

HEART OF A LION

AN INTERVIEW WITH MARTIAL ARTS ACTOR, DON NIAM
BY MIKE FURY



Don Niam

Don Niam is an American Martial Arts actor, best known from his work opposite Cynthia Rothrock in the movie, *Undefeatable*. The film features one of the most popular fight scenes of all time, a clip that would become an undisputed YouTube hit! In the movie, Don played the terrifying villain, Stingray, and was able to utilise his lifelong experience in Martial Arts to portray one of the most memorable genre villains of all time. Don even worked with Kickboxing Legend and Action Star, Don “The Dragon” Wilson in *Out For*

Blood and appeared in the TV series, LA Heat. Having developed his name and reputation as a personal trainer and instructor, while continuing to build his brand, Don Niam is making a long overdue return to the screen. With new projects in development and his Nitro Kick® fitness system travelling far, it seemed a good opportunity to catch up with Don, hear some stories and find out what's coming next.

Don, tell me about your background...

I grew up in Akron, Ohio. My parents owned a small diner and it was kind of a landmark in the city. My Dad was a football recruiter for Notre Dame as a hobby and his best friend was Ara Parsegian who was coach at Notre Dame. All the judges, policeman, doctors and everyone else would hang out there. My family setting was very grounded and I had great parents. I also have two older brothers. In high school I wrestled, but was never really interested in football... I always liked the one-on-one sports! As a kid I always liked the way Martial Arts looked and wanted to take it up. I had heard about a Kung Fu school in the Akron area. I checked it out and at the age of 19 I started learning Kung Fu. I was fanatical about it and trained every day... and I mean everyday! I opened my first school at the age of 23 which was on the second floor of an old building in downtown Akron paying \$100 a month rent.

What drew you to training?

Back then there was not much in the way of Martial Arts movies, but Bruce Lee was an influence in my interest along with the philosophies of the TV series, Kung Fu. At that time my school was a part time business. My instructor passed away and I wanted more. I trained with a Choy Lee Fut instructor in San Francisco for awhile. Unfortunately, I wasn't really satisfied, especially after having years of training. I do think Choy Lee Fut is a great style, but as in any style a lot of it comes down to the instructor. One night while teaching class I received a phone call from a guy named Mike Barry. He said he was in town working for naval intelligence at Goodyear Tire and Rubber. He said he owned a school in Waldorf Maryland and wanted to know if he could observe a class. I said he should come down! He had told me about Grandmaster Tai Yim in Wheaton, Maryland and that I would have never seen Kung Fu like his Hung Fut style. He was very convincing and my eagerness to learn prompted me to call Grandmaster Yim. I phoned him and he invited me to Maryland to see some schools that got together to fight and show forms. After watching one of his students perform, I knew Hung Fut was for me. To make a long story short, I made many trips to Maryland and trained privately with Grandmaster Tai Yim. I would say he pretty much changed my life and thank God I found him!



Don performing the "bow fist"

How did you first become involved in acting?

I knew that Martial Arts were starting to get big in the film industry and always wanted to be an actor. At the time I was 36 years old and operating my Kung Fu school full time. My business was going ok, but Akron was a small town and the discipline of Kung Fu was difficult for most people and I just never commercialized. I decided to close my school and move to LA with nothing but a friends place to stay and a couple of thousand dollars. Shortly before that my Sifu, Grandmaster Tai Yim, was planning on shooting a Martial Arts movie and bringing someone from Hong Kong over to do it. It was not happening fast enough for me, so I figured if I was going to go after acting I needed to be in LA anyway! After a couple of months I landed a job as a Personal Trainer in a small plush gym in Beverly Hills and also taught Kung Fu there. After a couple of months working in the club, my Sifu called and said they were going to shoot the movie, Honor and Glory. I could not leave at that time due to the fact that I had just landed some high profile clients and some in the film industry. I was not able to just leave the business as I was just getting established.

When I moved to LA I took private acting lessons, because I was not fearful of being in front of people and wanted to learn as quickly as possible without a lot of questions from others. I also took a cold reading class. I had auditions along the way, but none for any big budget films. To be honest, it's so difficult to break into the business. One of the film companies that shot a spoof on the Ten Commandments with Lou Ferrigno used my audition performing Kung Fu in the movie with no pay or written consent, but I didn't really care. I also did something for Concorde Pictures which later I found out was for some erotic series in France. I played a short part of a professor, so I didn't know what the series really was!

You had an early role in the Don "The Dragon" Wilson film, Out For Blood. How did you land the part?

One of my clients was an agent and helped me obtain an audition for Out For Blood. At the time I did a Kung Fu demonstration for fight choreographer, Eric Lee. He seemed pretty impressed and I ended up with a small part in it. Don Wilson is a class act and he was a genuinely nice guy.



Don Niam and John Miller in Undeatable

Undeatable remains one of your best known films. How did you come to co-star in the movie?

My Sifu phoned me again in 1992 when they had decided to shoot Undeatable and wanted me to meet director, Godfrey Ho. I went to Maryland and met Godfrey, did a

Kung Fu demonstration and that's how I ended up with the part of Stingray. I heard Godfrey was going to tournaments in New York and Maryland looking for someone to play Stingray but Godfrey liked the demo and he liked my eyes. I asked if he wanted me to cut my hair and he said no, they wanted it as long as I could get it, which today, just looks dated! I had a great time shooting the movie. The first day was 13 hours in the ring shooting the opening fight scene. The second day was a rape scene which was not easy to do, even though there wasn't much there. It was the second day on the set and I was not all that comfortable with camera and crew. It was nerve-racking! Actor, John Miller and I were friends before the film so he and I had good laughs together. Cynthia Rothrock was pleasant and very easy to work with. She picked up the choreography fast! In the low budget movies, you really don't practice much. It's just "do this and do that" with two practices and then you're shooting!

What was it like working with the director, Godfrey Ho, and some of the other names associated with the film?

Godfrey was funny and nice enough, although I didn't agree with everything he wanted me to do. It was kind of funny because in the scene where I had the girl chained up in the warehouse he wanted me to rape her, but fortunately that didn't have to happen. I didn't know anything about Godfrey before I met him. I also really got along with the stunt crew and they were a great and funny group of guys. Most people don't know this, but Godfrey shot a Chinese version called Bloody Mary Killer. Robin Shou, who became famous for Mortal Kombat, stayed with me in a house that was rented for us and the cameraman. Robin was in the Chinese version, but we never shot a scene together. When we were not shooting, Robin and I were either at the gym or eating! Robin thought I had a good future and was going to help me get into some films in Hong Kong, but unfortunately it didn't happen.

Did you have to prepare in any way for the film? Did your training change?

I didn't really prepare in any special way other than training hard as I always did! However, I hit the weights more for cosmetic effect!

Looking back at the film, do you have any favourite moments or scenes?

I actually enjoyed shooting the fight scene in the parking garage and the one at the trailer the most. Also, tearing everything in the house up was fun after my wife left me! The final fight scene with John, Cynthia and myself was lots of fun, but I kind of knew things were winding down and I wanted to do more.

That final fight remains one of the film's best loved scenes and has become something of a YouTube phenomenon. Do you get a kick out of the fact that people still enjoy the scene all these years later?

When I would check stats on my websites, I would find external links from forum sites talking about the movie and my character, Stingray. This started about three or four years

ago and continued to find more popularity through MySpace and Facebook. I'm also surprised that the movie is far more popular than it was years ago! I receive Facebook friend requests from young people in their early 20s that love the movie and my character, Stingray. I never realized there were so many people that sought out these old films. It took forever for the film to be released on DVD and I'm not sure why the film is so popular today, other than the fact that YouTube and the internet create a great venue for visibility. I do think the over the top acting and cult Martial Arts, almost horror flick look that *Undefeatable* has plays a big part in its popularity today.



Don Niam: still training hard at 56

What are some of the best experiences you took away from making the film?

I learned a lot about movie fighting and how to make the most out of what you do. Of course when it's all said and done, you wish it could be different. We did not have the opportunity to work with several cameras as they do on big budget films. From what I understood on that film working with Chinese directors, you also make more contact than people not associated with film would ever think.

The process is interesting and I gained some knowledge on some of the props and tools that are used. I can only imagine what a big budget film uses. It's nice to be in a leading role in a film. It's just kind of a good feeling!

After *Undefeatable*, what happened next?

Through an acting coach and casting director for PM Entertainment, I met Joseph Mehri, President of PM. We hit it off and I had dinner at his house with some mutual friends. I ended up auditioning for role as a Hitman in PM's TV Series, *LA Heat*. That role made me SAG eligible. I also played a drug dealer in a movie called *Baja Run*. I had a lot of fun on the set of *LA Heat*. The stunt guys put me on a car and drove about 70 mph backwards over huge bumps and it took everything to hang on! I was bouncing three feet high and slamming back down on the hood of the car, then they did figure eights in a parking lot. They actually had a bigger kick out of it than I did!

Later on as I was pursuing my acting career I met a couple of writers who had never had anything published. However, one of them won the Steven Spielberg award at UCLA for her script. Together we wrote a script with them doing the writing and me sitting in a couple times a week consulting on it. Later David Bradley, best known from the American Ninja movies, got a hold of the script and liked it. David ended up phoning me at a club I was running. I had rights to the script for two years and it could not be sold for two years without my approval, which meant I had to be the lead, which is who the character was written for. The script was called The Insider and was about an international diplomat during the 1997 convergence in Hong Kong. It was a good script and had the look of a James Bond film. Anyway, David Bradley and I became friends and since he could get the movie made through Nu Image, we agreed he would play my character and I would play the bad guy. David had convinced Nu Image to do the film, but the writers would have to rewrite the script according to the way Nu Image felt it would sell. Unfortunately those writers would not do it and that blew a very good opportunity for me. Nu Image was right up my alley and if you worked with them and were successful, they would continue to use you and create an acting career. That was the closest I ever came to getting something developed. While in LA I also made a living doing other jobs. I was a Personal Trainer, Kung Fu teacher, Bodyguard for a Princess in the Saudi Royal Family and managed a Strip Club! After six years of struggling to make it happen I was burnt out and moved back to Ohio.

Today, you're also well established as a Personal Trainer and run your own studio in Las Vegas. On top of that, you've been pursuing more acting work...

Yes! I opened another Kung Fu school when I moved back to Akron, Ohio and created a Fitness based Kickboxing and Kung Fu conditioning workout called Nitro Kick®. It was quite an expense to shoot the video and not long after shooting it, I had a bad flood in my school and lost all the videos. At that time things were just starting to convert to DVD. I did not have the capitol to re-master the two tape set to DVD. Everything in my studio was trashed and sadly there is no such thing as flood insurance. After the flood I had an opportunity to move to Vegas and I never really got used to the cold weather again in Ohio. Shortly after coming to Vegas I met a location guy from Atlas Media through a Gentleman's Club I was running. I told them I was quitting the job and starting a training business and wanted to know if they needed actors. I gave him my headshot and resume the next day. The following night I received a phone call from the producer to audition and obtained the co-star role in an episode of the History Channel documentary, Breaking Vegas. The episode was called Dice Dominator. It was fun for me because I had the opportunity to do something besides play a bad guy beating people up or shooting people. I have shot a few local commercials here in Vegas. Seems like once you get the acting bug, it never goes away. I recently auditioned for Bugsy Siegel for something at one of the casinos.

For those interested in training, what do you offer?

I make my living here in Vegas as a Certified Personal Trainer. I actually pay rent to a large Health Club chain called Las Vegas Athletic Clubs. I operate as an independent

contractor and use their facility to train my clients. Most of my training business is Personal Training and I do some private Kung Fu and self-defense instruction. Originally I taught classes and did personal training out of a Boxing and Kickboxing gym, but the Athletic Club had much more to offer.



Don offers training and diet advice as part of his programme

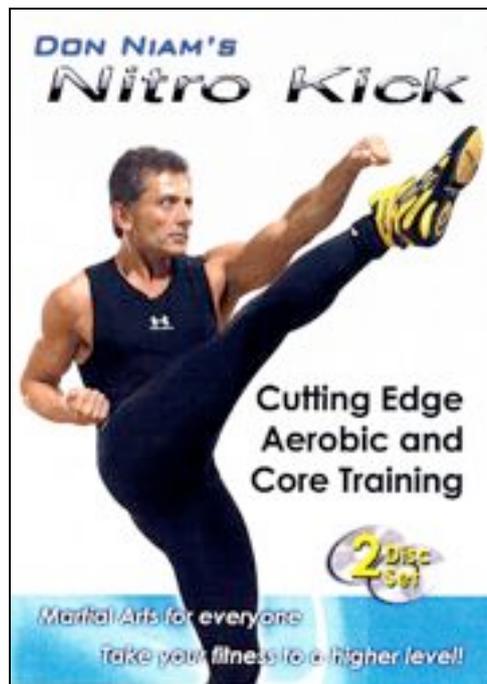
Could you provide a rundown of your training and diet programme today?

I train six days a week and do weight training, practice Kung Fu, stretch regularly and do a variety of plyometrics and cardiovascular training. My diet is high in protein with quality complex carbohydrates along with protein shakes, bananas and berries for fruit. I also eat a lot of nuts and natural nut butter. I pretty much stay away from white sugar, boxed, bagged and canned foods, and I try to eat fresh and organic foods as much as possible.

What advice would you give to anyone interested in pursuing training and fitness?

Personally if I were to give advice to people interested in training, I'm still a firm believer in traditional Martial Arts. It is where everything in the Martial Arts world sprang from. If people are looking to get fit with weights, I recommend they become educated as much as possible. There is a science and technique to achieving results. Today, I am 56 years old and still maintain around 8 to 9 percent body fat, but if I need to I can get it even lower pretty quick! Consistency is the key. Start training, get focused and keep improving and setting new goals for yourself. But knowing what you are doing and where you are headed is crucial! Recently I had my Nitro Kick® fitness based Kickboxing, strengthening, stretching and Kung Fu conditioning workout digitally re-mastered and it's now available through my website, where I am always very happy to answer questions about training and movies!

Thanks to Don Niam



**Don Niam's Nitro Kick® DVDs are available from www.NitroKick.com
Don's personal website can also be visited at www.DonNiam.com**

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