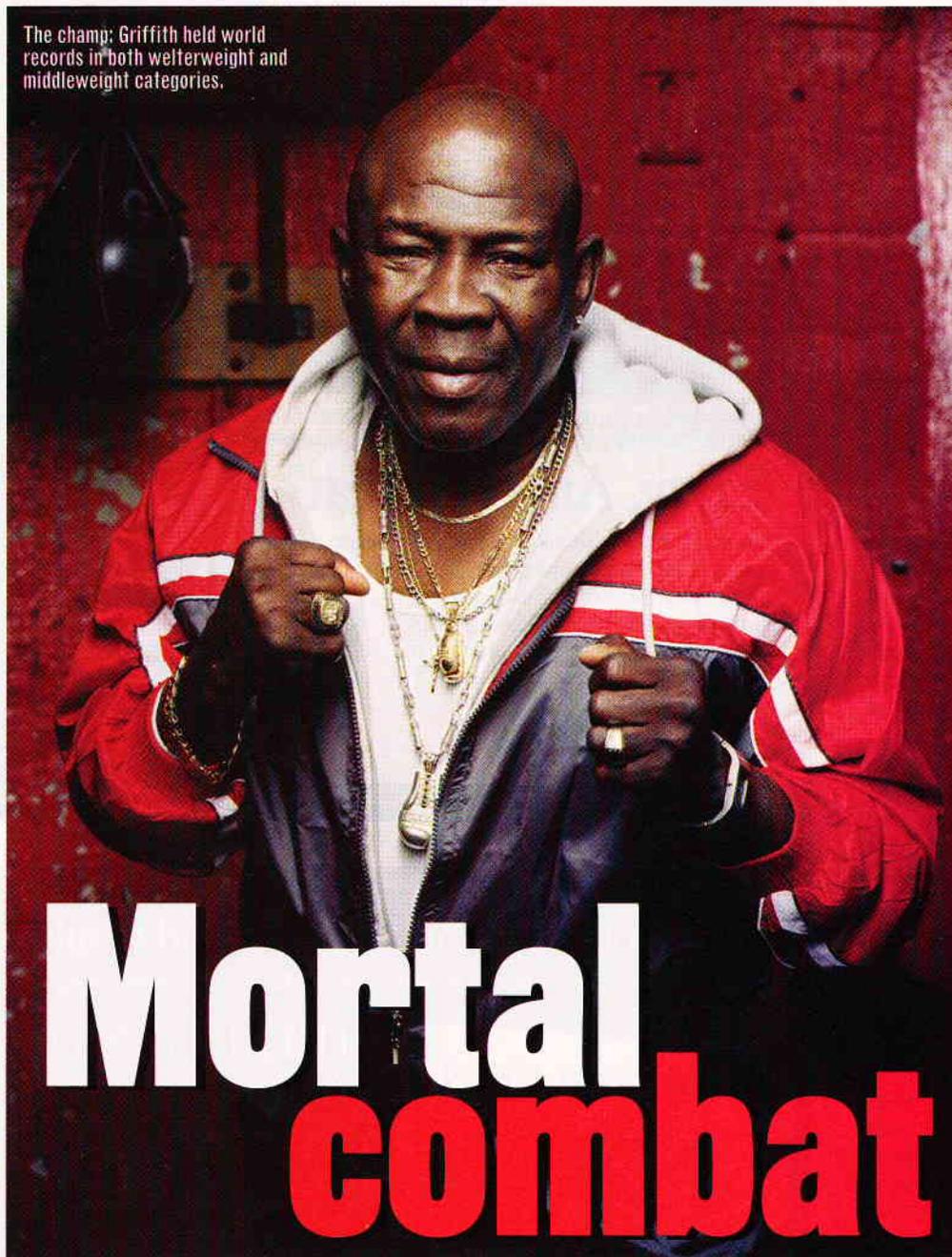


The champ: Griffith held world records in both welterweight and middleweight categories.



# Mortal combat

The new documentary *Ring of Fire* tells the story of a boxer who beat a man to death over one word: "faggot" **By Michael Giltz**

In March of 1962 reigning boxing champ Emile Griffith was set for a rematch with Benny "the Kid" Paret. During the weigh-in, Paret taunted Griffith with one word, voicing what was an open secret in the boxing world: "*Maricon*," said Paret, in front of all the media.

The new documentary *Ring of Fire: The Emile Griffith Story* (airing on USA Network April 20) details what

happened next: During the actual match, millions watching TV at home saw Griffith literally pummel Paret to death. (He was taken to the hospital and died 10 days later.)

Codirected by Dan Klores and Ron Berger, the film shows the world Griffith came from and details the repercussions in the sport (which didn't return to television for about a decade) and in the lives of Griffith's and

Paret's families. Pete Hamill, Jimmy Breslin, historian Charles Kaiser (*The Gay Metropolis*), and countless boxing insiders are featured. And the film climaxes with Griffith meeting Paret's son in an emotional reconciliation.

But for gay viewers, the most fascinating angle is the most elusive one: Griffith's sexuality. After being a six-time world champion (and briefly married to a woman), Griffith fell on hard times and worked as a corrections officer. He adopted and now lives with a prisoner he met on the job, along with another man.

Numerous people in the film say everyone in the boxing world knew he was gay. But even now, the closest Griffith, a native of the U.S. Virgin Islands, can come to acknowledging the obvious is to admit, "Some people think I'm gay, but I don't care. I don't care what they think."

Sadly, the man who made his living with his fists was brutally attacked after coming out of a gay bar in the early 1990s in what police termed a hate crime. He spent a month in the hospital and still suffers from short-term memory loss.

Filmmaker Klores better understood the culture that shaped the champ after visiting the Virgin Islands and experiencing its bigotry toward even its most famous son.

"Wherever you go there is stuff named after him," says Klores. "Griffith Park, Griffith Stadium, Griffith Gym. He's a hero. But when I started speaking to people, I was stunned. 'Oh, yeah, the faggot?' That's what they say. 'Oh, he was a fag.'" ■

ROBERTI MAXWELL/USA NETWORK