Was Muhammad Ali the First Rapper?

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"Float like a butterfly/ Sting like a bee/
Your hands can't hit/ What your eyes
can't see."

Muhammad Ali's rhymes, taunts, provocations and exclamations were an endlessly entertaining and insightful facet of his larger-than-life persona. As he once said, "I outwit them and then I outhit them."

A new book, "Ali Rap: Muhammad Ali the First Heavyweight Champion of Rap," proclaims Ali's verbal barrage was more than self-promotion, but that it sowed the seeds of hip-hop, which was born in the early `70s.

"Before there was rap ... there was Ali Rap ... a topsy-turvy, jivey jargon that only Ali could create, but a language we could all understand," writes the book's editor and designer, George Lois.

The book is not a continued analysis of this claim, but nearly 300 pages of examples, illustrated by a quote roughly every page that issued from Ali's world-class mouth. Lois, a renowned ad man and graphic designer, recently told The Associated Press he wanted to condense Ali's many sayings and memorable utterances into a "small, fat book — like a Bible or a Quran."

Lois remembers riding in a car with Ali years ago when a rap song came on the radio. Lois suggested Ali was a rapper himself, to which the boxer responded: "I'm a double rapper. First I rap them with my mouth, then I rap them in the mouth."

Presented chronologically, "Ali Rap" takes the reader from Ali's Kentucky childhood, through his historic fights against Sonny Liston, Joe Frazier and George Foreman — and finally to his current struggles with Parkinson's disease.

Even as an 89-pound 12-year-old, Ali — who as a teenager was known by some as "The Louisville Lip" or "Mighty Mouth" — had found his flow: "This guy is done. I'll stop him in one."

Ali's life story is all told through Ali's own words, in hysterical soundbites and intimate reflections. Lois, who counts himself a friend of Ali's, famously designed a 1964 Esquire magazine cover showing Ali punctured with arrows — an allusion to the criticism he received for refusing to fight in the Vietnam War, and modeled after the San Sebastian

painting by Francesco Botticini.

The book's bold, catchy boast that Ali invented rap is certainly debatable. Surely, hip-hop has more to gain by the association than Ali, who has always transcended all categorization.

Writing for ESPN — which published the book with Taschen — pop culture critic Chuck Klosterman pondered, "If true, this would mean that rap did not originate (as commonly believed) in the South Bronx during the `70s; it would mean that rap was invented in Kentucky during the `60s.

"This is hard to accept because there are very few memorable rap songs about competitive horse racing and/or Rex Chapman."

But there are more than a few rappers in Ali's corner, including Public Enemy's Chuck D, a well-respected elder statesman of hip-hop. Chuck D (born Carlton Douglas Ridenhour) recently hosted an ESPN special on Ali's love of language, which also included Rakim, Ludacris, Doug E. Fresh, Fab 5 Freddy, Jermaine Dupri and MC Lyte.

"He was able to engage his social surroundings into his whole persona. That's what hip-hop was able to do — to be an antenna for social reflection," Chuck D told The AP. "He's one of the few black people to get on TV in the '60s and speak their minds — thank God — and also back up what he talked about."

Ali often spoke out about racism, Vietnam and his religion of Islam — but it was usually in a purely self-expressionist, non-confrontational way. He once said of race relations in America — speaking in almost Yogi Berra-style contradiction — "Nothing is wrong, but something ain't right."

Ali's outspokenness was unusual in the Jim Crow-era South. Oddly enough, Ali infrequently seemed to use the boxing ring to let out his frustration — instead, his outlet was a steady stream of unabashed confidence.

"Where do you think I would be if I didn't shout and holler?" he once said. "I would be poor and down in Louisville washing windows, shining shoes or running an elevator and saying `Yes suh' and `No suh,' and knowing my place."

Rap's connection to social injustice is more tenuous today, though. The well-regarded lyricist Nas is releasing an album titled "Hip Hop is Dead," suggesting the music has lost its way. So even if Ali fathered hip-hop, he might not recognize his grandkids.

"It was important to the early rap artists and DJs to understand and tie into Muhammad Ali's persona and brilliance," says Chuck D. "The further we got away from that and the further away we get from history, hip-hop and rap seemed to form its own sort of story — which is not always good to get away from the reasons you were doing it in the first place."

Another possible progeny of Ali's motormouth is the less-esteemed art of trash talking. Though it was then a little-used tactic, trash talking is a constant in today's sports.

"Most of it was done with such humor," says Lois, noting the exception when Ali "lost his cookies" to be when Floyd Patterson refused to call him Muhammad, instead repeatedly

calling him by his original name, Cassius Clay. "But there's trash talk and there's trash talk. The guys who trash talk today, maybe Ali doing it gave them permission to be trash talkers, but I don't think it's his legacy."

Ali was extremely conscious of his legacy — he was, after all, "the greatest" and "shook up the world." And he wasn't ever concerned about his verbiage making it into poetry books.

"You call my poetry horrible?" he said. "I bet my poetry gets printed and quoted more than any that's been turned out by the poem writers that them critics like."

Truly, a "baaad man."