

ALI: HE PAID THE PRICE FOR HIS BRUTAL PROFESSION

R O N A L D K . F R I E D

JOE LOUIS DIED AT AGE 64. Joe Frazier lived to be 67. Jack Dempsey was lucky: he lived to be 87.

And now Muhamad Ali is dead at 74, though he'd been little more than a spectral presence for years.

As we remember Ali, it's important to understand that in the second half of his storied life, he paid the price for the brutal profession he chose. In a sense, we should have been mourning Ali for years.

"My business is hurting people," Sugar Ray Robinson explained. Robinson, arguably an even greater fighter than Ali, lived to be 67.

Ali was in the same business: he hurt people and was hurt in return.

Like many white kids of my generation, I loved him for all the usual reasons: He was so outrageous, so funny, so angry, so fearless, so physically beautiful. He stood up against the war in Vietnam and had the balls to espouse a version of black power certain to be offensive to many. And good lord could he fight!

He was my hero. But the hagiographers who depict him as something of a saint do Ali no service. He was no saint; he was a complex, difficult man, capable of great cruelty, and truly brilliant in his way.

His boasting and his poetry anticipated the braggadocio of Hip Hop. His repeated taunt, "I'm so pretty," was the opposite of what a heavyweight champion was supposed to say. Along with the Beatles, Ali feminized notions of a masculine ideal. The toughest fighter in the world could also be vain, witty and graceful, a brilliant dancer in the ring—as gifted at evading blows as delivering them.

When I interviewed Eddie Futch, the trainer of Joe Frazier and Ken Norton, the only two men to defeat Ali in his prime, I asked Futch to name Ali's greatest strength. Futch took a moment and then pointed to his head. "Presence of mind," he said.

Yes, that's exactly right. Ali could always seize the moment—in the ring and out. He improvised the "rope-a-dope" strategy against George Foreman, somehow evading Foreman's monstrous punches until Foreman was exhausted and discouraged—and ready to be knocked out.

Ali could render dull, routine moments memorable. In the ring before the "Thrilla in Manila," Ali's brutal third fight with Joe Frazier, Ali seized a trophy that was to be presented to the winner. Though he was about to face his greatest nemesis, Ali still had the presence of mind for a visual gag. He displayed the same gift during countless post-fight interviews with Howard Cosell, pretending to remove Cosell's toupee as Cosell, in his self-serious way, struggled to frame a question. Ali seemed to have never encountered a moment that was bigger than he was.

Ali also had a cruel genius for taunting his opponents. It's impossible today not to think of Donald Trump's name-calling—"Lying Ted," "Little Marco," "Crooked Hillary"—when reviewing Ali's nicknames for his opponents. He called Sonny Liston "the Ugly Bear" and labeled Floyd Patterson "the Rabbit." He depicted Joe Frazier, a good, proud man, as an Uncle Tom, and before their third fight called Frazier "the Gorilla," a phrase whose ugliness is a stain on Ali's legacy.

Of course, it's not the only stain. Ali was not, to say the least, a faithful husband to his first three wives. When Malcolm X split with the Elijah Muhammad, the founder the Nation of Islam, Ali turned his back on Malcolm, a decision he reportedly regretted all his life.

I once fell into a conversation about Ali with Melvin Van Peebles, the film maker best known for *Sweet Sweetback's Badass Song*. Van Peebles, a pioneer of African-American cinema, said that white America wasn't ready to embrace Ali until he was "teddy-bear up." It's a memorable phrase, and Van Peebles was correct. The same people who called Ali a draft-dodger cheered him after the seemingly unhittable Ali slowed down and proved that he could, as the sports writers say, take a punch. As time wore on, America came to love Ali after Ali was less than fully himself.

Knowing that Ali's health was failing, I'd lately taken to watching his old fights on YouTube. My conclusion: Ali was even better than I realized.

Watching Ali's first fight with Sonny Liston, I actually felt sorry for Liston: Ali was so fast that Liston couldn't hit him in the ass with a shovel, as old-time boxing types like to say.

Ali was at his greatest before the three-year layoff that resulted from his refusal to be drafted. Those pre-layoff fights against the likes of Cleveland Williams and Zora Foley show how deeply unconventional Ali was as a boxer. His dancing seemed like a waste of energy; many of his jabs seemed like little more than slaps; and he pulled back from punches rather than "slipping" them in the prescribed way. Most boxing writers at the time didn't get it. But it wasn't their fault really. How many critics understood Picasso's genius the first time they saw his work?

In later years, Ali was as likely to take a punch as give one. He famously said that his third fight with Frazier was the closest thing to death that he'd ever known. Watching the fight today, it seems cruel and absurd that these two fine men—men whose class interests were entirely aligned—would punish each other for money and, I suppose, honor.

Ali's finest chronicler, in my mind, was Norman Mailer. Mailer was at ringside in Atlantic City in 1998 when Mike Tyson fought Michael Spinks for the undisputed heavyweight title. Ali, by then greatly diminished from Parkinson's Disease, entered the ring to wave to the crowd before the fight. "Ali now moved with the deliberate, awesome calm of a blind man, sobering all who stared upon him," Mailer wrote. "He looked like the Shade of the boxing world. 'I, who gave you great pleasure for years, now ask you to witness the cost of your pleasure,' he could as well said."

Let that be the last word on this great man.