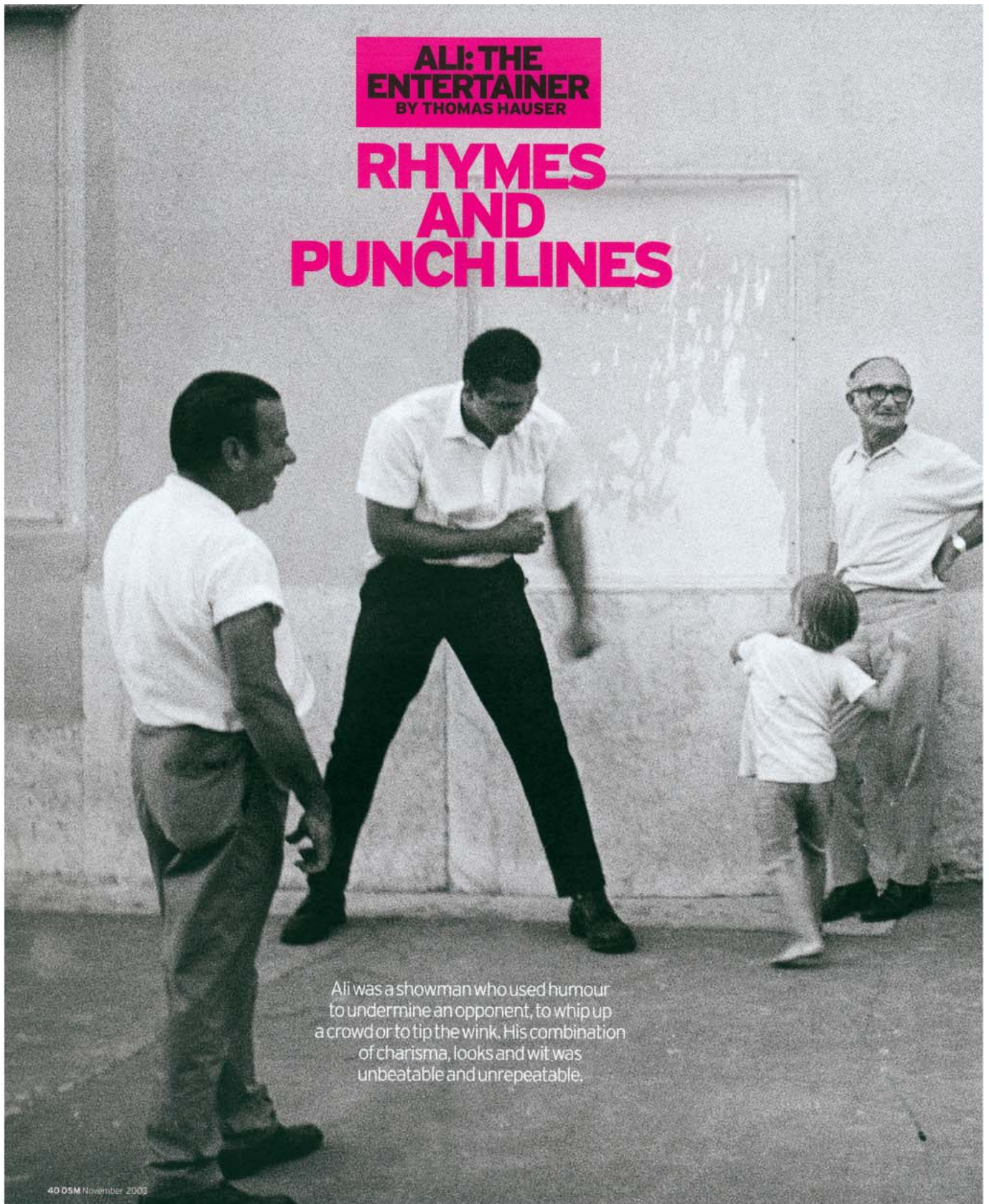


**ALI: THE
ENTERTAINER**
BY THOMAS HAUSER

RHYMES AND PUNCH LINES



Ali was a showman who used humour to undermine an opponent, to whip up a crowd or to tip the wink. His combination of charisma, looks and wit was unbeatable and unrepeatable.

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Comical! All: Sparring with a young boy in Miami, before a fight, 1970. Denny Lyon/Magnum

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Muhammad Ali first entered the public consciousness as an entertainer. 'It may not seem like much that a fighter should size up the fight business as show business,' Tom Wolfe wrote in 1963. 'But damned few before Cassius Clay ever did.'

That same year, while still an unproven fighter, Clay broke new ground for athletes by recording an album for Columbia Records. The disk consisted of monologues and poems devoted largely to the recording artist's own greatness. Some of the material was written by The Greatest himself, the rest by employees of Columbia Records. Released to a barrage of publicity, the album enjoyed moderate commercial success and contributed to the blend of mayhem and magic that would ultimately carry Ali deep into the collective psyche of us all.

One reason Ali was endearing as a self-promoter was that he had the personal qualities to carry it off. The same words emanating from another man's mouth would have constituted a wholly different phenomenon. What might have been insufferable in someone else was charming in Ali and made people smile.

What is more, the personal qualities that Ali had when he was young are still part of his make-up. His physical disabilities haven't changed who he is, nor have they dimmed his spirit.

Ali's charm started with his looks. He was extraordinarily handsome – better looking than most movie stars. Artist LeRoy Neiman observed: 'Ali looked like a piece of sculpture with no flaw or imperfection. His features and limbs were perfectly proportioned; and over the years, the way he looked never really changed.'

And Ali had charisma. Don Elbaum was the matchmaker for a show in Pittsburgh, when Cassius Clay fought Charlie Powell in early 1963. 'We were staying at a place called Carlton House,' Elbaum reminisced. 'And two or three days before the fight, Cassius decided to visit a black area of Pittsburgh. It was winter, real cold. But he went out, walking the streets, just talking to people. I've never seen anything like it in my life. When he came back to the hotel around six o'clock, there were 300 people following him. The Pied Piper couldn't have done any better. The night of the fight, the weather was awful. There was a blizzard; the schools were shut down. Snow kept falling; it was windy. Conditions were absolutely horrible. And the fight sold out.'

There was an innate sweetness in Ali. At his core, one found compassion for the poor, the elderly and the afflicted. And he was 'crazy', albeit captivatingly so. 'People remember that there were two Alis in the ring,' recalled Jerry Izenberg, who covered Ali from day one. 'Ali 1960 to 1967, and Ali 1970 to 1981. What they don't remember is that his personality changed too. He was wild early on. People forget how crazy he was when he was young.'

Dick Sadler rode by train with Cassius Clay from San Diego to Dallas in 1960. 'It was a pretty wild ride,' Sadler remembered.

IN 1964 HE MET THE BEATLES, WHO WERE TALKING ABOUT HOW MUCH MONEY THEY MADE. 'YOU GUYS AIN'T AS DUMB AS YOU LOOK,' ALI SAID. 'NO, BUT YOU ARE,' LENNON REPLIED

'First the kid would be standing, shouting out of the carriage, "I am the greatest! I am the greatest!" He'd shout this at passing cars and sheep and fields and stuff. Then, after a while, he started singing this Chubby Checker Twist number. He didn't know the words; just kept on and on singing, "Come on, baby, let's do the twist; come on, baby, let's do the twist!" It got to me, drove me crazy. I said, "Jesus, son, you done twisted all across California and Arizona." By the time we got to New Mexico, I told him, "Look; sing the Charleston or the Boogaloo – or any damn thing, but get off the Twist." Seven hundred miles of twisting, twisting, and "I am the greatest!" It drove me crazy.'

Over the years, some of Ali's humour has been scripted. He has a memory bank of one-liners that are constantly drawn upon. In his fighting days, one heard comments such as: 'I should be a postage stamp; that's the only way I'll ever get licked.' White opponents were labelled the 'Great White Dope' or the 'Great White No Hope'. There were also self-deprecating riffs on race. 'I'm just a nigger trying to get bigger,' was one frequent refrain. Caucasian friends entering Ali's car might be told: 'You get in back; I'll drive; it'll be like *Driving Miss Daisy*.'

Sometimes, his one-liners backfired. 'You ain't as dumb as you look' is a remark Ali has made to people as diverse as basketball legend Wilt Chamberlain and former Soviet Premier Leonid Brezhnev. In 1964, shortly before Clay fought Sonny Liston for the first time, he was introduced to The Beatles, who were in Miami Beach

to appear on *The Ed Sullivan Show*. The 'Fab Four' were talking about how much money they made. 'You guys ain't as dumb as you look,' Clay told them.

'No,' John Lennon responded, 'but you are.'

Ali often gave his opponents nicknames before a fight. Sonny Liston was The Big Ugly Bear ('Because he's ugly and smells like a bear'), Archie Moore was The Old Man ('Because he's old enough to be my grandfather'), Floyd Patterson was The Rabbit ('In the ring, he's frightened like a rabbit'), George Chuvalo was The Washerwoman ('He punches like a woman who's washing clothes'), Ernie Terrell was The Octopus ('He grabs and holds a lot when he fights'), Earnie Shavers was dubbed The Acorn ('He's got a shaved head that looks like an acorn'), Leon Spinks emerged as Dracula ('The man is missing his front teeth') and Larry Holmes was nicknamed Peanut ('Because his head is shaped like one').

Other times, Ali would take a one-liner and run with it. Explaining to reporters why he'd labelled George Foreman 'The Mummy', Ali declared: 'George Foreman is nothing but a big mummy. He moves like a slow mummy and there ain't no mummy gonna whup the great Muhammad Ali. See, you all believe that stuff you see in the movies. Here's a guy running through the jungle, doing the 100-yard dash, and the mummy is chasing him. Thomp. Thomp. Thomp. "Ooh, help! I can't get away from the mummy! Help! Help! The mummy's catching me! Help! Here comes the mummy!" And the mummy always catches him. Well, don't

you all believe that stuff. There ain't no mummy gonna catch me.'

Ali was quick with one-liners. In 1974, he was in Zaire training to fight George Foreman when Stokely Carmichael (considered by many to be the originator of the phrase 'burn, baby, burn') entered the room. 'Stokely Carmichael,' Ali admonished. 'Don't you burn nothin' over here or Mobutu's people will put you in a pot and cook you.'

Two years later, prior to fighting Jimmy Young, Ali was introduced to Susan Ford (President Gerald Ford's daughter). Muhammad put his arm around her for photographers and sang: 'If you knew Susie like I knew Susie...' Later that day, he spoke with a group of college students and promised \$1,000 to anyone who brought him commentator Howard Cosell's toupee.

Ali's wit still surfaces. Asked to name the 10 best-looking heavyweight champions of all time, he says simply: 'I'm number one. After me, it don't matter.' When an 80-year-old grandmother gazed at him admiringly and noted: 'You know something, that boxer is a good-looking fellow,' he advised her companion: 'Tell her I don't fool around with white women.' And when the girlfriend of an associate was slow to give her heart completely, Ali

A MAN AMONGST MEN

Clockwise from top left: 'The King' Elvis Presley puts his dukes up in Las Vegas in 1973; Michael Jackson stands on Ali while his brothers pin him in 1977; with Stevie Wonder in 1963; lining up a different kind of hit for The Beatles in 1964. Howard Bingham, Neil Leifer, Redferns, AP



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informed her: 'If you're waiting for me, you're wasting your time.'

Journeyman fighters and ring greats alike were also exposed to Ali's brand of humour. Roy Jones Jr (generally recognised as 'pound-for-pound' the best fighter of the past decade) and Ali once engaged in a mock sparring session. 'Take my advice,' Muhammad suggested when it was over. 'Get a gun.'

Then there was the time Ali attended a fight card in Seattle. The undercard fighters were in awe of him. One, a lightweight with a losing record in a handful of professional bouts, went so far as to confess: 'Mr Ali, I just want you to know, when I'm going to the ring for a fight, I get real nervous. So I say to myself, "I'm Muhammad Ali, I'm the greatest fighter of all time, and no one can beat me."' Ali leant forward and whispered to him: 'When I was boxing and got nervous before a fight, I said the same thing.'

Writer Vic Ziegel has memories of a classic Ali monologue at a press conference in Malaysia before his second fight against Joe Bugner. 'There was a rules committee meeting,' Ziegel recalls. 'And you know how boring they are - the three-knockdown rule will or won't be waived, the ring doctor can or can't stop the fight.'

'Ali and Bugner picked out their gloves and gave them to someone from the local boxing commission for safekeeping. Then the commissioner explained that the gloves would be kept in a local prison until the fight. And all of a sudden, Ali, who was just trying to stay awake, perked up, raised his hand like a kid in school and said, "Wait a minute! You're putting my gloves in jail?"

'Well, from that point on, he was unstoppable. What we heard with perfect comedic timing for the next ten minutes was, "This is awful! How can you do that! How can you put my gloves in jail? They ain't done nothing... yet."

'I learnt a lot from him,' Dick Schaap reminisced. 'I learnt about laughing and enjoying and having fun with your work. I learnt that life doesn't have to be solemn to be serious. Muhammad never believed all the myths and legends. He understood that a lot of it was show, and he would wink to let you know. He taught me that you can do so much with a wink. The athletes, the politicians, the people who don't wink, they're the ones who should frighten you.'

The wink. It meant so much. Many observers questioned whether Sonny Liston took a dive in his second fight against Ali. The punch that supposedly knocked him out didn't seem to have much on it. 'I call it the anchor punch,' Ali said in response. 'People couldn't see it because it was so fast. *Sports Illustrated* got a slow-motion camera and clocked the punch in four one-hundredths of a second, which is an eye blink, like a camera flash. Now the minute I hit Sonny Liston, all those people watching the fight blinked at the same moment. That's why they didn't see the punch. So if you watch the film, when I say, "All right, I'm getting ready to hit him," you gotta hold your eyes [open] or you won't see it. I swear! No kidding!'



'THE BEAR WILL FALL IN EIGHT'
Ali on 'big, ugly' Sonny Liston during this stunt before their fight in 1964. Howard Bingham

Years later, Ali attended two book signings in New York to promote a biography of his life. Each signing was enormously successful. Both stores reported he'd sold more books in a single session than any previous subject or author. The final promotional event for the book was Muhammad's attendance at the annual Boxing Writers' Association of America dinner. Ali spoke briefly and told the audience

about a slave named Omar. It was a parable that preached the message of humility and was met by sustained applause. Ali sat down and the programme resumed. HBO's Jim Lampley was speaking, when suddenly Muhammad returned to the podium and announced: 'I forgot to tell you. I had two book signings this week, and I broke the all-time record at both stores.' That left Lampley to wonder aloud: 'Muhammad, would Omar the slave brag about his book signings?' 'He would if he sold 1,000 books,' Ali answered.

**CHAMPIONS
AREN'T MADE
IN GYMS.
CHAMPIONS
ARE MADE
FROM
SOMETHING
DEEP INSIDE
THEM -
A DESIRE,
A DREAM,
A VISION.**

MUHAMMAD ALI

**GODDAM
CLAY.
THAT
SUCKER
HAD 57
VARIETIES
OF
BULLSHIT**

JOE FRAZIER

Later, a friend who signed 3,500 bookplates for a limited-edition work on Ali told Muhammad he couldn't sign more than 500 bookplates at a time. 'Any more than that,' the friend confided, 'and I couldn't connect the letters properly. Something started misfiring in my brain.'

'Now you know,' Ali responded, referring to his own physical condition. 'It wasn't the boxing. It was the autographs.'

Bartlett Giamatti once wrote: 'It is Ali who brought to the surface the actor in every athlete more successfully and obsessively than anyone else.' That remains true to this day. But, as noted earlier, Ali's humour worked - and he still makes us smile - because of his inherent decency.

The magic remains. Not long ago, Ali was at a party, surrounded by the usual chaos that accompanies his presence. Men who would rarely think of hugging another man fell into his embrace. Women were asking to be kissed. There were requests for autographs and photographs. Then, amid it all, a mother brought her four-year-old daughter over to Ali.

'Do you know who this is?' she asked the child.

The four-year-old nodded reverentially and told her mother: 'It's the Easter Bunny.'

OSM

BUY ALI ONLINE

Not surprisingly, Ali memorabilia is big business. In 1997, Christies auctioned 3,000 Ali artefacts; the robe he wore before the George Foreman fight in Zaire, in 1974, was sold for \$156,500.

Ali-mania isn't restricted to America. In 2001, a Briton paid £37,600 for the gloves Ali was wearing when floored by Henry Cooper in 1963. You don't have to break the bank, however, to buy a piece of the Ali legend.

The following memorabilia are all available on ebay:



Signed glove

Current highest bid - \$180 The Everlast glove is mounted within a perspex case.



Ali vs Tooth decay album

Current highest bid - \$1.99 The LP in which Ali 'whoops up on tooth decay' also features Frank Sinatra.

Signed Weatles box

Current highest bid - \$0.50 The unopened breakfast cereal box has been signed in gold pen.