

Documentary: LADY WRESTLER: THE AMAZING, UNTOLD STORY OF AFRICAN-AMERICAN WOMEN IN THE RING (2018)

Running Time: 82 minutes

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Writer/Director/Producer/Narrator: Chris Bournea

Edited by: Paul Hill, Chris Bournea

Opening Title Sequence by: Heather Shelini Alabado

#### SYNOPSIS – SHORT

*Lady Wrestler: The Amazing, Untold Story of African-American Women in the Ring* is a documentary that chronicles the stories of Babs Wingo, Ethel Johnson, Marva Scott, Ramona Isbell and dozens of other women who braved racism and sexism to succeed in the male-dominated world of professional wrestling during the sport's golden age in the 1950s, '60s and '70s. These courageous women raised families while blazing a trail for female athletes long before many of the breakthroughs of the civil rights and feminist movements.

#### SYNOPSIS – FULL

*Lady Wrestler: The Amazing, Untold Story of African-American Women in the Ring* chronicles the story of three sisters named Babs Wingo, Ethel Johnson and Marva Scott — African-American women who garnered international success with their athletic grace and distinctive style decades before another African-American “sister act” — Venus and Serena Williams — captured the world's attention by doing the same.

As teenagers in the 1950s, Babs, Ethel and Marva were recruited by famed wrestling promoter Billy Wolfe, who was described in the press as the “self-made Maharajah of Muscle who had lifted women's wrestling out of the murky confines of carnivals and burlesques to make it one of the top-drawing attractions in America.” Wolfe's operation was based in Columbus, Ohio — Babs, Ethel and Marva's hometown, and where *Lady Wrestler* director Chris Bournea was born and raised.

As African-American women, Babs, Ethel and Marva were in a unique position, not only battling sexism, but racism as well. While many of their white female peers have been inducted into wrestling halls of fame, these women's names have been omitted from the history books — perhaps due to racism or their reticence to revisit the past. *Lady Wrestler* finally tells not only the story not only of the three sisters, but of the dozens of long-forgotten women who blazed trails alongside them.

## DIRECTOR BIO

Chris Bournea (bor-NAY) directed, produced and narrated the documentary *Lady Wrestler: The Amazing, Untold Story of African-American Women in the Ring*. He is a journalist, author and documentary filmmaker based in Columbus, Ohio, where many of the lady wrestlers trained during the sport's golden age, and where some still live.

Bournea is the co-author, with Raymond Lambert, of the critically acclaimed nonfiction book *All Jokes Aside: Comedy Is a Phunny Business*. The book chronicles the legendary Chicago comedy club All Jokes Aside, which helped launch the careers of superstars such as Steve Harvey, Oscar winner Mo'Nique, Chris Rock, D.L. Hughley and Dave Chappelle, among many others. The club was also the subject of the award-winning documentary *Phunny Business*, which debuted on Showtime in March 2012 during Black History Month.

Bournea, who graduated *cum laude* with a bachelor's degree in English from The Ohio State University, is also the author of the novel *The Chloe Chronicles*. He began his career at Ohio's historic African-American newspaper, the *Call and Post*. He has also written for the *Columbus Dispatch*, the city's daily newspaper, where his interview with African-American wrestling legend Ethel Johnson first appeared during Women's History Month in March 2006.

**FAQs** with *Lady Wrestler* director Chris Bournea:

**Q: Why was the film made?**

I felt that a feature-length documentary was the appropriate venue to shine a light on these courageous African-American women who endured racism and sexism to become world champions in a sport that has traditionally been dominated by men. I'm an African-American man who was born and raised in Columbus, Ohio, where many of the lady wrestlers as well as famed wrestling promoter Billy Wolfe were based, and I never heard about these women growing up. Telling their stories is long overdue.

**Q: Why do you think the African-American women wrestlers aren't more widely known?**

For a long time, the wrestling industry had amnesia about this chapter of the sport's history, as Jeff Leen, *Washington Post* reporter and author of the book *The Queen of the Ring*, says in the documentary. I think that amnesia may in part be due to racism or sexism, but it may also be due to the women's reticence to revisit the past. After leaving the wrestling industry in the '60s and '70s, many of the women settled into second careers in a variety of fields, quietly raising their families, and didn't want to talk about their former lives as famous wrestlers.

In recent years, the wrestling industry seems to have become more open to celebrating these women, extending invitations for them to be inducted into halls of fame. The WWE even released a video game featuring Marva Scott, one of the black female wrestlers whose story is a major focus of *Lady Wrestler*.

**Q: How did you go about researching the wrestler's stories?**

I conducted on-camera interviews with three former wrestlers: Ethel Johnson, Ramona Isbell and Ethel Brown. I also interviewed Marva's Scott's daughter, son and grandson, Kim Martin, James Black and James Black Jr.; as well as Ethel's daughters, Shelly Adams, Pam Coleman and Nina Whitehead; and Ramona's daughter, Terri Lynn.

Jeff Leen, whose well-researched book *The Queen of the Ring* is about world wrestling champion Mildred Burke and her tumultuous marriage to promoter Billy Wolfe, was incredibly helpful. He was gracious not only in granting an on-camera interview, but also in referring me to the University of Notre Dame's wrestling archive. That archive is a treasure trove of newspaper and magazine clips, vintage photos and even letters between the wrestlers and promoters.

**Q: Did you uncover anything surprising in your research or interviews?**

I think what was most surprising is that by exploring the University of Notre Dame archive, I discovered there were dozens of African-American lady wrestlers. It's amazing to think that women — and African-American women, in particular — once held such a prominent place in a sport historically associated with men.

**Q: Did anything unexpected happen during the making of the documentary?**

Something that happened that was not only unexpected but tragic, was that wrestling legend “Rowdy” Roddy Piper died suddenly of a heart attack in July 2015, a couple of years after I interviewed him for the documentary. He was only 61 and his death came as a shock to wrestling fans around the world. When I interviewed him at a fan convention in Indianapolis in the summer of 2013, he was accessible, easy to talk to and funny.

Something else that was pretty unexpected was that in person, Ethel Johnson, Ramona Isbell and Ethel Brown are soft-spoken and mild-mannered mothers and grandmothers — not necessarily what you’d expect from former athletes who once traveled the world destroying opponents in the ring.