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Toughest Men in the South, Greatest Athletes in the World: Gender, Race, and Modernity in Southern Wrestling

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TOUGHEST MEN IN THE SOUTH, GREATEST ATHLETES IN THE WORLD: GENDER, RACE, AND MODERNITY IN SOUTHERN WRESTLING

by

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ABSTRACT

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, professional wrestling in the South, buoyed by the South's economic boom, reached its pinnacle during this period. Traditionally, Southern wrestling, affected by a struggling economy and small population, often struggled compared to other regions. However, as the population of the urban South expanded and became more diverse, a new wave of Southern wrestling promoters, found success by courting both their traditional white Southern working-class audience and attracting new African American fans. To do so, Southern wrestling promotions, Mid-South Wrestling and Continental Wrestling, created masculine heroes, like Junk Yard Dog and Jerry Lawler, who reinforced the importance of traditional Southern manhood while also embracing more equitable racial representation and elements of contemporary national culture. Simultaneously, the Republican Party helped bestow upon the South a political and economic influence it had not enjoyed since the Antebellum era. The effectiveness of this Southern resurgence depended on its acceptance of national corporate and cultural influences as well as the amelioration of race relations. Despite its newfound economic and cultural influence in the region, the success of Southern wrestling was short-lived. Wrestling promoter Vince McMahon capitalized on a changing media and corporate landscape to expand his World Wrestling Federation nationally and overtake regional promotions. Economic collapse, class and racial divisions, and national corporate interests doomed the promise of a Southern renaissance. Local wrestling, and its ability to bring together audiences across racial and generational lines, represents the loss of that promise.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AWA	American Wrestling Association
CWA	Continental Wrestling Association
GCW	Georgia Championship Wrestling
MSW	Mid-South Wrestling
SECW	Southeastern Championship Wrestling
SMW	Smoky Mountain Wrestling
USM	The University of Southern Mississippi
UWF	Universal Wrestling Federation
WCCW	World Class Championship Wrestling
WCW	World Championship Wrestling
WCU	William Carey University
WWF	World Wrestling Federation
WWWF	World-Wide Wrestling Federation

Introduction

I. Whitey Caldwell

In the early 1960s, the golden era of professional wrestling on national television came to an end. The spandex theater between the ropes was no longer held in the same esteem it earned in the 1940s and 1950s airing in millions of homes on the Dupont network.[1] However, in eastern Tennessee, the spectacle of wrestling was reaching its greatest heights. Local wrestler J.C. "Whitey" Caldwell became the biggest star on local television. Caldwell had been a top athlete in Tennessee from a young age, excelling at baseball, amateur wrestling, and boxing.[2] His wrestling career began in the mid-1950s and he soon became a local legend in Eastern Tennessee, particularly his hometown of Kingsport. Weighing in at about 195 pounds and only five feet and nine inches tall, Caldwell was not a herculean figure.[3] In fact, when legendary NWA champion Dory Funk Jr. came to Kingsport to wrestle Caldwell, he thought the promoters and wrestlers were playing a "rib" or prank on him. He believed Whitey was an ordinary fan and the real wrestlers were trying to bait Funk into believing the scrawny Caldwell was their most popular wrestler.[4] Despite his size, Caldwell's commitment to Southern honor and community made him one of the most revered wrestling stars in Tennessee.

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[1] David Weinstein, *The Forgotten Network: Dumont and the Birth of American Television* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2006), 61.
[2] "29 Fights Scheduled for Semi-Finals ET Golden Gloves Tourney," *Johnson City Chronicle*, February 4, 1955, p. 11.
[3] Wrestlers and wrestling promoters generally exaggerate their size and stature; however, the Tennessee Athletic commission were uncharacteristically scrupulous in regulating wrestling and kept scrupulous records, treating it as a legitimate contest.
[4] Jim Cornette, "Jim Cornette on Ron Wright Whitey Caldwell", YouTube, March 23, 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tMjETdWIxxU&t=23s.

Caldwell's rivalry with the heel (villain) Ron Wright became legendary in Tennessee. The rabid Southern fans came in droves to see the two local boys in life or death struggles each week. Caldwell was the star athlete hero, the local grappler who would help the older ladies who patronized his auto parts shop, where he continued to work forty hours a week even during his wrestling heyday.[5] Wright played the cowardly villain, jealous of Caldwell's success. Lorri Glover, in *Southern Sons*, describes Southern manhood as an identity which required independence, as opposed to the submissiveness of slaves, balanced with a commitment to preserving community and social values.[6] Caldwell perfectly embodied the spirit of Southern masculinity. Autonomous and willing to defend his honor against the cowardice and jealousy of Wright, Caldwell nonetheless demonstrated chivalry and a commitment to hard work and service in his small community even when he became a wrestling star.

Kingsport, like the rest of Eastern Tennessee, was grappling with the radical changes of 1960s America. Beyond a fervent renaissance in Appalachian art and culture, the area also saw an increase in the kind of activism going on in the rest of the country. Specifically, resistance to coal mining regulation united much of the Appalachian working-class. Additionally, feminist and Civil Rights activism sought social reorganization. It was in this tumultuous moment that a simple white hardware store

[5] Chuck Cavalaris, "The Fans Still Put Flowers on Whitey Caldwell's Grave," *The Knoxville News-Sentinel*, August 5, 1994, p. 66.
[6] David Weinstein, *The Forgotten Network: Dumont and the Birth of American Television* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2006), 25.

owner like Whitey Caldwell offered reassurance to the white audiences of Eastern Tennessee that traditional white masculinity could persevere no matter the obstacles.[7]

The seemingly endless conflict between Caldwell and Wright raged on until the early 1970s, before the two real-life best friends would finally call a truce in the fictional or "kayfabe" world of the ring.[8] The two wrestlers were fixtures in the community for a decade, local titans at night and boys next door in the day. However, the wrestling culture of eastern Tennessee came to an abrupt halt when Caldwell died tragically in a car accident on October 10, 1972.[9] Just three days later, Ron Wright took Caldwell's place in a scheduled match. The fans, nerves still raw from the death of their greatest wrestling hero, forgave Wright for his years of evil deeds. Fans cried for Caldwell and cheered for Wright.[10] Caldwell's death meant the community lost a connection to the values of the past he represented. The mourning of Caldwell simultaneously served as a funeral for the parts of traditional Southern masculinity he helped preserve.

In the following years, Ron Wright made a name for himself in Memphis and throughout the South, but in Kingsport, Tennessee, many citizens lost their taste for wrestling. Ron Fuller, who promoted wrestling shows in the area in the late 1970s and 1980s, believed a dark cloud hung over the city for decades:

> It just decimated business in that area. We had a hard time building somebody that had the power of Whitey Caldwell there as far as a babyface…after Whitey's

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[7] Mark T. Banker, *Appalachians All: East Tennesseans and The Elusive History of an American Region* (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 2011), 200

[8] Beau James, "Remembering Whitey Caldwell 45 Year after His Death." Remembering Whitey Caldwell 45 year after his death., January 1, 2012. Accessed September 12, 2019 http://www.kingofkingsport.com/2017/10/remembering-Whitey-caldwell-45-year.html.
Kayfabe is a professional wrestling term coined in the early twentieth century. The term refers to anything scripted or predetermined in wrestling.

[9] "Accident Claims Six Lives in Area." *Kingsport Times*, Kingsport, TN, October 9, 1972. Accessed September 10, 2019 https://www.newspapers.com/image/592618998

[10] "Tag Match Is Feature," *The Knoxville News-Sentinel*, October 13, 1972, p. 19.

> death, I heard several people tell me that business dropped off dramatically. Some say up to 50%, some say 75% of audiences in some cities never returned because they did not have Whitey Caldwell on those cards anymore. I just really had no idea the impact of this of this guy when I purchased Knoxville. I started to understand it. It kind of explained the difficulty I was having increasing business.[11]

As late as 1993, Ric Flair, perhaps the greatest Southern wrestling star of a generation, only garnered an audience of less than 500 in Kingsport.[12] New wrestling promotions came and went, but no one represented the working-class rural community like Caldwell. The South, including Kingsport, continued to modernize and industrialize. However, Southern wrestling fans still yearned for traditional Southern men like Caldwell.

Today few wrestling fans know the name Whitey Caldwell; however, his career represents the importance of local wrestling, and how it embodied local working-class culture. In the 1980s, the dissemination of national culture slowly eroded traditional Southern culture. This dissertation evaluates this era and the evolution of Southern Wrestling, becoming one of the last remaining vestiges of working-class Southern expression. In the 1980s, the new generation of Southerners did not adhere to the strict cultural and social status quo of the pre-Civil Rights era. Instead, they crafted a unique Southern identity while embracing modernity via national popular culture and racial progressivism. At a time of renewed optimism that the South, as part of the Sunbelt coalition, could become the economic and political powerhouse it had strived to be since Reconstruction, Southern wrestling helped build a cultural bridge between modern

[11] Ron Fuller, "Ron Fuller's Studcast - Episode 90: A Star Dies," YouTube April 11, 2019 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-3ZrbLhvWbM.
[12] "WCW House Show 1993 19.08.1993," Cagematch.org, accessed January 26, 2023, https://www.cagematch.net/?id=1&nr=60716.

nationalism and Southern traditionalism by reinforcing the dominance of white Southern masculinity.

This battle between traditionalism and modernity is one the South struggles with to the present day. However, the 1980s was a pivotal moment where the two forces seem to coexist. Pinning down how to define Southern traditional values and culture is a tricky proposition. The best way to understand Southern traditionalism is by defining it against the rest of the country. William Fielding Ogburn does:

> Thus the inhabitant of the South is, in popular opinion, different because of a variety of attitudes, such as his chivalry toward women, his race prejudice, his hospitality, his leisureliness, his preference for the military life, his manners, and his acceptance of social classes. These attitudes contrast greatly with those in other parts of the United States where there is a strong belief in women's rights, where Negro children go to school with whites, where speech is frank, and where one social class is held to be as good as another.[13]

Here, Ogburn defines traditional Southern culture as exclusively white and masculine against the more egalitarian and inclusive culture of the rest of the United States. Both points of view are incomplete and flawed; nonetheless, this ideology sets up the South as a bastion of conservatism headed by one social group, white men. In this setting, inclusivity and the embrace of a homogenous national culture defines modernism. As such, modernity is in tension with both Southern traditionalism and the dominance of white men over the rest of Southern society.

During this time, Southern wrestling promotions marketed more progressive African American characters than anywhere else in the country. These characters and stories represented the experiences of a mixed-race working-class, facilitating the

[13] William Fielding Ogburn, "Ideologies of the South in Transition," *Social Forces*, Volume 23, Issue 3, March 1945, Pages 334–342, https://doi.org/10.2307/2572297, 334.

coalescing of a cross-racial fan base around shared values. Even as modernity, symbolized by embracing national popular culture and uplifting African American through equitable representation, came to Southern wrestling and attracted younger and more diverse audiences, Southern wrestling adhered to traditional masculinity and codes of conduct which helped sooth the persistent anxieties of Southerners that embracing national culture would result in the erasure, or at least degradation, of the South. More than entertainment, wrestling served as a celebration of modernity and continuation of traditional Southern culture. This contradiction was ultimately made possible by economic prosperity.

The Sunbelt dream and the migration of people away from the Rust Belt to the Deep South was dictated by the expectations of racial progress and national conformity. However, the fall of the local Southern territories was part of a larger economic downturn in the South which exacerbated racial and class divisions in the South that never fully healed. When the economic benefits of racial progressivism no longer proved financially beneficial, Southerners reverted to traditional racist representation and segregated audiences. The fall of territorial wrestling in the South is part of a greater tragedy. Working-class Southerners, on the cusp of coming to terms with the paradoxes of modernity and traditionalism, were once again left behind by a nation who defined them as exploitable commodities to be ridiculed. The autonomy to change, progress, and unify taken were taken from working-class Southerners by forces beyond their culture. In-turn, Southerners entrenched themselves in division and rage, a common refrain in the history of the South.

II. The History of Wrestling

Professional wrestling evolved considerably over the course of the twentieth century. At its core, professional wrestling is a predetermined choreographed sport which blends amateur wrestling, striking (punches and kicks), and dance. Throughout much of wrestling history, those who performed and promoted it kept the predetermined nature of wrestling secret. Despite the secrecy, most fans knew promoters and wrestlers scripted wrestling events (or at least most of them).[14] The key to wrestling was, like a magic show, for the audience to suspend disbelief. Wrestling promoters' primary goal was the creation of characters and rivalries which garnered interest and passion from fans so that their emotional connection to wrestlers and stories aided their suspension of disbelief.

Professional wrestling's origins in the United States go back at least to the Civil War. There is no definitive starting point to the entertainment form we know today as professional wrestling, Amateur wrestling took off a pastime during the civil war among soldiers during rest days. The Union Army even held tournaments and crowned wrestling champions to keep soldiers occupied and in top shape.[15] Wrestling bouts after the Civil War were not strictly limited to grappling, but could involve striking as well, making it similar to professional wrestling and mixed martial arts.[16] Purveyors of this form of combat referred to this form of combat as scuffling. These fighters often intermixed with boxing; However, implementation of the Marquess of Queensbury Rules into the sport of

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[14] There are many examples of wrestling exposes dating back to the early twentieth centuries. One of the first known exposes is Marcus Griffin's 1936 book, *Fall Guys*.

[15] Paul Heller, "History Space: Early Days of Vermont Wrestling," *Burlington Free Press* (Burlington, February 24, 2018), https://www.burlingtonfreepress.com/story/news/2018/02/24/history-space-early-days-wrestling-vermont/110787962.

[16] Charles Morrow Wilson, *Magnificent Scufflers: Revealing the Great Days When America Wrestled the World*, (Stephen Greene Press, 1959), https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=mdp.39015068803710;view=2up;seq=20, Chapter 2.

boxing in the 1880s created a clear distinction between boxing and wrestling.[17] The Queensbury rules implemented boxing gloves which made grappling nearly impossible and outlawed wrestling and clinching in a boxing match.[18]

There is no specific moment when scuffling and wrestling transformed into the professional wrestling known around the world today, a predetermined contest rather than a sport. However, sometime between the end of the Civil War and the beginning of the twentieth century, amateur wrestlers, veterans, barroom brawlers, and hustlers coalesced to form something of an informal traveling circuit which toured working-class venues from the Bowery in New York to the backwoods barns of Tennessee.[19]

In the early parts of the twentieth century, wrestling became more of a large-scale attraction as legitimate amateur wrestling stars like George Hackenschmidt sold out Madison Square Garden as a top attraction by 1904.[20] However, the issue with amateur wrestling as a spectator sport is the length of the bouts. Major bouts could went on for hours as displeased fans headed for the exits. Wrestling legend Lou Thesz notes how this brought about the predetermined wrestling we know today,

> They were tremendous contests, but they had to be absolute boredom for the average paying customer to watch. It was matches like those, coupled with the public's appetite for action and excitement, which illustrate why the profit-oriented people in the business decided a more entertaining style was necessary if the business was going to survive. And the only way to accomplish that was for the wrestlers to cooperate in their matches … to 'work' with each other.[21]

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[17] *Britannica*, s.v. "Queensberry Rules" Last Modified February 13, 2017, https://www.britannica.com/sports/Marquess-of-Queensberry-rules.
[18] *Britannica*, "Queensberry Rules."
[19] Wilson, *Magnificent Scufflers*, Chapter 4.
[20] "Hackenschmidt is Wrestling Champion," *New York Times*, May 5, 1905, p. 5, https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1905/05/05/100485496.pdf.
[21] Lou Thesz, Kit Bauman, and Mike Chapman, *Hooker: An Authentic Wrestler's Adventures inside the Bizarre World of Professional Wrestling* (Seattle , WA: Wrestling Channel Press, 2000), 85.

In the coming decades, professional wrestlers like Thesz and Hackenschmidt predetermined and, to an extent, choreographed their bouts to help build interest and excitement.

Much as the United States, through the ideology of Manifest Destiny, saw it as the fate of the nation to spread their dominion from sea to shining sea, so too did the National Wrestling Alliance (NWA). The NWA was a corporation started in the early 1900s run by various professional wrestling "promoters" or owners of local wrestling companies. These men, as the United States did with the West, divided the country into "territories," loosely defined areas of the country where wrestling businesses would run shows without competition from the rest of the NWA. Each wrestling promotion or company ran shows in a territory with their own wrestlers and eventually established their own television programs. The result was a conglomerate which effectively finished competition from outside the NWA. They also kept wrestler salaries or "payoffs" low and stifled in-fighting amongst the various promoters. The result was that each territory catered to their area of the country, featuring local wrestlers and storylines or "angles" which appealed to each specific audience.

Despite local control, wrestlers in the early twentieth century developed a universal language of violent artistic expression. The most important reasons for the similarity of artistic expression in professional wrestling across the country was its homogeneous evolution throughout the twentieth century and the transient nature of its competitors. Kyrieakoudes and Cocianis write in "Tennessee Test of Manhood" of backwater fights garnering large crowds in the Deep South in the same way that Civil War veterans and wheat farmers in rural Vermont garnered crowds in the late 1800s.

Soon, a group of wrestlers emerged who, rather than stay in their local area, moved around the country to display their athletic prowess in the realm of theatrical violence. Quickly the backwater fights created a standard language of rehearsed violence and athleticism, which they transferred to local wrestling arenas. As the players of Commedia del Arte did 500 years earlier, the men and women of the ring used the shared language of theatrical violence to tell unique stories for each location. Wrestlers like the preening Gorgeous George developed patterned performances which included the same choreographed entrance, props, and attire, but his verbiage and mannerisms changed to agitate the local crowds. These variations in presentation made wrestling fans tribal. Wrestling fans in St. Louis believed the grand grappling in the ballrooms of hotels they saw each week was incomparable to that of the backwater wrestling in Oklahoma. The wild Southerners were the most faithful fans, protecting Southern identity and culture, with wrestling serving as a metaphorical battlefield.[22]

The focus of this study is the Deep South area of the United States, specifically the territories which controlled major urban areas of Louisiana, Oklahoma, Mississippi, Tennessee, and Kentucky. While several other smaller territories existed in this region, the two major territories were Mid-South Wrestling (also known as Tri-State Wrestling and later Universal Wrestling Federation) and Continental Wrestling Association (formerly known as the Gulas Promotions and later the United States Wrestling Alliance). Mid-South Wrestling put on performances primarily in Louisiana, Oklahoma, and central Mississippi. The Continental Wrestling (known colloquially as "Memphis

[22] Louis M. Kyriakoudes and Peter A. Coclanis, "The 'Tennessee Test of Manhood': Professional Wrestling and Southern Cultural Stereotypes," *Southern Cultures* 3, no. 3 (1997): pp. 8-27, https://doi.org/10.1353/scu.1997.0012, 10.

Wrestling") ran shows in Tennessee, Kentucky, and northern Mississippi. This study primarily focuses on the period between 1977 and 1989. During that time, former wrestler Bill Watts took control of the Mid-South territory splitting with former owner Leroy McGuirk. In 1977, wrestlers and promoters Jerry Jarrett and Jerry Lawler split from Nick Gulas to create Continental Wrestling.

III. Context and Literature

This study begins in 1976 and 1977 as Southern Wrestling changed hands to a new generation of wrestlers and promoters who helped usher in a period of economic and cultural prominence. This period coincides with the formation and national prominence of the idea of a "Sunbelt Economy" in the United States. The term Sunbelt emerged in 1960s political spheres; however, in 1976, the term entered the zeitgeist.[23] Beyond the shift in cultural capital, the second half of the twentieth century witnessed a large population migration to the South. The population boom in the South outpaced the North by roughly twenty percent.[24] As industry faded and the United States remade itself into a land of ideas over manufacturing, the former powerhouses of the North went into a period of urban decline. Thus, the 1970s established the opposition of the Sunbelt and the Rustbelt. This opposition made the South, for the first time in the twentieth century, as the possible focus of the modern manufacturing economy.[25]

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[23] Kevin Phillips, "How the GOP Became God's Own Party," *The Washington Post* (WP Company, April 2, 2006), https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/04/01/AR2006040100004.html.
[24] U.S. Bureau of the Census, Current Population Reports, Series P23, no. 175, Population Trends in the 1980's, US. Government Printing Office, Washington, DC, 1992.
[25] William H. Frey and Alden Speare, *Regional and Metropolitan Growth and Decline in the United States* (New York, ny: Sage Foundation, 1988), chapter 1.

Although Kirkpatrick Sale, author of the 1976 book *Power Shift,* prefers the term "Southern Rim," he argues it was at this time the South became the epicenter of the United States. This was especially so for sports. Sports franchises felt emboldened to move into the South after desegregation, especially as the AFL and ABA courted Southern fans and threatened the monopoly of the NFL and NBA, respectively. Sports franchises thus normalized relations with the South as a potent symbol of post-Civil Rights reconciliation with the North. [26]

At the same time, the Republican party imbued the South with a renewed level of power in the mid twentieth century as they sought a voting coalition capable of dominating the nation's political sphere. Republicans' "Southern Strategy" began with Nixon in the 1960s, but quickly transformed in the 1970s and 1980s into something more accurately labeled a "Sunbelt Strategy," unifying the Deep South with the Southwest. The two regions represented the fastest growing area in the country. Reagan, governor of Sunbelt-state California, balanced his appeal between white collar business interests and evangelical moralism. Writing for the *Washington Pos*t in 1984, David Hoffman and James R. Dickinson summarize the demographic advantage Republican sought by targeting the Sunbelt. Hoffman argued in his piece,

> Republican leaders hope their economic appeal and emphasis on traditional values will enable them to form a coalition that includes the so-called 'baby boom' generation (generally those between 25 and 40), traditional conservative or 'populist' Democrats, and a sizable fraction of Hispanics, in part to neutralize the overwhelmingly pro-Democratic voting pattern of blacks.[27]

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[26]Kirkpatrick Sale, *Power Shift: The Rise of the Southern Rim and Its Challenge to the Eastern Establishment* (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1976), introduction.
[27] David Hoffman et al., "GOP Hitches Its Hopes for Party Prosperity to Sun Belt," *The Washington Post* (WP Company, August 25, 1984), https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1984/08/25/gop-hitches-its-hopes-for-party-prosperity-to-sun-belt/1e3dd0d7-fc00-4585-a614-515d9b9276f3.

Implicit in this analysis is a national political movement which attempted to empower white Southerners to the detriment of Black Southerners. The post-Civil Rights era of the South promised racial progressivism as a means of modernizing and appealing to potential migrants and big business. However, the political messaging and strategy of the Republican party reveals that this racial progressivism was a façade driven by economic interest. This pattern is exemplified by the rise and fall of Mid-South Wrestling in the 1980s, whose racial progressivism was carefully planned for the purpose of economic self-interest. To white Southerners, Republicans and local leadership were not to blame the failure of the economic promise of the 1980s, but instead the racial progressivism and modernization undermined economic success and the South ended up back in a position of powerlessness.

The promise of the Sunbelt was that the economic cultural energy of the South and West would overtake the traditional metropolitan centers of the Northeast; however, for many in the South life remained consistent. Relatively little changed in the day-to-day lives of working-class Southerners despite large changes in the demographic makeup of the urban sphere. Southern worker's welfare and treatment lagged not just the elite members of society, but also working-class Americans in other parts of the United States.[28] This dissertation argues Southern wrestling helped the Southern working-class accept this version of modernity by coating it in traditional Southern values and shared cultural history. Cultural forms like wrestling helped highlight the importance of Southern masculinity as central to the moral superiority of the South. However, the

[28] James C. Cobb, *The Selling of the South: The Southern Crusade or Industrial Development*, 1936-1990 (Urbana (Ill.): University of Illinois press, n.d.), introduction

Sunbelt boom was short-lived and the economic downturn in the South and the ascendance of national corporations and consumerism deteriorated the local culture of the Southern working class and the progressivism it attempted to instill.

Since the Antebellum era, a particular brand of masculinity thrived in the South even as it adapted to the end of slavery and eventually the end of segregation and Jim Crow. Wrestling's popularity with children served the social function of demonstrating moral and social behavior to boys to help them to develop into socially conforming men. This ability to disseminate traditional masculine ideals of social responsibility and autonomy was an essential service against the backdrop of a masculinity crisis and the disruption of white masculine dominance caused by the Civil Rights Movement. Southern political and religious institutions protected the white Masculinity for generations; however, racial progressivism was at the heart of Sunbelt messaging that the South finally modernized and accepted a shared national identity.[29]

In the 1980s, White masculinity could no longer (publicly at least) define its virtues and elevated status in contrast to Blackness. Southerners required public figures and cultural forms which instilled those elements of manhood and honor which Bertram Wyatt-Brown argues existed before and after slavery and the creation of racial hierarchy. It is these characteristics of honor as, "inseparable from hierarchy and entitlement, defense of family blood and community needs. All these exigencies required the rejection of the lowly, the alien, the ashamed," which defined the great heroes of Southern Wrestling and which they in turn instilled in a new generation of Southern boys.[30]

[29] Sally Robinson, *Marked Men White Masculinity in Crisis* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2005) 153.
[30] Wyatt-brown, *Southern Honor*, 4.

Wrestling's larger purpose as a social institution was as an instruction manual for masculinity. In its appeal to a mixed-race audience (while being controlled by white ownership), wrestling also disseminated Southern white masculinity and morality to Black audiences and brought about conformity even as it allowed black characters to influence white audiences.

Part of the South's movement toward the traditionalism of identity and gender politics in the South was in defiance of the changes going on in the rest of America in the 1960s and 1970s. The feminist movement influenced both society and the national popular culture of the moment. By the late 1970s, feminism representation in popular culture was no longer relegated to ingénue ideologues and hipster films like *The Graduate*. Oscar winning films like *Kramer vs. Kramer* featured an older married women leaving the nuclear family in search of personal autonomy.[31] Professional wrestling in the South reaffirmed masculine dominance and the importance of the traditional family unit. As the national culture reckoned with the progressive radicalism of the 1970s, the local cultural form of professional wrestling in the South helped offset national cultural images of women's liberation. As such, it served as a useful tool in maintaining traditional values in the public sphere.

The battle between modernity and traditionalism in the South was based in-part on a feeling that the national culture would in some ways denigrate white men's role at the head of the table of Southern society. The 20th century thus marked a constant cycle of crises in masculinity in the South, despite the stronghold Southern white men kept

[31] Editor: Stephen J. Whitfield and Leo P Ribuffo, "1974 - 1988," in *A Companion to 20th-Century America* (Malden, MA: John Wiley & Sons, 2009), pp. 102-123, 109.

upon all facets of society. Well into the 1980s, cultural products emanating from the South and about the South, such as the literature and subsequent film adaptations of James Dickey and Pat Conroy, represent a version of white manhood torn between a less-masculine but more socially acceptable version of manhood and a more primitive and violent version of manhood. Sally Robinson, in *Marked Men*, argues these stories show the South as, "a space of an ongoing crisis in masculinity, one that can never be resolved but instead gets repeated again and again; that crisis is given a bodily form… what is understood as a natural male violence."[32] Professional wrestling offered masculinity a space to thrive in the South. The wrestling ring, like boxing and football, was a space for violence to be unleashed and consumed by Southern men and boys allowing for a catharsis of masculine violence. However, its scripted and isolated nature meant that those fans could return to their domestic, civilized lives. Wrestling, unlike boxing and football, also created storylines and characters who transmitted cultural values. By fulfilling these functions, Southern wrestling was allowed to modernize and diversify without upsetting more conservative fans.

This dissertation illuminates the ways in which modern national culture influenced a new generation of Southerners. Karen Cox's *Dreaming of Dixie* observes the inverse, evaluating how national culture formed and made standard a depiction of the South. Cox argues it was not Southerners who created a foundational image of the South in mass culture, but northerners. In the early twentieth century, film, theater, and radio reproduced a romantic narrative of Southern culture based on an idealist version of

[32] Sally Robinson, *Marked Men White Masculinity in Crisis* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2005), 165.

Antebellum Southern life. Images of romantic agrarian life in the South contrasted with the urban industrial North. Cox's work thus gives credibility to the idea of conquering the South in the twentieth century. However, what the national culture missed in the Southernization of America was the culture of the Southern white working-class, which stayed outside the mainstream. Because of this, the imagination of the South as a pure white community holding on to vestiges of past racial and social supremacy misses the increasingly diverse working-classes, who, as my dissertation argues, unified and embraced both modernity and traditionalism through their idolatry of cross-racial wrestling superheroes.[33]

In *Black Camelot*, William L Van Deburg argues the 1960s and 1970s saw newly emerging figures representing the African American community take hold in the national zeitgeist. Sports icons like Jim Brown and film characters like Shaft represented John F. Kennedy's vision of a new Camelot in America to the black community. Van Deburg addresses four versions of the black hero: athletes; musicians; "urban bad men"; and fictional detectives. Rather than holding them up as singular forces, he argues these people "helped fuel civil rights and Black Power activism, sustained an oppressed population during desperate times, and offered a series of compelling counterproposals to majoritarian teachings."[34] This dissertation seeks to complicate Van Deburg's vision of the black hero. Black athletes and entertainers like Junk Yard Dog embody this image of the black hero. However, figures like Ernie Ladd demonstrate one must look beyond the

[33] Karen L. Cox, *Dreaming of Dixie: How the South Was Created in American Popular Culture* (Chapel Hill, NC: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 2011), Introduction.
[34] Van Deburg William L., *Black Camelot African-American Culture Heroes in Their Times, 1960-1980* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2014), 15.

wrestling mat to see the influence of some African Americans in the wrestling community. Ernie Ladd's dignity as a real-life sports star and his influence on the creation of the Junk Yard Dog character is at odds with the brash and villainous character he played on screen. This study shows how figures like wrestler and promoter Ladd, even while portraying stereotypical and villainous figures, positively influenced the portrayal of African Americans in the South. The influence of Ladd and other African Americans in the Southern wrestling community proves that the positive representation of African Americans on display in the ring was not simply the product of white men's economic interest; instead, African-American wrestlers and audiences also used their talent and purchasing power to force change.

To better understand the complex figures in professional wrestling like Ladd, and how members of the African American community experienced them, one must look beyond the text itself. Lynn Abbott and Doug Seroff's *Ragged but Right* examines the early development of African American music, specifically the racist caricatures of coon songs and minstrelsy. They argue that the African-American musical community operated within the constraints of white oppression to build a sense of community, integrate themselves within the larger American culture, and establish a musical language. Analysis of professional wrestling, using Abbott and Seroff's example, interrogates the performance of African-American professional wrestlers and the ways they worked within the framework of stereotypes to express dignity. Wrestlers sometimes

undermined white expectations of African Americans while also making a living for themselves.[35]

Despite the popularity of Southern wrestling, the economic upturn which helped facilitate the boom in popularity proved to be an illusion for many Southerners. Like many local businesses and cultural forms, wrestling became a national rather than local product. Once absorbed into the American mainstream, wrestling began to conform to white middle-class culture. This process played out continuously throughout American history. In *Highbrow/Lowbrow*, Lawrence W. Levine explains the way nineteenth-century communities of different races and classes used Shakespeare to help express their experience. Levine's analysis of the popularity and decline of Shakespeare in the nineteenth century illustrates the evolution of culture over time. Levine's research into the ways Jewish and African Americans used and manipulated Shakespearean texts as the basis of the unique expression of their experience is of special importance to the analysis here. Building on Levine's work, this dissertation explores the performative text of professional wrestling. Promoters adapted wrestling performances to meet the expectations and culture of various Southern communities. For Levine, class-based forces shaped American Shakespeare performance into its new high-brow form. As the upper-class took control of the cultural capital of Shakespeare, its presence among and significance to the lower-classes and minority communities waned. This study uses Levine's analysis of the malleability of culture as a reference point in investigating the

[35] Lynn Abbott and Doug Seroff, *Ragged but Right: Black Traveling Shows, 'Coon Songs', and the Dark Pathway to Blues and Jazz* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2012), introduction.

ways the increasing nationalization of wrestling robbed the artform of its resonance to Southern audiences.[36]

What local and national wrestling held in common was the dissemination of masculine ideology. Susan Jefford's *Hard Bodies* argues the 1980s were a time in which masculinity and the masculine "hard body" became central to the social, cultural, and political life of Americans. Hollywood films celebrated a heroic masculinity capable of saving America from the malaise of the 1970s to bring America back to perceived glory. This cultural trope was essential to the political rhetoric of the 1980s, symbolized by President Ronald Reagan. Jefford explains the duality of culture and politics. "The depiction of the indefatigable, muscular, and invincible masculine body became the linchpin of the Regan imaginary; this male form became the emblem not only for the Reagan presidency but for the ideologies and economies as well."[37] Reagan himself became the symbol for the return to hard masculinity in America. While Southern wrestlers like Jerry Lawler helped spread Southern masculinity to the working-class audiences of the South, they ultimately were too working-class and did not fit into the physical representation of Reagan's masculinity in a way that Hulk Hogan and the supermen of the WWF did.

Over the past decade, more scholars have looked to understand the complex world of professional wrestling and its place within the wider cultural and social context. In his book, *The Death of the Territories*, Tim Hornbaker argues the end of the territory system

[36] Lawrence Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow the Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), chapter 1.
[37] Susan Jeffords, *Hard Bodies: Hollywood Masculinity in the Reagan Era* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers Univ. Press, 1993), 25.

was multifaceted. The promoters of the individual territories across the country, all part of the NWA, were only kept together through the work of Sam Muchinuk, the NWA president. To build on his analysis, this study focuses on the last years of a specific area of the country, the Mid-South. This analysis allows a more thorough understanding of not only how this process occurred, but how it affected the culture and fans around it. However, Hornbaker's thorough analysis of the history of professional wrestling in the twentieth century is essential in understanding the evolution of professional wrestling on the macro level.[38]

A complex analysis of demographic representation in Southern wrestling must push beyond the Southern African American community to include the experience and expectations of White Southerners. In "The 'Tennessee Test of Manhood': Professional Wrestling and Southern Cultural Stereotypes," Louis M. Kyriakoudes and Peter A. Coclanis investigates the evolution of Southern wrestler throughout the twentieth century. Their research demonstrates wrestling shaped the cultural language of all Southerners in a shared racial community. Kyriakoudes and Coclanis argue that the cultural shift from the do-gooder Southerner narrative of the Carter administration gave way to the neoliberalism of the Reagan Era. Using wrestling as their lens, they expand Cox's analysis of the Southerner in popular culture to the end of the twentieth century. They also note African American wrestlers in the South acquired their popularity by being superhero patriots, combining their powers with white Americans to fight off evil foreigners. Building on Kyriakoudes and Coclanis, this study examines not just the

[38] Tim Hornbaker, *Death of the Territories: Expansion, Betrayal and the War That Changed pro Wrestling Forever* (Toronto, Ontario, Canada: ECW Press, 2018).

diversity of professional wrestlers, but also the importance of space and demographics in this narrative. Spatial analysis explains how wrestling spread into a national medium fractured audiences in local communities and deteriorated connections to local audiences central to creation of nuanced characters.[39]

Additionally, Neal Hebert explores the performative evolution of wrestling in his dissertation *Local Performance History, Global Performance Praxis*. Hebert examines wrestling as a hybrid of theater and dance. This performative analysis shows that wrestling consistently changed based on the social and cultural context of its current moment. The end of the territorial era, as symbolized by the Mid-South region, was a key piece in the evolution from localized performance to a performance capable of reaching a global audience. In this way, the death of Southern territories not only reshaped wrestling's social and political power, but that power translated into the mode of performance itself.[40]

In addition to these texts, this work seeks to disprove the corporate narrative created by World Wrestling Entertainment about the end of the territorial system and Southern wrestling. With the national expansion of the WWE, the company bought and took over most of the wrestling tape libraries in the United States. Over the last thirty years, the WWE has released books and documentaries telling their version of wrestling history. This has in many ways been beneficial to preserving wrestling history. The documentaries produced by the WWE and the thousands of hours of footage on the WWE network have kept wrestling's past alive in the minds of fans. However, the WWE

[39] Kyriakouds and Coclains, *Tennessee Test of Manhood*.
[40] Neal Anderson Hebert, "Professional Wrestling: Local Performance History, Global Performance Praxis" (2016), LSU Doctoral Dissertations, 2329, https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/gradschool_dissertations/2329.

presents a history formed in their own image. The narrative, briefly summarized, is that, after its heyday in the 1950s, wrestling was forced underground into dirty barns and barrooms until the WWF and Vince McMahon Jr. saved wrestling by making it mainstream.[41] However, this dissertation, by examining the full scope of wrestling in the Deep South for the first time demonstrates the viability and power of local wrestling not just as a business, but as a art form which reflected the dreams and anxieties of its consumers.

IV. Chapter Overview

Chapter one examines the ascendance of the Continental Wrestling Association based in Memphis, Tennessee, in the 1970s and 1980s. The promotion, owned by Jerry Jarrett and Jerry Lawler, launched in 1977. Memphis was already a hotbed for wrestling at the time; however, the spectacle's popularity took off as Lawler and Jarrett split from promoter Nick Gulas to create their own company. Jerry Jarrett, a former wrestler, served as head booker for the new promotion.[42] Lawler was the preeminent star wrestler. Jarrett and Lawler's success illustrates the changing fortunes of the South as it transformed from the segregationist lost cause stepchildren of the United States into the modern moral center of the United States. Memphis wrestling at once assimilated with the mainstream popular culture of the 1970s and 80s, while promoting the values and morality of the Old South, primarily those which championed the dominance of heteronormative whiteness. This chapter primarily focuses on the peak of Memphis's popularity in 1982 when

[41] Logan Paul, *Triple H On Logan Paul Joining WWE, Rivalry With The Rock & Stone Cold - IMPAULSIVE EP. 33*, YouTube (Impaulsive, 2022), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BE9DDOPzHLA.
[42] The booker of a wrestling promotion decided on the wrestlers to hire and put on each show, and the matches they would be involved in.

comedian and television star Andy Kaufman attempted to dethrone the Memphis King, Jerry Lawler, and denigrate the South. Lawler and Jarrett, a new generation of Southerners, mastered the paradox of the South since reconstruction.

Chapter two, "The Cowboy and the Big Cat," and Chapter Three, "Blinding The Dog," explore the three most important men in the Mid-South territory in the late 1970s and early 1980s: Bill Watts, Ernie Ladd, and Sylvester Ritter. Bill Watts and Ernie Ladd, owner, and booker of Mid-South Wrestling respectively, helped bring about progressive African American representation in Southern wrestling.[43] Watts, as a wrestler, promoter, and native Southerner, saw the value of manipulating race in Southern wrestling narratives, as well as the cultural and economic value of seeking support from an ethnically mixed crowd. Chapter two argues that the Watts's success came from unifying his audience around a shared morality of Southern manhood across racial lines. Appealing to the Southern working-classes, away from the gaze of elite whites determined to maintain racial order, allowed Watts and Ladd to embrace progressive racial representation consistent with modern national sporting and entertainment culture. Ultimately, they created black and white characters which all working-class Southerners could believe in and who formed partnerships across racial lines.[44]

No man embodied the new cross-racial Southern working-class hero more than The Junk Yard Dog, Sylvester Ritter. Ritter grew up in South Carolina, but his race

[43] Bill Watts was a major star around the United States but was originally from Oklahoma. He learned booking and running a wrestling territory from Eddie Graham in Florida before buying part of the "Tri-State Wrestling" territory from Leroy McGuirk. Eventually, Watts bought out the entire territory and renamed it Mid-South Wrestling.

[44] Ladd was a wrestler and former football player for the San Diego Chargers. He was the first black man to successfully play a heel in the South without endangering his life and later took control as booker (head writer) for Mid-South before becoming the respected elder statesman and face of respectability for various wrestling companies for the rest of his life.

initially hampered his success in the South. However, his charisma combined with Watts' promotion and Ladd's influence made him into the biggest star in Mid-South history. Chapter four argues that the economic success of Mid-South Wrestling rested on the creation of an African American hero in the Junk Yard Dog. These two chapters focus heavily on weekly television from the Mid-South to see the way characters like Junk Yard Dog evolved. While Ritter did not live long enough give his perspective on his meteoric rise, oral histories and economic data demonstrate how these representations changed the fortunes of the Mid-South territory.

The story of the Junk Yard Dog was an exceptional one and not representative of the black wrestling experience or the black experience in the South. As wrestling's greatest black superhero, Ritter achieved unprecedented acclaim and wealth. However, most African American wrestlers in the South struggled beneath a glass ceiling, always part of the show but never the star of the show, paid commiserate with their race, rather than their place on the card. Chapter four examines the life and career of Jim Harris, who wrestled under the name Kamala "The Ugandan Giant." Harris, born in northern Mississippi, suffered under systems of oppression and exploitation since his childhood and experienced wrestling as a continuation of his systemic oppression. Perhaps no area in the South was more exempt from the promise of the Sunbelt than rural Mississippi.

The final chapter of this story explains the downfall of Southern wrestling and the territory system in the United States. In 1984, Vince McMahon Jr. purchased the World-Wide Wrestling Federation from his father and used the glitz, glamor, and money of Northeastern media markets to establish a national wrestling product. Despite consternation from Northerners that urban decay would lead to irrelevancy, McMahon

proved the Northeastern influence over national media was as important as ever. McMahon tapped into Reagan's America with a focus on patriotic white superheroes and ethnic stereotypes often laced with xenophobic paranoia. McMahon's aggressive strategy of exploiting the national reach of cable television together with buying out competing territories and local television stations left territories around the country in economic disarray. The aggressive strategy of the Southern territories to compete with McMahon nationally escalated, rather than eased, their economic burden. The promise of Reagan's vision for the South went unfulfilled; instead, the vibrant wrestling culture of the early 1980s vanished in less than half a decade.

In the epilogue, this dissertation moves to the mid-1990s as wrestling's popularity declined in the United States. Even as the decade promised peace and prosperity, wrestling fans in the South, rural and working-class, resented the changes to the South brought about by modernity. Smoky Mountain Wrestling (SMW), based in rural Tennessee and Kentucky, attempted to appeal to this disenchanted fan base by allowing them to relive the glory days of Southern wrestling. Cultural and racial progress made during the early 1980s all but vanished from Southern wrestling as Jim Cornette and SMW profited on racist stereotypes which played on the white working-class's rage at the disappearance of their local culture and the failed vision of progress promised by the Republican Party's Sunbelt vision.

V. Sources

Analysis of professional wrestling culture requires a multimedia source base. The foundation of this study rests upon examination of professional wrestling events and television filmed in the 1980s. Before the mass adoption of the VCR, most fans could not

record their favorite wrestling show. Consequently, most footage before 1979 remains scarce.[45] The WWE Network streams every episode of Mid-South Wrestling television from November 1981 to its final episode. Mid-South Wrestling, in the late 1970s and 1980s, was the apex of popularity for wrestling in the South.[46] Mid-South Wrestling television provides a glimpse into a distinctly Southern culture. So too does footage of Memphis Wrestling from the same period, almost all of which is available online. Footage from local events or "house shows," recorded mostly by fans and available in the UWF Wrestling archive, gives insight into a much less polished and rehearsed performance. Wrestling on local shows depended on increased interactivity with fans and creation of a dialogue between performer and audience. Thus, watching and listening to the audiences in this footage allows a small glimpse into the behavior and tastes of Southerners in addition to the differences between crowds across the South.

Additionally, digitized magazines running from the 1970s to the year 2000 allow a glimpse into the perspective of the wrestling fan. A brief list of these magazines includes *Championship Wrestling*, *Inside Wrestling*, *New Wave Wrestling*, and *Pro Wrestling Illustrated*. The writers for wrestling magazines wrote in "kayfabe" or the wrestling term for fiction. Rather than journalistic entities, the magazines tried to entice the average fan by giving them gossip and played into wrestling storylines. Like film,

[45] Another major issue is that while some of this footage does exist it's hard to pin down who has it and where it is located. Florida wrestling, after the suicide of owner Eddie Graham went through various ownership groups as it was found out Graham had sold roughly 10000% of the stock to the company to various people throughout the United States.

[46] Mid-South Wrestling promoted its television on a "bicycle" in which a tape of the show would move from one local television station to the next. This meant that fans in New Orleans, LA and fans in Jackson, MS would see the same show one week apart. It also means getting exact air and tape dates for the show are difficult.

gossip, and soap opera magazines, they enticed readers with salacious covers and wild stories while also promising the inside scoop on professional wrestling.

A collection of oral histories collected for commercial use gives insight into the experiences of the men who lived and performed the territorial wrestling business. These oral histories, termed "shoot interviews," include people on every level of professional wrestling from the performers in the ring to the magazine writers. These interviews provided, for the first-time, professional wrestling personalities talking candidly about their lives outside of "kayfabe." Their stories about interactions with promoters and fans prove invaluable in understanding the Southern professional wrestling community. This work relies particularly on interviews with Jerry Jarrett, Jerry Lawler, Jim Cornette, Jim "Kamala" Harris, Ernie Ladd, and Bill Watts. These interviews, in conjunction with the nearly 500 other interviews, give the best insight into the various relationships which constructed territorial wrestling, how they attempted to keep their fans engaged on a weekly basis, and how these companies changed over time and eventually came to an end. They also serve to get varied perspectives on those who never got a chance to tell their side of the stories. Wrestlers, like Sylvester Ritter, who passed before the advent of "shoot interviews" (oral histories with wrestlers) rarely gave interviews due to the secrecy around wrestling. Like the reporter, Jerry Thompson, in *Citizen Kane*, I hope these various perspectives of the people who knew him gives an insight into their lives and personalities even if their version of the truth remains unattainable.

Finally, the collection of roughly 5,000 *Wrestling Observer Newsletters* spanning from 1981 to 2000 provide the longest running and most thorough American journalism on professional wrestling. The *Observer* provides critical reviews of matches as well as

detailed and researched ratings and attendance figures for local and national wrestling companies. Dave Meltzer, writer of the Wrestling Observer, has covered and reviewed wrestling for over forty years and is one of the most-respected journalists and historians of professional wrestling. In addition to his writing, he many times included fan notes and letters in the observer. In this dissertation, the *Observer* serves as a glimpse at how the wrestling business and its economics changed over time, while also offering credible insight into the ways wrestlers, promoters, and fans from all over the country experienced the death of territorial wrestling and the rise of the WWF. Along with internet databases which mark the attendance records for various live events and ratings for wrestling television programs, these newsletters show the territorial wrestling business in the South, even during waning popularity, still outperformed national wrestling.

What is often missing in the records is audience reception of the events taking place inside the ring. The focus of this study is on those who participated in the making and unmaking of Southern wrestling. Often, the views of the fans are understood through the prism of those men. However, where possible, there are recollections from fans who witnessed these events and who were shaped by those experiences.

This study also focuses primarily on the experiences of white men and Southern white masculine culture. Men, particularly white men, made up most of the wrestling audience in the 1980s. However, as wrestling garnered respectability and embraced popular culture, it gained a larger female audience. The opinions of female fans remain elusive with very little of their voices featuring in magazines, newsletters, and online forums. Additionally, older wrestlers tend to neglect or ridicule the female fanbase in their oral histories. Their absence from this story is indicative of the ways in which

female participation in Southern life was rejected and undermined by wrestling and masculine Southern culture.

The 1980s marked a turning point in the history of race representation in Southern professional wrestling as owners and promoters of territorial wrestling pursued a more diverse audience on a local level. To achieve this, wrestling promoters diversified their territories both on the mat and behind the scenes. African Americans like Ernie Ladd and Sylvester Ritter acquired influence as star wrestlers, matchmakers, and business executives. The influx of African Americans fans created a fervent and loyal wrestling fanbase, which allowed Southern wrestling to flourish.

By the end of the 1980s, however, professional wrestling was a nationally homogenous rather than local artform. As middle-class whites became both producers and consumers of national wrestling, the sport often portrayed both Southerners and ethnic minorities as stereotypes. Southern audiences aligned against the World Wrestling Federation (WWF), the most significant national wrestling company. Thus, the WWF failed to gain an economic or cultural foothold in the South for almost twenty years. The World Wrestling Federation drew over 80,000 people to Wrestlemania III in Detroit, but attendance in the South often paled in comparison to Mid-South Wrestling and smaller promotions like Gulf Coast Championship Wrestling.[47] This dissertation examines the development of a loyal fanbase for Southern regional wrestling and the WWF's inability to acquire a similar foothold. Ultimately, this analysis proves Southern wrestling attracted

[47] Wrestlemania III, until 2016, was the largest attendance for a wrestling event in the United States at just 80,000 people. The WWF still claim a 93,000 attendance; however, like all wrestling attendance figures, the announced and real attendance are disputed.

audiences of all races by providing a mirror to Southern experience and creating heroic figures Southern audiences admired.

This dissertation seeks to add to current research by exploring the intersection of local culture in the South with larger changes to economies and social structure. By looking specifically at professional wrestling, one of the last remaining local entertainments, one sees the cultural consistency, with the promulgation of Southern masculine violence and honor, while also seeing cultural and social change, through the rise of African American characters. However, economic changes in the South eventually outpaced cultural shifts. I argue that racial progressivism in the South was possible within the working-class, but its long-term staying power depended on its economic viability.

Although nationally, Americans embraced elite Southern culture and turned it into a palatable fairytale, the working-class Southerner remained the foolish bumpkin. However, on the local level, Southern wrestling created working-class heroes who brought an authenticity, if imagined, to the working-classes. Men like Jerry "The King" Lawler of Memphis were gargantuan figures of "the squared circle" who helped perpetuate the culture of the South. The wrestlers of the South not only talked directly to their audience but talked like them. Additionally, these wrestlers became fixtures in the lives of Southerners. These were not simply superheroes on the screen but flesh and blood actors playing out real life struggles in front of their audiences. It was sport and melodrama combined, Faulkner in spandex. Ultimately, internal and external forces undercut Southern progress, the promise of a new Southern hegemony shattered and replaced by a familiar division and rage.

CHAPTER I – This is a Bar of Soap: Masculinity and Modernity in Memphis Wrestling

I. The Slap Heard 'Round the World

The most infamous moment in the history of Southern wrestling took place in the unlikeliest of places, Los Angeles, California. Comedian and actor Andy Kaufman made an appearance on *Late Night with David Letterman*. Kaufman, an underground surrealist comedian, emerged into the mainstream with his character Latka on the television program *Taxi*. Kaufman and Letterman forged a relationship due to their shared experience as comedic-outsiders-come-mainstream television stars. *The Late-Night Show* began on the first of February 1982, and Kaufman made the first of eleven appearances just two weeks later.[48] Because of their close relationship, Letterman allowed Kaufman to make his July 28th appearance special. On this night, Kaufman appeared alongside his arch nemesis and star of Memphis wrestling, Jerry Lawler.

Before meeting on the *Late Show*, Lawler and Kaufman competed in a wrestling match on Memphis television. Lawler easily won the match; however, the tough Memphian craved vengeance more than victory. After the match, egged on by the fans, Lawler "broke" Kaufman's neck with a piledriver.[49] Kaufman's neck was unharmed; however, he did all he could to convince the world it was broken. To preserve the illusion, Kaufman stayed in the hospital for several days after the match and wore a neck brace in public for months. Months after the match, Kaufman and Lawler kept up the

[48] Tom Jory, "Letterman's Going to Stay Up Late," *The Spokesman Review*, February 1, 1982, p. 6, https://news.google.com/newspapers?id=n_lLAAAAIBAJ&sjid=0e4DAAAAIBAJ&pg=6960%2C65820.

[49] A piledriver is a maneuver in which the head of one man is forced between the thighs of his opponent. The victim would then have his legs lifted so that he would be completely upside down. The perpetrator would then jump up and sit out and thus piledrive the opponent's head into the mat.

facade in an interview with sportswriter Tony Kornheiser of the *Washington Post*. Kaufman, as much magician as comedian, never revealed his secrets to Kornheiser or his audience. The closest Kaufman came to confessing inauthenticity was a sly quote in the *Washington Post* article, "I guess some people might think that, I mean, I've been known to pull stunts."[50]

Letterman's interview with the two wrestling foes is now etched into television lore. Letterman expected the segment would be a breeze; a comedic moment in which a wrestler and comedian would exchange apologies and celebrate the victory of peace over violence. The absurd spectacle would mock the inauthenticity and masculinity of wrestling. However, Lawler and Kaufman made plans the night before to take things in a much different direction.[51] Kaufman, wearing a large neck brace, began the interview with over-the-top graciousness and deference to his former foe. Instead of accepting Kaufman's insincere apologies, Lawler slapped Kaufman out of his chair. The studio immediately flew into chaos. Kaufman emerged after the commercial break screaming obscenities. The anarchy of wrestling proved too much to handle for even the most subversive host on television.[52]

In the minds of viewers around the country, Andy Kaufman and Jerry Lawler represented the chaotic absurdity of wrestling. Andy Kaufman, the mild-mannered comedian, portrayed a boastful, cowardly, and pretentious villain from the glitz and

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[50] Tony Kornheiser, "Wrestler's Wrath Andy Kaufman Finds Pain in the Ring ," *Washington Post*, accessed October 9, 2022, https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/lifestyle/1982/04/10/wrestlers-wrath-andy-kaufman-finds-pain-in-the-ring/ef201bce-a3ed-4f2a-845d-79cdc5178f36.
[51] Jerry Lawler, *It's Good to Be the King - Sometimes* (London: World Wrestling Entertainment, 2003), 208.
[52] David Letterman, "Jerry Lawler Slaps Kaufman," YouTube February 1, 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FL9PGJslS6A.

glamor of Hollywood. Jerry Lawler, the Memphian with nearly a decade wrestling experience, was ready to shut up the arrogant heel. An examination of this seemingly simplistic story of an outsider against the hometown hero illuminates a complex web of storytelling and history in Southern wrestling. These violent soap operas played out across decades, with audiences projecting their hopes and anxieties onto every interaction. Those audiences helped narrate the action in the ring with their adulation and hatred while also affecting the stories with their purchasing power.

Rather than fiercely protecting the traditional sporting presentation of wrestling, Continental Wrestling in Memphis embraced showmanship and absurdity. The stories often played on common themes, involving the heroic white Southern gentleman fighting off outsiders bent on corrupting the South. Drawing older audiences sometimes involved race-baiting stories and characters who broke gender and sexual norms. However, often the best-selling rivalries pitted the two greatest athletes and warriors against one another in a test of masculine power. Similar stories played out around the country, but much like the Commedia Del Arte performances of Renaissance Italy, each wrestling territory molded their stories to their audience. The cowboys, savages, and rockabillies of Continental Wrestling played out these masculine soap operas for their specific Southern audience. Kaufman's character, the Hollywood elite on a mission to civilize, was a relic of the past meant to rile up older generations of fans holding on to generational resentment of the North while also capturing the younger generation of fans craving a glimpse at national celebrity.

In the late-twentieth century, Southern culture remained apart from the rest of American culture. However, the uniqueness of that culture no longer equated to

inferiority. Reagan and the conservative right courted the South throughout the 1980s. The Republican party held up the South as central to the moral strength of America, supporting evangelical values which powered the Republican culture war into the 2000s. Television shows and films no longer portrayed Southerners as backward racists, but a link to a refined old past. In *The South as Counterculture*, Sheldon Hackney argues the South offered a respite from the chaos which came from the liberal youth countercultures of the 1960s and 1970s. "There is a wholeness to life in the South…and this is a useful antidote to a world in which individuality means increasing isolation."[53] By the 1980s, the South was no longer the enemy, but the ideal of American life. Memphis represents the clearest example of a Southern city embraced by the rest of the world. Through its music and location, Memphis provided a link to a soulful Southern past, while the skyscrapers and vibrant youth culture represented a promise of the future.

Wrestling with the duality of modernity and tradition connected Continental Wrestling to the city of Memphis. The birth of rock and roll and the proliferation of blues music throughout the world made Memphis one of the most culturally important cities of the twentieth century. However, the paradox of Memphis goes beyond culture into the soil itself. Historian David Kohn described Memphis as the "Metropolis of the Delta," the white capital of a Black region.[54] Despite the promise of freedom, the economic institution of sharecropping in the 20th century forced most black farmers into the depths of poverty despite some of the richest soil in the country.[55] The foundations of a

[53] Sheldon Hackney, "The South as a Counterculture," *American Scholar* 42, no. 2 (2017): pp. 59-68, https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203786727-4, 60.
[54] *David Lewis Cohn, God Shakes Creation* (Ann Arbor, MI: University Microfilms, 1973), 14.
[55] Cohn, *God Shakes Creation*, 14.

burgeoning white metropolis in Memphis built on the labor of black farmers forged two contrasting city identities. Working classes, primarily African American, seeking escape from the shackles of poverty formed the first identity. The other, a population of white elites determined to maintain the status quo.

In the late-1970s, these two identities were at a crossroads. The rural, white community of Memphis bristled at their global reputation as the site of a modern cultural revolution. The death of Memphis's adopted king, Elvis Presley, promised unfathomable tourist attention and money; however, older generations of white Southerners wished for a more refined legacy for their city. Joe Mulherin summed up this uneasy tension between modern reputation and traditionalist attitudes in a 1979 article for *Memphis Magazine*. "Memphis continued to look upon its successful local rock artists as if they were adolescents going through a flashy phase that they should outgrow. The rowdy emotions and urgent immediacy of rock & roll didn't sit too well with the city's conservative tradition…"[56] However, the transition from 1970s to the 1980s was the inflection point when the city of Memphis and Memphis wrestling balanced their paradoxical identities. At this moment, the city became the symbol for both the past and future of the South.

Memphis itself had a long history of racial division oftentimes masked by sports like wrestling and popular culture. Memphis State basketball and the hiring of one of the first black head coach in the South gave the city of rock and roll and the blues a sense of

[56] Joe Mulherin, "Taking Care of Business," *Memphis Magazine*, August 1979, https://memphismagazine.com/elvis/elvis-memphis-taking-care-of-business/.

calm even as the social and cultural racial divide remained as strong as ever.[57] The success of black politicians in the late 1970s into the 1980s raised a threat to white masculine domination over the political sphere. Sharon Wright argues that "the issue of race dominated most citywide Memphis elections. From 1975 to 1987, blacks and whites engaged in a power struggle. As the black population increased, a growing number of 'serious' contenders ran for office. Black politicians made the initial steps in changing their role in the political structure from subordinate to dominant."[58] As the city of Memphis reckoned with duality of modernity and traditionalism, it also became a battleground between white and black politicians. It was in this moment that white residents of Memphis wanted a hero who solidified white masculine dominance over outsiders; yet, at the same time, the modern aesthetic and language of wrestling helped create a bridge between the traditionalists and modernists, white Memphians and the outsiders.

To straddle the line between generations, Memphis wrestling promoted new vibrant heroes like Jerry Lawler and Jimmy Valiant, Sharp witted, cool, and pop-culture literate, the new generation of wrestlers became larger-than-life heroes for the younger generation. They accomplished this in part by embracing their celebrity outside the ring, including recording their own rock albums.[59] Simultaneously, they proved to parents and older generations they still represented the attitudes of the Old South by espousing virtues of Southern honor. Since the antebellum era, Southern boys looked to elders to

[57] Keith B. Wood, *Memphis Hoops: Race and Basketball in the Bluff City, 1968-1997* (Knoxville, TN: The University of Tennessee Press, 2021), introduction.
[58] Sharon D. Wright, *Race, Power, and Political Emergence in Memphis* (Oxfordshire: Routledge, 2018), 85.
[59] Jerry Lawler, *Jerry Lawler Sings* (Memphis, TN: Starburst Records).

understand how to become men. As Lorri Glover argues in Southern Sons, "boys…did not automatically become men after achieving a particular age or accomplishment. A boy became a man only when he convinced his community that he was one."[60] Boys learned the traits and duties of Southern men: boldness, autonomy, honor, and above all the preservation of social, gender, and racial order from observation. Beneath their cool modern veneer, heroes of Southern wrestling embraced the role of chivalrous, rowdy, and honorable Southern men. Wrestling in Memphis, despite its connections to national modernity, ameliorated the supremacy of traditional Southern culture and values.

II. The Battle for Memphis

The decision to bring Andy Kaufman to Memphis fell to the two most powerful men in Memphis wrestling, Jerry Jarrett and Jerry Lawler. Jerry Lawler and Jerry Jarrett took control of Memphis Wrestling from Nick Gulas in 1977. They became two of the youngest wrestling promoters in the country; however, both men began their careers in wrestling at a young age.[61] The Tennessee wrestling style was always wild and innovative compared to the rest of the country. Fans expected crazy brawls like matches on scaffolds and concession stands. Lawler and Jarrett moved the spectacle further toward modern national culture, and frequently clashed with former Memphis promoter, seventy-nine-year-old Nick Gulas.[62] They brought in the flare of national media including modern film techniques and rock and roll to make Memphis feel hip for younger fans more attune to national media than the traditional Southern culture. Christopher Stacy

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[60] Glover, *Southern Sons*, 16.
[61] Rob Feinstein and Jerry Jarrett, *Jerry Jarrett Shoot Interview*, 2009.
[62] Dave Meltzer, "NIck Gulas Biography," *Wrestling Observer*, Feb. 1991, accessed January 30, 2023, https://members.f4wonline.com/wrestling-observer-newsletter/feb-4-1991-observer-newsletter-pivotal-week-life-dave-meltzer-89881.

argues the key to understand the modernization was the way Jarrett employed music. "The changing role of music in the Memphis and UWF territories reflect the changes in politics and culture in the South from the 1950s through the 1980s."[63] Wrestler Jimmy Valiant's transformation from Yankee heel to rock n roll baby face is a prime example of the power of modern music. Valiant recorded a hit rock and roll song titled "Son of a Gypsy." The song was so popular with Memphis wrestling fans, they grew to love the braggadocios and wealthy Yankee character.[64]

Jerry Lawler and Jerry Jarrett's ascendance marked the evolution of Southern wrestling into something which captured both the local and national zeitgeist. They attained unparalleled popularity by appealing to multiple generations of Southerners. The biggest key to their success was the ascendancy of Jerry Lawler as the superstar embodiment of both Southern masculinity and Elvis Presley's effortless charisma. Previous ownership hung on to old wrestlers and old wrestling styles. Jarrett and Lawler captured younger fans by thinking outside the box and embracing sometimes ludicrous storylines, bringing in celebrities like Adam West as Bat Man, and promoting their young stars with rock and roll music videos.

Lawler and Jarrett founded Continental Wrestling Association in 1977, though their company was mostly a continuation of the promotion which had existed in Memphis since roughly 1940. Nick Gulas and Roy Welch promoted wrestling in Tennessee independently as Gulas Promotions and later Gulas-Welch Promotions through the early

[63] Aaron D. Horton and Christopher Stacey, "'I Couldn't Carry a Tune in a Bucket," in *Identity in Professional Wrestling Essays on Nationality, Race and Gender* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2018), 221.
[64] Aaron D. Horton and Christopher Stacey, "I Couldn't Carry a Tune in a Bucket," 226.

1940s until the creation of the National Wrestling Alliance.[65] The promotion officially joined the National Wrestling Alliance in 1949 with Welch present at the second annual members' meeting.[66] The NWA appointed heads of regional office which oversaw promoters throughout the region, and Gulas and Welch served as heads for the Nashville office. As a result, Gulas and Welch also oversaw the booking of Birmingham, AL, as a subsidiary promotion, with the help of Joe Gunther.[67]

The fracture between Jarrett and Gulas seems inevitable in hindsight. Jerry Jarrett promoted shows in Memphis and Jackson, Tennessee; Jonesboro, Arkansas; Tupelo, Mississippi; and Evansville, Indiana. Gulas booked shows in Birmingham and Huntsville, AL; Nashville, TN; and Bowling Green, Kentucky.[68] The two sides initially worked amicably as Jerry Jarrett, who spent his high school years working as Gulas's assistant, bought stock in the company as the heir apparent to own the Memphis territory. However, tensions between the two mounted when Nick Gulas's son George began wrestling in Alabama. Nick Gulas wanted his son to move up to Memphis in front of much larger crowds. Jarrett and many wrestlers did not believe George had the talent or experience to captivate the Memphis fans. Subsequently, Jarrett and Gulas got into a heated argument during which Gulas notified Jarrett that he had not actually sold him any

[65] "History of the National Wrestling Alliance (Nashville Office)," Wrestling-Titles, accessed January 30, 2023, https://www.wrestling-titles.com/us/tn/nwa.
[66] "NWA Membership Roster: 1949," Wrestling-Titles, accessed January 30, 2023, https://www.wrestling-titles.com/nwa/members/1949.html.
[67] In the 1940s Les Wolfe ran a wrestling promotion in Memphis which would fold in the 1950s. Gulas and Welch took over Memphis which was closer to their home base in Dyersburg, TN. However, the NWA continued to recognize them as the Nashville office until 1979.
[68] Jerry Lawler and Rob Feinstein, *RF Video Shoot with Jerry Lawler*, Highspots Wrestling Network February 12, 2017, https://www.highspotswrestlingnetwork.com/media/jerry-lawler-shoot-interview/59340.

stock in the company and Gulas planned to keep the money. After the fight, the two parted ways and Jarrett established the Continental Wrestling Association.[69]

For fans in Tennessee, little changed in terms of in-ring production after control shifted from Gulas to the two Jerrys; however, creative, and financial freedom allowed the company to flourish for several years based primarily on the success of Jerry Lawler as the self-proclaimed "King of Memphis." Lawler began his career by drawing portraits of the wrestlers he saw on TV. Once he began bringing the pictures to shows, the wrestlers capitalized on his talent by selling his autographed pictures. Jackie Fargo, the biggest star in Memphis Wrestling, took Lawler under his wing. Before long, Lawler was inside the ropes as one of Memphis's favorite stars.[70]

Jackie Fargo, the most popular wrestler in the Memphis territory throughout the late 1960s and through the 1970s, was Lawler's favorite wrestler. The evolution of Fargo's character and how the audience embraced him set the template for modern wrestling hero in Memphis. Fargo became one of the most influential wrestlers in Southern history with his trademark bleached blonde hair and cocky demeanor, which included his often-imitated Fargo strut in which another wrestler would shoot him off into the ropes with an Irish whip. Fargo hit the ropes with maximum speed and force as his opponent stood ready to strike with a right hook or a clothesline. However, as his opponent clinched his fist, Fargo stopped in his tracks and strutted around the ring like the literal cock of the walk.[71]

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[69] Jarrett and Feinstein, *RF Video Shoot With Jerry Jarrett*, Highspots Wrestling Network.
[70] Lawler and Feinstein, *RF Video Shoot with Jerry Lawler*, Highspots Wrestling Network.
[71] *Jackie Fargo VS Jerry Lawler (1970s)*, YouTube (Continental Wrestling Association, 2020), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rP1NwSg2yzM.

Fargo exuded effortless charisma and charm on the microphone. He embodied the humble southern gentleman one moment, and a wild, angry cowboy the next.[72] In doing so, he symbolized the peculiar paradox of the Southern gentleman. Fargo adhered to the Antebellum code of manliness which required honor and vigilance in protection of family and social status quo while also adhering to the form of manliness which emerged in the South after the Civil War, which Joe Creech describes as, "the development of body and mind: the body should be exercised to exhibit maximum physical prowess; the mind and soul should channel the more 'primitive' components of the psyche through hunting, sports, and other forms of male dominance"[73] Fargo (and later Lawler) blended these two historical elements of Southern masculinity with the showmanship and coolness of the modern rock and roll celebrity.

Most Southern wrestling heroes embodied the spirit of the cowboy. Unsurprisingly, these characters made a massive impact on the young children of the territory era, just as the cowboy heroes of television westerns were legends to the same generation. However, Jackie Fargo was something different early in his career. Fargo, lacking movie star good looks, none the less, gave himself the monicker of "Fabulous," (which originated with his 1950s tag team with his kayfabe brother don Fargo as the Fabulous Fargos). Fargo bleached his hair, mimicking wrestling characters from the

[72] WrestlingsGoldenAge, "1979 Jackie Fargo Calls Danny Davis a 'Blank Idiot' Memphis Wrestling", YouTube, April 16, 2013, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2bzfdsxmS0o.
[73] Craig Thompson Friend and Joseph Creech, "The Price of Eternal Honor: Independent White Christian Manhood in the Late Nineteenth-Century South," in *Southern Masculinity: Perspectives on Manhood in the South since Reconstruction* (Athens, GA: Univ. of Georgia Press, 2010), pp. 25-45.

1950s like Gorgeous George. He drew the ire of Memphis fans by demeaning the South and their favorite heroes.[74]

The character of Fabulous Jackie Fargo was a microcosm of the ludicrous world of wrestling in the South, multilayered with decades of backstory and context important to understanding it fully despite its simplicity. Jackie Fargo started as a serious attempt by Southern promoters and wrestlers to mimic the beach blond, pretty-boy in the mold of Gorgeous George. This "fabulous" character was the ultimate villain for working-class audiences of the South. Arrogant and preening, yet ultimately cowardly and dishonorable, Fargo was everything a Southern heel should be. However, years of wrestling every day in front of the same audience forged a long-standing emotional connection. By the late-1970s, the fans grew to love Fargo. He used the same preening arrogant strut against his foes. In a match with a younger, more villainous Jerry Lawler, Fargo not only performed his trademark strut to the delight of the fans and the ire of his opponent, but also stopped after each punch to shake his hips in the style of Elvis Presley.[75] However, the context changed, as it infuriated the prideful heels. His bleach blond hair and strut became caricature meant to make fun of the very Yankees he once pretended to be, a funhouse mirror of traditional wrestling. Memphis, more than just a Southern city, was the "birthplace of Rock N Roll" and home to Elvis Presley. Flamboyance was allowable when combatants mixed in a Southern cocksure attitude. Jackie Fargo became something

[74] Steve Crawford, *Legends of Memphis Wrestling* (North Charleston, SC: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2012), 36.
[75] "Jerry Lawler vs Jackie Fargo - Southern Heavyweight Title Match (10-4-76) ," Facebook (Classic Memphis Wrestling, October 4, 2019), https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=779837315802581.

more than a wrestler in Memphis, Tennessee. He represented the city in all its quirks and eccentricities.

When Lawler and Jarrett split from Gulas, Fargo was at the end of his career. Fargo helped make Lawler a star as the two battled as beloved teacher and ungrateful student. Lawler's new rival was Aussie brute Bill Dundee. Dundee and Lawler battled each week in the same building as wrestling stars had done in the South for decades. Jarrett consistently escalated the stakes having each match conclude with a new stipulation. One week the foes would put their hair on the line, the next week a car, and finally both on the line at the same time.[76] The two battled for months as attendance rates rose from roughly six thousand fans a week to eleven thousand fans every week.[77] While the new Continental Wrestling flourished, Gulas' rival company saw attendance dwindle until he stopped running shows in 1978.[78]

Dundee played the hero against the cocky and villainous young Lawler, despite Lawler being the home-town wrestler. However, Lawler's villainous run ended in October 1977. Lawler announced his retirement in September, citing fatigue and a desire to seek other creative endeavors. It was a stunt, designed to let Lawler recover, grow his hair, and return as a conquering hero. When he returned in October 1977, Lawler was the top babyface in Memphis. For the next 30 years, Jerry Lawler was the noble hero of Memphis, a weekly fixture of television as the representation of all Memphis could be -- flashy and flamboyant yet tough and rugged. Over time, Lawler replaced Fargo as the

[76] James, *Memphis Wrestling History: Presents 1977: The War For Memphis*, Self-Published.
[77] "Mid-South Coliseum 1977 Wrestling Cards," Pro Wrestling History, accessed February 1, 2023, http://www.prowrestlinghistory.com/memphis/jarrett/1977.html.
[78] Mark James, *Memphis Wrestling History Presents: 1978: Building the Legend* (Memphis, TN: Mark James, 2016).

most beloved hero in Memphis wrestling history. His sarcastic and humorous one-liners became the stuff of legend (later earning him a commentating job in the World Wrestling Federation), while wrestling historians consider his punches and in-ring work to be some of the best in history.[79]

Memphis had the reputation among wrestlers as one of the lowest-paying territories in the country; however, Lawler as the biggest star and part owner, never hurt for money.[80] While his total salary is unknown, he made roughly 2,500 dollars for one match against NWA champion Harley Race in front 10,000 fans in Memphis in 1977.[81] NWA championship matches meant higher ticket prices and the higher prices often went to paying the champion rather than the local challenger, so this was not a regular paycheck. [82] However, it is safe to assume as both co-owner and top star, $2500 was within the range of his usual pay. The steady stream of money meant Lawler did not consider leaving the territory until 1994, creating a long-lasting connection between fans and Lawler. No matter how many times they saw him fight, fans would continue to pay to see Lawler wrestler because Lawler was part of the fabric of the community. Since 1977, Jerry Lawler has been the face of wrestling in Memphis. As of 2022, he continues to wrestle in Memphis and makes appearances at Memphis Grizzlies basketball games. His

[79] Mark James, *Memphis Wrestling History Presents: 1977: The War for Memphis* (Memphis, TN: Self Published, 2014), chapter 7.
[80] A popular story from Lawler's run in the WWF was that one of the former Memphis wrestlers defecated in Lawler's crown while he wrestled a match. The wrestler (believed to be Sean Waltman) allegedly said it was payback for all the times he defecated on wrestlers' paychecks.
[81]"Jerry Lawler's Paycheck, 1977," Facebook (Classic Memphis Wrestling, February 20, 2013), https://www.facebook.com/MemphisWrestling/photos/a.498287280228255/503815679675415/?comment_id=2735401453183482&_rdr.
[82] Ric Flair, *Classic Ric Flair Shoot Part 2*, YouTube September 23, 2022 (Highspots Wrestling Network, 2022), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gb8ZpkRWiO4.

chain of BBQ restaurants in the area remain successful.[83] To the fans of Memphis, Lawler represented everything a wrestler should be.

III. Intergender Champion of the World

If Lawler represented all a wrestler should be, Andy Kaufman represented everything a wrestler was not. No one looked less at home within the confines of the squared circle than Andy Kaufman. An acne scarred 150-pound comedian from New York (though he often squawked at the Memphis fans that he was from Hollywood), he was the last person anyone expected to grace the hallowed halls of the Mid-South Coliseum, the indoor arena which had held wrestling matches in Memphis since 1964.[84] Memphis wrestling fans did not expect to see statuesque wrestlers such as Hulk Hogan who frequented Madison Square Garden. The men who frequented Memphis like Jerry Lawler and Bill Dundee were rugged, over six-feet tall and two hundred pounds. They did not look like the men on the cover of bodybuilding magazines, but weathered brawlers you would not want to pick a fight with at a bar. Kaufman was the opposite, and he played up his weaselly appearance in any way possible. Besides his trademark t-shirt with "Intergender champion of the world" in bold text, he wore a long-sleeve shirt underneath and boxing shorts over long white leggings. He looked like a man who was attending a gym for the first time in his life, unsure of his physique and not wanting to show an inch of skin.[85]

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[83] "Jerry Lawler Memphis BBQ Company," Jerry Lawler Memphis BBQ Company, accessed February 2, 2023, https://jerrylawlerbbq.com.
[84] "Mid-South Coliseum," Memphis Heritage Inc., June 29, 2022, https://www.memphisheritage.org/mid-south-coliseum.
[85] Jerry Lawler, *Classic Memphis Wrestling, Lawler Vs. Kaufman*, Highspots Wrestling Network, January 29, 2016, https://www.highspotswrestlingnetwork.com/media/classic-memphis-wrestling-jerry-lawler-vs.-andy-kaufman/39830.

Andy Kaufman, in the years before and after his death in 1984, was a cult figure on the periphery of the entertainment world. Kaufman, in many regards, was ahead of his time in terms of his post-structural, avant-garde comedy and the way he thumbed his nose at the media establishment. He was part of a counterculture in television, film, and popular culture in the 1970s. Professional wrestling appealed to Kaufman because it thumbed its nose at respectability. Professional wrestling has its roots long before television and slightly before film, but it stayed outside of the mainstream for much of its existence. Wrestling constantly blurred the lines between reality and fantasy in a way that Kaufman obsessed over throughout his career.

Kaufman began wrestling on NBC's new sketch program *Saturday Night Live*. Kaufman offered one-thousand dollars to any woman around the country able to defeat him.[86] For many Americans, especially for the younger, college-educated, white middle class which Kaufman appealed to, wrestling was a remnant of the 1940s and 50s. Joe Jares's based his pioneering study in professional wrestling, *Whatever Happened to Gorgeous George*, on the premise that wrestling faded from national spotlight after the 1950s and became to many young people something their grandmothers' watched on Saturday afternoons. Kaufman's wrestling was a bit of nostalgia for some, and cringeworthy for others.[87]

Kaufman's performative chauvinism and wrestling skits pushed away his loyal hipster fanbase in the 1980s. By 1983, fans were sick of Kaufman's annoying games and

[86] Lorne Michaels, "December 22, 1979 Episode," *Saturday Night Live* (New York, New York, December 22, 1979).
[87] Joe Jares, *Whatever Happened to Gorgeous George?* (New York, NY: Grosset & Dunlap, 1974), chapter 1.

wrestling events. After receiving numerous complaints, producer Lorne Michaels ran a vote where fans voted on whether Saturday Night Live should ban Kaufman from appearing on Saturday Night Live. The results were not close; audiences wanted Kaufman gone.[88] In almost every aspect, Andy Kaufman repeated the ideology and character which Bobby Riggs portrayed building up his legendary "Battle of the Sexes" tennis matches with Margaret Court and Billie Jean King. In fact, Bobby Riggs would push his sexist rhetoric beyond that of Kaufman noting not just that he preferred women "stay in the kitchen" but that he also "admired Henry VIII. He knew how to treat his women."[89] Kaufman mimicked the rageful and bombastic language of antifeminism used extensively by Riggs; however, his wrestling exploits did not revive his career as it did for Riggs.

Riggs played the misogyny straight in the legitimate sport of tennis. In 2013, ESPN reporter Don Van Natta Jr. uncovered evidence which substantiated long-held beliefs that the match between Riggs and King was fixed, but at the time the match was thought to be on the level.[90] Riggs performed an exaggerated chauvinist character much like Kaufman. He previously challenged and defeated tennis champion Margaret Court without using the misogynistic rhetoric spewed on television. Their match garnered relatively little media attention.[91] It was only once the bright lights and media caught his attention and the dollar signs came to his eyes that Riggs blasted his anti-feminist rhetoric

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[88] Lorne Michaels, *Election IV: Andy Kaufman on Saturday Night Live* , YouTube, 1978, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yLc1tJpKG4g.
[89] "How Bobby Runs and Talks, Talks, Talks," *Time* (Time Inc., September 10, 1973), https://content.time.com/time/subscriber/article/0,33009,907843-5,00.html.
[90] Don Van Natta, "OTL: The Match Maker," ESPN (ESPN Internet Ventures, August 25, 2013), http://www.espn.com/espn/feature/story/_/id/9589625/the-match-maker.
[91] "Bobby Riggs and Margaret Court Face off in First 'Battle of ... - History," History.com, 2009, https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/first-battle-of-the-sexes.

and as soon as the match was over, Riggs' dropped his facade. However, Riggs was a legitimate athlete and fans were more than willing to overlook his showmanship and get caught up in the battle of the sexes in a bid of cognitive dissidence. Audiences of the early 1980s understood that Kaufman was playing a joke on them, but they were not interested in being the punchline.

While much of the country rejected Kaufman's chauvinism and intergender wrestling matches, the bad example he set for young viewers and his treatment of women got under the skin of Southerners. The letters which women in the South sent to Kaufman to wrestle him reveal a notion of the superiority of Southern women over northern women. A woman from Mississippi named Sheryll Holzapfel sent in the most exemplary of these letters:

> I can understand why you can't find a woman who can beat you. That's because you stick to Yankee women. Everybody knows that all the tough broads live down in here in the deep South! There are many women here in Southern Mississippi who could whip yo' butt, but I'm the toughest… If you're serious about your offer, Cough-man, you just contact me, Sheryll "Brick-House" Holzapfel down in the deep South![92]

Kaufman and his agent Bob Zmuda collected his challenges by mail and Zmuda later published the best of his challengers. From those women in rural areas, particularly the South and Ohio, is a sense of special athletic prowess because of their heritage. Southern women, like Holzapfel, took Kaufman's challenge seriously and sought to show the superiority of Southern working-class women, both able to project gentility and fight off most Northern men. While Kaufman's misogynistic wrestling character alienated his Northern fan base, it proved viable in the Deep South.

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[92] Lynne Margulies and Sheryll Holzapfel , "Letter from Sheryll Holzapfel ," in *Dear Andy Kaufman, I Hate Your Guts!* (Los Angeles, CA: Process, 2009), 11.

IV. Where have you people been raised?

Kaufman grew up idolizing the heel wrestlers in New York City, including "Classy' Freddie Blassie, who he later made an experimental film with.[93] When Kaufman began wrestling, his first option was Vince McMahon Sr.'s World Wide Wrestling Federation. McMahon Sr. was one of the true old-guard of the professional wrestling business who portrayed his product as a legitimate sport. Wrestlers around the country derided WWWF's wrestlers' ability to put on believable fights, but they nonetheless looked the part and carried themselves as real athletes. McMahon spent the 1970s trying to change the perception of the WWWF so it would be viewed as a serious wrestling promotion by making Bob Backlund, a legitimate amateur wrestling star, the world champion. Kaufman's antics and persona did not fit in Vince McMahon Sr.'s vision of wrestling. In Memphis, however, the relatively young ownership of Lawler and Jarrett used showmanship to bring in younger audiences. When Kaufman asked Bill Apter, wrestling magazine writer and publisher, for advice on where to wrestle he knew Memphis was the place to call.[94] He explained his role in getting Kaufman to Memphis:

> Vince McMahon Sr. had no interest in using him (Kaufman)—felt it was too show-business oriented. We went back to my apartment in Queens, N.Y., after a MSG show and I called Jerry Lawler, knowing how Memphis was way ahead of the rest of the wrestling world in trying new gimmicks. Jerry and Andy spoke for a few minutes and … the rest is history![95]

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[93] *My Breakfast with Blassie* was Kaufman's satire of the Louis Malle film *My Dinner with Andre*.
[94] Andy Kaufman and Bill Apter had a friendship going back a decade at the time. The two lived together in a New York apartment with a female wrestler for a short time in the 1970s, and the two shared a love for wrestling.
[95] Mark James and Jerry Jarrett, *Memphis Wrestling History Presents 1982* (Charleston, SC: CreateSpace, 2010), 120.

Indeed, many fans and wrestlers believed Memphis was the most innovative territory in the country. Rocky Johnson argued as such, "Jerry Lawler was a good booker, but he was twenty years ahead of his time. They were doing things and people would say 'you could only do that in Memphis.'"[96] However, many of the experimental ideas tried in Memphis were the brainchild of Lawler and not Jarrett. Jarrett's hesitance to bring in Kaufman and potentially expose his wrestling as scripted entertainment meant a feud between Kaufman and Lawler would have to wait.

The appearance of Andy Kaufman on Continental Wrestling's Saturday morning television must have seemed like an alien invasion to weekly viewers. Despite the wild moments and comedy, the show stuck to a weekly format which made the dedicated viewer comfortable. Each week began with hosts and commentators Lance Russell and Dave Brown welcoming viewers to the wild world of Memphis wrestling. Russell and Brown, staples of Memphis television and radio since the 1950s, provided a calming presence to the otherwise unruly atmosphere. The brown and orange backdrops, so distinctly mid-century modern aesthetic, blended with the often beige and grey suits of the hosts. It was as much comfort food as the southern fried chicken advertised during the commercial breaks.[97]

Memphis wrestling supplied plenty of spectacle and comedy, but Jarrett treated his main event matches seriously as legitimate sport. It was the combination of the two which made Memphis special, although Jarrett liked to keep the comedy and the reality

[96] Wayde Bowles, *Rocky Johnson Full Career Shoot Interview The Hannibal TV!*, YouTube, November 2, 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eWXbQudEz4Y.
[97]Lawler, *Classic Memphis Wrestling – Jerry Lawler VS. Andy Kaufman*, Highspots Wrestling Network.

separated. Thus, Jarrett was hesitant to put Kaufman and Lawler in the ring together. Jarrett explained his rationale:

> The original reason for bringing Andy in was simply to get a 'rub' from the association with a television star. I anticipated allowing Andy to do his thing with the women marks. I expected Andy to get beat and we would all have a good laugh and go our separate ways. As far as planning on a Lawler/Kaufman angle, it was not in any way in the plans. Lawler was our big star and champion. Andy was a non-wrestler. At the time we all felt it would damage Lawler's image to even wrestle Andy.[98]

Kaufman began his career in Memphis by doing the same sideshow wrestling matches he had been performing in nightclubs around the country. These matches did not involve top wrestlers; instead, Kaufman faced off with women from the audience.

Kaufman in a sense parodied the chauvinistic media villains the 1960s and 1970s such as Archie Bunker of who believed women belonged in the kitchen and whose movement into the workforce was a tyranny of feminism against the status quo. While the demographics of Southern wrestling skewed heavily in favor of men, women were not out of place in the Mid-South coliseum. By the early 1980s, Memphis Wrestling reached out to female fans with acts such as the Fabulous Ones and Rock 'N' Roll Express, young athletic tag-teams with muscular builds in modern rock attire. They were not rugged heroes like Lawler who appealed to the male audience; instead, they were literal baby faces meant to make young women scream as they ripped their shirts off.

The depiction of the Fabulous Ones in 1982 illustrates the ways Continental Wrestling hoped to bridge modernity with Southern regionalism. Jarrett immediately put the proverbial rocket on the backs of The Fabulous Ones, Stan Lane and Steve Kiern, by

[98] James, *Memphis Wrestling History Presents 1982*, 123.

making them the new protégés of Jackie Fargo (hence the Fabulous moniker).[99] After two years in retirement, Fargo sent a video to Memphis television in which he railed against manager Jimmy Hart's new tag team, The New York Dolls, an imitation of the Fabulous Fargos. Fargo, in his gruff voice told the camera, "I've got two of the greatest men I've ever seen. They're gonna where the tuxedos, and yeah they're gonna be doing the Fargo strut. They're gonna give you hard times pal."[100] Immediately, the Fabulous Ones, wearing gold and black shimmering tuxedos and sporting long blond mullets, were the hottest tag team in the South. To furtherer their popularity with the female fanbase, music videos aired on television each week featuring the Fabulous Ones. The videos simultaneously portray the tag team as both traditional Southern men and modern rock heart throbs. In the first video, set to ZZ Top's *Sharp Dressed Man*, the men dressed in blue jeans and cowboy boots struggle to get the interest of glamorous looking women. However, once they put on their tuxedos, every woman is interested in them.[101] The second video, set to The Gap Band's *You Dropped A Bomb on Me*, shows the Fabulous Ones working on the farm together before taking bubble baths and going out with their tuxedos to night clubs and wrestling matches.[102] The videos show the modern Southern man is capable of maintaining traditional Southern masculinity, while also embracing modern dress and music as the embodiment of cool.

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[99] Jerry Jarrett, *Classic Memphis Wrestling: The Fabulous Ones*, Highspots Wrestling, July 7, 2017, https://www.highspotswrestlingnetwork.com/media/classic-memphis-wrestling-the-fabulous-ones/49414/feature.
[100] Jarrett, *Classic Memphis Wrestling*: *The Fabulous Ones*, Highspots Wrestling Network.
[101] *The Most Fabulous Video of All Time, YouTube* (Continental Wrestling Association, 2013), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-7R_BTjxjkA.
[102] Jerry Jarrett, *Memphis Wrestling-The Fabulous One's Vid-"You Dropped a Bomb on Me"*, YouTube, January 27, 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MMaMIdTiEgM.

Kaufman's first appearance in Memphis was an inter-gender match, a onetime appearance meant to infuriate the women in the crowd who lusted after the Fabulous Ones. Rather than in-studio, Memphis telecaster Lance Russell introduced Kaufman via pre-recorded tape. This segment displayed the exceptional ability of Kaufman to rile up the Southern crowd. Kaufman says, "now I'm not saying women are mentally inferior to men because when it comes to cooking and cleaning, scrubbing the potatoes, raising the babies, and mopping the floors, they have it all over men…but when it comes to wrestling…there's nothing up there. They're all oatmeal above the eyeballs." [103] Kaufman's ideology espoused in a relatively calm demeanor made his act appear real. Even in the conservative stronghold of the South, such misogynistic and regressive attitude toward women was excruciating. While Southerners sought to reaffirm traditional gender roles, in the South, men believed that protecting femininity was essential to preservation of Southern exceptionalism. In Southern Wrestling women were not their own champions, and it is only through the physical power of men that the social status quo was preserved and outside threats were vanquished. Even against the unathletic Northern comedian, no woman could best a man at physical sport, less they shake the foundations of gender norms. Instead, Jerry Lawler, unable to stand for Kaufman's denigration of Southern womanhood, decided to step in and train Foxxy, an African-American woman from the audience, to take down Kaufman.[104]

[103] *The Real Andy Kaufman, Amazon*, DVD, 1977, https://www.amazon.com/Real-Andy-Kaufman/dp/B07DR2W75R/ref=atv_pr_sw_sc.
[104] *Tales from the Territory - Andy Kaufman Vs. The King of Memphis* (Vice Television, 2022); According to Lawler and Jarrett, Foxxy was unaware wrestling was scripted and thus really tried to defeat Kaufman, only narrowly losing the bout once she became too tired to keep wrestling.

When Kaufman began his feud against Lawler, he turned ire towards all of Southern identity. Kaufman, still filming comedy shows around the country, sent in videos to Continental Wrestling each week to fuel the hatred of Southern fans. His most famous video involved him giving "hygiene tips" to the fans of Memphis wrestling. His first lesson involved the use of soap:

> This is a bar of soap. Now, does it look familiar to any of you? I know that you probably don't know what this is and probably you have never seen one of these before. But it is called soap. Matter of fact, if you're sitting at home now, you can maybe repeat after me and say: 'Soap'. Say 'soap'. S-O-A-P, soap. Not 'sowp'. Not 'say-owp.' It's 'soap', okay?" You people, your hands are so greasy and slimy. I mean, I don't wanna shake 'em. You ask me for an autograph, I'll sign you an autograph. But please, don't put out your hand and shake it until you can wash your hands… You ladies, I have been travelling around the South, I see you in your shorts and I've seen some of the hairiest legs. Where have you people been raised?[105]

Kaufman's sermonizing to Southerners harkened back to a century of hillbilly representation in popular media. While the hillbilly caricature begins in the Appalachian area, the identity of the hillbilly migrated throughout the southern US. In fact, Kaufman begins his "bar of soap" promo by telling the audience he will eventually get his hands on the "hillbilly Jerry Lawler."[106] Kaufman based his characterization of Southerners upon the depiction of hillbillies of his youth in the 1950s and early 1960s. Television shows of the era portrayed Southerners as backwards people corrupting the industrial society. Anthony Harkins explains the antagonism toward the South "In the late 1950s, fears of hillbilly 'invasions' of mid-western cities prompted press accounts of backward and

[105] Lawler, *Classic Memphis Wrestling, Andy Kaufman Vs. Jerry Lawler,* Highspots Wrestling Network.
[106] Lawler, *Classic Memphis Wrestling, Andy Kaufman Vs. Jerry Lawler,* Highspots Wrestling Network.

degenerate men and women who despite their 'superior' racial heritage threatened the comity of the industrial heartland."[107]

However, this version of the Hillbilly became romanticized in the late 1960s and into the 1970s and 80s. Frin the caricature of the hillbilly, the South created a scapegoat for the ills of the South of the twentieth century. Alison Graham argues the redneck became the whipping boy of America and Southerners saw themselves as morally and culturally superior. Graham explains "more than simply a scapegoat, he (the 'redneck' or 'cracker') has functioned in popular culture as a signifier of racial ambiguity, with his class-bound vulgarity consistently representative of contaminated whiteness… As the personification of sullied purity, he is racial debris." [108] The hatred Southern fans directed at Kaufman was a reaction to Kaufman digging at a raw wound.

V. The Match

The act of improvisation is key to good wrestling. The best wrestlers understand every crowd is different and thus have different expectations which wrestlers appeal to. In addition, spontaneity is key to interactions between wrestlers and making the entire presentation feel genuine. However, with the inexperienced Kaufman, Lawler was not going to take any chances. Lawler and Kaufman carefully laid out their match move for move. This included a meeting at local referee Jerry Calhoun's house where the participants choreographed their upcoming match. Calhoun recounts,

> …because of all the hype around Andy's first match with Jerry Lawler, we hid Andy Kaufman out at my house that Sunday night before their match. Lawler came over and he and Andy worked through what was going to happen in the

[107] Anthony Harkins, *Hillbilly: A Cultural History of an American Icon* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 174.
[108] Allison Graham, *"Framing the South: Hollywood, Television, and Race during the Civil Rights Struggle"* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 34.

> match. Behind the scenes, Andy was so quiet…But the second the camera was on; his persona came alive. [109]

Kaufman said little in the meeting, agreeing with whatever Lawler told him to do. Lawler laid out a match with a familiar formula, one which he crafted after years of watching and taking part in matches with local high school football coaches and former rock and roll star turned wrestling manager Jimmy Hart.[110] Lawler planned out a basic match in which Kaufman would get beaten quickly with minimal damage. However, the best laid plans of mice and men often go awry, and more so when Andy Kaufman was involved.

The match itself was nothing special. Lawler understood he had to protect his reputation. Thus, the match with Kaufman involved no offense by Kaufman after Lawler gave him a free first punch. Lawler beat Kaufman from pillar to post the entire match to the delight of the Southern crowd. What played out reaffirmed Southern honor and supremacy over the North' the Southern punch closed the Yankee's mouth. Following the match, Lawler gave Kaufman two illegal piledrivers. Kaufman acted paralyzed, refusing to move for the rest of the night. The fans cheered the Yankee's demise and Kaufman left on a stretcher. Lawler vanquished the prideful Yankee, proving the South would always win in a battle of physical force. Kaufman returned to Memphis multiple times over the next few years to get his revenge, as all good villains do. Like all good heroes, Lawler always came out on top.[111]

Lawler and Jarrett reveled in the national spotlight brought to them by the appearance on David Letterman; however, the event garnered relatively little press

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[109] James, *Memphis Wrestling History Presents 1982*, 123.
[110] Southern wrestling promotions often performed shows in local high school gyms. Using the school's football coach as a referee or in a match with an evil manager was a popular tactic to sell extra tickets.
[111] Lawler, *Jerry Lawler Vs. Andy Kaufman*, Highspots Wrestling Network

coverage in Memphis. Despite the mainstream publicity given to Memphis wrestling's biggest star, the television appearance did not move media or audiences. Attendance figures for the Mid-South Coliseum remained steady and subsequent appearances of Andy Kaufman brought lower ticket sales. Even in his first appearance against Lawler, the event drew only 8,091 fans.[112] While the number was high for non-summer attendance, it was not exceptional. The following week, without Kaufman in attendance, CWA drew 9,121 fans to the same venue. The CWA drew 8,147 fans to an event one year to the day previous to Kaufman's match with Lawler.[113] Of the recorded attendance figures for the year, Kaufman's main event came in 9th of the year in Memphis.[114] This is not a number which shows a failure; however, perhaps worse for Kaufman, it displays something akin to ambivalence.

While bringing in Kaufman did not affect popularity in the short-term, the hope for Jarrett was that other people in media and wrestling would take notice. Continental Wrestling was in the awkward position of being affiliated with the National Wrestling Alliance and the American Wrestling Alliance. However, until the late 1980s, the big stars and champions of both promotions rarely wrestled in Memphis. Memphis Wrestling also rarely received publicity in wrestling magazines. In 1982, one of the most profitable and exciting years in Memphis Wrestling, *Wrestler*, a popular monthly magazine in the 1980s, only mentioned Jerry Lawler once in a column commenting on his resemblance to

[112] Crazymax -Jack, "Memphis Results: 1982," crazymax.org, February 3, 2014, https://crazymax.org/newsite/results/memphis-results-1982/.
[113] Crazymax Jack, "Memphis Results: 1981," crazymax.org, February 3, 2014, http://crazymax.org/newsite/results/memphis-results-1981/.
[114] Crazymax -Jack, "Memphis Results: 1982," crazymax.org, February 3, 2014, https://crazymax.org/newsite/results/memphis-results-1982/.

Elvis Presley. Months after Andy Kaufman's match with Lawler, the magazine dedicated a three-page spread to the match.[115] Memphis fans seemed to look at the Kaufman match as a bizarre detour in Lawler's quest for championships and fame, but the rest of the country saw it as a coming-out moment for the promotion. At the very least, one wrestling promoter appreciated the angle between Kaufman and Lawler. Jarrett claims after Kaufman received a call from Mid-South promoter Bill Watts thanking him and Lawler for injuring Kaufman and sticking up for the dignity of professional wrestling.[116] Kaufman fooled Watts like many other viewers at home. While the feud did not change the economics of Continental, it did garner respect from other wrestling promoters. Sadly, respect does little to pay the bills in professional wrestling.

Because of the local nature of Continental Wrestling and the economics of territorial wrestling, Jarrett could not properly monetize the notoriety his company received following Kaufman's appearances and the incident on David Letterman's show. Continental Wrestling relied on nightly ticket-sales rather than television revenue. Ticket sales did not change substantially, and eventually declined with each Kaufman appearance. Thus, while Jarrett used Kaufman to garner publicity and boost ticket sales for a few shows, he did not provide a large economic boost.[117]

Kaufman's story is a small part of a larger theme of wrestling in the South, as it represented their embrace of national culture and celebrity. Just as the South did in the 1980s, wrestling in the South rapidly modernized, celebrating, and embracing American

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[115] Bill Apter, "Jerry Lawler Drives Home His Point," *The Wrestler*, August 1982, pp. 42-45.
[116] *Tales from the Territory - Andy Kaufman Vs. The King of Memphis* (Vice Television, 2022).
[117]"Memphis Results: 1982," crazymax.org, February 3, 2014, https://crazymax.org/newsite/results/memphis-results-1982/.

culture just as it celebrated and embraced Ronald Reagan. Simultaneously, working-class white Southerners, the primary audience of Memphis wrestling, maintained a sense of local cultural superiority. Wrestlers in Memphis, including Jerry Lawler, symbolized this cultural fusion of national celebrity and traditional Southern masculinity. The ability to defend and uphold traditional masculinity became more important in the 1980s as modern national influence became more prevalent. While younger Memphians embraced rock music and celebrity, perceived social ills stemming from modernity including feminism, homosexuality, and racial equality became targets for Southern wrestling heroes to vanquish.

The peak of Memphis wrestling in 1982 came when the heroic Lawler battled a demon named Kimala from deepest, darkest Africa and once again showed the superiority of the white over black in the Deep South. The primitive cannibal Kimala (James Harris) ran rampant over Memphis, defeating Lawler in his first match. As one white hope after another failed to conquer and the children in the audience cowered closer to their parents, fans pleaded for Lawler to get one more chance against the monster from Africa. Lawler and Kamala drew three consecutive sellouts of 11,000 at the Memphis Coliseum in August 1982, the three biggest audiences of the year.[118] More than celebrity or centuries-old rivalries with the North, Southern wrestling fans craved victory of civility and whiteness.

[118] Crazymax Jack, "Memphis Results: 1982," crazymax.org, February 3, 2014, https://crazymax.org/newsite/results/memphis-results-1982/.

November 1982 also saw the Memphis debut of British cross-dressing wrestler Adrian Street, a true villain against the hetero-normative dominance of wrestling.[119] The art of performative masculinity in choreographed combat only succeeded when the ideal Southern man had the proper foil. Southern wrestling's greatest feuds were between the two manliest of competitors, but rivalries which gained notoriety beyond the wrestling fans, and which drew hatred and controversy were those which pitted Southern masculinity against feminine characters. The taboo threat of homosexuality was the greatest threat to Southern manhood. In Memphis Wrestling, gay panic was most famously and successfully exploited by Adrian Street.

British wrestler Adrian Street was an enigma within the wrestling business. A legitimate brawler with years of experience fighting in the streets of Brynmawr in Brecknockshire, Wales, Street's Uncle Fred taught him at a young age death or loss of consciousness were the only suitable reasons to lose a fight.[120] Street was fiercely protective of wrestling and its secrets, legitimately injuring British celebrity wrestler Jimmy Savile, an act which would make him a hero in retrospect. Street rationalized his behavior by noting Saville only wrestled part-time for fun, and Street was furious he had to wrestle a celebrity the fans knew was not a trained fighter.[121] This no-nonsense approach to wrestling seemingly put the grizzled veteran at odds with the bizarre and chaotic world of Memphis Wrestling. However, it was not his cockney accent nor his

[119] "List of Adrian Street Matches," Cagematch, accessed February 6, 2023, https://www.cagematch.net/?id=2.
[120] Adrian Street, *My Pink Gas Mask*, version kindle (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2012), https://www.amazon.com/Pink-Gas-Mask-Adrian-Street-ebook/dp/B0081U3XI2.
[121] Adrian Street, *Adrian Street on WHY He Beat the SH*T Out of Jimmy Savile! (Disgraced TV Presenter)*, YouTube 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PNhhJJMyIEk.

serious tone which made him the perfect villain of Memphis. Instead, it was his overtly effeminate cross-dressing character which struck fear and hate into the hearts of Southern audiences.

In Tennessee, like the rest of the bible belt, homosexuality was a third-rail subject, even the mention of the word would receive condemnation from audiences. Instead of explicitly outing Street as homosexual, his character and the way other characters interacted with him dripped with innuendo. His alliance with manager Linda Gunthorpe Hawker (better known as Miss Linda) further complicated his sexual identity. Outside of public view, Hawker and Street were the closest thing two wrestling personalities could be to a normal married couple. Jim Cornette, who served as a mouthpiece for Street for a short time in Memphis, recalled the two having normal marital arguments on road trips though far more entertaining as the rugged brawler Street was quick to acquiesce to his wife's every whim and joked about her physical superiority to him.[122] Linda further infuriated wrestling fans by routinely intimidating opponents and influening the outcome of matches. If the point of a renewed interest in Antebellum chivalry and manhood was a reassertion of white male superiority, a woman physically and mentally dominating the most powerful men in the South was as dangerous as the moral and sexual threat posed by Street.

Street's character pushed boundaries in queer representation in wrestling. Street's overt and stereotypical homosexual traits and appearance reflected homosexuality increased, though often unwanted, visibility within American and Southern society. While Southerners tried to bury their heads in the sand and ignore homosexuality, John

[122] Feinstein and Cornette, *RF Video Shoot with Jim Cornette*, Highspots Wrestling Network.

Howard argues by the 1970s, "with the bravery earned in lives of…everyday resistance, they (queer Southerners) moved onto the public stage, determined to win a legitimacy and equity so long denied them."[123] Street represented the most dangerous facet of modern homosexuality, the courage of visibility and ownership of identity.

Faced with a radical restructuring of society by the Civil Rights Movement and the feminist movement, preservation of their place at the head of the table socially and culturally was paramount to Southern white men. The ideology of a distinct special Manhood or Southern masculinity perpetuated the culture since the Antebellum era; however, in the years after the Civil Rights movement Southern white masculinity reckoned with a society more focused on gender and racial equality. The re-establishment of the superiority of Southern masculinity, specifically white masculinity, took on a new revitalized importance. Seth Dowland, writing about Southern Evangelicalism in the 1980s, notes that white men publicly shied away from supporting racial segregation but, "they had not, however, abandoned a belief in divine hierarchy."[124] Thus, Street and his wife posed a threat to the newly established order in a way Kaufman did not.

Despite his rage, power, and subversion, Lawler and Dundee combined forces in December 1982 to defeat and defang Street. In front of the studio audience, the two heroes of Memphis refused to be taken in and mocked his effeminate ways. Ultimately, despite Street's underhanded tactics, the match ended not just with Lawler physically dominating Adonis punching him repeatedly in a mounted position, but he was further

[123] John Howard, *Men like That: A Southern Queer History* (University of Chicago Press, 2001), xvii.
[124] Craig Thompson Friend and Seth Dowland, "A New Kind of Patriarchy: Innerancy and Masculinity in the Southern Baptist Convention 1979 - 2000," in *Southern Masculinity: Perspectives on Manhood in the South since Reconstruction* (Athens, GA: Univ. of Georgia Press, 2010), pp. 246-269, 247.

emasculated when Dundee forced a big kiss on Miss Linda while Street laid prone. The infuriated Street broke his effeminate character and set out in a rage to destroy everything in his sight. The match served multiple masters. It proved that the hetero-normative masculine heroes were superior to the effeminate Street. It also established masculine superiority over Miss Linda and even the most powerful feminine force. For the next three years of Street's tenure in Memphis, his homosexual character still enraged fans, but no longer served as the existential threat to Southern masculinity.[125]

VI. Andy Kaufman's Gone Wrestling

Even decades after his death, Kaufman remained essential to the story of Southern Wrestling. However, despite its legendary status, it was not, contrary to popular belief, a sustained success in Memphis Wrestling. Kaufman was a boost to box office for a few shows, but the appeal did not last. Andy Kaufman, like many celebrities in wrestling, was a special attraction, but ultimately, wrestling fans wanted to watch wrestling. After the audience saw Lawler beat up Kaufman once, there was not much appeal in seeing it again. Unless Kaufman was to, like Jimmy Hart, build up a stable of wrestlers to combat Lawler, he did not pose a threat to Lawler. While all wrestling feuds have shelf lives, Kaufman and Lawler's feud was shorter than usual. Southern wrestling fans wanted brawls between the toughest men in the South.

Kaufman passed away from cancer a year after his last appearance in Memphis Wrestling, though hardcore fans still believe he is planning his imminent return.[126]

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[125] Jerry Lawler, *Lawler & Dundee vs Adrian Street & Apocalypse 12 11 82 Memphis Wrestling*, YouTube, May 8, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eW4mXLRsy3E.
[126] "Andy Kaufman's Hangin' with Elvis," *The Smoking Gun*, July 1, 2010, http://www.thesmokinggun.com/documents/crime/andy-kaufmans-hangin-elvis-0.

Despite his fondness for wrestling, the obituaries around the country seldom mentioned his wrestling exploits. The world wanted to forget Kaufman's wrestling and focus on his moments on the television show *Taxi*. Even most wrestling fans forgot or tried to forget about Kaufman's time as a wrestler. It was a decade later when the Andy Kaufman biopic *Man on the Moon* was released that Kaufman's wrestling career took on cult popularity. The WWF heavily promoted the movie, which featured Lawler playing himself, causing wrestling fans to permanently associate Kaufman with Southern wrestling. Despite only appearing a handful of times in Memphis, Kaufman is one of the key figures in Southern wrestling history to those who never saw it.

Andy Kaufman was a fan of wrestling since childhood; however, he was not a fan of Southern wrestling. The distinction is one which on the surface seems trivial; however, understanding that difference explains why Kaufman did not make a significant impact on Memphis wrestling fans. Southern wrestling, for all its silliness and madness, boiled down to a contest between men for physical and moral supremacy. Ultimately, Southern wrestling ended with a bout which tested the manhood of the two individuals. Kaufman loved the wrestling he saw in New York with short matches and colorful characters. Andy Kaufman loved the show-business side of wrestling. In Memphis, wrestling was more than entertainment. It was the dominant sport of the area. Real of fake, the fans of Memphis wanted to believe they were seeing the greatest athletes in the world compete to crown champions of the toughest men in the South. These were contests which drew thousands of viewers to the television on Saturday mornings and to the Mid-South Coliseum every week. These contests reaffirmed the dominance of manhood within

Southern society. More than reliving battles of North and South, Memphis wrestling reaffirmed traditional Southern values and hierarchy.

Based on ticket sales, the feud between Kaufman and Lawler affected Continental Wrestling's business and popularity relatively little. The series of matches between the two drew lower attendance numbers than regular wrestling shows in the same venue. However, the feud is a perfect example of Memphis wrestling's ability to attract multiple generations of Southern audiences and bridge the traditional Southern values with modernity. On the one hand, bringing in Andy Kaufman symbolizes Memphis Wrestling's evolution as they embraced national celebrity and youth culture. However, Jerry Lawler's vanquishing of Kaufman's misogynist character reaffirmed the traditional role of Southern masculinity in its protection of Southern white womanhood. Simultaneously, Kaufman's anti-Southern reignited the centuries-old struggle between North and South. Use of national celebrity, rock music, and flamboyant younger wrestlers signaled the birth of a fresh modern take on Southern wrestling for a younger generation of fans while staying true to traditional Southern values to avoid alienating Southern white traditionalists.

CHAPTER II – The Cowboy and the Big Cat – Race and Modernity in Mid-South Wrestling

I. The AFL All-Star Game Boycott

In January 1965, The American Football League sent its best players to New Orleans, Louisiana for the annual All-Star Game. Twenty-one of those players were African American. Upon arrival in the city, those twenty-one African Americans found a city which did not meet its reputation as an oasis of racial harmony in the heart of the Deep South. However, San Diego Chargers defensive lineman Ernie Ladd was not surprised. Ladd's family left Louisiana when he was a child to shield him from racism in the state. Now a football all-star, Ladd entered New Orleans with a dignity and swagger reserved only for elite athletes who stood at nearly seven feet tall. Even when a bouncer held a gun to his head, Ladd kept his trademark cool.[127]

Thirteen years later, Ladd embraced his inherited hatred of Louisiana and made himself into the most reviled wrestler in the South. So evil were his actions, even the African-American audiences of the South came to despise him. By turning his back on fellow African-American star Ray Candy, he made Candy into the biggest African American hero in Southern wrestling. The two men sold more tickets to the Louisiana Superdome than any wrestlers in history.[128] In portraying himself as a villain hellbent on holding down other wrestlers, including other African Americans, he achieved the exact

[127] Mike Scott, "Before the NFL's Kneeling Controversy, There Was the 1965 AFL All-Star Boycott in New Orleans," NOLA.com, September 26, 2017, https://www.nola.com/archive/article_993271e2-8181-5607-8968-0a6a33f22de5.html.
[128] Pro Wrestling History, "Superdome Extravaganza Cards," http://www.prowrestlinghistory.com/supercards/usa/misc/midsouth/cards.html.

opposite. As both wrestler and booker, Ladd uplifted the African Americans he worked with. In turn, he helped set the business of Mid-South Wrestling on fire.

Continental Wrestling in Memphis, with its war between Andy Kaufman and Jerry Lawler, symbolized Southern Wrestling to the rest of the entertainment world. Even further South, in the home of Mardi Gras, two other men reached new heights of artistic and economic success. The first, William (Bill) Watts, a star wrestler in the Northeastern United States, returned home to Oklahoma with the goal of taking over the local Tri-State wrestling territory which covered parts of Oklahoma, Arkansas, Louisiana, and Mississippi.[129] By 1979, Watts controlled most of the territory in New Orleans and Mississippi and his business flourished. At Watts' side was his star wrestler and booker Ernest (Ernie) Ladd. Ladd broke barriers as an African-American nefarious heel wrestler in the South, an unheard-of and dangerous proposition anywhere south of the Mason Dixon until his arrival. His villainous character succeeded beyond the ring. His business acumen and knowledge of wrestling helped him become the most powerful African American in wrestling both in the ring and in the locker room.

The story of the rise of Mid-South wrestling is a Faulknerian tale of two Southerners returning to build anew from the past. They built a wrestling company designed to appeal to a diverse audience by prominently featuring both white and Black wrestlers. Unlike Continental wrestling in Memphis, Watts did not initially attempt to gain younger fans by embracing celebrity or modern aesthetics. Instead, Watts embraced the diversity of the post-segregation urban South, seeing African Americans as an

[129] Tim Hornbaker, 2010. *National Wrestling Alliance:The Untold Story of the Monopoly That Strangled Pro Wrestling* (Toronto, Ontario: ECW Press), 223.

untapped economic market to capitalize on. Specifically, Watts appealed to the black majority population of New Orleans, and the growing working-class black population throughout the urban South to boost ticket sales. In doing so, Mid-South Wrestling became a unique cross-racial Southern space which empowered black audiences to cheer on the superiority of black over white. Concurrently, Ernie Ladd used his position of power to push African-American representation forward in an area of the country which actively sought to repress and undermine that representation for centuries.

This change was in part achievable because the 1970s and 1980s brought the unification of a working-class Southern culture built on the foundation of traditional Southern moralism and masculinity. Matthew Lassiter argues that the Sunbelt ethos of colorblind suburban middle-class individualism created a distinct space and culture for middle-class whites at the exclusion of not just African Americans but working-class whites as well.[130] White middle and upper classes throughout the Sunbelt fled to their own version of the frontier, the suburbs, distancing themselves from the increasingly diverse urban sphere. The fracturing of the South between suburban and urban helped create a racially mixed urban culture. Simultaneously, the promise of the sunbelt and the economic boom of the South in this era was promulgated by the promise of a post-civil rights, racial harmony in the South. Together, Watts and Ladd created a uniquely Southern business which concurrently fulfilled the sunbelt promise of progressive racial representation for economic prosperity while also adhering to Southern exceptionalism and moralism at the core of Southern White identity.[131]

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[130] Matthew D. Lassiter, *The Silent Majority: Suburban Politics in the Sunbelt South* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 4.
[131] Roland Barthes, "The World of Wrestling," in *Mythologies* (New York: The Noonday Press, 1991).

Bill Watts created a wrestling promotion in the Deep South which saw significant financial and cultural growth through the promotion of Black athletes. While depiction of the African American athletes in Mid-South was far from progressive in the larger culture, it made significant leaps in the realm of wrestling by creating black superheroes capable of challenging and conquering white foes. While Watts was slow to embrace the modern wrestling flare of Continental, he capitalized on an untapped demographic and economic growth to bring wrestling in Louisiana and Mississippi to unique heights. The empowerment of the respectable African American superstar Ernie Ladd also signaled a change for wrestling in the South. Ladd's willingness to challenge the cultural status quo regarding race representation in his promotion of black athletes helped promote wrestling in urban areas by actively seeking rather than tolerating African American audiences. The combination of economic and cultural savvy of Bill Watts and the racially progressive creativity and labor relations of Ernie Ladd precipitated the rise of Mid-South Wrestling.

The success of Mid-South was its ability to continue reflection of values of its white consumers but allowing those values to be played out by black performers. In doing so, Mid-South became an entertainment space in which Southern values and manhood superseded race and allowed the for the creation of a unified racial audience. Like Continental Wrestling, a major key to the success was the continuation of Southern manhood and traditional Southern values as the moral base. Watts understood the most important part of wrestling was the transmission of cultural values as Tyson Platt explains, "the story being told must align with some values or beliefs of the audience in order to convey a narrative. By aligning with cultural values, professional wrestling allows the viewer to interpret professional wrestling as a series of images depicting

morality plays."[132] Upholding the social and moral status quo in the morality play of wrestling and consistently enforcing white leadership of Bill Watts afforded Mid-South Wrestling the moral cover to create black stars capable of dismantling the notion of white superiority.

No matter who Watts marketed as a star, the wrestling fan base in the South was passionate enough to support their heroes given they continued to disseminate the appropriate cultural values. While the Deep South did not have the same population to provide the sizeable crowds of the northeast and west coast, wrestling fans were no less passionate. A common refrain of wrestling fans, dating back to the 1960s, was that the national wrestling magazines did not appropriately cover the Southern territories. The February 1967 issue of *Wrestling World* contained two complaints by Southern readers that the magazine did not cover their favorite wrestling stars well enough. The first letter complained that the great Oklahoma wrestler Danny Hodge never appeared in the magazine. The second letter, titled "Dixie Dealings" opined, "I have been reading your magazine for six months now and I enjoy every story… There is one thing, however, that needs to be improved, there are hardly any stories on the wrestlers who appear in the South…"[133] Southern fans also gained a reputation around the country as those most willing to distend disbelief, a troubling proposition for villain wrestlers. With a passionate white working-class fanbase in-tact, the addition of a larger share of African

[132] Tyson L. Platt, "The Transmission of Cultural Values Through Professional Wrestling." In *Identity in Professional Wrestling*, edited by Aaron D. Horton (McFarland: Jefferson, North Carolina, 2018) 179.
[133] Norman Jacobs ed, "Letters to the Editor," *Wrestling World*, February 1967, 3.

American audiences made the Mid-South territory one of the most successful in the country.

The Deep South was never the epicenter of professional wrestling. "The World's Most Famous Arena" Madison Square Garden in New York City was the gateway to immortality treasures which fueled the imagination of the mountainous men from humble beginnings who made a living within the ropes of wrestling's squared circle. Even as a transitory home, the dirt roads and youth boxing gyms of Louisiana and Tennessee did not serve as appealing stops along the road to the glitz and glamor of professional wrestling superstardom. The sweltering humidity of the Deep South and the various boys' clubs and high school gyms which hosted weekly wrestling served as deterrents for the most wrestlers. Mike Graham, son of Florida Championship Wrestling owner Eddie Graham, described the appeal of his father's Florida promotion. "Wrestlers might not want to go to Alabama or Tennessee… but if you look at your wife and say, 'hey honey, we're gonna make a little money and live on the beach for six months' that sounds like a good idea."[134] For wrestlers, the bayous of New Orleans did not hold the same allure as the beaches of Key West. Mid-South Wrestling leadership, unable to attract the biggest stars, created grappling stars from scratch or find the potential in wrestlers discarded from other territories. Creating one of the most powerful and popular professional wrestling companies in the world from these circumstances was one of the most improbable and impressive feats in the artform's history. A feat accomplished through an appeal to multiracial fanbase while adhering to a unique Southern identity.

[134] Mike Graham, *Championship Wrestling From Florida – The Story of Wrestling in the Sunshine State*, 2019, https://www.highspotswrestlingnetwork.com.

II.The Cowboy

Bill Watts' journey to ownership of Mid-South Wrestling began with him working as a traditional cowboy wrestler. A rugged college football player with some amateur wrestling experience, Bill Watts rose to popularity in the South quickly. He was never a Shakespearean wordsmith, but he gave purposeful, and passionate monologues. His wrestling ability, for its time, was solid if not spectacular. He understood the correct pacing of a match and connected with the crowd through his body language and facial expressions. More than that, he was a believable dirty villain capable of doing hideous things to his opponents. By the beginning of the 1970s, Watts gained a reputation as a wrestler capable of being a top drawing card anywhere in the country. A profile in the May 1972 fan magazine *Wrestling Revue* detailed his rise to main event status in Oklahoma, Texas, New York, Washington, and California, "Every territory he hit has seen Watts rated as the top man."[135]

After star-making performances as a racist cowboy villain in the 1960s on both the East and West coasts, he returned home in the 1970s as a conquering hero. He was a champion of the South and brought home a knowledge of how to exploit local culture to make himself and others into wrestling superstars. With the money he made wrestling and the financial power of the South rising, he furnished a plan for control of all Southern wrestling. Watts' Mid-South was modern and nationally influenced, and yet uniquely Southern. Watts brought on board Southern athletes with Southern attitudes mixed with

[135] Al Vavasseur, "Cowboy Bill Watts," *Wrestling Revue,* May 1972, 32.

modern wrestling styles to create a product which appealed to multiple generations of Southern wrestling fans.[136]

The Mid-South wrestling territory was, in the late-1970s, a distressed asset. In 1950s Tulsa, Oklahoma, Tri-State wrestling owner Sam Avery put former amateur wrestling champion Leroy McGuirk in charge of the territory. Promoters and wrestlers seemed to respect, or at least sympathize with McGuirk, who accomplished a great deal as an amateur and professional wrestler despite losing vision in one eye at a young age.[137] However, on February 8, 1950, McGuirk lost his vision entirely in an automobile incident. McGuirk blamed himself for the accident stating, "I insisted on wearing my dark glasses most of the time because I didn't think my false eye matched my good one. Tragically, the lens over the good eye was the one that shattered…"[138] McGuirk, unable to continue wrestling, became part-owner and booker for the promotion.

Wrestlers saw the Tri-State Territory as an undesirable destination due to the travel, weather, night life, and pay. McGuirk saw the detriments of his territory as a reason to stop trying to promote outside talent. Instead, Junior Heavyweight Champion Danny Hodge became the primary focus of Tri-State wrestling. Hodge's legendary amateur wrestling career made him a hero to the fans in the territory.[139] The territory's business under McGuirk was stable but not exceptional. McGuirk, a pillar of the Oklahoma wrestling community and a sympathetic figure because of his accidents, was

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[136] Bill Watts and Scott Williams, *The Cowboy and the Cross: The Bill Watts Story: Rebellion, Wrestling and Redemption* (Toronto: ECW Press, 2006), Chapter 5.
[137] Tim Hornbaker, *National Wrestling Alliance: The Untold Story of the Monopoly That Strangled Pro Wrestling*, (Toronto, Ontario: ECW Press, 2010), 144.
[138] Russell Gideon, "McGuirk Might Have Chosen Journalism if He Didn't Wrestle," https://www.newspapers.com/image/891119915/?terms=mcguirk&match=1.
[139] The Danny Hodge Trophy is the highest individual honor in college wrestling, the equivalent to college football's Heisman Trophy. It is awarded each year to the best collegiate wrestler.

important for the respectability of his company. Tri-State, like many territories, came under fire when the NWA went on trial for monopolistic practices. McGuirk was sympathetic public face for the territory through the scandal. However, for many wrestlers, McGuirk would was not a dream to work for. Bill Watts claims by the 1970s McGuirk was bitter, worn down, and struggling with alcohol. Soon he lost interest in innovation and creating new stars.[140]

While McGuirk's wrestling promotion floundered in the 1960s and 1970s, Bill Watts carved a path towards wrestling stardom. Like many Southern professional wrestlers of the mid-twentieth century, Watts was a standout football player before making his way into professional wrestling. Similar to McGuirk, a car accident cut his athletic career short.[141] It was Oklahoma University football teammate Edward "Wahoo" McDaniel who introduced Watts to professional wrestling. Watts worked for various Southern wrestling, including Tri State Wrestling, before catching the eye of Vince McMahon Sr., the owner of the Northeastern wrestling territory.

Before his infamous son made his company into a publicly traded international force, McMahon Sr. ruled over the Northeast as one of the most powerful regional wrestling promoters in the world. McMahon successfully capitalized on the financial prospects in the metropolitan cities of the northeast such as New York City, Boston, and Washington D.C. In New York, McMahon's largest market, the company became a laughingstock in newspapers like the *New York Times.*[142] McMahon's promotion of

[140] Bill Watts, *Bill Watts Shoot Interview*, *Highspots Wrestling Network*, February 6, 2018. https://www.highspotswrestlingnetwork.com/media/bill-watts-shoot-interview/40527.
[141] Watts, *Bill Watts Shoot Interview*," *Highspots Wrestling Network.*
[142] "Mat Game on Downgrade," *New York Times, Timesmachine*, accessed January 15, 2023, https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1939/12/24/issue.html.

Italian champion Bruno Sammartino led to a renewed relationship with the Garden, selling out the building almost seventy times.[143] McMahon's ability to find and promote star wrestlers who found unique connections with minority audiences gave him the respect of promoters and wrestlers alike. With McMahon's backing, Watts became a headliner in New York City. There Watts wrestled champion Bruno Sammartino in a series of wildly successful bouts. There first match against each other at Madison Square Garden in March 1965 drew over 19,000 fans, the largest recorded attendance in the United States that year. Despite the success of their first bout, return matches provided diminishing returns. Instead of staying in New York, McMahon sent Watts to Washington D.C.[144]

In Washington D.C. the black majority felt isolated and unwanted by the white residents of the nation's capital. Since the 1940s, black residents opposed forces of urban renewal meant to "clean up" the Southwest region of D.C. and in the process gentrify black neighborhoods and displace black residents. However, in the 1960s the city began to change in congruence with demographic changes. African Americans held greater influence over the cultural identity of the city as they became the city's majority population. Even still, the white and mostly transient minority either ignored or denigrated the African American population. Despite their strength in numbers, African Americans remained ostracized in the city they, more than anyone else, called home.[145]

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[143] Dave Metlzer, "Bruno Sammartino Obituary," accessed January 15, 2023, https://members.f4wonline.com/wrestling-observer-newsletter/april-24-2018-wrestling-observer-newsletter-death-bruno-sammartino.
[144] Meltzer, "Bruno Sammartino Obituary," *Wrestling Observer Newsletter.*
[145] Chris Myers Asch and George Derek Musgrove, *Chocolate City: A History of Race and Democracy in the Nation's Capital* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2017), Chapter 11.

In Washington D.C., "Cowboy" Bill Watts played a villain fighting against the African American heroes of the area. McMahon was adept at appealing to the racial and ethnic makeup of his audiences to create his cavalcade of popular characters. He also exploited the tensions between wrestlers and ethnic groups to ignite white hot feuds to keep his audience buying tickets week after week. Like most territories, foreign villains were standard fare for the northeast. However, unlike most of the country, McMahon chose heroes who were not the typical all American Anglo-American farm boys. Instead, the noble hero of Northeaster territory in the mid-twentieth century was Bruno Sammartino, an Italian American immigrant who survived Nazi occupation as a child.[146] Sammartino's story reflected the American dream of the New York and Pittsburgh audience who adored him. Similarly, McMahon employed African American stars in urban D. C. to court the growing African American population. Beginning in 1957, Washington D. C. became the first American city to claim a majority African American population.[147] Citizens of the D.C., later nicknamed "Chocolate City," supported the great Sammartino and later the Puerto Rican superstar Pedro Morales; however, they would never share the same passion as the immigrant populations of New York.[148] For the nation's capital, McMahon created an African American hero and a white villain to stir up the emotions of the urban fanbase.

[146] Rob Feinstein, "RF Video Shoot: Bruno Sammartino," Highspots Wrestling Network, January 25, 2017, https://www.highspotswrestlingnetwork.com/checkout/bruno-sammartino-shoot-interview/58683.
[147] Peter A Tatian, "Demographic Change in Washington, D.C.: Taking the Long View," Urban Institute, March 29, 2011, https://www.urban.org/urban-wire/demographic-change-washington-dc-taking-long-view.
[148] NYU Web Communications, "Chocolate City: A History of Race and Democracy in the Nation's Capital," NYU, accessed January 26, 2023, https://www.nyu.edu/washington-dc/academics/special-programs/welcome-to-chocolate-city.html.

Bill Watts, under the "Cowboy" moniker, played the racist heel against the heroic African American wrestler, Houston Harris, better known as Bobo Brazil. In the 1960s, Brazil's stature made him a giant among even his grappling peers. While his actual height is unknown, most promoters billed him at six foot and six inches, weighing in at an intimidating 300 pounds of muscle. Brazil wrestled until he turned 60 in 1993; however, the peak of his popularity was in the 1960s when he was likely the first African American to challenge and perhaps successfully capture the world heavyweight championship.[149] Watts, originally portrayed as a hero, double crossed heroes Sammartino and Brazil to gain power and championships. While beginning as a hero and turning to the dark side is standard fare in professional wrestling, Watts' Southern identity, together with his coded interviews, clarified that money and championships were only part of the story. The Southern cowboy also believed himself better than the Italian and African American champions of the Northeast.

Watts riled up the fans with barely coded racist rhetoric, exploiting the unique demographics of the crowd. Watts explained in his autobiography; "Fans aren't ignorant. If a black athlete is wrestling against a white athlete who presents himself as being a racist, fans understand without it having to be overdone verbally or visually."[150] The African American fans understood coded racist rhetoric; having experienced it their entire lives. Watts exploited racist ideology without ever explicitly playing a racist

[149] The lack of records and the sheer amount of title defenses make knowing for certain who the first African American wrestler was to challenger for the world title; Bobo Brazil did successfully defeat world champion Buddy Rogers. However, he did so after "inadvertently" hitting Rogers in the groin. Because he cheated to win, Brazil refused to accept the championship.

[150] Bill Watts and Scott Williams, *The Cowboy and the Cross: The Bill Watts Story: Rebellion, Wrestling and Redemption* (Toronto: ECW Press, 2006), 113.

character. Similarly, his opponent Bobo Brazil made himself a champion for African American fans without alienating white fans.

While no footage of their battles remains, a few photographs and an article in the *Saturday Evening Post* offer Watts' perspective. Watts, like many wrestlers of years gone by, was protective of the secrets of wrestling even when interviewed by sports journalists like Pittsburgh mainstay Myron Cope. Watts does the interview mostly in character and revealed nothing about how he performed the match. Instead, Cope does his best to relay the action. Included was a moment of genuine terror as Watts threatened to hang Brazil in front of the crowd. Cope describes the wild interplay between antagonist, protagonist, and audience,

> Up in the ring the Cowboy suddenly shoved Bobo's head between the middle and top ropes, twisting a pretzel-like noose around Bobo's neck. Bobo's eyes bulged and his tongue hung out. Even though the referee freed him, the crowd was now convinced that Bobo's only hope lay in divesting the Cowboy of his headgear. 'Take it off, Bobo!' the fans pleaded.[151]

The imagery of the sadistic cowboy threatening to lynch the man of color created an unmistakable and horrifyingly familiar image to the fans in attendance. Watts instantly transformed himself from an individual villain into a monstrous amalgam of the white Southern male capable of murderous lows against his enemies. Brazil, of course, rallied back against his would be lyncher using his patented headbutt to "bust open" Watts' forehead which streamed with blood. While Brazil was the hero for the African American audience, he played to racist phrenological studies of black skulls being heavier and stronger than white skulls. With blood flowing down his face, the cowardly Watts walked

[151] Myron Cope, "The Rich, Full Life of a Bad Guy," *Saturday Evening Post*, February 12, 1966, p. 90.

away from the match in a forfeit, not allowing the black fans the satisfaction of seeing him lose to their black hero.[152]

Within the chaotic confines of the wrestling ring, the ravages of racial strife could play out safely. The white cowboy facing off against the rugged, jive African American was a riled-up version of the battles of Jack Johnson and the white hopes of the nineteenth century. The whole bloody affair seemed like an exploitative grotesque; the athletically and morally superior black athlete looking to win on merit while the white cowboy, threatened by the supremacy of his black challenger, lies and cheats to undermine the just gains of his opponent. In the end, the black hero will either win despite the underhanded tactics of white opposition or fall short not because he's not good enough but because the deck is stacked against him. Looking past the racist stereotypes and the exploitation of racial strife, the audience saw the injustice of the black experience played out in the ring. In life, progress against these obstacles took generations, but Brazil could symbolically conquer them in less than twenty minutes.

The matches between Watts and Brazil represent cultural change in the twentieth century as progressive racial attitudes forced a reassessment of the Cowboy figure. In the 1960s, the Cowboy no longer carried the same invincibility and moral supremacy he once held in the cultural zeitgeist. In professional wrestling, the Cowboy had long been a symbol of Southern masculinity. The cowboy counterbalanced the simple Hillbilly character, which was a mainstay in professional wrestling since the 1920s. Northern wrestling promoters and fans pigeonholed Southern characters in professional wrestling

[152] Cope,"The Rich Full Life of a Bad Guy," 91.

into degrading caricatures with poor physiques, hygiene, and clothing.[153] Southern hick wrestlers forwent the traditional garb of the professional wrestler, including short trunks, long boots, and kneepads. Instead, Southerners typically wrestled in street clothes. A match featuring Leo "Whiskers" Savage and Farmer Jones portrays the distinction perfectly. Their opponents Fred Blassie and Bill McDaniels are the model wrestlers, decked out in large, collared ring jackets and short trunks with shiny new boots. Savage and Jones are in comically large blue jeans, with Jones' shabbily cut into shorts. Whiskers refused to wear shoes to the ring adhering to the stereotype of Southerners, though Farmer Jones at least has a shabby pair of boots on.[154] The Northern audience identified the two as caricatures of Southern incivility, dangerous to the social status quo because they refused to adhere to modern cultural norms.

Savage lived up to his name in the style of his wrestling. Savage did little of the so-called "scientific" or "catch-as-catch-can" wrestling which involved complicated and perfectly executed suplexes and submission holds. Instead, Savage wrestled in a style typical of Hillbilly wrestlers and wrestlers portraying "crazy" or "backwards" characters. Savage punched, kicked, head-butted, and stomped for most of his offense. There is no technique in this style, but brute force and grit. The hillbilly southern wrestler thus often played the tougher and more violent opponent against the smarter and more technical opponents.[155]

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[153] Jares, *Whatever Happened to Gorgeous George*, Location 506.
[154] "Whiskers Savage & Farmer Jones Vs. Fred Blassie & Bill McDaniels (1952/06/10)," YouTube, January 20, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6SyC6oWpoRg&ab_channel=KAZUSHISAKURABA.
[155] Joe Jares, *Whatever Happened to Gorgeous George?* (Kindle edition) (New York, NY: Grosset & Dunlap, 1974), Location 504.

Unlike the stereotypical hillbilly, Watts and the countless other cowboys of wrestling wrestled with a John Wayne swagger, which captured the hearts of young boys across the nation. However, in the 1960s, as America reckoned with the Civil Rights Movement, the Women's liberation movement, and shifted away from the traditional popular culture of the 1950s toward a more radical youth orientated popular culture the Cowboy fell out of favor. John G. Cawelti in *The Six-Gun Mystique Sequel* argues "growing uncertainty about American uniqueness and about the special place of the West in establishing that uniqueness," brought about the decline in the popularity of cowboy heroes. [156] Television shows like *Gunsmoke* kept the American fable of the cowboy alive as a top ten rated show until the 1970s; nonetheless, outside of the South and to people of color, the Western and the Cowboy increasingly became a symbol of America's racist legacy.[157]

In the South, the cowboy character remained an image of the heroic, masculine South. Characters like Terry Funk, despite their evil ways, remained heroes in the South. The outlaw persona garnered the adulation of the Southern fans, still purveyors of the autonomous spirit of the Old South. While the rest of the country reconsidered the Cowboy as a symbol of the freedom of America, the South embraced it as a figure of power and dominance over the rest of the country. The "Cowboy" nickname allowed Watts to move seamlessly between hero and villain, depending on where he was wrestling. This movement also added to his understanding of how local crowds

[156] John G. Cawelti, *The Six-Gun Mystique Sequel* (Bowling Green, KY: Bowling Green State University Popular, 1999), 6.
[157] Terrence Moss, "The Scheduling and Ratings History of 'Gunsmoke,'" *The Barrel of Forty*, accessed February 3, 2023, http://terrencemoss.blogspot.com/2015/03/the-scheduling-and-ratings-history-of.html.

responded differently to characters, depending on their cultural identity and ethnic makeup. As a main-event wrestler around the country, Watts gained a perspective on how a crowd's ethnic makeup informs their reactions to characters and stories, which in-turn affects their spending patterns.

In the mid-1970s, Watts made his return to the Mid-South territory. He parlayed his wealth and stardom into an ownership stake in the territory. He started as a main-event wrestler and promoter of Mississippi and Louisiana while McGuirk kept control of Oklahoma. Part of what made Watts essential to the renewed success of the territory was the relationships built through the strength of personality and his familiarity with the region. When he needed a booking license to promote wrestling shows in Louisiana, he relied on his friendship with the head of the Louisiana Athletic Commission Emile Bruneau. By 1980, Bruneau was well-tenured having spent decades dealing with everyone from the National Football League to Muhammad Ali.[158] Professional wrestling, still considered the stepchild of legitimate sport, needed Bruneau's special permission to run wrestling shows in Louisiana. Watts understood that Bruneau and McGuirk had a long respectful relationship. Thus, Watts cultivated a fast friendship with Bruneau which allowed him to run his shows without McGuirk at the wheel.[159]

The fan demographics in the Deep South had changed dramatically since Watts left during the peak of the Civil Rights movement. In the 1970s and 1980s, a migration of workers seeking new opportunities away from the decaying rust belt lifted the population

[158] Vic Ziegel, "Ali, Spinks, and the Battle of New Orleans," *New York Magazine*, October 2, 1978, https://nymag.com/news/sports/48897/.
[159] Watts and Williams, *The Cowboy and The Cross*, 461.

of the Deep South.[160] This was especially the case for African Americans who both spurred on and were motivated by a perceived cultural and economic boom period. While the Southern economy only grew moderately in the 1970s and 1980s, its growth relative to the northern Rustbelt cities such as Pittsburgh made it an attractive destination for working-class families. In the 1980s, New Orleans, the most important city for Mid-south Wrestling, became a black majority city.[161] The promise of economic prosperity brought together a more diverse urban working class. This population spike allowed for a golden age in Southern wrestling.

Since the Antebellum era, New Orleans has been the one of the most peculiar Southern cities. In the heart of Protestant evangelicalism dominated South, its Catholic creole origins define the city. The city's reputation as a progressive metropolis and haven from the racist ills of the Deep South, however, was undermined by its deep-rooted racial tensions. Popular culture in New Orleans, like the rest of the South, depicted African Americans as an inferior race, instilling in white New Orleans residents a sense of moral and cultural superiority which justified social and political racism including segregation. Bentley Anderson argues the Catholic Church exacerbated rather than quelled this rhetoric, including advertising minstrelsy in the post-World War II era:

> New Orleans Catholics expressed prejudiced views of blacks through social activities, especially minstrel shows in the 1940s and 1950s. In these comic variety shows, white actors wore blackface as they sang songs and told jokes to a white audience. Especially under church auspices, this form of entertainment not

[160] Edward L Glaeser and Kristina Tobio, "Rise of the Sunbelt 4.17.07 ," NBer.org (National Bureau of Economic Research, April 2007), https://www.nber.org/system/files/working_papers/w13071/w13071.pdf.
[161] Elizabeth Fussell, "Constructing New Orleans, Constructing Race: A Population History of New Orleans," *Journal of American History* 94, no. 3 (January 2007): pp. 846-855, https://doi.org/10.2307/25095147, 851.

> only confirmed stereotypes of African Americans as childlike and inferior, but also gave white Catholics permission to ridicule blacks.[162]

Despite cultural and religious justification for the discrimination of African Americans, the demographic change which made African Americans the majority population in the city created an opportunity for advancement. In 1977, Ernest Morial became the first Black mayor of New Orleans. However, despite winning his position by the ballots of an overwhelming majority of Black voters, Morial and other Black politicians were still wary of upsetting the white population. Ignoring tremendous pressure from Black leadership to clamp down on police brutality by appointing more African Americans to positions of authority, Morial selected a white man as the new police chief. Leonard Moore, in *Black Rage*, argues Morial, "did not want to appoint a black chief and upset the predominantly white NOPD, nor did he want to alienate white residents."[163] A demographic majority and political power not won since Reconstruction was not enough for African Americans to make inroads on the most vital issues facing their community in what was supposed to be the South's most progressive and multicultural city.

Watts built his reputation in another city with a black majority population, Washington D.C., against a black superstar beloved by the city. Watts knew a black champion was the key to garnering the loyalty and money of black audiences. Watts changed the wrestling business in the Deep South by marketing to the underrepresented black urban population while also keeping the loyal working-class white audience. In

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[162] R. Bentley Anderson, *Black, White, and Catholic: New Orleans Interrracialism, 1947-1956* (Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 2008), 9.

[163] Leonard N. Moore, *Black Rage in New Orleans: Police Brutality and African American Activism from World War II to Hurricane Katrina* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 2021), 144.

doing so, Watts created a unified working-class audience with shared cultural values on display at the wrestling performances they consumed each week. The search for a black star to accomplish this goal required the guidance of wrestling pioneer Ernie Ladd.[164]

As an older generation of White Southerners lost their stranglehold on the region and moved into the suburbs, the generation of baby boomers like Bill Watts sought to modernize and profit from Southern culture. Bill Watts and Ernie Ladd, the two most influential people behind the scenes of Mid-South Wrestling, represent this generational shift in the context of Southern Wrestling. Ladd and Watts, both natives of the Deep South, moved to centers of industry in search of greater economic opportunities. However, in the late 1970s, the South progressed into a new post-Civil Rights phase and became a political and economic force nationally. Americans believed in the promise of the Sunbelt, a unified politically and economically dominant coalition of South and West. Watts and Ladd moved back to the South and saw in the growing metropolitan urban sphere a fertile place for economic and cultural growth. Ruggedly traditional in presentation and yet wildly progressive in representation, Mid-South served traditional Southern masculine culture while moving forward into a new multiracial Southern working-class identity.

III. The Big Cat

Ernie Ladd, in the 1970s, was one of the most respected professional wrestlers in the world. Ladd was not only a superstar professional wrestler in the ring with legions of fans and detractors around the world, but also a leader in the locker room too. Ladd's

[164] Kevin Michael Kruse, *White Flight: Atlanta and the Making of Modern Conservatism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007), Introduction.

teammates nicknamed him “Big Cat” as a professional football player because of his lightening-fast reflexes and unusual height for a defensive back. He gained attention on the field and off it when he was with the San Diego Chargers. Off the field, Ladd was a menace to Charger ownership than he was to offensive linemen on the field. Ladd fought for fair compensation and racial justice at the expense of the AFL’s economic stability.[165] Professional wrestlers, especially African American wrestlers, gained significantly from representation by a man like Ladd, who fought against those in power for fair pay and representation without fear of retaliation by unscrupulous wrestling promoters. To this day, wrestlers do not belong to a union and the government considers them independent contractors despite signing exclusive contracts to multibillion dollar corporations. Only through leadership from top stars like Ladd were wrestlers able to make strides in terms of financial compensation and fair treatment.

Ladd began wrestling during the AFL off-season in the mid-1960s. He used the money from wrestling as leverage against AFL ownership for fair compensation.[166] Sports historians often cite Curt Flood as one of the most influential figures in sports labor history. In 1969, Flood challenged the reserve clause in Major League Baseball (MLB) which gave baseball ownership complete control of a player’s career, including the ability to trade him without permission. Flood sued the MLB, challenging previous Supreme Court rulings which made the MLB exempt from anti-trust laws. While Flood’s 1970 lawsuit and subsequent 1971 refiling failed in court, the mounting pressure from

[165] “Ladd Suspended by Chargers,” *Williamson Daily News*, August 3, 1965, https://news.google.com/newspapers?id=USREAAAAIBAJ&pg=3029%2C2351210.
[166] Frank Litsky, “Ernie Ladd, Hall of Famer in Football and Pro Wrestling, Dies at 68,” *The New York Times (The New York Times*, March 14, 2007), https://www.nytimes.com/2007/03/14/sports/football/14ladd.html?searchResultPosition=1.

players and the public led to the dismantling of the reserve clause.[167] Four years before Flood's activism, Ladd fought against the AFL for a more equitable split in revenue after the league signed a lucrative television deal. The uproar he caused led to his trade to another team and an increase in salary.[168] Ladd's protest for higher wages ultimately failed and the AFL folded by the end of the decade; however, his willingness to challenge the establishment for fair pay was a radical step for football players as fans and ownership viewed their labor and bodies as disposable and replaceable.

Ladd was one of twenty-one African American players to protest the 1965 AFL All-Star Game in New Orleans. While the All-Star Game was a ratings success and a crowd pleaser, it was an exhibition for the players. Players do not take preparation for an exhibition as seriously as games which matter. The AFL players thus unsurprisingly sought to enjoy themselves on Bourbon Street. However, not only were players turned away by drivers but also by the clubs on Bourbon Street. All-Star Ernie Warlick later recounted, "The white players could walk into the clubs, but when I tried to follow, the men on the doors would extend their arms across the entrance and tell me, 'Not you. You're not allowed in here.'"[169] Ladd and the other African American players met in a hotel room later that night with leadership from the AFL. Despite the protestations white players and white management, the elected leaders of the African American contingent of

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[167] Robert Lipsyte, "The Lives They Lived: Curt Flood; Baseball's Last Martyr," *The New York Times* (*The New York Times*, January 4, 1998), https://www.nytimes.com/1998/01/04/magazine/the-lives-they-lived-curt-flood-baseball-s-last-martyr.html?searchResultPosition=4.

[168] Bob Valli, "The San Diego Player Revolt: Ladd Fined and Suspended," *The Oakland Tribune*, August 2, 1965, pp. 35-37, https://www.newspapers.com/image/354614534/.

[169] Mike Scott, "Before the NFL's Kneeling Controversy, There Was the 1965 AFL All-Star Boycott in New Orleans," NOLA.com, September 26, 2017, https://www.nola.com/archive/before-the-nfls-kneeling-controversy-there-was-the-1965-afl-all-star-boycott-in-new/article_993271e2-8181-5607-8968-0a6a33f22de5.html.

players, including Ladd, voted to boycott the game. Their boycott enraged government officials and the citizens of New Orleans, but the leadership of the AFL stood behind them and moved the game to Houston. Ladd no doubt remembered the rage of New Orleanians when he returned as a villainous wrestler years later.[170]

Despite Ladd's willingness to rebel against unequal treatment, he was not a political radical. Ernie Ladd was a rugged individualist in the style of Ronald Reagan who won the governorship of California at the same time Ladd was making his name as a football star in San Diego. In fact, Ladd was a lifelong Republican and advocated for African Americans to join the party. Ira Linderman quoted Ladd in a *Sun Sentinel* piece saying, "I want to do something politically in terms of making the community more aware… If the black community is strictly 80 to 90 percent Democrat, they can't be involved in politics. They need to know something about both parties, about the Reagan administration. The black community can't stand on the outside."[171] Ladd's beliefs fell in line with a recent wave of black Republicans in the 1980s, who felt underserved and taken for granted by both white and black Democratic leadership.

African American politicians like Edwin Meese and Clarence Thomas represented a new era of African Americans embracing the Republican vision of Reagan's America. Lisa Veronni-Paccere summarizes the goal of these new Republicans as, "the need for personal responsibility… and political diversity in the community, they tried to modify the political discourse on matters that are of most concern to African Americans… The

[170] Scott, "1965 AFL All-Star Boycott in New Orleans," NOLA.com.
[171] Ira Winderman, "A Grip and Grid Career All-pro Defender Ernie Ladd Chose Professional Wrestling over Football," *Sun Sentinel*, September 26, 2021, https://www.sun-sentinel.com/news/fl-xpm-1985-04-24-8501160314-story.html.

resurgence of a black conservative ideology was the expression of a rejection of a collective vision of African Americans interests."[172] African Americans, like Ladd, saw blaming racism for social problems as a scapegoat holding back African Americans who needed to embrace personal responsibility. In this, Ladd adhered to the color-blind individualism of the affluent white community which believed in autonomy of the individual while turning a blind eye to the intrinsic inequalities baked into American economic and political institutions.[173] Additionally, Ladd and others believed in earning economic and social opportunities based on merit, which explains his decision to protest for fair compensation and against racial discrimination. Ladd believed in a liberalism in which a man receives what he earns whether that be financially or socially regardless of race. The only radicalism in his thought process was his audacity to express it as an African American.

Ladd's impulse, like other black republicans, to reshape the expectations and political leanings of African American Southerners influenced his decision to return to the South (and Louisiana specifically) after a lifetime of shunning his birthplace. Other wrestlers advised Ladd from returning to the South lest he endanger himself and his family, which Ladd noted only pushed him to prove them wrong.[174] Ladd was born in northern Louisiana, he had no genuine connection to the state as he spent most of his life

[172] Lisa Veroni-Paccher, "Black Conservatism in the 1980s: Will the Future Be Conservative...," *Revue de recherche en civilisation américaine* (Diallo, David, March 3, 2009), https://journals.openedition.org/rrca/115.

[174] *Ernie Ladd Interview, YouTube* (Highspots, 2022), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_6Xg0YBFUOU.

in Texas. Like Mid-South owner Bill Watts, Ernie Ladd developed his knowledge of wrestling in the WWWF territory in New York. McMahon, like Watts, preferred tall and imposing wrestlers, and the "Big Cat" fit in well. Even as Ladd's knees continued to deteriorate, his smooth talking and intimidating demeanor created a mystique which existed far beyond his athletic peak. He also garnered the respect of wrestlers around the world as he fought for greater percentage of revenue and always encouraged wrestlers both young and old to sit under his "learning tree" to discover how to be respectable wrestlers and men.[175]

In a profession fueled by deception, Ernie Ladd, to white society, was a beacon of respectability. When Watts needed a respected name to help run his business in Mid-South, his star attraction Ernie Ladd was the obvious choice. For Watts too he fit the bill of a "respectable" black man to put in place as creative and business second in command. Ernie Ladd was a black man that Watts and other white businessmen could rally around. He spoke eloquently, he was wealthy, well-educated, and his ideology around black uplift was never radical or violent. He was a life-long Republican who even became casual friends with President George H.W. Bush. He and others would repeat a story that when former President George W. Bush was having too much fun in college, then governor H.W. Bush sent the Big Cat to have a long talk with him.[176] This was the kind of black man Watts could both promote on screen and put in a leadership role from it without intimidating his business partners. The white community in the South saw him as a figure not defined by race. In the words of Watts himself, "Ernie Ladd was never racial."[177]

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[175] Cornette, *RF Video Shoot with Jim Cornette, Highspots Wrestling Network.*
[176] Ernie Ladd, *Ernie Ladd Interview*, *YouTube* (Highspots, 2022).
[177] Watts, *The Cowboy and the Cross*, 359.

However, outside the gaze of white authority Ladd used his authority and respectability to uplift African Americans within wrestling and set a moral example for black audiences.

The presence of Bill Watts provided a white shield to the progressive racial representation of Mid-South. Watts was brilliant in putting together a show which appealed to Southern audiences. Watts also promoted a flamboyant and dominating blackness on television which no black ownership or management in the Deep South could have without some reprisal. In the American economic sphere, white consumers see popular culture with substantive black representation, like black-owned business, as inferior and exclusive to black clientele. As recently as 2014, a Nielsen reports showed that only twenty percent of white Americans making over 50,000 dollars a year would purchase from black-owned business.[178] These attitudes reflect the American cultural ideology which perceives whiteness as the dominant and normative culture. Culture created and promoted by African Americans must necessarily be other and lesser than white culture. By serving as the face of Mid-South, Bill Watts made white audiences feel comfortable consuming Mid-South Wrestling even as African Americans became central to the product.

Mid-South Wrestling in the early 1980s, like Continental Wrestling, marked a definitive shift in Southern professional wrestling leading to a boom period unmatched before or since. Both new companies depended on a new generation of leadership willing to change their presentation to cater to new audiences. Ernie Ladd and Bill Watts

[178] "Black Impact: Consumer Categories Where African-Americans Move Markets," Nielsen IQ, February 15, 2018, https://nielseniq.com/global/en/insights/analysis/2018/black-impact-consumer-categories-where-african-americans-move-markets/.

symbolized a New South and new attitudes toward race influenced by other parts of the country. This progressive ideology toward depiction of race was at once a moral decision dictated by Ladd and an economic decision dictated by Watts. More than any Southern promotion, Mid-South catered to African Audiences.

As Watts created Mid-South's new foundation, he sought a black star to push his business to new heights. However, the great black stars of the 1960s and 1970s like Ernie Ladd neared the end of their career. The insular nature of the primarily white wrestling culture made it difficult for African Americans to enter the business. Those African Americans who did penetrate the exclusive club had to live up to a higher standard of excellence than their white colleagues. Black men like Kenneth Johnson (who managed under the name Slick) came into wrestlers knowing it was a "white man's sport," and knew he either had to excel beyond his white contemporaries or fit into "stereotypical gimmicks which highlight the worst parts of black culture."[179]

Tony White is a prime example of the excellence necessary for an African American wrestler to compete in Mid-South. White went by the name Tony Atlas, a reference to the Greek mythological figure whose broad shoulders carried the world. A star bodybuilder and power lifter, the name Atlas was a suitable one as he looked like a Greek divinity sent to earth. Atlas headlined wrestling shows around the country, including being part of the first black tag team to win championships in the WWWF.[180] Atlas had perhaps the best physique in all of wrestling and his intensity and charisma exploded on camera. Atlas had to be awe-inspiring in almost every way to gain a position

[179] Johnson, *RF Video Shoot with Slick* (RF Videos, 2004).
[180] His tag team partner was a man known as Rocky Johnson. Johnson's son, Dwayne, would take his father's nickname Rocky and later shorten it to just "The Rock" to modest success.

on wrestling rosters around the country. For most African Americans, this level of excellence was too much to compete with, as former wrestler Brickhouse Brown noted most wrestling companies only employed two African American wrestlers at a given time.[181] Men like Atlas and Butch Reed set a high standard which intimidated wrestlers like Brown especially given the low pay for lower-level wrestlers and the racism they had to endure.

It was not Atlas who Watts first tried to make his great black superhero; that opportunity went to wrestler Ray Candy. Before owning the territory, Watts focused on using Ladd as his lead African American attraction. Candy, born Ray Canty, a Georgia born wrestler who bounced around the territory scene for decades, struggled to find long-term success. Watts never truly believed in Candy as a drawing card. Despite his overwhelming size, Candy lacked the charisma and wrestling skill to become a true superstar. Candy's most consistently successful run in the South came in 1983 as part of the tag team the Zambue Express. In a nod to the Nation of Islam, Candy changed his name to Kareem Muhammad. The two toured the South as villains representing, without ever saying the words, the Black Panther party.[182] However, this exploitation of white anxieties was not the aim of Bill Watts. Watts saw Candy as a formidable wrestler but not one who could be a main event star. Instead, tt was Ladd who first brought up the idea of making Candy into the biggest babyface in the promotion.

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[181] Frederick Seawright, *Brichouse Brown Shoot Interview*, *Highspots Wrestling Network*, accessed February 7, 2023, https://www.highspotswrestlingnetwork.com/media/brickhouse-brown-shoot-interview/49894.

[182] "Zambuie Express Tag Teams Database ," Cagematch, accessed February 8, 2023, https://www.cagematch.net/?id=28&nr=1039.

Ladd wanted to lose to Candy to set up a match at the Superdome, insisting Candy could be a hero for the black audiences of the Deep South against the villainous Ladd. Ladd had made money against white heroes without the size or charisma of Candy for a decade, and once again Ladd felt the desire to uplift black competitors in the South.[183] The idea worked and a main event cage match at the New Orleans Superdome between Ernie Ladd and Ray Candy drew the largest gate and attendance in Mid-South before the arrival of the Junk Yard Dog. The two drew 23,800 fans and $142,000 in 1978.[184] Adjusted for inflation, that amounts to roughly $650,000 in one night. This was the proof Ladd and Watts needed to push further in marketing to the urban black audiences in Southern Louisiana and central Mississippi. This push for African American talent was the largest break with the previous generation of promoters in the Deep South. Analysis of the cards put on by Tri-State Wrestling in New Orleans 1975 show, at least in the recorded matches, no more than one African American wrestler appeared per show, and never in the main event. After the record-breaking bout between Ladd and Candy, Leroy McGuirk, still co-owner of the territory at the time, allegedly used a racial slur to deride the racial makeup of the audience. Watts and Grizzly Smith responded that "the money was green."[185] This exchange demonstrates just how much the business in the South changed under the leadership of Watts and Ladd.

Mid-South also struggled to get wrestling stars from around the country to settle in the South. Even as the economy of the South took off, the demographics made it

[183] Ernie Ladd, *Ernie Ladd Interview*, *YouTube* (Highspots, 2022).
[184] "Mid-South Superdome Shows 1976 - 1982," Pro Wrestling History, accessed February 3, 2023, http://www.prowrestlinghistory.com/supercards/usa/misc/midsouth/cards.html.
[185] Watts, *RF Video Shoot with Bill Watts*, *Highspots Wrestling Network.*

difficult for wrestlers to make the same money they would in more populace areas of the country. From a numbers standpoint the lack of urban centers in the South meant drawing large crowds was a challenge. When Watts first approached Ladd to work for Mid-South Ladd, working in Mississippi at the time, responded, "I've been studying the demographics of Mississippi. There's only one town with a half-way decent population. I don't care how much business we do. I can't afford to stay there."[186] The urban centers of New Orleans and Oklahoma City would prove profitable, but wrestling, a touring attraction, still needed to play smaller towns. Additionally, Ladd understood that the longer wrestlers stayed in a territory, especially in the small towns of the South, the more they cultivated a relationship with the audience. He tried to find talent who would stay in the area long enough to draw money by creating a bond with the fans, either good or bad. Speaking about the tag team, The Wild Samoans he complained,

> They were in and out. They wanted to come out on top and make the money on top and then move right along…But in a small territory like Louisiana when they got this rapport. You got Baton Rouge, you got to Alexandria, you got Monroe…you have to build those towns…They just wanted to come in and take the cash out for the tarp and run and didn't want to put nothing back in the box. They didn't understand the psychology of building a town.[187]

To combat the economic disadvantage of running small towns, both creatively and economically, Watts and Ladd crafted a business which connected specifically to the fans of the territory and built an emotional relationship with them.

Over time, by making New Orleans the center of his promotion rather than Tulsa, Watts began attracting more African American talent. New Orleans tried to accommodate sports leagues, businesses, and athletes by burying the history of their racial politics. New

[186] Watts and Williams, *The Cowboy and the Cross*, 446.
[187] Ernie Ladd, *Ernie Ladd Interview*, Highspots Wrestling Network.

Orleans' metropolitan culture of parties and Mardi Gras has often been used to make the case for the city as exception to the legacy of racism in the South. The reaction to Ernie Ladd and other African American players' protests of the AFL All-Star game are illustrative of this. Less than five years after six-year-old Ruby Bridges had to be escorted into school by police officers to integrate the New Orleans school system, New Orleans journalists and officials snarled at the idea of their city and their population still battling against segregation and racism.[188] However, even if imagined, the perception was that New Orleans was an exception to the racism of the South. Moving into the 1980s, with Ladd in control of the creative aspects of Mid-South, the city of Jazz and Mardi Gras was an appealing destination for African American wrestlers.

IV.Tarred and Feathered: Memphis Vs. Mid-South

Like Continental Wrestling in Memphis, two men of a new generation not beholden to the traditions and culture of the old South ran the new Mid-South territory. The two organizations moved to a more modern style of wrestling, using a faster pace and younger wrestlers. In the 1990s young wrestlers under management of Bill Watts considered him behind the times in terms of in-ring style and presentation and that reputation has stayed with him to this day. However, in the early-1980s, Watts, along with his Memphis counterpart Jarrett, allowed young wrestlers to blend a new style of energetic fast paced wrestling with the traditional brawling and amateur wrestling style beloved in the South. Additionally, they both modernized the presentation of the wrestlers. While the two organizations still performed Southern manhood among its

[188] "Civil Rights Movement: Leaders on Both Sides Smoothed Way to Integration," NOLA.com, June 17, 1993, https://www.nola.com/news/politics/article_9b724757-2b77-59d0-aa36-5ec34fb80c1e.html.

heroes and the cowardice of its villains, they updated their wardrobes and their manner of speaking. They both added the element of Rock and Roll music to the characters and the music which blasted through the arenas as the wrestlers entered combat. But the Southern drawls of the combatants, the frequent mentions of local events and sports teams, and focus on Southern values reminded fans that the product remained uniquely Southern. Both Memphis and Mid-South Wrestling used contemporary culture to give the wrestling product a more youthful orientation.

There were key differences in how Mid-South and Continental Wrestling approached modernity. The white flight away from the urban cities of the South, like New Orleans, meant urban centers housed black audiences begging for greater representation. Watts and Ladd looked to develop more African American stars to appeal to the African American audiences. Watts witnessed firsthand the power of pitting white villains against black heroes in Washington D.C., and Ladd spent his time in the South paving the way for this opportunity to bring in more African American wrestlers into the sport. Mid-South, throughout the early 1980s, showcased a plethora of African American wrestlers both heroic and villainous, almost all of whom ended up at the top of the cards. They showed that a multiracial audience, even in the South, would accept black wrestlers as main attractions, a direct turnaround from less than two decades before when the athletic commission barred African American wrestlers from sharing a ring against white opponents. While Continental Wrestling employed black stars, they rarely stayed on the top of the card with the champions like Jerry Lawler. Instead, African American stars like Rocky Johnson and Kimala were temporary foes to attract African American audiences only to eventually fall to the white stars.

The significant difference between the two Southern wrestling companies was their style and form both inside and outside the ring. Memphis wrestling never attempted to maintain a tight grip on realism and seriousness. While Jerry Lawler often had serious blood vendettas with his opponents, there were also many moments of levity, especially with villains such as Jimmy Hart. Lawler and Jarrett employed sometimes goofy wrestlers and gimmicks. One such example was the Colossus of Death, a journeyman wrestler, Duke Meyers, under a generic looking beige mask but who played an unstoppable killer under the employ of Jimmy Hart and Andy Kaufman. The Colossus himself would mostly lumber around the ring taking everything the heroic wrestlers such as Lawler could throw at him without flinching. The character was an obvious imitation of Jason Voorhees from Friday the 13th films of the same era.[189] An even more blatant knockoff of Freddy Krueger from the Nightmare on Elm Street films, was added by the way of Doug Gilbert's "Nightmare Freddy" character. In later years, things would get more outlandish with such wrestlers as Ta-Gar Lord of the Volcano. Ta-Gar was a deity of volcanic regions of the earth that came to face off against Memphis wrestling's mightiest warriors. Mid-South Wrestling was willing to put on the occasional silly match and were not above sticking a manager's face in a birthday cake. However, the wrestlers from the bottom of the card to the top were realistic and intimidating athletes inside and outside the ring.

While Bill Watts quickly gained a reputation as a good territory owner willing to pay fair money to wrestlers under his employ, it was money that had to be earned inside

[189] Memphis was not alone with this attempt at capitalizing on the films, Stampede Wrestling in Calgary also head their character "Jason the Terrible."

and outside the squared circle. Watts not only required physicality inside the ring, but professionalism and physicality outside of it as well. Watts described his rules,

> We also had a system of fines to ensure you were in town on time and handled yourself like a professional. If you didn't show up, you got fined. If you were late, you got fined. If you stiffed a motel, I took it out of your money…If you got into a fight at a bar; I didn't care, but if you lost, I fired you. It was that simple - if you were going to go out and make an ass of yourself, you'd better win.[190]

While Memphis Wrestling had a laissez-fair attitude towards the conduct of its wrestlers, Bill Watts wanted his enterprise to run as militarily as possible.

One of the most glaring and symbolic examples of the difference in approaches between the two companies is how they handled one peculiar and uniquely Southern match. The "tarred and feathered" match was a staple of Memphis wrestling since the early 1970s. Tarring and feathering is a form of humiliation and torture made infamous in the years before the American Revolution. The tactic, used primarily by revolutionaries against British taxation, consisted of immobilizing an individual before pouring scalding wood tar on them and covering them with feathers. Over time, the tactic changed to include syrup and goose down to humiliate or threaten anyone who threatened the social status quo.[191]

It is hard to pinpoint the first tarred and feathered match in wrestling history though, Joe Jares, in his book, *Whatever Happened to Gorgeous George*, reports that one took place in Austin, Texas in 1964.[192] However, the match took off in popularity as a Southern tradition throughout the 1970s, including many in the states of Mississippi and

[190] Watts and Williams, *Cowboy and the Cross*, 509.
[191] Benjamin H. Irvin, "Tar, Feathers, and the Enemies of American Liberties, 1768-1776," *The New England Quarterly* 76, no. 2 (2003): p. 197, https://doi.org/10.2307/1559903.
[192] Jares, *Whatever Happened to Gorgeous George*, Kindle Edition, Location 1745.

Tennessee. Memphis's matches took on a comedic appeal throughout the decades. However, an incident in Mississippi portrays the controversial and racially charged elements of the match. The incident involved an African American wrestler known as Burrhead Jones, working in Tri-State Wrestling in Mississippi and Alabama in the 1970s. He was in a series of matches which ended with him tarred and feathered before eventually gaining the upper hand over his tormentors. Jones, working as a villain in other areas of the country, had been tarred and feathered without much uproar from the local African American community.[193]

When Jones began wrestling in the Deep South, he became a babyface. This was a necessity before the late 1970s, when Ladd became the first African American villain in the South. Conventional thinking before Ladd's move to the South was that an African American portraying a villain in the South was a danger to his life due to the unpredictability of white fans. Now, African Americans recoiled at the indignity he suffered despite his righteousness. Jones claims his tarring and feathering led to a protest by the local chapter of the NAACP in Hattiesburg, Mississippi. This eventually led the entire company had to shut down to let the heat die down.[194] However, local promoter and wrestler Buddy Wayne (who Jones credits for the idea of the tarred and feathered matches) asserts that they only canceled the television shows for a few weeks and

[193] Mike Mooneyham, "Burrhead Jones: Legend of the Ring - the Wrestling Gospel According to Mike Mooneyham," The Wrestling Gospel According to Mike Mooneyham - Sex, Lies and Headlocks, February 8, 2011, http://mikemooneyham.com/2003/02/23/burrhead-jones-legend-of-the-ring/.
[194]Mooneyham, "Burrhead Jones: Legend of the Ring - the Wrestling Gospel According to Mike Mooneyham," The Wrestling Gospel According to Mike Mooneyham.

continued to run live shows without fuss.[195] If the controversy repelled fans, the idea of seeing the hero gain his revenge brought them back.

In the 1970s and 80s, Memphis Wrestling used Tarring and Feathering matches to humiliate villains, a comeuppance for their cowardice and evildoings. Despite the sometimes-violent reactions to the match in the South, Continental Wrestling made the match into a comedic spectacle. A famous example took place of this absurdity took place in 1981. The wrestler Dream Machine took on Jerry Lawler on Continental Wrestling Television. Dream Machine's allies thwarted Lawler on the edge of victory; so, Lawler turned the tables on a bumbling stumbling Dream and punched him several times, effectively knocking him out. Jimmy Hart, Dream Machine's manager, scurried away in fear as Lawler covered Dream Machine in chocolate syrup (tar) and threw a pink pillow full of feathers all over his masked face. Dream Machine, slipping around in slapstick fashion, tried in vain to gain his balance and dignity with his yellow mask and purple tights covered in feathers and chocolate. He then gave an impassionate if awkward monologue vowing revenge. The whole affair was a violent farce accompanied by cheering and guffawing kids in the audience.[196] They shied away from any ties to racial or political violence. Continual Wrestling was a place to have fun and forget about the genuine problems in society.

Memphis Wrestling's style involved celebrating the absurdity of wrestling. The history of tarring and feathering of individuals is filled with heinous torture; however, the

[195] Buddy Wayne, Post to Wrestling Classics Message Board November 4, 2002, WrestlingClassics.com http://wrestlingclassics.com/cgi-bin/.ubbcgi/ultimatebb.cgi?ubb=print_topic;f=9;t=054517.
[196] Lawler, *Dream Machine Tarred and Feathered by Jerry Lawler (1981) Classic Memphis Wrestling Angle*, YouTube, 2010, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wWpx0953aV8.

misery and seriousness of the issue is what allows Memphis's treatment of the subject to work. A man covered in chocolate syrup and feathers, despite any history connected is a farce, and the farcical nature is key to the humiliating aspect of the torture. This celebration of the absurdity of a traumatic history is one well-tread in comedy. A classic example from the era is the Mel Brooks' film *The Producers*. In the film, two men produce a Broadway musical meant to fail titled, *Springtime for Hitler*. The humor of the film's second act revolves around the unrelenting audacity of staging celebratory Nazi musical. The film concludes with the play becoming a rousing success; the fictional audience, much like the real-life audience, cannot escape the humor of such a taboo spectacle. The difference between the Producers and the comic madness of tarred and feathered matches is that *The Producers* was an American film reckoning with the humor of a German event. In his book *Is It Ok to Laugh About it*, Liat Livni argues Holocaust and Nazi humor was strictly taboo in Israel until the 1990s.[197] The response in Mississippi and Louisiana to the tarred and feathered matches demonstrates that African American audiences did not respond to the match with a sense of humor, the wounds from the tragic history it symbolized were too fresh to find the match funny. In Tennessee, the minority African American fanbase either accepted the taboo humor or disguised their distaste.

For years, Bill Watts did not book the match. Jim Cornette, a Memphis wrestling manager traded to Mid-South in 1984, brought the idea to Watts.[198] Watts used humor sparingly in Mid-South and tried to recast the tarred and feathered match. Rather than

[197] Liat Livni, *Is It OK to Laugh about It?: Holocaust Humour, Satire and Parody in Israeli Culture* (London, England: Vallentine Mitchell, 2017), Chapter 1.
[198] Cornette, *RF Video Shoot with Jim Cornette*, Highspots Wrestling Network.

embrace the tragic humor, Bill Watts used the pain of the past to engender rage and sadness from his audience. Tarring and feathering might not have been a regular occurrence in Louisiana, but the act stood in for the heinous lynchings which populate the tragic history of racial violence in the Deep South. Watts knew that history was an easy way to draw heat. However, he also knew using tarring and feathering was lighting a match next to a powder keg. Watts first used the tactic with Jim Cornette and his tag team The Midnight Express against young white superstar, Magnum TA. Still, the fury and sadness of TA covered in feathers and dried mud screaming into the camera for vengeance was enough to propel TA into martyrdom with the Mid-South crowd and made the new team of the Midnight Express into the most hated villains in the territory. When Watts finally used the tactic against his primary black draw, Junk Yard Dog, he both used a black antagonist, Butch Reed, and waited to do the angle when Junk Yard Dog was on a rare sabbatical in Memphis Wrestling. The Memphis Wrestling fans in attendance did not have the spiritual connection to Junk Yard Dog that those in Mid-South did and fans saw tarring and feathering as a semiregular occurrence. The same angle, once it aired on Mid-South television in the following weeks, drove fans into hysterics and officially turned Butch Reed from a middle card hero to a main event villain. Watts catered to his African American fanbase and used the realities of the past to play with (or indeed exploit) their emotions.

Watts was not a man of conviction fighting against the racial prejudices of the South. Watts admitted his views on race changed drastically only after he met Ernie Ladd.[199] Watts, the triumphant white cowboy, was ever the entrepreneur using the bodies

[199] Watts, *Shoot Interview with Bill Watts*, Highspots Wrestling Network.

of black athletes to get money out of the pockets of Black fans. Whatever the motivation, Watts brought in several African American wrestlers both as heroes and villains. In 1980, Sylvester Ritter quickly became the biggest drawing card in the history of the South while wrestlers such as Olympian Tony Atlas and the gargantuan "Bad Bad" Leroy Brown attempted to take down the mighty Junk Yard Dog. These wrestlers portrayed themselves less like savages than previous black stars. Ritter might still use his devastating headbutt to finish his opponents, but he was an intelligent, charismatic modern man, relatable to working-class audiences of all races.

Bill Watts is not a progressive hero who took the racial backwaters of the South into a progressive utopia which embraced representation. Watts ultimately exploited a market of African Americans in the South during a time of economic growth spurred by oil profits. Watts, by his own admission, was no champion of civil rights. Instead, Watts was driven by economic gain and the ability to perhaps more than double his attendance and weekly television viewership by actively recruiting black audiences rather than begrudgingly accepting them.

Where Mid-South was not progressive but in-step with the rest of the wrestling industry was on its treatment of women. Women were not a large part of the professional wrestling audience. From the 1980s to today, the male audience for most wrestling television shows varies from double to quadruple the female audience.[200] Throughout the 1980s, wrestling promotions attempted to bring in female audience through young

[200] Brandon Thurston and Jason Ounpraseuth, "Race Demographics in TV Wrestling Viewership: AEW Is Still behind WWE with Black Viewers," Wrestlenomics, March 24, 2022, https://wrestlenomics.com/2022/03/23/race-demographics-in-tv-wrestling-viewership-aew-is-still-behind-wwe-with-black-viewers/.

attractive stars like the Rock n Roll Express, a tag team Watts gained from Memphis in a talent exchange. However, female wrestlers remained a rarity in Mid-South. Watts also refused to have a woman in a position of power in his company. Christine Jarrett, wife of promoter Jerry Jarrett, helped run the Memphis Wrestling business. Later, Linda McMahon worked in various roles behind the scenes of the WWF. However, when Watts first arrived in Mid-south as part owner, his first employee purge was of Jack Donovan and his wife Verne Bottoms because "I could never let a woman run my matches."[201] Watts courted the dollars of female fans but wanted no part of their leadership.

Grizzly Smith was head matchmaker of Mid-South Wrestling before Ernie Ladd and one of the more influential members of Bill Watts' brain trust. Eventually Smith left the territory for a smaller Mississippi territory which paid him a larger wage for his services. However, Smith remained close to Watts for some time, and eventually Watts hired his son as a top wrestler. Smith, a top wrestler for decades later became one of the most reviled figures in wrestling. His son, Jake Roberts, accused him of abuse throughout his childhood and claimed his mother was only the age of thirteen when his forty-year-old father impregnated her.[202] Smith's daughter Robin also accused her father of molestation from the age of seven.[203] While many wrestlers of the time claimed they did not know of the incidents, they also admit to looking the other way when Smith interacted with young girls.[204] Grizzly Smith is the most extreme example, but frequently

[201] Watts and Williams, *The Cowboy and the Cross*, 330.
[202] Jake Roberts, *Jake 'the Snake' Roberts: Pick Your Poison*, WWE, DVD, 2005.
[203] *In the Shadow of Grizzly Smith*, *Vice*, 2021, https://www.vicetv.com/en_us/video/in-the-shadow-of-grizzly-smith/6078b6b6d540ac37105224d1.
[204] Jim Cornette, *Jim Cornette Reviews Dark Side Of The Ring's Grizzly Smith Episode*, YouTube, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ywbFgMzZp-M.

wrestlers and wrestling personalities made jokes about wrestlers attracting young girls and that the attraction might have gone both ways. It is exemplary of the rationale that "boys will be boys," in wrestling, including Mid-South. The South, in culture and politics, looked the other way at sexual exploitation by powerful and famous white men even as they trumpeted chivalry and protection of women's place as angel of the household. Ultimately, the bottom line and protecting members of their fraternity mattered more to wrestling companies than holding men accountable for their actions. Southern heroes like Jerry Lawler and Bill Watts signaled to audiences the importance of protecting women from dangerous outsiders; however, behind the scenes, they sought only protection of the economic and patriarchal control.

The paradox of racial progressivism and gender traditionalism emerged from the new social order following the Civil Rights Movement in the South. Seth Dowland argues the late 1970s and 1980s saw white Southern Evangelicals wrestle more power over the South. Part of the Southern strategy of Republicans was pandering to the perceived moral superiority of Southern religion. Evangelicals sought to reform the social hierarchy lost in segregation by focusing on issues relating to family and gender dynamics. With the legal foundation of racial hierarchy fading and the emerging economy of the South resting on the belief of improving race relations, the white patriarchy instead focused on alternative forms of superiority to reaffirm their place on top of the social order. Dowland outlines the change as, "The Christian right, a political coalition that attracted national attention at the outset of the 1980s, won its most important gains in the South because its leaders focused attention on issues related to

gender and sexuality rather than on race."[205] The feminist and gay rights movements threatened the patriarchal order; thus, the evangelicals fought back centering their belief system on gender conformity. Watts's Mid-South wrestling, like Memphis Wrestling, helped disburse the message of dominant Southern masculinity. This proliferation of traditional Southern identity and values allowed Watts and Ladd to push progressive African American representation for both selfish and altruistic reasons.

Watts clung more closely to the traditions of wrestling while pushing forward racial dynamics both in the ring and behind the scenes. Compared to the territories which surrounded him and the history of wrestling before him, Watts ran a wrestling promotion whose portrayal of race was not simply progressive but ahead of its time by decades by reaffirming the superiority of Southern masculinity, spreading cultural values of Southern patriarchy through black and white heroes. Led by Watts and Ladd, Mid-South Wrestling symbolizes a rare display of Southern Blackness as equal and often superior to whiteness. This symbolism is never more apparent than in the great black hero of the Mid-South, The Junk Yard Dog.

[205] Seth Dowland, "Defending Manhood: Gender, Social Order and the Rise of the Christian Right in the South, 1965--1995." Duke University Dissertation, Proquest, 2007. https://media.proquest.com/media/hms/ORIG/2/pJE3J?cit%3Aauth=Dowland%2C+Seth&cit%3Atitle=Defending+manhood%3A+Gender%2C+social+order+and+the+rise+of+the+Christian+right+in+the+South%2C+1965%E2%80%931995&cit%3Apub=ProQuest+Dissertations+and+Theses, 5.

CHAPTER III – Who Dat Say They Gon' Beat Dat Dog: New Orleans' Working-Class Hero

I: They Blinded the Dog

Under the bright lights of the New Orleans Municipal Auditorium on June 9, 1980, The Junk Yard Dog (Sylvester Ritter) was the toughest man walking the earth. Sporting columnists often compare athletes to gladiators before audiences of blood-thirsty Romans waiting to see them confront the lions. However, amidst the sweltering Louisiana summer heat and a rowdy New Orleans audience, the Roman metaphor is perhaps fitting. The night of June 9, 1980, went down in professional wrestling lore. The audience hoped to witness the dastardly Fabulous Freebirds of Michael Hayes, Terry Gordy, and Buddy Roberts have their hair removed after losing the match. Instead, they witnessed an event which set the Mid-South Wrestling promotion ablaze for the next half-decade.[206]

The only footage of the match comes from handheld footage shown in the following weeks on the Mid-South Wrestling television show. The match itself is not notable in terms of performance. Junk Yard Dog and his tag team partner Buck Robley, a scraggily but solid white wrestler, dominated the short match despite the persistent cheating of the Freebirds. With the Dog taken down on the outside of the ring, Gordy and Roberts held Robley at bay while Hayes snatched a bottle of hair cream at ringside. Hayes, ever the showman, preened and posed for the crowd as he savored the evil deed

[206] "Mid South Wrestling « Events Database ," Cagematch, accessed February 9, 2023, https://www.cagematch.net/?id=1&nr=207101.

he had in mind. Then, from outside the picture, Junk Yard Dog dove to shield his partner. Ritter made himself into a martyr, sacrificing his own welfare for his ally. In response, Hayes "accidentally" mashed the hair dye into the eyes of Ritter and blinded him.[207]

After being "blinded" by the concoction, The Junk Yard Dog writhed on the ground in pain holding his face as the crowd jumped up and down with fury.[208] Hayes and the rest of the Freebirds knew his life was in danger, and the cockiness of Hayes disappeared instantly after winning the match. Instead of relishing his victory over Junk Yard Dog, Hayes immediately jumped out of the ring and ran to the exit. Hayes was aware of the horrifying reputation of wrestling fans in the Mid-South, and he wanted no part of what they would have in store for him after blinding their beloved hero. Over the next few months, Hayes would not escape the wrath of the enraged fans. He recalled fans bringing water guns filled with drain cleaner to wrestling shows, which they shot into the eyes of the Freebirds. This prompted undercover police to sit among the fans for the rest of the year.[209]

The horrific blinding incident culminated in the Junk Yard Dog's "retirement" speech on television a few weeks later. The end of Junk Yard Dog's career enraged and saddened the fans. In just a month, the Dog had become the hero of the South and the Confederate Flag draped rednecks, the Freebirds, took him away. Black heroes, willing to fight injustices of the South, have short shelf lives in the racist system of the South. Just as the poor Dog came to the ring with bandages underneath his dark sunglasses and

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[207] Bill Watts, *The Freebirds Blinding JYD. Mid-South Wrestling 1980*, YouTube, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w50sJjdsKyA.
[208] Bill Watts, *The Freebirds Blinding JYD, Mid-South Wrestling 1980, Youtube.*
[209] Michael Hayes, *Michael P.S. Hayes Talking about The Freebirds vs Junkyard Dog in Lake Charles, La in the '80's*, YouTube, 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fX7aXSoBG5o.

began pouring his heart out to the fans who grew to love him, Hayes came to the ring to put an end to the ceremony. One fan in attendance refused to have the moment ruined; he jumped into the ring and pressed a gun to Hayes's head. In the *King of New Orleans*, Greg Klein notes the fan yelled out, "Don't worry, Dog, I'm covering you."[210] According to Hayes, the gun had a fresh engraving which read "Freebirds."[211]

Sylvester Ritter began wrestling in the Mid-South territory less than a year before his blinding. The character transformed from main event wrestler to local icon, a figure so important to the working-class culture that they would protect him with lethal force if necessary. The Freebirds became the most hated men in New Orleans. The diverse audience, bolstered by the courage and morality of the Junk Yard Dog, no longer tolerated toxic whiteness. African Americans in the South rallied around a hero to fight back against the systems of white violence and control which dominated and humiliated them for centuries.

This chapter examines the period in Mid-South Wrestling between 1979 and 1984 when the Junk Yard Dog's rise in popularity brought the territory to staggering heights. By channeling a combination of traditional Southern masculinity and working-class African-American culture, the Junk Yard Dog appealed to a multiracial Southern audience. White audiences looked past Ritter's race to applaud his Southern values of faith and family. Black audiences lived vicariously through a physically, mentally, and spiritually superior superhero they could call their own. Sylvester Ritter's cultural

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[210] Greg Klein, *The King of New Orleans* (Toronto, Ont: ECW Press, 2012). 82.
[211] Anthony Nash, "Michael Hayes Retells Freebirds vs. Jyd Story: 'They Had Undercover Cops in the Audience'," Wrestlezone, April 27, 2019, https://www.wrestlezone.com/news/1085221-michael-hayes-retells-freebirds-vs-jyd-story-they-had-undercover-cops-in-the-audience.

importance often remains obscured in the popular imagination by the caricature he became at the end of his career in the World Wrestling Federation. Years of drug abuse led to diminished physical ability and the Junk Yard Dog transformed from a philosopher of the Black South to a cartoon for white audiences to mock, but in half a decade, Ritter helped turn New Orleans wrestling into a financial juggernaut. Main events featuring Ritter sold tens of thousands of tickets and scored record ratings on television. He simultaneously helped save the Houston Wrestling Territory by temporarily sparking the ethnic fanbase just as he had in the Mid-South. The Junk Yard Dog achieved the economic dreams of a multiracial working-class audience in the modern South. The Junk Yard Dog represented hope for working-class Southerners that the new economic power of the Sunbelt South would benefit them as well, while simultaneously reassuring white viewers that they were correct in believing that progress of the South and the promise of the Sunbelt and modernity had uplifted the black race and moved the South beyond the ills of racism. In unifying a multiethnic working-class Southern audience, Junk Yard Dog was the perfect hero for Mid-South wrestling.

In the months following his brutal blinding, Ritter would not appear on Mid-South television and did not go to the live events. The Junk Yard Dog was temporarily blind and unable to wrestle. The real Sylvester Ritter was on something of a paternity leave celebrating the birth of his child. However, never one to miss an opportunity, Bill Watts used the absence and the birth to make Ritter a bigger star. Watts reminded everyone every chance he could that the Freebirds not only blinded the Dog, but they did so just weeks before the birth of his daughter. The connection to family and men's role as patriarchs were key to the Southern masculine identity. Ritter, the great African

American hero, was also the prototype for Southern masculinity, willing to take on all challengers and risk his safety to support his family.[212]

The feud between the Junk Yard Dog and the Fabulous Freebirds came to an end at the Superdome in New Orleans on August 2, 1980. The Junk Yard Dog got revenge against the leader of the Freebirds, Michael Hayes. The two battled inside a steel cage, a special stipulation to make sure the other Freebirds would not interfere with the match. A second stipulation was also necessary; the two would wear dog collars connected by a leather strap. The Junk Yard Dog, still blinded by the heinous attack of Hayes, needed the strap to stay connected to Hayes who he could not see. The Junk Yard Dog, despite his deteriorated vision, destroyed Hayes inside the cage and emerged victorious.[213] The two continued having matches around the territory so fans in every city could witness JYD get his revenge. Even in victory, fans wanted their chance at revenge against Hayes. As one fan recollects:

> I saw one of these matches live, and let me tell you, Hayes was a lucky man to make it out of Thibodaux that night. It sounds crazy in this post-kayfabe era, but the fans were true believers, and Hayes was even worse than the Devil by this time. I mean there were legit, police investigated death threats on the man in more than one town. In Thibodaux, was it not for a few of the cops making liberal use of batons, and at least one drawn gun...Michael Hayes would have been swinging from the bridge over Bayou Lafourche with a rope around his neck. Hayes against Dog, in the Superdome, chained together with Dog collars, inside a steel cage, and no way out for Hayes. I don't mean to offend the religious…but it is my belief that only the real deal Judgment Day, with Angel Gabriel blowing Dixie, and all the angels and so forth, could have possibly generated more excitement and anticipation in Wattsland than this professional wrestling match.[214]

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[212] Klein, *King of New Orleans*, 68.
[213] Klein, *King of New Orleans*, 70.
[214] Greyghost From MS, Forum Post 08:59 PM 03-29-2005, Wrestling Classics, http://wrestlingclassics.com/.ubb/ultimatebb.php?ubb=get_topic;f=9;t=002410;p=1#000037.

The Junk Yard Dog transcended simple equality between black and white. In the wrestling ring he represented black physical and moral supremacy, a supremacy which white audiences approved with thunderous applause and with the money in their pocket. *The Superdome Extravaganza* in 1980, headlined by Hayes and Ritter, drew over 28,000 fans, almost double the attendance of the previous Superdome show in July 1979.[215] The Junk Yard Dog's return and his resilience was symbolic of the ability of the working class, particularly the black working class to persevere despite the best efforts of those white villains determined to drive them away. Those twenty-eight thousand fans spent their money to see Ritter return and vanquish the perpetrators of white violence through moral vengeance. Ritter's righteous crusade to defend his honor and that of his family served as a symbol to black audiences that they too could stand against the injustice of racial violence in the South.

The Junk Yard Dog character symbolized the culmination of a cultural moment in the South. The Junk Yard Dog embodied the America of the working classes escaping poverty through merit alone. His bombastic oration, dancing, and use of modern music appealed to younger and mostly ethnic fans. However, his ability to be serious and soft-spoken, his morality, courage, and honor, made him the perfect hero in the tradition of the Old South. White flight away from the urban sphere created a more ethnically diverse urban working-class audience which made Junk Yard Dog's blackness a selling point rather than a detraction from his star power. The Junk Yard Dog was the definitive

[215] *Mid-South Superdome Cards*, Pro-Wrestling History, http://www.prowrestlinghistory.com/supercards/usa/misc/midsouth/cards.html#1180.

sporting hero of the Deep South who appealed to massive audiences, both black and white.

II: Big Daddy Ritter

The Junk Yard Dog was not an accomplished wrestler before his time in Mid-South. Sylvester Ritter toiled around as a wrestler for nearly a decade with little success. Still segregated in the Southern States and lacking diversity in others, the professional wrestling business in the United States was not a straightforward business for white men to get into and nearly impossible for African Americans. The ability to have good matches was not a prerequisite for success, especially for men with the charisma and aesthetic of Ritter. However, historians and fans universally acknowledged that Ritter was a special case in that his work inside the ring was subpar even for someone with his lack of experience.[216] Ritter was an exceptional athlete, but his lack of ring awareness as a rookie made him unappealing to white promoters in America who only employed one or two African American wrestlers.[217] Ritter eventually found work in the more racially tolerant Canadian territory, Stampede Wrestling.

In Stampede Wrestling, promoter Stu Hart pushed Ritter from the bottom of the card to champion in short order. Black champions were not entirely unheard of in the United States, even in the South. A wrestler known as The Black Panther wrestled in Louisville, Kentucky, for the heavyweight championship as early as the 1940s.[218] However, most African-American wrestlers never received these opportunities. Many,

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[216] Hebert, *Professional Wrestling: Local Performance History, Global Performance Praxis*, 147
[217] Johnson, *RF Video Shoot with Slick*, RF Videos.
[218] "Mitchell, Jim 'The Black Panther,'" Notable Kentucky African Americans Database, accessed February 8, 2023, https://nkaa.uky.edu/nkaa/items/show/2621.

like Ritter, relied on Canada to both improve their work and prove they were capable of selling tickets. Ritter played a stereotypical black pimp character known as "Big Daddy" Ritter in Stampede Wrestling.[219] Even in Canada, African American champion athletes posed a danger to the purity of whiteness, specifically white women. While wrestlers perceived Canadian fans as more racially progressive, many white fans nonetheless held a stereotypical view of African-American characters.

Outside of the ring, Ritter attempted to alter the fans' perception of blackness. He told the *Edmonton Journal* being the villain "doesn't bother me. It's like playing ball. I just go out there and do my thing." [220] He also acknowledged he used the color of his skin to rile up fans because he knew blackness made them uncomfortable. Throughout this interview and others in Canada he embellished his academic career and downplayed his racist on-screen character. Ritter was, as David Crockett explains it, "managing everyday racism. This includes efforts to ameliorate (rather than eradicate) racism that rely on micro-political action. That is, they bring to bear individual power resources to effect change within the scope of interpersonal interactions. Managing everyday racism seeks to make daily life more tolerable, not necessarily more equal."[221] Ritter's management of everyday racism was on a larger scale than interpersonal relationships; he sought to show himself as above the character he depicted rather than disavowing the character as a racist portrayal of black experience.

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[219] Klein, *King of New Orleans*, 12.
[220] Joanne Munro, "Villainy Is Only Skin-Deep for Big Daddy," *Edmonton Journal*, December 26, 1978, sec. F4, p. 84,https://www.newspapers.com/image/472002564.
[221] David Crockett, "Paths to Respectability: Consumption and Stigma Management in the Contemporary Black Middle Class," *Journal of Consumer Research* 44, no. 3 (September 2017): pp. 554-581, https://doi.org/10.1093/jcr/ucx049, 557.

Bill Watts, upon seeing and hearing of Ritter's success in Canada, saw him as a potential top draw for his company. Upon his emergence into the confines of Mid-South's squared circle, Watts and Ladd did not give him the same immediate push he received in Canada. Instead, Ritter defeated lower-level competition while losing title matches to established stars like Mike George, Mike Sharp, and Charlie Cook.[222] Despite these high-profile losses, Ritter's popularity steadily increased as his undeniable charisma outshined his opponents', win, lose, or draw. Booker Ernie Ladd was skeptical of Ritter's ability to handle stardom; however, Watts put the Junk Yard Dog on a path to superstardom.

Ritter became the biggest star in Mid-South defeating Ernie Ladd four consecutive times in New Orleans (the last time in only eighteen seconds).[223] These matches represented Ladd's passing of the torch. As pensive as Ladd might have been, he made sure Ritter was now positioned to be the star Watts believed he could be. Ladd would never truly be the top hero in Mid-South, the towering giant who spoke with elocution unmatched by black or white wrestlers, could never relate to the working-class audiences of the South even if he wanted to. The Junk Yard Dog became the black champion of the South and the working class in ways the eloquent and wealthy pro-athlete Ladd could never be.

[222] *Junkyard Dog Matchlistings*, Cagematch , accessed February 9, 2023, https://www.cagematch.net/?id=2&nr=466.
[223] *Junkyard Dog Matchlistings*, Cagematch , accessed February 9, 2023, https://www.cagematch.net/?id=2&nr=466.

III: The Junk Yard Dog and the Modern Black Athlete

Ladd's fear of making Junk Yard Dog into the great star of Mid-South was symbolic of a changing of generations and of conflicting class consensus. Ladd did not object to the Junk Yard Dog character, but rather to Ritter as an athlete and wrestler. Ritter did not have the athletic prowess nor the wrestling ability to be the best in the company and Ladd believed champion wrestlers had to be top athletes so that fans could believe the contests they paid to see were real. Edward Denton (a white wrestler with the stage name The Grappler) notes that working for Ladd meant your work ethic and your body were subject to constant criticism. "He had a work ethic people didn't understand. He demanded that from you… Every match I had he would critique, and he would say you're our champion and you gotta push it hard. You gotta be in shape and present yourself as an athlete to these people."[224] However, Ladd held African-American wrestlers to an even higher standard.

Ladd, fourteen years the elder of Ritter, believed for a black man to excel in wrestling or in any endeavor, he had to outperform his white competition. However, the younger generation of wrestling audiences saw beyond any of his flaws in the ring because his personality captivated them. One fan summarized the feeling of Southern audiences toward Junk Yard Dog,

> The thing is, in Wattsland (Mid-South), JYD was almost 'Bigger than Jesus.' It was something you had to see to believe. Yeah, he was not really a very good wrestler, but Watts protected him well in the way he was booked. In the kayfabe era, some fans might have bet on the Dog in a shoot fight with King Kong and Godzilla.[225]

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[224] Title Match Wrestling, *The Grappler - What "Big Cat" Ernie Ladd Was Like Outside of Wrestling*, YouTube 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=53KWoV10ZIc.
[225] Greyghost from Mississippi, Forum Post on 03/29/2005, Wrestling Classics Forum, http://wrestlingclassics.com/.ubb/ultimatebb.php?ubb=get_topic;f=9;t=002410;p=1#000037

What Ladd did not see was the changing attitudes of white audiences, perhaps led by Ladd himself, who were now willing to accept black heroes as their champions if they conformed to the masculine ideal of the South and their charisma kept audiences entertained. The new audiences no longer needed technical masterpieces in the ring. Instead, they yearned for heroes who could relate to them and capture their imagination with their words. Young Southern audiences could do without the soft-spoken cowboys. They wanted their heroes, black or white, to be as entertaining as their villains.

Ladd's increased criticism of African American wrestlers was a response to the high-wire act black athletes and entertainers had to perform in the post-Civil Rights era. African Americans in the public eye did not only have to excel at their profession, but also served as moral examples for their community. William Vanderburg explains that the black athlete, "had to be everything to everyone all at once, endlessly, and without complaint."

> In addition to advancing the black revolution, they were asked to entertain the mainstream without bowing to traditional racial etiquette or perpetuating negative stereotypes; to remain true to themselves, their craft, and their historical role even as they voluntarily put principle and honor in harm's way by courting the national media.[226]

Ladd played that role willingly on the football field and behind the scenes in the wrestling world. What Ladd did not realize was the audience's expectations for black athletes changed in the 1980s.

Throughout the 1970s, perception of the black athlete changed in the United States. While athletes like Muhammad Ali rubbed against the constraints of white America, many black athletes became flamboyant stars. Celebrity athletes, such as

[226] Van Deburg William L., *Black Camelot African-American Culture Heroes in Their Times, 1960-1980* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2014), 84.

baseball player Reggie Jackson, earned as many fans for his off-the-field splendor as he did with his exceptional athletic achievements. Flashy black superstars were nothing new, as symbolized by the success of Jack Johnson in the 1800s and the extravagant dominance of basketball legend Wilt Chamberlain; however, a societal change occurred, and younger generations of fans embraced, rather than condemned, the ostentatious athletes of the 1970s.[227]

African American athletes of the late 70s and early 1980s believed self-expression off the field was as important as their play on it. Historian Johnny Smith's analysis of Reggie Jackson argues, "For Jackson, freedom was not just about negotiating a better contract. It meant reclaiming his manhood, controlling his own labor, and asserting his independence.'[228] The black athletes of the 1980s and 1990s fought for representation, freedom, and financial gain. The quote most often attributed to Michael Jordan, the most popular athlete of the 1990s, has nothing to do with basketball. When asked about his personal politics, Michael Jordan allegedly replied, "Republicans buy sneakers too."[229] Jordan afterward said he made the statement as a joke, but it came to symbolize the apolitical nature of modern athletes. For modern athletes, money and fame came by marketing themselves and hiding their politics. By embracing their flamboyance and expressing themselves with flair they appealed to a younger multiethnic audience while alienating an older generation, including older athletes like Ladd.

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[227] Johnny Smith, "'The Magnitude of Me': Reggie Jackson, Baseball, and the Seventies," *Journal of Sport History* 45, no. 2 (January 2018): pp. 145-164, https://doi.org/10.5406/jsporthistory.45.2.0145.
[228] Smith, "The Magnitude of Me," 146
[229] Tim Bontemps, "Michael Jordan Stands Firm on 'Republicans Buy Sneakers, Too' Quote, Says It Was Made in Jest," ESPN (ESPN Internet Ventures, May 4, 2020), https://www.espn.com/nba/story/_/id/29130478/michael-jordan-stands-firm-republicans-buy-sneakers-too-quote-says-was-made-jest.

Watts's goal for the Junk Yard Dog was to match the reality of the cultural moment. If African American athletes were to dominate the rest of sporting world, then why not professional wrestling?[230] If this was so, Junk Yard Dog had to embody the character of the new black athlete. His million-dollar smile and charming demeanor was reminiscent of eighties stars like Magic Johnson, Sugar Ray Leonard, and Michael Jordan. However, athletes required excellence along with the charisma and the beauty of the perfect athletic body. This would not be a problem for the Junk Yard Dog. Over the course of four years wrestling for Mid-South, Ritter won over eighty percent of his matches.[231] The Junk Yard Dog exhibited black excellence without the controversy and political baggage of earlier black athletes. The essential quality which made athletes like Jordan, Leonard, and Ritter marketable was their ability to define excellence without their blackness becoming a danger to white America. Ritter's ability to dominate white men physically and verbally was inherently political for African American audiences; however, his overt political neutrality allowed him to become the glorious hero of the multiethnic Southern fanbase.

For white audiences, the success of Ritter and other black entertainers symbolized the promise of a post-racial America. While Black audiences understood Black athletes as symbols of hope that they could achieve economic and social progress, white Americans viewed the large paychecks, personal autonomy, and social influence of black athletes as proof that economic and social progress had been achieved. Analysis of the 1980s' economy show that most African American families, particularly in poorer areas

[230] Watts, *RF Video Shoot with Bill Watts*, Highspots Wrestling Network.
[231] Chris Harrington, "Mid South Wrestling Results (1979-1986) ," Indeed Wrestling, accessed February 8, 2023, https://sites.google.com/site/chrisharrington/mookieghana-prowrestlingstatistics/midsouth_wrestling.

like the Rural South, made far less than their white counterparts and that both local and national politics put policies in place to make financial exploitation of black labor easier for white management.[232] However, for many Americans their television screens repeatedly assured them that whether it was Ritter, Magic Johnson, or Bill Cosby, African Americans had conquered the racist systems of the past. Because these entertainers did not express themselves politically, they became acceptable heroes for white audiences who interpreted their silence on political issues, as an endorsement that racism was no longer an issue.

Not that Ritter or his counterparts in other sports removed themselves from the politics of their generation. Sylvester Ritter, raised in 1960s South Carolina, witnessed the violent oppressive racism resulting from desegregation first-hand. Because of his athletic ability, Ritter was one of the first students to attend a white high school in his county. After the assassination of Martin Luther King, Ritter and the other African American students in the school walked out after the school refused to fly their flag at half-mast. The principal of the school suspended every student but one, Ritter. Ritter, who understood his athletic ability would give him opportunities at other schools, verbally assaulted the principal. Ritter was expelled immediately. He thus used the power and autonomy afforded to him by his talent to protest for social change in his area. The

[232]Bennett Harrison and Lucy Gorham, "Growing Inequality in Black Wages in the 1980s and the Emergence of an African-American Middle Class," *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management* 11, no. 2 (1992): p. 235, https://doi.org/10.2307/3325366.

character Junk Yard Dog was apolitical, but Sylvester Ritter knew how to use his athletic ability to challenge Southern racism.[233]

The Junk Yard Dog character represented a cultural moment in the South in which Black representation began catching up with the rest of America. Ritter, like many of his contemporaries, unapologetically displayed charisma and flamboyance which attracted younger audiences. Older generations of black athletes sacrificed flamboyance and individuality for respectability which allowed them to express their political and cultural beliefs and fight for equitable rights and representation. The new generation of athletes, like Ritter, believed their autonomy was more valuable than the need to fight for equality. This change made Junk Yard Dog and his contemporaries more marketable to white audiences.

IV: The New Orleans Superman

The Junk Yard Dog was a phenomenon in Louisiana, and Watts protected his most valuable asset. Between the years 1980 and 1986, Ritter wrestled more times (361) than any other wrestler in the Mid-South territory, despite leaving the territory in 1984.[234] From a sporting perspective, Watts treated Ritter like an unstoppable champion (like Muhammad Ali or Ray Robinson). There's no official record of how much Watts paid wrestlers in Mid-South. There were no actual contracts for wrestlers until the corporatization of wrestling in the 1990s. In a contract for Houston Wrestling in 1983,

[233] Al Getz, "A Dog and a King: Looking at the Junkyard Dog's Experiences in the Wake of Desegregation and Assassination," Charting the Territories (Blogger, May 23, 2021), http://chartingtheterritories.blogspot.com/2021/05/a-dog-and-king-looking-at-junkyard-dogs.html.
[234] Chris Harrington, "Mid South Wrestling Results (1979-1986) ," Indeed Wrestling (Google Sites), accessed February 6, 2023, https://sites.google.com/site/chrisharrington/mookieghana-prowrestlingstatistics/midsouth_wrestling.

Sylvester Ritter signed his contract for a minimum of 150 dollars over an undetermined amount of time.[235] As cheap as wrestling promoters could be, 150 dollars for six months of work was not what Ritter took home. Watts claimed in a newspaper interview that Ritter averaged $237,000 dollars a year over the five years he was the featured attraction in Mid-South.[236] Adding in the money Ritter made for his dates in other territories such as Memphis, Georgia, and Houston, Ritter likely made well over one million dollars a year (adjusted to 2023 inflation). According to wrestlers of the time, Bill Watts was one of the most respected promoters in terms of pay and never was he more so than when wrestlers shared a card with the Junk Yard Dog. The rise of ticket sales across the territory meant his financial power filled the pocketbooks of not just himself and Watts, but of every wrestler on the roster.

Numbers alone do not do justice to the popularity of the Junk Yard Dog throughout the South. More than just a sports star, Ritter was akin to a folk hero. The Junk Yard Dog's popularity in the Deep South for the brief period he wrestled there was unmatched. At the peak of his popularity in 1983, the Junk Yard Dog was so popular he no longer had to wrestle regularly on television to draw viewers. Instead, for many weeks, Mid-South television would begin by showing the various honors earned by Ritter throughout the South. On March 3rd, Mid-South Wrestling began its weekly television show by airing a local news segment which covered Ritter visiting East Side Upper Elementary school in DeRidder, Louisiana. Dressed in all black, including a leather

[235] Texas Department of Labor and Standards, Boxing or Wrestling Contract for Sylvester Ritter, https://i.ebayimg.com/images/g/Vf8AAOSwP49hfXn1/s-l1600.jpg.
[236] Edward Cassiere, "Wrestling, Brother It's Big Business," *Shreveport Journal*, January 27, 1984, p. 38, https://www.newspapers.com/image/601753352/?terms=junkyard%20dog&match=1.

blazer and dark sunglasses, the Dog was the personification of cool as he not only signed autographs for the children in the school but also received a key to the city. In Deridder, February 10th was declared Junk Yard Dog Day.[237]

On the August 6 broadcast, the show opened with Ritter being declared an honorary citizen of New Orleans by the Mayor's office and a colonel in the Governor of Louisiana's staff. Once again, Ritter never takes off his sunglasses and his demeanor never changes. Young African American kids, unable to take their eyes off him, surrounded him. Despite the violence it displayed, wrestling attracted young children drawn to the simple dynamics of good and evil. The Junk Yard, a symbol of virtue and excellence, was thus the idol of working-class children, especially African Americans, who saw the Junk Yard Dog as an inspiration.[238]

The popularity of the Junk Yard Dog moved beyond the ring and into the local culture of New Orleans as The Junk Yard Dog's years of headlining shows eventually led to a famous chant of "who dat' who dat' who dat think they gon' beat that dog." The chant evolved to become a standard element of New Orleans Saints Football games. While Ritter's biographer Greg Kline notes the chant dates to the 19th century, the chant reappeared in 1979 at the same time Ritter began headlining sold-out events in the home of the Saints, the New Orleans Superdome.[239] The chant is quintessentially New Orleans, a reflection of the Cajun dialect, a multicultural confluence of languages which make up the city's strange history. Thus, the chant never followed Ritter to other territories

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[237] *Mid South Wrestling 1983 03-03-83 and 03-10-83 Eps 182 and 183, YouTube* (Mid-South Wrestling, 2021), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3yGLZhd8_s0.
[238] *Mid South Wrestling 1983 08-04-83 and 08-13-83, YouTube* (Mid-South Wrestling, 2021), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iECPFJ7YFeE.
[239] Klein, *King of New Orleans*, 20.

throughout his career. Instead, the chant belonged to New Orleans, brought back into existence for its greatest multicultural sports star.

Wrestling was not the greatest attraction New Orleans had to offer. Even at the height of the Junk Yard Dog's popularity, the Mid-South territory could not hold a candle to the popularity of the NFL and the local Saints football team. The 1980 Superdome match against Michael Hayes drew around 1000 fewer fans than the least attended Saints game that season, the same season the Saints had a 1–15 record and never won at a game in New Orleans.[240] However, given the popularity of the NFL in the Mid-South region during this era, the Junk Yard Dog's ability to rival the NFL in popularity is extraordinary. In an article for NOLA.com, Ritter's former rival Ted DiBiase notes that in 1981 a survey of New Orleanians saw Junk Yard Dog win most popular athlete over Pete Maravich and Archie Manning.[241]The existence of such a poll has been questioned, but whether the poll is real or imagined, in the minds of New Orleans wrestling fans and historians the Junk Yard Dog was as big, if not bigger, than any Southern sports star of his era.

It was not only New Orleans and the Urban South which was key to Mid-South's long-term success. In 1982, Watts expanded his promotion to more rural areas once promoted by McGuirk. Perhaps the most fervent (and dangerous) fanbase in Mid-South became Tulsa, OK. Tulsa's population climbed throughout the post-war period by

[240] "1980 New Orleans Saints (NFL)," 1980 New Orleans Saints (NFL) - Pro Football Archives, accessed February 8, 2023, https://www.profootballarchives.com/1980nflno.html.
[241] Gene Guillot, "Mid-South Wrestling, Junkyard Dog Left an Indelible Mark on New Orleans," NOLA.com, April 4, 2014, https://www.nola.com/entertainment_life/festivals/article_18555ad5-4bbf-5d58-9823-892e1e3f724e.html; Similarly, in his book *The King of New Orleans*, Greg Klein says the New Orleans School System did the poll.[241] Others have attributed the poll to the *Times-Picayune*.

developing their transportation systems and making themselves more inviting to national businesses; nonetheless, the city lagged behind Southern metropolitan cities with only 360,000 citizens by 1980. Of those 360,000 inhabitants, African Americans made up only sixteen percent.[242] In Southern cities like Tulsa, devoid of sports franchises and lacking the infrastructure to attract many traveling entertainments acts, the weekly Mid-South live events became the hottest ticket in town. When Watts expanded into Tulsa, Junk Yard Dog main-evented shows on consecutive nights on cards featuring international stars Andre the Giant and former world champion Harley Race.[243]

Sylvester Ritter became an icon in Tulsa and the surrounding areas despite the relatively low African American population. The moral and physical dominance of Ritter was enough to become a local sporting icon as his every match in Tulsa became headline news in the local paper, *The Tulsa World*.[244] He only lost three of his combined 48 matches in Tulsa and never without cheating or interference.[245] The passion of the fanbase also meant danger for heel wrestlers in Tulsa as riots became commonplace whenever Junk Yard Dog or one of the other top babyfaces lost a match. Jim Cornette described Tulsa audiences as "fans from hell," less clean-cut and reserved than the fans in Oklahoma City who they often wrestled in front of the same day.[246] Finally, the riots became so violent that the police chief Bob Dick (whose son was hurt during a riot) no

[242]Carl E Gregory, "Tulsa," Oklahoma Historical Society | OHS, accessed February 8, 2023, https://www.okhistory.org/publications/enc/entry.php?entry=TU003#:~:text=Numbers%20continued%20to%20climb%20to,Indian%2C%20and%202.3%20percent%20Asian.
[243] "New Wrestling Promoters Schedule Card For May 16," *Tulsa World*, May 5, 1982, p. 40, https://www.newspapers.com/image/891173569/?terms=junkyard%20dog&match=1.
[244] "Dog Wins Main Event," *Tulsa World*, November 28, 1983, p. 16, https://www.newspapers.com/image/891591406/?terms=junkyard%20dog&match=1.
[245] "Junk Yard Dog Match List" Cagematch.com, https://www.cagematch.net/?id=2&nr=466&page=4&s=1300.
[246] Cornette, *RF Video Shoot with Jim Cornette*, *Highspots Wrestling Network.*

longer allowed local police to attend matches calling the audiences' actions degrading to both the people of Tulsa and the Tulsa police. [247] The fantastic world of wrestling allowed working-class wrestling fans to express themselves freely without the confines of polite society. The Junk Yard Dog represented a hope that violence, passion, and morality could defeat the oppressive system.

Beyond the appeal to black audiences, younger white audiences latched on to Junk Yard Dog's jive talking and funky clothing as a defiant symbol against the very same restrictions imposed by Southern manhood that their parents hoped wrestling heroes would help instill. The wild hip swivels Ritter performed as taunts against his opponent were reminiscent of the rock and roll stars of years gone by. This is representative of a pattern going back multiple generations: young White Southerners attempted to grasp a piece of African American identity as a source of freedom. Michael Bertrand, in his analysis of rockabilly's early popularity among white youth, summarizes this process, "These 'white Negroes' or hillbilly hipsters assumed 'Black' characteristics as a means to find release from the confinement of a regimented and repressed mainstream culture that furnished little inner satisfaction. Temporarily morphing into imaginary black men allowed them to live dangerously and, on the edge, to escape the boredom and homogeneity associated with a rapidly evolving corporate and mass society."[248]

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[247] Joey Senat, "Wrestling Promoter, Police Chief Go to the Mat Over Security," *Tulsa World*, November 30, 1984, 1.

[248] Kristine M. McCusker, Diane Pecknold, and Michael Bertrand, "I Don't Think Hank Done It That Way Elvis, Country Music, and the Reconstruction of Southern Masculinity," in *A Boy Named Sue: Gender and Country Music* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2004), pp. 59-86, 68.

The charisma of Junk Yard Dog and his appeal to the working-classes around the South is hard to capture in text. His interviews were often either energetic or chaotic, full of barks and Southern jive talking which does not work well on the page. One representative interview took place in Florida where he challenged all of the villains of Florida to take him on:

> Let me tell you Snake Man Kevin Sullivan, send the One Man Gang or Chief Wahoo McDaniel or the Boogeyman or whoever else... I'ma tell you right here on television today they're trying to get to the old Dog, putting knuckle bumps all over my noggin' get my head looking like a Baby Ruth. But *barking and chewing noises* I'm bad to the bone! Bad to the Bone! Get ready little boys. Those four squared circles, that ring, that's the Dog's yard. The Dog don't let nobody into his yard. Bring whoever you want Snake Man, Big Bobby Bash, Big Angelo Mosca, or whoever else. Because I'm Bad to the Bone, Bad to the Bone! In the city so nice they had to name it twice, Miami, Miami.[249]

The appeal of the Junk Yard Dog was his effortless Charisma, the way he contorted his face. To older fans, it was not these interviews, but the more serious and somber ones that they drew them in. Whether talking about missing the birth of his daughter or fighting against the jealousy of his white rivals, the Junk Yard Dog could be either a wild animal or philosopher depending on his audience.

Watts made Ritter the sun which the rest of the Mid-South universe revolved around, eventually awarding every singles championship to him concurrently. On June 26, 1982, episode of Mid-South television, Watts explained the complicated title situation. At an untelevised event earlier in the week, the Junk Yard Dog won the North American Heavyweight Title from Bob Roop. The top white babyface, Ted DiBiase was originally scheduled to face Bob Roop; however, DiBiase injured himself helping the

[249]Sylvester Ritter, *Junkyard Dog Getting Spicy*, YouTube, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s2uWC1k8Gos.

Junk Yard Dog earlier in the night when he was being attacked by a group of villains. With DiBiase unable to wrestle, Junk Yard Dog took his place in the title match and won the title. The Junk Yard Dog, already Mid-South Tag Team Champion and Louisiana state champion, had to relinquish his Louisiana State championship because of his already "rigorous scheduling." Things became even more complicated because Ted DiBiase won a contract to compete for the North American Heavyweight Title in a No-Disqualification match which he vowed if he lost, he would leave Mid-South Wrestling forever.[250]

If the whole story sounds confusing, it's because it was. Watts forced best friends Junk Yard Dog and DiBiase to compete for the North American Championship in the Main Event of the weekly television show. Junk Yard Dog willingly relinquished the Louisiana championship, but both Watts and Junk Yard dog in their promos had a hard time keeping the Louisiana and North American titles straight in their head. This shows the amount of faith Watts had in Junk Yard Dog, putting every title he had on Dog. The Dog was the proverbial "golden goose," and could win every championship, even at the expense of overly complicating the championship picture.

The match between the two men and the rivalry which followed is exemplary of the way Ritter and Watts constructed stories which read differently to the various demographics which made up the Mid-South audience. The two men both cut promos on the show noting how hard the match would be because of how much they loved and respected each other. However, Ted DiBiase, whose career was on the line, pointed out

[250] Bill Watts, *1982 06 24 E146 Mid South Wrestling*, *YouTube*, 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oKB-IWzmoFc.

he must feed his family and he had to win the match "no matter what."[251] In the match itself, the two spent the first few minutes having a very cordial match based on athleticism and skill. Former champion Bob Roop told the story on commentary of the two best friends having trouble fighting their hardest. However, he was sure to point out it was Junk yard Dog who was winning and was being nice by trying not to hurt DiBiase. Eventually, with the referee distracted, DiBiase pulled out a roll of quarters and hit Junk Yard Dog to win the match. Thus, in a battle of the two babyfaces it was DiBiase, the white competitor, who used the underhanded trick to win the match. The Black man who was perceived to be the superior athlete and moral individual, was tricked by the white man who was forced to cheat to win.[252]

The story reflects a reality which many African Americans watching at home no doubt saw in their real lives. The white coworker, friendly while the two remained equals, becomes jealous as the African American pushes past him Finally, the white coworker uses underhanded means to push the African American to the side even as the African American does the moral thing, as Junk Yard Dog did, by relinquishing one of his titles.

As David Morrey concludes in his research on *Nationwide* audiences, cultural texts are reinterpreted based on their specific audience, and a singular reading is impossible. Instead, one's own experience influences the reception of messages.[253] The story of DiBiase plays to a universal audience, as a white working-class audience no

[251] Bill Watts, *1982 06 24 E146 Mid South Wrestling*, YouTube, *2015,* https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oKB-IWzmoFc.
[252] Bill Watts, *1982 06 24 E146 Mid South Wrestling*, YouTube, 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oKB-IWzmoFc.
[253] David Morley, *Television, Audiences and Cultural Studies* (London (New York): Routledge, 2005), 75.

doubt understood the jealousy of a coworker seeing a friend promoted into a position, they believed was unearned. However, the angle specifically played into the anxieties of urban African American audiences in the working-class who believed their comradery with white coworkers depended on African Americans remaining on the bottom of the racial and economic totem pole. This idea, rooted in class consciousness across centuries of American history, relates to David Roedegir's *Wages of Whiteness* in which he argues the white working class did not just establish their identity economically but racially, as identifying blackness as distinctly other from the working-class white identity.[254] The feud between Junk Yard Dog and DiBiase thus parrots fracture between the white and black working class, while not alienating either fan base by never overtly addressing race.

Junk Yard Dog, in this story, represents the African American audience in their daily struggle against the inequalities of Southern culture, which aim to keep African Americans from reaching their true potential. This representation is important and radical in that Junk Yard Dog always comes out as the moral hero and vanquishes his foes. T through the production of cultural forms, audiences establish and reconsider their identity. As Stuart Hall writes, if "identities are constructed within, not outside, discourse, we need to understand them as produced in specific historical and institutional sites within specific discursive formations…"[255] Junk Yard Dog and other positive representations of Blackness in Mid-South gave African Americans a sense of identity which could overcome Southern racism. The Junk Yard Dog was a symbol of racial

[254] David R. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (London, England: Verso, 1991), 14
[255] Paul Du Gay and Stuart Hall, *Questions of Cultural Identity* (London: Sage, 2013), 5.

progress and the triumph of African American will against this backdrop of impossible poverty and racism.[256]

Ritter's struggles with racism on screen mirrored his battles behind the scenes. While Watts was the ultimate decision maker, he still relied on local business owners to promote shows, sell tickets, book buildings, and perform other tasks. One of the most well-known stories of the racism Ritter faced is the treatment he received from promoter George Culkin:

> At least one of Watts' local promoters was an outright racist who didn't even want JYD booked on the shows despite JYD literally being the goose laying the golden eggs. JYD, with his classic sense of humor, used to do localized interviews on television for that market, talking about coming to Jackson, MS, going over to his good friend promoter George C. Culkin's house before the matches to eat watermelon and fried chicken before kicking whomever behind later that night at the Coliseum, driving Culkin crazy, as he'd call Watts up and demand not only that JYD be fired, but that Jim Ross, who handled the interviews at the time, be fired as well.[257]

Culkin was a respected promoter in northern Mississippi who went on to have a successful political career in Vicksburg. Jim Ross corroborated the story in his book as well; although Culkin's son Gil refutes the story in his book.[258] Culkin's son however rebuffs this claim in his memoir, defending his father from claims of racism. Even if writers and participants embellished the story over time, Ross and others believed Culkin actively tried to sabotage Ritter in Mississippi, even as he drew tremendous crowds in Jackson and other urban areas. Ritter's overwhelming success did little to soothe

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[256] See: Janice A. Radway, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature ; with a New Introduction by the Author* (Chapel Hill, NC: Univ. of North Carolina Pr., n.d.).
[257] Dave Meltzer, "June 15, 1998 Wrestling Observer Newsletter: Full Jyd Bio, WCW Files," F4Wonline, 2015, https://www.f4wonline.com/news/june-15-1998-wrestling-observer-newsletter-full-jyd-bio-wcw-files-lawsuit-against-wwf-tons-more.
[258] Gil Culkin, *The Mississippi Wrestling Territory: The Untold Story* (Createspace Independent Publishing, 2012).120

detractors who saw African American success as the product of a Watts' affirmative action or as the defiling of wrestling. As much as the character of the Junk Yard Dog represented hope for African Americans that they could overcome oppression, racism, and violence through morality and merit. The resentment of Black success Ritter faced behind the scenes reflected their daily reality.

By 1984, Sylvester Ritter struggled to live up to the physical and moral standards set by the Junk Yard Dog character. Ritter's cocaine addiction became an open secret to his colleagues in Mid-South and Houston Wrestling.[259] Along with his addiction, Ritter spent less time working on his impressive physique. By the time Ritter made his way to the World Wrestling Federation, the *Wrestling Observer Newsletter*'s Dave Meltzer began calling him "The Junk Food Dog"[260] Additionally, urban audiences in the South, specifically New Orleans began to dwindle. This was in part because rumors of Ritter's addictions began to spread around black communities in New Orleans as Ritter's drug purchases became more frequent.[261]

Part of Junk Yard Dog's appeal was his absolute morality conforming to messianic masculinity. Messianic masculinity influenced the discourse around race in conservative religious Black circles during Civil Rights era and beyond. Albert B. Cleague explained a strong Black church would allow "… each individual black man to decide where he will stand — united with his own people and laboring and sacrificing in the spirit of the Black Messiah, or individualistically seeking his own advancement and

[259] Klein, *King of New Orleans*,104.
[260] *Klein, king of New Orleans*, 134.
[261] Jim Cornette, *Jim Cornette on Junkyard Dog In New Orleans If He Doesn't Leave Mid South*, YouTube, 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1UwcsetfHpI.

maintaining his slave identification with the white oppressor."[262] Black communities in the South looked to Black men to provide the moral Christian ideal as an example to help lead the community forward. The most obvious example of this leadership was Martin Luther King. Ritter served as an athletic version of this masculinity; moral in his crusades and setting a Christian example for younger viewers. The Junkyard Dog was a symbol of righteous morality and masculinity, even if Ritter the man (belonging to the new generation of publicly apolitical athletes) did not publicly embrace his role as a leader for his race. While white communities embraced the Christian moralism of Ritter (as they posthumously did for Martin Luther King), Black audiences in New Orleans, privy to Ritter's real-life weaknesses, no longer viewed Ritter as the messianic masculine ideal they had once perceived him to be.

Watts' collaboration with Houston Wrestling helped sustain Ritter's standing. In the early 1980s, Houston wrestling was on a downslide. Boesch depended on top wrestlers from around the country and local wrestlers from nearby promotions to fill out his card without having to contract a roster of wrestlers. Houston Wrestling began airing Mid-South Wrestling matches in 1982 and brought in Ritter for occasional high-profile matches. In May of 1982, Junk Yard Dog was in the main event of the highest-selling Houston show to date. Boesch had to turn away thousands of fans at the door as Ritter vied for the AWA championship.[263] The magnetism of Ritter's personality both in and

[262] Albert B. Cleage, Jr., "The Black Messiah, 1968," in: James H. Cone and Gayraud S. Wilmore (eds.). *Black Theology: A Documentary History, Volume One: 1966-1979* Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books 1979. Í05.
[263]Peter Birkholz, *When Wrestling Was Rasslin': The Wild and Exciting inside Story of Legendary Houston Wrestling* (Coppell, TX: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2012), 159.

out of the ring, fresh to the eyes of Houston observers, outshined his declining health and athleticism.

Unlike New Orleans, Houston's population in the 1980s did not have a Black majority, but the city boasted a much larger population and a large Black popularion.[264] The working-class Houston wrestling audience was more diverse than that of the Mid-South. Houston promoter Boesch consistently courted the significant Latino population by regularly booking Mexican Lucha Libre wrestlers on Houston shows. Thus, it was no challenge for the Houston audience to accept a black hero as their champion. Ritter's success was not solely Watts' skill at promoting a Black superstar. Ritter proved he could evolve his character into one capable of drawing fans around the country.

V: The Dog in New York

The Junk Yard Dog's time in Mid-South was coming to an end even as the crowds in Houston exploded. In 1984, Vince McMahon actively sought to sign the biggest stars around the wrestling world as he planned a national wrestling takeover. In May of 1984, McMahon's WWF began running television shows locally in Memphis, and soon the WWF aired throughout the South.[265] While the WWF boasted rock music and top production quality, McMahon also wanted the biggest names from every territory in the country. There were several prizes to be won in Mid-South, but no prize as large as the Junk Yard Dog. In a series of matches dubbed "The Last Stampede" in early 1984,

[264] Demographics, "Planning and Development Department," www.houstontx.gov, accessed February 13, 2023, https://www.houstontx.gov/planning/Demographics/.
[265] Dave Meltzer, "Mid-South," *Wrestling Observer*, 21.

Watts and Ritter teamed up in front of sold-out crowds around the Mid-South territory.[266] They were marketed as the last matches Watts's wrestling career. However, they also doubled (unbeknownst to the fans) as the end of the Junk Yard Dog's career in Mid-South. Soon after The Last Stampede, Ritter was on his way to New York.

The Junk Yard Dog was one of many who jumped to the WWF in 1984. Dave Meltzer, in his annual yearbook, dedicated a section to the various wrestlers who moved to the WWF. He explains, "Starting with Hulk Hogan, the biggest news throughout '84 concerned who was the latest wrestler to jump… Many of the jumpers became important WWF stars, most notably Roddy Piper… As the year went on the defection to Titan list grew including Blackjack Mulligan, Barry Windham, Mike Rotundo, Kimala, The Fabulous Freebirds, Junkyard Dog, Mad Dog Vachon, Jesse Ventura, David Schults, Billy Jack, announcer Gene Okerlund, Greg Valentine, Bob Orton and many others."[267] [268] Far from the crown jewel of the WWF, the Junk Yard Dog was transformed from the moral superhero of the Deep South to just another cog in the national wrestling machine. In doing so, the mystique of the Junk Yard Dog faded quickly. The Junk Yard Dog played something akin to a minstrel jester in the whitewashed WWF product.

In the World Wrestling Federation, The Junk Yard Dog was a shell of the character and man he had been in Mid-South. One writer in the *Wrestling Observer Yearbook*, never fans of Ritter's wrestling, described the Junk Yard Dog as "the worst

[266] Meltzer, "Mid-South," *Wrestling Observer*, 21.
[267] Titan Sports is the name of the company started by Vince McMahon Jr. which purchased the Worldwide Wrestling Federation (later the World Wrestling Federation and currently World Wrestling Entertainment) from his father's company, Capitol Sports.
[268] Dave Meltzer, "AWA Finishes Year Strong, WWF Finished," *Wrestling Observer Yearbook 1984*, 6.

wrestler I have ever seen…Junk Yard Dog has no in-ring ability whatsoever."[269] While Ritter was never a polished technical wrestler, in the WWF no one expected him to perform at a high level. Instead, Ritter began to wrestle and talk more and more like a cartoon character, sometimes mimicking an actual dog. He would finish his matches with a signature headbutt which he would land after crawling slowly over to his opponent, mimicking a dog walking on four legs. Sometimes, Ritter even lifted his leg and mimed urinating on his opponent, like a dog marking his territory.

Even in the WWF, where wrestlers garnered a reputation of partying harder than they wrestled, fellow wrestlers complained about Ritter's laziness. Wayne Farris (who wrestled as the Honky Tonk Man) claims that wrestler Terry Funk quit the WWF because he could not stand working with Ritter anymore. "He never got anything right… You do one thing to him, and he'd just lay on his back and go (growling). He'd just lay there."[270] After victories he would often pick white children out of the crowd to dance with him as the television announcers gleefully described his jive dancing.[271] It was a credit to his unbelievable charisma that despite his decline he always connected to the fans, as even his harshest critics (like Ferris) admit. "The people gravitated to him, and I do not know why. To see him in the South where he drew so many people, and then in New York where he'd just lay there and his promos weren't even good anymore. The people still gravitated to him." [272]

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[269] Dave Meltzer, "Yearly Awards," *Wrestling Observer Yearbook 1984*, 30
[270] Roy W. Ferris, *Honky Tonk Man on The Junkyard Dog*, *YouTube* (The Hannibal TV, 2013), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oFIIPn0xO9U.
[271] Sylvester Ritter, *Junkyard Dog Dancing with Kids after a Win*, *YouTube* (WWF, 2007), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tEANstyOMtk.
[272] Ferris, *Honky Tonk Man on The Junkyard Dog*, *YouTube* (The Hannibal TV, 2013), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oFIIPn0xO9U.

Promoters like Vince McMahon and national wrestling audiences viewed Junk Yard Dog as a Black stereotype to be mocked. Dave Meltzer, quoted in Sports *Illustrated* explained the transition. "When he was with Mid-South, he was one of the 10 best interviews in wrestling… He was almost like a philosopher to the black fans in the South. Now he goes into New York, and he barks his interviews."[273] McMahon wanted to attract a national audience and in doing so believed that the appeal must be to a white middle- and upper-class audience. The WWF thus headlined of most its show with white wrestlers, and the WWF's employed exclusively white hosts and announcers. While Ritter had to turn the Junk Yard Dog into a caricature for McMahon, his character was far from the most offensive representation. The Wild Samoans were one of the premier tag-teams for the WWF who acted as barbaric island savages without the ability to speak English. Positive and non-stereotypical representations of minorities like Rocky Johnson left the WWF in this period. The amelioration of racial representation in the Urban South spurred on by creation of increased economic opportunities in the imagined Sunbelt did not translate to the rest of America. White Middle-America continued to dominate the national culture in the age of Reagan, and black entertainers largely yielded to their expectations of blackness. Sylvester Ritter, by joining the WWF, changed the Junk Yard Dog from philosopher of the south to black jester of Reagan's America.

By the end of his run in the World Wrestling Federation, the Junk Yard Dog was wealthy and internationally famous . He was not only a star in the ring but also sold untold amounts of merchandise and appeared on MTV and starred in a Saturday morning

[273] Bruce Newman, "Who's Kidding Whom?," *Sports Illustrated*, April 29, 1985, https://vault.si.com/vault/1985/04/29/whos-kidding-whom.

cartoon. However, his poor health and transformation into a comedy character caused his popularity to dwindle after years of exposure. Even in the South, Ritter no longer connected to his fans. His return to New Orleans came in 1989 with Ted Turner's World Championship Wrestling (WCW). Ritter did not return to New Orleans as a conquering hero who made his mark on a national audience. Instead, fans saw him as a diminished version of the hero they once loved. Fan and young wrestler Derick Dukes said of Junkyard Dog's hiring in WCW; "It's too late… He should have had the belt before now, the end of his career… Junkyard Dog was a hell of a guy in his heyday, but he's at the end of his career."[274] WCW president Jim Herd saw The Junk Yard Dog, a success in the WWF, as a major signing. However, his diminished physical and mental state made him a liability in the ring and on the microphone. He wrestled in the Superdome against Butch Reed, a match which five years previous garnered an audience of over 20,000 fans. The 1990 match, promoted on national cable television, attracted just over 5,000 fans.[275]

Despite his failings, Herd booked JYD to face champion Ric Flair for the world title. Fans rejected the exploitative nature of the feud between Junkyard Dog and champion Flair. Flair's racist remarks towards the Junk Yard Dog drew resentment from fans around the South. Ultimately, fans voted the feud between Flair and Junk Yard Dog "worst feud of the year" in the *Wrestling Observer Newsletter*. [276] WCW looked for an African American star to pit against racist white characters to bring back African

[274] Wade Keller, "Junkyard Dog, Racism, and Ole's Comfort Zone," *Pro-Wrestling Torch*, June 7, 1990, 2.
[275] "NWA Clash of the Champions #6 - 'Ragin' Cajun' - Cagematch," Cagematch, accessed February 13, 2023, https://www.cagematch.net/?id=1&nr=1104.
[276] Dave Meltzer, "Observer Year End Award," *Wrestling Observer Yearbook 1991*, 1-5.

American audiences, but JYD aging and battling demons, was no longer the man for the job.

Historians of Mid-South argue Ritter was not the only key to the Mid-South Wrestling's success. The basis of this argument is that 1984, the year Junk Yard Dog left Mid-South, proved to be the territory's most profitable year. They argue the reason for this success was the introduction of new talent. Historian Neal Hebert explains; "With every attempt to recreate the promotion's success with JYD failing, little did Watts know that he already had his most profitable year ahead of him because of a pair of undersized tag teams and a manager he took on as a favor to Memphis promoters Jerry Jarrett and Jerry Lawler…" [277] However, the success of Mid-South after Ritter's departure was only temporary. Within three years, the Superdome show headlined by the Fabulous Freebirds run by Mid-South (rebranded as the Universal Wrestling Federation) drew just 3,000 fans.[278] The same team who set the territory ablaze less than a decade earlier drew less than a third of the fans to the same building. The temporary success was buoyed by many fans who came to wrestling to support their hero the Junk Yard Dog, and the Mid-South territory never created a comparable ethnic superstar.

VI. The Junk Yard Dog's Legacy

On June 4th, 1998, an *Associated Press* article out of Jackson, Mississippi, made its way around the nation with the news that wrestler Sylvester Ritter, The Junk Yard Dog, passed away in a car crash. The short article focused on Junk Yard Dog's popularity

[277] Hebert, *Professional Wrestling: Local Performance History*, *Global Performance Praxis*, 138.
[278] "Mid-South Superdome Extravaganzas," Pro-Wrestling History.

in the World Wrestling Federation.[279] Despite the wire coming from Jackson, Mississippi there was no mention of Ritter's accomplishments in Mid-South Wrestling in the early 1980s. The legacy of the Junk Yard Dog, one of the biggest stars in the history of Southern Wrestling, was limited to his years as a *Rock 'n Wrestling* cartoon character. In the 1980s, Ritter was a symbol of Black empowerment and manhood in the Deep South. In death, the media remembered him as the growling dog who danced for white children in New York.

Beyond a cultural symbol of Black heroism in the world of sports, Junk Yard Dog was a figure capable of fighting against the social ills of white society. New Orleans, the urban sphere decimated by white flight and economic turmoil, was characterized by violence and poverty and shunned by white society. Government agencies and the police infrastructure catered to the remaining white population. Leonard N. Moore notes the exceptionality of New Orleans in racist activity, particularly in its police department. Moore explains:

> firstly, the New Orleans Police Department has been arguably one of the most brutal, corrupt, and incompetent police units in the United States in the postwar period… At the height of its corruption in the mid-1990s, the New Orleans department had the highest number of citizen complaints of police brutality in the country, and a 1992 Justice Department study reported that New Orleans citizens had lodged more complaints with federal officials about police abuse than residents in any other city between 1984 and 1990. [280]

[279] "Sylvester Ritter, 45, pro Wrestler; Known as 'Junk Yard Dog'," The Morning Call (Associate Press, October 4, 2021), https://www.mcall.com/1998/06/04/sylvester-ritter-45-pro-wrestler-known-as-junk-yard-dog/.
[280] Leonard N. Moore, *Black Rage in New Orleans: Police Brutality and African American Activism from World War II to Hurricane Katrina* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 2021). 5.

As black residents in the city protested, the Junk Yard Dog overcame racism and violence through the brute force and wit. The Junk Yard Dog was not simply a fulfillment of the American Dream but a challenge to the racist system.

New Orleans itself became a majority black city not only because of black migration back to the South, but also because of the exodus of white flight. Louisiana paradoxically and steadily became a more segregated state throughout the 1970s and early 1980s even as the formal segregation of Jim Crow dismantled. The 1960s marked the beginning of a steady decline in the population of New Orleans city proper which continued for decades, coinciding with formal desegregation of the state.[281] From the 1970s to the 2000s the number of concentrated poverty neighborhoods in New Orleans grew by two-thirds, even though the poverty rate remained stable.[282] The physical separation between classes and between races became more distinct over time, even if the city became statistically more diverse.

However, this cultural change should not be overlooked even as social changes moved slowly. The Junk Yard Dog, working with and against white wrestlers and showing his superiority morally and physically did not simply appear in front of audiences, but aired on wildly popular television across the Mid-South territory. While white audiences in the South saw black sports and physical excellence on television in most sporting endeavors, sports stars rarely gave voice to their actions. The ever-heroic Junk Yard Dog invaded the homes of white Southerners every week and subverted their

[281] E. Fussell, "Constructing New Orleans, Constructing Race: A Population History of New Orleans," *Journal of American History* 94, no. 3 (January 2007): pp. 846-855, https://doi.org/10.2307/25095147.
[282] Elizabeth Fussell, Narayan Sastry, and Mark Vanlandingham, "Race, Socioeconomic Status, and Return Migration to New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina," Population and environment (U.S. National Library of Medicine, January 2010), https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2862006/.

ideas of who the black Southern man was and could be. Rather than rejecting and threatening white manhood, the Junk Yard Dog and other African American wrestlers embraced their values.

What happened in the urban space was a coalescing of different working-class cultures in a city which attempted to celebrate its multicultural metropolitan history. While sports are not a magic pill which cures social ills and fractured cities, they can bring diverse groups together to celebrate a common cause. While the Saints struggled in mediocrity, the Junk Yard Dog dominated the world and did so in the most entertaining way possible. Despite his unmistakable blackness, his working-class charisma, and his excellence appealed to the working-classes of every race. While the rich white population moved to the suburbs, the working-classes worked together to create the prosperity promised to them by the Sunbelt dream, and the Junk Yard Dog was their symbol.

CHAPTER IV - From the Mississippi Delta to the Jungles of Uganda: The Strange Career of James "Kamala" Harris

I. Tears at the Garden

Madison Square Garden is an entertainment cathedral, the preeminent arena of New York City. For many entertainers, headlining Madison Square Garden is life changing, the culmination of a career. So it was for James Harris, who portrayed the character Kamala, "The Ugandan Giant." The young man who grew up sharecropping near the Mississippi Delta headlined the Garden in 1986. His opponent, Hulk Hogan, was just months away from headlining in front of over 80,000 people at *WrestleMania III*. As the crowd relished Hogan's victory over the "African savage," Harris basked in the glory of achieving fame and wealth beyond his wildest dreams. On that day, Harris could not have been farther away from the hot Mississippi Sun. A decade later, Harris returned to Madison Square Garden as a delivery man. The titan of a man collapsed in his truck weeping as his anxiety overcame him.[283]

Professional wrestling, especially in the 1980s, left hundreds of men and women emotionally and physically beaten and bruised. Wrestlers like Jake Roberts and Sylvester Ritter coped with the physical toll of wrestling with drugs, while others like "Dynamite Kid" Tom Billington destroyed their bodies with steroids to make themselves appear to be the superhero wrestling fans and promoters wanted them to be.[284] Wrestling left emotional scars for James Harris. After decades of wrestling for the biggest wrestling

[283] James Harris and Kenny Casanova, *Kamala Speaks*, version Kindle (Albany, NY: WOHW Publishing, 2015), Location 4511
[284] *Dynamite Kid: A Matter Of Pride*, Highspots Wrestling Network, 2021, https://www.highspotswrestlingnetwork.com/media/dynamite-kid%3A-a-matter-of-pride/36352.

promotions in the world, Harris did not have enough money to support his family. After years of denigrating himself and destroying his body, Harris spent most of the rest of his life as a delivery man. The boom in professional wrestling's popularity in the 1980s made millions of dollars for a select few but left a generation of men like Harris financially and physically broken.

James Harris, the man who portrayed Kamala for three decades, launched his career amid the dramatic shift in Southern wrestling outlined in previous chapters. In the 1970s, James Harris began his career as a journeyman wrestler in the various territories around the South. After finding success with the Kamala character, he transitioned to the burgeoning World Wrestling Federation, which ran shows on national cable television. Harris lived a complicated existence within the wrestling community. He allowed wrestling promoters to exploit his body, race, and dignity for a chance to escape dire circumstances in the Deep South. Escape proved elusive for Harris. He died in poverty in a Delta Hospital, his numerous medical expenses funded by charitable donations from wrestlers and wrestling fans.[285]

While Junk Yard Dog and others represent progress toward more equitable racial representation, Harris's experiences undermine this progress. This dichotomy between the progressivism and heroism of Junk Yard Dog and the exploitative caricature of Kamala has flummoxed historians attempting to reconcile how both could existence simultaneously, often pitted against one another. Charles Hughes summarizes this paradox:

[285] "Kamala, organized by Jason King," gofundme.com, accessed February 4, 2023, https://www.gofundme.com/f/kamala.

> the sophistication of southern professional wrestling's portrayal of racial violence – or black characters in general – should not be overstated. In the 1980s, numerous southern promoters (including Bill Watts) continued to rely on simplistic black stereotypes that were rooted in the minstrel era and remixed for a contemporary context. Heels like the Zambuie Express and Kamala combined older beliefs in black savagery with post-colonial anxieties over third-world black militancy…Even Mid-South, which had its greatest success through the explicit promotion of strong black characters in race-based angles, regularly presented such characters as part of their shows. Their audiences dwindled in the late 1980s, which – while not directly traceable to the lack of strong African-American protagonists – nonetheless marked a significant difference from the booming days of the Junkyard Dog.[286]

However, rather than undermining the power of Junk Yard Dog's ascendance, I argue Kamala helped to empower Junk Yard Dog, especially for white fans. Kamala demonstrated blackness as a deficiency that could only be overcome by western white influence. Therefore, JYD became a figure which symbolized to white fans the superiority of their race while simultaneously symbolizing the empowerment of African Americans in the South as a positive representation of their ability to ascend beyond America's glass ceiling.

Harris's financial exploitation reveals a lack of progress for African Americans in the wrestling industry of the South. His experience highlights a cyclical system of exploitation and abuse of African Americans in American culture. This limited progression signifies the continued exploitation of black labor without adequate compensation. African-American integration into Southern wrestling precipitated a boom period for the product and produced tens of millions of dollars in revenue; however, African Americans did not receive the full fruits of their labor. Regardless of integration

[286] Broderick Chow et al., "'Tell Them It's What Their Grandfathers Got' Racial Violence in Southern Professional Wrestling," in *Performance and Professional Wrestling* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2017), pp. 165-177, 170.

and pushes for representative equality, Harris's inequitable wages and racist character are indicative of Southern wrestling's regressive race relations and prove that positive representatives like Ritter were exceptions rather than the rule.

Professional wrestling is an attraction built on larger-than-life characters and extraordinary physiques. A colossal struggle between good and evil is played out in scripted sport among titans seemingly carved out of granite. Even among the giants, blood, and ballyhoo of the squared circle, perhaps no professional wrestler in history made a more permanent and jarring impression than "the savage from Uganda" known as Kamala. A mammoth of a man, the "Ugandan" giant stood just shy of six feet seven inches tall and weighed a purported three hundred and fifty pounds. Kamala's physique, in tandem with his trademark war paint, made an indelible mark on the minds of wrestling fans. However, when he passed away back home in Mississippi, he was just Jim Harris, a man physically broken down. His biography illustrates that for many African Americans in the South, all roads eventually led back to poverty and despair.[287]

II. Life in the Mississippi Delta

James Harris was born on May 28, 1950, in Senatobia, Mississippi. Near the Tennessee border, Senatobia borders the Mississippi Delta region. During Harris's upbringing, Senatobia boasted a population of just two thousand, with African Americans compromising most of the population. [288] Harris's childhood in a poor sharecropping

[287] "Kamala, organized by Jason King," gofundme.com, accessed February 4, 2023, https://www.gofundme.com/f/kamala.
[288] "Brief History of Senatobia, Mississippi," accessed February 5, 2023, http://www.cityofsenatobia.com/about/history.

community left an indelible mark. He was consistently wary of white authority figures. The untimely death of his father, Jessie Harris, amplified his cynicism. Allegedly, a former friend murdered Jesse Harris after a gambling dispute; however, prosecutors never put his killer on trial. Harris recalls, "… the police didn't care enough about what happened to investigate, nobody will ever know… A black man's life in this time wasn't worth the hassle. The 1950s and 1960s were good times for civil rights, but not so good if you were in Mississippi."[289] Harris, like many African Americans in Mississippi, viewed the struggle for economic and racial uplift as hopeless.

Harris's sentiments were common among African Americans living in the Delta region in the Civil Rights era and beyond. The popular perception of the Delta in the post-war period is one of a place seemingly stuck in time. James Cobb's explains the plight of African Americans in the Delta:

> World War II brought a massive dislocation of labor and induced considerable social ferment, but the ability of Delta whites to utilize their continuing influence over federal agencies and programs proved crucial to their efforts to resist the rising civil rights pressures and black political challenges of the 1960s and 1970s. Only in the 1980s did Delta blacks begin to gain political influence consistent with their numerical strength, and even then it was by no means clear whether blacks were actually capturing political control or whites were simply surrendering it.[290]

In the postwar period, Mississippi emerged as perhaps the most resistant to the Civil Rights movement. The Delta remained a stronghold of segregation and economic exploitation of African Americans. To African Americans like Harris, inequality and

[289] Harris and Casanova, *Kamala Speaks*, Location 183.
[290] Melinda Cecile Kanner, *The Most Southern Place on Earth: Negotiating Identities through Tourist Encounters in Savannah, Georgia* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2001), IX.

exploitation were part of an unescapable reality, as the fixed racial hierarchy showed no signs of changing in the Post-Civil Rights period.[291]

Sharecropping and the violence of white authorities in the Delta region following World War II cultivated despair. Both were systemic symptoms of a broken system, with the dual purpose of programming inferiority in the African American community. Harris understood the inequality of the sharecropping system, in which his family barely made enough money to survive. White control of the police and government suppressed Black resistance. Systemic fear tactics, both large and small, instilled fear. Civil Rights Activist Margaret Block recounts witnessing not only brutality and terrorism, but also routine police intimidation. "We had another preacher; we were having a little march there in Indianola, and he was coming on behind the march. The policeman picked him up. He asked, what are they picking him up for? The policeman told me, you're black, ain't you?"[292] Until the 1980s, white leadership in the Delta region met attempts at changing the racial status quo with fierce resistance. For many, like Margaret Block, the only solace was escape. She notes that after all she witnessed as an activist, including the withholding of federal aid from starving African Americans by white government officials, she attempted to erase everything from her past. "I just try to mind my business. Anyway, I was so devastated and traumatized when I first left Mississippi, my children

[291] Mark Newman, *Divine Agitators: The Delta Ministry and Civil Rights in Mississippi* (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 2004), 2.
[292]Khambria Clarke, Amanda Noll, and Elmo Proctor, Interview With Elmo Proctor. Other. *University of Florida*. University of Florida, August 22, 2009. https://ufdc.ufl.edu/AA00021409/00001/pdf. 16.

didn't even know (of her activism)."[293] White resistance made the Delta into a rural backwater that showed no chance of reformation. The only way to freedom was escape.

The history of intimidation created in Harris a deep distrust of white authority figures and that later shaped his dealings with wrestling promoters. "Farmers were like wrestling promoters. They never seemed to make any money they could spread around, no matter how much they made. The costs always outweighed the profits." [294] The system of sharecropping kept African American families in a relentless state of debt and economic immobility in the post-war period. Harris, saw fleeing from the Delta as the only option for respite because of destitute financial conditions and the horror of racial violence.

After running into legal problems throughout his teenage years, Harris migrated North to Detroit to find factory work; however, Harris did not find the black metropolis and economic opportunity which lived in the African-American imagination during the Great Migration. The 1970's energy crisis had caused an economic decline in Detroit, which only exacerbated racial tensions simmering since the riots of 1967. The economic downturn in Detroit's urban center, brought in by the decentralization of automobile manufacturing, the city's primary economic source, exacerbated racial tensions. Middle-class white workers, much like those in the South, saw retreat into the suburbs as the only escape from racial mixing and brought factories and factory jobs with them. The white media quickly blamed white flight not just on the economic deterioration of the Rust

[293] Marna Weston and Margaret Block, Interview with Margaret Block, *University of Florida*, March 20, 2011. https://ufdc.ufl.edu/AA00017905/00001/pdf.
[294] Harris and Casanova, *Kamala Speaks*, location 211.

Belt, but also the dangers posed by African American criminal activity. Jon Lowell's investigation into Detroit's urban decline in *Newsweek* culminates in such rhetoric:

> "…above all, there is Detroit's lawlessness. The city's 1.3 million people are as inured to the common run of city crime as any other urbanites. But this summer it turned epidemic, spilling over into some of the best downtown streets and even the freeways. Roving bands of teen-agers assaulted stalled motorists and robbed passengers on a bus. The director of the city's neighborhood legal services had his leg broken by an auto thief who ran him over with his own car. In August, a group of black youths went on a violent rampage, harassing, robbing and bloodying patrons at a Cobo Hall rock concert. Public outrage hit a peak shortly afterwards when a well-known priest was murdered during a robbery in his rectory.[295]

In the deteriorating urban center of Detroit, Harris became just another uneducated African American transplant seeking work where none existed. For many African Americans, the solution was moving back to the burgeoning economy of the South. The promise of a Sunbelt industrial boom and Southern propaganda that the Civil Rights Movement had ushered in a new era of racial harmony brought many African Americans back to the South in a reversal of the Great Migration.[296] However, for Harris and other Mississippi residents, returning to the source of their trauma was a last resort. This desperation led Harris to joke to his brother-in-law, "You know I should just give up and start 'rasslin."[297]

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[295] John Lowell, "Detroit: That Sinking Feeling," *Newsweek*, October 11, 1976, pp. 37-39, https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:3SJ4-F090-0008-X1MK-00000-00&context=1516831, 37.

[296] William H. Frey, "The New Great Migration: Black Americans' Return to the South, 1965-2000," Brookings (Brookings, July 28, 2016), https://www.brookings.edu/research/the-new-great-migration-black-americans-return-to-the-south-1965-2000/.

[297] Rob Feinstein and James Harris, *RF Video Shoot with Kamala, Highspots Wrestling Network*, 1 Jan. 2017, https://www.highspotswrestlingnetwork.com/media/kamala-shootinterview/58674/ (Accessed 10.30.2019).

III. "Big" Jim Harris: The Mississippi Mauler

Harris began his professional wrestling career in Detroit. Standing well above six feet tall, he was a dominating presence. African American wrestler Bobo Brazil took Harris under his wing. Born Houston Harris in Little Rock, Arkansas, Brazil blazed a similar path to Jim Harris and many African Americans of the early twentieth century. In his teens, Brazil migrated to Michigan to play Negro League Baseball and escape racial prejudice. In Michigan, while working in a steel mill, Brazil started his professional wrestling career. Brazil captured the hearts of African American fans around the country, including those fans in Washington D.C. who cheered him on against the racist "Cowboy" Bill Watts. Brazil and Harris symbolized two generations of migration from the South. Brazil and others like him created the Black Metropolis in cities like Detroit and Chicago, helping to bring African American Southern culture to white America.

Brazil accepted Harris as his protégé. However, in the 1970s, Detroit's wrestling scene was withering away. At its economic apex, in the 1950s and 1960s, ethnic superstars portraying outlandish and often racist characters performed to sold-out crowds every week. The city's economic decline not only meant there was a lack of paying fans, but also deterred wrestlers interested from settling down in Detroit. Like most of the industries in Detroit, professional wrestling fell on tough times. Ed Farhat (better known as the Sheik) owned the Detroit territory which fell into disrepair by the mid-1970s.[298] By this time, Detroit wrestling performances drew less than ten percent of the crowds they had in during their peak in the 1950s and 1960s. [299] The territory did not build new stars

[298] Dave Meltzer, *Tributes II: Remembering More of the World's Greatest Professional Wrestlers* (Champaign, iL: Sports Pub., 2004), 86.
[299] Meltzer, *Tributes II*, 88.

to bring in younger fans; instead, older stars like The Sheik and Brazil, already wealthy enough from their decades of experience, hung on to their positions at the top of the territory.

Not finding an opportunity for career advancement in Detroit, Harris returned to Mississippi after a brief period working as a roofer in Florida. [300] Most African Americans returning to the South from Detroit and other northern cities picked Atlanta, New Orleans, Memphis, or other urban centers. Harris's lack of skill and experience carried him back to Mississippi. Mississippi wrestling promotions (aside from the larger Mid-South Wrestling), depended on less experienced wrestlers who needed to acquire experience and earn a modest paycheck on their way to more lucrative metropolitan territories. Harris's size and athleticism made him attractive to wrestling promoters despite his inexperience; however, in the mid-1970s, African American wrestlers faced a more competitive marketplace than whites. Wrestling manager Kenneth Johnson (known as Slick) noted that early in his career he was told there was no position for him because, "There was already one black guy here to draw black fans."[301]

Harris's began his Southern wrestling career in International Championship Wrestling (ICW), a little-known and unsuccessful wrestling promotion which produced shows from 1977 to 1979. [302] George Culkin, former local promoter for Leroy McGuirk's Tri-State Wrestling, began promoting wrestling shows in towns throughout Mississippi, in towns usually ignored by Memphis and Mid-South. William Moody looked fondly

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[300] Harris and Casanova, *Kamala Speaks*, Location 2742
[301] Rob Feinstein and Kenneth Johnson, *RF Video Shoot with Slick* (RF Videos, 2004), https://rfvideo.com/products/slick-shoot-interview.
[302] Philip Kreikenbohm, " Kamala" CAGEMATCH - The Internet Wrestling Database, https://www.cagematch.net/?id=2&nr=567&page=4&s=1100.

upon his beginnings in ICW, "We had weekly cards at The Mississippi Coast Coliseum in Biloxi, The Jackson Coliseum, Vicksburg, and in Greenwood where we taped our TV. We worked six days a week. There are very few Mississippi National Guard Armories and High School Gyms that I have never been to."[303] However, many Southern wrestlers believed Culkin held racist views and undermined the success of black talent.[304] Smaller territories, which primarily pandered to rural audiences, were the flip side of the racial and cultural progressivism of Mid-South and Continental Wrestling. In rural areas like the Delta, where informal racial segregation persisted throughout the twentieth century, wrestling leadership and audiences stalled racial and cultural progress.

Jim Harris, now given the nickname "Big," was an intimidating sight in the wrestling ring. His generic nickname betrayed his lack of flash in and out of the ring. Because of his lack of charisma on the microphone, Culkin paired Harris with a young manager named Percy Pringle (who would later gain notoriety in the WWF as Paul Bearer). In storyline, and sometimes in real-life, the manager received a percentage of the wrestler's money by serving as an advisor. Wrestlers such as Harris, whose public speaking skills needed developing, often started with a manager. Pringle drew what wrestlers and wrestling fans call heat (crowd reaction involving jeers and cheers), with his short stature, obese body, and high-pitched Southern accent.

Mobile, Alabama resident William Moody, a rabid wrestling fan from his earliest days, brought joy to the ring and relished his character. Moody took on the name Percy Pringle III, a name meant to signify generational Southern wealth. He bought large villain

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[303] Percival Pringle III, post to wrestlingclassics.com forum, June 30, 2002 12:43 PM, http://wrestlingclassics.com/cgi-bin/.ubbcgi/ultimatebb.cgi?ubb=get_topic;f=9;t=049532;p=0
[304] Klein, *King OF New Orleans*, 66.

wrestlers to be his bodyguards and win matches on his behalf. A man of purported Southern aristocratic heritage buying the services of large black men like Harris paralleled the racial strife of the South's past and present. While fans thought Harris's affiliation with Pringle made him a sell-out while white fans both feared and admired his impressive physique and penchant for violence.[305]

By the time Harris started wrestling in Mississippi, Sylvester Ritter had begun setting Bill Watts's Mid-South Wrestling promotion on fire as the Junk Yard Dog. However, management did not give Harris the same tools for success that were given to Ritter. Culkin paired Harris with Oki Shikana, an offensive Asian character. A picture of Shikana, Pringle, and Harris together showed the place Harris occupied in the wrestling hierarchy. The wild-eyed Pringle stares ahead with a big smile on his face draped in a gold shimmering jacket with the sneering Shikana clutching his left arm while Harris stares awkwardly ahead.[306] Harris was the straight man with no personality, who could not offend white audiences. However, in not offending, he also did not amaze.

While Harris eventually won the tag-team championship with his partner Shikana, a losing streak defined Harris's time in Mississippi. Harris began losing matches every night. The large, doughy, and pale-skinned Pringle berated him, which got the crowd in a fury. Every fan in attendance knew Harris could beat up Pringle in record time and begged him to do so. However, Harris could not stand up to the man who (in the storyline) wrote his paycheck. The story was multilayered, the obese white Southern

[305] William Moody, *PERCY PRINGLE SHOOT INTERVIEW*, *Highspots Wrestling Network*, 2016, https://www.highspotswrestlingnetwork.com/media/percy-pringle-shoot-interview/46009.
[306] Lundgren, Paul. "Duluth Arena Pro Wrestling Photos from the 1980s - Killer Khan and so On." Perfect Duluth Day, Perfect Duluth Day, 1 Aug. 2017, https://www.perfectduluthday.com/2009/11/29/from-the-photo-archive-circa-1990/. (Accessed 10/18/2019)

loudmouth controlling the hulking black man conjured images of the slave and master. Pringle as the villain, using Harris as his muscle and berating him for his poor performance, played to the working-class white audience. Even in the less progressive rural environment of ICW, wrestling made African American characters like Harris sympathetic to white audiences by matching them against a greater foe, the white aristocracy who lacked the traits which defined Southern manhood. In doing so, they created a unified working-class in opposition to the existing white power structure. However, unlike in Mid-South, the African American characters remained powerless to change their situation, waiting instead for white saviors.[307]

Harris's treatment was humiliating. While he got sympathy for his unwinnable situation, his inability to stand up for himself showed a lack of Southern honor. This humiliation led Harris's wife to threaten to leave him if he did not stand up to Pringle (as she apparently remained unaware of the scripted nature of the combat and stories).[308] However, Harris faced a similar dilemma to that of his in-ring character. He could not stand up for himself and ask Culkin to either end the storyline or give Pringle his comeuppance for fear of losing his job, especially given the perceived bigotry of ownership. Harris writes in his book the promoter's reputation forced him to go to Pringle instead, after the two formed a friendship.[309] Pringle, seeing the anger and sadness experienced by African American fans and his friend, no longer abused Harris's character, despite objections from ownership.[310] Unlike Continental and Mid-South, a

[307] William Moody, "Story Time: My Ol' Friend James," PercyPringle.com, accessed February 4, 2023, http://percypringle.com/Story-Time/Storytime-MyOlFriendJames.html.
[308] Harris and Casanova, *Kamala Speaks,* 912.
[309] Harris and Casanova, *Kamala Speaks,* 915.
[310] Moody, "Story Time: My Ol' Friend James," PercyPringle.com.

new generation of ownership had not come to Mississippi in the 1970s. Instead, the older generation of white ownership clung to old representations of power dynamics between white and Black. Both in and out of the ring, Black wrestlers were unable to stand against racist humiliation.

Like African Americans across the entertainment spectrum, black wrestlers like Harris went abroad not only to make money and hone their craft, but also to escape racial prejudice of the South. The British wrestling industry struggled economically for much of its existence. While the weekly *World of Sport* wrestling program on ITV gained high ratings and became a Saturday morning staple for fans, that popularity rarely translated to large, live-attendance audiences. Instead, wrestling remained a successful, if not exceedingly profitable, form of vaudevillian entertainment in front of small crowds. The most successful UK Wrestling featured the Mardi Gras inspired wrestler Big Daddy (whose real name was Shirley Crabtree), a rotund, bald man in a gold jacket and top hat. He used his popularity to push himself to the top of the card for decades. To sustain his popularity, Crabtree often wrestled against and defeated massive foreigners who visually matched his size. Harris perfectly fit that mold.[311]

In Europe, Harris began using the skills of transformation many Black entertainers had been honing for a century. This process of reinvention was key, as employment opportunities for African American entertainers remained in short supply. Black entertainers knew this process well as Kevin Greene outlines in his book on Bill Broonzy:

> His path to success was often difficult and financially challenging as he traveled around the country and the world, frequently separated from his friends and

[311] John Lister, *Have a Good Week...Till Next Week*, version Kindle (Independently Published, 2018), 386.

> family. And yet Broonzy understood that he could find and sustain celebrity by continually reinventing his career and recognizing the changing tastes of his audiences.[312]

In Mississippi and Tennessee, Harris served as the quiet henchmen of the dastardly Pringle. He performed the work so a white Southern gentlemen could take both money and credit. In Europe, Harris reconstructed himself as an "authentic" version of Black masculinity, pairing his Southern accent with stereotypical African garb, including daishiki, and face paint. Harris believed the tribal paint gave him power and confidence as a wrestler. [313] Harris thus played into the European fascination with Blackness by assimilating multiple visions of blackness. He portrayed black Southerner with thick accent and "Mississippi Mauler" name; but he dressed as the post-colonial African vowing revenge against generations of European oppression.

Harris wanted to be closer to home, but resisted working under Culkin again; therefore, Harris took a job working undercard matches for Continental Wrestling in Memphis. Harris rebranded himself "Sugar Bear" Harris, a nickname he had earned playing high-school football.[314] However, Sugar Bear failed to gain traction with the fans. White stars like Lawler and Bill Dundee dominated main events, while most African American wrestlers stayed on the undercard. African American wrestlers needed either a proven record of drawing crowds or an outlandish, often racially exploitative, character to

[312] Kevin D. Greene, *The Invention and Reinvention of Big Bill Broonzy* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2018), 116.
[313] *World Of Sport - Mississippi Mauler (Kamala) vs Tom Tyrone Pt.1*, *YouTube* (World of Sport, 2009), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZGK7HJ9KVf0.
[314] Harris and Casanova, *Kamala Speaks*, Location 882.

improve their position on the card. Harris lost all but one match in his initial run in Memphis in 1980.[315]

Harris moved to the neighboring Southeastern Championship Wrestling, a struggling promotion where he could get experience as a top wrestler. SECW had existed in some form since 1974; however, it expanded out of Pensacola Florida into Alabama, Tennessee, and parts of Mississippi after a name and ownership change (away from Gulf Coast Championship Wrestling) in 1977.[316] Owner Ron Fuller gave Harris the opportunity to be a headlining act in smaller towns around the South. Instead of the passive bodyguard in rural Mississippi or the blend of Blackness of European imagination, Harris portrayed a loud, aggressive, and dumb black man who threatened and bullied men far smaller than him. As the threatening black menace to the "good ol' boy" Southern white wrestlers of the Southeastern territory, Harris played into the fears of Blackness corrupting the South and threatening white society. As Mid-South Wrestling created black superheroes like Junk Yard Dog and the South signaled to the rest of America that it wanted to move to a modern post-racial society, the rural working-class audiences of Southern wrestling continued to support racially degrading characterizations of African American characters and hang on to the version of Southern manhood which defined manliness by the ability to vanquish black foes like Harris.[317]

Harris's villainous character pandered to the rural Tennessee fan base of Knoxville and the surrounding area, whose population at the time was over ninety percent

[315] Matches " Kamala " Wrestlers Database, Cagematch.com.
[316] Southeastern Championship Wrestling, Kayfabememories.com, accessed November 18, 2019, https://www.kayfabememories.com/Regions/secw/secw2.htm).
[317] Armstrong Alley, Southeastern Championship Wrestling 5/24/80 (Knoxville), YouTube,26 Jan. 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Tss_tDrU8_g&t=2416s.

white. [318] However, to only see Harris as a caricature diminishes Harris's ability to infiltrate the customarily homogenous white culture of rural wrestling in the South. W.T. Lhamon argues in *Raising Cane*, that exploitative and stereotyped black performance, such as Harris's, while demeaning black experience, also introduced black culture into the white mainstream. This performance is part of what he terms the minstrel "lore cycle," expression of inauthentic blackness.[319] In the generation before Harris, African Americans did not get the opportunity to wrestle in high-profile matches in rural areas of Tennessee and Mississippi. Even though his performance exploited racist stereotypes, Harris's presence opened the door for other African Americans to appear as a more realistic version of blackness. On a personal level, his ability to headline in the smaller territory paved the way for his return to Memphis in 1982, with a more prominent role.

IV. Kamala: From the Jungles of Uganda

The new role for Harris was one with deep ties to the historical portrayal of African Americans and other ethnic minorities in wrestling and in the broader cultural zeitgeist. Jarrett knew the character could be potentially dangerous and humiliating, and he told Harris over the phone that he might be uncomfortable with it.[320] However, like many African Americans throughout the twentieth century in various modes of entertainment, exploitation was the price to pay for life-changing wealth. Harris decided to portray the character Kamala, an African savage. In his introductory video, a narrator

[318] "Characteristics of the Population, Detailed Population Characteristics, Tennessee," US Department of Commerce, accessed February 9, 2023, https://www.census.gov/library/publications/1980/dec/population-volume-1.html.
[319] W. T. Lhamon, *Raising Cain: Blackface Performance from Jim Crow to Hip Hop* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), Introduction.
[320] Harris and Feinstein, *RF Video Shoot with Kamala*, Highspots Wrestling Network.

explained Ugandan dictator Idi Amin hired Kamala as a headhunter.[321] Not only a savage, Kamala was also trained murderer for a despotic African leader despised in the United States. American media purported Amin, one of the worst despots in modern history, might also be a cannibal. Amin never denied the claim, only responding with a joke that human flesh was too salty.[322] Kamala represented both the reality and the post-colonial fantasy of Africa; despotic leadership with savage tendencies unabated by white civilization.

Harris had started using African face paint and garb as part of his Mississippi Mauler character when in Europe.[323] However, Lawler and Jarrett transformed Harris's use of African culture as a symbol of power and post-colonial revenge into a caricature based on a comic book Lawler saw by artist Frank Frazetta.[324] The entire character, from his appearance to his name, were African only in the white imagination. The name Kimala itself (later changed to Kamala) was a misremembering by Jarrett of Uganda's capital city Kampala. The character Kamala portrayed Africans as violent, sadistic, simple, idiotic, and inhuman. For centuries white culture had portrayed African peoples as savages; the only change in this representation was colonized black leadership replaced white control.

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[321] Jerry Lawler, *Jerry Lawler Vs The Monsters*, Highspots Wrestling Network, https://www.highspotswrestlingnetwork.com/media/classic-memphis-wrestling-jerry-lawler-vs-the-monsters/55457/feature?t=0.
[322] Riccardo Orizio, "Idi Amin's Exile Dream," *The New York Times* (The New York Times, August 21, 2003), https://www.nytimes.com/2003/08/21/opinion/idi-amin-s-exile-dream.html.
[323] Harris and Feinstein, *RF Video Shoot with Kamala*, *Highspots Wrestling Network*
[324] Steve Williams,. "Jerry Lawler Part 1." Steve Austin Show, https://www.mixcloud.com/TheSteveAustinShow/sas-ep46-jerry-lawler-pt1/. (Accessed, 10/31/2019).

Embracing the racially exploitative character afforded Harris higher profile matches and a massive upgrade in pay and stature. The character also gave Harris freedom. To understand the freedom of Kamala is to understand the freedom of black minstrelsy. In minstrelsy, performers no longer had to abide by the rules of white culture, that one could embrace silliness and wildness, an individuality not afforded to all other wrestlers. Scholars Taylor and Austen explain the freedom and horror in blackface performance:

> Minstrelsy presents a carefree life liberated from oppression, responsibilities, and burdens, where one can be as lazy crazy and irresponsible as one wants to be. It held and still holds tremendous attraction for performers and audiences… There are many reasons to be horrified by minstrel material and as many reasons to be attracted to it. The two reactions are equally natural and equally valid. [325]

As much freedom as it allowed, it was still a horrific representation which demeaned Blackness as an inferior and devolved state. The entertainment of this kind of performance comes from the feelings of superiority it gives to audiences; denigrating racial others to reassert the dominance of white society. That performance afforded Harris greater wages and performative freedom but also limited his ability to improve his standing and paychecks in wrestling beyond a certain level. Ultimately, the exploitative villainous savage character was one to be defeated and discarded, a stepping stone for the great heroes of wrestling.

The same freedom and liberation which came with the portrayal of Kamala also infected the audiences of Mid-South and Continental Wrestling. Facing such absurdity and terror gave audiences the license to disregard their own moral compass and social

[325] Yuval Taylor and Jake Austen, *Darkest America: Black Minstrelsy from Slavery to Hip Hop* (New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, 2012), 14.

decorum. Such was the case in all of wrestling, though the racially exploitative and chaotic performance of Kamala unleashed the audience's demons. Fans screamed racist epithets at Kamala, attempted to attack him, and even follow him outside the arena. Kamala's manager recalled,

> "When I managed Kamala especially, they'd follow our van… but we knew more or less how to lose them. Yeah, we have fans one night in Lake Charles. They hit me with some Drano in my eyes. Oh, you know, I thought it was acid. But I made it back to the dressing room. So for three hours, they wash that stuff out of my eyes."[326]

This was the same form of violence inflicted on Michael Hayes by Black fans attempting to protect the Junk Yard Dog. In that case, the fear of losing the great black hero was fueled by mob violence as a form of protection. Here, the white wrestling audience transformed into a bloodthirsty mob. The racist caricature Kamala loosened the societal restrictions of their race hatred.

The rowdy crowds of Memphis could be unforgiving, but the garish pastels of the television studio were a place of unbridled optimism and celebration of the sport of professional wrestling. Men, women, and enthusiastic youths congregated to witness the spectacle of Memphis wrestling and to be transported into a simple world, where the lines of good and evil were drawn neatly and which Southern men and women ruled the stage once more, where honor was social currency and problems were solved with fists and not dollars. Lawler played the hero, protecting Memphis and Southern honor from the rest of the world whether it be Yankees bent on bringing their coastal elitism to the South or the dark underbelly of societies from across the globe. The xenophobic nature of these

[326] Jimmy S. Wehba, *Skandor Akbar Shoot Interview*, Highspots Wrestling Network, 2017, https://www.highspotswrestlingnetwork.com/media/skandor-akbar-shoot-interview/70795.

characters did not repel the fans but drew them in. They represented the heart of Southern cultural elitism. These bestial men spread terror; however, the fear was short lived. Ultimately, the white southerners bested the bestial black characters, saving the South from foreign menaces. However, even as white heroes neutered the sense of danger brought by these characters, the audiences still reviled them for their race and action. "Some great memories watching all of these shows with my grandpa. He hated Tojo in Memphis...I can't actually repeat some of the things he would say. Certainly not politically correct now!"[327] Ultimately, the victory of Southern heroes soothed their fears and reestablished superiority of the Whiteness in the South.[328]

Kamala's character in Memphis, his mannerisms and his wrestling style, set the foundation for the rest of his career. Harris pretended to not know the rules of wrestling, so his biting and scratching, not officially allowed in wrestling, were not the actions of a villain but an ignorant savage. He could not perform sufficient wrestling maneuvers because no one trained him as a wrestler; instead, he chopped and wildly threw his opponents around like pinballs. Even winning his matches was a struggle because, despite years of experience, Kamala "the savage" could not understand that an opponent must have his back on the mat to be pinned. Kamala stalked his opponent with a wonky gate and slapped his stomach with delight when he sensed his opponent was in tremendous pain. Because Harris knew no African languages, he shrieked in fear or

[327] Knightmare414, Message Board Post 07/12/2011, Wrestlingclassics.com, http://wrestlingclassics.com/cgi-bin/.ubbcgi/ultimatebb.cgi?ubb=get_topic;f=1;t=118731#000002
[328] Lawler, *Classic Memphis Wrestling: Lawler Vs. The Monsters*, *Highspots Wrestling Network.*

delight based on the situation rather than speaking. Even minstrel performers spoke, Kamala did not. He represented the primal beast turned man.[329]

In Memphis, which still drew a majority white fanbase, Lawler and Jarrett used exploitation of race to draw in white fans. Kamala fit in perfectly within the extremely violent spectacle. He not only struck fear into the hearts of white audiences who let themselves believe Kamala was a real cannibal, but also played into stereotypes of African Americans as primitive and simpleminded. Harris explains, "It wasn't that the people running the show were racist, but rather that they knew that a lot of their audience was. So by throwing in a few racial jabs here and there, they could really rile up the crowd and then get them to come back next week."[330] Harris played into the racist fantasies of the white audience as he once again transformed his persona to his economic benefit. Rather than attacking his audience, he absorbed their jeers and further exaggerated his big belly slaps and "African" gibberish. The most infamous example was when manager Jimmy Hart offered Kamala Watermelon and women to injure Dutch Mantell. This event exploited a racial stereotype that posited that only food and sex motivated black men. [331] Hart never explicitly said the women were white, but that was his implication. This is exemplary of Southern wrestling's exploitation of black characters and white fears for financial gain.

Kamala's battles with Lawler set the template Kamala's matches with white heroes for the rest of his career. Kamala landed his trademark chops and biting, licking

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[329] Lawler, *Classic Memphis Wrestling: Lawler Vs. The Monsters*, Highspots Wrestling Network.
[330] Harris and Casanova, *Kamala Speaks*, location 1437.
[331] *Memphis Wrestling Video. Jimmy Hart Offers Kamala Watermelons and Women!* Memphis Wrestling, YouTube, 18 Jan. 2010, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4kGWFk4ZcWQ (Accessed 10.31.2019).

off the blood of Lawler from his fingers to prove his cannibalistic savagery. In June 1982, the Ugandan Giant upset the King of Memphis in only his second match for the AWA Southern Heavyweight title. The victory set up a storyline in which the dominant Kamala ran roughshod over all challengers with seemingly no one capable of stopping him. In the end, Lawler vanquished Kamala, proving a solid punch from a confident southerner ultimately reigned supreme against primitive violence.[332]

Once Kamala lost his terrifying aura in Memphis, Harris moved to Mid-South Wrestling. In the territory, both black and white audiences saw Kamala as a monster and a threat, was the best place for Kamala to make money. As Kamala said in an interview, "It is the Dog who bought my house."[333] In Mid-South, instead of being vanquished by the All-American white star, African Americans and working-class champion Junk Yard Dog vanquished the black beast. The victory of Junk Yard Dog represented white society's perceived importance of the civilization process for African Americans. Through civilization and white influence, the African American hero was superior to the African savage Kamala. This is representative of the white perception of Black sporting excellence since the beginning of the twentieth century. In the legendary fight between African American boxing champion Joe Louis and German Max Schmelling, white support of Louis rested not only on opposition to the Germans but on his Americanization. One writer for the New York Age went so far as to argue Louis's slave heritage gave him a physical advantage as years in the cotton fields hardened his

[332] Lawler, *Classic Memphis Wrestling: Lawler Vs. The Monsters*, Highspots Wrestling Network.
[333] Feinstein, *RF Video Shoot with Kamala*, Highspots Wrestling Network.

ancestors. However, even in the case of Louis, white audiences felt uneasy rooting for the victory of a Black man. [334]

White audiences were much more likely to embrace a Black champion against a version of Blackness they viewed as dangerous. This was on full display in the previous decade when white Americans cheered on Joe Frazier against Muhammad Ali. Ali, a member of the Nation of Islam who refused to participate in the Vietnam War, was a villain in the eyes of conservative, white America. Black writers like Bryant Gumbel deemed Frazier, despite his dark skin and earlier friendship with Ali, a white champion.[335] Sylvester Ritter and Frazier, both from poor roots in South Carolina, fit into the mold of acceptable Black heroes in the white imagination, hard-working, humble, and apolitical. By promoting men like Ladd and Ritter against savage stereotypes like Kamala or preening showboats like Tony Atlas, Watts showed the African American athlete as equal to white athletes, if they fit into Southern masculine ideal. Kamala's losses to Ritter reaffirmed the hierarchy of races, and the postcolonial idea that without the white man, the African American would default to his baser roots.

Despite the inequitable treatment and pay, early in his career Harris often performed the role of humble Black worker for his white bosses and coworkers Harris rarely spoke and refused to go out partying with the rest of the wrestlers. In a world dominated by whiteness and where opportunities for African American were limited, Harris stomached the low pay and exploitative character for an opportunity to improve

[334] Art Evans, "Joe Louis as a Key Functionary," *Journal of Black Studies* 16, no. 1 (1985): pp. 95-111, https://doi.org/10.1177/002193478501600107.
[335] Bryant Gumbel, "Is Joe Frazier a White Champion in a Black Skin?" *Boxing Illustrated* (BI), October 1972, cover.

his position in the wrestling industry. He also did so to protect the mystique of his character. Skandar Akbar (Jimmy Wheba), who managed Kamala in Mid-South, said of Kamala; "Kamala we never went out. We always bring the food to the room… Everybody knew me. Suppose I go into a restaurant, and they see big Black guy with a baseball hat on or something like that. And they'll say, hey, wait a minute. That's Akbar. That might be…Or could be (Kamala)."[336] Harris thus embodied two characters in the Southern imagination, the noble and deferential Black worker and the crazed savage. He forced himself into both roles for an opportunity at economic advancement despite personal and economic exploitation.

Harris, no matter his popularity, improvement as a wrestler, or his deference and respectability behind the scenes, never received the economic gains of his white coworkers. It was this form of inequity which mattered most to Harris. "In the end, racist humor really didn't bother me. Racist promoters who wanted to pay you less because you were Black — that's a whole different topic altogether." [337] Harris understood long before becoming a wrestler that moving through the world as a Black man required exploitation of your character and race; however, he believed the exploitation should have earned him higher wages which promoters withheld from him.

Beginning with his childhood, Harris had been skeptical of powerful white men. While Harris could not complain about money early in his career, he understood his value as Kamala. Harris walked out of World Class Championship Wrestling in Dallas, Texas, when he discovered that promoter Fritz Von Erich (Jack Adkisson) shorted him on his

[336] Jimmy S. Wehba, *Skandor Akbar Shoot Interview*, Highspots Wrestling Network,
[337] Harris and Casanova, *Kamala Speaks*, *l*ocation 1465.

pay. After performing on a Dallas wrestling show drawing over 40,000 fans, Harris discovered Adkisson paid him far less than the female talent on the show. Harris, indoctrinated into patriarchal wrestling system, believed men in wrestling deserved higher pay and walked out of the promotion. Even though he made more money in WCCW than Memphis, he believed he was not being paid commiserate with his ability.[338]

Later in his career, he left the World Wrestling Federation for the same reason. While McMahon paid him more than any other promoter, he refused to pay for travel which caused Harris to sometimes lose money on smaller shows. He believed that, "the 'not knowing much about money' big dumb Black stereotype I fit was probably why they only threw me a bone here and there to start, just to keep me quiet. When they no longer needed me, the good paydays went away. When no money was coming in again… I started thinking about going away, too." [339] Harris believed white ownership viewed African American wrestlers as expendable, while those same promoters protected and valued white wrestlers even past the peak of their earning power. Once again, Harris found the wrestling promoters exploited his body for profit and did not afford him the same financial security and dignity of his white coworkers, just as white sharecroppers had done his family for generations.

Harris separated the spectacle of wrestling from the reality of racism Memphis. Because of this ability to separate himself from his performance, he stayed in Memphis despite the racist portrayal of Kamala, but a decline in his paycheck caused his exit.

[338] Harris and Casanova, *Kamala Speaks*, Location 3390.
[339] Harris and Casanova, *Kamala Speaks*, Location 3373.

Later, in his dealings with Bill Watts, Harris disregarded any questionable actions or racist ideology because Watts always paid him fairly. The fact that promoters paid Harris and other African Americans less than their white peers shows that the wrestling business of the 1980s, despite profiting from integrating Black wrestlers, still saw them as inferior and not worthy of fair compensation. Harris accepted racially exploitative characters, but refused to work for less than he felt he was worth.

Kamala's character represents the limitations of racial progress in the South and throughout the United States. Ideas of racial hierarchy and the willingness to exploit racist caricatures still permeated the South. The motivation behind the victory of Junk Yard Dog was not simply progressive representation, but also a capitalist tactic to garner attention from a growing African American population. Even as wrestling in Mississippi, Louisiana, and Tennessee attracted African Americans, it was still a space where whiteness dominated and African Americans only succeeded with the assistance of white influence.

V. Kamala Outside of the South

Kamala made brief appearances for wrestling in the Caribbean for Carlos Colon's WWC wrestling promotion. Puerto Rico was also a place many wrestlers feared. The violent style of Puerto Rico's wrestling and bloodthirsty fans made Memphis and Mid-South look like the Metropolitan Opera House. Simultaneously, the money generated by the passionate fanbase in Puerto Rico and the promoter's political connections made wrestling bullet proof. The most notorious example was the murder of wrestler Frank Goodish (Bruiser Brody) by fellow wrestler and promoter Jose Gonzalez. Gonzalez

admitted to the murder but was never convicted.[340] For many wrestlers, especially African American wrestlers like Harris, Puerto Rico was a last resort they could turn to for financial gain when domestic promotions and white promoters no longer desired their services.

Carlos Colon, the owner of the Puerto Rico territory, pushed his wrestlers toward greater violence than anywhere else in the world. Harris, as he had done throughout his career, adapted his persona to fit the desires of his new audience. The audiences in Memphis and Mid-South jeered racist epithets at the Ugandan headhunter before running away from Harris as he slowly walked towards them. "I remember seeing Kamala coming toward the ring once and some fans were at the rail jeering and he ran toward them and even put one leg over the rail and everyone scattered."[341] While fans were ruthless in their mockery and violence, their suspension of disbelief made them terrified of what Kamala could do to them. However, the fans in Peurto Rico craved Kamala's violence, even if it was directed at them. His matches were bloodier than anywhere else and Harris bit and clawed at his opponents while the fans screamed with joy at the chaotic brutality. In one match with an opponent named Invader I, Kamala beat Invader with punches and chops to the head until his bloodied body lay prone in the middle of the ring. Kamala then climbed to the top rope to jump on top of his opponent and, if he had not been stopped, crush him.[342] Puerto Rican fans embraced wrestling's violence and

[340] "The Killing of Bruiser Brody," *Dark Side of the Ring* (Viceland, April 24, 2019).
[341] http://wrestlingclassics.com/cgi-bin/.ubbcgi/ultimatebb.cgi?ubb=get_topic;f=1;t=168786#000016
[342]WWC Classics, *WWC: Invader #1 vs. Kamala (1986)*, Youtube, 2011 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aKOj92XpKfc%29.

chaos and Harris once again matched his persona to meet the violent desires of the fanbase.

After leaving Peurto Rico, Harris refashioned his Kamala character to fit Vince McMahon's World Wrestling Federation. By 1986, when Kamala debuted in the WWF, McMahon had taken his father's New York promotion across the country. McMahon's television partners, including NBC and MTV, gave him a national platform. The WWF's over-the-top presentation made Kamala into an even more cartoonish representation of white fantasies of African identity. On *Tuesday Night Titans*, The WWF variety show on which McMahon would interview wrestlers and have outlandish skits in the vein of Johnny Carson's *Tonight Show*, Kamala entered the studio carrying a live chicken to eat. Just as Kamala reached to put the Chicken in his mouth, the video feed cut out. Returning from commercial, Kamala had feathers coming out of his mouth.[343] Kamala once again transformed, this time into a less aggressive and more comedic African Savage, devoid of any realism and stripped of the raw violence to appeal to middle-class white America.

Kamala played the brutal monster even more overtly in the wrestling magazines of the 1980s. For hardcore fans, wrestling magazines provided insight into their obsession with wrestling. While some magazines took readers behind the scenes, most kept the fallacy of legitimacy alive. The WWF, now the dominant promotion in the country, also dominated the pages of wrestling magazines. The most notorious of all wrestling magazine covers of the 1980s featured Kamala holding his spear with Hulk Hogan's decapitated head sitting atop it.[344] Wrestling magazines reinforced the narrative and

[343] Vince McMahon, *Best of Tuesday Night Titans 1985*, *WWE Network* (WWE), accessed February 6, 2023, https://watch.wwe.com/episode/Tuesday-Night-Titans-best-moments-from-1985-2808.
[344] "Bring me the Head of Hulk Hogan," *Sports Review Wrestling*, March 1987

character for wrestling promoters and the wrestlers themselves. Kamala, this larger-than-life character with an outrageous backstory, was the perfect fit as wrestling magazines could add salacious details to the unofficial canon using overtly racist stereotypes of African peoples. One WWF magazine noting in 1992 that Kamala would bring the Undertaker back to his tribe as a "sacrifice." [345] Racist characters were not just performed in the ring but created in multiple forms of media.

In the WWF, only Hulk Hogan could vanquish this barbarity. The two had numerous battles, both untelevised and televised. All the matches played out the same way; Kamala the brute would overpower Hogan with chops and head buts making Hogan bleed from his forehead; Kamala would continue to pound him until Hogan was fired up and then Hogan vanquished Kamal with his signature body slam and leg drop.[346] Just like the Junk Yard Dog and Jerry Lawler before him, Hogan dispatched the monster. Once again, there was little remaining value for the Kamala character after being vanquished by the white hero. Harris's pay decreased substantially, and he left for other opportunities in different countries.

Harris left the WWF without notice because of inequitable pay compared to the white wrestlers. Because of this, McMahon deducted fifteen percent from all of his paychecks when he returned to the WWF. The contract stated he would receive the fifteen percent, totaling $17,000, back once his contract expired. Over the course of 183 matches Harris earned roughly $622 per match. The Undertaker (Mark Calaway) made

[345] "Headhunting the Undertaker" WWF Magazine Vol. 207, 1992.
[346] James Harris and Terry Bolea, *Boston Garden: Dec. 6, 1986*, World Wrestling Entertainment, WWE Network, Accessed 11.18.19. https://watch.wwe.com/episode/Boston-Garden-Dec-6-1986-102093?startPoint=6836.067

$500,000 for one match with Harris, while Harris made $13,000.[347] In the years leading up to and during Harris's time in the World Wrestling Federation in the 1990s, wrestler Bret Hart made roughly $250,000 per year, about five times what Harris earned wrestling in a similar number of matches[348] McMahon simply did not pay Harris equally to white wrestlers of comparable status and experience.

Harris believed his inadequate pay in the WWF was due to the perception by management that he was, "a big dumb Black guy from Mississippi."[349] Despite the popularity of the WWF and its extensive merchandising, he was paid less by McMahon than Watts. While the depiction of Kamala does not fit Mid-South's reputation for progressive racial representation, Harris's belief that Watts compensated him more equitably and showed him more respect than any other promoter demonstrates that racial progressivism in the Mid-South persisted behind-the-scenes even when it did not translate to the on-screen product. Mid-South was more progressive than the national wrestling product aimed at a middle-class white audience.

When Kamala returned to the WWF in the early-1990s, McMahon pitted him against a new character known as The Undertaker. Harris once again transformed himself, this time into a sympathetic comedy figure. Slick, a jive talking African American, managed Kamala. In a series of cringe inducing videos Slick tried to educate his "savage brother" on the ways of the modern world. One vignette involved Slick teaching Kamala to bowl despite his inability to understand the fundamental idea of

[347] Harris, *Kamala Speaks*, location, 3350.
[348] Bret Hart, *My Real Life in the Cartoon World Of Wrestling* (New York , New York: Grand Central Publishing, 2009), 384.
[349] Harris, *Kamala Speaks*, location, 3350.

throwing a ball down a lane. This humiliating caricature is one passed had deep historical roots. One of the earliest examples appeared in the Victorian periodical *Judy*, in which the cartoon tramp Ally Sloper attempted in vain to teach an African to play dice only to have the uneducated savage eat the dice from his hand.[350] The new Kamala was a parody of the old, with the addition of a second stereotypical character, the jive talking huckster of blaxploitation cinema of the 1970s. The combination of the two characters solidified Blackness in wrestling as something for fans to mock rather than revere. As the national wrestling product overtook the local, racial representation regressed as national wrestling companies courted the middle classes rather than the multicultural urban working class.[351]

VI. James

Audiences of the 1980s, influenced by Reagan's nostalgic vision of the past, viewed Kamala as a story of race relations in America. Complicated characters and stories promulgated media of the 1960s and 70s which complicated the Black and white dichotomy of good and evil. White characters no longer had the moral and social advantage against African Americans. The character of Kamala was uncomplicated. White audiences feared Kamala's monstrous qualities, and the victory of civilized heroes over Kamala put their minds at ease. Other Black villainous characters like Kareem Muhammad and Elijah Akeem, Black nationalists bent on taking over Southern wrestling, embodied fears of radical Black manhood unafraid to challenge the white

[350] *Some Playful Episodes in the Career of Ally Sloper: Late of Fleet Street, Timbuctoo, Wagga Wagga, Millbank, and Elsewhere ; with Casual References to Iky Mo* (London: Published at the "Judy" office, 73 Fleet Street, E.C., 1873), https://nla.gov.au/nla.obj-500247869/view?partId=nla.obj-500248207#page/n0/mode/1up.
[351] Feinstein, *RF Video Shoot with Kamala*, Highspots Wrestling Network.

status quo. This is why Harris, performing as Kamala, could consistently remake himself to sustain his career. The exploitative and outlandish character easily fit into the white imagination in numerous ways.

The working-class nature of wrestling allowed it and its audiences to enjoy their entertainment free from the upper-class gazes and the expectation of respectability. This resulted in a homogenous working-class cultural product that elevated African-American characters. However, this freedom allowed outdated, xenophobic, and racist characters like of Kamala to gain prominence without much media outrage. This lack of respectability also allowed the economic exploitation of Harris and other wrestlers to go unnoticed. In a recent interview with Harris on the *Dan LeBatard Radio Show*, LeBatard and his producers did not get the fun stories they expected. Instead, Harris expressed pain and sadness, as he described the costs of years of wrestling. Harris served as a sobering reminder to the national wrestling audience that behind the cartoonish veneer of wrestling was a mode of performance which physically and economically exploited the bodies of the performers.[352]

The common refrain about Harris throughout the last years of his life, including his obituary, was his bitterness to the wrestling business. *The New York Times* obituary states explicitly, "Mr. Harris remained bitter about the poor pay he received, but he also expressed pride in his wrestling career."[353] However, this is a simplification of Harris's feelings. The emotion Harris displayed in interviews before his passing was not anger,

[352] Dan LeBatard, "The Dan Lebatard Show with Stugotz." ESPN.com, 7 Dec. 2018, http://www.espn.com/espnradio/play/_/id/25477595. (Accessed 10/25/2019).
[353] Alex Traub, "James Harris, Towering Wrestler Known as Kamala, Dies at 70," *The New York Time*s (The New York Times, August 12, 2020), https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/12/obituaries/james-harris-kamala-dead-coronavirus.html.

but hopelessness and disappointment. Harris achieved the dream of millions of African Americans. He made a career in sports with the potential to make more money than he ever imagined. However, like numerous athletes, the system exploited him, leaving him with little to show for his efforts other than a broken body and broken dreams. James Harris stood in front of thousands as a headline act in Madison Square Garden, only to return to same building years later weeping in a UPS truck, is not a man who felt bitterness but shame and regret. The hopelessness and violence which festers within impoverished communities in the Deep South led to the death of Harris's father. America's glass ceiling for African Americans did the same to Harris.

Examination of James Harris's career in professional wrestling demonstrates the lack of fundamental change in African American representation not just in wrestling, but in all of American culture. On screen and in wrestling arenas around the country, the Kamala character exploited African American stereotypes which capitalized on white fantasies of a postcolonial Africa. In turn, his numerous losses solidified white exceptionalism and superiority. Behind the scenes, wrestling promoters undervalued Harris's performance by paying him less than his white counterparts. That Kamala not only existed but continually thrived both on the local and national stages demonstrates that regressive rather progressive Black representation shaped much of wrestling despite the success of Junk Yard Dog. Harris's inequitable compensation demonstrates that white management continued a cycle of exploitation of Black workers and their bodies. The advancements of the 1960s and 1970s for Black America were not universal nor consistent. African Americans of the working-class continued to be exploited by a system controlled by white America which limited their opportunities of escape or advancement.

CHAPTER V – This Is Wrestlemania: Vince McMahon and the End of Territorial Wrestling

I. Black Saturday

The event which signaled a war for professional wrestling in America was the takeover of Georgia Championship Wrestling by Titan Sports. On July 14, 1984, an unwelcomed surprise greeted regular viewers of the weekly World Championship Wrestling program at 6:05 PM on WTBS cable television. While the familiar sets still read "World Championship Wrestling," the face that greeted them was none other than Vincent Kennedy McMahon Jr., owner of the World Wrestling Federation.[354] The event so shocked Southern wrestling fans that they refer to it as "Black Saturday." Beginning that day, Ted Turner's Atlanta-based cable station no longer served as the national home for Southern Wrestling. Southerners, as ever, fought tooth and nail against a Yankee insurgence.

McMahon's takeover of WTBS was symbolic of his business strategy over the course of the 1980s. He reshaped the wrestling landscape by eliminating competition through reckless spending. Georgia-born billionaire Ted Turner introduced Georgia Championship Wrestling on his UHF station WTCG in 1972.[355] Even after ownership disputes, advancements in satellite and the rise of cable television, and a civil war among promotional ownership, Georgia Championship Wrestling was still the highest rated program on Turner's WTBS station. However, in 1984 Ole Anderson, part owner and booker of GCW, lost the support of his business partners after a few years of deteriorating

354 Vince McMahon, *NWA Georgia Wrestling 7/14/84 "Black Saturday"*, YouTube, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rPHcM4e5kLg.
355 Hornbaker, *The National Wrestling Alliance*, 424.

revenues. In May 1984, Jerry Brisco, Jack Brisco, and Jim Barnett sold their stake, comprising roughly sixty percent of Georgia Championship Wrestling's total shares to Vince McMahon.[356] Ole Anderson sued to prevent McMahon's purchase, but ultimately his suit failed. As a result, McMahon acquired a controlling interest of GCW and their television show on WTBS.[357] McMahon aggressively pursued national expansion with monopolistic practices, including buying television rights, even if he had no use for them. Dave Meltzer points out in the *Wrestling Observer*, the greatest advantage McMahon gained from the expansion was a monopoly on nationally distributed wrestling content in North America.[358] McMahon's strategy was to disrupt other wrestling companies while making the WWF synonymous with wrestling to national consumers. Wrestlers and promoters around the country hoped McMahon's reckless spending would catch up to him before he could capitalize on that national exposure.[359]

Despite the popularity and reach of the WTBS wrestling program, McMahon failed to fulfill GCW's contract with WTBS which required the production of original live content produced in Atlanta; instead, McMahon presented something akin to highlights (or perhaps lowlights) of the WWF program which aired on the USA Network the same week. Wrestling fans in the South rebelled against the unfamiliar Yankee wrestling. Spurred on by countless consumer complaints, within a month Turner began putting deals in place with Southern Wrestling companies like Bill Watts's Mid-South to

356 Dave Meltzer, "McMahon Buys Georgia Wrestling," *Wrestling Observer*.
357 Dave Meltzer, "Big Month for Titan," *Wrestling Observer*.
358 At the time McMahon and the WWF had wrestling on WTBS, WOR-TV, and USA Network as well as syndication in Canada.
359 Many issues of the *Wrestling Observer Newsletter* from 1984 to 1987 featured articles and letters claiming the end was near for McMahon. In subsequent decades, McMahon and his executives have admitted the company was on the verge of bankruptcy before the success of WrestleMania.

air regional wrestling on WTBS for the loyal Southern fans. The war for the soul of wrestling began to get ugly, entering the legal arena. The next half-decade saw an escalation in corporate alliances, lawsuits, and sabotage, as territorial wrestling drew its final breaths.[360]

This chapter builds upon the work Tim Hornbaker, whose comprehensive examination of the end of the territory era, *The Death of the Territories*, was crucial in forming this regional analysis. While Mid-South and Memphis remain central to the chapter, their fall, after the heights of the early eighties, is part of the larger narrative of national movement away from local entertainment to a homogenous national culture. By shunning regionalism and focusing on American exceptionalism, the national culture of the 1980s attempted to erase the struggle of the working classes and people of color. The national wrestling product, promoted by Vince McMahaon, capitalized on the emerging patriotic nationalism of Reagan, effectively shunning the working-class audiences of professional wrestling.

Vince McMahon used generational wealth and access to credit to gamble large amounts of money on his business and accumulate debt. He outspent regional wrestling promoters and created a national product featuring the highest-quality production values and most established wrestling stars from the territorial era. Southern wrestling epitomized the triumphant moralism of the Reagan era. Self-made men, conservative individualism, and Christian moralism was wound up in the heroes of Southern wrestling from Whitey Caldwell to Junk Yard Dog. Thus, it was not a cultural incongruity which made Southern wrestling incompatible with audiences in the rest of the country. The

[360] Dave Meltzer, "WTBS," *Wrestling Observer*, April 15, 1985, 4.

major advantage the WWF had over regional territories was that Vince McMahon understood how to market a national media product. Additionally, having the Deep South, far from media capitals of the country, as their base was disadvantageous to territorial wrestling companies. Based in Connecticut, with television and media partnerships in Hollywood and New York, the WWF had more access to national media corporations and corporate sponsors. To his credit, McMahon made himself more accessible than other wrestling promoters to the business and advertising world.[361]

Simultaneously, Southern Wrestling companies suffered from a lack of star power. Not only did Mid-South and Memphis lose wrestlers to the WWF, but they also failed to create new stars to replace aging veterans like Jerry Lawler. Additionally, Southern wrestling promoters, attempting to go national, homogenized their product to appeal to the white middle-classes; however, they did not understand how to market their product beyond their fanbase to corporations and mass media. In attempting to court national audiences, Southern wrestling promoters made their product distinctly less Southern in presentation. In taking the local flavor out of the production, Southern wrestling companies no longer appealed to the Southern fanbase. These failures of business and creative strategy coincided with an economic downturn in the South precipitated by the oil bust of the mid-1980s and changes to the American manufacturing system which decreased the number of jobs available to the working classes.

The failure of local wrestling is symbolic of a larger trend in the South during the age of Reagan. The promise of a Sunbelt renaissance, complete with political and cultural

361 Gary S. Cross, *An All-Consuming Century Why Commercialism Won in Modern America* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2002), chapter 6.

relevance and a boom in local economies, did not substantially change the lives of most Southerners. Instead, the influx of national corporate interests in the South only eroded local culture and small businesses. Vince McMahon created a national wrestling product, uniform and sanitized, to be consumed anywhere. The WWF became the McDonalds of professional wrestling, the predominate international brand. Just as McDonalds may not have the best hamburgers, the WWF did not always have the best wrestlers, but they marketed a product and brand name so that product and brand became synonymous. While McDonalds undercut local restaurants, McMahon exploited Reagan-era corporate deregulation. Working-class Southerners watched their culture vanish before their eyes.

II. Rise of the WWF

Vince McMahon's national expansion of the World Wrestling Federation (WWF) was the first attempt by a wrestling promoter to challenge the dominance of the National Wrestling Alliance. After taking over his father's promotion (then named the World-Wide Wrestling Federation) in 1982, McMahon sought to create a national wrestling product which appealed to middle-class white consumers. Eliminating ethnic representation as top wrestling attractions created a homogenized product targeted at advertisers who wanted a television product which appealed to young, white, and wealthy demographics. McMahon also capitalized directly on the economic benefits of appealing to a national wrestling audience, including the commodification of cartoonlike wrestling characters for a mass youth audience. For nearly a century, wrestling depended almost exclusively on ticket sales. Promoters depended on an audience's personal and emotional connection with the wrestlers in the ring. Local stars represented the plight of the working-class audiences they performed for every week. McMahon reshaped wrestling

into another American mass culture product to be marketed and exported to as many audiences as possible.

Vince McMahon's plan for national domination rested on creating a homogenized product which appealed to both middle-class white audiences and corporate advertisers. The first step for McMahon was to create a national star who captured the spirit of Regan's hard-bodied vision of America.

The main stars of his father's WWWF appealed to an ethnic fan base. Whether it be African American Bobo Brazil, mentioned in a previous chapter, who drew an African American fanbase in Washington D.C., or Pedro Morales who stood as a cultural symbol for Puerto Rican immigrants in New York, McMahon Sr. promoted wrestlers who appealed to the working-class, ethnic fanbase.[362] This was a necessity, as the northeastern newspapers had been merciless in their contempt for professional wrestling since the Great Depression. Even as professional wrestling generated unimaginable popularity around the country both in live attendance and television ratings, the middle-class, white media had no patience for a predetermined sport which played to the fantasies of the poor and working classes. Middle-class newspapers told respectable audiences repeatedly that wrestling was beneath them, but working-class and minority audiences saw in professional wrestling an inexpensive form of sport and entertainment free from the stifling expectations of white respectability.[363]

Before McMahon Jr. bought the WWWF from his father, the company already began the process of gentrification by making Bob Backlund a champion in 1978.

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[362] Hornbaker, *National Wrestling Alliance*, 213.
[363] "Wrestling in Disrepute," *New York Times*, https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1938/12/25/99578530.pdf.

Backlund was WWWF and later WWF champion for roughly five years. Backlund was the opposite of the previous champions in almost every way. Previous WWWF champions were larger than life with charisma to spare, though with limited wrestling ability. "Superstar" Billy Graham and Bruno Sammartino were gigantic men, bodybuilders whose strength astonished audiences. Bob Backlund was a Division II All-American in both wrestling and football and ended up winning a national championship in collegiate wrestling. Backlund was also a white wrestler from Minnesota, who went to school in North Dakota and had no roots in the northeast or to any ethnicity or nationality. Backlund's pale skin, short red hair, and wide smile often drew comparisons from wrestling fans to the puppet Howdy Doody. Backlund helped appeal to white audiences; however, McMahon Jr.'s plan involved not just white fans, but young white fans. The middle-American farm boy Backlund would not work for the MTV generation.[364]

Vince McMahon's champion for national expansion would be a young enigmatic wrestler named Terry Bollea, better known as Hulk Hogan. Hulk Hogan began his career in the South, specifically Florida and Tennessee, but became a star in the Minnesota-based promotion the American Wrestling Alliance. A brief, but notable, appearance in the movie *Rocky III* made him into a national headliner. Hogan built his career around the country as a cocky villain trying to dethrone the legendary Andre the Giant. The two wrestled around the world including at the Louisiana Superdome.[365]

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[364] Hornbaker, *National Wrestling Alliance*, 217.
[365] "Mid-South Supercards," Prowrestlinghistory.com http://www.prowrestlinghistory.com/supercards/usa/misc/midsouth/cards.html

Instead of the over-the-top braggart villain, McMahon created the perfect Reagan-era patriotic superhero. Damion Sturm notes Hogan's character deployed a "heroic 'All American' persona, symbolizing American power and progress as he often wrestled either much-larger foes or stereotypical foreign heels. Self-referencing his biceps as '24-inch pythons,' Hogan was an imposing blonde, bronzed, and hyper-muscular 'hulk' figure."[366] To his millions of young fans, which he called Hulkamaniacs, he extolled the mantra, "eat your vitamins and say your prayers."[367] Although Hogan later admitted under oath to taking steroids, the implication was that his success and his appearance was all achievable through training, vitamins, and God (if you were from the United States). Hogan's enhanced physique, patriotic and religious rhetoric, and undeniable charisma made him the perfect vehicle to pick up middle-class audiences in Reagan's America. Hogan not only had the muscles to fit the hard body ideal of the 1980s, but fans also perceived him as a sensitive Christian family man. Together these characteristics fit the Reagan ideal Susan Jeffords summarizes in *Hard Bodies*:

> … masculine strength and power through internal, personal, and family-oriented values. Both of these predominant models—the hard body and the 'sensitive family man'—are overlapping components of the Reagan Revolution, comprising on the one hand a strong militaristic foreign-policy position and on the other hand a domestic regime of an economy and a set of social values dependent on the centrality of fatherhood.[368]

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[366] Damion Sturm, "Macho Madness and the Mania ('Oh Yeaaaah, Dig It!') Mediatization, Masculinities and Affective Memories of WWF's Halcyon Days (c. 1984–1993)," in *Identity in Professional Wrestling: Essays on Nationality, Race and Gender* (Jefferson, nc: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2018), pp. 270-287, 271.
[367] Vince McMahon, *Hulk Hogan - Say Your Prayers, Eat Your Vitamins*, YouTube, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0-dI4Sl2rzE.
[368] Jeffords, *Hard Bodies*, 15.

With a mainstream star in place, McMahon sought to control the national wrestling landscape through mergers and acquisitions with other local territories. Specifically, McMahon focused on large metropolitan populations on the West Coast**.** The California territories had been declining in popularity for over a decade, as wrestling promotions failed to create new stars to replace those from the 1950s. McMahon purchased Michael Lebell's Los Angeles-based territory and television contracts for roughly one million dollars.[369] The move paid off as it allowed McMahon easier access to media moguls in Hollywood such as NBC president Dick Ebersol, who spoke glowingly of McMahon as an influence on his career.[370] This type of acquisition enraged wrestling fans and promoters but was a tactic commonplace in Reagan's corporate America. "Mergers and acquisitions were two of the many ways American companies were attempting to get up to speed in this new environment, and the Reagan Administration did everything it could to ease them through that transition, Louis Galambos writes, and "the United States was developing the world's most lively market for corporate control…" [371] In the 1950s, the National Wrestling Alliance faced the wrath of the Sherman Anti-Trust Act, but won in court.[372] Under Reagan's loosened regulation over monopolistic activities, McMahon never faced such opposition.[373]

[369] Michael Lebell Vs. Vincent K. McMahon (Superior Court of California for the City of Los Angeles, June 12, 1985).
[370] Dick Ebersol, *From Saturday Night to Sunday Night: My Forty Years of Laughter, Tears, and Touchdowns in TV* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2022), 131.
[371] Kenneth Lipartito and Louis Galambos, "The Monopoly Enigma, the Reagan Administration's Antitrust Experiment and the Global Economy," in *Constructing Corporate America: History, Politics, Culture* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 149-168.
[372] United States v. National Wrestling Alliance, *Wrestling Perspective* (United States District Court for the Southern District of Iowa, Central Division, 1956).
[373] Dave Meltzer, *Wrestling Observer*, April 1984.

Vince McMahon's goal was a monopoly over the entire wrestling industry beyond the choreographed violence in the ring. To achieve his goal, McMahon evolved the WWF from strictly a wrestling company to a multimedia conglomerate. McMahon started his own wrestling magazine in 1983 with the idea of cannibalizing the successful wrestling magazines, some of which had existed for over thirty years. [374] In a predominately local cultural medium, wrestling magazines ran nationally exposing the greatest wrestling attractions from around the country to a wider audience. McMahon's plan helped to bring the best wrestlers with the greatest followings to his company and allowed him to take the national media exposure away from the wrestlers and promoters who stayed with his opposition.

McMahon also sought to distance his product from traditional wrestling. Territorial wrestling maintained a degree of realism to their performances which alienated respectable audiences and advertisers who believed the false sport was low-rent. McMahon restructured his product to eliminate believability and become strictly entertainment. McMahon invented the term "sports entertainment" to replace professional wrestling. In an interview with stockholders in 2018, Stephanie McMahon, Vince McMahon Jr.'s daughter, explained; "Advertisers either had adverse reactions to the words 'professional wrestling' or they simply did not understand what it was. So how could we create a term or a label potential partners could understand… that's when we coined the term "sports entertainment."[375] McMahon was not interested in promoting his

[374] Bill Apter and Jerry Lawler, *Is Wrestling Fixed? I Didn't Know It Was Broken!: My Incredible pro Wrestling Journey... and beyond!* (Toronto, Ontario, Canada: ECW Press, 2015), 51.
[375] Sean Ross Sapp, "Stephanie McMahon Announces Resignation from WWE, Vince McMahon Voted Executive Chairman of the Board," Fightful News, May 1, 2018,

product to traditional wrestling fans, but to the millions who rejected wrestling as a second-rate false sport. McMahon wanted those audiences to fall in love with the spectacle and ballyhoo of wrestling, to bath in the absurdity rather than lose themselves in the sport.

McMahon commodified wrestling by turning it into a brand capable of sustaining a profit based on its name and logo alone. Many, like Watts and Jarrett, believed a superior product would eventually allow them to topple McMahon. However, McMahon looked to use wrestling to create a multimedia company, in which wrestling was one of many products. McMahon tells a story about a phone call he received from Ted Turner when Turner bought Mid-Atlantic Wrestling which signifies this transition. According to McMahon, Turner called him to tell him, "Vince I'm in the Rasslin' business." McMahon purportedly responded, "That's very nice Ted; I'm in the Sports Entertainment business."[376] McMahon understood wrestling was not enough to sustain a profitable company, but marketing wrestling produced enough avenues for revenue to keep the business strong, even when the wrestling product no longer attracted the same number of fans.

McMahon's greatest achievement was changing the media's narrative around and acceptance of professional wrestling. McMahon's movement to "sports entertainment" opened the doors to new fans and media by exposing the falseness of his product to the media. This allowed the media and the consumer to feel that they were now part of the production. In July 1985, famed Philadelphia Sportswriter Ray Didinger wrote a five-part

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https://www.fightful.com/wrestling/stephanie-mcmahon-explains-sports-entertainment-was-created-advertisers.

[376] Vince McMahon, *The Monday Night War: WWE Raw vs. WCW Nitro*, DVD (WWE, 2004).

expose on the professional wrestling business and how it garnered fans and exploited its wrestlers.[25] While Didinger's piece was not all flattering to wrestling and the WWF, it still garnered large scale interest and forced promoters like Bill Watts to reluctantly do newspaper interviews to refute the idea that wrestling was predetermined. [377] The success of the piece convinced the producers of the television program *20/20* to run with Didinger's premise and conduct their own expose on the wrestling business as an eleven-minute feature hosted by John Stossel. Rather than fighting against the attention (like Watts), McMahon let Stossel backstage at his events. McMahon used the piece to create publicity to sell his new great invention, a closed-circuit pay-per-view spectacular titled WrestleMania.

The1984 expose on *20/20* on professional wrestling hosted by John Stossel went behind the scenes of the World Wrestling Federation. The segment ended with John Stossel interviewing Southern wrestler David Schultz. Since Schultz was a true Southern wrestler protective of the secrets of wrestling, he was hostile to Stosell's question.[378] When Stossel asked the magic question, "isn't this all fake," Schultz slaps him twice across the face, sending Stossel to his knees.[379] Schultz later claimed McMahon coached him to be aggressive toward Stossel. Schultz's recounting of the event suggests McMahon hoped to a create a moment similar to Lawler slapping Kaufman. The parallels are difficult to ignore; a Southern wrestler slapping a smug outsider questioning the reality of wrestling on NBC television. Whether an attempt to copy the *Late Night* scuffle

[377] Dean Balley, "Searching for the Truth: 'Cowboy Bill' Slams Series," *The Daily Oklahoman*, July 26, 1985, pp. 128-129, https://www.newspapers.com/image/451625767/?terms=bill%20watts&match=1.
[378] "David Schultz and the Slap Heard 'Round the World," *Dark Side of the Ring* (Vice TV, April 28, 2020)
[379] "Pro Wrestling Exposed," *20/20* (NBC, December 28, 1984).

or a totally improvised moment, the effect was the same: a national conversation about the frenzied wrestling world. The difference being McMahon's ability to capitalize on the media attention.

McMahon also seized upon a bit of controversy involving his two main event stars, Hulk Hogan and television star Lawrence "Mr. T." Tureaud. Hogan and T. went on a media tour to promote the first ever WrestleMania. On March 20, 1985, the two men appeared on Richard Belzer's television talk show *Hot Properties*.[380] While on the show, the comedian Belzer egged on Hogan to put him in a wrestling maneuver. Belzer copied the antics of Kaufman, noting the whole thing was just a show and mocked T. and Hogan for being fake athletes. Hogan whispered to T. loud enough for the cameras to pick it up: "I'm gonna make him squeal." [381]Belzer requests Hogan perform his signature leg drop, but Hulk declines and tells Belzer he is going to demonstrate the most basic hold in wrestling, the headlock. The move is one of the simplest yet effective moves in combat, as all it requires is an arm around an opponent's neck and that cuts off blood flow to the brain. A quick squeeze can render any man unconscious. Indeed, within seconds Belzer goes limp and when Hogan lets go, he crashed headfirst to the floor. The event shocked the audience and garnered national publicity when T. discussed the incident on David Letterman's *Late Night* program, and *Sports Illustrated* later produced a cover story on Hulk Hogan.[382]

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[380] David Shoemaker, "Wrestling's Greatest Shoots, 'WrestleMania' Edition: Hulk Hogan vs. Richard Belzer," *Grantland,* April 2, 2014, https://grantland.com/the-triangle/wrestlings-greatest-shoots-wrestlemania-edition-hulk-hogan-vs-richard-belzer/.
[381] Shoemaker, "Wrestling's Greatest Shoots, 'WrestleMania' Edition: Hulk Hogan vs. Richard Belzer," *Grantland.*
[382] *Sports Illustrated,* April 29, 1985, Cover.

Southern Wrestling had, over the course of the early 1980s, modernized by introducing rock music both as music videos and entrance themes for wrestlers. McMahon ratcheted up the connection between rock and wrestling even further. Just three years after his father scoffed at the idea of bringing in Andy Kaufman, McMahon invested in celebrity. In an interview with D.C. Denison, McMahon notes that wrestling and rock go well together as the two are never boring. He observed that rock superstar Cindi Lauper, an avid wrestling fan, contributed to the popularity of his burgeoning wrestling empire. McMahon noted that Lauper fit the WWF because "she relates in general to the wrestling audience, which is somewhat similar to the rock audience. Our audience is broader… but the 18 to 35 audience is the same."[383] Lauper's carefree attitude and outrageous 1980s look made her feel right at home within the circus of McMahon's WWF. McMahon would reach a younger global audience through rock music and the newly established MTV.

Beyond the connection with popular culture figures like Mr. T and Cyndi Lauper, the biggest move to legitimize the WWF as a modern representative of the 1980's zeitgeist was a partnership with MTV. Lauper's "Girls Just Wanna Have Fun" music video was in heavy rotation on MTV featuring former wrestler Captain Lou Albano, and MTV jumped at the opportunity to have the WWF on their station in some capacity. Lauper challenged Albano to a match between two selected surrogates. Lauper selected up-and-coming wrestler Wendi Richter as her competitor, while Albano picked veteran heel Fabulous Moolah. McMahon titled the event *The Brawl to End It All* and it aired on

[383] Dave Meltzer, *Wrestling Observer*, March 5, 1981.

July 23rd, 1984.[384] The following February, the WWF held another on MTV called *The War to Settle the Score*. The two events averaged roughly a 9.0 Nielsen rating, roughly nine times the average rating for MTV in the same time slot.[385] Fans labeled this era of the WWF as "Rock 'N Wrestling" (based on the cartoon of the same name), as WWF and MTV formed a mutually beneficial partnership. The WWF brought their loyal audience to MTV drawing record ratings for the startup cable network, in return, MTV gave WWF a mystique of coolness for the much sought-after teenage demographic.

McMahon's need to cultivate younger audiences went beyond teenagers obsessed with MTV; he also attracted children by promoting his wrestlers as something akin to superheroes. In addition to the many live shows and televised wrestling programs, McMahon utilized merchandizing on an international scale to expand the reach of his brand. The most lucrative enterprise would be toys. The WWF began a collaboration with LJN, a domestic toy manufacturer. LJN produced "Wrestling Superstars," a line of action figures featuring the WWF's most popular wrestlers.[386] A short-run Saturday morning cartoon titled, *Hulk Hogan's Rock N Wrestling*, demonstrated that the WWF was entertainment meant to be watched and purchased by the whole family. McMahon's obsession with marketing his product became more important than wrestling itself. Jim Cornette recalled that when he t met McMahon for the first time in the early 1990s, it was not Cornette' in-ring ability which interested him; it was what dolls McMahon could

[384] "The Brawl to End It All," *WWF* (MTV, July 23, 1984).
[385] Jon Pareles, "MTV Makes Changes," *New York Times*, June 12, 1986, p. 76, https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1986/06/12/580986.html?pageNumber=76.
[386] "Professional Wrestling," *The Toys That Made Us* (Netflix, November 15, 2019), https://www.netflix.com/title/80161497?source=35.

sell.[387] Much like comic book movies and Saturday morning cartoons, the wrestlers existed to sell merchandise.

Merchandizing tie-ins were not a new concept. *Star Wars* was the greatest box office success of all time but was perhaps even more successful as a mover of merchandise, specifically toys. In 1978, just one year after the release of Star Wars, the movie already had sold more than one hundred million dollars in merchandise. With the release of *Empire Strikes Back* and *Return of the Jedi*, *Star Wars* creator George Lucas developed television cartoons which not only advertised movies, but also new characters and toys.[388] In the 1980s, high-profile films like *E.T.* learned from *Star Wars*' massive merchandizing success and made their movies into money-making machines that produced profits far beyond the films' release window. Action figures, cartoons, video games, and breakfast cereals were all common products that entertainment media could churn out to hungry children and adults alike.

However, merchandizing tie-ins also benefited from the deregulation of advertising in the 1980s. In the 1970s, the FTC attempted to crack down on the amount of advertising targeted at children on television. The central concern was that television aimed at children did not have high moral or educational value. However, attempts to make more enlightened programming and advertising for children faltered in the 1980s. A defunded FTC admitted defeat on the quality of children's programming in a 1980 report.

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[387] Cornette, *RF Video Shoot With Jim Cornette*, Highspots Wrestling Network.
[388] Alex Ben Block, "The Real Force behind 'Star Wars': How George Lucas Built an Empire," *The Hollywood Reporter*, February 10, 2022, https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/general-news/george-lucas-star-wars-288513/.

> While the rulemaking record establishes that child-oriented television advertising is a legitimate cause for public concern, there do not appear to be, at the present time, workable solutions which the Commission can implement through rulemaking in response to the problems articulated during the course of the proceeding.[389]

Deregulation of ad time meant that companies could begin advertising products specifically to children without interference. More than ever, children's consumption controlled the marketplace. "Perhaps the bigger reasons for marketers' interest in kids may be the amount of adult spending that American kids under twelve now directly influence—an astronomical 700 billion dollars a year."[390]

McMahon's gamble to move away from wrestling as a sport and turn it into a spectacle for the masses paid off, even as it drove away many fervent fans of traditional wrestling. While even the most fervent critics enjoyed the spectacle, most wrestling magazines derided the technical quality of the matches and continued railing against McMahon's insistence on invading opposing territories with his outlandish brand of wrestling. McMahon's WrestleMania, publicized by MTV with the addition of Cyndi Lauper, Mr. T, and even Muhammad Ali, was surrounded by controversy. However, the event was an overwhelming financial success. The event drew almost 20,000 fans to Madison Square Garden and made record profits on closed-circuit television.[391] McMahon gambled his wealth and company on national expansion and WrestleMania was his winning hand.

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[389] Carol J. Jennings, "Advertising to Kids and the FTC: A Regulatory Retrospective That Advises the Present," Advertising to Kids and the FTC: A Regulatory Retrospective That Advises the Present,"(2004), https://www.ftc.gov/sites/default/files/documents/public_statements/advertising-kids-and-ftc-regulatory-retrospective-advises-present/040802adstokids.pdf, 7.
[390] *Consuming Kids: The Commercialization of Childhood* (Media Education Foundation, 2008).
[391] Brian Shields, *Main Event: WWE in the Raging 80s* (New York, NY: Pocket Books, 2006), p.148.

Despite the burgeoning popularity of the WWF to young, white, middle-class audiences, McMahon struggled to capture the hearts of Southerners. McMahon's World Wrestling Federation failed in Southern markets, partly because of loyalty to regional professional wrestling territories. Unlike territories in California, Detroit, Chicago, and Canada, the regional promotions in the South reached unprecedented popularity in the years before their complete collapse in the late 1980s. For fans, both young and old, familiarity and connection meant the WWF was playing a losing game attempting to infiltrate a market already monopolized by successful promotions. Weekly shows from local wrestling promotions kept Southern consumers well fed in terms of wrestling products.

In their first foray into Memphis, The WWF fared well; however, subsequent performances brought diminishing returns. On September 11, 1986, the WWF drew roughly six thousand fans to the Mid-South Coliseum, approximately the same attendance as the biggest Continental Wrestling shows of the period.[392] The WWF often ran three events a day in different cities across the country, and so different wrestlers appeared on different shows. For the first Memphis event, McMahon sent his A-list stars including Hulk Hogan.[393] However, the next event, which occurred in May 1987, drew an embarrassing 700 people.[394] In the WWF's first visit to Jackson, MS, in 1984, they drew 4,000 fans. The previous night, they drew over 16,000 in Chicago.[395] Mid-South Wrestling routinely drew over 6,000 fans in Jackson, MS until the sale of the UWF in

[392] Graham Cawthon, *The History of Professional Wrestling Volume 1: The WWF 19863 - 1989* (Self-Published, 2014), 560.
[393] Cawthon, *The History of Professional Wrestling Volume 1*, 615.
[394] Cawthon, *The History of Professional Wrestling Volume 1*, 615.
[395] Cawthon, *The History of Professional Wrestling Volume 1*, 616.

1987. The following year, WWF ran a show in the Atlanta Omni, and drew only 900 fans.[396] This contrasts with Memphis Wrestling's popularity throughout 1984 and 1985 in which they drew fans at a nearly historic rate with attendance ranging from 5,000 to 10,000 on an almost weekly basis in the Mid-South Coliseum.[397]

The WWF's attempt to control its own media narrative also failed in the South. National wrestling magazines and newsletters covered Southern wrestling and the NWA favorably compared to the WWF which helped sustain Southern wrestling fans' belief they supported the superior product. This was in-part a response by magazine editors to McMahon's creation of a single WWF magazine.[398] The magazines and newsletters dismissed McMahon and the WWF product, telling the diehard wrestling fanbase that the WWF product was little more than a flash in the pan. In the Fall 1985 issue of *Wrestling Magazine,* editors mocked the debut of the WWF's *Saturday Night's Main Event* on NBC. The show was a seminal moment of national media attention exposure for the WWF, as NBC president Brandon Tartikoff gave McMahon *Saturday Night Live*'s time slot on special occasions throughout the year.[399] Editors for Wrestling Magazine buried coverage of the show in the middle of the magazine and panned it for including music videos and hijinks which made wrestling look silly and fake. "By allowing his wrestlers to take part… Vince McMahon is all about condoning marriage for the sake of money. It's wrong and he knows it; but somehow the money makes it okay. He knows that there is the very real risk that fans will never be able to take a feud involving these people

[396] Cawthon, *The History of Professional Wrestling Volume 1,* 616.
[397] James, *Memphis Wrestling History: Tennessee Record Book 1980 -1989*, 370.
[398] Apter, "Shoot Interview With Bill Apter," *Highspots Wrestling Network.*
[399] Hornbaker, *Death of the Territories*, 142.

seriously again, but he doesn't care."[400] McMahon's branding brought attention from advertisers and middle-America, but alienated devoted territorial wrestling fans.

McMahon struggled to attract Southern audiences in-part because of his depiction of Southern characters. While many WWF stars either began their career in the South or were of Southern descent, McMahon whitewashed their Southern identity. McMahon was notorious for disliking regionalism in his product, specifically Southern qualities. As recently as 2019, WWE wrestlers complained that their Southern accents limited their aspirations as a wrestler. Former WWE wrestler Cash Wheeler said in an interview, "It wasn't just a Vince thing, I think a lot of the upper management there… they just think with a southern accent, you'll only go so far."[401] McMahon, born and raised in North Carolina, saw the South as a place to escape, not to sell.

WWF did not completely erase Southern culture from the ring. Instead, Southern characters in the WWF reverted to cultural stereotypes stemming back to the early twentieth century. The most famous Southern character in the WWF was Hillbilly Jim. Kentucky-born James Morris portrayed the hillbilly simpleton. At six-foot-and-seven-inches tall with a toned physique, he was an imposing figure, who appealed to McMahon when creating his league of superheroes. In Continental Wrestling, Morris portrayed the character Harley Davidson, the leader of a motorcycle gang. However, McMahon saw the potential to exploit Morris's enormous stature and thick Kentucky accent to create another cartoon character to appeal to families in Middle America. While Hillbilly Jim was a tough guy when in the ring, as his theme song "Don't Go Messin' With a Country

[400] Stu Saks, "Wrestling Returns to Network TV," *Wrestling 85*, 1985, pp. 40-60, 60.
[401] "The Revival of The Revolt," *Talk Is Jericho*, May 6, 2020, https://talk-is-jericho.simplecast.com/episodes/the-revival-of-the-revolt.

Boy" suggests, he was ultimately a dancing simpleton to be mocked by fans. Like The Junkyard Dog, the Southern working-class character lacked all semblance of realism. The fervent regionalism and pride of the South made the WWF's insulting portrayals of once great wrestling heroes a tough sell.[402]

The key to McMahon's takeover of the wrestling world was that it was never about wrestling. While McMahon pillaged the best wrestlers around the country, he never wanted to put on the best wrestling matches or to court wrestling fans, instead he wanted to create something entirely different to appeal to middle America and corporate America. Through mass marketing, McMahon created a juggernaut of sports entertainment bent on erasing the rest of the wrestling world. He would succeed, but the Southern wrestling territories were not leaving without a fight.

III. Collapse of Mid-South

Despite the devotion of Southern wrestling fans to local wrestling and their distaste for the WWF, the Southern territories ultimately succumbed to the national. In 1984, Mid-South Wrestling achieved record profits. The "Last Stampede," which featured the retirement tour of Bill Watts and the Junk Yard Dog's last matches in the territory, was an unbridled economic success. Introducing young wrestlers (signed in a talent trade with Continental Wrestling), including the Rock and Roll Express, the Midnight Express, and Jim Cornette, helped bring in younger audiences attracted to young wrestlers and an entertaining fast-paced style. Despite the boom in popularity and record profits, a downturn in the Sunbelt economy, changes in production and style,

[402] James Morris, *Hillbilly Jim Shoot Interview*, Highspots Wrestling Network, https://www.highspotswrestlingnetwork.com/media/hillbilly-jim-shoot-interview/85107.

changes to television regulation, and external competition combined to put them out of business by the end of the decade.

In the late-1980s, the spread of cable television played a role in the demise of the regional territories. Writing for the *Washington Post*, Ron Wright notes that the widespread availability of cable in the 1980s changed television for the better. Audiences felt these changes most in the late 1980s, "cable television passed the 50 percent barrier. At that point, more American homes were getting TV from cable than from over-the-air broadcasts. It gave the cable industry a huge lift in advertising revenue and ushered in an era of greater expectations for viewers."[403] With the spread of national cable television came greater competition for viewership. The proliferation of channel choices provided viewing options unavailable to Americans for the first half century of television history.

Moreso than the maturation of cable television, the rise of infomercials weakened regional television. Wrestling was a staple of local television since the 1950s. Stations saw wrestling as an inexpensive way to gain a large and dedicated viewership throughout the country. Many territories provided the weekly television for free or a small cut of the advertising revenue. Wrestling promoters believed this was necessary to garner interest in fans and sell tickets to the local matches. However, in 1984 the FCC loosened its regulation of television. Television deregulation was part of the conservative push for less bureaucratic oversight. Conservatives viewed this as a necessary change as the number of television stations had risen exponentially for forty years.[404] In 1950, the FCC regulated

[403] Ron Miller, "The '80s Were Big for TV," *The Washington Post* (WP Company, December 24, 1989), https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/lifestyle/tv/1989/12/24/the-80s-were-big-for-tv/fce422b1-9857-4335-a1f6-ecb2461ac8c6/.
[404]Heidi R Young, "The Deregulation of Commercial Television," *Fordham Urban Law Journal* 12, no. 2 (1985): pp. 373-393, https://ir.lawnet.fordham.edu/ulj/vol12/iss2/1.

roughly 98 total stations nationwide. By 1985, there were 1,197 stations.[405] The FCC's 1984 Deregulation Report and Order significantly lessened oversight of station and eliminated restrictions on program length advertisements.[406] Popularly known as infomercials, Direct Response Television (DRTV) came to dominate the late-night television landscape.

In the 1980s, most paid programming came from local businesses seeking an opportunity to introduce their local company or new product to the market. These infomercials made up approximately 97 percent of DRTV.[407] For the first time, television programmers took a check from a local business and put on a tape requiring no work at all. With the popularity of this form of advertisement, competition and prices for television time rose throughout the 1980s and into the 1990s. While these programs could not match the ratings or popularity of wrestling, the guaranteed money was difficult to pass up. This required wrestling promoters to either drive interest in their product so that advertising rates could compete with infomercials or pay increased prices to air their television. McMahon exacerbated this problem for many wrestling promoters as he offered large sums of money to local stations to air the WWF in place of local wrestling and infomercials.

However, the issues of national competition from the WWF and the changes to the television landscape alone were not enough to destroy territorial wrestling. Instead,

[405] Julia Stoll, "Number of Commercial TV Stations in the U.S. 2017," Statista, July 7, 2021, https://www.statista.com/statistics/189655/number-of-commercial-television-stations-in-the-us-since-1950/.
[406] Young, "The Deregulation of Commercial Television."
[407] The Week Staff, "The Lucrative Secret behind Infomercials," *The Week* (The Week, January 11, 2015), https://theweek.com/articles/454561/lucrative-secret-behind-infomercials.

evaluation of the various promotions in the South demonstrates that it was disastrous economic circumstances, some within and some outside the promoters' control, which hurt territorial wrestling. The success of Continental Wrestling in Memphis in the 1980s and 1990s indicate the territories themselves still appealed to local fans, but it became clear that the success they achieved in the early 1980s was no longer possible. At the end of the territorial era, there was only one challenger to Vince McMahon's monopoly over wrestling, Atlanta-based billionaire Ted Turner.

In 1984, the rivalry between Turner and McMahon began with the disastrous "Black Saturday." While Turner and his company touted the WWF as a ratings success, behind-the-scenes Turner and loyal NWA fans were upset with being treated as an afterthought by the WWF.[408] At the end of 1984, Mid-South's most profitable year, Watts received an offer from WTBS to air Mid-South Wrestling. Watts recalls the offer was not just to air the show, but for Ted Turner to buy a fifty-percent stake in Mid-South as well.[409] Turner told Watts he would get out of his contract with McMahon and start airing Mid-South in 1985. Negotiations stalled when McMahon refused to terminate his deal with Turner, presumably to keep Watts and other promoters from taking the time slot and gaining a competitive edge. Turner responded by forbidding WWF to run their own advertising and demanded they stop all programming on other cable networks. McMahon, fearing a legal fight with Turner, sold his contract to Crockett for roughly one million dollars, (which he later used to help fund the first WrestleMania).[410]

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[408]Bob Michals, "Factions Wrestle For Ring Control," *The Palm Beach Post*, October 15, 1984, p. 24,

[409] Watts and Williams, *The Cowboy and the Cross*, 639.

[410] "Wrestling Match Costs Turner 2 Top Shows," *Fort Lauderdale News*, April 29, 1985, pp. 76-78.

Mid-South Wrestling on TBS was only a placeholder until Turner could finalize a deal with Jim Crockett's Mid-Atlantic Wrestling. Mid-Atlantic Wrestling began on TBS in April 1985. Turner agreed that Mid-Atlantic and Crockett would hold exclusive rights to wrestling on the television station.[411] Turner, familiar with the famous wrestlers under contract with Crockett, including Dusty Rhodes and Ric Flair, believed Mid-Atlantic Wrestling was the safest bet to draw consistent viewership. However, the contractual exclusivity left Mid-South Wrestling without national television exposure.

The following year, in March 1986, Bill Watts rebranded his promotion as the Universal Wrestling Federation. Watts wanted his promotion to be less "regional," or more pointedly, less Southern. According to Jim Ross, Watts's main television announcer and the man Watts put in charge of selling the UWF television show to various syndication and cable networks, the game plan was to expand slowly to the national level. Ross noted they borrowed their game plan from an unlikely source. "This young airline, Southwest Airlines was really taking off… You don't want to be called regional. You don't make any money being regional… but the Southwest Airlines map was where we wanted to start from and expand from there."[412] The UWF planned to expand throughout the Sunbelt and later into the rest of the country.

This expansion of the UWF came at a disastrous time. Watts, like most of the wealthy men in Oklahoma, was not expecting the price of oil to collapse in the mid-1980s. *The New York Times* quoted Oklahoma oilman Don Hughes:

> There was not a week that at least three bankers from the major banks weren't here trying to loan me more money for more rigs. Chase Manhattan, Continental

[411] Hornbaker, *Death of the Territories*, 142.
[412] Jim Ross, *Jim Ross Shoots on What Could Have Happened to the UWF*, YouTube, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tX-8oQ_e-Ro.

> Illinois, Seafirst. They told me I was a shining star… And here I am just an oilfield hand. I kept believing what all these people were telling me."[413]

Economists and journalists were uncertain of what the continued fall of oil prices due to overproduction would mean for the economy; however, for the men and women who profited on the oil fields the change was sudden and drastic. Watts, a successful business manager and wrestler for decades, struggled with a rapidly deteriorating southern economy, his customers, like Don Hughes, were feeling the brunt of the economic despair.

Watts believed the downfall of his business was caused by the oil bust. He said in an interview, "Let me tell you we didn't get beat. Every time he (McMahon) came here we kicked his ass. We embarrassed him. What beat us was when the oil crunch hit and wiped out the oil states."[414] Indeed, in March 1986 (the year before UWF closed for good), oil prices plummeted to $28.56 a barrel, down from $79.24 in March 1985.[415] Watts' partners in Houston faced a similar economic disaster. Houston promoter Peter Birkholz noted in his autobiography that his territory struggled not simply due to the audiences' decreased spending power, but also due to the increased expenses coming in from state taxes and arena fees levied as oil revenue fell. Birkholz explains:

> At the same time, the city of Houston changed the lease for the Sam Houston Coliseum, increasing rental fees and staffing by almost one hundred percent, which made it more difficult to make money. The State of Texas continued to enforce an additional 6.25% sales tax on all wrestling tickets, besides the 3% state

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[413] Robert Reinhold, "Desperation Descends on Oklahoma," *New York Times*, May 11, 1986, sec. 3, p. 226, https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1986/05/11/752186.html?pageNumber=226.

[414] Watts, *RF Shoot Interview With Bill Watts*, Highspots Wrestling Network.

[415] "Crude Oil Prices - 70 Year Historical Chart," MacroTrends, https://www.macrotrends.net/1369/crude-oil-price-history-chart.

> commission tax which had been levied against professional wrestling live gates since the thirties.[416]

While the rest of the country benefited from lower gas prices, the unemployment rate in Louisiana was nearly double that of the rest of the country. In 1986, the state of Louisiana's unemployment rate went to 10.5 percent. Louisana's poverty rate also skyrocketed during this time.[417] Watts personally felt the effects from over spending and the oil crash. "I'm telling you we were just doing fine. And then all sudden when that thing hit…when the bottom dropped out of oil, it was like a spigot turned it off. I started losing $50,000 every week. That wasn't Monopoly money. That's out of my pocket. That's a hell of a deal."[418]

The oil glut was only one aspect of the crumbling façade of the Sunbelt. Despite the utopian vision of the Sunbelt, the Southern working class was not exempt from the hard times faced by working classes around the country during the Reagan era. Farmers in Southern states like Oklahoma had suffered from an economic recession beginning with the grain embargo of the Soiest Union in the late-1970s. While the farm bust of the 1980s hit hardest in the mid-west, but the shockwaves reached the mid-South. Although the farm bill of 1985 helped farmers get back on their feet after years of massive debts at high interest rates, the overall effect was a mass exodus from rural areas for industrial

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[416] Peter Birkholz, *When Wrestling Was Rasslin': The Wild and Exciting inside Story of Legendary Houston Wrestling* (Coppell, TX: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2012), 176.
[417] Robert D. Bullard, *In Search of the New South: The Black Urban Experience in the 1970s and 1980s* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 1991), 49.
[418] Watts, *RF Video Shoot with Bill Watts*, Highspots Wreslting Network.

metropolitan areas in the South and <id-west. Rural communities saw their community size and relevance decrease throughout the decade.[419]

Many within the industrial working class found the kinds of jobs available shifting. The goods-producing industries of steel and coal mining, textile manufacturing, and oil production fell significantly in the 1980s. Conversely, the service industry grew steadily, though these jobs often paid substantially less than goods-producing jobs.[420] The elimination of factory and mining jobs coincided with a steady decline in wages for the working-class compared to the rest of America. From 1979 to 2005, the average wage of workers with a college degree grew 28 percent. In comparison, wages for workers with only a high school diploma fell two percent and wages for high school dropout fell 18 percent.[421] While manufacturing jobs increased throughout the 1980s, there were already cracks forming in those sectors in the early-1980s. Manufacturing of automobiles and consumer electronics moved almost exclusively to Japan, leading to a sharp decrease in these jobs. Increasingly, too, Reagan's shrinking of government regulation over the stock market led to an increase in business decisions which helped stockholders ahead of the industry and employees. Soon, American firms were looking for cheaper labor around the world to compete with countries like Japan. Heading into the 1990s, the jobs which had sustained the working class since the New Deal slowly faded.

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[419] "Aftermath: The Farm Crisis of the 1980s," Morning Ag Clips, January 20, 2023, https://www.morningagclips.com/aftermath-the-farm-crisis-of-the-1980s/.
[420] Lois M Plunkert, "The 1980's: A Decade of Job Growth and Industry Shift," *Monthly Labor Review*, September 1990, pp. 3-16, 5.
[421]Alan Abramowitz and Ruy Teixeira, "The Decline of the White Working Class and the Rise of a Mass Upper-Middle Class," *Political Science Quarterly* 124, no. 3 (2009): pp. 391-422, 394. https://doi.org/10.1002/j.1538-165x.2009.tb00653.x.

Since the height of the Great Depression, popular culture proved impervious to the ravages of economic downturns, but in the 1980s, popular culture's evolution meant that Southerners now had a multitude of entertainment options available to them. The post-Civil Rights era led to an increase in professional sports teams throughout the Mid-South. Cable television sent a steady stream of entertainment right to people's televisions, including more sports and more wrestling. To keep Southern audiences, Watts needed to evolve his product and create superstars to replace Junk Yard Dog who could compete with the wrestling stars on national television. Stars like Oklahoma wrestler Dr. Death Steve Williams and Terry "Bam Bam" Gordy put on critically acclaimed matches but did not capture the imagination of Southern audiences. While no doubt economic factors played a part in the decline of Southern wrestling, its decline in popularity was also self-inflicted. Increasingly, the product became less exciting and less Southern. Mid-South and Continental Wrestling presented a product which Southern wrestling fans no longer felt a close connection to and could no longer afford.[422]

Watts's embrace of national wrestling also eliminated much of his company's connection with local audiences. Without local flavor, from the intimate confines of the Shreveport Boys' Club to the Southern announcers, the UWF became just another national production with inferior production values and less charismatic characters than the WWF.[423] Watts's gentrification of his product also demonstrates that McMahon was not alone in his distaste for regionalism in his presentation. Watts, born and raised in Oklahoma, saw the South as a detriment in the presentation of a national wrestling

[422] "The Movies Meet the Great Depression," *Digital history*, 2021, https://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/topic_display.cfm?tcid=125.
[423] Watts, *Cowboy and the Cross*, 642.

product. Watts believed both advertisers and fans around the country would see Southern men and hear Southern voices and assume his wrestling was second rate. Mainstream entertainment no longer sought to alienate the South by propagating negative Southern stereotypes, but since the rural purge of television in the 1960s, television executives had avoided programs with a uniquely Southern appeal, believing Southerners lacked sufficient buying power to appease advertisers.[424] In making his productwds more friendly to national advertisers, Watts made himself the third or fourth place wrestling show in the country, rather the number one wrestling show in the South. Southern audiences buying power surely fell in the oil glut of the 1980s, but they were also increasingly presented with a product which no longer appealed to them in the form of the new UWF.

The UWF never truly became a national product. Despite paying exorbitant fees for television deals around the country, Watts continued to run his live events almost exclusively in the Mid-South region. Part of the appeal of national syndicated television was the ability to push the promotion into new areas and use television to attract audiences to live events around the country. A brief tour of the West Coast brought in modest profits, but the UWF had limited success running live shows in other markets.[425] Watts paid extraordinary fees, like McMahon, to air his television shows in local markets around the country but did not capitalize on those television contracts by running live events or exploiting merchandising opportunities. Watts further sent himself into debt by signing his talent to high-paying guaranteed contracts (an effort to avoid McMahon

[424] Josh Ozersky, *Archie Bunker's America: TV in an ERA of Change, 1968-1978* (Carbondale, Il: Southern Illinois U.P., 2003), Introduction.
[425] Hornbaker, *Death of the Territories*, 202.

signing them) at a time when the UWF's revenue decreased substantially. Watts, already hit hard by the oil crisis, exacerbated the economic turmoil of his company with poor budgeting and planning.[426]

IV. Mid-Atlantic and Ted Turner Try to Save Wrestling

On April 9 of 1987, Watts finally gave in and agreed to sell his promotion to Jim Crockett.[427] Just a few months earlier, the UWF still drew over 6,000 fans to Albuquerque, NM. Even at the lowest point of their popularity, the most loyal fans still packed in to see the stars they had grown to love. However, the loyalty and money of a passionate but small fanbase was not enough to keep Watts' pocketbook lined. Jim Crockett and his Mid-Atlantic territory hoped to take the fight to McMahon with all guns blazing, by purchasing the Florida territory and the UWF. The purchase of the UWF, in theory, gave Crockett an advantage over the WWF in the Southeast and Southwest and a deeper talent roster. However, as Dave Meltzer argued in the *Wrestling Observer*, was an an uphill battle as long as the WWF had Hulk Hogan. "Hulk Hogan, by himself, is worth more than any other 30 wrestlers in terms of a marketing tool and drawing card." [428] The entire UWF purchase failed spectacularly at changing the fortunes of Mid-Atlantic Wrestling. Many UWF stars, including Ted DiBiase, Jim Duggan, and Jaker Roberts, left for the WWF. The UWF stars who went to Mid-Atlantic hardly ever won their matches. Crockett believed the syndicated television of the UWF would serve them as well;

[426] Hornbaker, *Death of the Territories*, 189.
[427] Dave Meltzer, *Wrestling Observer*, 4/13/1987, 2.
[428] Meltzer, *Wrestling Observer*, 4/13/1987, 1.

however, the World Championship Wrestling program on TBS already reached more homes than the UWF.[429]

Mid-Atlantic, in its national expansion, pursued a different direction than the middle-class superhero Hulk Hogan. The relationship between Ric Flair and Dusty Rhodes dated to the early 1970s when rookie wrestler Flair worked as something of an apprentice to the heel tag team of the Texas Outlaws, which comprised Dusty Rhodes and Dick Murdoch in the Minnesota-based territory the American Wrestling Alliance.[430] Rhodes and Murdoch were one of the most despised teams in wrestling history for their dirty redneck cowboy personas, which often spilled into their real lives. Eventually, Dusty set off as a solo star leaving the outlaw life and Murdoch and Flair behind. Dusty became a legendary hero in Florida, while Flair became the biggest villain in the history of the Carolinas. By the early 1980s, the two were destined to meet again, this time as rivals and the two biggest stars in the NWA.[431]

The difference between the rivalry of top stars Dusty Rhodes and Ric Flair and the phenomenon of WWF champion Hogan demonstrates the differences in the working-class audiences of the NWA and the middle-class audiences of the WWF. Dusty Rhodes, the great hero of Florida, became the NWA champion multiple times by appealing to the working class, and referring to himself as "The American Dream." While Rhodes became a star as one of the vilest villains in wrestling, his change of character from vicious

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[429] Jim Ross, *Slobberknocker: My Life In Wrestling* (New York, NY: Sports Publishing, 2020), 135.
[430] Flair often billed himself as being from North Carolina because of the decades spent wrestling in the area. However, Flair spent most of his life in Minnesota where he eventually trained to wrestle. Flair was actually born in Memphis, TN where he was adopted from Tennessee Children's Home Society as part of a baby kidnapping ring.
[431] Virgil Runnels, *Dusty Rhodes Shoot Interview*, Highspots Wrestling Network, https://www.highspotswrestlingnetwork.com/media/dusty-rhodes-shoot-interview/39625/feature.

cowboy to jive talking hero sent him into superstardom. Rhodes was pudgy with dirty curly, blond hair and a pronounced lisp. Far from the statuesque champions like Bruno Sammartino and Hulk Hogan, Rhodes looked like the average Joe in the audience.[432]

Ric Flair moved from the AWA and Minnesota to Charlotte and the Mid-Atlantic territory in the mid-1970s. Flair, a bodybuilder and football player in his youth, lost a massive amount of muscle and made himself into a lean, bleached-blond villain in the mold of Gorgeous George and Buddy Rogers. In fact, Flair took the moniker "The Nature Boy" from the infamous villain Rogers. Flair acquired a large amount of hatred (and popularity) throughout the 1970s as United States Champion, the second most prestigious title in the NWA. Flair's persona was that of arrogant pretty boy, and his underhanded victories earned him the secondary moniker "the dirtiest player in the game." Flair's elaborate jewel-studded, feather adorned robes and his egotistical strut (also a tribute to Rogers) made him a massive irritant to the burly, rugged heroes of the Carolinas.[433]

Ric Flair would be the symbol of the yuppy in Reagan's America. Flair bragged about his wealth and fame routinely in a bid to enrage working-class fans, such as one infamous promo in which he said:

> "It's so hard for me to sit back here in this studio, looking at a guy out here, hollering my name! When last year I spent more money, on spilled liquor, in bars from one side of this world to the other, than you made! You're talking to the Rolex wearing, diamond ring wearing, kiss stealing, whoa! Wheeling, dealing, limousine riding, jet flying son of a gun and I'm having a hard time holding these alligators down!" [434]

[432] "Dusty Rhodes," WWE, accessed February 12, 2023, https://www.wwe.com/superstars/dustyrhodes.
[433] *Woooooo! Becoming Ric Flair*, *Peacocktv* (WWE, 2022), https://www.peacocktv.com/watch-online/movies/woooooo-becoming-ric-flair/94a45ebc-5e83-3f3b-b405-398be721a8d3.
[434]Richard Fleihr,*The Nature Boy One Limosine Ridin Jet Flyin Son of a Gun WHOO*, Youtube, 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5qtvuV4mx4s.

Flair was a personification of greed, vanity, and consumerism, all qualities central to Reagan's America. Flair's suits, limousines, and diamond encrusted robes were symbols of 1980s yuppy excess, a symbol of what unregulated capitalism and ego could bring under Reagan's America.

Rhodes's real-life background as a Texas-born son of a plumber gave him a legitimate connection to Southern working-class audiences attending the matches each week. The pronounced lisp did not stand in the way of Rhodes becoming one of the great wordsmiths in wrestling history, as his tough cowboy demeanor quickly changed to one of jive as he mimicked the cool lingo and delivery of African American actors, comedians, and musicians of the time. Rhodes spoke in the vernacular of the working classes with the presentation of a televangelist. This rhetoric is best displayed by the notorious interview he gave after Ric Flair and his friends known as "The Four Horsemen" broke Rhodes' arm to keep him from defeating Flair for the world championship. Looking down the lens of the camera, Rhodes recited an ode to the working class:

> He put hard times on Dusty Rhodes and his family. You don't know what hard times are daddy. Hard times are when the textile workers around this country are out of work, they got 4 or 5 kids and can't pay their wages, can't buy their food. Hard times are when the auto workers are out of work and they tell 'em go home. And hard times are when a man has worked at a job for thirty years, thirty years, and they give him a watch, kick him in the butt and say "hey a computer took your place, daddy," that's hard times! That's hard times! And Ric Flair you put hard times on this country by takin' Dusty Rhodes out, that's hard times. And we all had hard times together, and I admit, I don't look like the athlete of the day supposed to look. My belly's just a lil' big, my heiny's a lil' big, but brother, I am bad. And they know I'm bad… I'm gonna reach out right now, I want you at home to know my hand is touchin' your hand for the gathering of the biggest body of people in this country, in this universe, all over the world now, reachin' out because the love that was given me and this time I will repay you now.

> Because I will be the next World's Heavyweight Champion on this hard time blues.[435]

The "hard times" promo constructs the forces of modern capitalism as the antagonist against working-class America. Dusty Rhodes was the symbol of a promise left unfulfilled for many in the working class (That a better life was coming if you simply worked hard enough and stayed an honest man). Rhodes also symbolized a cross-racial cultural unity between the white cowboy and hip black athlete, combining his thick Southern accent and cowboy boots with jive talk and fur coats. Dusty was the white equivalent of the Junk Yard Dog, capable of uniting working-class fanbases around a hero who encapsulated both cultures at once. However, the reality was that hard times really had come, and Dusty Rhodes offered hope for the working classes that survival and progress was possible. However, that hope too would not last forever.

Even given the national exposure of WTBS and two of the biggest stars in wrestling history, Ric Flair and Dusty Rhodes, reckless spending and attempts to expand nationally doomed Crockett Promotions. Mid-Atlantic, like many other territories, fell into the trap of trying to compete with McMahon on a national level rather than using their national television and local popularity to build their already thriving territory in favorable markets. McMahon's company had virtual monopolies on both the East and West coasts, helping him to forge hugely profitable media partnerships. Instead of attempting to fight McMahon until the very end, the Crockett family eventually sold their promotion to Ted Turner who rebranded the company, giving it the same name as its

[435]Virgil Runnels, *Dusty Rhodes Talks about "Hard Times": Mid-Atlantic Wrestling, Oct. 29, 1985*, YouTube, 2013, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9py4aMK3aIU.

flagship television program *World Championship Wrestling*.[436] Turner knew the value of wrestling to his cable channel. Even as its popularity waned, WCW gave the channel its highest ratings. Although Turner's acquisition proved financially detrimental, losing money for most of its existence; the ratings brought about by wrestling helped maintain Turner's position as one of the leading figures in cable television.[437]

The sale of the Mid-Atlantic territory marked the end of territorial wrestling and the NWA as the predominant method of selling professional wrestling in North America. Throughout the 1980s, fans, journalists, and wrestlers believed McMahon's WWF was a fad that would be brought down eventually by traditional wrestling.[438] After all, McMahon faced competition around the country against the greatest minds in wrestling; how could he win against those odds? In 1989, the answer seemed obvious. Through exposing the secrets of wrestling, and exploiting the bodies of wrestlers, McMahon destroyed territorial wrestling.

While there is validity to this argument, it leaves out a crucial context. McMahon's business strategy to create a brand in the WWF which would become synonymous with wrestling to middle-and upper-class audiences and corporate America allowed McMahon to not only to sink more money to his company, but also to create a narrative that wrestling was changing and becoming more respectable. Exposing

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[436] Bo Emerson, "Turner Broadcasting's Wrestling Team Goes to the Mat With TV Rivals," *The Atlanta Constitution*, December 19, 1989, https://www.newspapers.com/image/400190436/?terms=ted%20turner%20wcw&match=1.

[437] Emerson, "Turner Broadcasting's Wrestling Team Goes to the Mat With TV Rivals," *The Atlanta Constitution*.

[438] Wrestling Observer Newsletters throughout the 1980s are filled with letters from fans and columns from experts who espoused this anti-WWF rhetoric. The April 15, 1984 Wrestling Observer is perhaps the best example as it followed the first *WrestleMania*. Letters from readers called Vince a media manipulator and predicted doom for the company.

wrestling was a tool to broaden the popularity of wrestling at the expense of existing fervent fans, many of whom did not have the same consumer power as those he sought. McMahon also benefited from a political era which sought to benefit big business over small; the era of trickle-down economics meant less regulation. Titan Sports was free to partake in monopolistic practices without fear of government interference.

The WWF, to its credit, also struck a cultural nerve. Ultimately, for the WWF to succeed, it had to present a product which appealed to a mass fanbase. With larger-than-life heroes, specifically Hulk Hogan, and the use of MTV and celebrity, the WWF appealed to new and lapsed audiences entertained by spectacle rather than sport. However, this argument excludes the mistakes made by regional promoters. Promoters in the South expanded their companies nationally to compete with McMahon and, in doing so, exacerbated the financial problems they faced in an already struggling economy. The promoter's egotistical belief that their product would be good enough to outshine, the WWF pushed their local audiences away.

Despite the signaling from Reagan and the federal government to the Sunbelt that it was the moment in which the South would return as the moral and economic center of America, the Deep South remained a backwater within the framework of the national culture and economy. The working classes in the South, despite their faith in individuality, often required government help. Rural Americans were more likely to be impoverished than urban Americans, and African Americans were nearly four times as likely to live in poverty.[439] Johnson's Great Society Programs, many of which expanded

[439] Cole Wilson and John Schifano, "American Social Policy in the 1960's and 1970's," Social Welfare History Project, October 30, 2017, https://socialwelfare.library.vcu.edu/war-on-poverty/american-social-policy-in-the-60s-and-70s/.

under President Nixon, benefited large parts of the South. Despite Reagan's popularity in the South, working-class Southerners would feel the brunt of social welfare cuts. Reagan's government cut social welfare rapidly (even if Congress stifled many of the attempted cutbacks). However, it was clear that under Regan, America left the working-classes behind. James Patterson summarizes the shift: "the goal of social policy in the Johnson (and even the Nixon) years had started with the question, 'How can we help the poor?' Reagan, in contrast, asked, 'How can we cut costs, and how can we get people to work?'"[440]

The less paternalistic and more individualistic message of Reagan and conservatives in the 1970s and 1980s might have appealed to Southern cowboy sensibility, but this ideology damaged the working classes. The Southern working-class continued to support the autonomy and individualism of Southern masculinity and the Republican party seized on this ideology to prop up Ronald Reagan as a savior of the South. However, the corporate interests which drove Republican policy were not only detrimental to the Southern working-class economically but also culturally. The manufactured cowboy image of Reagan replaced the working-class heroes of Southern wrestling, erased or consumed by national wrestling.

V. Southern Wrestling Fades Away

Like Watts did with Mid-South, Jerry Jarrett also rebranded his company. The new, more nationally focused company called the United States Wrestling Alliance.[441] Jarrett, rather than striking out on his own, sought to create an alliance with other NWA

[440] James T. Patterson, *America's Struggle against Poverty in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 206.
[441] Hornbaker, *Death of the Territories*, 236.

outsiders, Dallas's World Class Championship Wrestling, and the Minnesota based American Wrestling Alliance. However, this alliance was too little too late. The tragic deaths of four of the Von Erich brothers (sons of owner Fritz Von Erich, and the biggest wrestling stars in Dallas) sent World Class Championship Wrestling went into disrepair.[442] Additionally, the American Wrestling Alliance was in financial and creative downfall since losing Hulk Hogan. The alliance of these territories with Continental Wrestling was a major failure over time, even as the promotions continued to soldier on in some form into the 1990s.[443]

On the local level, the alliance with the American Wrestling Alliance helped Memphis wrestling rejuvenate itself. Despite its enormous popularity, Memphis failed to create young stars to rival the popularity of Jerry Lawler. Instead, Memphis Wrestling's talent pool grew increasingly stagnant. Introducing the young AWA stars like Shawn Michaels and Curt Hennig offered exciting matches for younger fans growing weary of Lawler and Dundee renewing their seemingly endless rivalry. The event fans had been waiting for a decade, the crowning of Jerry Lawler as world champion boosted local attendance temporarily. On May 9, 1988, Jerry Lawler defeated Curt Hennig for the AWA World Championship in front of 8,000 fans drawing roughly $52,000.[444] The event was the largest recorded attendance and gross of the year. The following week, Lawler was once again sharing the main event with his rival Bill Dundee, this time in front of

[442] Brian Harrison, *Heroes of World Class: The Story of the Von Erichs and the Rise and Fall of World Class Championship Wrestling* (Right Here Pictures, 2006).
[443] Hornbaker, *Death of the Territories*, 235.
[444] Mark James, *Memphis Wrestling History: Tennessee Record Book 1980-1989 James, Memphis Wrestling History* (Memphis, TN: Independently Published, 2013), 413.

2,000 fans.[445] A year after the death of the UWF and four years after McMahon began his systemic takedown of the territory system, Memphis still had the ability to draw fans by thousands for their big events. For the fans who spent their lives rooting on Jerry Lawler, his crowning moments as world champion, even if only for the fledgling AWA, was a moment they needed to witness as validation of what they knew their whole lives: that Jerry Lawler was the toughest man in the world. With Lawler as their champion, Continental wrestling maintained a strong connection to older audiences, but had trouble creating new fans.

Until the end of the decade, Jarrett and Lawler soldiered on as one of the handful of remaining territories in the country. A brief expansion across the Sunbelt, including purchasing Von Erich's Dallas promotion, ultimately proved to be nothing more than a blip on the radar. The rebranded USWA ran shows in the same towns CWA always had with largely the same, if older, talent pool. [446] Complacency allowed the territory to remain open, if not wildly successful. Jarrett understood he was incapable of truly taking on McMahon. McMahon simply overmatched him financially. Rather than burn out in blaze of spending and ego like Watts and Crockett, Memphis wrestling slowly faded from its former glory.

Jerry Jarrett sold his stake in Memphis Wrestling to Jerry Lawler in 1992 for $250,000. Lawler attempted to keep the territory alive, banking on his relationships with local advertisers and drawing power across Tennessee. However, he sold his stake just a

[445] James, *Memphis Wrestling History: Tennessee Record Book 1980-1989*, 414.
[446] Mark James, *Memphis Wrestling History: Tennessee Record Book 1980-1989 James, Mark; Dills, Tim. Memphis Wrestling History: Tennessee Record Book 1980-1989 . Memphis Wrestling History* (Memphis, TN: Independently Published, 2013), Chapter 8.

few years later to an entrepreneur in Ohio for approximately $2,000,000. [447] After a decade of fighting, the USWA, instead of selling to McMahon, forged a relationship with the WWF as a sort of developmental territory. This allowed Memphis to keep its local wrestling, albeit with diminished profit margins. However, many Memphians never reconciled a relationship with the Yankee who ruined Southern wrestling. Jerry Jarrett's mother Christine "Teeny" Jarrett had worked for the territory since the 1940s. Even in the 1990s, when both her son and grandson worked for McMahon, McMahon infuriated Teeny. She saw McMahon as the greatest villain in wrestling history, corrupting the business and art she spent her life in.[448]

Many Southern wrestling fans shared Teeny Jarrett's hatred for McMahon and the WWF. The problem for those fans was, much like many aspects of American life, big business was an oncoming storm impossible to ignore. Like the decline of independent retailers, the WWF would eat away at the business of local wrestling, driving away all but the most devoted fans. The promise of the 1980s was that the South would have more say in crafting their own culture and the culture of the United States. However, what working-class Southerners found was that the dream of the Sunbelt left them and their culture behind. Before long, even Southern wrestling would be little more than a memory.

[447] Brennon Martin, *Teeny: Professional Wrestling's Grand Dame* (S.l.: Createspace P, 2017), 196.
[448] Brennon Martin, *Teeny: Professional Wrestling's Grand Dame*, 198.

Epilogue

I. Wrestling in the 1990s

By 1989, the National Wrestling Alliance was in shambles. Vince McMahon had taken down the multinational conglomerate which controlled professional wrestling for half a century. The NWA, so often compared to a mob family by wrestlers and journalists, was "rubbed out" by McMahon's modern corporate version of wrestling. Throughout the 1980s, fans, critics, promoters, and wrestlers predicted doom and gloom for McMahon, believing he was a flash in the pan. However, McMahon persevered even as Southern stalwarts struggled to resurrect territorial wrestling in the early 1990s. Just as wrestling fans in the South fought most virulently against the oncoming storm that was the World Wrestling Federation, they fought equally hard to revive the local wrestling they held dear.

The WWF epitomized the Reagan, with Hulk Hogan playing the masculine, blonde-haired patriotic superhero facing menaces foreign and domestic. Hogan represented American might against those who sought to undermine it. The WWF capitalized on its new stature and WWF wrestlers became crossover media stars. In the 1980s, wrestlers began showing up in cartoons, music videos, and movies. The World Wrestling Federation was the place for misfit muscle heads capitalizing on an ever-growing national youth culture obsessed with absurdity, neon color, and excess.

In the early 1990s, however, wrestling's popularity hit a nadir not seen since the 1960s. McMahon's bet on MTV and the younger generation produced a fad which waned in popularity. The success of the hyper colorful "rock and wrestling" promotion did not fit with the 1990s Generation X youth movement. By 1993, stars like Hulk Hogan, Ted

DiBiase, Roddy Piper, and Randy Savage were aging into semi-retirement, and McMahon struggled to find new who could take their place. Meanwhile, World Championship Wrestling, McMahon's remaining competitor, struggled to achieve relevance. Poor management and leadership led to disaffected wrestlers and fans. Professional wrestling, at the pinnacle of popularity in the late 1980s, lost almost all its mainstream appeal and cultural relevance in the early 1990s.

This epilogue focuses on the legacy of Southern wrestling in the 1990s and the growing resentment the economic failures of the 1980s left in their wake. Smoky Mountain Wrestling (SMW), a regional promotion based in Tennessee and Kentucky, attempted to revive the spirit of regional Southern wrestling and exploited the rage and resentment of the Southern working-class. SMW owner Jim Cornette, a fan and performer of Southern territorial wrestling since childhood, sought to replicate the Southern wrestling he grew up adoring. However, the fresh territory was not economically viable. By 1995, just four years after its first show, Smokey Mountain was out of business and Jim Cornette began working for Vince McMahon and the WWF. However, the success of SMW's largest show, *The Night of Legends* represents both the enduring power of nostalgia for Southern wrestling and the emotional connection made by its fans.

Concurrently, Ted Turner's fledgling WCW brought in former Mid-South owner Bill Watts to fix the company. His most important goal was regaining the working-class Southern audiences the company lost in the early 1990s. However, Watts could not reconcile the autonomous outlaw spirit which made him "The Cowboy," with the corporate structure of modern wrestling. The spirit of independence and self-made men,

those attributes so celebrated in the great wrestling heroes of the South, caused his downfall. The idea of working as a cog in the machine did not fit within the construct of Southern masculinity.

Smokey Mountain Wrestling began as Jim Cornette's dream to run a regional wrestling territory, and to escape World Championship Wrestling. Cornette, born in Louisville, Kentucky and a devoted wrestling fan since childhood, began working in the wrestling business as a teenager. He started as a ringside photographer for Continental wrestling at fourteen in 1975.[449] Cornette, taking pictures for his personal collection, caught the eye of Jerry Lawler. Lawler (who began his career as a sketch artist) admired Cornette's photography and realized the potential revenue his photography could generate when sold to fans. Co-owner Jerry Jarrett, whose mother Teeny was friends with Cornette's mother, took notice of Cornette's passion and hired him as a wrestling manager, the mouthpiece for a stable of wrestlers.[450]

Cornette was a prolific orator and improviser, able to speak with the speed of lightening and turn a phrase faster than almost any man. Cornette began his wrestling career in Memphis and later worked in World Class Championship Wrestling, Mid-South Wrestling, and Mid-Atlantic Wrestling as manager of the heel tag-team The Midnight Express. When Turner purchased Mid-Atlantic, Cornette butted heads with WCW president Jim Herd. Herd was a former Pizza Hut executive who knew relatively little about modern professional wrestling. He helped produce wrestling television programs in New York and St. Louis for a brief time in the 1960s, but had been out of wrestling for

[449] Cornette and Feinstein, *RF Video Shoot with Jim Cornette*, Highspots Wrestling Network.
[450] Cornette and Feinstein, *RF Video Shoot with Jim Cornette*, Highspots Wrestling Network.

twenty years.[451] Cornette, a dedicated fan and performer since the age of five, could not stand working for someone with such little experience. After two years of fighting the system from within, Cornette abandoned WCW to create his own regional territory, Smokey Mountain Wrestling.[452]

Jim Cornette was the brains behind SMW, but the cost of starting and running a proper territory was beyond the budget of a typical wrestling manager. To finance the operation, Cornette reached out to music producer and wrestling fan Rick Rubin. Rubin founded the famous hip-hop label Def Jam Records in 1982, and helped pioneer and popularize hip-hop music throughout the 1980s and 1990s. [453] Rubin grew up in New York and first began going to wrestling shows at Nassau Coliseum and Madison Square Garden in the 1970s. However, it was a fated trip to Disney World which would lead him down the path to funding his own wrestling company. In an interview with *Rolling Stone*, Rubin recounted how his love of wrestling changed on that trip:

> I remember going to Disney World with my parents, and I was really insistent that we figured out how far Disney was from wrestling, so we could see Dusty Rhodes! I used to watch Championship Wrestling from Florida with Gordon Solie, and the NWA on TBS, which was really my favorite – the Four Horsemen, Ric Flair, Jim Cornette. That was great; it was during a time when the WWE had kind of gone soft, and that felt like real rasslin'.[454]

[451] Dave Meltzer, *Wrestling Observer*, December 12, 1988.
[452] Dave Meltzer, "Here and There," *Wrestling Observer* accessed January 29, 2023, https://members.f4wonline.com/wrestling-observer-newsletter/nov-11-1991-wrestling-observer-newsletter-gene-anderson-dies-havoc-ppv, 3
[453] James Montgomery, "Rick Rubin: How Roddy Piper Turned the Beastie Boys Bad," Rolling Stone (Rolling Stone, June 25, 2018), https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-news/rick-rubin-on-wrestling-and-how-roddy-piper-turned-the-beastie-boys-bad-65043/.
[454] Montgomery, "Rick Rubin: How Roddy Piper Turned the Beastie Boys Bad," *Rolling Stone*

Rubin, a kid from the streets of New York obsessed with hip-hop and heavy metal, fell in love with Southern wrestling. Despite the seeming incongruence in culture, the flashy style of Ric Flair appealed to Rubin's hip hop sensibilities.

Cornette's Smokey Mountain Wrestling was the most famous of a seemingly endless number of wrestling promotions in the early 1990s seeking to recapture the spirit of the territory system of decades gone by.[455] Over the course of fifty years, the National Wrestling Alliance and the territory system were the backbone of the sport of wrestling. To diehard fans like Rubin and Cornette, the idea of recapturing the magic of regional territories seemed like a welcome return to normalcy. However, Cornette and Rubin found remaking regional wrestling to be a herculean task at a time when even the national wrestling business struggled to maintain cultural and economic relevancy.

The Appalachian region, since the late-1980s has been in a perpetual identity crisis. The renaissance of Appalachian culture in the 1960s and 1970s developed civic and cultural pride in a place often mocked in the national culture as the bastion of backwater hillbilly life. The influx of modern, national corporations and culture promised improvement; yet, its real accomplishment was the erasure of the very culture that many Eastern Tennesseans had only recently grown to respect and love.

> Even a casual Rip Van Winkle who went to sleep in East Tennessee in 1970 and awakened to- day could not help but notice a dramatic change in local eating establishments. I am not referring to the bevy of chain fast-food joints that have mushroomed in even my own little hometown. In the hinterlands our choices are more limited, but within fifteen minutes of home I can find good Chinese, Vietnamese, Thai cuisine, and several varieties of Mexican food. East Tennessee

[455] Eastern Championship Wrestling (later Extreme Championship Wrestling) achieved modest economic success in Pennsylvania and the Northeast. The remaining NWA members formed various small promotions around the country, including the South.

> may still be more homogenous than many parts of the nation, but Knoxville has always had a more varied populace than most folks imagine.[456]

Yet, even in Knoxville, one of the more progressive and multicultural cities in the Appalachian region, nativist movements still blossomed, and many residents of Eastern Tennessee resented the bevy of new outsiders and the modern culture which they brought with them. They feared this new, homogenous culture was replacing something the traditional world of their parents and grandparents.

Smokey Mountain Wrestling looked to appeal directly to this disaffected working-class white population of the Deep South. With business struggling since opening its doors, Cornette was desperate to gain interest among his desired fanbase. Smokey Mountain never gained their desirable superhero baby face nor dastardly heel who could keep fans buying tickets every week. Cornette and Rubin believed that Ric Flair could fill that role as their champion and Rubin agreed to empty his wallet to get the biggest star of the NWA and his favorite wrestler. Flair, like Cornette, despised the management in World Champion Wrestling and planned to leave when his contract ran out.[457] However, Rubin could not match the offer McMahon made to Flair to join the WWF.[458] Without a major star to capture the fans' imagination, Cornette relied on nostalgia for the territory system and the stars of a previous generation. More

[456] Mark T. Banker, *Appalachians All: East Tennesseans and The Elusive History of an American Region* (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 2011), 238.
[457] Ric Flair, *To Be the Man* (New York, NY: Pocket Books, 2004), 168.
[458] Jim Cornette, *Jim Cornette Experience - Episode 275: A Look At Smoky Mountain's Night Of Legends*, YouTube, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7197JcAqOio.

disturbingly, Cornette exploited racial stereotypes with a tag team named The Gangstas to drive wrestling fans to his promotion. [459]

Jerome Young, going by the stage name New Jack, and Jamal Mustafa, under the name Mustafa Sayed, formed the Gangstas tag team after Jim Cornette recruited them at a small wrestling show in the South. Young and Mustafa were already friends, as Young convinced Mustafa to wrestle after meeting him during a drug deal.[460] When Cornette saw them, he immediately knew the two would garner major heat from white audiences. Young and Mustafa knew the situation they put themselves in, saying in an interview, "of course it was racist. He (Cornette)was looking for a heel tag team and he saw us…"[461] However, jobs at the national level had become more limited as audiences dwindled. The best of bad options, the two chose to accept Cornette's offer to wrestle for Smokey Mountain as The Gangsta. Wearing 1990s hip hop attire and claiming to be from Southern California, the home of hip-hop group NWA and Death Row Records, the two tapped into the racial panic around black culture which was infiltrating the white mainstream.[462]

The fans in attendance ate it up. New Jack recalls being called racial slurs at his first show in SMW. He played into the persona even more once he realized it was the easiest way to make money and draw in the fans. He brought malt liquor to the ring, which in 1994 was viewed by some as doing as much damage to African American youth

[459] Rob Feinstein, Jamal Mustafa, and Jerome Young, *RF Video Shoot with the Gangstas*, Highspots Wrestling Network (RF Video), accessed February 1, 2023, https://www.highspotswrestlingnetwork.com/media/the-gangstas-shoot-interview/60568/feature.
[460] Feinstein, Mustafa, and Young, *RF Video Shoot with the Gangstas*, Highspots Wrestling Network.
[461] Feinstein, Mustafa, and Young, *RF Video Shoot with the Gangstas*, Highspots Wrestling Network.
[462] Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Cultural Resistance in Contemporary American Popular Culture* (Lebanon, NH: University Press of New England, 1993), 296.

as crack.[463] The entire presentation was one to put Southern white audiences on edge. The Gangstas caused the Viewers of the SMW Television to become so enraged they called and wrote letters to the television station at an unprecedented rate. The station thus forced Cornette put up a chyron during the Gangstas' interviews which read, "The views of the Gangstas are not the views of Smokey Mountain Wrestling or this station."[464]

The Gangstas often faced traditional Southern tag teams like the Rock and Roll Express. The Gangstas were the most hated villains in Smokey Mountain Wrestling. Once they finally defeated the Rock and Roll Express and became tag team champions, they celebrated "back home" in Los Angeles.[465] The Gangstas exploited the white audiences' fears of the emerging rap scene in LA. New Jack and Mustafa actually filmed the vignettes in Atlanta, but used the city of LA to invoke outrage associated with the west-coast hip-hop's perceived danger to white society. The Gangstas gloated about their victory via tape to the Southern crowd. In the video, New Jack spoke while Mustafa swung a bat and admired his belt. New Jack began, "This is an area where it's not about how pretty you are. It's about how much gold you got, what kind of car you got…it's all about who got what. It's a materialistic world and that's what we're trying to do."[466] Materialistic rhetoric was common among Southern heels dating back to the villainous origins of Jackie Fargo and Ric Flair. However, later in the video New Jack continued, "We used to have a sit in the back of the bus. It's funny how times have changed. Now

[463] Calvin Sims, "Under Siege: Liquor's Inner-City Pipeline," *New York Times*, November 29, 1992, pp. 134 -139.
[464] Jerome Young, *The Gangstas Reign of Terror over SMW Pt2*, YouTube, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tm9mq0eIHEw.
[465] Both Mustafa and Young were born and raised in North Carolina.
[466] Young, *The Gangstas Reign of Terror Over SMW PT2,* YouTube.

we own the bus. We used to not (be allowed to) eat at the same restaurants…Now we own the restaurants…it's a new day and time."[467] New Jack used the idea of racial uplift, in which African American wrestlers earned a place of labor equality, as a slap in the face to white audiences. Junk Yard Dog once used that same rhetoric as a bastion of hope and progress to working-class fans. Over the course of a decade, the racial rhetoric devolved rather than progressed. The idea of a unified working-class culture dissipated as the white fans who consumed and extolled the virtues of JYD's ascendance in the South and embraced his Blackness no longer believed in the economic and cultural viability of a cross-racial unity. Instead, the working-class white audience became enraged at New Jack's assertion that African Americans found success in the South, as he exacerbated white fears of being pushed out by minority representation. Cornette, rather than attempting to coalesce around a multiracial working-class audience, appealed to the racist instincts of an embittered white fanbase.

Despite the best efforts of Cornette and the wrestlers in SMW, regional wrestling was a hard sell in the post-WWF era, especially when the markets were in mostly-rural Tennessee and Kentucky. The amount of money coming in from television outlets was perilous, especially as the executives of local stations increasingly wanted to move toward paid programming instead of splitting ad revenue with Smoky Mountain Wrestling. Without television to drive interest in the product, the already small crowds dwindled even further. Despite the relative decline in interest, wrestling fans around the country held the promotion in high acclaim. Southern wrestling promotions, like the USWA and SMW, still racked up many awards from the *Wrestling Observer* in the early

[467] Young, *The Gangstas Reign of Terror Over SMW PT2,* YouTube.

1990s.[468] It was another instance of history repeating itself; Cornette was a wrestling promoter in the South looking to win out with a superior product, rather than a superior business strategy.[469]

While Cornette attempted to remake the Southern territories in Kentucky and Tennessee, Bill Watts joined Ted Turner's World Championship Wrestling as executive and head booker in 1992. Turner brought in Watts to help improve business after three years of steep decline. Former executive Jim Herd clashed with established wrestlers and failed to stave off declining attendance figures and television ratings. However, in the five years between the closing of the UWF and running WCW, Watts distanced himself from wrestling. Upon entering WCW, Watts called reporter Dave Meltzer to go over the current state of the business. Meltzer recalls being alarmed with Watts' call, noting Watts seemed out of touch with modern wresters and audiences.[470]

II. The Cowboy's Last Ride

While working for Turner, Watts became bitter and resented the corporatization of wrestling. The promise of the oil boom of the late 1970s and the prominence of the Sunbelt combined with the early success of the Mid-South made Watts believe he was invincible, He convinced himself that the failure of UWF was not his doing, but was caused by the oil bust alone. In WCW, he was unable to fix the failing promotion. More than this, Watts's bullying and outdated beliefs about wrestling and management were

[468] Dave Meltzer, "1993 Wrestling Observer Readers' Awards," *Wrestling Observer Newsletter*, 3
[469] Wade Keller, "Smoky Mountain Wrestling Shuts It Doors After Weekend of Poor Houses, Promoter Jim Cornette Throws in the Towel after Four Years," *Pro-Wrestling Torch*, accessed February 9, 2023, https://pwtorch.com/artman2/publish/wadekellerdotcom/45651.shtml.
[470] Dave Meltzer, twitter post, February 7, 2020, thttps://mobile.twitter.com/davemeltzerwon/status/1225887895279427584?lang=da

out of step with modern wrestlers and national corporate structure. Not only did he clash with management, but also younger wrestlers who resented his fascistic rule over the locker room. Tony Anthony (who wrestled briefly for Watts during this period as "Dirty White Boy") in response to the question, "what are your feelings on Bill Watts," said simply, "I wouldn't piss down his throat if his belly was on fire."[471] In Mid-South, Watts was the owner, and the buck stopped with him. Turner gave Watts creative and financial control of WCW; however, he still had to fit within the corporate structure of Turner's empire. Within a year, Watts admitted he wore out his welcome in WCW, and was out of the company.[472]

Watts' resentment with the changing modern national culture and new generation of wrestlers spilled out in his public comments. Most infamously, an interview with Wade Keller of the Pro Wrestling Torch caused a scandal which ended his time in wrestling for good. In the interview, Watts argued discrimination based on race and sexual orientation was a right and privilege business owners earned.

> If free enterprise is going to make or break it, you should be able to discriminate? It should be that, by God, if you're going to open your doors in America, you can discriminate. Why the fuck not? That's why I went into business, so that I could discriminate. I mean, really. I mean I want to be able to serve who I want to. It's my business. It's my investment … I can't tell a fag to get the fuck out. I should have the right to not associate with a fag if I don't want to. I mean, why should I have to hire a fuckin' fag, if I don't like fags? Fags discriminate against us, don't they? Sure they do.[473]

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[471] Rob Feinstein and Tony Anthony, *RF Video Shoot with Dirty White Boy*, Highspots Wrestling Network, 2020, https://www.highspotswrestlingnetwork.com/media/dirty-White-boy-shoot-interview/46250.
[472] Watts and Feinstein, *RF Video Shoot with Bill Watts*, HighspotsWrestlingNetwork.com
[473] Wade Keller, "Interview With Bill Watts," *Pro-Wrestling Torch*, accessed January 31, 2023, https://www.pwtorch.com/site/2019/12/12/vip-audio-12-12-retro-radio-kellers-pro-wrestling-focus-6-7-1992-keller-interviews-new-wcw-v-p-bill-watts-about-changes-he-was-implementing-in-his-first-days-on-the-jo/.

Watts continued with a diatribe about the unfair white guilt fostered specifically by the television program *Roots* to undermine the reality of black-on-black crime. These are familiar statements from white Southerners, based on a brand of social conservatism which shifts blame away from white hetero-normative society and onto the oppressed for causing or at least contributing to their own demise.

These statements are not shocking coming from a white Southerner in a position of power. However, they are surprising coming from Watts, who built his career as a promoter and wrestler who elevated African American wrestlers to positions of prominence. Watts's frustration came as his power and influence drained away amid the nationalization of wrestling, a world he was incapable of excelling in. Watts blamed his failures on diversity and changes in society. The world moved away from rugged individuality, which he saw as key to his success and the success of the South. Like many working-class Southerners, Watts did not blame capitalism or his own failings for his downfall, instead he blamed a more racially egalitarian system.

III. The Night of Legends

Despite the rocky road of Smokey Mountain Wrestling and the controversy surrounding the Gangstas, the promotion created many special moments for die-hard Southern wrestling fans. The most successful night in the promotion's history was on August 5, 1994, at the City Coliseum in Knoxville, TN.[474] The show, which Cornette titled *The Night of Legends*, was a celebration of wrestling history in the South. Southern wrestling stars from throughout the twentieth century populated the nights matches. Two

[474] Jim Cornette, "'Night of Legends,'" Jim Cornette, accessed January 31, 2023, https://www.jimcornette.com/night-of-legends.html.

young Canadians, the Thrill seekers, stole the show defeating the dastardly Heavenly Bodies in a rare showcase of the future of wrestling.[475] However, it was mostly a night of unbridled nostalgia, and a love letter to the past meant to draw out those fans who believed that national wrestling left them behind.

The biggest stars of the show were the legends honored as part of the inaugural class of the Knoxville Wrestling Hall of Fame. Cornette, a lifelong fan of Southern Wrestling, knew his audience would melt at the sight of their greatest heroes, including national stars Cowboy Bob Orton, Mongolian Stomper, and Ron Garvin. However, the most memorable moment of the night did not feature a former wrestler, but instead a woman who had never step foot in a wrestling ring, Nancy Carter Caldwell. Nancy Caldwell was the widow of Whitey Caldwell, the most popular wrestler in the history of Eastern Tennessee. Ron Wright, Caldwell's greatest rival, presented an award and the hall of fame plaque to Caldwell as she and the fans in attendance shed tears for her late husband. Over twenty years after the death of Whitey Caldwell, his memory still haunted the wrestling arenas in Eastern Tennessee and his loyal fans put flowers on his grave. Wrestling, to the die-hard fans of the territory era, was more than entertainment. In small towns, hours away from a major sports league and where even the traveling circus seldom come to town, local wrestling was a piece of popular culture to call their own, a weekly form of community, a church of blood, sweat, and tears performed by men who

[475] The Thrillseekers included Chris Jericho and Lance Storm. Both wrestlers achieved success internationally over the next decades; however, Jericho became one of the biggest stars in wrestling and continues to wrestle in main events to publication

were not simply entertainers, but friends and neighbors. The connection was one which could never be rebuilt.[476]

IV. Conclusion

Professional wrestling's appeal to small local audiences since the beginning of the twentieth century persisted into the mid-1980s. As wrestling promoters carved out their territories on the national landscape, they did so with an understanding of the need to reach the local fan base by conforming to the local culture. As American culture evolved, so to did professional wrestling. In the 1970s and 1980s, professional wrestling in the South reflected the optimism and progression of the post-Civil Rights South. In the 1970s and 80s, the Republican Party, headed by Ronald Reagan, made the South a focal point of their party, promising them a more prominent place at the political and social table as an essential part of the Sunbelt coalition. With this renewed optimism came the belief that modernity could be achieved in the South without giving up the values which defined Southern identity for centuries.

Southern wrestling embraced the 1980s popular culture to bring in younger audiences and created new stars as a new generation of ownership sought to modernize Southern wrestling. However, even as Memphis wrestling looked more modern and embraced celebrity culture by bringing in people like Adam West and Andy Kaufman, they presented characters and conflicts which conformed to Old South masculine values. Beneath the golden crown and Elvis Presley-inspired hair, Jerry Lawler's brash, independent attitude, and his embracement of chivalry and honor were traditional values

[476] Jim Cornette, *SMW Night of the Legends 1994 -- Commentary from Jim Cornette and Dave Meltzer*, YouTube, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xMiWzWL1zsk&ab_channel=JakeAllonar.

of Southern masculinity. He, in-turn, passed those values to the thousands of adoring young men who looked to him as an example of what a Southern man should be. Part of that education in masculinity was a reaffirmation of gender roles essential to white Southern masculinity in the wake of the Civil Rights Movement.

While Memphis Wrestling progressed in presentation and embracing popular culture, Mid-South wrestling in Oklahoma, Louisiana, and Mississippi modernized by marketing towards a cross-racial coalition of working-class consumers. Professional wrestling was slow to desegregate after the Civil Rights movement. Even the predetermined physical battle between white and Black threatened to subvert the racial hierarchy of the South. Even after desegregation, working-class African Americans found little realistic representation in wrestling. Bill Watts and Ernie Ladd created African-American stars who embraced African American culture and Southern masculinity, united a working-class consumer base. These black superheroes precipitated a boom period for Mid-South Wrestling.

The success of Mid-South was largely built on the creation of African American superhero. Sylvester Ritter (The Junk Yard Dog) was the Black star who represented the hope for a more unified South. The Junk Yard Dog straddled the line between conforming to white Southern masculinity while representing the black experience to become the most beloved hero in the history of Mid-South. The cross-racial audience allowed for a melding of Black and white cultural identities. The rise of the Junk Yard Dog was proof of the economic viability of greater Black representation in Southern culture. However, the descent of Ritter on the national level was a portent of the ultimate long-term failure of this racial progress.

Despite the success of the Junk Yard Dog, the racial representation in wrestling still fell behind that of most cultural forms. The clearest symbol of the economic and racial exploitation was the grotesque African caricature, Kamala. James Harris's tragic story of exploitation shows the limitations of racial progress in the South. While the Junk Yard Dog became a symbol for modern Southern masculinity, Harris as Kamala, represented the degradation of Blackness. Harris, born into abject poverty of sharecropping in the Mississippi Delta, used wrestling to escape poverty. However, he found his ability to get out of poverty depended on his demeaning of himself and his race. Even then, the wrestling business discarded him once he proved no longer to be of value. Ultimately, despite the progress showed by the Junk Yard Dog, the plight of many African Americans in the South remained a seemingly hopeless struggle against an oppressive system.

With wrestling in the Deep South on an upward trajectory and with some promise of progress, the end of Southern wrestling is a story of local culture eliminated by economic trends out of the control of Southerners. Vince McMahon exploited the media deregulation and commodified his product to create a near monopoly over the wrestling business. To do so, McMahon created a wrestling product which shunned ethnic working-class consumer base which kept wrestling profitable for the past half-century, instead looking appeal to a white middle-class consumer base all important to advertisers and big business in the 1980s. Southern wrestling companies thus had to make, slowly fade from relevancy or to fight against McMahon on a national level. Both decisions left the local Southern fan without the wrestling they grew up with. Ultimately, the end of

Southern wrestling coincided with the economic stagnation of the South as the hope for the melding of modernity and traditionalism faded away.

In the end, local Southern wrestling became a small business enterprise struggling to stay afloat, like many other small businesses in the South and around the country. Promotions like Smoky Mountain come and go, attempted to resurrect the local connections lost with the nationalization of wrestling. However, the remaining Southern audience was no longer unified. Instead, the changes wrought by modernity left an embittered and enraged white working-class feeling that they were being left behind by the national culture yet again. The economic apex of Southern wrestling was achieved through bringing together a unified audience. In an era of increasing racial fracturing in the South, there was no chance for Southern wrestling to succeed.

APPENDIX A –IRB Approval Letter

THE UNIVERSITY OF
SOUTHERN MISSISSIPPI

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD
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NOTICE OF COMMITTEE ACTION

The project has been reviewed by The University of Southern Mississippi Institutional Review Board in accordance with Federal Drug Administration regulations (21 CFR 26, 111), Department of Health and Human Services (45 CFR Part 46), and university guidelines to ensure adherence to the following criteria:

- The risks to subjects are minimized.
- The risks to subjects are reasonable in relation to the anticipated benefits.
- The selection of subjects is equitable.
- Informed consent is adequate and appropriately documented.
- Where appropriate, the research plan makes adequate provisions for monitoring the data collected to ensure the safety of the subjects.
- Where appropriate, there are adequate provisions to protect the privacy of subjects and to maintain the confidentiality of all data.
- Appropriate additional safeguards have been included to protect vulnerable subjects.
- Any unanticipated, serious, or continuing problems encountered regarding risks to subjects must be reported immediately, but not later than 10 days following the event. This should be reported to the IRB Office via the "Adverse Effect Report Form".
- If approved, the maximum period of approval is limited to twelve months.
  Projects that exceed this period must submit an application for renewal or continuation.

PROTOCOL NUMBER: 12345678
PROJECT TITLE: How to Achieve IRB Approval at USM
PROJECT TYPE: New Project
RESEARCHER(S): Jonas Doe
COLLEGE/DIVISION: College of Education and Psychology
DEPARTMENT: Psychology
FUNDING AGENCY/SPONSOR: N/A
IRB COMMITTEE ACTION: Expedited Review Approval
PERIOD OF APPROVAL: 01/02/2015 to 01/01/2016
Lawrence A. Hosman, Ph.D.
Institutional Review Board

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