

Program Title: The Trials of Muhammad Ali
Program Subject(s): Sports; African Americans; U.S. History;
Year Produced: 2013
Directed by: Bill Siegel
Produced by: Kartemquin Educational Films
Distributed by: Kino Lorber, Incorporated
Reviewed by: Timothy Hackman, University of Maryland
Running Time: 94 minutes
Color or B&W: Color
Awards Received: N/A
Audience Level: College – General Adult
Review:

The opening sequence of *The Trials of Muhammad Ali* also works as a summary of the film's point of view and primary narrative. First, talk show host David Susskind, addressing Ali via satellite in 1968, declares, "He's a disgrace to his country, his race, and to what he laughingly calls his profession. He is a convicted felon in the United States... He's a simplistic fool and a pawn." Director Bill Siegel (*The Weather Underground*, 2002) immediately cuts to footage of President George W. Bush awarding Ali the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 2005. In his speech, the President says of the former boxer, "The American people are proud to call Muhammad Ali one of our own." That story arc – from despised member of a fringe religious movement to adored national icon – has been traced time and again. It is part of the continuing beatification of Muhammad Ali, which began at least in 1996 with the documentary *When We Were Kings* and with Ali's surprise appearance as torchbearer at the Atlanta Olympic Games, continued with David Remnick's worshipful biography, *King of the World: Muhammad Ali and the Rise of an American Hero* (1998) and crested with Michael Mann's biopic *Ali* (2001). Muhammad Ali is undoubtedly important to the sport of boxing, and to any cultural history of the 1960s and 1970s. But as his health declines and he recedes farther from public view, the man himself is being replaced with hagiography and legend, of which *The Trials of Muhammad Ali* is but the latest example.

Siegel's film is a well-made and entertaining, albeit biased, look at an important chapter in the life of the three-time heavyweight champion. It focuses on the years between 1960, when young Cassius Clay returned from the Rome Olympics with a gold medal and began his professional boxing career, and 1971, when the U.S. Supreme Court handed down its unanimous decision acquitting Ali of any wrongdoing in avoiding the draft and allowing him to return to boxing after three years. These years were marked by great triumphs in the ring, especially his two victories over the fierce Sonny Liston, but also great controversy outside of it, most notably his association with the Nation of Islam, subsequent name change, and refusal to be drafted. The film's greatest weakness is its generally uncritical tone towards Ali's involvement with the Nation of Islam (NOI), likely due to its heavy reliance on voices from inside that movement to tell its story. Current NOI leader Louis Farrakhan, whose presence alone should be a warning sign, gets the first word after the opening sequence described above; other commenters include Ali's second wife, Khalilah Ali, his brother, Rahman Ali, and other current and former members of the NOI.

This bias leads to some disturbing incongruities. For example, we see Elijah Muhammad, the Nation of Islam's leader from 1934 until his death in 1975, proclaiming: "I think integration is completely a sin, to the black man and the white man," immediately

followed by an NOI member reminiscing, “He was indeed a majestic leader,” without comment on the problems inherent in such hateful ideology. We briefly see Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who states, “I am convinced that a doctrine of black supremacy is as dangerous as a doctrine of white supremacy,” but that is not the dominant opinion of the film’s various speakers. Instead, those speakers characterize the NOI as “liberation theology,” contrasting it with the civil rights movement of the same era and the latter’s association with Christianity (a “slave making” religion which is contrasted with NOI’s dubious characterization of Islam as a “slave breaking” religion.) In so doing, however, it glosses over the fact that NOI is not the same thing as Islam, and omits some of its more problematic founding tenants, including the belief that a black scientist named Yakub created white people 6,600 years ago to be a “race of devils.” (In one scene, Ali admits, after much badgering by David Frost, that yes, he literally believes all white men to be devils. Nevertheless, he continued to accept the support of the white Louisville businessmen who had sponsored him from the beginning of his professional career.)

This bias is also reflected in the way Ali’s story is told. For example, we see his humiliation of Floyd Patterson in the ring – “Clay Tortures Patterson,” reads one headline – to punish Patterson for speaking out against the NOI and for refusing to call Ali by his newly adopted name. Sports writer Robert Lipsyte calls that fight “a truly terrible moment in boxing,” but Farrakhan is given the last word to facilely conclude: “Ali was exemplifying a freedom which most black men did not enjoy. And that made him loved by some and hated by others.” (That may have been true on the broader societal level, but Farrakhan conveniently ignores the fact that Patterson was also black, and that boxing’s heavyweight division, post-Joe Louis, enjoyed a period of black dominance which continued uninterrupted until the 1990s.)

Although the NOI affiliation which led Ali to claim conscientious objector status was and remains problematic, there is no question that his refusal to step forward for the draft was indeed courageous, carrying as it did major consequences for his life and career. Its effects were also felt in diverse corners of American society, and the film does a good job of demonstrating those cultural ripples. For Ali, the immediate effects were financial: he was stripped of his titles and faced a potential five-year prison sentence and a \$10,000 fine; in addition, no state would sanction him to fight so he was left with no way to earn a living. To make ends meet, he traveled around the country as a paid lecturer, spouting NOI dogma at college campuses and other venues that would have him. (He also starred in a short-lived musical called *Buck White* (1969), and one of the great joys of the film is the inclusion of Ali performing a truly terrible musical number, “We Came in Chains,” in a ridiculous Afro wig and fake beard.) Culturally, the effects included the disapproval of Joe Louis and Jackie Robinson, both black sports heroes who interrupted their professional careers to perform military service, Dr. King calling for every young man to register as a conscientious objector to the Vietnam War – “Whatever you think of Mr. Muhammad Ali’s religion,” says King, “you certainly have to admire his courage.” – and John Carlos and Tommy Smith giving the “Black Power” salute at the 1968 Olympics. (Carlos says the act was inspired by Ali’s struggle.) The film’s other strength is in its detailed recounting of the legal arguments which allowed the Supreme Court to overturn Ali’s conviction without opening up conscientious objector status to every member of the Nation of Islam.

Near the end of the film, Robert Lipsyte observes that Ali never “totally transcended boxing until he went back to boxing.” This reviewer agrees, but by focusing on Ali as a social figure, not as a fighter, and by restricting its scope to the period between 1960 and

1971, the film misses much of what made Ali truly great, including his three career-defining fights against Joe Frazier (1971, 1974, and 1975) and his genius performance against the bigger, stronger George Foreman in the “Rumble in the Jungle” (1974). (Fortunately it also misses his ugly race-baiting treatment of Joe Frazier, which left psychological scars still fresh on Frazier when he was interviewed for the 2009 documentary *Facing Ali*.) *The Trials of Muhammad Ali* will be a useful document for courses on Vietnam-era American history, African American studies, and the intersection of sports and culture or sports and politics. However, it is a far from balanced portrayal of Muhammad Ali or the Nation of Islam and should be used in conjunction with something like the aforementioned *Facing Ali* (2009) or Mark Kram’s *Ghosts of Manila: The Fateful Blood Feud Between Muhammad Ali and Joe Frazier* (Harper Collins, 2001).

Reviewer Rating: Recommended with Reservations