
Introduction

Why Another Book about Muhammad Ali?

For almost thirty years, Muhammad Ali has held the Guinness World Record as the most written-about person in history. Although John Lennon once claimed that the Beatles had become bigger than Jesus, Ali is the one who really deserves such distinction, at least in a literary sense. Why, then, would anybody have the temerity to think that he could add something to this already overflowing mix? What makes this book worth reading? Though library shelves may buckle under the weight of the Muhammad Ali literature, there is surprisingly little written about key aspects of his life, such as his pre-championship boxing matches, the management of his career, and his current legacy. I concentrate on these three important themes.

Understanding Ali's transformation from a controversial to a revered figure takes knowledge of his entire life in the public spotlight. To comprehend this phenomenon, one must look at Ali's career holistically, from his appearance as an Olympic champion in 1960 to his present incarnation as an iconic international hero. The problem for readers is that so much is already written about Ali, and so much information is at hand, that one must wade through everything to find events and trends that have enough representative clout to get at key meanings without drowning in detail. Although this book spans nearly fifty years, from 1960 to the present, it is hardly a comprehensive account of Ali's life. Instead, *Muhammad Ali: The Making of an Icon* is a distillation of crucial paradigm shifts in how Ali has been perceived by various segments of the public.

At the heart of this book is a study of the relationships between Muhammad Ali's cultural image and its commercial manifestations. The central concept that I use to get at these meanings is what I call moral authority, a term I use throughout this book. My thesis has two parts. First, the most significant way people have made meaning of Muhammad Ali over the years has been through their understanding of him as a moral force, both positive and negative. Second, the crucial way many Americans have arrived at their moral understanding of Ali—his cultural image—has come from their perception of who is making money by associating with him—the commercial manifestations. This book traces the relationships between public perceptions of Ali, the economic entanglements surrounding his career, and the cultural meanings that have emerged from such connections.

The idea that Ali's moral authority is intimately bound to the economic consequences of his public life and career is a new one. The dominant interpretations of Ali usually tie his moral authority to his political or racial symbolism. The generic Ali Story explains his transformation from an oppositional to a mainstream figure as a product, among other things, of his stand against the Vietnam War or his being a member of the Nation of Islam. As these versions go, Ali's moral authority and cultural image crumbled as he took an unpopular political stand in challenging the Vietnam War and turned toward black nationalism by joining the racially separatist Nation of Islam. But over time, the public began to reject the war, Ali renounced the Nation's core tenets, and he became a morally authoritative cultural hero. There is much more to the process, however; namely, the economic aspects of these seemingly racial, political, and moral changes. My argument is that Ali's relationships to the Vietnam War and the Nation of Islam, as barometers of his public moral authority, were important not primarily because of their political and racial content, but because they represented who had economic ownership of him. What brought Ali infamy during the 1960s was not necessarily that he was a politically oppositional force, but that he threatened to generate wealth for the wrong people. The public's sense of Ali's moral authority has always been a function of its perception of who has economic ownership of him.

I have divided this book into three parts, each of them a response to the ever-evolving question "Who owns Cassius Clay/Muhammad Ali?" Part I, "Louisville Sponsoring Group," details Clay's rise as pugilism's biggest box-office draw under the management of the millionaire boys' club known as the Louisville Sponsoring Group. Part II, "Nation of Islam," explores the difficulties he encountered as his cultural image and commercial viability plummeted when the black nationalist religious sect took control of his career. Part

III, “Good People,” is a study of the fighter’s rebirth as an admired cultural icon representing corporate interests.

Before I begin the narrative, I want to make four points that will help readers understand my perspective and goals. First, you may have noticed that I treat the words *Ali Story* as a proper noun. The reason for the capitalization is that I consider history to be primarily art rather than science. The *Ali Story*, although certainly based upon fact, is a construct: part fact, part myth, part interpretation. Like all history, my version of the *Ali Story* leaves out far more than it includes. This book is neither definitive nor comprehensive. Instead, *Muhammad Ali: The Making of an Icon* is a plausible interpretation of how people have made meaning of Muhammad Ali’s life and times. The book is truthful but is not the truth. Second, this study bucks the trend of most *Ali* literature that insists upon making moral judgments about him. I view *Ali* as neither great nor wicked, but rather a person with both strengths and weaknesses. This book is neither a sentimental celebration of *Ali* nor an iconoclastic attempt to knock him off his pedestal. What I have tried to do instead is explain how people have come to invest or divest moral authority in the rich and multifaceted cultural symbol known as Muhammad *Ali*. I will leave the fool’s errand of identifying his true and essential nature to others. Third, my protagonist changed his name from Cassius Clay to Muhammad *Ali* shortly after winning the championship from Sonny Liston in February 1964. When I discuss the pre-championship man I refer to him as Cassius Clay. When I discuss the post-championship man I call him Muhammad *Ali*. Fourth, this book explores the economics behind the boxing matches of Cassius Clay/*Muhammad Ali*. It is often difficult to figure out exactly how much money had been made and by whom. I relied on newspaper reports for the most part to do this work, but such reports are often conflicting and inconsistent. Whenever faced with contradictory information, I have done my best to honestly and accurately follow the money.