

Gimmicks, Gold, and Gushers
The Occupational Folklife of Independent Professional Wrestlers

Harris, Tanya — Oral History Interview

July 7, 2020

Delainey Bowers

This oral history interview was created in 2020 as part of the *Gimmicks, Gold, and Gushers: The Occupational Folklife of Independent Professional Wrestlers* project with funding from the Archie Green Fellowship provided by the American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress.

Background Information

Name of interviewee: Tanya Harris

Wrestling name: Ruthless Lala

Date of birth: [REDACTED] 1985

Current residence: Nashville, Tennessee

Interviewer: Delainey Bowers

Indexer: Delainey Bowers

Interview format: Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, this interview was conducted remotely via Skype, a web-based VoIP recording platform. Poor audio connection results in several dropped parts of the interview. Harris was at her home in Nashville, Tennessee while Bowers recorded the interview at her place of residence in Somerset, Kentucky.

Date of interview: July 7, 2020

Keywords: Professional wrestling, independent professional wrestling, wrestlers, women wrestlers, sports, athletes, entertainment, wrestling promoters, wrestling promotions, wrestling matches, Professional Championship Wrestling, Texas, Tennessee, Appalachia, African Americans

Abstract: Tanya Harris, whose wrestling name is Ruthless Lala, has worked as an independent professional wrestler throughout the south for the last 17 years. In this oral history, Harris talks openly about her journey towards becoming a respected female wrestler, experiences as a woman of color in a heavily white male dominated industry, and her dedication to creating a strong and memorable in-ring persona.

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[00:00:00] Brief introduction; Tanya Harris (“Ruthless Lala”) describes basic personal background information including her date of birth, her hometown of Dallas, Texas and her current place of residence in Nashville, Tennessee.

[00:02:02] Harris discusses her personal connections with wrestling. As the daughter of a preacher, Harris was raised under “very strict rules,” so she had to sneak out of her bedroom at night to watch pro wrestling. Harris recalls how her decision to become a wrestler was met with resistance from her mother. She remembers being drawn to the storytelling elements of televised WWF events, especially the Paul Bearer versus The Undertaker storyline. Harris draws connections between her use of music, dancing, and posing with that of other famous professional wrestlers.

Harris then charts her journey towards becoming an indie wrestler while still in high school. She began attending shows hosted by Professional Championship Wrestling, a local independent promotion. “Off the first match alone, I was sold.” Harris initially began her career as a “runner” (i.e. someone who gets food and drinks for wrestlers in the locker room) for PCW inside the Six Flags Mall in Arlington, Texas. As a runner, Harris was afforded the opportunity to get a glimpse into the locker room, which is often viewed as a sacred space. She notes that this particular promotion was concerned with “keeping kayfabe.” Harris also worked security for PCW. A miscommunication forced Harris to quit PCW, but she returned after she graduated from high school in 2003. Harris lists a number of influential trainers, wrestlers, and promoters who played a significant role in the earliest stages of her career.

[00:10:18] Harris describes the training process and in-ring knowledge that was passed down to her from more experienced professional wrestlers. “It is a pain in the ass.” Wrestlers practicing safety and protecting themselves as well as their opponents is paramount. Harris remembers learning front rolls, back rolls, quarter rolls, running the ropes, taking back bumps, handstands, and various types of flips.

[00:12:01] Harris comments on the creation of her in-ring persona, Ruthless Lala. She has noticed new trainees are more concerned with developing a character rather than learning the fundamentals. “A lot of people wrestle, and a lot of people work. There’s a big difference.” In thinking of her character as an extension of herself, Harris notes, “Ruthless is me.” “You have to learn how to get comfortable with who you are.” As a wrestler, Harris believes that Ruthless “is a god.” She explores different aspects of her character’s personality, motivations, and intentions. “All she really cares about is how much pain she can inflict on her opponent.”

Relatedly, Harris touches on how audiences respond to Ruthless Lala, and how she forms meaningful relationships with her fans. She believes fans appreciate her fearlessness and her commitment to full-body contact. “I am known as one of the hardest-hitting female wrestlers in the game.” Harris sees herself as a representative for women who have been silenced. In a tag-team context, Harris and her partner, Mike Cobb, enjoy causing chaos and destruction.

[00:17:58] Harris explores how being a woman of color has shaped her career as an indie pro wrestler. “Our voices doesn’t really get heard.” Throughout her 17 years in the industry, Harris has encountered racism as nearly every step along the way. “I’ve been called everything in the book.” Harris provides several examples of racist behaviors perpetuated by local promoters. “I thought we were better than this, but apparently we are not.” Harris actively tries to create a space where people feel safe and comfortable in publicly sharing their personal experiences. She also notes the drawbacks of vocalizing concerns and how it affects promotional bookings.

Harris also discusses how she advocates for herself in a heavily male-dominated profession. “I’m at the point now where I’m not asking for anybody’s permission.”

[00:23:31] Harris outlines a typical show day from start to finish. She shares that she has suffered from a skin disorder for the last 15 years, which affects how she moves throughout her day. “I have to get myself situated.” Breakfast, prepping a gear bag, showering, getting on the road, and arriving early to practice in the ring. “Things don’t get really serious until I put my contacts in.” Harris’ contact lenses are an opaque white, but she recalls her struggles in attempting to find a style that worked best for her.

[00:27:28] Harris talks about her approach to planning a match. Rather than arranging the match spot-by-spot, Harris prefers to craft a story arc for the match with a beginning, middle, and end. Calling a match based on moves “takes away the fun.” She talks about the security of wrestling with a knowledgeable and compatible tag-team partner. “You have to trust somebody with your life in that ring.”

Harris explains her wrestling style as a hybrid between highspots and grappling. People often assume she is a heavyweight wrestler based on her physical appearance, but Harris rejects that descriptor.

Harris also talks about how it feels to perform in the ring. “You’re on a high, you know?” She references a host of factors (e.g. adrenaline and crowd reactions) that affect her emotions during the match, but she also notes that she doesn’t fully process the event until a week later.

[00:31:18] Harris touches on what she feels are the more challenging aspects of wrestling, especially as they relate to being a woman of color. She references the #speakingout movement which calls attention to the mental, physical, emotional, and sexual abuse present in the professional wrestling industry. “A lot of wrestlers like to belittle...they try to bully you into doing things that is embarrassing and degrading.” Harris also confronts stigmas related to mental health issues and how the wrestling world lacks a level of transparency when addressing these issues.

[00:34:35] Harris comments on how people react when they learn she is a professional wrestler. “Oh, that fake shit.” Similarly, Harris talks about keeping kayfabe and how audiences are “smart” to what’s going on behind the curtain. Maintaining a visible presence on social media is something Harris does not enjoy. “I horribly suck at it.” While she recognizes the value, her day-to-day life takes precedence over engaging with fans. This leads to a discussion on building

and maintaining a recognizable brand or image. Harris talks about her catchphrase, “Respectfully,” and how she has incorporated it into merchandising.

She briefly details her podcasting endeavors with “The Ruthless Realness Podcast” and what she hopes to accomplish by giving other wrestlers of color a platform to share their stories.

[00:42:46] Harris reflects on how the world of independent professional wrestling has evolved over the course of the last two decades. “It’s still been a lot of the same old bullshit.” Harris chooses to focus on creating safe and productive environments for other women wrestlers. She returns to the #speakingout movement.

[00:46:22] Harris delves into her strongest matches and those she believes were a learning lesson. She discusses the one-year anniversary of a “last man standing” match with tag-team partner, Mike Cobb, which was the first time they had ever wrestled against each other. “It was a different thing to be in the ring with somebody that wanted me to hit them as bad as I wanted them to hit me.” She also talks about a six-man tag-match with Canadian pro wrestler Teddy Hart. Harris lists several other indie matches where she felt proud of her accomplishments. She goes off on a brief tangent about her intense love for Dragon Ball Z and how the anime has influenced her wrestling aesthetic.

Harris offers her opinions on the merit of intergender wrestling and how the wrestling industry can benefit from these types of matches. She notes the existence of traditional gender roles that have taken root in the world of pro wrestling and how she works to subvert gendered norms. “Do you have the patience and time to put that story together and make some money out of it? Or do you want to just stay in your ways?”

[00:57:43] Harris gives advice to those who are interested in pursuing a career in professional wrestling. She comments that “legitimate” wrestling schools that want their trainees to succeed still exist. “If you get at that ‘right’ school, keep your mouth closed and your ears open.” Harris also values humility. “There’s room at the top for everybody.” She emphasizes positivity over negativity, confidence, and refraining from overthinking.

[01:01:24] Closing remarks. Harris takes several minutes acknowledging promotions, wrestlers, and other industry professionals who have helped her find success throughout her career.

[01:08:17] End of interview