

**ALI:  
THE RISE**  
BY BUD SCHULBERG

# FROM LOUISVILLE TO LISTON

Right from the start, he broke all the rules. Dismissed by the press, disdained by opponents, Cassius Clay kept on winning. And then came the Liston fight: the night when it all changed

**W**hat child of 12 has a few bouts with bigger boys in a local gym and comes home to tell his parents – the light-skinned, plump, sweet-natured Odessa and the hard-drinking, skirt-chasing dandy of a daddy, Cassius Marcellus Clay Sr – that he is The Greatest and will one day be champion of the world?

Once upon a time in the segregated city of Louisville, Kentucky, lived a young prince who at 16 displayed such speed in the ring that opponents found themselves punching at the air while he danced around them with peppery jabs and stinging right hands.

With his mantra – 'I am the greatest! I am the greatest!' – outrageous but leavened with humour, he was writing his own fairy tale. National Golden Gloves champion at the age of 18, he was on his way to becoming the most extraordinary figure in the history of modern boxing.

Boxing is a sport with a technique as highly developed as fencing. How you place your feet, how to slip, duck and move away from blows, how to pivot and get your body behind the punches to increase the power – there are dozens of books by boxing professors.

Well, young Clay was breaking every one of their rules. He defied the traditionalists by holding his gloves at his side, by almost never punching to the body, by not using his strength to fight 'inside' and, most grievous of all, by pulling straight back from punches, rather than side to side, and even leaning back – a pugilistic sin. Doing everything wrong, he won the light-heavyweight gold medal at the 1960 Rome Olympics. But outside the ring, the speed of mouth was just as outrageous and just as winning. Talking and preening his way all over town, with his father's feisty *braggadocio* and his mother's smile, he was the acknowledged 'Mayor of the Olympic Village'.

Mingling with athletes from all over the world gave him his first lesson in global relationships. Barely making it out of high school, he had an uncanny sense of what he needed to do to accomplish his dream. He was telling everyone who would listen that one day – and that day was not too far off – he would come back to Europe as professional heavyweight champion of the world.

Not everybody agreed with him. The

world's champion of boxing writers, A. J. Liebling, thought Cassius 'hopped around too much for a heavyweight' and that, while his antics might confuse the amateurs, he'd never make it in the pros.

Liebling had a lovely touch in describing a sport that only he could bring to the rarefied pages of the *New Yorker*. But he was like an astronomer who fails to discover a new planet in the sky because nothing in his previous observations prepares him for its arrival. Clay's style was so antipathetic to the experts' understanding of what boxing 'ought' to be that Liebling wasn't the only student of the game put off by his antics. Even as Cassius continued his winning ways as a professional, confusing and toppling rugged heavyweight trial horses and working his way up to top contenders, the leading boxing writers of the day – Jimmy Cannon, Red Smith, Dick Young – wrote him off as a one-day wonder.

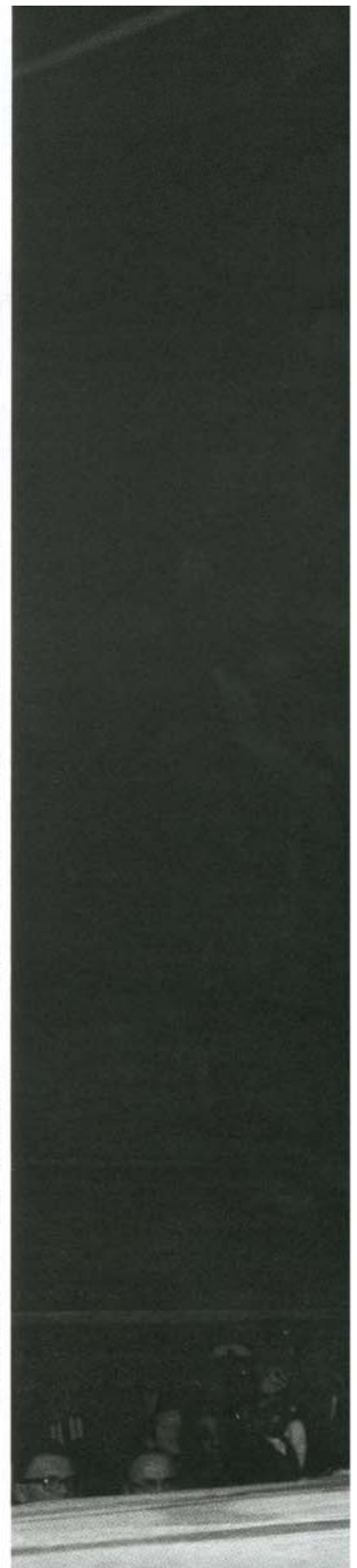
What they resented was not only young Clay's style inside the ropes, but what they considered his outrageous and narcissistic behaviour outside the ring. What the Smiths and Cannons – raised on modest, monosyllabic champions such as Joe Louis and Rocky Marciano – found irritating if not downright obnoxious, the younger generation found entertaining and appealing.

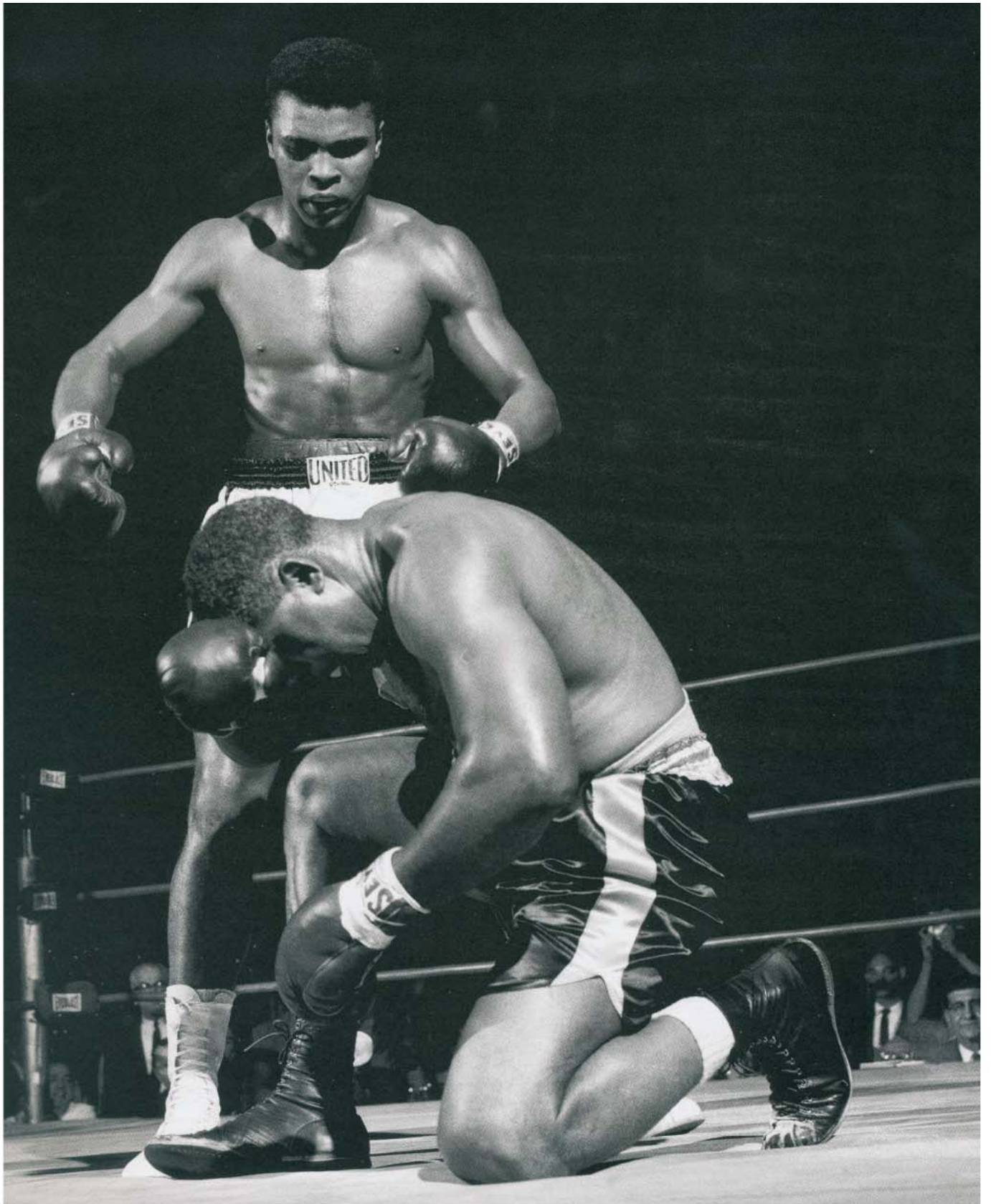
When he fought the venerable, ex-light-heavyweight world champion Archie Moore, who had had 50 tough fights before Cassius was born, the upstart taunted the old man with the doggerel prediction he was making his trademark: 'When you come to the fight / don't block the aisle / and don't block the door / 'cuz Archie Moore will fall in four...' A pretty

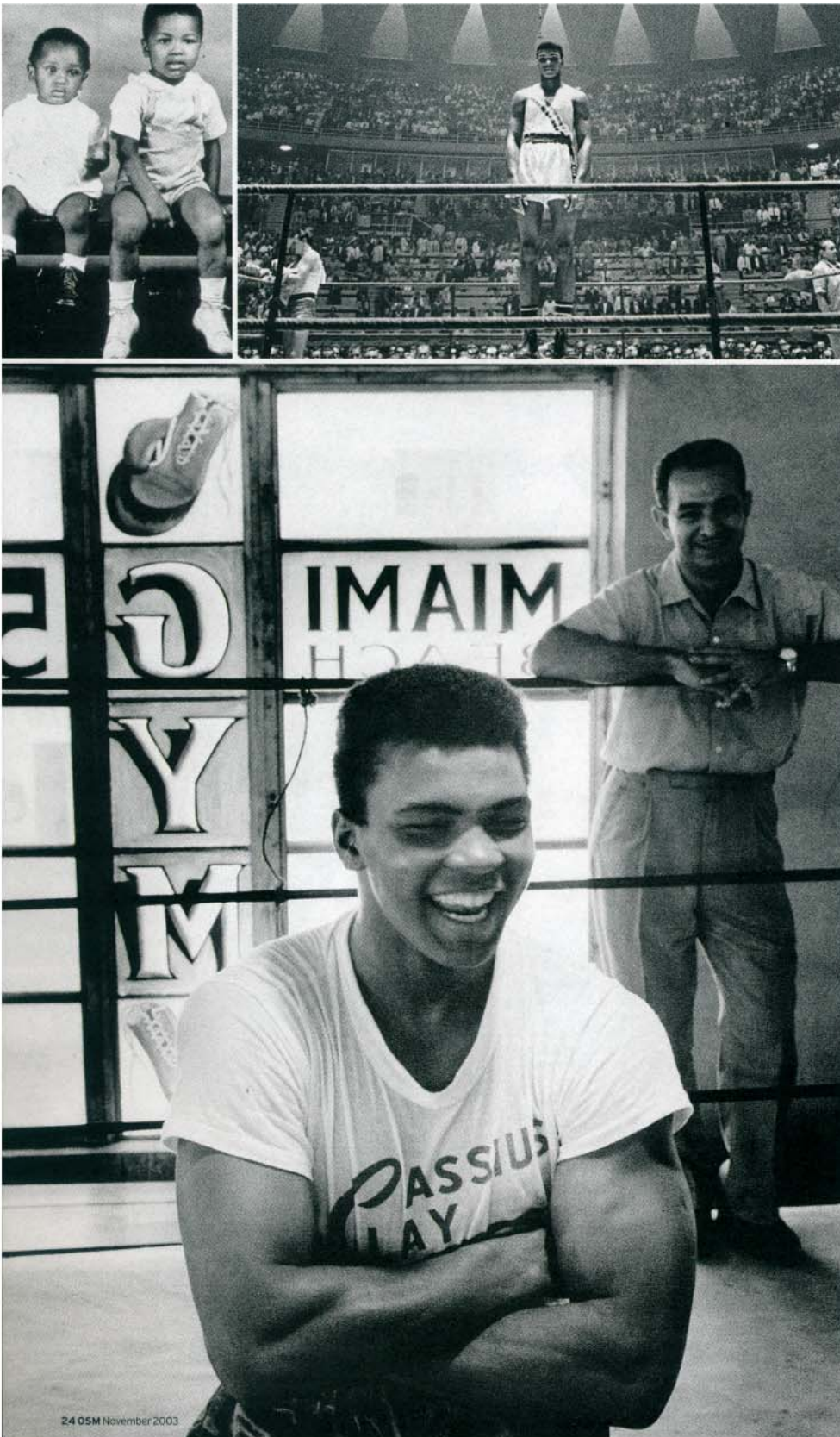
## DOWN AND OUT

Archie Moore falls to one knee in round four of their 1962 bout, just as Clay predicted.

By Peskin/Sports Illustrated







good talker himself, in his never-to-be-equalled 229th fight, old Archie rebutted: 'He's like a man who writes beautifully but doesn't know how to punctuate.' But this time Clay remembered his punctuation: he put an exclamation point at the end of Archie Moore.

**Next stop, Madison Square Garden.** The opposition was a credible heavyweight, Doug Jones, but the problem was a newspaper strike in New York. Ticket sales depended on press coverage and the blackout posed a major threat to the box-office gate. But the promoters happened to have the boxing press agent of all time selling the fight. Cassius Clay was on a mission to make everybody in New York excitedly aware that the greatest fighter in history was in town to display his genius.

I caught his act at The Bottom Line, a most unlikely venue for a pugilist, where the popular attractions were avant-garde musicians and poets. But there he was, the undefeated contender, knocking everybody out with his charm, standing toe-to-toe with the long-hairs, and spouting his doggerel attack on Doug Jones as if he were Allen Ginsberg performing *Howl*:

*I hear this boy loves to mix/And so I say he falls in six/Now I'm changing the pick I made before/Instead of six, Doug goes in four...*

The Village hippies were enthralled. 'Is he really a prize-fighter?' asked an intense young poetess. 'He's gorgeous.'

Maybe there were more hippie poets in New York than we realised. Without a newspaper on the street all week, not only was the Garden sold out but the police had to turn thousands away. Even his detractors had to admit that Clay had pulled off a miracle. People were coming to the Garden who had never seen a fight before. A. J. Liebling couldn't believe his sceptical eyes. Never before had there been a boxer with such a gifted jab and gift of gab. He only won a close 10-round decision that night but, as usual, he had the last word: 'Well, first I said six, then I said four - that adds up to ten.'

My next sighting of the Louisville Lip, as cynical sportswriters still dismissed him, was at the second Sonny Liston v Floyd Patterson fight in Las Vegas. The first had been a two-minute disaster for Floyd. Liston's pile-driving jabs and crushing right hands had convinced the sports world he was unbeatable. Sports writers were rating him one of the great heavyweights of all time. Clay had come to town with a challenge to Liston that was looked on as downright suicidal.

When my brother Stuart was producing the popular *David Brinkley's Journal* for NBC, he and David decided to interview Cassius before what everyone

**THE AGE OF CASSIUS**

**Top left:** The earliest known photograph of four year old Cassius Clay, sat on a bench with his younger brother Rudy. Rex Features

**Top right:** Clay receives his Olympic light-heavyweight gold medal in Rome, 1960. Marvin Newman/Sports Illustrated

**Left:** Clay at Miami Beach Fifth Street Gym in 1961, under the watchful eye of his trainer Angelo Dundee. Flip Schulke

24 OSM November 2003

# OUR SHINING BLACK PRINCE. TO BLACK PEOPLE, HE WAS LIKE GOD

SPIKE LEE, FILM DIRECTOR



## THE SHOWMAN

Top right: Clay relaxes at his parents' home in Louisville, in 1963. Steve Schapiro

Bottom: Showing the kids who's boss in 1962. Howard Bingham

predicted would be his untimely demise. Inviting myself along, we found Cassius with his younger brother, Rudolph Valentino Clay, stretched out on a king-sized bed in a lavish suite. Bare to the waist, he was calling room service. 'Hello. This is Cassius Clay, the coming heavyweight champion of the world. I wanna order breakfast. Bring us some scrambled eggs - oh, about a dozen - and bacon, make it a pound of bacon, and toast. Send up a loaf of toast...'

Ignoring everybody's advice not to take on the sinister Liston until he had more experience - if ever - Cassius went out of his way to goad and humiliate him at

every turn. He had dubbed Liston 'The Big Ugly Bear', adding injury to insult by driving to Sonny's home in Denver at one o'clock in the morning in his bus, bearing a statuesque blow-up of himself heralding 'The World's Most Colorful Fighter' - a touch he borrowed from my fight film exposé, *The Harder They Fall*.

Like Icarus flying too close to the sun, Cassius had shouted for Sonny to come out and fight him on the spot, and set up a huge bear trap on the lawn. Naturally, the super salesman had alerted all the local media to record this fearless (or self-immolating) act of goading the beast in his lair. Sonny's answer was to promise to drive his big fist through the big mouth and all the way down the throat of his tormentor.

I marvelled at Clay's bravado but wondered if he wasn't going too far. The consensus was summed up in *Sports Illustrated*: 'He's crazy to consider entering the

ring against a virtually indestructible and demonstrably deadly fighting machine.'

If further proof was needed, it was the hysteria of the weigh-in on the day of the fight. Before Clay's appearance we could hear the thunder of his coming, as he and fellow street-poet Drew Bundini Brown came pounding their canes on the floor and screaming: 'Float like a butterfly and sting like a bee...! Aaaaaaah! Rumble, young man, rumble!'

When Clay finally appeared, he screamed at a bemused, contemptuous, silent Liston: 'I'm the champ and you're the tramp!' and flung himself at the champion as if he truly intended to attack him right there at the scales. Convinced that Clay was suffering hysterical panic, the New York boxing writers urged the local commissioners to call off the fight. Especially after the commission doctor reported Clay's blood pressure to be 200

## LIFE AND TIMES

17 January 1942: Born Cassius Marcellus Clay in Louisville, Kentucky.

1954: Starts boxing.

1960: Wins light-heavyweight gold at Rome Olympics. Throws his medal into the Ohio river after being refused service in a restaurant.

29 October 1960: Makes his professional debut. Wins his next 19 fights, 15 by knockout.

25 February 1964: Defeats world heavyweight champion Sonny Liston. Drops 'slave name', Cassius Clay.

1967: Citing his faith, refuses induction to the US Army during Vietnam. Is stripped of his licence and given a five-year prison term.

1970: Starts fighting again.

8 March 1971: First defeat, to Joe Frazier.

31 March 1973: Loses to Ken Norton.

28 January 1974: Defeats Frazier.

29 October 1974: Reclaims title, defeating George Foreman in the famous 'Rumble in the Jungle'.

1 October 1975: Defends his title, beating Joe Frazier in 14 rounds, in the fight billed the 'Thriller in Manila'.

15 February 1978: Loses title to Leon Spinks in Las Vegas.

15 September 1978: Defeats Spinks, becoming the only fighter to win the heavyweight crown three times.

27 June 1979: Retires, aged 37.

2 October 1980: Another comeback: suffers the worst defeat of his career, knocked out by Larry Holmes.

11 December 1981: Loses to Trevor Berbick and retires permanently.

19 July 1996: Lights the Olympic flame in Atlanta.

15 September 2000: UN Secretary General Kofi Annan honours Ali as a United Nations Messenger of Peace.

Career record: Total fights: 61  
Won: 56 (KOs: 37); Lost: 5

over 100. 'He could have a heart attack,' Jimmy Cannon said. 'He's obviously in no condition to fight Liston tonight.'

But less than an hour later, I had a call from Clay's physician, the multi-talented Dr Ferdie Pacheco: 'Budd, you won't believe this. I've just examined Cassius and his pulse is perfect. His blood pressure is 120 over 80. Perfecto. He couldn't be any calmer. You'd think he'd be excited, the night of his life, but you'd never know it from my examination. I'm convinced it was self-induced hysteria to convince Sonny he's crazy. To psych him out. It's going to be an interesting evening.'

Crouched in Ali's corner that night alongside trainer Angelo Dundee, Dr Ferdie and Bundini, I watched the fight unfold just as Cassius's pop poetry had predicted. Liston had never seen a heavyweight move like this and the baleful champion who

**OSM ALI: THE RISE**

had twice destroyed Patterson in a single round 'couldn't hit him in the ass with a broom', as Angelo would say.

Cassius just kept flicking jabs into the champion's stolid face; Liston kept swinging at where Cassius had been a split second before. Sonny hadn't lost a fight in nine years. He had knocked out 27 of his past 30 opponents. But now there was an angry wound on his left cheek. He had been knocking out top contenders when Cassius was still in junior high, but the look on his face said: 'What the hell is this?'

What happened next was one of those high-wire moments that Clay's career seemed to attract. I was grateful to the fistic gods that put me in his corner, able to catch every word of it. At the end of round four, Cassius had come back to his corner screaming that something was burning his eyes, that he couldn't see. 'Cut the gloves off! Cut the gloves off!' There would be talk of skulduggery, but the most likely explanation is that a coagulant used to close Liston's cut got on Clay's gloves and blinded him. While Cassius kept screaming, two men who turned out to be Black Muslims came to the corner sus-

**I AM THE GREATEST**

All is mobbed exiting the ring after his first round win over Sonny Liston in 1965. John Dominis

pecting 'Whitey' of betraying their man. Frantic, quick-thinking Angelo took the sponge he was using and applied it to his own eyes to prove his innocence, then just as quickly went about the business of washing out Cassius's eyes.

But what he said was just as vital as what he did. Ignoring Cassius's protests, he shouted: 'Big Daddy, get in there, this is your night!' By now the referee had come over to investigate and Angelo, afraid he was going to stop the fight, pulled Cassius to his feet, gave him a smart smack on the butt and said: 'This the big one, Daddy. Run. Stay away. But get in there...' All in 60 seconds.

Cassius was one of the most courageous fighters I ever saw and he proved it that night, as he would on so many nights to come - maybe too many. But that one minute in Miami was the turning point in his career. If Angelo Dundee never did another thing for him in his whole life, those magic 60 seconds would have put Cassius in his debt for ever. When Cassius managed to survive until his eyes began to clear in the fifth and then took over to make Liston quit on his stool at the end of the sixth - the first heavyweight champion to quit since Jess Willard against Dempsey almost 50 years earlier - Cassius had fulfilled his childhood prophecy.

**I'M NOT THE GREATEST. I'M THE DOUBLE GREATEST. NOT ONLY DO I KNOCK 'EM OUT, I PICK THE ROUND**  
CASSIUS CLAY, 1962

In his dressing room, the new champion could be heard all over Miami, scolding the press for ever doubting him, trying to cheerlead them into admitting he was the greatest, turning it into opera: 'Oh, I'm so great, I shook up the world, I whupped him so bad. You said he was the powerfuller man in the world and I put 'im in the hospital, and look at me, you see a mark on me? Not only the greatest, the prettiest. I shook up the world...'

The boxing writers shook their heads. Almost without exception they had pre-

dicted a Liston knockout in the first or second round. They were reluctant believers. And, somehow, it was more than a boxing event. It was beginning to dawn on us that Liston was the bygone square and silent Fifties, and that Cassius was the Sixties, the dawn of a new era, a revolution in morals and manners. Whether we liked it or not, we were being dragged along into Cassius's world. In training for the fight, Liston had skipped rope interminably to Coleman Hawkins's 'Night Train'. But we were having to sing along with Bob Dylan: 'The times, they are a-changin'...'

Clay was not just the new champion of the world, he was the first television champion of the world. He had not only mastered Old Sonny; some instinct or intuition, some self-invented genius had given him a mastery of the medium, that infernal little box we hadn't taken seriously enough in the early Fifties and that was taking control of our lives by the early Sixties.

At the press conference we were in for another surprise. The young victor whose 'I told you so's' had pierced our eardrums the night before was now talking so quietly we had to lean forward to hear him. Reporters were actually shouting, 'Louder!' His name was no longer Cassius Marcellus Clay, he whispered. That had been his slave name.

Clay had been the name of the slave-owner of his great grand-daddy, purposely given him to deprive him of his true identity. Soon he would be calling himself Cassius X, the 'X' representing his 'obliterated' ancestors in Africa. He had become a follower of the Honorable Elijah Muhammad. He was now a Black Muslim.

How quietly Muhammad dropped his bombshell on the startled press conference that morning. The fight, after all, had been merely an athletic contest. This was a declaration of independence that would send shock waves around the world. The old-line columnists couldn't believe what they were hearing. First they had to accept a winning boxing style they had totally scorned. Now they were being asked to accept a champion whose religious crusade, according to Jimmy Cannon, was the worst thing that had ever happened to boxing. But the quixotic champion held his ground, looked all the doubters in the eye, and said: 'I don't have to be what you want me to be.'

After the conference I was able to get a few minutes alone with him. He knew me now as a friend of Angelo's and the 'fight doctor' and I had put in my time watching him train in Angelo's sweat-stained Fifth Street Gym. I had never seen a fighter work harder. He didn't boast about his work ethic, but it was there.

'Now that you're the champion,' I asked, 'what do you plan to do next?' 'As the champion of the whole world,' he said, 'I plan to travel all over the world and meet with the great leaders of the world.'

Fascinating. He actually saw his championship belt as the emblem of an international ambassadorship. If there is a day that defines a man for the rest of his life, it was that morning, 26 February 1964, when brash young Cassius Clay projected himself as the icon the whole world now knows as Muhammad Ali. **OSM**

