

Nick Tosches Darkness and Light

Nick Tosches has interviewed a lot of people in his day, and he's tough.

To Patti Smith: Were you a horny teenager, Patti?

To Muddy Waters: Do you like getting drunk?

To Jerry Lee Lewis: Why are you so obsessed with dying and going to hell, Jerry?

PW admits to a little trepidation waiting for Tosches at Da Silvano, an Italian eatery of the author's choosing in Greenwich Village. Tosches, who has written about organized crime, drugs, prostitution and payola, who has admitted to killing somebody "on a hot summer night in Newark twenty years ago," who has been called "the story-teller of hell" and "darker than the dark" has, through his publisher, insisted on a few things: not only the restaurant, but the day, the time, a tag line on the cover and "at least a full-page" interview in the magazine.

No problem.

It is 11 in the morning on a cold, raw day in late January. Told that we are here for an appointment with Mr. Tosches, a burly maître d' sits us at "Nick's table" in the corner. A glass of dark Chianti helps warm the wait a bit. Twenty minutes pass as PW fiddles with thoughts of disaster. At last, Tosches breezes in.

Elegantly turned out despite the winter chill in a fine burnt umber wool sportcoat over a pale green knitted shirt buttoned to the top, the 50-year-old Tosches slides into his seat with ease. His long-fingered hands bring forth cigarettes and a box of match-

es and a waiter silently produces an ashtray. Tosches is impeccably barbered, his hair slightly orange, his smooth, smartly shaven cheeks belying the image of the hellbound boozier. His olive green eyes dart about the room or linger on a burl of light on the table; over the next three hours they will seldom make direct contact with his tablemate.



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It is immediately clear that Tosches is a veteran of everything, even the book schmooze, and he knows the score. And to PW's relief, he has a genuine well of good will and respect for the requirements of the trade. He kindly remembers a single meeting years ago with his interlocutor, and asks after his family.

After 32 years in the writing business, as music critic, journalist, novelist and biographer, Tosches has not only survived, but perhaps arrived. This month sees the publication of two new books, *The Devil and Sonny Liston* (Forecasts, starred review, Feb. 28) from Little, Brown, and *The Nick Tosches Reader* (also reviewed Feb. 28), a massive compilation of his reviews, poems, diary entries and excerpts from his books, published by Da Capo. In *Sonny*, Tosches is at the top of his form as demimonde biographer, bringing to vivid, harrowing light the life and times of the former heavyweight champ; and in the *Reader*, which amounts to something like a literary autobiography, the life and times of one Nick Tosches are shown to be just as vivid and no less harrowing.

"For years I never really pondered how I came to be a writer from where I came from," says Tosches in a gravelly voice made street-smart harsh by his native

Newark. The son of a first-generation Italian father who ran a bar in Newark and an Irish mother who was orphaned and raised in an Italian family, Tosches never had it easy. His father made him finish high school, almost punitively—"cause his father made *him* do it"—but college was never part of the picture. One could hardly imagine that writing would be either.

"What it comes down to," says Tosches, rearranging the flatware in front of him, "is that as a young man I felt a need to communicate with somebody or something, but it seemed in my own particular environment that that wasn't an option. On the other hand, I probably lacked the courage to do so even if it was an option. But looking back, I realized that writing must have appeared to me at some point as a great way to communicate when one is in total fear of communicating, looking someone else in the eye. The way out was built on desperation and fear, but then, slowly, the fear became exorcised, through the writing, I guess, or maybe just the living. And then came the love of words and meters and rhythms and in the end there was the writing." He puts down a butter knife and drops his hands to his lap.

Rock 'n' Roll Gateway

Tosches got his start during the early days of rock 'n' roll magazines, when "under the pretext of writing about music you could write about anything." Although these efforts are in prolific evidence in the *Reader*, it was not a yellow-brick road. After arriving in New York City when he was 17 in the mid-'60s, Tosches rarely saw a "three-figure month," though the circuit of five-night-a-week parties kept his belly full. But he did run across a mentor who gave him his first truly literary encouragement.

"Ed Sanders ran the Peace Eye bookstore on the Lower East Side back then, a very political and literary joint. Ed was in the band The Fugs, and he was also formally trained in Greek and Latin and even hieroglyphics, and he opened me up to what lay out there in the classics. I have always believed in going to the source of things, and that what is said of value now was said 2000 years ago with probably more power and beauty, and the closer you get to the source the more power and beauty something has." Sanders also praised a poem Tosches showed him. "I don't know if it was good or bad. It's lost. But I really needed the boost."

Learning the value of sources was perhaps equally important. Tosches is an indefatigable researcher, whose first book, *Country*, published in 1977, was such a fresh and revelatory look at country music in America, bringing forth little-known performers and backroom dealers, that the book has gone into three editions from three publishers (Stein & Day, Scribners, Da Capo), with three different subtitles that attest to the ways in which music literature is still trying to catch up to Tosches. Then, he dove to the bottom of the wild life of Jerry Lee Lewis in *Hellfire* (published by Delacorte in 1982), and wowed critics with *Dino*, his biography of Dean Martin (Doubleday, 1992), which, through prodigious digging, not only brought the distant, faded crooner into focus, but delivered a mocking clap to the antics of the “Rat Pack” and, in particular, to Frank Sinatra’s shameless courting of the Kennedys.

The Liston biography is even more impressive. For one thing, Charles “Sonny” Liston has been dead since 1970, was born in abject poverty in east Arkansas, had no schooling; hardly any records of his life exist other than a criminal one and one that goes like this: 50-4. And yet Tosches traveled the country patching together a tragic, moving portrait of a tough, silent young man who got out of one kind of enslavement—poverty—on the strength of his fists, only to find himself the property of the more hard-hitting Mafia. And though the mob involvement in Liston’s career has long been rumored, no one has gotten the story that Tosches got.

“I did about half of the research for a *Vanity Fair* piece,” says Tosches, lighting another cigarette and allowing himself another glass of port. “I had heard from so many people that not only did the mob own Sonny, but that the two fights with Ali were fixed. I actually sort of disbelieved it, but we found the last real family tie to Liston—his older half-brother who, incredibly, was B.B. King’s stepfather. He was in an old age home in Arkansas, and he led me to a lot of characters from back then. It was almost worth it just to capture those old voices that you’ll never hear again, and the words and phraseologies and those rhythms. But what surfaced were conversations that Sonny had had with his mother and with his closest confidante right after the first fight; that is the verification.”

Tosches is quick to make the point that Ali was not in on it, and that he was indeed a great fighter—“but only because, after that fight in Miami, he really thought he was ‘The Greatest.’ That’s what made him so.”

Underground Networks

Uncovering linkages is part of what motivates Tosches. He subscribes to the notion that the real history of America is encoded in what his friend Greil Marcus has called “a series of secret handshakes.” And he readily admits that one can find contiguous links through his own work. As he speaks of them, one gets a glimpse of just what kind of activity writing is for this survivor of the streets.

“If you take the nonfiction books, the link, for me, is that there is some uncertain affinity or empathy that I don’t understand. There’s a mystery there, and there has to be some mystery apart from what I seek to solve. How could a person like Jerry Lee Lewis create his own hell? How could a guy like Dean Martin, who all the world knew and expressed such love and fondness for, be so withdrawn from himself and the world? How could a person like Sonny Liston even bear to live in such darkness? There is still a black hole there that I want to enter, something I want to solve; and at the same time I recognize there is a piece of me reflected in that and it’s usually a bad piece of me or a negative piece that I want to get to the bottom of.”

Something about Tosches’s mojo with his material must be working. At first glance, the “links” he mentions notwithstanding, his publishing career has been all over the place—defunct publishers, literary houses, commercial houses (Crown), maverick ones (Arbor House). But Tosches reads it differently, and you begin to see that amid the turmoil there is a continuity of people who have stuck by Tosches, through a series of handshakes, as it were.

“Russ Galen has been with me since the second book. He was a new kid at Scott Meredith then, and we’ve been together now close to 30 years [Galen is now a principal at Scovil Chichak Galen]. A great conspirator, a great friend,” Tosches calls him. “And the first book I wrote when I knew how to write, *Hellfire*, that was the first book that Morgan Entrekin ever edited. He had just come to Delacorte, and it is ironic that many years later he reissued the book at Grove; Morgan has always been very strong for me. After Morgan I had Michael Pietsch who published my

first novel, *Cut Numbers* [Tosches has written two novels, and a third is in the works]; he left Scribners and one of his conditions on going to Crown was that he be allowed to take it with him. Now Michael and I are reunited in what seems like a long-term thing, and it happened in a strange way. I’d written a story about a character named Sidney Korshak in *Vanity Fair*; he was a

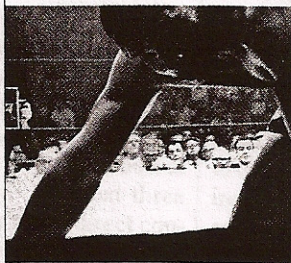
guy from Chicago who tied in with the mob and became the most powerful gray eminence in Hollywood. Everyone wanted to make a book out of it. When it came time to meet with Little, Brown, Sara Crichton and Michael, I basically told Michael what I told everyone else—this is really not a good idea for a book. I told Michael what I really wanted to write was this novel that takes place both at the turn of the 14th century and today, 700 years later, and I went through the whole thing. Sara said, ‘Promise me you won’t tell that idea to anyone else—no, I can’t make you promise that.’ But that was the be-

ginning of our coming together. First the Liston book, then this big novel, *In the Hands of Dante*.”

The *Tosches Reader* opens with an epigraph from a biography of Faulkner: “‘Now, Mr. Faulkner, what were you thinking of when you wrote that?’ ‘Money,’ he replied.” And though the money has made a difference for Tosches (his works have generated more than a few handsome Hollywood options), the most valuable thing it has bought for him is the freedom to write what he wants how he wants to—and to see it published. Just recently, his enthusiasm for Emmett Miller, an obscure musician from the 1920s, was enough to cause Pietsch to agree—just as enthusiastically—to publish a book next spring, between *Liston* and *Dante*. Tosches describes it as “a tying together of the breezes of ancient poetry and the impulse to say things that can’t be said, with a line from Virgil—*sunt lacrimae rerum*—a line that no translator has ever been able to successfully render in a different language. I found it in Elmore James: ‘the sky is crying.’”

Tosches has a gleam in his eye over that one. “We should eat,” he says with a summary wink, and a waiter appears. ■

Nick Tosches
THE DEVIL AND
SONNY LISTON



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