

“The Greatest” — Still!

Barry Barkan

1970

One time Muhammad Ali and I sat sipping grapefruit juice at the snack bar of a hotel on Richmond, Virginia’s Second Street—the busy, shabby artery which before “integration” had been the Woodward Avenue of that city’s black bourgeoisie.

This was the street Muhammad Ali gravitated to. With its hangers out and hustlers and pimps and junkies and small business men and kids getting ready to drop out and pool halls and barber shops and soul food restaurants and illegal whiskey houses, and shoe shine parlors... this was the street where Muhammad Ali’s people were.

These were the people whose champion Muhammad Ali had chosen to be. He could have been like champs gone by, tap dancing on the Ed Sullivan Show or selling U.S. War Bonds, basking in the accolades of a public that milked him for all they could get.

Not so Muhammad Ali. He knew who he was. He knows who the Vietnamese people are and why they are fighting. He knows who is attempting to order him to do their genocidal thing in Southeast Asia.

He moved down the street, bantering with his people, sparring with a guy in the pool hall who was beginning to look old at 25, handing out dollar bills to kids, flirting with pretty girls, grabbing a basketball from a young boy and artfully dribbling it between his legs, and always interspersing the horseplay with a constant admonition to “get straight” and listen to the teachings of the Honorable Elijah Muhammad, Muhammad Ali’s teacher and prophet.

Again and again he asked, “Who’s the champ?” The answer was always the one he wanted to hear, but it didn’t really matter, because he knew. Muhammad Ali was the Heavyweight Champion of the World. Boxing bureaucrats in fifty states could take away his title in the leather seats of their conference rooms, but no one could put on leather gloves and take the title away in the boxing ring.

He and he alone could move like a butterfly and sting like a bee.

I Was a reporter at the time and I asked him a reporter’s question:

“If you could fight again, do you think you could get. back in shape’ after such a long layoff?”

His face furrowed as he took on a mocking hurt expression. He, slipped out of his tailored silk jacket and handed it to John 3X of the local Mosque.

Then he said, “Count to ‘one’—slowly...

“O-n-e,” said I. And in that time he unloaded a barrage of punches out into the air.

“I can still throw 20 punches in one second. I am still the greatest,” he grinned.

Now, after three years as a boxing exile, Muhammad Ali may once again get a chance to prove his greatness. Efforts are underway to schedule a fight between Muhammad Ali and pretender to the throne, Joe Frazier, at Cobo Hall September 21.

Start with the absurdity of the war in Southeast Asia. Add the absurdity of attempting to jail a man because of his refusal to travel 15,000 miles to commit murder. Add again the further absurdity of denying a man’s prowess because of his religious and political convictions...and all that follows has to be absurd.

The efforts to bring the fight to Detroit are absurd.

The city is choking under heat, humidity and industrial haze. The money to keep Detroit alive is being spent in Vietnam. Meanwhile, civil service employees are being laid off. Factory workers are being laid off. People are rising up angry and shooting down cops in the street.

Ignorance and repression are sending the price of narcotics skyrocketing. Junkies are making the streets perilous in their effort to get money to buy dope.

People with no place else to go are being railroaded out of their homes to build university buildings; buildings which inevitably will alienate the students who use them.

And as all that shit goes down, controversy rages over a possible fight with Muhammad Ali as one of the protagonists.

The former mayor of the city of Detroit becomes legal counsel for the fight's promoters.

The fight possibility involves the highest levels of government. City Councilmen are uptight about it. The governor is called on for his judicious decision on whether such a fight will be allowed. Soberly, he says he will study the implications and will act based on the facts involved.

The liaison man between the promoters and the governor is Doc Greene, the dapper bon vivant and sucker for the underdog whose column long occupied the back pages of the Detroit News.

It no longer occupies the back page of the News because Martin Hayden, editor of the News, fired Doc Greene because the reporter thought the fight would be a good thing for Detroit. Because a reporter who spent the whole of his adult life working for the Detroit News thought it would be a good thing for Muhammad Ali to fight in Detroit, he was fired.

Hayden feared that the fight would result in a "race riot." Ali is black. Frazier is black.

Hayden is also the guy who thought that if the media had ignored the 1967 rebellion, it would have gone away.

Doc Greene spent the night after he was fired getting drunk at the Detroit Press Club. He's a sentimental man.

The next day he told a reporter friend, "Hayden thought the fight would be bad for Detroit. I thought it would be good. We never agree on anything, anyway."

Just about the only sanity in the whole affair comes from Muhammad Ali. That day in Richmond he said he'd like to fight again but that if he didn't it wouldn't matter, because by taking the stand he did, he stood up for the oppressed peoples of the world.

In a recent interview with Liberation News Service he said opposition to a Frazier fight is "bigger than boxing."

"I represent the Islam faith and Elijah Muhammad, which are feared by the government. I represent the Vietnamese people who are raising hell. The black militants would be inspired by the victory and made stronger. It's not just boxing. No state, no governor, no promoter can touch it, no matter how much money it would mean."

Unfortunately for Doc Greene—who thinks everyone's a good guy—that's something he never understood.

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