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Gorgeous George: The Outrageous Bad-Boy Wrestler Who Created American Pop Culture

John Capouya

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> This is the first-ever biography of the legendary wrestler Gorgeous George, filled with incredible never-before-told stories. George directly influenced the likes of Muhammad Ali, who took his bragging and boasting from George; James Brown, who began to wear sequined capes onstage after seeing George on TV; John Waters, whose films featured the outrageous drag queen Divine as an homage to George; and too many wrestlers to count. Amid these pop culture discoveries are firsthand accounts of the pro wrestling game from the 1930s to the 1960s.

The ideal American male used to be stoic, quiet, and dignified. But for a young couple struggling to make ends meet, in the desperation born of the lingering Depression and wartime rationing, an idea was hatched that changed the face of American popular culture, an idea so bold, so over-the-top and absurd, that it was *perfect*. That idea transformed journeyman wrestler George Wagner from a dark-haired, clean-cut good guy to a peroxide-blond braggart who blatantly cheated every chance he got. Crowds were stunned—they had never seen anything like *this* before—and they came from miles around to witness it for themselves.

Suddenly George—guided by Betty, his pistol of a wife—was a draw. With his golden tresses grown long and styled in a marcel, George went from handsome to . . . well . . . *gorgeous* overnight, the small, dank wrestling venues giving way to major arenas. As if the hair wasn't enough, his robes—unmanly things of silk, lace, and chiffon in pale pinks, sunny yellows, and rich mauves—were but a prelude to the act: the regal entrance, the tailcoat-clad valet spraying the mat with perfume, the haughty looks and sneers for the "peasants" who paid to watch this outrageously prissy hulk prance around the ring. How they loved to see his glorious mane mussed up by his manly opponents. And how they loved that alluringly alliterative name . . . Gorgeous George . . . the self-proclaimed Toast of the Coast, the Sensation of the Nation!

All this was timed to the arrival of that new invention everyone was talking about—television. In its early days, professional wrestling and its larger-than-life characters dominated prime-time broadcasts—none more so than Gorgeous George, who sold as many sets as Uncle Miltie.

Fans came in droves—to boo him, to stick him with hatpins, to ogle his gowns, and to rejoice in his comeuppance. He was the man they loved to hate, and his provocative, gender-bending act took him to the top of the entertainment world. America would never be the same again.

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