

Amsterdam News

Vol. 99 No. 39 September 18-September 24, 2008
© 2008 The Amsterdam News

The new Black view

75¢ New York City
\$1.00 Outside N.Y.C.

Preserving the legacy of Sammy Davis Jr.

By **DEMETRIA IRWIN**
Amsterdam News Staff

Sammy Davis Jr., arguably one of the greatest entertainers in the world, died 18 years ago, and Matt Birkbeck's new book "Deconstructing Sammy: Music, Madness, Money and the Mob" explains why there's never been a biopic, play or Broadway musical based on the performance legend's life.

Fellow Rat Packers Frank Sinatra and Dean Martin have estates worth tens of millions

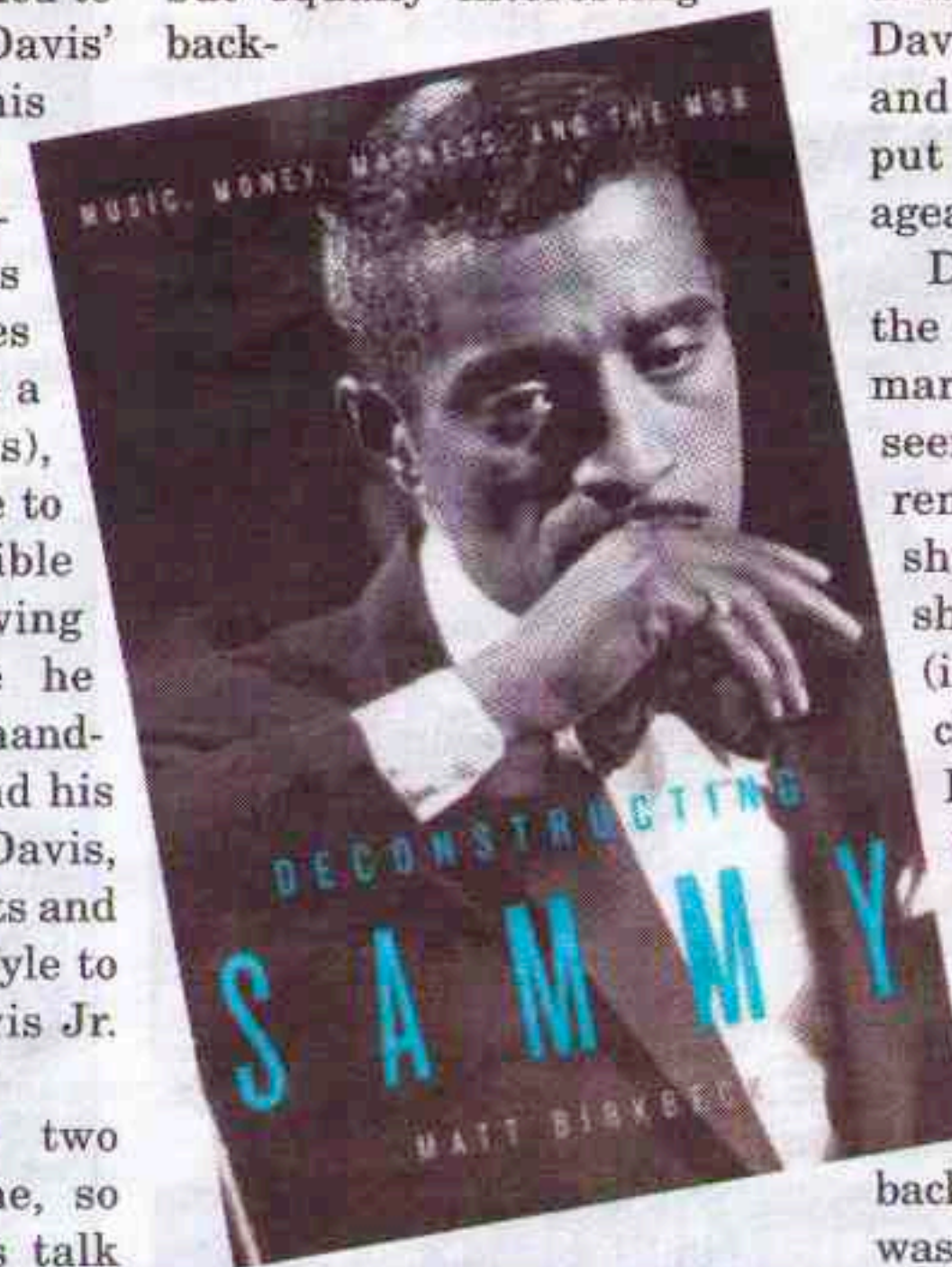
of dollars (and counting) and an impressive list of critically acclaimed made-for-TV movies, concerts and CD collections based on their work. Davis' estate, meanwhile, has been mired in family conflicts, poor business investments and tax trouble—managing to put out only a handful of money-earning products to preserve Davis' legacy.

When Davis passed away from cancer at 65 years old, he lived in an opulent mansion in

the rambling Hollywood hills; his wife and his girlfriend lived with him and cash, cars and a mountain of jewelry seemed to be at his disposal. But Davis' lavish lifestyle belied his massive money problems. Despite earning an estimated \$50 million in his lifetime (sometimes pulling in over \$100,000 a week at Las Vegas shows), Davis was in the red due to poor investments, horrible management and a growing cocaine problem. Once he passed away, the IRS demanded millions of dollars and his widow, Altovise Gore-Davis, did her best to stash assets and continue living the lifestyle to which Mrs. Sammy Davis Jr. was accustomed.

Davis co-authored two memoirs in his lifetime, so although Birkbeck does talk about important and interesting facts from Davis' fascinating life, the events that took place after his death are the focus of the book. Birkbeck is an investigative journalist by trade and it shows. It would be easy to spend pages and even whole chapters on Davis' sex parties, cocaine binges, occult

interest and all those other tidbits that sell tabloids, but Birkbeck goes for the lesser known but equally interesting back-



story about finances, loyalty and the overwhelming desire to be loved. The book almost reads like a modern-day treasure hunt, the ultimate prize being Davis' intact legacy—a prize that requires slaying many demons along the way, including the ones created by Davis himself.

Birkbeck allows the reader to follow the "hero" of the book, Albert "Sonny" Murray, who embarked on a quest to save Davis' widow from alcoholism and almost single handedly put Davis' estate into a manageable position.

Deep family conflict between the children from Davis' first marriage and his widow seemed insurmountable and remain to this day, and the shady practices of equally shady "business" people (including mobsters) in charge of various aspects of Davis' affairs also contributed to a long and winding journey for Murray. In the end, Murray achieved major successes toward helping Gore-Davis and putting the Davis estate back on track. Unfortunately, it wasn't enough and the estate is back in disrepair for various reasons.

"Deconstructing Sammy" is an enthralling read that adds another layer to the already complicated, inspiring and depressing life and death story of Sammy Davis, Jr. The book is on shelves now and well worth the read.