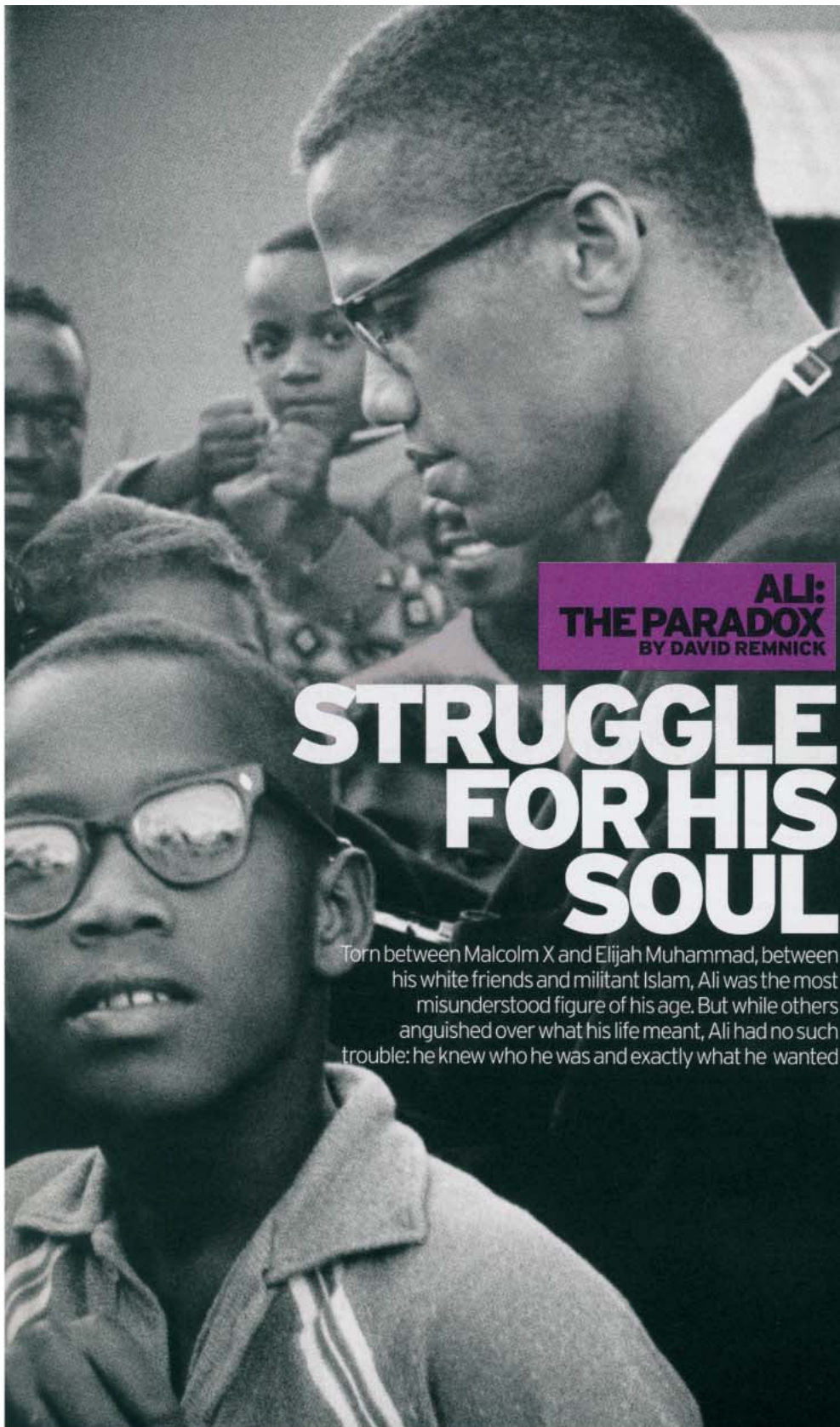


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**ALI:  
THE PARADOX**  
BY DAVID REMNICK

# STRUGGLE FOR HIS SOUL

Torn between Malcolm X and Elijah Muhammad, between his white friends and militant Islam, Ali was the most misunderstood figure of his age. But while others anguished over what his life meant, Ali had no such trouble: he knew who he was and exactly what he wanted

**B**y the time Muhammad Ali won the heavyweight title for the third time, in a fight against Leon Spinks in 1978, his biography, his politics, his religion, his rhetoric – so help me, even his boxing – had been limned and processed by a veritable editorial board of the mid-century. LeRoi Jones, Murray Kempton, Tom Wolfe, Hunter S. Thompson, Irwin Shaw, George Plimpton, Gordon Parks: each, in his own way, made something of Norman Mailer's remark that Ali 'is the very spirit of the twentieth century'.

Ishmael Reed, covering the second Leon Spinks fight, wrote that, even as the years slipped by, Ali 'would still remind us of the turbulent decade of Muslims, Malcolm X, Rap Brown, the Great Society, LBJ, Vietnam, General Hershey, dashikis, afros, Black Power, Martin Luther King Jr, Robert Kennedy and so on. Ali represented the New Black of the 1960s, who was the successor to the New Negro of the 1920s: glamorous, sophisticated, intelligent, international and militant.'

Ali was far from the first champion to come into the ring wearing the gaudy robe of literary approval and historical meaning. Boxing, despite its increasingly marginal place in the American interest, bears more of this freight, this heavy meaning, than any other sport. Only Jackie Robinson in baseball comes close. (Who are the Alis of professional football? Of basketball? Michael Jordan's most determined decision off the court was to refuse politics, the better to preserve the historical scope of his earning power.)

Ali himself was well aware of the historical origins of his sport. Boxing's subtext is America's subtext: race. 'We're just like two slaves in that ring,' Ali said at the height of his glamour and fame. 'The masters get two of us big old black slaves and let us fight it out while they bet. "My slave can whup your slave." That's what I see when I see two black people fighting.'

The first American champion was a slave named Tom Molineaux. Owned by Virginia farmers, Molineaux fought for his masters the way a thoroughbred race-horse runs for his. After many years of this, Molineaux went north to New York as a freeman and to England, where he beat the white champion of the British Empire, Tom Cribb.

With the rise of modern heavyweight champions, race was at the centre of nearly every important heavyweight drama. First came John L. Sullivan, who refused to cross the colour line and face a black challenger. Then came Jim Jeffries, who swore he would retire 'when there are no white men left to fight'. When he came out of retirement to fight the great Jack Johnson, Jeffries declared: 'I am going into this fight for the sole purpose of proving that a white man is better than a Negro.' Jeffries seemed to have the support of all of white America, including the press, led by Jack London, who wrote that 'Jeffries would surely win' because the white man 'has 30 centuries of traditions behind him – all the supreme efforts, the

On the road with Malcolm X  
in Miami, 1964, Tony Triolo

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inventions and the conquests, and, whether he knows it or not, Bunker Hill and Thermopylae and Hastings and Agincourt'.

Johnson's victory on 4 July 1910, his complete domination of Jeffries, came as such a shock and humiliation to the white public that it triggered massive riots from Missouri to the eastern seaboard. There were shootings in Georgia, knifings in Houston, furious white crowds in their thousands in Manhattan, walking up and down Eighth Avenue threatening to beat the first black man they saw. No racial incident on that scale of violence and geography would occur in the United States until the riots following the assassination of Martin

Luther King Jr, in 1968.

There was something about the spectacle, two men naked to the waist, in brutal conflict, that seemed stripped of all metaphor and capable of inciting the national passions.

Johnson was a defiant and proud figure, dating white women as he pleased, speaking as he pleased, spending as he pleased. When, many years later, Ali came to know Johnson's history, he took it as a template. 'I grew to love the Jack Johnson image,' he said. 'I wanted to be rough, tough, arrogant, the nigger white folks didn't like.'

Johnson finally went into exile as world champion. In 1915, he was defeated by Jess Willard. Jack Dempsey and other white

champions dominated the boxing scene until the 1930s. In fact, the white heavyweights of that era succeeded for so long because they avoided fighting such black contenders as Sam Langford and Harry Wills. That interregnum of racial avoidance came to an end when Joe Louis thrashed Jim Braddock for the title in 1937.

And with Louis – or in spite of Louis – came another racial archetype, one that seemed, to many white columnists, more acceptable than that of Johnson. In the Southern press, Louis won plaudits as 'the good nigger' and, in the more sophisticated north, he was dubbed 'the Dusky David from Detroit', 'the Shufflin' Shadow', 'the Tan Tarzan of Thump'.

Yet, unknown to the white public, many blacks saw Louis as their surrogate, a dignified and powerful confederate who refused shame or defeat. As the African-American historian Franklin Frazier wrote in 1940, Louis allowed blacks 'to inflict vicariously the aggression which they would like to carry out against whites for the discriminations and insults which they have suffered'.

Louis himself may have been quiet and unlettered, but his significance was undeniable. Martin Luther King Jr used to tell a story about a young black man sentenced to death in the gas chamber: 'As the pellet dropped into the container

**HOLDING COURT**

**Above:** Heading a meeting in 1963 with the all-white men of the Kentucky Sponsoring Group who backed his early career. James Drake/Getty  
**Above right:** Ali receives a hero's welcome upon his arrival in Ghana in 1964. The trip was part of a month-long tour of Africa. Gerry Cranham/SI  
**Right:** Entertaining guests with his second wife Belinda at their home in Cherry Hill, New Jersey, in 1972. Neil Leifer

and gas curled upward, through the microphone came these words: "Save me, Joe Louis. Save me, Joe Louis. Save me, Joe Louis."

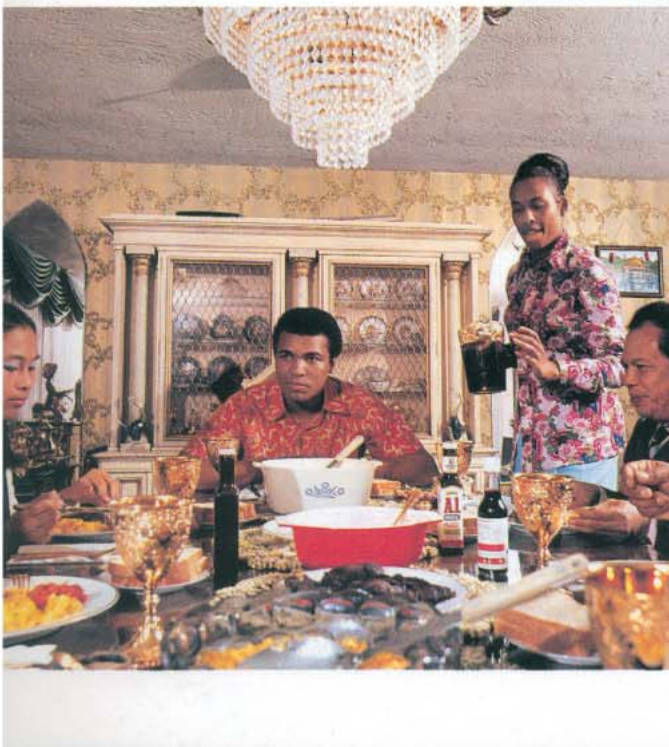
Ali was a far more self-aware performer than Louis and he attracted attention beyond his prowess in the ring for myriad and obvious reasons: his rejection of mob-run management; his rejection of Christianity (the 'white man's religion') for the Nation of Islam; his rejection of 'Cassius Clay' ('my slave name') for 'Muhammad Ali'; his rejection of the draft; his rejection of Civil Rights for Black Power.

Thousands of articles and books, many of them overheated and purple, were written to 'explain the meaning' of Muhammad Ali. Harry Wills, a seminarian turned journalist and scholar, was among those who came along to mock the spectacle. Ali, he cracked, had become 'the intellectuals' catnip'.

**I AIN'T GOT NO  
QUARREL WITH  
THEM VIETCONG.  
NO VIETCONG EVER  
CALLED ME NIGGER**

MUHAMMAD ALI, 1966

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'Modern Pindars sing the weirdest songs about Ali,' Wills wrote. 'They cluster around him, trying to probe non-existent mysteries. There is Mailer, under the impression that he is interviewing the Heart of Darkness. (What did Heart have to say today? "Being a fighter enables me to attain certain ends." Heavy.)'

In Wills's view, a boxer could not possibly carry such cultural weight. After all, Ali himself was not an intellectual, not a thinker. 'Ali cannot read books,' Wills wrote. 'He is barely able to make out newspaper headlines; but he had his gingerly affair with various causes in the Sixties. For some reason, people don't want fighters just to be fighters. They have to stand for an era, for the colour of hope, for a metaphysics of the spirit. Virtue (Floyd Patterson) meets vice (Sonny Liston). Poor Jerry Quarry was, for a while, the voice of the new ethnics. Joe Louis, we were brought up to believe, dropped the first American bombs of World War II on Schmeling's head. It is as if the art were not enough to redeem boxing's violence, all that cruelty inflicted on the face — so we prefer to think the loser is being destroyed for some deeply ideological reason. Get the Nazi. Smash the traitor. Beat Whitey. This tendency, quite as degrading as it is silly...' And so on.

The tone is superior and self-righteous, but there is some truth to what Wills was

saying. At times, there seemed to be no analogy that the higher-minded writers at ringside would not draw between fighters and writers.

In 'Ego', an essay written for *Life* magazine after Ali lost to Joe Frazier in the first of their three fights, Mailer wrote of fighters generally: 'If [heavyweights] become champions they begin to have inner lives like Hemingway or Dostoevsky, Tolstoy or Faulkner, Joyce or Melville or Conrad or Lawrence or Proust...'

Wow. That's some inner life. And yet what Wills also seems to imply is that only works of the mind can have genuine meaning for minds as fine as his own. The physical performer, the athlete, the singer, the musician, cannot stand for more than their victories, their songs. It is true that Ali wrote no books of consequence, embarked on no research, recited doggerel and punched other men for a living. But he mattered. Here was the symbol of strength and power — the heavyweight champion of the world — refusing to fight in Vietnam, refusing even the smooth road of fighting exhibition bouts for the troops. Here was the heavyweight champion, the black heavyweight champion, giving up his title (to say nothing of his considerable income) rather than fight the Vietcong, who had, as he said, never called

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him nigger: 'Why should they ask me to put on a uniform and go 10,000 miles from home and drop bombs and bullets on brown people in Vietnam while so-called Negro people in Louisville are treated like dogs?'

Perhaps this was not the most sophisticated analysis of the politics of south-east Asia – although it was a question asked by thousands – but no less than the Johnson administration seemed to acknowledge the power of Ali's action when it ordered the Federal Bureau of Investigation to tap his telephones, the same treatment accorded to Martin Luther King Jr. J. Edgar Hoover received regular reports on Ali, including transcripts of his speeches and appearances on TV talk shows. When Ali refused the draft, there was no genuinely mass anti-war movement in the country; not long after, he would become one of the standard-bearers of that movement.

Rather than ask if Ali had real significance, perhaps the better question to ask is why he is now so universally loved when, in his time, he was a figure of enormous controversy. Ever since Ali held high the Olympic torch in Atlanta in 1996, his entire body trembling with Parkinson's, he has been America's teddy bear, beloved by all. Everywhere Ali goes – and he goes everywhere, tirelessly, despite his deteriorating health – he is accorded standing ovations and tributes of all kinds. From southern governors. From Republican presidents. From anyone and everyone.



**ONE OF THE MANY PARADOXES ABOUT ALI IS THAT HE EMBRACED AN IDEOLOGY THAT DISPARAGED WHITE PEOPLE; YET HE WAS NEVER CRUEL TO WHITE PEOPLE, ONLY BLACKS**  
**RANDY ROBERTS, WRITER**

What is lost in this is the richness of Ali's story. When he was fighting and, more, when he was banned from boxing because of the draft, he was a deeply divisive figure, beloved but also despised. He was also a man of theatrical contradictions. What is lost in the current pabulum about Ali and his career is the young man whose role models included not only Malcolm X, but also Gorgeous George, the leading professional wrestler of his day, and, more important, the hucksters and thugs of the Nation of Islam. Even as he was surrounded by white friends and handlers such as Angelo Dundee and Ferdie Pacheco, Ali, that most inclusive of personalities, assimilated a bizarre cult that preached a doctrine of spaceships and separatism.

**A MAN ALONE**  
 During a moment of reflection in Zaire in 1974. Neil Leifer

river by white men in Mississippi in the summer of 1955, because he had flirted with a white woman.

Even in his reduced condition these days, Ali is less forgiving of some of his own mistakes than many of his idolaters. He is not especially proud of the way he treated some of his wives (there were four). He wishes he had not been so brutal, even sadistic, in the ring with Floyd Patterson, Ernie Terrell and a few others. He was awful to Joe Frazier, making him out to be an Uncle Tom. And it took Ali far too long to apologise.

In 1998, when I visited Ali on his farm in Michigan, the first thing he did when we sat down to talk was take out a large glossy photograph of himself standing shoulder-to-shoulder with Malcolm X on the eve of the first fight with Sonny Liston. Ali clearly regrets the way he caved in to the Nation of Islam and rejected Malcolm, his friend, on the orders of Elijah Muhammad.

So there are times when Ali seems too flawed, too limited in some ways, to bear all the symbolic weight. No, he never had a particularly original idea. Except one. He had an idea about himself. And, by drawing on so many figures and currents in the air of his times – on Malcolm X, Sugar Ray Robinson, Jack Johnson, Little Richard, Joe Louis, Gorgeous George – he created an American character, an original who was proud, powerful, funny, surprising, instinctively intelligent, generous and absolutely true to himself. And while he was a symbol, he was also, unlike so many athletes and musicians today who have made their fortunes, forever accessible and human.

We think of him as the solemn, devout Muslim who preached peace after 11 September; we forget the younger Ali and the crazy 'certainties' he inherited from the Honorable Elijah Muhammad. One imagines that very few watching the Atlanta torch-lighting ceremony were also thinking back on the kind of sentiments he expressed in an interview with *Playboy* in 1975, just after beating George Foreman in Zaire, an event that serves as the rousing (but de-politicised) climax to the two key movies in the Ali canon, Leon Gast's documentary *When We Were Kings* and Michael Mann's biopic *Ali*.

'America don't have no future!' Ali said. 'America's going to be destroyed! Allah's going to divinely chastise America! Violence, crimes, earthquakes – there's gonna be all kinds of trouble. America's going to pay for all its lynchings and killings of slaves and what it's done to black people. America's day is over – and if it doesn't do justice to the black man and separate, it gonna burn!'

Here, Ali sounded less like Malcolm X than Malcolm's enemy in the Nation of Islam, Louis Farrakhan. Later in the same interview, Ali raged against interracial sex and dating. And one would never know that this was the same man who claimed he had begun to form his racial and political identity when he saw the pictures of the mutilated corpse of Emmett Till, a young boy of Ali's age who was beaten, lynched, and thrown into a

Muhammad Ali was his own creation and he has never stopped sharing his own joy in what he conceived. 'I'm not going to do anything to mislead my people,' he once told the journal *The Black Scholar*. 'I get pleasure out of walking down the alleys, walking through the ghettos, walking up to little black children... The whole neighbourhood comes out. They haven't seen a celebrity sitting on the garbage can with them. That makes them feel good and it makes me feel good, too.' **OSM**

**JACK**

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