



Why I Love Ali

By George Lois

Once I said to him, "Hey, Muhammad, you listening to that rap stuff?" He said, "Yeah." And I said, "Well, you were the first rapper." And he said, "I'm a double rapper. I rap them with my mouth, and then I rap them *in* the mouth." He's incredibly funny. He's so fast with lines.

Muhammad Ali was still Cassius Clay when I met him, before he'd gone to the Olympics. A sportswriter told me, "There's a kid in Kentucky — beautiful, dances, has terrific ring command. He's going to be really something." We had lunch together. I thought he was wonderful. He said, "Some day I'm going to be on the cover of *Life* magazine." A couple of years later, he was.

At the time, I was doing covers for *Esquire*. I had my own ad agency and was doing the covers on weekends. A lot of them were very controversial, but they couldn't stop me from what I was doing. I did three covers on Ali. The most famous one is the one where I depicted him as the martyr Saint Sebastian.

People today don't understand how much Ali did to galvanize anti-Vietnam War feeling among the young people in America. Ali irritated the hell out of Nixon by refusing to go into the army. They really went after him — he was indicted by a federal grand jury. He couldn't fight in America, but before the Supreme Court had come down with a final decision to support him, he did get a fight in Toronto in 1972, against George Chuvalo. Everybody got excited that Ali was going to step into the ring again. When he was up there, many reporters said, "Muhammad, you're up here, you're going to have a payday — why don't you stay in Canada, stay out of jail? You can fight in Canada and in the rest of the world." Ali said, "America is my birth country. I'm going to play by the rules. If they're going to put me in jail, I'll go to jail. I'm not running away."

Now that he has Parkinson's I just want everybody to understand *why* they love him. If you're not knocked over by the greatness of the man, I don't know. I'm proselytizing. But I think the book nails what a lot of people have had in their heads for a long time. When Jay-Z saw what I was doing, he said, "Yeah, yeah — he is the first ever rapper." Chuck D went nuts." ■