician who took care of Sonny," Rabbit Watkins would say in his Las Vegas home, not far from the Town Tavern, when I tracked him down more than forty years later. "He told me, from what he seen, that wasn't no natural causes." The death of Sonny Liston remains one of the most enduring mysteries in Las Vegas. There never was a homicide investigation because his death was never classified as a homicide. As a result, leads surfaced that haven't been followed, suspects died with their secrets, and stories haven't been told. At the funeral, Geraldine flung herself at her husband's casket and yelled, "I can't even see his face. Oh Jesus." Then she rose and shouted a question that would hover over the case for the next five decades. "Can you tell me what happened to you, Sonny?"