

WHEN WE WERE KINGS:
REVIEW AND COMMENTARY

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When We Were Kings (Blu-Ray Special Edition)

Directed and Produced by Leon Gast

Featuring Muhammad Ali, George Foreman

With Norman Mailer, George Plimpton

The Criterion Collection, 2019, \$35.00

“In the ring, genius is transcendent moxie—the audacity to know that what usually does not work, or is too dangerous to attempt, can, in a special case, prove the winning move. Maybe that is why attempts are made from time to time to compare boxing with chess—the best move can lie very close to the worst move. At Ali’s level, you had to be ready to die, then, for your best ideas.”

—Norman Mailer, “The Best Move Lies Close to the Worst”

IN THE FALL OF 1974, EIGHT DAYS BEFORE GEORGE FOREMAN was expected to annihilate Muhammad Ali in “The Rumble in the Jungle” in Zaire, Foreman suffered a cut over the eye while sparring. His trainer, Dick Sadler, closed the cut, which would require eleven stitches, with a butterfly bandage (Dundee 177).

The so-called Butterfly Effect might have just as well taken its name from boxing, rather than chaos theory, and, in popular culture, Ray Bradbury’s 1952 science fiction story, “A Sound of Thunder.” The basic concept is that small causes may have momentous effects. In Bradbury’s tale, a time traveler

goes back to the age of dinosaurs, accidentally steps on a butterfly, and returns to find his world irreparably changed--and not for the better (Bradbury 236). In the boxing example, one of the results was the documentary *When We Were Kings*, which would not have been produced but for Foreman's cut and the rescheduling of the heavyweight Championship of the World for five weeks later.

Criterion has released a Blu-Ray DVD of *When We Were Kings*. Norman Mailer and George Plimpton, along with Spike Lee, Ali Biographer Thomas Hauser, and actor Malik Bowens provide sometimes-valuable commentary in studio interviews recorded twenty years after the fight. The big bonus in the Blu-Ray version is the inclusion of *Soul Power*, a documentary of the Zaire 74 music festival associated with the fight. *When We Were Kings* is the perfect companion to Mailer's short-but-compelling classic, *The Fight*. The movie received an Academy Award in 1997 for Best Documentary, along with numerous other accolades. Coincidentally, six years after presenting the Oscar to director Leon Gast, actor Will Smith was cast to play Muhammad Ali in the biopic.

Mailer's presence in the documentary is indispensable. Even though some of his contentions are based on hearsay, his tone is authoritative, and, as always when on camera, he's simply entertaining. His account of the fight itself, like his written account, is precise and accurate. Plimpton, who was also in Zaire, has drawn criticism for some of his conjectures, and will from this reviewer a little further on. Spike Lee, who was a teenager at the time of the fight, deadpans a few Ali truisms, which add little to the film, and Malik Bowens' presence feels entirely gratuitous. Bowens, who is fluent in English, and whose connection to the fight is unknown, for some reason delivers his remarks in French, which comes across as a directorial decision to introduce an unnecessary, exotic layer to the film.

Soul Power was the original project *When We Were Kings* director Leon Gast hoped to complete when he went to Africa. Segments of the music performances by James Brown, B.B. King, The Spinners, and Miriam Makeba did make it into *When We Were Kings* and also serve as the soundtrack for interesting B-roll footage. Many of the performances appear to be from rehearsals, with the performers enjoying themselves among one another rather than playing to an audience. No trace of an audience, in fact, is ever shown. Neither are any of the many African performers, with the unfortunate exception of Miriam Makeba.

Rolling Stone reported that only 8,000 attended the first two nights of the festival, which may explain the dearth of crowd shots accompanying the performances. The 80,000 seat stadium filled on the final night only because President Mobutu “convinced” concert promoters to give away the remaining tickets (Gehr). Included on the Blu-ray version are brief interviews with Gast and co-producer David Sonenberg. For those devotees of Norman Mailer not interested in accumulating another piece of plastic in their home, both films are available via streaming on Amazon Prime, minus the extra content.

The fact that *When We Were Kings* was ever completed and released in 1996—more than twenty years after the fight—is a tribute to the perseverance of director Leon Gast. An entire book could be written about the legal and logistical rigamarole required to recover the exposed film, edit it, arrange for music rights, add additional interviews, and finance what eventually became the movie.

According to the Yale Film Archive, Gast was originally hired by promoter Don King to make a concert film of the Zaire 74 music festival, which was scheduled to be held along with the boxing match. His crew shot the festival, but then came Foreman’s cut and the crew was not allowed to leave the country. Perhaps sensing a great opportunity, Gast had them document the weeks leading up to the fight and we are all the richer for it today (Yale).

The perceptive, business-minded, and ever-mischievous Muhammad Ali may have precipitated all of this. Soon after learning of Foreman’s sparring injury, he called a press conference and said, “I appeal to the President to not let anybody connected with the fight out of the country. Be careful. George might sneak out at night. Watch the airports. Watch the train stations. Watch the elephant trails. Send boats to patrol the rivers. Check all the luggage big enough for a big man to crawl into. Do whatever you have to do, Mr. President, but don’t let George leave the country. He’ll never come back if you let him out . . . Because he knows I can’t lose!” To this he added, “These are my people, and I ain’t leaving!” (Dundee 177).

Foreman, in fact, would have liked nothing better than to return home. “I was miserable in Zaire,” he recalled. “My first quarters were at an old army base infested with rats, lizards, and insects. Surrounded by cyclone fencing and barbed wire, it was patrolled and inhabited by rowdy soldiers” (Goldstein 108). Foreman had hoped to go to Paris for medical attention and then have the fight rescheduled to take place in the United States. However, soon

after Ali's remarks, President Sele Seke Mobutu, who had ostensibly put up ten million dollars to have Zaire host the fight, took Ali's advice and unofficially sealed the borders.

Foreman, although not well-educated, is a very intelligent man and he understood the situation in which he was placed. "This was clearly Muhammad Ali country . . . If I knocked him out, the most I'd get would be grudging respect for vanquishing a legend. And if I lost, there'd be a big crowd at the station, jeering me back to Palookaville" (Goldstein 108).

Indeed, as far the fans in Zaire were concerned, the fix was in against Foreman from the outset—partially due to Muhammad Ali and partially due to Foreman's and his managers' lack of worldliness. Ali had arrived in Zaire first, where there was little infrastructure and few people had access to television or print media. It seems incredible today, but up until fight time, because of rumors Ali started, quite a number of Zairians believed that George Foreman was *white*. For his own part, Foreman deplaned in Zaire with his pet German shepherd, Diego. The dog was introduced at a press conference and filmed with his front paws on the table next to Foreman. George and his unsophisticated handlers had no idea that just a generation earlier, when Zaire was the Belgian Congo, German shepherds had been used by Belgian police to intimidate and attack Zairians (Gast).

After sustaining the injury, for the next five weeks Foreman retreated to his compound and had minimal contact with the press. He lost an additional ten days of training due to being advised that strenuous activity and sweating might delay the healing of his cut. Still, he was confident of his ability to dominate and knock out Muhammad Ali. He had good reason to believe this, having TKO'd both Ken Norton and Joe Frazier in short order within the past eighteen months. Norton had broken Ali's jaw in the course of earning a split decision victory and Frazier had sent Ali to the canvas with one of the most perfectly delivered left hooks in boxing history. Foreman, like the rest of the boxing world, had observed that Ali was not the fighter he once was.

"This was gonna be the easiest fight of my life," a mature Foreman quipped in a tone of good-natured irony in the 2009 documentary *Facing Ali*. "I was just gonna walk in and knock him out in one, two, or three rounds. It was the most confident I'd ever been in a boxing match" (McKormack).

While Ali no longer danced as gracefully at age 32, his well of boxing re-

sources was far from dry. For one thing, he could take a punch. Following his fight with Joe Frazier in Madison Square Garden on March 8, 1971, referee Arthur Mercante commented on the fourteenth-round knockdown: "Frazier hit him as hard as a man can be hit . . . Ali was exhausted. He went down, and anyone else would have stayed on the canvas, but he was up in three seconds . . . I motioned Frazier to a neutral corner and when I turned around to face Ali, he was on his feet" (Hauser 229). Besides his physical resilience, Ali could think under pressure and was a master of improvisation, both in and out of the ring.

In re-watching Foreman dismantle Norton and Frazier, I see exactly why Foreman felt the way he did. I've watched hundreds, perhaps over a thousand fights over the years and have never seen anyone punch harder than Foreman. In winning the championship against Joe Frazier in Kingston, Jamaica, on January 22, 1973 (after Frazier had defeated Ali) one of George's uppercuts in the second round lifted Smokin' Joe entirely off the canvas. Incredibly, Frazier got up, only to be knocked down again, for the sixth and final time, before the fight was stopped (Cosell). Coincidentally, the match was refereed by Arthur Mercante, who afterward may have revised his opinion about the hardest a man can be hit.

During the run-up to the fight in Zaire, while Foreman healed, brooded, and trained without gusto, Ali threw his one-man public relations machine into high gear. During a reception given in his honor at the presidential palace, Ali said, "Mr. President, I've been a citizen of the United States for 33 years and was never invited to the White House. It sure gives me pleasure to be invited to the Black House" (Goldstein 110). Meanwhile, he privately confessed to Howard Bingham, his personal photographer, "I'd give anything to be training in the United States. They got ice cream there, and pretty girls and miniskirts" (Hauser 270).

When We Were Kings refers to the subject of women distracting boxers from their training regimens by way of George Plimpton's comments. Ali, he reports, visited president Mobutu's fortune teller, who predicted that a mystical woman with shaky hands would somehow get to Foreman. Plimpton refers to the woman as a succubus—a female demon believed to have sexual intercourse with sleeping men. "*And that impressed me enormously,*" Plimpton says with gravitas (Gast).

This arguably led to the decision by Leon Gast and his editors to open the movie with a brief clip from the music festival, showing an extreme

close-up of South African performer Miriam Makeba spotlighted onstage against a dark background. She's posed as if about to unleash a spell and emits a sound from her throat not unlike a death rattle. Later in the film, when Foreman gets KO'd, more of Makeba's performance is cut in, symbolizing the supposedly invincible boxer's vital powers having been drained by a succubus.

Ironically, one of the open secrets of Ali's legacy was *his* penchant for women. Larry Holmes, who accompanied Ali to Africa as a sparring partner, had boxed hundreds of rounds with him at his Deer Lake, Pennsylvania training camp. He talked openly about his experiences in the book, *Facing Ali*, and in a documentary of the same title. In those interviews, the plain-spoken Holmes let it all hang out. "The women that came to that camp! He had his pick, you know what I'm saying? I know how he lived. I knew what he did. I seen the people come into camp and leaving camp. I know he walked around with a stiff dick every day. He would fuck a snake if you hold its head. You don't even have to hold the motherfucker's head. Just give him the snake" (Brunt 286).

Holmes even attempted to caution Ali, telling him, "You better be careful. You want to be prepared . . . and that's when he told me, 'Shut the hell up. I know boxing. You don't tell me what to do.' So I shut up and went about my business. Like he said, he knew what he was doing. He won the fight" (Brunt 287).

Following his apprenticeship with Ali, Holmes would go on to become one of the longest-reigning heavyweight champions and in 1980 defeated his mentor in a sad, one-sided affair that, toward the end, had Holmes waving the referee in to protect a proud-but-defenseless Ali.

Two other individuals featured in the film—promoter Don King and President Sese Seke Mobutu—are essential to understanding the context of the fight. Like Ali and Foreman and Mailer and Plimpton, they each possessed a huge ego and led complex and controversial lives.

Mailer comments in the film, "This fight came into existence because of Don King's desire to be famous . . . if it failed, he was destined to go back into obscurity" (Gast). Consider the fact that just three and a half years earlier, King had listened to reports of the Ali-Frazier fight in his prison cell in Marion, Ohio, where he was serving time for a manslaughter conviction (Hauser 261). He had been convicted in 1967 for stomping Sam Garrett, an ex-employee in his numbers racket, to death on the street in Cleveland. It was the

second time he had killed a man. In 1954, he shot Hillary Brown in the back and the killing was ruled justifiable homicide. Paroled in 1971, King was eventually granted a full pardon by Ohio Governor James Rhodes in 1983. Rhodes justified the pardon by saying he relied heavily on letters of support submitted by Reverend Jesse Jackson, Coretta Scott King, Steve Davis, executive director of the National Publishers Association, Cleveland Mayor George Voinovich, Cleveland Browns owner Art Modell, and Cleveland Indians president Gabe Paul, among others (Cengage).

Thomas Hauser, Ali's biographer, said, "Don King is one of the brightest, most charismatic, hardest working people in the world . . . he's also totally amoral and I can't think of a man who has done more to demoralize fighters, take from fighters, and exploit fighters and ruin their careers. But you have to give him his due for what he did to make Muhammad Ali and George Foreman in Zaire" (Gast). Since 1975, King has been sued by Muhammad Ali, Larry Holmes, Tim Witherspoon, Mike Tyson, Terry Norris, Lennox Lewis, and ESPN, to name but a few ("Don King," Wikipedia).

According to the popular legend of how the fight was put together, King more or less willed it into existence through a combination of guile and gumption. As the story goes, King first went to George Foreman, told him he could get him five million dollars for fighting Ali, and got him to sign a contract. Then he went to Ali and did the same. However, at that point, Don King had not a penny to actually promote the fight (Gast).

Madison Square Garden matchmaker Teddy Brenner, who knew a thing or two about such matters, said, "Actually, King didn't promote the fight, although he did his best to make it seem that way. Video Techniques put it together, with up front money from a British corporation and the rest from the government of Zaire. King was helpful in lining up the fighters, but the deal could have been made without him. For ten million dollars, which is what Foreman and Ali split, anyone could have done the job" (Hauser 263). The five million dollars each fighter was paid in 1974 is worth a total of roughly \$52,200,000 now in 2020 (CPI).

Brenner's explanation makes sense. The big money was going to come in through worldwide television coverage and the fight ended up being broadcast live to an estimated one billion viewers, a record at that time. We'll never know for sure, but chances are President Mobutu may have put up far less than the ten million he has been credited with. Like Don King, though, he did his best to make it seem that way.

Not that Mobutu was entirely without resources—both imagined and real. According to Neil Leifer, who photographed the fight for *Sports Illustrated*, Mobutu owned one of only two privately-owned Boeing 747s at that time. In a phone interview, Leifer related the story of a photo shoot he did at the presidential palace prior to the fight. Ali and Foreman were to be personally escorted down a long, exquisitely beautiful flower-lined path by the president, strolling slowly toward the amassed press corps. Leifer, a consummate pro, arrived early and secured a good vantage point.

“An official press aide came out,” he related, “and gave us very specific instructions that we were not to cross the flower paths. No barricades had been set up.” As Mobutu and Ali approached, the photographers couldn’t contain themselves and the jostling began.

“Those Europeans were aggressive,” Leifer laughed. “I think it was a couple of French guys who started it . . . long story short, by the time the session was over, there wasn’t a single flower left . . . What could they do? They weren’t going to shoot the foreign press corps. I pitied the poor press aide, though. I hope they didn’t shoot him!” (Leifer).

Born Joseph Desire Mobutu, upon seizing power with CIA help in 1965, Mobutu became Mobutu Sese Seko Kuku Ngbendu waza Banga, which translates to, “the all-conquering warrior, who because of his endurance and inflexible will to win, will go from conquest to conquest leaving fire in his wake” (French). Like Don King, Mobutu was familiar with homicide. Six months after taking office, he had four former cabinet ministers hanged before 50,000 spectators (French). In the film and in his book, *The Fight*, Mailer relates the unconfirmed tale of Mobutu’s detention cells beneath the Kinshasa stadium and the summary execution of 100 unfortunates in order to deter crime during the festival.

With borders on nine countries, Mobutu promoted Zaire to Washington, D.C. and Paris. He received economic and political support in exchange for allowing Zaire to be used as a staging area for Cold War era interventions and covert activities throughout Central Africa, most notably against the Marxist regime in Angola. Moreover, Zaire had extensive mineral deposits, especially copper, which provided revenue for his grandiose economic schemes. Despite these projects, such as the world’s largest hydroelectric dam near Kinshasa, the country had few viable roads or other infrastructure. In a special report to the *New York Times International Edition* subtitled, “Master of Ruin,” Howard French wrote in 1997, when Mobutu was still president, “Life

in a vast country deprived of roads, health care, electricity, telephones, and often education has reverted to a brutishness not known since the 1940s” (French).

Using other autocrats as role models, Mobutu’s personality cult had few rivals during his era. For weeks at a time, the press in Zaire was forbidden to mention any Zairian other than the president. “Mobutism” was cultivated, being described as, “The sum total of his actions . . . just as the sum total of Mao’s actions constitute Maoism.” A Zairian citizen related years later that the first 15 minutes of the day in elementary school required students to dance and shout the name of the president (French).

Unlike the open secret of Muhammad Ali’s dalliances, Mobutu’s sexual conquests were celebrated. Described as “looking like a sadist,” by Mailer, Mobutu fathered twenty-one children by official count. However, it should come as no surprise that he adopted *driot de cuissage*, the right to deflower, as local chiefs offered him virgins on his trips across Zaire. The practice was considered—or required to be considered—an honor by the virgin’s family (Van Raybrouck 384).

Mobutu’s usefulness to Washington and Paris faded as the Cold War wound down. In 1994, he briefly returned to importance as over a million Rwandan Hutus, many of whom had perpetrated mass genocide, fled into Zaire. Surviving Tutsis, of whom up to a million had been slaughtered, had, in a bizarre twist, assumed power. Mobutu reinstituted relations with France, who had been a major backer of the genocidal Hutus (French). Like boxing, the backstories of international politics are almost always ugly.

Nothing would be easier than to apply 20/20 hindsight in the year 2020 to attack Muhammad Ali’s culpability in accepting five million dollars to fight in a country ruled by a brutal dictator whose crimes were well-known, especially given Ali’s even-then growing reputation as a crusader for human rights and humanitarian causes. At the time, however, Ali expressed nothing but appreciation, even awe, at Zaire’s very existence. “It don’t seem possible,” he said, “but 28 million people run this country and not one white man is involved” (Goldstein 111). As for the money coming from Mobutu and the dictator’s goal to promote himself and Zaire, Ali was only too happy to take it. “Countries go to war to get their names put on the map. And wars cost a lot more than ten million dollars” (Gast). As Ali told British challenger Joe Bugner in private before they fought the following year, “Whatever happens, boxing is like business” (Brunt 153).

The same 2020 self-righteous political correctness epidemic in our culture today could be applied to Ali's embrace of the chant "*Ali, boma ye*"—Ali, *kill him*, by Zairian fans. In the context of the times, from his pre-fight antics to waving his glove to lead the crowd in the chant between rounds, it was all theater for Ali. Conversely, in what may be the film's most poignant moment, one day, while receiving a post-workout rubdown, Foreman reflected, quietly, "When I walk down the street, the kids follow me, some screaming, George Foreman, *boma ye*. I don't like that. If they say anything about me, they should say George Foreman likes being here, George Foreman loves Africa, not George Foreman, *kill him*. I don't like that" (Gast).

With scenes like this, *When We Were Kings* does an admirable job of chronicling the weeks up to the fight, adding montage sequences set to musical performances from the Zaire 74 festival. The film has been criticized by some as depicting life in Zaire with more of a positive spin than it deserves, and while I can see the point, it doesn't spoil the movie for me.

What does spoil the film for me in places is the heavy-handed return to the succubus reference, both visually and with the leitmotif. I remember being angered by it when the film was originally released. Now, after repeated viewings, the effect has diminished, but I find myself deliberately ignoring it and still wishing they'd stuck to boxing. It is, after all, primarily a boxing film. According to the Yale Film Archive, Gast recovered 250 hours of exposed 16mm film and audio tape from Liberian investors, from which he edited the Zaire parts of the movie. I wish he'd included more of that material instead of relying on Plimpton's comment to establish what turned out to be, for me at least, an unsuccessful sub plot.

In Gast's defense, though, who knows what personal and financial dynamics came into play when producer Taylor Hackford joined the project in 1995 and arranged for the studio interviews? Plimpton floated that comment and the editing team must have thought it too good to end up on the cutting room floor. The effect is one of the tail wagging the dog. And I wonder what Miriam Makeba thought of it.

The early betting line on the fight was seven-to-one, Foreman. By fight time, the odds had dropped to four-to-one, little consolation considering many in the sports world believed Ali would, at best, be knocked out, and, at worst, killed. Plimpton said, "The sense was, we were watching a man about to go to the gallows." Howard Cosell, the toupee'd, verbose ABC commentator who had supported Ali throughout his career, delivers a morbid,

premature eulogy that is included in the film, representing the mood of the moment (Gast).

In Ali's pre-fight dressing room, according to Mailer, there was tense silence, until Ali led his entourage in a half-hearted call-and-response promising to dance. What Norman may not have heard was when, according to Bernie Yuman, who was also there, Ali first said to his shaky followers, "What's the matter? This ain't nothing but another day in the dramatic life of Muhammad Ali" (Hauser 273). To this day, I'm not convinced by Mailer's contention that Ali was terrified of Foreman. Norman may have been projecting his own awe for Foreman on to Ali, as conveyed in his description of George hitting the heavy bag. But as Ali told the press earlier, "Us Black folks ain't afraid of one another the way White folks is afraid of us" (Hauser 270).

The fight starts and Mailer does a brilliant job of describing the action, summarizing his even-better blow-by-blow account fleshed out in *The Fight*. Norman is at his best here, nearly equaling his famous description of the 1962 ring death of Benny Paret at the hands of Emile Griffith and his piece for *Life* magazine on the first Ali-Frazier fight.

In round two, Ali begins the rope-a-dope, so it's time to shine some light on the myth of Ali's trainer, Angelo Dundee, loosening the ropes prior to the fight. Mailer has, to some degree, helped to perpetuate this myth. According to Dundee's autobiography, *My View From The Corner* (a great read for all boxing fans), upon inspecting the ring the afternoon before the fight, Angelo and assistant Bobby Goodman discovered it had been set up by people who had never seen a boxing ring (Dundee 181). Having set up a ring myself several times before matches I promoted, I can attest to the fact that it requires experience to do so properly.

The ring in the 20th of May Stadium had a pronounced list, one corner support having sunk into the turf. The ropes were sagging due to improper installation along with the tropical heat and humidity. Angelo and Goodman worked for several hours to jack up the sunken corner and install blocks under it. As for the ropes, they had to scrounge up a razor blade and use it to cut over a foot of slack from each rope before reinstalling and tightening them. According to Dundee, if they hadn't attended to the ring, by fight time the ropes would have been sagging onto the canvas. (Dundee 182). His account is verified by Goodman in a separate interview (Hauser 272).

Dundee also found the canvas and padding on the ring floor to be improperly installed, but there was no time to rectify it. The foam padding un-

derneath the canvas had turned mushy from the humidity, making it a very slow surface on which to box, much less dance. This he reported to Ali. Still, as far as Angelo or anyone else knew, the plan was for Ali to dance.

"I saw him dancing for five or six rounds," Dundee recalled, "Then I imagined him picking up the pace when George got tired and knocking him out in the late rounds, but everything was planned around not getting hit . . . when he went to the ropes I felt sick . . . that shows what I know" (Goldstein 109).

Joyce Carol Oates points out in her small classic, *On Boxing*, that "boxers, like chess players, must think on their feet—must be able to improvise in mid-fight, so-to-speak" (Oates 77). Ali personified this and explains what happened in his own words:

I didn't really plan what happened that night. But when a fighter gets in the ring, he has to adjust according to the conditions he faces. Against George, the ring was slow. Dancing all night, my legs would have gotten tired. And George was following me too close, cutting off the ring. In the first round, I used more energy staying away from him than he used chasing me. I was tireder than I should have been with fourteen rounds to go. I knew I couldn't keep dancing, because by the middle of the fight I'd be really tired and George would get me. So between rounds I decided to do what I did in training when I got tired . . . It was something Archie Moore used to do. He'd let younger men take their shots and blocked everything in scientific fashion . . . when they got tired, Archie would attack . . . So starting in the second round, I gave George what he thought he wanted. (Hauser 277).

Ironically, Archie Moore had helped to train Foreman and was in his corner that night. In the film, Mailer goes on to do an admirable job of describing the ebb and flow of the contest.

Fast forward to Round 8. Foreman has punched himself out and here comes the succubus again. Her leitmotif builds up slowly behind the action and Makeba's ominous, hissing mouth is superimposed over the boxing. Ali connects, Foreman topples over. Plimpton recalls, "I turned to Norman and said, 'The succubus has got him!'"

Bullshit, George. Joyce Carol Oates, a far more practical observer of the sweet science, quotes a smart fighter in her book, who explains: "Boxing is a game of control, and, as in chess, this control can radiate in circles *from* the center, or in circles *toward* the center . . . the entire action of a fight goes in a circle; it can be little circles in the middle of the ring or big circles along the ropes, but always in a circle. The man who wins is the man who controls the action of the circle" (Oates 78).

Ali had done exactly that, from the outset. His lateral movement, circling first to the right and reversing to the left, had opened Foreman up to the right hand leads he threw so effectively in the first round. It had likewise opened Foreman up to the one-two combination that floored him in round eight, when Ali spun in a tight arc off the ropes. Boxing, not hoodoo, had won the fight.

Foreman, initially, made all kinds of excuses for losing. Years later, in retrospect, he was incredibly insightful and gracious. "Muhammad amazed me", he recalled. "He out-thought me; he out-fought me. That night, he was just the better fighter . . . I went out and hit Muhammad Ali with the hardest body shot I ever delivered . . . anybody else in the world would have crumbled . . . I could see it hurt . . . he had that look in his eyes, like he was saying I'm not gonna let you hurt me. And to be honest, that's the main thing I remember about the fight. Everything else happened too fast. I got burned out . . . I was the aggressor . . . but I knew in some way I was losing" (Hauser 277).

Following the fight, on a whim, writer Pete Bonventre commandeered a car and driver and rode through the monsoon to Ali's compound, the twenty-mile trip taking two hours. The compound was deserted, with the press all having filed their stories and the entourage gone to party. "Three hours after the greatest victory of his life, Muhammad Ali was sitting on the stoop, showing a magic trick to a group of black children. . . . And it was hard to tell who was having a better time, Ali or the children." Ten years after upsetting Sonny Liston and seven years after he'd been stripped of the title, Muhammad Ali was once again the heavyweight champion (Hauser 279).

While the Rumble in the Jungle may have been Ali's greatest boxing victory, I think of it as the high point of the second act of his four-part dramatic career. In Act One, he defeats Sonny Liston and is stripped of his title for refusing induction into the military. In Act Two, after a three-year legal battle, his boxing license is reinstated, he loses to Frazier, and regains the title in

Zaire. Act Three begins with winning the epic Thrilla in Manilla rubber match with Frazier, losing the title to Leon Spinks, who had only eight professional fights, defeating Spinks in the rematch to win the title for the third time, and ending his ring career with several tragically bad performances. In Act Four, Ali goes into serious physical decline and begins to slip into obscurity. Then he reemerges—more popular than ever—when he unsteadily lights the 1996 Olympic torch in Atlanta. To me, his greatest victory took place not in the ring, but in foregoing his physical peak as an athlete and defeating the United States government in the courtroom.

Muhammad Ali died in 2016. George Foreman remains alive, and, by all indications, is well at this writing. His career after Zaire is equally remarkable to Ali's. Two years after losing to Ali, following a savage fight with slugger Ron Lyle, Foreman lost a decision to slick boxer Jimmy Young in San Juan, Puerto Rico. Afterward, George collapsed from heat stroke in his dressing room and had a near-death experience. He claimed God pulled him from the brink of an abyss and gave him a mission in life. He returned to Houston, stopped boxing, gained a hundred pounds, and began preaching on street corners. He established a church and built a congregation.

Foreman stayed away from boxing for ten years. He watched no television and didn't follow the sport, concentrating on his preaching. Then, at age 38, weighing over 300 pounds, he began a comeback. His goal was to raise money to build a youth center for his church and—to everyone's amusement—regain the heavyweight championship of the world (Dundee 281).

The New George looked nothing like the original. He'd always been big, but now he was huge. And he'd learned to relax in the ring, no longer tensely stalking opponents and wasting energy as he had in those few short rounds in Zaire. The New George waited patiently, sometimes absorbing terrible blows, for his chance to land a short, sneaky right, and when he did, the effect was devastating. Somehow, he'd retained—even refined—his jab into something akin to a pile driver. His style was anything but pretty, but he had enough weapons to remain dangerous (Dundee 281).

Another thing happened. He became a nice guy. A very funny guy. His self-deprecating humor charmed the press and the public alike, especially anyone old enough to remember his earlier incarnation. We'd always wanted to like George, but he wouldn't let us. Now, when asked by a reporter with tongue-in-cheek, "When do you think you'll fight for the title?" George replied, laughing, "Today, the biggest decisions I'll make aren't related to the

heavyweight title, they're whether I visit McDonald's, Burger King, Wendy's, or Jack in the Box" (Dundee 282).

He took fights in places like Anchorage and other locations not on the boxing map. "I had seen others, like Muhammad Ali and Joe Frazier, fail in their comeback attempts because they were looking for overnight success. I knew it would take a long period of time to do it right, so I started from the bottom and worked my way up and it took three years" (Dundee 282). He fought twenty-one fights against increasingly challenging opponents, including Gerry Cooney, Tommy Morrison, and Evander Holyfield.

On November 5, 1994, age 45 years, 299 days, the New George got his chance. Following the ninth round in a fight against champion Michael Moorer, George had lost every previous round on all scorecards. His corner man told him, "You gotta put this guy down. You're behind, baby." Foreman's corner man was none other than Angelo Dundee, Ali's former handler ("Foreman," *You Tube*). George bristled at Angelo's comment, but boy did he ever go out and follow directions. Like Ali in Zaire, he controlled the action of the circle. Moving to his left, he saw the opening and landed that sneaky right directly on Moorer's chin. Traveling no more than twelve inches, the punch was reminiscent of the one Joe Louis floored Max Schmeling with in the first round of their rematch in 1938. Moorer was starched, as they say in boxing, landing on the seat of his pants, knocked out cold. Twenty years after losing the title to Ali, Foreman took it back from a man 19 years his junior. He had come full circle—along with his red boxing trunks, the same ones he wore in Zaire—with alterations for waist size. Muhammad Ali, whose disabilities had by this time become very evident, wrote to George. He said, "Congratulations, Champ, you had the courage and the guts to go out and do it" (Dundee 298).

Following a close loss in his final fight at age 48 to respected heavyweight Shannon Briggs, Foreman returned to his dressing room dejected. There he was met by his lawyer with a check for a million dollars from the Salton company, whose electric grill George had reluctantly agreed to endorse. It was just the beginning (Rovell).

By 1998, Salton had sold \$200 million worth of the George Foreman Lean, Mean, Fat-Reducing Grilling Machine, and the company made the business decision to offer Foreman a buyout instead of awarding him a percentage of sales. George was paid \$137.5 million in cash and stock for use of his name in perpetuity. Added to what he'd earned previously, along with \$11 million

more for television appearances, Foreman's profit from the grill approaches \$200 million—more, by far, than he earned or ever dreamt of in his boxing career. He continues to sidelight as a boxing commentator for HBO and pay-per-view broadcasts (Rovell).

Asked in recent years to reflect on the Rumble in the Jungle, the New George delivers his own version of the Butterfly Effect. "I'm just happy that I didn't win it . . . because everything would be different . . . it made me fall into the hands of God . . . it was that fragile . . . one little thing could have messed the whole thing up. The world would have been different for us" (Brunt 189) . . . "I'm just proud to be part of the Ali legend. If people mention my name with his from time to time, that's enough for me. That, and I hope Muhammad Ali likes me, because I like him. I like him a lot" (Hauser 278).

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