

“Striking Distance”- At The Beginning

By
Bruce Anders

Prof. Wally Jay was there. So was Ralph Castro. So was Lau Bun. Odds are at least one of those names are familiar to you. And there are probably several in the story of whom you are not.

I had a surprise in September of 2016. I was in a local bookstore and, as usual, found myself in the martial arts section. A hardback, spine out, caught my attention. The title is *Striking Distance*. Saw the subtitle: *Bruce Lee & The Dawn of Martial Arts in America*. Almost immediately put the book back on the shelf. I'm not a Bruce Lee fan and think his name and life are blown way out of proportion. The book has a section devoted to photos. Got curious to see what was printed. And I'm glad I stopped to examine the book further. I'll get to the bottom line: I can't say enough good things about this book. And as many of our members reside in the San Francisco Bay Area, I think you will find it especially enthralling.

Striking Distance is not so much about Bruce Lee as it is about a crossroads time in martial arts in America in general and the Bay Area in particular. The photos I saw first were of Lau Bun and T.Y. Wong who a few of us will recognize as old-time icons in San Francisco's gung fu community. The book is as much about them and other martial arts pioneers as it is an era when awareness of martial arts was about to explode into public awareness. The background on Wong and Bun alone is worth the price of admission. The author, Charles Russo, has done a herculean task of five years of research to present both classical martial artists and modernists who were part of a tipping point in peoples' attitudes both in the martial arts and the larger society. Bruce Lee was in the Bay Area in the early 1960s and part of that tipping point. Lee is part of the story. He is not the whole story. Russo paints a picture that is fair and balanced. The world would eventually know of Bruce Lee and forget or never know of many others.

The 1960s were a time of huge change. The post- World War 2 generation was coming of age. Attitudes were changing. And media resources were exploding. Bruce Lee was a face and personality that was a mixture of ability and being at the right place at a pivotal time.

In some ways, the exposure of Bruce Lee is comparable to that of Arnold Schwarzenegger, in that both were in fringe activities, martial arts and body building respectively. Both activities had existed long before each man came along and had small groups of dedicated practitioners. The rest of the world really had no idea of either. Judo was sort of known and would be an Olympic sport in 1964. But it would take larger public awareness to catapult both fields to prominence. Both men were attention addicts who mixed genuine enthusiasm with tireless self-promotion. And print and movie exposure helped both reach the public to inspire untold numbers of people. Their years of exposure to the world overlapped each other's as America was changing. Looking at how one man brought a field to public fame helps to understand the other.

Whatever one may think of them personally, their influence has been incalculable. They inspired many people both then and today. *Striking Distance* weaves the story of an era of change with the personalities and histories of the people who were on the cusp of

change. Both had a backdrop of many people who had trained for decades before them and provided a knowledge base from which they could spring. Of particular interest to Pacific Jujitsu Alliance members, Wally Jay and Danzan Ryu receive prominent mention in the book. As many of you know, Prof. Jay was part of a group of martial artists looking for new twists on old traditions. And Lee fit into that group.

If you want to know a bit of how martial arts in America got to where they are today, this book is essential reading and shares never before published information. I like how Russo cites there were many more influential people in the overall story of martial arts in the Bay Area than he could adequately address in one book. Each, he acknowledges, rate their own chapters if not their own books. He had to narrow the story while honoring the scope of the larger development of martial arts in America. I hope Russo writes more. He's a superb reader-friendly writer and tells a great story.

I highly recommend this book.

Russo, Charles. *Striking Distance: Bruce Lee & The Dawn of Martial Arts In America*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2016. 232 pages; ISBN 9780803269606

February 2017