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Street Justice: Harley Flanagan Talks BJJ, MMA, and Underground Fighting

Monday, November 23rd, 2009 at 12:00 pm
by Jeff Harder



(Metallica's James Hetfield with Harley Flanagan. Props to Skiz1.)

Scowling, tattooed, and shirtless, Harley Flanagan was the living embodiment of Manhattan's Lower East Side in the 1970s and 1980s. A talented street tough, Flanagan drew from his experiences to pen songs for his now-legendary hardcore punk band, Cro Mags. Flanagan recently penned a memoir, tentatively titled *Life of My Own*, that he says is scheduled for release in 2010 through Feral House. In the meantime, FIGHT! caught up with the Renzo Gracie purple belt to talk about the efficacy of martial arts in street fights, training BJJ way back when, and his foray into New York's underground fight scene.

FIGHT!: You started training with Renzo Gracie shortly after he arrived in New York. How did you first hear about Renzo, and when did your relationship with him begin?

Flanagan: I started training with Renzo in 1995. At that point, he was still working with Craig Kukuk. He pretty much had only one purple belt there and one brown belt, these two cats that he brought over from Brazil...One day I found this little article in the back of *Black Belt* magazine that said "Renzo Gracie, Craig Kukuk, Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu," and it had an address and a phone number...so I go to the place and there was probably three people training, if that...I didn't know what to expect. But I walked in and Renzo just smiled and puts his arm around me and said, "Hey, my friend, you come to train?" And I was like, "Oh shit, this guy's awesome."

FIGHT!: A recurring theme in the lyrics from all your band is street life. What was it like coming up in New York in the '70s and the '80s in that climate of violence?

Flanagan: You know, that's really hard for me to sum up for you quickly. I'd have to refer you to my book because it really covers a lot of it. There really was a lot of gang culture back then; every neighborhood and every area had different gangs that ran different streets. You know, you didn't get much respect unless you were sort of a hard ass, and if you were white in my neighborhood, you were definitely a little more prone to getting fucked with. So after a few years of getting abused, I eventually got pretty tough myself, and I guess a lot of my lyrics really reflected the energy in that neighborhood. There was a lot of gangs, a lot of drugs, a lot of crazy shit going on. You know, at night you'd hear guns go off, it was no big deal. You'd hear roosters crowing because they used to fight roosters on my block, they fought dogs on my block...I mean things that most people only see in movies and shit like that were pretty much normal...

FIGHT!: If you had somehow been able to train jiu-jitsu back then—

Flanagan: Oh dude, I talk about it often. I've always wished that there would have been that type of an outlet growing up. I think it could have changed just about everything—shit, I probably would have been into mixed martial arts instead of music. I would have probably had a whole different direction. Because back then, I used to fight a lot. Growing up, it's part of what went on...in the '70s, everybody was into fuckin' Bruce Lee. Everybody was into kung fu, or everybody was into pretending to be into kung fu. If you went to 42nd Street, there were kung fu movies playing everyfuckinwhere, in between the horror movies and the pornos. You had all your martial arts supply stores all over 42nd and 14th Street...Most of my early training, if you want to call it that, came from guys who were roadies for the Cro Mags. Some of them were black belts in certain Korean styles of karate, and these dudes were just fucking deadly. Growing up, we were all pretty much street fighters. These guys competed in tournament karate with the quick one-strike point system and everything, but when it translated to street fighting, it was pretty efficient, because you're talking about trying to take someone out with one or two strikes. And these guys pretty much had perfected that art.

FIGHT!: That's interesting because one of the big knocks that a lot of people give to traditional martial arts is that they say it's not applicable to a real environment.

Flanagan: That's bullshit though. Because the way I see it, all martial arts have some validity, it's just how you apply it. Sure, some things are just real fancy fuckin' showmanship bullshit. However, a staff system may not make much sense, but if you're at a bar and you pick up a pool cue, it becomes very efficient (laughs)...I remember a couple of street fights I got into after I had gotten my purple belt in BJJ, and just by instinct and just from training, I took these cats to the ground, went to knee on stomach, started pounding, and then all the sudden I'm getting kicked in the ribs by someone else (laughs). So it's like, certain things become instinctual that are not necessarily the appropriate thing to do in a street fight...There was a guy a long time ago that used to train at Renzo's for a minute. I didn't really know him too well. And he walked up on someone breaking into his car, took the guy down and started fucking him up, and got shot by someone else.

FIGHT!: Shit.

Flanagan: So the point is, street fights are not mixed martial arts fights. And people who think they are, or who think that UFC strategy works on the street, are wrong. Because on the street, somebody's gonna try to stab you if you're winning...I think that as barbaric as people want to say mixed martial arts is, I think it's very civilized in the sense that two people get into the ring and abide by certain rules, and someone is gonna submit or get knocked out at the appropriate time and that's that.



