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BOXING

Ali, 61, still the greatest

Muhammad Ali was back in the ring Saturday night.

The Ali shuffle wasn't what it used to be. The lightning-quick hands shook



IN MY OPINION

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rather than stung. He recited no poetry.

But Ali still fills a ring like no other man.

Or a room, or an entire hall

of the Miami Beach Convention Center. He is, still, the Greatest of All Time, GOAT, which is the title of the massive new book on his life. Nearly 40 years after he took the heavyweight title from Sonny Liston on Feb. 25, 1964, Ali came back to the very same venue of his astonishing upset to be feted by his publisher, his fans and the remaining members of his entourage.

It was a love fest. Actor Will Smith led the tribute. Etta James sang *At Last*. Former Ali jaw-breaker Ken Norton, photographers Neil Leifer and Flip Schulke, Miami barber Sonny Armbrister, Malcolm X's eldest daughter, Ms. Shabazz, and Ali's wife, Lonnie, said a few words.

It was a reunion. Photographer and Ali confidant Howard Bingham, trainer Angelo Dundee, historian Hank Kaplan and renaissance man Dr. Ferdie Pacheco also spoke. Too briefly, of course. They could have talked for three dozen rounds. They are brimming with stories.

"You never run out of juice with Ali," Dundee said. "I've been all over the joint with him, and every day was fun."

Malcolm attended the fight. Ali was a black man who fought for his beliefs in a white man's world — and refused to fight in Vietnam despite withering criticism and the sacrifice of three of his prime years.

"I shook up the world!" Ali cried after beating Liston. He had only just begun.

It was Ali's combination of physical and spiritual courage that made him one of a kind.

"If everyone had even 10 percent of his love and affection for people, the world would be a completely different place," Bingham said.

In 1964 in Miami Beach, Clay was initially known as a brash young boxer with a big mouth. Kaplan recalled "the wackiest weigh-in I've ever seen," when Ali's frenzied behavior caused Liston and the attending physician to think he was having a nervous breakdown.

"I knew Muhammad was selling the show," Kaplan said. Many of the photographs and news clips displayed Saturday showed Ali the egotist, rhyming and boasting and dancing and mugging. But that was part of an act. We see the serene Ali today. Parkinson's limits his facial expressions, but his eyes are clear. He doesn't miss a thing. His magnetism is undiminished. When he stepped slowly between the ropes and into the ring Saturday and flicked a couple punches at the ringside photographers, the crowd shouted "Ali! Ali! Ali!"

"He's a tremendously kind kid who ain't got a phony bone in his body," Dundee said. "He still asks my wife, 'Is Angelo being good to you? If he's not, I'll knock him out.'"

Ali was a sellout even at

It was almost like yesterday. Almost. Ali, 61, has been all but silenced by Parkinson's disease. The men in his circle have gone gray or bald. The Fifth Street Gym is gone. Sonny Liston is dead, Malcolm X is dead, Howard Cosell is dead. Overtown, which was the Harlem of the South when Ali shadow-boxed in the swimming pool of the Sir John Hotel, has lost its glamour. Miami Beach, which was in its golden era when Ali trained there, has a different kind of glamour in 2003.

But in 1964, Ali caused an earthquake in Miami Beach — and not just because he won a boxing match against Sonny Liston. He was at the epicenter of change during tumultuous times in the United States. Then Cassius Clay, he was days from announcing his conversion to Islam. He brought Malcolm X to segregated Miami, which so incensed organizers of the fight they almost canceled it. Ali refused to renounce his religion and

Ali was a sellout even at Art Basel. As incongruous as it may seem, he truly belonged among the Picassos and Chagalls. For he is still pretty.

There he was among the beautiful people at the Delano Hotel on Friday night. As he walked haltingly through the long lobby, a murmur went up among the diners and cocktail drinkers.

"Hey, champ!" they called. He responded by making his way to their table. He took out a small piece of pink silk, stuffed it into his fist and made it disappear into thin air.

Despite the tremors, his hands still made magic.

His handlers whispered that it was time to go, he needed to rest and take his medicine. But before Ali stepped away, he smiled. It took some effort. His audience smiled back. Then he reached out, grabbed a piece of egg roll off someone's plate and ate it.

"Ali, you're the greatest," a man said.

Of all time.



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SPECIAL BOOK: The book about Muhammad Ali's life — *GOAT (Greatest of All Time)* — is displayed Saturday.