Written by Robert Mladinich
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Actor Tony Lip is best known as the late Carmine Lupertazzi Sr., the crime boss he played for three seasons on HBO's hit television series "The Sopranos." When his character died of a heart attack while playing golf, Lip, who was born and raised in the Bronx, New York, was sad to see him go.

"When they were shooting the scene of me in a coffin, I fell asleep," Lip said, while taking in the action with former heavyweight contender Chuck Wepner, and others, at the Main Events "Back to the Future" boxing show at the Schuetzen Park ballroom in North Bergen, New Jersey, on November 30.

"It took them a lot of takes to get the right shot – so I really fell asleep. Imagine that!"

Lip, who now resides in New Jersey, has been a diehard boxing fan his whole life. He is a regular fixture at club shows and other boxing-related events throughout the New York metropolitan area.

While watching undefeated Colombian sensation Joel Julio batter Hicklet Lau around the ring, he recalled listening to a fight between Sugar Ray Robinson and Jake LaMotta on the radio when he was a young man. Those days, he said, provided some of his best boxing memories.

"I think I enjoyed listening to the fights more than watching them," he mused. "Your imagination would go wild. Back then, listening to fights [involving] guys like Jake [LaMotta] and Rocky [Graziano] – your heart would race with excitement. They were real neighborhood heroes."

While working for 30 years as a host at the Copacabana, Lip eventually became friendly with LaMotta and Graziano, as well a scores of other influential people. It was his casual acquaintance with a film producer that led him to his first film role – in none other than "The Godfather" in 1972. He played a wedding guest.

One thing led to another, and he soon became a regular in films with Italian-American or organized crime-related themes. He played Frankie the Wop in "Goodfellas," Nicky Bad Lungs in "29th Street," Vito Pasquale in "Who's the Man," and Philly Lucky in "Donnie Brasco."

He's also appeared in, among other films, "Raging Bull" and "The Pope of Greenwich Village."

"I never took an acting lesson in my life," said Lip, who refuses to divulge his age, as well as a lot of other things about himself. "But it's something I love. I wish I started earlier."

"He's a natural," Wepner said with a chuckle. "I've known Tony for 30 years. He's a helluva an actor. Sometimes it doesn't look like he's acting at all. Maybe he isn't."

Working with the cast and crew of "The Sopranos" was like no other set Lip had ever been on.

He said James Gandolfini, who plays the lead character Tony Soprano, kept everyone laughing and that life on the set was more like fun than work.

"We told a lot of jokes and had a lot of laughs," Lip said. "Everyone was so easy to work with. All those things you hear about actors – nobody was like that on the show. A happy crew made it a healthy show."

Lip's first book, which he co-authored with Steven Prigge, was published by Berkeley in October. It is called "Shut Up and Eat" and lists the favorite recipes of 39 Italian-American celebrities.

Among them is comedian Pat Cooper, as well as actors Danny Aiello, who also wrote the forward, Edie Falco, Lorraine Bracco, Chazz Palminteri, Drew DeMatteo, Talia Shire, Tony Sirico, Robert Loggia, Robert Davi, and Gandolfini.

"The book is doing dynamite," Lip said. "I hear they can't keep it on the shelves in some stores. That's great news."

At the time of this writing, it was listed as one of the top 5,000 selling books on Amazon.com. It also had numerous five-star reviews from readers.

While discussing the book, Lip was distracted by Julio's fourth round TKO of Lau. When asked for an email address so I could forward the publication date of this story, he motioned for me to get that from his friend, a burly fellow who was sitting to my right.

"What do you want it for?" he asked gruffly. "What are you going to send?"

When I told him, his position softened a bit and he passed it along.

"Nice to meet you," Lip said as I made my way over to Wepner, who was sitting two seats to his left. Directly on Lip's left was Wepner's lovely wife Linda.

"I hear there's gonna be another show here in February," Lip added. "I'm looking forward to it. I enjoy these fights more than the big fights. I enjoy the winners and the losers. Even the losers fight with their heart. At [club] fights like these you get great crowds – just like the old days."