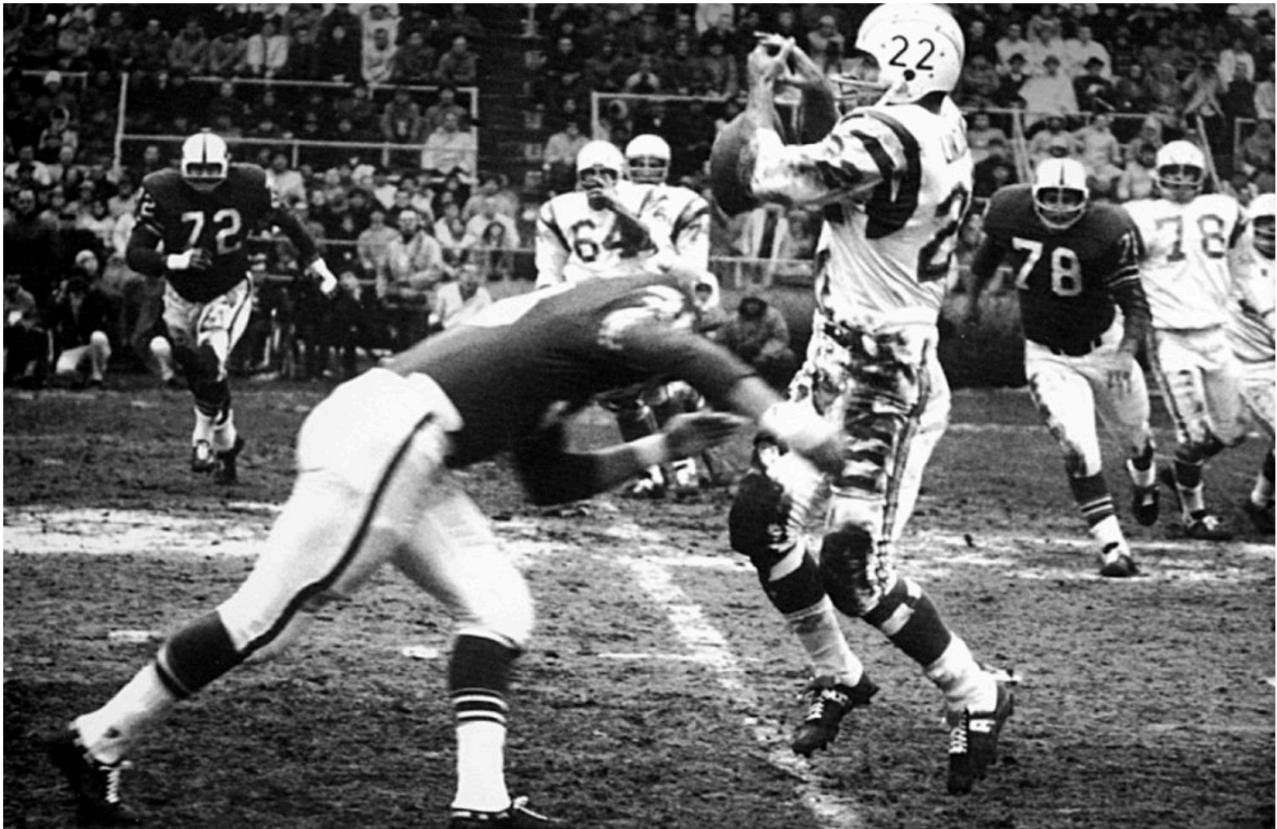


THE BUFFALO NEWS

Erik Brady: The Hit Heard 'Round the World captured a moment you know, and one you never knew

Erik Brady Feb 11, 2022



Bills linebacker Mike Stratton closes in on San Diego Chargers running back Keith Lincoln in the 1964 AFL championship game for what would be called the "Hit Heard 'Round the World."

Robert L. Smith/News file photo

Erik Brady

This is the story behind the story of the most famous photo in Buffalo Bills history.

Hereabouts the image remains as familiar as a framed family photograph. Buffalo Evening News photographer Robert L. Smith captured the split second before Bills linebacker Mike Stratton rocked San Diego Chargers

running back Keith Lincoln with the [Hit Heard 'Round the World](#) in 1964's AFL championship game. The hit broke Lincoln's ribs — and the spirit of the Chargers.

The Bills were trailing 7-0 at the time and would go on to win, 20-7. They would beat San Diego again the next season, 23-0, for their second consecutive AFL title. The first Super Bowl would come the season after that — and this season's Super Bowl arrives on Sunday, which makes now a good time to take a closer look at Smith's iconic photo.

There it is at the top of this story. That's Stratton and Lincoln in the foreground, of course. But look between their bodies at the fuzzy figure in the background. See him? He's on the sideline, on one knee, with the hood of his car coat slung over his head.

"That's me," says Tarabu Betseraï Kirkland.

He is 72 now; he was freshly 15 then. He lived not far from War Memorial Stadium and sneaked into every home game of that magical 1964 season. Now here he was, on the day after Christmas, forlorn because all his usual points of entry were closed off with security tightened for a title game. Just then, a bearded man with a clutch of cameras noticed the sad lad.

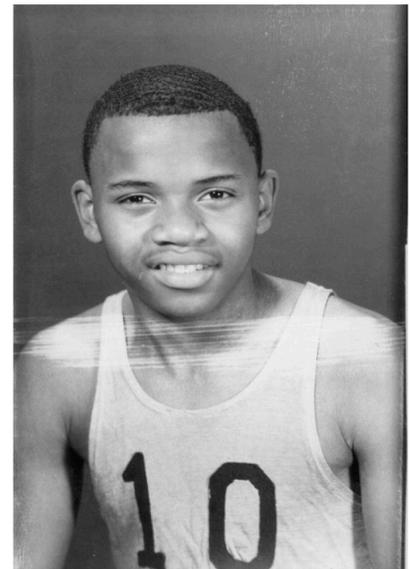
"This guy comes up to me outside the main entrance of the Rockpile," Kirkland says by phone from his home in Los Angeles. "And he says, 'Hey, kid, do you want to go to the game?' I said, 'Yeah!' And he said, 'OK, hold these.' Then he slung two cameras around my neck and said, 'Follow me.' And we walked right into War Memorial Stadium."

Nowadays you would need a sideline pass to do that. But in that simpler time, a nod from Smith was good enough. He was the team's official photographer, and his word was gold at the gate. "Next thing I know," Kirkland says, "I'm standing on the 50-yard line."

Soon Smith went to work documenting the day, but he left one of his cameras with the kid. "He gave me a quick lesson — one, two, three — and I started snapping pictures. I had no idea what I was doing, but I gave it the old college try. I don't know whatever happened to those photos or if they were any good. But I remember how much I liked the feeling. I had never looked through a viewfinder in my life until that moment."

Now Kirkland looks through lenses for a living: He is a Los Angeles filmmaker. And this month **"100 Years From Mississippi,"** his hourlong documentary on the remarkable life of his mother, Mamie Lang Kirkland, is newly available on streaming sites, including Amazon Prime Video and Apple TV. Last year it won awards at film festivals across North America, including here in Buffalo.

Mamie Kirkland died in 2019 as Buffalo's oldest citizen. She was 111. The arc of her long life tells the story of the African American experience in the 20th century. [We told you about her here](#) last October, when the documentary played at the North Park Theatre. Her inspiring story — mother of nine, matriarch of 158, survivor of racial terrorism — is [also told at the Legacy Museum](#), in Montgomery, Ala.



Kirkland as a freshman or sophomore sprinter for Bennett High School, when he was about the same age as he was on the day he got an up-close view of history.

As it happens, Mamie Kirkland turned 56 years old in 1964. She had half of her lifetime still to come on the day that her son got that up-close view of history in the making — and the breaking. “You could almost hear Lincoln’s ribs break,” Kirkland says. “It was that powerful. That was the turning point of the game and went into Bills lore.”

Chargers coach Sid Gillman called it the most beautiful tackle he had ever seen. And here we are, still talking about it all these decades later. This year we will celebrate its 58th anniversary; it is a number that matches the one on Stratton’s uniform.

When the championship game ended, Bills fans stormed the field. Kirkland couldn’t join them. Instead he followed closely behind Smith, who — ever the pro — was shooting the celebratory scene.

“I was shadowing Robert because I had to get the gear returned,” Kirkland says. “But I remember the feeling of total jubilation. We were on top of the mountain, looking down at the village below. Celebrating with our flag on the top of the mountain.”

He pauses. “Maybe next year we can get there again.”

Robert Smith died in 2020, at 89. Mike Stratton died a month later, at 78. I spoke with Stratton some months earlier and asked what he thought about the way his forever hit lives in our collective memory.

“It greatly surprises me,” he said. “I feel honored and blessed by it. It certainly has a life of its own.”

Some of that is thanks to Smith’s picture-perfect picture, which captures the moment before impact so vividly that you can almost feel it.

Stratton’s timing was perfect on the hit. Smith’s timing was perfect on the shot. And Kirkland’s timing was perfect on the day.

The kid bore witness to history. And he was a part of it, too.



Erik Brady: The incredible resilience of Mamie Kirkland and the story she rarely told Buffalo

Documentary “[100 Years From Mississippi](#),” featuring Kirkland, is an American story of resilience amid the horror of racial terrorism, and of forgiveness of the unforgivable.



Tarabu Betsera Kirkland last year at the Harlem International Film Festival.