

Joe Babinsack reviews "Shoot First, Ask Questions Later" wrestling book

Shoot First…Ask Questions Later By James Guttman ECW Press ecwpress.com \$19.95 Reviewed by Joe Babinsack Since the wrestling review gig seems to have become a crowded house, I’ve been a bit more forthcoming on keeping up with the new material. Case in point: James Guttman’s second book, by ECW press. In this case, it was a quick read. Said my wife: “Why are you so engrossed in that book?” Said me: “I don’t know, it’s not THAT good.” Said my wife: “Well, you seemed engrossed in it.” I didn’t respond because I was actually engrossed in it. There’s a myriad of complexities and levels to this book, not all of which are THAT engrossing, and many of which revolve around Mr. Guttman’s peculiar focus on gaining interviews primarily with former WWE types. While Guttman is self-deferential, humorous and seems to have a solid perspective on the industry, at the same time, he has shifted from his rather strong anti-WWE stance in his World Wrestling Insanity book, and to a more deferential “It isn’t THAT bad” mentality. Problem is, in the context of this book, it SEEMS like James Guttman is ignorant of the reality that the majority of wrestlers are always in “work” mode, and working an interviewer is child’s play to the likes of Nash, Bischoff or even the Iron Sheik. Then again, he does take a few waves at that sentiment. What concerns me is that the general feel of the book is a run of mostly second string interview subjects, peppered with some big names, yet mostly focused on kow-towing to the dominance of the WWE. In many ways, it feels like he has the same mindset as TNA! From my perspective, the industry is much bigger than the WWE, and for the industry to persevere, the journalists, historians and especially those of us who purport to be journalists and historians and writers need to be more interested in expanding their knowledge bases, not overfocusing attention on subjects who have agendas that do not mesh with any sense of learning about the business… The book jacket touts WorldWrestlingInsanity.com and ClubWWI.com as “online benchmark for diverse and important guests” but the problem is that the diversity is almost exclusively made up of former WWE wrestlers and talent. Which means it’s not exactly a diversity. Sure, there’s old school people like Bruno Sammartino and Terry Funk, but there’s fewer TNA guys, and almost no one of the indy level. To be fair, a quick review of Guttman’s web sites does tout ROH, SHIMMER and more than just the WWE, but its sad to read a book about the industry, and only read about the WWE and it’s domination. On the other hand, too much of this book is wrapped up in celebrity. Kevin Nash, Vince Russo, Eric Bischoff – all touted because of their appearances on Guttman’s audio shows (which, by the way were severely limited in internet access, by his own description, a reality vastly … laughable.) Sure, those guys are important, but those guys are also over-the-top self-promoters, and ultimately capable of manipulating a star struck interviewer. And James Guttman, book writing credentials aside, doesn’t seem to have the heft of being an industry celebrity. His hemming and hawing and contradictions (Vince Russo was great, Vince Russo was a poor writer) and his fawning apologies and constant reconsiderations don’t make him anything like a critic. At times, he speaks with an assumption of knowing the minds of all the fans, other times, he speaks of “facts” when clearly there aren’t any. Granted, I’m known for rambling criticisms and diverting from the topic, as well as overblown opinions and a sense of perspective that I may or may not truly deserve, but it’s one thing to put pixels on computer screens, another to put them on the printed page. However, I would have much rather read chapters and verses of excerpts from these vaunted interviews, instead of reading James Guttman tell me how interesting they were, how much insight he gleaned and how it was wonderful to talk to all these guys, apparently often when cold-calling them. But the book is worthwhile.. It chronicles a growing list of talented wrestlers who found themselves outside of the WWE circle of power, and the final chapter, fixating on who guys would have loved to have worked with (despite some annoying diversions) is well worth reading. One vastly interesting chapter is the one on Ole Anderson. I’m not quite sure if Guttman truly realizes how badly he makes himself look when he exposes how Ole bull-rushed him, but it is funny and fascinating nonetheless. Point is, I know James Guttman is learning the interview business along the way, but preparation and knowledge and getting a good interview is the responsibility of the interviewer. Letting the interviewee run roughshod is part of the game, but why show your reading audience how ill-prepared you are? When Ole Anderson asks a pointed question, and Guttman sets himself up by blindly walking into it, am I supposed to feel sympathy? Am I supposed, as Guttman posits, to feel antipathy for Anderson? My response was gut-felt…I saw Ole as the stubborn, wily and cranky personality that I’ve read about, and I saw Guttman as someone who was revealing far too much of himself that he should have thought twice about. Revelations about professional wrestlers is a positive thing, and I can’t get enough of such insights. Again, I would have wished the book had presented more raw interview transcripts, and less snippets; more insight gleaned from the interviewees and less opining by the interviewer; more knowledge and controversy, and less backtracking and apologizing. Yes, Vince McMahon is a brilliant businessman and yes, the WWE isn’t a cold hearted, evil company, but glossing over the realities of how the WWE has decimated the industry, all the while has reduced the jobs, opportunities and careers of the people who work there, seems to have suddenly become an afterthought. At the end of this book, I’m thinking James Guttman used this as an attempt to mellow out his harsh criticisms of the WWE, even though he really doesn’t go back on much of it specifically (just some self-directed wondering if HHH was really the bad guy he himself had presented in his first book.) What he does do is question himself, give wide latitude to the bigger names he spoke with, and present a forum for some guys who aren’t quite associated with the WWE anymore, and presents all this as a forum for learning more about professional wrestling. Maybe it truly is a journey of James Guttman’s soul, and maybe I just don’t “get it” because my level of cynicism and disdain for the WWE doesn’t give much respect to people who suddenly become moderate about the subject. But the end result is a book that isn’t as bad as others, but isn’t as good as it could have been. Less Guttman and more ‘diverse’ voices would have improved it greatly. Joe Babinsack can be

reached at chaosonejoe@yahoo.com. Full disclosure: I've pitched several books to ECW Press, and none of them have taken root (although Wrestling's Greatest Moments is coming out soon, just not the one I wanted to write.) Did it cloud my judgment? Perhaps. But being a critic means not pulling punches, not tap dancing around perceptions.