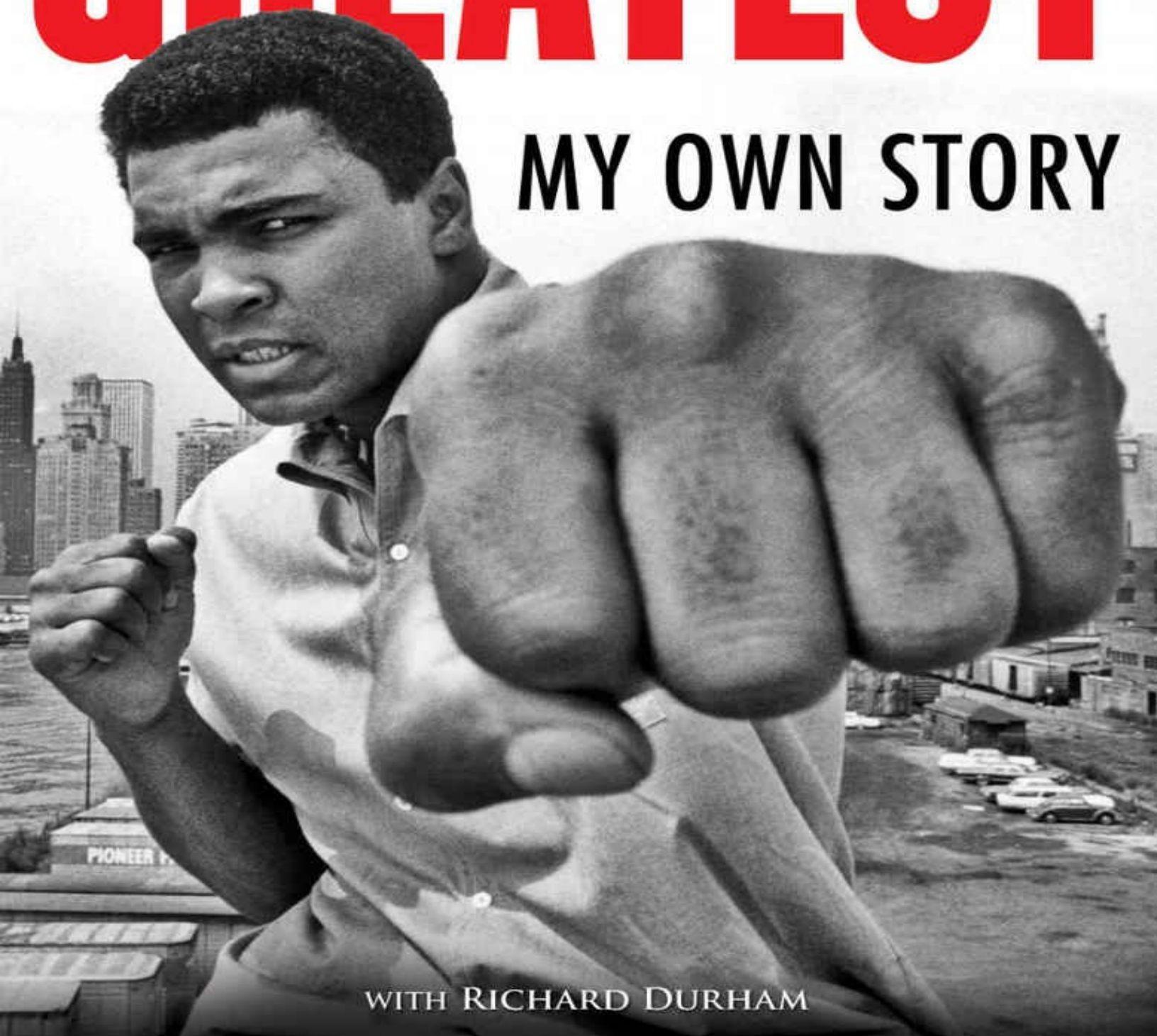


MUHAMMAD ALI

THE

GREATEST

MY OWN STORY



WITH RICHARD DURHAM

**THE
GREATEST
MY OWN STORY**

Muhammad Ali
With Richard Durham

Edited by Toni Morrison



GRAYMALKIN
MEDIA

LOS ANGELES • NEW YORK

**To Cassius Marcellus Clay, Sr.
and
Odessa Clay**

***Cash and Bird*
With love**

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

In order for a prizefighter to be successful and come out with what belongs to him, he has to be two separate people in two different places at the same time—in the gym and in the lawyer's office, in the ring and in the accountant's office. And since no one can be two people, a prizefighter must have a partner, a brother, a friend, a counsel, a twin in thinking and aspiration who will be the other self he needs.

Herbert Muhammad is all of these things. There's been no single decision I've ever made, unrevealed or in the pages that follow, where he hasn't played the prominent and decisive part.

It was Herbert who, during the time I was completely barred from boxing, suggested that I should start work on my autobiography. I had been outlawed in the United States for three years from the only profession I'd every really worked at, and my passport had been lifted so I couldn't practice in any other country. When I first came to Random House to talk about doing a book, there was a strong chance that the only boxing I'd ever be a part of would be the fights in the past, and that I might even have to finish my story in jail.

I had just begun to look back over my life and put it together, thinking the Supreme Court decision would be the climax of it all, when Herbert's constant probing broke the boycott against me. He found an opening in Georgia, and like a Second Coming, the final, most important part of my life as a fighter opened up.

I first met Herbert, who has become my closest friend and counselor, and who eventually exerted more influence in the ranks of boxing than any manager in

history, when I went to Chicago to have photos taken shortly after I won the World Heavyweight Title from Sonny Liston in 1964. The photographer had been recommended to me as one of the best in the city, and during our first picture-taking session in his South Side Studio, we talked frankly of fighters and what they are really, deep down, fighting for—their lives and the lives of their families and those they love and who love them. He was warm, friendly, but serious, and I was deeply impressed with his sharp business sense.

“I wanted to be a prizefighter myself,” Herbert Muhammad told me, “and although my father asked me to give it up, I’ve never gotten it out of my blood. I came up in the days when the names Joe Louis, Sugar Ray Robinson, Ezzard Charles, Rocky Marciano were the great names in boxing. I got over the desire to get inside the ring, but I never got over the desire to help these great fighters outside the ring. I guess this was so because I could see what happened at the end of the careers of those great fighters, and what they had left after all those years. It shocked me, and I said if I ever got a chance to help a fighter who was worthy of the name, help him realize something out of what he fought for, I would try to do it.”

While technically I already had my “eleven managers” in the Louisville Sponsoring Group, I knew none of them really had the time or background to understand my real ambition, to help me go as far as I wanted to go. And while I believed that I would continue to do better, I knew that if I was ever to maintain my position in the field of boxing, every thought, every move would have to be concentrated on training and developing my craft. I would have to discover, if I was lucky, someone who had the business gift and skills to work for me in those areas where sound judgment is needed—an agent capable of selecting lawyers, analyzing financial propositions, securing finances and maintaining the image of the fighter in a progressive way.

I approached the Honorable Elijah Muhammad who, although not in support of professional sports, understood the need for me, one of his followers, to be protected until I was able to retire from that profession, and asked if he would allow Herbert to act as my consultant in and out of the ring, to help make it possible for me to pursue my career and still be able to live the kind of life that can make contributions to freedom, justice and equality for the black man in America.

The Louisville Sponsoring Group, who were worried about the gap in communications between us, welcomed Herbert as a consultant, especially when

they discovered his keen business instincts and devotion to my development. In a short while, he had mastered the fundamentals of business in the fight game.

When my Louisville sponsors' contract expired in 1966, Herbert took over as manager. Working as a unit, we decided on a division of labor. "It's your job to be champion of what goes on in the ring," Herbert said. "You concentrate on training and developing the skills and your own specialty for promoting. I'll concentrate on bringing you the finances that are due you.

"Promoters have a way of taking from a fighter," he explained, "closing off tributaries that should flow into a fighter's purse. I'm learning them all—hidden rebates, endorsements, hidden commercials, all monies that are created by the fighter and some portions of what should flow into the fighter.

"Interest in the Heavyweight Championship will never be as high as it is now—because of the way you have built it up and promoted it. After you go, it's bound to die down, because never in history has any fighter been exposed to so much of the world as you've been, in so many ways. When you came into Islam, you made an enormous number of people—who had never thought of boxing before, or very little of any sport, for that matter—conscious of the World Heavyweight Champion. Never before had the world focused so much attention on one athlete. This is your time. You have to benefit from it."

It was Herbert's aggressive outlook and imagination that brought about for the first time in sports history fights supported by governments, as in Zaire, Malaysia and the Philippines; attracted bids from such countries as Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Santo Domingo and Haiti; and set up promotions for matches in Ireland, Switzerland, Japan, Indonesia and Canada.

Herbert had a poem which went with the new strategy:

*Invite Muhammad Ali to fight,
And your country will share the world spotlight.*

I've been fortunate to have a manager with skill, integrity and devotion, and a friend who, although he helped mastermind my career, has been retiring and modest. He has made it possible for me to help change the history of manager/boxer relationships and is forever encouraging me, not only to give the best performance to the people, but to be a part of the struggles of the people, to be concerned with the progress of the people and to stand for the principles of peace, justice and equality—to show that in a profession which is mainly known

for brutality and blood, a man can have nobility and dignity. It is not only I who owes Herbert Muhammad a debt of gratitude, it is the entire boxing and athletic world.

For these many benefits I thank Allah and the Honorable Elijah Muhammad, the servant of Allah—may the peace and blessings of Allah be upon him. And because of Herbert, a brilliant and dedicated man—whom I first met as a photographer, but who changed the picture of my future to make it brighter than it ever could have been—it is possible for me to share with you some of the highlights of my life.

Muhammad Ali

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CHRONOLOGY

- 1942 Birth date (January 17, Louisville)
- 1959 Golden Gloves Championship (Chicago)
- 1960 Golden Gloves Championship (Chicago); Olympic Championship (Rome); Reynolds offered two contracts (September); signed with Louisville Sponsoring Group (October)
- 1964 Announced membership in Nation of Islam six months after joining (February 28); marriage to Sonji (June 4)
- 1965 WBA rescinded boxing license (June 19)
- 1966 Divorce from Sonji (January 7); held press conference announcing Viet Nam sentiments (February 17, Miami); left Louisville Sponsoring Group and signed with Herbert Muhammad (October 26)
- 1967 Reported to Induction Center (April 28, Houston); boxing license rescinded by New York State Boxing Commission (April 28); received five-year jail sentence for refusal to join Army (June 25); marriage to Belinda (August 17)
- 1968 Birth of daughter, Maryum (June 18)
- 1970 Reversal of five-year jail sentence (June 20); birth of twins, Jamillah and Rasheda (August 21); received first state boxing license after exile (September 28)
- 1972 Birth of son, Muhammad, Jr. (May 14)