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# NYC's Unforgettable '77 Summer

By THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

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NEW YORK (AP) -- It was the summer of Reggie, the summer of Sam, the summer when the lights went dark and the Bronx burned bright.

Thirty years ago, as the temperatures soared and its morale plunged, New York City endured a scathing summer custom-made for tabloid headlines: A crippling July blackout, complete with arson and looting ("24 HOURS OF TERROR"); a media-savvy serial killer dubbed the Son of Sam ("NO ONE IS SAFE"); and a dysfunctional, sensational New York Yankees team ("THE BRONX ZOO").

There was more: A bitterly contested mayoral race, the lingering threat of fiscal disaster, the perception that crime was turning New York City into Dodge City (albeit with a splashier skyline). The nation's largest city was becoming a punchline, but those who resisted the urge to flee the five boroughs weren't laughing.

"There were three things that were bad for the city: First was the blackout and the looting," recalled [Ed Koch](#), who was running to unseat incumbent Mayor Abe Beame. "Second was the fear in the city with the Son of Sam. And third was Howard Cosell's comment that the Bronx was burning."

The air of desperation eventually led to inspiration: ESPN is revisiting 1977 with its eight-part serialization of the Jonathan Mahler book "Ladies and Gentlemen, The Bronx Is Burning," while [Spike Lee](#) directed the slice of '77 life "Summer of Sam" back in 1999.

But it's not an era that inspires nostalgia.

"You had looting, you had a homicidal maniac, you had the city in dire straits fiscally," said Mitchell Moss, a professor at the [New York University](#) Urban Research Center. "There was a genuine breakdown in the city's self-confidence."

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It was 9:34 p.m. on July 13, 1977, when the lights went out. All of 'em, in all five boroughs, when a lightning bolt knocked out electricity to about 8 million people.

When the power returned 25 hours later, it illuminated a city in chaos. Widespread looting and arson had raged, with Beame lamenting "a night of terror." The mayor's quote, in large type, became newspaper shorthand for the destruction: more than 1,700 stores looted, more than \$150 million in property damage, more than 3,000 people arrested.

Daily News columnist Jimmy Breslin remembered walking along Brooklyn's Atlantic Avenue around 6 a.m. on July 14, watching a woman and a small boy lugging a dining room table.

"The boy is struggling," Breslin said. "Out of the goodness of my heart, I hold up the back end of the table. I took four steps, and the thought occurs to me: I'm a looter. I told the kid, 'Sorry, you'll have to do it yourself.'"

For Koch, Beame's failure to maintain order provided a huge campaign boost. Koch was a law-and-order candidate in a city where anarchy had ruled for a day.

"The blackout probably meant the difference between my winning and losing," Koch now says. "I was then, and am now, for the death penalty.

"Although not for looters."

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Even when the power disappeared, this was the summer when Reggie Jackson owned the spotlight.

The power-hitting right fielder arrived in New York with a huge contract and an ego to match, announcing -- at the expense of team captain Thurman Munson -- that he was "the straw that stirs the drink."

His big bat and bigger mouth kept the Yankees on the back page of the tabloids, even as the city's bigger stories dominated page one. By season's end, Reggie would become front-page news, too.

A month before the blackout, Jackson and combative Yankees manager Billy Martin nearly came to blows in the dugout after Martin pulled the future Hall of Famer mid-game for a perceived lack of effort in Fenway Park.

"Was this the straw that broke the camel's back?" asked Daily News sportswriter Phil Pepe after the June 18, 1977, near-brawl.

The Yankees had recently been bought by [George Steinbrenner](#), rounding out the troika that transfixed fans into the fall. The once-storied franchise, moribund for most of the previous decade, was back as the new owner and the old-school manager struggled to find harmony with their superstar slugger.

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It was around 2:30 a.m. on July 31 when the Son of Sam struck for the last time.

His real name was David Berkowitz. He lived north of the city, in Yonkers, and claimed to take his homicidal marching orders from a neighbor's dog. His weapon of choice was a Charter Arms Bulldog .44-caliber revolver.

He killed six New Yorkers and wounded seven more. Terrified women across the city, noting the gunman targeted long-haired brunettes, opted for a shorter, blonder look. The shootings began in July 1976, shortly after the nation's bicentennial. The last attack, one year later on a Brooklyn lovers' lane, killed 20-year-old Stacy Moskowitz.

It took eight months after the first murder for police to link the shootings. Once they did, a sense of dread consumed the city.

"It was all looking for freaking Berkowitz," said Breslin. "I didn't know if the Yankees were playing baseball or not. The political campaign, I hardly looked at. ... It was the same, all the time."

In taunting letters to police and Breslin, the killer proclaimed himself the Son of Sam.

"I had to go in and talk with the police," Breslin remembered. "This inspector said, 'I'm hoping you're the one that can bring him in.' I said, 'What am I supposed to do? Get killed?'"

Instead, Breslin wrote a column urging Son of Sam to surrender.

"GIVE UP!" the headline screamed. "IT'S ONLY WAY OUT."

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It was in October, during the World Series between the Yankees and the Los Angeles Dodgers, when Howard Cosell told a national television audience, "Ladies and gentlemen, the Bronx is burning."

A building near Yankee Stadium was indeed ablaze, although Cosell's crack created a negative image that lasted long after the flames were extinguished.

Cosell spoke as the mayor's race reached its final weeks. Koch would win and spend the next 12 years in City Hall.

"The most important thing, aside from balancing the budget, was upgrading the spirits of New Yorkers, making them feel we could overcome and prevail," Koch said.

Berkowitz was already behind bars, arrested Aug. 10 after a Brooklyn parking ticket led police to his door. "How come it took you so long?" he asked the arresting detectives.

The Yankees won their first World Series in 15 years, led by Jackson, who drilled three homers on three pitches in the deciding game. "YANKEES ARE CHAMPS!" read page one of the Daily News.

Thirty years later, "Mr. October" returned to the Bronx for the annual Yankees' old timers' day festivities. His long-ago season was inevitably brought up, and Jackson acknowledged that it lingers to this day.

"I can forgive," he said of that year's assorted pinstriped contretemps, "but I can't forget."

Few can when it comes to the summer of '77.