

Introduction

In 1970, Sammy was married again, this time to Altovise Gore, and the couple would become Hollywood's version of Bonnie and Clyde. They were notorious for hosting numerous gatherings where the phrase, 'anything goes,' could have easily been coined. Their sprawling Beverly Hills home was the scene of parties that catered to aficionados of heavy drinking, experimental sex – especially wife swapping and orgies – and the flagrant use of drugs.

Although, Altovise, herself, was a professional dancer, and had performed with Sammy on various stages, somewhere along the way, she'd lost a strong sense of herself. Living with Sammy could be overwhelming; for a man with a small physique, his persona would cast a huge shadow.

Following their marriage, Altovise continued to appear in Sammy's shows, at least, until the period when entertainer, Katherine McKee, replaced her, both, under the stage lights of Sammy's productions and under the silk sheets of his bed. Altovise and Sammy's 'open marriage' allowed Katherine to assume the role of Sammy's 'road wife,' but it would also contribute to Altovise's long and painful battle with alcohol. Despite the complicated, and sometimes degrading nature of their union, she would always call Sammy her hero. After all, he was like an open wallet.

During the height of his career, Sammy, literally, made millions each year, but, unfortunately, made an art of spending considerably more. Back during his heyday – when the money was good and the loans were quick – he got away with it. After all, there was always another show to cover his debts.

Sammy, who had extravagant tastes, shared his indulgent lifestyle with Altovise, who, like her husband, shopped with almost reckless abandon. From luxurious furs and exquisite jewels, to a fleet of customized and exotic cars, Sammy tried to quench their every desire.

The years of hard living and reckless spending would eventually catch up to the star. His business and investment ventures were plagued with mismanagement. A troubling pattern existed in which Sammy had been underpaid by various recording studios, and he'd signed contracts which offered less than favorable terms. There were even instances in which he'd failed to secure the master recordings of his own songs.

Having lived far beyond his means, when Sammy died of throat cancer in 1990, he left to his wife an estate that was embroiled in a huge legal and financial crisis. With over \$5 million owed to the IRS, alone, Altovise faced a tax lien that, at the time, was the highest in the country. The glamorous and privileged life she'd known for twenty years was now over.

Altovise was ill-prepared to accept the sobering realities of her new life, especially when the IRS seized the Davis estate, selling their twenty-two room mansion and auctioning their most precious possessions. She was equally unprepared for the cold rejection of some of their oldest friends, especially Bill Cosby, who'd been one of Sammy's closest buddies.

After all, when Sammy was battling cancer, he made one of his last T.V. appearances on *The Cosby Show*, and on the day of Sammy's funeral, Cosby was an honorary pallbearer. To memorialize him, Bill wore Sammy's initials on his clothing during the following season of his show. It was the type of moving, Cosby-like gesture for which he was so famous.

However, while Bill donned Sammy's initials in public, behind the scenes, he had a very different attitude. Altovise later confided in me that she'd been desperate for help, but when she'd reached out to Bill, she'd been shocked by his indifference. "He never helped me," she said, her voice still filled with pain. A friend had also called Bill on her behalf, but she claimed that he'd never even called back.

In the following seasons, Altovise would quietly disappear from the public, and her whereabouts would be a mystery for many years, at least, up until 2004, when she first resurfaced in Sarasota, Florida. A cloud of questions still remained, though, regarding the years when she was seemingly 'missing,' and the final outcome of the Davis estate.

A few months later, in 2005, a friend would introduce me to Altovise, to help write her autobiography. I welcomed the new assignment with the intention of, first, learning all I could about her amazing life. In my efforts to understand Altovise's struggle – the pressures of her marriage and the magnitude of her debt – I began to research Sammy's career and their unconventional marriage.

I was struck by the cruel dichotomy in Altovise's life. I was lunching with a woman who'd entertained some of the world's most famous celebrities. She'd once lived in a

sprawling Beverly Hills mansion, where, parked out front, was a Rolls-Royce bearing her name on its plate. That day, however, she would return to a cramped little apartment down the street from my community and actually need a ride to get home.

Altovise and I found that we shared a passion for creating children's stories, an interest which began to consume most of our conversations. We became increasingly drawn to the idea of collaborating on stories that might impact the lives of teens, especially future artists. This was ideal, because Altovise wasn't ready to discuss the sensitive nature of her marriage, which was controversial, to say the least. Nor, was she forthcoming about the last 'missing' years of her life. In fact, a frightening new problem was developing, and she couldn't speak about this, either.

I paused the work that I'd begun on Altovise's autobiography, because her life was far more complex than it had first appeared. She was struggling with a great deal more than just a mountain of debt and a Smirnoff bottle, stashed inside her Louis Vuitton. Behind her radiant smile was a woman facing, still another crisis.

Altovise wasn't exactly homeless when she was later evicted from her Sarasota apartment, but her tenuous situation became something close to perilous.

To make bad matters worse, rumor had it that two men were stealing her belonging, raiding her bank accounts and sponging off what was left of Sammy's estate. For some reason, Altovise believed that she'd found herself a hero in one of the men. When they entered a business partnership – though it was heavily tilted in their favor – she'd believed that her rags-to-riches-to-rags ordeal was over. Unfortunately, when Altovise signed over the control of Sammy's estate, she unwittingly opened up Pandora's Box.

Being a quiet and soft-spoken writer, I never wanted to be pulled into a messy legal battle, especially since Altovise, initially, wanted to keep this part of her life private. So, even when their arrangement went sour, I managed to refrain from getting involved, that is, until February 2007, on the unforgettable evening of the Academy Awards.