

*near greatness*

## MY DANCE WITH MR. BOJANGLES

I shared more than a hug with Sammy Davis Jr.

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by John Stark | Saturday, August 29, 2015

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When I was a reporter at the S.F. Examiner in the late 1970s, I was assigned to write a feature about people who live and work at Lake Tahoe. Sammy Davis Jr., aka "the world's greatest entertainer," kept a residence there.

As it turned out, "Mr. Show Biz" was going to be performing at Harrah's Resort & Casino while I was in town. I had booked a room at Harrah's. What a feather in my cap it would be to interview the singer, dancer, impressionist, musician and Rat Packer for my story. I called the casino's PR person. No dice, he told me: "Mr. Davis doesn't do interviews."

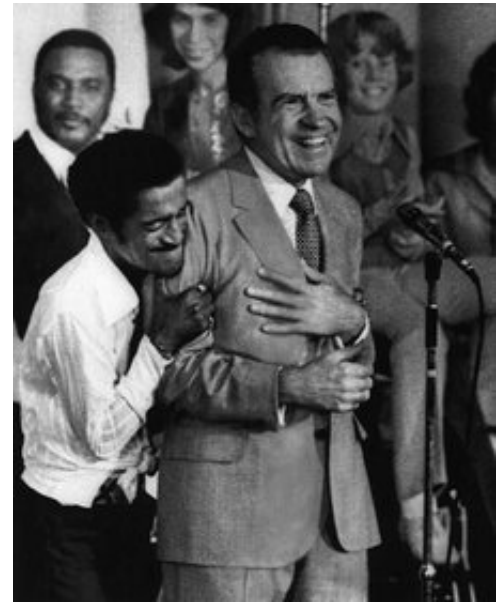
Davis had reason to avoid the press. A photograph of him hugging President Richard Nixon at the 1972 Republican Convention in Miami left the nation speechless. Nixon wasn't exactly loved in the black community. There were so many death threats in Davis' mail afterwards that federal authorities were called in. That hug—and his close friendship with Nixon—shadowed Davis the rest of his life.

On the day I was to fly to Tahoe, I did an impromptu interview with another African-American superstar, Harry Belafonte. He had stopped by the newspaper unannounced. It wasn't unusual in those days for celebrities to wander in, especially if they had something to promote—hello Clint Eastwood, Andy Griffith, Divine, Charo, Harry Reems and Don Novello (AKA Father Guido Sarducci).

Reporters looked up from their IBM Selectrics as I escorted Belafonte through the newsroom. Tall and handsome beyond belief, he smiled and nodded to everyone. I felt like a proud cat that had caught a very big bird.

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I copiously took notes as Belafonte talked about his latest political mission. When the interview was over, I told him that I was flying to Lake Tahoe later that day. "I'm hoping to interview Sammy Davis Jr.," I said. Mr. Calypso wasn't impressed, to say the least.

In a soft voice, he bluntly told me what he thought of Davis.

*Yikes, and tally me bananas!*

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I wasn't ready to give up on getting an interview with Davis. I began hounding the PR man as soon as I got to Harrah's that night. Still no luck, although I did secure a pass to Davis' Saturday night late show.

I guess I wore the PR man down. He showed up at my ringside table. "Mr. Davis has agreed to meet you after the show in his dressing room. But you only have five minutes to ask him about Lake Tahoe. That's it."

This was Davis' second show of the night. Even though the room wasn't full, he gave it his all, from "Birth of the Blues" to "Candy Man." The cocktail waitresses stopped serving when he performed "Mr. Bojangles." Tears welled in my eyes when he got to the part about his dog up and dying.

A security guard came to my table after Davis' last bow. He was enormous, as I recall, at least twice the size of Davis. He escorted me to the star's dressing room. Davis opened the door. He had a cocktail in one hand, and a cigarette in the other — he died in 1990 of lung cancer at age 64.

Davis didn't offer me a seat, or a drink, even though there was a fully stocked, stand-up bar in the dressing room. He looked annoyed.

After a few minutes of polite questions and answers about Lake Tahoe's allure, the security guard took my arm. "Time to go," he said.

But I wasn't finished! I wanted to ask Davis about his interracial marriage to Mae Britt, converting to Judaism, his glass eye and being snubbed by his pal JFK.

I was desperate. It was time to play my ace in the hole.

"I am sorry we don't have more time to talk," I said. "I interviewed Harry Belafonte yesterday. I thought you might want to comment on what he said about you."

"What *did* he say about me?" Davis asked.

"Nothing much," I said coyly, "just that you're a traitor to your race."

The security guard yanked me towards the exit. "Wait!" Davis said to him, "He's not going anywhere. Sit him down!" The guard put his hand on my shoulder and pushed me into a leather armchair.

Davis went to the bar and poured me a glass of whisky.

"What else did he say about me?" he asked, handing me a Scotch on the rocks. "Uh," I replied nervously, "that you're an Uncle Tom."

I'd never seen a black, Jewish, one-eyed tornado before, and I hope never to again. Davis' rage filled the dressing room. He began jabbing his finger in the air, as if he were doing a James Cagney impression.

"How fucking dare he say that," Davis said. "Let me tell you something about Harry Belafonte. When he was starting out in show business, nobody kissed more white ass in Beverly Hills than he did. Next time you see him, you can tell him I said that."

To my relief, the tornado dissipated quickly. More so, Davis didn't kill the messenger. Instead, he invited me to hang with him as long as my tape recorder wasn't on. I think he was lonely and wanted someone to drink with.

And drink we did. I can't recall how many I had, how long I stayed or what we talked about. I know it wasn't Lake Tahoe or Harry Belafonte.

Whatever it was earned me a hug as I was leaving. "Sorry, man, I shouldn't be hugging people, it gets me in trouble," Davis said.

"When I was in China," he continued, "I tried to hug Mao Tse Tung. But I was stopped by one of his guards who said to me, 'Please don't squeeze the Chairman.'" With that corny Mr. Whipple joke, Davis roared with laughter and hugged me again.

When I awoke the next morning in my hotel room, I was sprawled across the king-size bed, fully clothed in my white leisure suit. A signed picture of Sammy Davis Jr. lay beside me. "To John," it said, "always."

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My dad was a musician in Vegas at that time. I met a lot of celebrities, but Sammy Davis Jr. was one I wanted to meet but never got to.

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