
In the introduction to his inspired *Muhammad Ali: The Making of an Icon*, Michael Ezra, Chair of American Studies at Sonoma State University, anticipates the very question that would occur to most coming across the text for the first time: why another Ali book? Fair enough, and certainly a means with which to cut straight to the chase, Ezra self-consciously, and, as the reader will quickly note, quite adroitly makes clear that this work, while ostensibly about Ali, is really about the many ways in which we, the people, read, have read, and may continue to read what he quite reasonably contends is *The Ali Story* [his italics]. And in moving away from biography as the sole jumping off point, what Ezra offers us is a quite fascinating look at the vagaries of public perception and the path with which this story has ebbed and flowed since Ali first broke into the public eye in the 1960 Rome Olympics as the brash young Cassius Clay.

All told, Ezra places the broader Ali narrative in a context that is one-part critical narrative and one-part myth-busting while constructing a thoroughly engaging accounting of the various corners of Ali’s life and times. He looks beyond the supposition and banality that has crept into the discussion of this man’s role in helping to shape the modern world and seeks to explore Ali in a way that hadn’t been done in a long time and certainly not in the post-1996 Olympics era where we can trace the evolution of a thoroughly modern yet often misinterpreted Ali. In this regard, Ezra is not afraid to step out on a ledge and offer criticism aimed not at merely the man but at those who seek to elevate him to places unwarranted or to assign him responsibility for things well beyond logic let alone his control.
One of the more inventive aspects of this work is that regardless of the subtitle, Ali comes off as less iconic and more a product of his age and an oft times passive object of the frequently harsh competition that swirled about him, much of which had little to do with his boxing career. More importantly, Ezra makes the case that, in spite of Ali’s obvious talents both within and outside the ring, the more substantive, if not lasting, examples of the very competitiveness that once drove this subject was actually prelude to the larger battles concerning race, politics, culture, and such that were not always in the boxer’s purview. Accordingly, Ezra has sought to reclaim much of the uncluttered importance of Ali and his relationship to the world at-large outside Ali’s circle of friends, associates, and confidants, not all of whom always had his best interest in their sights while all-the-while reminding us that from the beginning, Clay/Ali—the trade name—seemed to be in a constant state of construction and reconstruction, a yo-yo on a very short string being manipulated and tugged along on several fronts as his reputation continued (and continues) to undergo a seemingly endless array of reinterpretation to fit whatever age or discussion his legacy might serve.

Among the more intriguing discussions Ezra weaves into his thesis, it is perhaps his various examinations of the economic side of the Ali narrative that shed some more disturbing light on the modern rendering. Sure, the man who has become king was something of a financial boon to his management and handlers, but, as Ezra reminds, the implications of Ali’s decisions, i.e. his conversions to Islam, his outspoken candor in terms of race in America, and certainly his refusal to be inducted into the armed services, were notable as political moments, but what are typically often overlooked in these discussion are the ramifications of such acts on the champ’s own finances and how often his own remarks to this issue went virtually ignored. Retracing these elements, Ezra reminds that not only did the Nation of Islam toss Ali aside for articulating
publicly his financial straits, but he also goes on to both describe how the very thing that has allowed for Ali’s more substantive rehabilitation, his diminished physical capacity, can be tied more directly to Ali’s fruitless attempts to reclaim at least a portion of the purses he’d left behind during those lost years. What’s more is that while this appears to have a direct bearing—at least in part—on Ali’s current medical state, Ezra also makes clear how Ali’s material needs often clashed headlong with the more romantic notions we have of him that emanate from such high-minded moments, including his 1966 pronouncement “I’m not going to sell my manhood for a few dollars, or a smile. I’d rather be poor and free than rich and a slave.” (111)

The tension between this sort of idealism against the backdrop of Ali’s free fall into disrepute and rebound in such grand fashion marks the heart of Ezra’s thesis, one in which he demonstrates that through the bumps in the road, the changing nature of American life, and even a touch of good fortune, Ali the man has become Ali the brand, the legend, and most certainly the icon. In this repositioning (more proper positioning?) of the Ali legend, Ezra reminds that the once unpalatable has become not only palatable but also the marketable, and he does so with a narrative quality that is enriched through its nimble phrasing, yeoman research, and effective jags into those less prurient corners of Ali’s life that lend considerable authority and heft to what is by its very design a most taxing subject.

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