

TORONTO

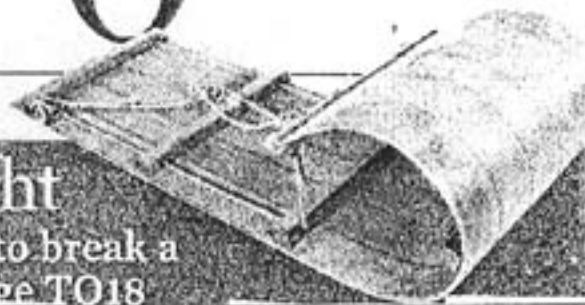
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Spider Jones: From punk to pugilist to personality

Radio DJ inspires others with personal rags-to-riches story

By Sherry Nolk-Bent

His fans know him as "the Lovable One," but CFRB's Spider Jones wasn't always so congenial.

Growing up dirt poor in the black section of Windsor, Ont., young Charles Jones ran with gangs and did jail time before finding redemption in the boxing ring. Now, at 56, he's a broadcaster and motivational speaker who urges kids to stay in school. In his recently published autobiography, *Out of the Darkness*, co-written by Michael Hughes, Jones writes about his journey from punk to pugilist to radio personality.

As a hard-up black kid in the remedial class — "the ding dong class," it was called — Jones had a lot of strikes against him. One of nine children in a family headed by a Baptist minister, he lost his baby brother to illness and watched violence claim the lives of family members and friends. At school he was the target of unrelenting racial taunts. He writes

of spending sleepless nights racked with fear and going to school soaked in his own urine.

"I hated myself so much," Jones recalls. "I'd get upset at something, I'd just pound myself so hard I'd be swollen. I'd call myself an effin' nigger, pound my head against the wall and cry."

At the age of 14 he dropped out and took to the streets of Windsor and Detroit, a brawler with hard fists and a blade in his pocket.

He found boxing while he was still a teenager, first in illegal "smokers," then on the legitimate circuit. After a while he came to the attention of legendary boxing trainer Earl "Sully" Sullivan, who brought him to Toronto and started coaching him at his Parkdale athletic club. It was in the ring that Jones first found respect. Sullivan likened his fighting style to that of boxer Spider Webb, and the nickname stuck. Jones went on to win three Golden Gloves championships.

By this time Jones was street smart but virtually illiterate. As an 11-year-old, at Detroit's Fox Theatre, he'd seen a concert hosted by Alan Freed, the DJ credited with coining the phrase "rock 'n' roll." "It just got into me," he re-



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"It's where you're going that counts," says CFRB DJ Spider Jones.

members. "I wanted to be that. But there were no blacks in radio then. And we didn't think that way, we didn't think big. My mother and father discouraged it. My friends did, too."

In the late '70s he was working as a DJ and bouncer at the Drake Hotel, a notorious den of iniquity until very recently. "Comin' home

with cuts and bruises, blood all over, my wife freaked out," Jones says. Jackie Robinson Jones asked him what, in his wildest dreams, he would like to do instead, and encouraged him to pursue it. So, at the age of 30, Jones returned to school and completed the radio program at Seneca College.

He got his first radio gig at Oakville-based CHWO 1250, now known as AM 740, where he took requests and dedications in the wee hours. "The first week I did the show, I got all my friends, neighbours and cousins to call and ask for requests," Jones says. In 1993, he was hired to do overnights on The FAN, where he remained until 1999, when TALK 640 slotted his open-line talk show on weekday evenings from 7 till 9.

Two years later, when the station changed its name and format to MOJO (or "MOJO Ray-jo," as Jones put it in his distinctive speaking style), Jones didn't figure into the plans. Later that year he moved on to CFRB, where he continues to host the 3 to 6 p.m. slot on Sundays. He brings his street cred to his show, where open-line discussions of everything from sports and movies to politics are liberally sprinkled with such colourful trademark epigrams as, "Ain't nuthin' shakin' but the bacon."

Jones is in a minority of black broadcasters in Toronto radio, but he thinks the ethnic representation in this city has improved a great deal. "Let's face it," he says, "a large percentage of lis-

teners at CFRB are white listeners, and they're from that old school." He commends his employer, Standard Radio president Gary Slaight, for giving him a chance to break the mould. "When [Slaight] brings in a black guy who is known to be outspoken, it takes a little bit of balls."

Now firmly in the ranks of the mainstream, Jones still feels his point of view is unlike those of his colleagues. "I may be coming to broadcasting from a different perspective than a bunch of other guys that came out of college, university, maybe had things handed to them," he says. "Nothing was ever handed to me. To this day, everything I got I've fought for. I've had more doors shut in my face than a Jehovah's Witness."

There's little evidence of bad breaks and hard living on his face, only a slightly crooked smile from hundreds of tooth-shifting blows to the jaw. He recounts his rags-to-riches story often as a motivational speaker at schools and community clubs. But he's no longer plagued by the past. "You mature and you understand that low self-esteem is nothing more than a state of mind," Jones says. "My philosophy is, it doesn't matter where you come from, it's where you're going that counts."

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