

THE COUNT DANTE STORY PART III

THE LAST CHAPTER

BY MASSAD F. AYOUB

At the time Count Dante died, all who knew him proclaimed him one of the wealthiest men in the martial arts. By some accounts, he had made more from his book than Bruce Tegner, and more from his catalog than anybody but Bruce Lee and Mito Uyehara ever amassed from any martial arts endeavor.

His book wouldn't even be called a paperback—it was really more of a leaflet. He titled it, "The World's Deadliest Fighting Arts." It was built almost wholly on hand techniques—basic kung-fu punches and an assortment of ripping and gouging tactics. It incorporated what he called "the Dance of Death," an overkill technique that involved either crushing or tearing away almost every vital organ in the body. Watching some of his students doing it, it seemed ludicrous. But John could perform his dance in a way that made you picture it happening on a barroom floor. He was a fast and graceful man, and even those who hated him as much as Kenny Knudsen would admit that he did a hell of a spectacular kata in conventional forms.

The man's system never appeared, really, in anything he wrote; the most he ever put down in print was a critique of other systems. His own form, when he was teaching it, he called by a basic name. "My system," he'd say, "is 'fuck-em-up waza.' Cause what I'm doing is fucking up the other guy's body." Later, disciples led by Bill Aguiar would prevail upon him to put a more conventional and saleable name on his style. With characteristic humility, he called it Dan-Te, which he said stood for "deadly hands." It was a hand-based system.

"In my philosophy of combat," he said, "you don't use your feet much until your man is on the floor, except that your legs will bring you in toward your opponent. Your legs are transportation, not weapons." He felt that close-in training had two advantages. It psyched out an opponent accustomed to fighting with boxing or karate techniques at a distance measured in feet instead of inches and it trained you to fight in any situation. "Show me how to throw a sidekick in a phone booth," he'd say. "Show me how to do a uchimata in a phone booth."

Dante trained his men to fight in saloons. At least two sequences of the Dan-Te system involve techniques that don't work on anybody who isn't sitting on a bar stool. In the main training hall of Dante's Black Dragon Society in Fall River, Massachusetts, you'll find the black belts lounging between workouts with bottles of Bud from the capacious



Photos by Ed Ikuta

beer cooler. "I know it's not what you BLACK BELT writers are used to seeing . . . us sitting here with beer and cigarettes," says a gi-clad Black Dragon instructor sitting there with a beer and a cigarette, "but this is the condition most of us are going to be in if we get into any beefs, and we want to be accustomed to it."

John himself had a compelling taste for malts and spirits, and he also chain-smoked Kools, a habit he picked up shortly after the death of Jim Concevic.

But if you had visited the hall in Fall River, run by Bill Aguiar, or Russell Brown's school in Chicago, you wouldn't really have had the feel of what Dante was doing. While he never

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left the martial arts entirely, he had gravitated into other fields of endeavor after Concevic's demise.

One was pornography. Chicago Police listed him as the owner of an adult bookstore. In fact, he was involved in a chain of them. "Involved" means different things, depending on whether you believe Dante's version or that of others. Some said he owned the chain, but John told BLACK BELT, "All I do now is kind of supervise the chain for some people in the organization. I just make sure that nobody gets out of line, and nobody tries to muscle in." His students claimed that he grossed \$9,000 a week.

Dante was into drugs, but nobody was ever sure how deep. For publication, he'd only say, "Tell the readers of BLACK BELT that I share, with the late Bruce Lee, a certain taste for cannabis." It was hinted that he had dealt in narcotics. In a candid moment, he told the writer that he had been thrown out of the Army because of drug charges though he maintained that it was a bum rap.

Toward the last part of his life, Dante was into drugs . . . not heavily, but definitely. He got drunk a lot, the way hard-living people do after a doctor has told them that the end might be in sight. And he had other problems. One night he called me at about 3:30 AM and apologized for being slightly incoherent. He was drunk, he said, and had been mixing liquor with some of his wife's surplus pain killers. She was suffering, he explained, from pernicious anemia that the doctors feared would develop into leukemia.

Jane Orr, Jim Concevic's number one confidante, told us, "At the time Jim was killed, he and Keehan favored each other a lot. Keehan had his brown curly hair, and he wore a beard and so did Jim. They were both the same height, but Keehan weighed less and had smaller bones. Sometimes I think it was a case of mistaken identity. They were trying to kill Keehan. A lot of people said so at the time. Jim had a school not far from the place where he was killed and he never had any beef with those people.

"Keehan is psychotic. I think he's crazy. Just from some of the things his girlfriend told me . . . he frightened me. Once I went to their apartment to visit Cynthia Brown (a pseudonym). No one would take me home, they got high on some kind of drugs, and I got scared. Keehan was into marijuana and pills. He really strung that poor girl out . . ."

BLACK BELT spent a couple of days trying to track down "Cynthia Brown." The writer finally tracked down a phone

number. A girl named Cynthia Brown answered the telephone. She had a pert kind of voice. We told her who we were and the voice got hard, cold and scared. "I don't want to talk to you. I don't care who you are. I don't know anyone named John Keehan or John Dante. I don't want you to call me again." The phone went dead.

The phone went dead a lot when we were checking into Dante's background. For every person who liked Dante there were two or three who loathed him. And for every one of those there was somebody who didn't dare talk about him at all. His legend may or may not have been true, but the fear he inspired was real enough.

It was said that Count Dante was an enforcer for the Chicago Syndicate. His students liked to play that up. So, on rare occasions, did he. In one unguarded moment, when he was visiting the coast for a tournament, he claimed he "... did two hits . . .," one "... for myself . . .," and another for a local gangster who is allegedly the acknowledged godfather of the New England Mafia.

Who was Count Dante to be doing stuff that heavy? Sicilian, he wasn't. His claim to the title of Count, he said, was through his mother's noble Spanish birth. His name had been legally changed to Count Juan Raphael Dante. Though he furnished BLACK BELT with the original certificate of his rank in the various arts he had acquired black belts in (see part I), he never came through with documentation of his title. In one mood, he would tell me with a characteristic snarl, "Look it up for yourself," and other times, he'd say, "A man's name should be what he says it is. No one questions that Cassius Clay is now Muhammad Ali. It doesn't bother anybody that Lew Alcindor is now Kareem Abdul Jabbar. Why do people question whether or not John Keehan is Count Dante?"

* * * * *

Count Dante stands in Bill Aguiar's hardwood-paneled office. On the desk in front of him are a few copies of his book, "The World's Deadliest Fighting Arts."

It's a book you see advertised in men's magazines and in comic books. He pays five figures a year for the ads in the Marvel comic series, and when we were talking to him, he was negotiating to put his ad in the DC (*Superman*, etc.) comic line.

"I am the most famous martial artist who ever lived," he said flatly. "Ask any martial artist who I am and either they won't know me or they'll say I'm shit.

But ask the average person on the street. He's heard two names that he relates with the martial arts, Bruce Lee and Count Dante.

"The martial arts boom is dying. A lot of the magazines are going to go under. But I'll still be here, big as life. Bigger."

The book was written between 1966 and '67, copyrighted in '68 and published at his own expense. It has sold millions of copies, probably more than any other martial arts book in history. It has made him a fortune.

He followed the book with the creation of the Black Dragon Fighting Society, which gives membership cards to anybody who buys the book and puts on the order card what belt color he wants his membership certificate to state. Also in the catalog are sweatpants and sweatshirts with the BDFS symbol on them, warmup jackets, acrylic yawara sticks and shuriken.

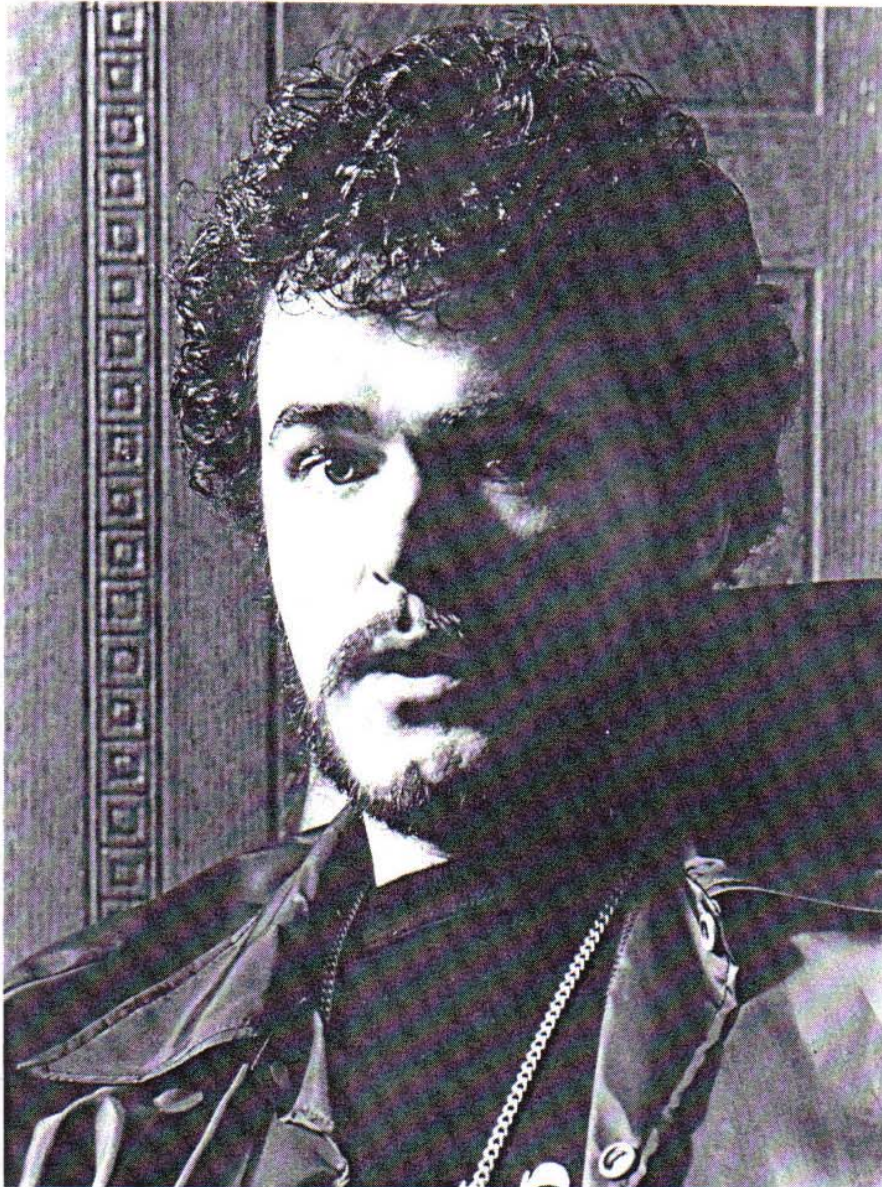
Mail order martial arts is still big business. John was making a bundle off it before anybody ever heard of Bruce Lee or Kwai Chang Caine. John protected that money the way your Syrian-American rug merchant protects his business—by putting everything in his wife's name.

"I don't have anything to do with the mail order business anymore," John would tell you with a straight face. "It was part of the divorce settlement. My estranged wife runs it now."

Krista Dante, 22, was perhaps the only person John ever loved more than himself. He always referred to her as his "estranged" wife, even though he still loved her and lived with her, because that phrase made her remote from him, kept her away from the dangers he believed were surrounding him.

And those dangers, in his mind, were many. The Mob, he told me, was unhappy with him. He had been associated with the famous Chicago Purloiner Burglary, the biggest American heist since the Brink's job, and he had been pulled in along with many Chicago syndicate figures in the aftermath of the hit.

Dante landed feet first in the bigtime martial arts again in March of 1975, as guest host of—and, some said, silent partner in—the infamous "Taunton Death Matches." What Dante had thought would be just another full-contact tournament along the lines of what Mike Anderson was popularizing had turned, he told me, into a debacle that brought New England-wide headlines, and with it, attention of people who don't like publicity for people associated with them. "I got a call," said John ominously. "When you get a call



from these people about something they don't like, one of two things happen. You kiss somebody's hand and tell him it won't happen again, or you get dead."

After the tournament, John went to Chicago and secluded himself in his condominium.

He developed the habit, after that, of calling me late at night when he was drinking and doped and lonesome. He told me that he was sitting waiting to be hit, that he didn't dare venture out of the house and that he sat at the phone with a shotgun across his lap.

At moments like that, he showed a side of himself that had never come out before. "I don't care what you write about me, Mas," he said. "You can tell them I'm an asshole, tell them I'm a jag-off . . . it's true. I've done a lot of ass-

hole things in my life. But I'll tell you something. I love my wife and our son. (Dante explained that their son was by Krista's first marriage.) I don't know if I've ever loved anybody else. Say what you want about me. But don't say anything to hurt them.

"I think they're going to kill me. If I stay here, I haven't got six months left. I've got friends in other places and I'm going to get out of the country. I've got a friend in Lebanon and I'm thinking of splitting for there.

"I'm not, at my age, gonna fuck with those people," he told me. "Years ago, it was different. I'd fuck with bikies, junkies, the whole bit, that's how I got my reputation. Now, I've got to sit quiet a little bit. But I will pay your way out here and we will get together

on a book, but I will have to get the fuck out of the country."

Dante was incensed that Luigi DiFonzo, a figure in the Purolator heist who was believed to have "laundered" the stolen money, was coming out with a book on the exploit. Dante had been questioned about the heist, and threatened with subpoena, and considered himself to be more on the inside than DiFonzo. He spoke of other "expose" books on the workings of organized crime. "(The book) 'Joey' was legit. Like Joey, I know. Vincent Thresa was an asshole. He had somebody get all his information for him. Joe Valachi was a soldier, an old man who knew nothing.

"I'm set to move to the Bahamas. I've got money there . . . I'll give you facts, information, names, the whole bit. The only thing is, if I do it—and believe me, I've got my course set—I'll move like a big-ass bird."

These statements came after an unnerving confrontation in William Aguiar's Fall River dojo. John and I had agreed previously that, following the BLACK BELT interviews, I would give him for review only those passages of the manuscript that dealt with his involvement in organized crime, to prevent anything that could result in charges or indictments from getting into print. However, dropping into the dojo where Dante was visiting for a followup interview, I was faced with a release to sign stating that anything BLACK BELT published about him would have to have his word-for-word approval. I explained that it would be impossible.

Soon Dante arrived and I was ushered into his office. He stated coldly and flatly that without that signature, there would be no further cooperation. I explained again that the original agreement was for review rights on my own manuscript to the extent of passages referring to criminal offenses he might have committed.

At that moment, Dante's face changed. The lips drew back from the teeth and for the first and only time I saw the face that peers from the comic book ads. "Listen," he snarled. "I can get twenty people to testify in court that they heard you give me full approval rights and if you give the magazine anything about me that I haven't seen first, I'll own everything you have. And you can tell that fucking slant-eyed bastard Uyehara that if he publishes anything about me without my consent, I'll own his fucking magazine!" Then the snarl disappeared as quickly as it had come, and he put a hand on my shoulder, adding, "But don't worry, Mas. After I own Rainbow Publications,

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maybe I'll make you editor-in-chief."

We sat and talked calmly for a while after that. I suggested that John have his attorney put those feelings in writing, and he carefully wrote down the editor's name and address. Then we all went out for an amiable afternoon of shooting the breeze over beer and anti-pasto.

His manner of referring to BLACK BELT's Japanese-American publisher was typical of him. Dante made it clear to all that he had no love for Orientals. BLACK BELT confirmed that a few months before his death, Dante challenged Paul Kwan to a death match, and told him that all Orientals should be put into ovens. Kwan, public information director for an Eastern American kung fu association, told us that Dante's challenge was in response to his, Kwan's, curiosity as to how a Caucasian could claim to hold a tenth degree in kung fu. Dante's version was more colorful: "Paul Kwan, who I don't even know who in the hell he is . . . (asked one of my disciple's students) if I was still blowing up dojos or something like this. Well, they were gonna deck him and plant him, but they had just about a month earlier broke into one dojo and destroyed it . . . just to keep in practice. Practice makes perfect. They weren't told to do it, it was just a bunch of guys out like the Ku Klux Klan, guys out having a good time.

"And so, they were going to deck Kwan, but because Master Aguiar had chewed them out for getting caught on their last one, they didn't know what to do. (One of our students), an ex pro boxer and wrestler, had tried to drive through the side of the building after Kwan, and got halfway through a partition and a brick wall, but didn't quite make it to get to him. So I challenged him over the phone."

"You really can't reason with people like that," Kwan explained philosophically after the incident.

On tape, Dante elaborated on his prejudice against Orientals: "I've mentioned many times that I don't believe that the Orientals can fight. If they can, how come they don't hold any records or championships? The toughest Oriental fighters I've seen have either been Sumo wrestlers, or Indian pit wrestlers, or Thai boxers. But as far as Koreans, Japanese . . . I would say JKA shotokan is about the best there. But the Koreans, their tae kwon do, tang soo do, mu duk kwan, couldn't beat their way out of paper bags. The Japanese are better but not much. They wouldn't last 6 seconds with some of my one year black belts even if they had 6 years in. The Okin-

nawans? They need federal assistance for their programs in this country as far as the fighting arts. The Chinese, I would say, are about the worst. They get by with all this mystical garbage, but they can't fight. They're highly overrated, they get a big name for doing nothing. The soft movements of tai chi, from which a lot of aikido was copied, and kung fu, why don't they win matches? How come they don't win the pro knockout matches? It's always your white Americans, your black Americans, your Canadians (who are) bigger, stronger, tougher. I have no use for Orientals, I think they're sneaks. I think they're trying to take over the country every possible way they can. They've got their own crime syndicates in this country, New York especially, that even the Families don't move in on."

A racist in terms of Orientals, Dante, surprisingly, had an extensive black following. "I'm their blue-eyed soul brother," he once quipped. He claimed to have taught the Blackstone Rangers, the feared black street gang. And indeed, most of his schools were heavily weighted with black students. Even at the end, he counted nationally-known black karateka such as Karriem Allah, Fred Hamilton and Russell Brown among his staunchest supporters in the martial arts.

He was the first to run full-contact tournaments in this country that were open to all styles. Promotion of those events brought him into the sharply focused center of anger on the part of the established martial arts community. At the time, BLACK BELT magazine castigated him roundly and published a forum of almost totally negative opinion. Today, when contact matches have become generally accepted, it's interesting to look back on some of the statements that damned Dante.

"I am totally against such a tournament personally and I will not send any of my students to compete. I know this type of contest will hurt karate in America tremendously in a very short time." Those were the words of Jhoon Rhee, whose introduction of safety equipment a few years later would fling wide the door to full contact karate in America.

"I personally think that such a contest would be assinine (sic) in the extreme! It would have all the vulgar atmosphere of a second-rate circus and could do nothing except harm the image so many of us have tried to build for karate in the United States . . . If karate is ever to be accepted on a spectator sports basis, there can be no blood-letting involved. Nothing could entice

me to participate in such a function either as a contestant or as an official!" Thus spoke Allen Steen, who went to a full contact format in his latest National Karate Championships.

Dante eventually dropped the World Fighting Arts Expo, a concept that would be revived later by his protegee Bill Aguiar as the infamous "Taunton Death Matches" of March, 1975. "I was about seven years ahead of my time," Dante lamented.

Accounts of his full-contact matches in the Midwest differ. The following is a direct excerpt from BLACK BELT's exclusive interview with Dante:

DANTE: Vic Ryther won the '67 World Professional Championship, a ten thousand dollar prize, no holds barred knockout contest, which of course outraged everybody in the land because they hadn't thought of it first. Ryther was one of my men and he won that. The following year at the Chicago Coliseum, it was open to boxers, wrestlers, judomen, streetfighters, anybody—there was no matching up by style or anything else. It was round robin, for a ten thousand dollar prize.

BLACK BELT: Who put up the ten thousand?

DANTE: The corporation that was backing it, the promotional organization, and the World Karate Federation (author's note: the WKF was created, and at that time, controlled by Dante). I won that contest.

BLACK BELT: Who did you fight to win that battle?

DANTE: Well, it was basically a round robin, everyone had to fight just about everybody.

BLACK BELT: How many did you fight yourself?

DANTE: I fought seven men.

BLACK BELT: Who?

DANTE: Rolf Borkowski, a kung fu man, he was very good . . . there were a couple of wrestlers, but it's best not to mention their names because they're still very big, very prominent in wrestling in the Midwest as a tag team.

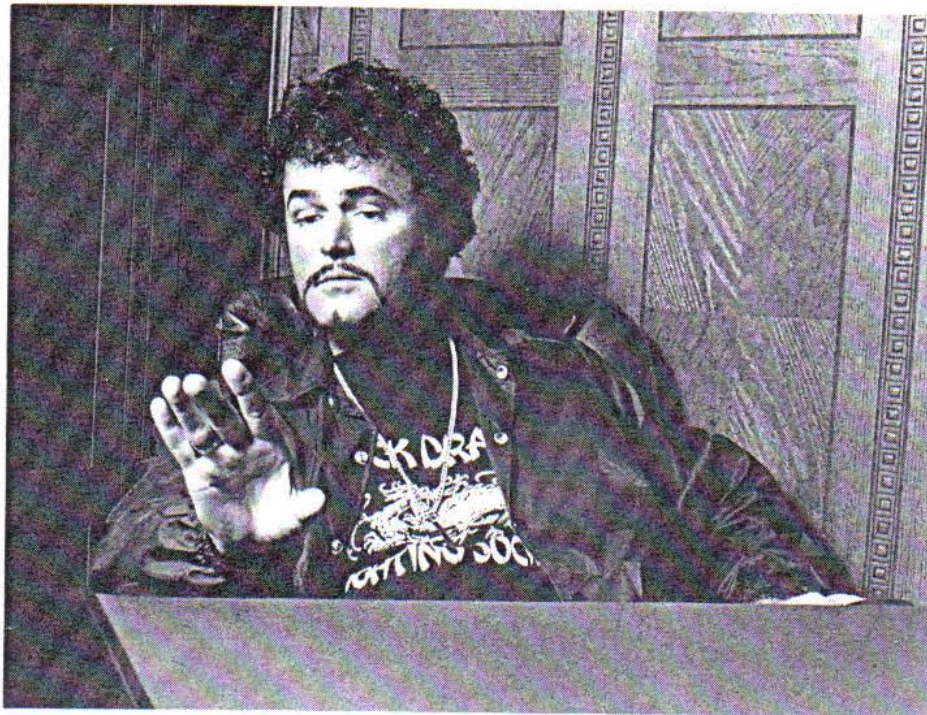
BLACK BELT: Tell us about the other men you fought for the 1968 World Professional championship.

DANTE: To be completely honest . . . (pauses) I was so busy watching the box office . . . (Dante declined at this point to comment further).

It is interesting to compare Dante's account with that of Vic Ryther, one of his ace students, and the winner of the 1967 event:

BLACK BELT: Did Dante fight in the 1967 tournament?

RYTHER: No.



BLACK BELT: In the 1968 tournament?

RYTHER: No. Nobody fought in 1968, nobody signed up as far as I know.

BLACK BELT: Was that because of the "no holds barred" rules?

RYTHER: (Laughs). No, I don't think so, because 1967 was no holds barred. There was a lot of bad publicity from California, they didn't want anybody competing in knockout tournaments.

BLACK BELT: How many competed in the 1967 tournament? How many were injured?

RYTHER: There were eight contestants. One quit. No one was injured. It was completely no holds barred. You could use anything you wanted. But you know, everybody . . . well, originally, there was supposed to be ten thousand dollars, and it was supposed to be backed by Chicago wrestling, but they backed out, then it came down to a hundred bucks, something like that. Then all the bad publicity from **BLACK BELT**, you know, everybody was afraid to compete because of that.

BLACK BELT: Did you ever see Dante fight?

RYTHER: No. I heard he used to compete a lot before he took over the Midwest under Trias. The only guy I know of that he ever fought was a black belt in judo who was studying karate. He asked John to spar with him, and John broke his nose in two seconds. Nobody ever wanted to fight with him because he was so fast.

Dante counted among his accomplishments in karate the sponsorship of the World Karate Championships, 1962 through '65, the First World Professional Karate Championship in 1967, and the First World Fighting Arts Championship in 1968. However great or small their success, and however much or little respect they commanded from the American martial arts establishment of the day, it appears clear that Dante/Keehan did, indeed, pioneer open, full-contact karate tournaments in this country.

His tournament career was not especially distinguished. The biggest name competitor he ever fought in his short time on the circuit was Gary Alexander. Dante claimed the unenviable achievement of being the first American competitor to be disqualified because of unsportsmanlike contact in a tournament, after disabling Alexander with a groin-grab. Alexander told us that he had decked Keehan in the first moments of the round, and that both were disqualified in the scuffle that followed.

Embittered by the experience of being shunned by the karate establishment, Dante left tournament promotion and didn't surface there again until the controversial "Taunton Death Matches," which bore his trademarked approach of sensationalism. He had reportedly challenged Joe Lewis to fight him for a \$70,000 purse. Told of the rumor, Lewis' manager Mike Anderson was greatly amused.

But Dante wasn't that eager to fight, and the \$70,000 purse was partly a

shield. "I'm 36," he told me. "I can still do it. But up against a guy who's 29, in top shape, I would have to be a fool unless I trained . . . I'm over the hill."

At the Taunton event, at least two individuals challenged him openly, one a nobody, the other a small local sensei whom Dante knew slightly. He sat calmly at the judges' table, chewing his gum placidly and only raising an eyebrow at the heated requests. Three of the men at that table put restraining hands on Dante, but there was no need. He had no intention of going anywhere near the ring. It was two months almost to the day before his life would run out, and he knew himself to be, if not terminal, at least a sick man. But even at his peak, he probably would have bypassed the challenges—partly because he'd have seen no profit potential in the risk, and partly because he, who claimed to have challenged Muhammad Ali face to face, knew the challenge game too well to play it when anyone else was dealing.

Dante had been ill for a long time. When we interviewed him, he claimed to be down to 190 pounds from 220, and looked more like 175. He was suffering from high blood pressure and internal bleeding. His intimates say that he didn't know that he was going to die, but his private conversations with this writer were laced with phrases like, "I don't give a shit anymore, I'm going to be dead in six months anyway." At the time, he said he meant the danger of his being killed because his prominence in the newspapers after the Purolator robbery and the Taunton "death matches" had brought him into disfavor with the Chicago family, and particularly, he hinted, with the Mafia overlord.

After Dante died in his sleep, due to an internal hemorrhage from a perforated ulcer, some whispered that he had been poisoned by Family hit men. Insiders debunk that theory, claiming that Dante had been in such fear of his life that he hadn't ventured out of his Chicago condominium for several days prior to his death, or let anyone in. His wife confirmed the latter statement in the local press and Dante had told the writer the same thing in telephone conversations shortly before his demise. People who knew Dante scorn the statement published in one martial arts magazine suggesting that Dante, like Bruce Lee, had supposedly been a victim of a "Death Touch" applied by envious kung fu practitioners.

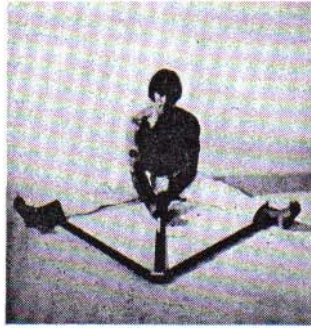
It was hinted in Chicago for a time that enough evidence of a silencing mur-

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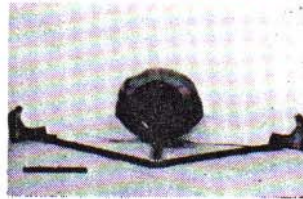
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der by Mafia button men existed that the district attorney was going to request permission to exhume Dante's body and analyze it for traces of poison. It was never done.

Dante had told me, on the day of our confrontation over review rights to the manuscript, that "90% of what I've told you on tape and off, is bullshit and I'm the only one that knows which 10% is the truth." He later amended his estimate to 50% "bullshit," 50% veracity. But even if his Mafia reminiscences were lies, they were convincing enough to pin Dante behind locked doors with a gun in his lap during his last days. And it is a matter of public record that Dante was called in for questioning after the Purolator job, and was a known associate of Chicago gangsters. We know for-certain that Dante was associated with Luigi DiFonzo of Purolator fame.

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Shortly after Dante's death, another martial arts magazine showcased Frank Ryan as "the new 'deadliest man alive,'" on the theory that Ryan was his leading surviving disciple. Our evidence, based on the most extensive taped interview Dante ever gave, indicates that this is not the case. Dante listed among "his

champions" a number of noted black belts, some of whom did indeed study under him, but some who, like Bill Wallace, had never even met him. Had he taught Ryan, a martial artist of national recognition, he surely would have said so, even if Ryan had broken from him. Dante listed as his students some karateka who had renounced him utterly in public.

Dante's hand-picked successor, he told us flatly on several occasions, was William Aguiar of Fall River, Massachusetts. At the time of the interviews, Dante told BLACK BELT that he had bequeathed his Black Dragon Fighting Society, his World Karate Federation, and his Dan-Te system to Aguiar.

It is not for this writer or this magazine to decide whether Dante's martial arts empire and heritage was evil or not, nor whether that heritage is something to be cherished or, as one of Keehan/Dante's contemporaries put it, something to be worn like a cap with a black feather in it. But the fact remains that, whatever Dante left, Aguiar was his chosen heir. He left no blood heir, having had no children of his own. And his young wife, whom he joyfully announced was pregnant in April, 1975, lost the baby shortly after his sudden death.

* * * * *

Dante had mentioned the possibility of writing a book that named names when talking on the phone to this writer. After analyzing those taped conversations, there is reason to believe that the line was bugged from Dante's end. And he had a very real fear of a local Mafia head.

It is said that those closest to Dante accept his death as natural, and all evidence indicates that this is probably the case. Yet this writer recalls that Dante spoke often of assassination weapons and silencers. And the majority of Dante's students were toughened street people, often with their own brutal backgrounds in the underworld, who had followed him with nothing less than total devotion.

I remembered too when Dante had spoken of death in Aguiar's dojo early in the interviews: "If you put across this attitude of 'kill,'" he said, "it will overcome the basic weakness within all men—self preservation. You have to come to the point where you are not afraid of dying. I'm not afraid of it right now. If someone came in that door and blew me away, that's it. I don't care. I'll come back again. I believe in reincarnation. But even if I didn't, it's over with. You've got to overcome the fear of death . . . I really don't care. It doesn't matter now." (Continued on Page 78)

"Count Dante." That and "Kwai Chang Caine" are names that people writing histories of the American martial arts fad of the Sixties and Seventies will put into their first chapters. The fact that true budomen considered both names anathema to their art and science will probably be lost, and that in itself may say something.

Dante, at least, was real. But the extent of his reality is a matter of debate. He was, in the early days prior to the martial arts boom, the very personification of the lethal mystery of the Oriental fighting arts, though only the people who knew him realized how much he despised Orientals.

He began as John Keehan, a promising young karate prodigy who wanted to bring the martial arts he devoted himself to, into the prominence he felt they deserved. And he wanted to bring himself into the limelight with them. The flamboyant approach he took achieved much of that, but at the expense of branding karate as a homicidal cult of hoodlums, and himself as a deranged egomaniac.

Count Dante is dead. We wanted him to be alive when we did this story. He was looking forward, in his own way, to reading it.

"They resented Bruce Lee when he was alive," Dante had said. "The martial

arts people made him a legend after he died only because they weren't afraid of him anymore." And he spoke, too, of the legendary samurai Musashi, "Look up his history. Musashi is the hero of Japan, yet he murdered innocent men, women, children, for money. He was a stone killer. They despised him when he was alive, and canonized him in the arts after he was dead. Mark my words, that's what they'll do to me."

Maybe, maybe not. Dante was a pornographer, a drug user and by all accounts, a familiar of the Chicago Mafia. He knew how most people felt about him. Dante would tell you, "My friends call me John. People who aren't my friends call me an asshole. But they don't call me that to my face."

Was he really just an asshole with a lucky streak? Or was he, as he styled himself, "The Deadliest Man Alive?"

There were elements of both in this strange man, and he, ironically, was the first to admit it. By any contemporary standard, he was an evil man. Yet in his own way he was brilliant, personable, even compelling. Those who knew him well describe him most often in two words—"charismatic" and "psychotic." His criticisms of traditional martial arts as applied to American streetfighting were for the most part valid and were widely recognized as such. They will become more acceptable with him dead.

So, perhaps, will the outlaw disciples he spawned in the martial arts.

How much of the legend he created for himself was real and how much was expertly-wrought fantasy? We may never know. The Oriental death matches are debatable, the organized crime connections authentic but unknown as to extent. The tragedy of Jim Concevic's death is all too real, as is Dante's culpability, direct or indirect, which he recognized himself.

Had Dante really killed men? I believe so. By all indications, he was capable of it. The writer's work brings him into contact with many who have killed, and such men give off a certain vibration. Dante had it, but whether he had acquired it in mortal combat or through an expert mimicry, we may never know. But either way, via experience or assimilation, he had that aura, and it made him deadly. He was the kind of man who was fun to drink with, but whom you would never dare let yourself get drunk with.

If he hadn't lived, someone would have had to create him, and if he hadn't died, someone would have had to kill him. No matter how we feel personally about such a man, we have to recognize that he did much, good and bad, to shape the martial arts in America as we know them today—and perhaps, as we will know them tomorrow.

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