

On Gorgeous George
Robert S. Griffin
www.robertsgriffin.com

George Wagner was a quiet, deferring man who grew up in Texas during the Great Depression of the 1930s. He had little education and few job prospects and the best he could do was eke out a living traveling from town to town as a professional wrestler. Although, as now, the matches were rigged, wrestlers in those years played it straight and gave the show the appearance of a genuine athletic contest: black trunks and high top shoes; modest, functional robes; real wrestling holds held for extended periods of time; and a sober, “game face” demeanor as they went about their business. Wagner was small for his trade—5’9” or 5’10” and around 190 pounds—but he was muscular and agile and gave crowds their money’s worth. But while George Wagner could be trusted to do his job well, he was just another wrestler and not a headliner. He and his wife Betty barely got along from payday to payday.

And then Betty came up with an idea of what could be done about their situation. Under her direction, George Wagner, journeyman wrestler, was transformed into--the name Betty came up with-- “Gorgeous George.” He grew his hair out and Betty curled it and dyed it blond. She sewed up some trunks and robes of silk and lace and chiffon in pale pinks and rich mauves. Now, rather than modest, dark-haired, clean cut George Wagner anonymously entering the ring, it was haughty Gorgeous George, blond curls glistening and engulfed in “unmanly” adornments, making a regal entrance to the strains of “Pomp and Circumstance.” Preceding him was “Jefferies,” his “valet” (actually a drinking buddy) decked out in formal attire, including a tailcoat, spraying the arena and mat with perfume. George Wagner-now-Gorgeous George convincingly affected an imperious look and strode about the ring sneering at the “peasants” who had paid to be in his presence and who ought to be grateful for the privilege. His wasn’t a prissy or gay presentation but rather an in-your-face display of pompousness, arrogance, and grating fastidiousness. Once the match began, he stalked around ring, constantly ran off at the mouth, occasionally interjected interludes of actual wrestling (at which time he became a startlingly fast, high-flying athlete), and cheated every chance he got.

This was in the late 1940s and on through the '50s. Television was in its early years, and wrestling became a regular feature of its prime time programming. Wrestling shows were cheap to produce--just an announcer and one camera at a show that was going to go on anyway--and it drew good ratings. As the '50s went along, Gorgeous George became the biggest thing going, especially in the Los Angeles market. People paid their money and sat in front of their console TVs to ogle his attire, scoff at his outrageous act, and watch him get his due from his salt-of-the-earth opponents. But after taking a licking and looking like a sure-fire loser the whole match, right at the end Gorgeous George would invariably pull an underhanded stunt that everybody saw but the referee and come out the winner. Of course that enticed the arena customers and home viewers to come back next time to see Gorgeous George get his comeuppance, which was sure to happen (the referee couldn't be that oblivious again). And of course the next time Gorgeous George would unfairly win again and smugly strut around the ring in triumph to hoots and hollers both in the arena and living rooms.

For over a decade Gorgeous George was at the top of the entertainment world: his fame transcended wrestling. He became a genuine celebrity. He inspired popular songs and made a movie. He hobnobbed with the show business elite of the time. Although her motive had been just to beef up their paycheck, Betty, with her husband going along with it and pulling it off superbly, had created an icon of American popular culture whose influence spread far and wide and past his time in the spotlight. Among the non-wrestlers who have acknowledged Gorgeous George's influence on their careers are Muhammad Ali, the singer James Brown, the filmmaker John Waters, and, no less, Bob Dylan.

With the coming of the 1960s Gorgeous George was bearing in on fifty, and advancing age abetted by a strong taste for alcohol was taking a heavy toll. It was getting tougher and tougher for this shy and retiring man—underneath the facade, he was still George Wagner—to keep the show going. Matches got further and further apart and the crowds sparser and sparser, and people were turning the station on their TVs to see what else was on (you had to get up

to do that in those years; no remote controls back then). Gorgeous George's career looked as if it had run its course.

But the Los Angeles wrestling promoter came up with an idea he was sure would bring the audience back one last time. It was a gimmick match between Gorgeous George and the "world champion" at the time, "The Destroyer"—real name Dick Beyer. Beyer was sixteen years younger than Gorgeous George, tanned, much bigger, and in far better physical shape. He could move well and put on a good show. Gorgeous George's success had prompted other wrestlers to come up with over-the-top personas of their own. Beyer had devised The Destroyer character, whose identity was concealed by a white elastic hood that fit snugly over his whole head. All you could see were his eyes, nose, and mouth. Who was The Destroyer? What did he look like? He was the mystery man.

The promoter's gimmick was to stage the Gorgeous George-Destroyer showdown as a "mask versus hair" match. The sell was that if Gorgeous George won, The Destroyer would be unmasked (or unhooded, close enough) and his identity revealed for the first time. If The Destroyer won, Gorgeous George's precious golden locks would be shorn right then and there in the middle of the ring. For the paying customers and the TV watchers it was a no-lose proposition: either they'd finally find out what The Destroyer looks like and who he is, or they'd see Gorgeous George get his, and they'd been waiting a long time for that to happen. The arrangement was for Gorgeous George to lose the match; which was fine with him. Low on money, he was grateful for the work.

On a Wednesday night in November of 1962, 7,634 showed up at Los Angeles' Olympic Auditorium—not a sellout by any means, but a good crowd. "Pomp and Circumstance" rang out on the loud speakers. The crowd perked up and looked around for Gorgeous George, and here he came up the walkway from the dressing room. George couldn't afford to pay a valet any more, and the promoter refused to cover the cost, so he strutted along spraying his own perfume. He had on his famous white boots and one of his favorite nylon robes, crimson with rhinestones and yellow embroidery. To the close observer, however, Gorgeous George's tight curls didn't look quite the same. Instead of their usual champagne color, they

looked almost white, and they lacked their usual sheen—perhaps because Betty had split and wasn't available to do his hair. When Gorgeous George removed his robe he looked thick but reasonably taut. He had cut back on his drinking and lost some of his paunch, and his arms had some definition, though not much.

The Destroyer and Gorgeous George put the match across well. As one spectator remarked later, "They gave the people their money's worth." George inadvertently twisted his knee, but he kept the show going through the pain. The crowd really got into it, stomping and screaming. And then the prearranged ending: The Destroyer got Gorgeous George up on his shoulders and took him for an "airplane spin"—round and round in dizzying fashion. Then he slammed Gorgeous George to the mat and applied the "figure four" hold. The Destroyer/Beyer described it as "bending a guy's leg 'til it looks like the number four." The "pain" from the figure four (which included some real pain from his hurt knee) "compelled" Gorgeous George to give up and the match was over.

Now for the humiliation—the vainglorious "Orchid" would suffer the ultimate indignity: those annoying curls were coming off! The crowd worked itself into a frenzy in the anticipation. They roared as two "hairdressers"—a couple of guys named Frank and Joseph—armed with shears and clippers entered the ring. Gorgeous George was going to get put in his place at last! Slumped in a metal folding chair in the middle of the ring, Gorgeous George was genuinely exhausted; his chest heaved. He was too tired to act anymore. He just sat there stoically, his eyes closed, as Frank and Joseph began chopping away at his hair with the shears and throwing the shorn damaged-from-dye, whitish-yellow snips into a plastic bucket. The Destroyer stayed in character shouting, "Yeah, that's it. Shave him good." After the shears, the Frank and Joseph started in on Gorgeous George's head with clippers working down toward the skin. The crowd was going wild, jumping and screaming.

And then the oddest thing happened. The crowd fell silent. There wasn't a sound in the huge arena. A man's voice rang out: "Leave him alone!" And then there were other cries of sympathy. People started streaming out of the arena. More silence. Finally Gorgeous George, slumped in the chair in the middle of the ring, was

completely bald. His large head gleamed in the glaring ring lights. Later, the promoter of the match scrawled on a photo taken at the occasion, "The final end of a swollen-headed drunk."

The next year, 1963, on Christmas day, his money and career gone along with Betty, Gorgeous George was in the flophouse where he was living alone. He managed to get himself to a hospital and tell them he was having chest pains. The next afternoon he had a massive heart attack and died. George Wagner was forty-eight years old.

Source: John Capouya, *Gorgeous George: The Outrageous Bad-Boy Wrestler Who Created American Pop Culture* (New York: HarperCollins, 2008).