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A Blues Song Just for Fighters: The Legend of Sonny Liston

Timothy Hackman

legend, n.1. *The story of the life of a Saint.*6. *An unauthentic or non-historical story, esp. one handed down by tradition from early times and popularly regarded as historical.*8. *A person of such fame or distinction as to become the subject of popularly repeated (true or fictitious) stories; esp. in phr. a legend in one's (own) lifetime.*¹

Despite the black and white reassurances of the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the term “legend” (much like the term “folklore”) has yet to be authoritatively defined. Folklorist Linda Dégh spends nearly the first one hundred pages of her 2001 study of *Legend and Belief* on the question, “Is there a definition for the legend?” She begins with the generally accepted notion of a legend as it appears in definition six above—an untrue story that is told as true—but, for the purposes of her study, ultimately decides to “use legend as an overarching term to include all stories, short or long, which so far have been forced into small categories based on different organizational principles.” That is, the term covers not only those stories traditionally understood as legends, but also the myriad variations, such as anecdotes, belief stories and legends, horror stories, myths, rumor-legends, superstitions, urban legends and the like, which “contain a possible legend core.” The truth or falsity of the story is not important, Dégh insists; what matters is the *uncertainty* about whether or not the story is true. “The legend is a legend once it entertains debate about belief. Short or long, complete or rudimentary, local or global ... the sounding of contrary opinions is what makes a legend a legend.”²

Following Dégh's formula, the life of any sports celebrity, and particularly that of a boxer, would seem an unlikely subject for legend. Boxing fans, like baseball fans, are especially obsessed with the facts and statistics that make up the history of their sport, as Joyce Carol Oates comments in her meditation *On Boxing*:

The dead immortals are always with us, not only their names and the hazy outlines of careers recalled, but individual bouts, moments when decisive punches were thrown and caught, the size of a boxer's fist, the measurement of his reach, his age when he began and when he retired, his record of wins, losses, draws.³

The statistics should eliminate any ambiguity: someone won, someone lost. Moreover, it seems that the advent of video recording technology should have forever erased the uncertainty from any sporting event thus documented. And yet we have the Muhammad Ali-Sonny Liston championship fight of 1965, and the infamous "Phantom Punch" (note the capitalization) that remains unresolved over forty years after the fact. Clearly, legends can still emerge and flourish in a history-obsessed sport like boxing, and Sonny Liston is a perfect example.

If "legend" retained only its original meaning as the life story of a saint, then Charles "Sonny" Liston would be an odd choice indeed to become the stuff of legend. But more than any of his predecessors or peers, Liston remains shrouded in the sort of uncertainty that Dégh describes as the core of a legend, a man whose life and death invite no end of "debate about belief" from boxing enthusiasts, cultural historians and artists. A fearsome heavyweight who held the championship for less than two short years—from 1962 (when he destroyed Floyd Patterson in a single round) to 1964 (when he quit on his stool after six rounds with the young upstart then known as Cassius Clay)—Liston was also an ex-convict who learned to box in prison, a repeat offender, a mob enforcer, and an all-around terrifying presence in and out of the ring. This article will explore the legend of Sonny Liston as it has been created and nurtured since his arrival on the boxing scene—indeed, one could say "since the year of his birth" except that that date is unknown—to the present day. It will examine published biographies, along with numerous essays and other "readings" of Liston produced both during and after his lifetime, to uncover the "sounding of contrary opinions" that has made him into a legend. It will also analyze the reflections of Sonny Liston in literature and song which continue to expand and shape his story.

There is strong precedent for the treatment of boxers, especially African American boxers, as legends and folk heroes, beginning with the very first black heavyweight champion, Jack Johnson. William Wiggins, for example, finds in Johnson's "fearless defiance" of white America's rules—his physical

superiority in the ring, his frequent breach of the taboo of white women, his material extravagance and general hedonism—a representative of the “bad nigger” and the “hard hero” character types who “refuse to accept the place given to Negroes.”⁴ Al-Tony Gilmore’s *Bad Nigger! The National Impact of Jack Johnson* greatly expands on Wiggins’ work, reading Johnson as not just a folk hero but “a major force in American intellectual, social and folk history.”⁵ Joe Louis, the second black heavyweight champion, has been similarly examined from the folklorist’s perspective. In his work on *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*, Lawrence Levine includes Louis, along with Jack Johnson and folk heroes John Henry and Shine, in his discussion of important black figures that “signified the growing Negro insistence ... that they be accepted in American society not merely as Americans but as black Americans, not merely as individuals but as a people.”⁶ Others have explored Louis as an altogether different sort of hero from Johnson, a patriotic “American Hero” who was as universally revered as Johnson was despised by whites: Dominic Capeci, Jr. and Martha Wilkerson name Louis a “multifarious hero” for the many roles and meanings he took on during his long career,⁷ while Gilmore begins his article on “The Myth, Legend, and Folklore of Joe Louis” with the claim that “the lives of few individuals in the nation’s history either take on legendary characteristics or reveal more about the hopes, fears, ambitions, and ambiguities of the American people than that of boxing champion Joe Louis.”⁸

The research makes clear that both Johnson and Louis were more than great fighters, and that their legends were largely shaped by social and historical circumstance. To whites, Johnson was a threat to the social order, while Louis was a symbol of his country; to blacks, both men were sources of racial pride and examples of black resistance and achievement in the face of white racism. Enormous caches of jokes, stories, songs, and poetry grew up around both men in their own times and continue to develop long after their retirements from the ring, reflecting their cultural importance and transforming them from mere historical figures into legends. But Jack Johnson and Joe Louis, it could be argued, were exceptional cases since there were relatively few African American sports celebrities during their times. Their essential duality—as champions they stood at the center of American society, while as black men they remained forever outside of it—contributed to their solitariness. Their legendary status, in other words, was largely created and defined by their outsider status. Joe Louis, however, inaugurated the era of the black heavyweight champion, which stretched virtually uninterrupted from 1937 to the early 2000s, when fighters from Eastern Europe began to establish themselves in the heavyweight ranks. Only two times in a series of twenty-six unified titleholders—Rocky Marciano (1952-1956) and Ingemar Johansson (1959-1960)—have white men held the undisputed heavyweight championship of the world.⁹ In this era of black supremacy in boxing, then,

can the same folkloric processes that made legends of Johnson and Louis still apply to black fighters?

To this question, the story of Muhammad Ali offers a resounding “yes.” Of the post-Louis heavyweights, it seems that only Muhammad Ali (and, as we will see, Sonny Liston) has risen to the legendary status of his predecessors. In Ali’s case, the combination of his athletic genius, his unceasing self-promotion,¹⁰ and his iconoclasm transformed him into a folk hero, a symbol of a decade, and a cultural touchstone.¹¹ As early as 1971, Pete Hamill wrote of Ali’s defeat at the hands of Joe Frazier in terms of “The Disintegration of a Folk Hero;”¹² in that same year, William Wiggins explored “The Folklore of Muhammad Ali,” highlighting the fighter’s verbal expressions in the form of toasts and the black game of insults known as “the dozens,” his use of the “Trickster” archetype in his professional career, and his adherence to the “bad nigger” character type out of the ring.¹³ As with Johnson and Louis, Ali’s legend continues to grow, with new biographies, scholarly essays, creative tributes, and critical reappraisals of his life and legacy appearing regularly.¹⁴

In venerating Johnson, Louis and Ali as the holy trinity of black heavyweight champions, many writers skip over Sonny Liston.¹⁵ This is perhaps due to his relatively short time as champion, but, more likely, it is because his story was so quickly eclipsed by Ali’s turbulent reign. But those who ignore Liston have not considered that the man Ali called “the big ugly bear” was also a legendary figure in his own right; just like those of his more famous colleagues, his reign forced public confrontation with issues of race, and his significance continues to invite discussion and debate. As with the other champions, there has also been a flurry of creative activity around Sonny Liston, suggesting that his name and story retain some resonance in the popular imagination decades after his death. Robert Hedin and Michael Waters 2003 collection of boxing poetry includes four poems about Liston, the same number as for Muhammad Ali and only two less than for Jack Johnson. (Joe Louis is far and away the winner with thirteen.) A 1996 collection of poems by Gary Short is entitled *Flying Over Sonny Liston*, Thom Jones titled his 1999 collection of short stories *Sonny Liston Was a Friend of Mine*, and the main character in Brian DeVido’s 2006 novel, *Every Time I Talk to Liston*, visits Sonny’s Las Vegas grave regularly. There have been folk and rock songs by artists as diverse as Phil Ochs and Morrissey, and in 2004 Mark Knopfler recorded a full-length blues ballad, “Song for Sonny Liston.” Finally, there are his multiple biographies; the most recent of these is Nick Tosches’ hard-boiled *The Devil and Sonny Liston*, which tries to untangle Liston fact from folklore but ends up reading as equal parts of both. As with the other champions, Liston became a legendary figure through the combination of his physical abilities and his participation in a series of epoch-defining fights. Unlike the others, however, there is an uncertainty about Liston’s story, a general air of mystery surrounding him, which continues to expand his legend.

The first thing mentioned in most Sonny Liston stories is his physical size. Many boxers are tall, broad, and muscular, of course, and several, Muhammad Ali included, have been larger than Liston. But, when combined with his intimidating stare, the no-nonsense way he went about his work, and his distaste for public relations small-talk, Sonny's stature seemed to make him especially menacing. There are manifold variations on this theme in the coverage of Liston's life and career. Richard Carter, writing in 2005 of meeting Liston in 1962, remarks, "He was the most physically intimidating man I'd ever encountered. And still is."¹⁶ Boxing correspondent A.J. Liebling wrote with some humor in 1963 that, "His size and his public scowl, perhaps, are the chief counts against him, although the latter is only a professional tool, like a doctor's bedside manner ... His voice can make 'yes' sound like an insult."¹⁷ Norman Mailer recalled, somewhat more melodramatically, that "His charisma was majestic with menace. One would hold one's breath when near him."¹⁸ Sportswriter William Nack joked that all Sonny had to do was look at his opponents and they would "start bleeding during the national anthem."¹⁹ Marty Marshall, who fought Liston three times, observed after their first fight (which Marshall won): "He hit me like no man should be hit ... He's tough. That's one thing nobody can deny about that man. He hurts when he breathes on you."²⁰

Hyperbole is a common ingredient in all sports writing of course, but in Liston's case, there is an indication of something beyond the ordinary—what Linda Dégh would term the "extranormal"²¹—in the descriptions of his size and strength. Over time, his physical characteristics and seeming invulnerability in the ring led to many "tall tales" of his strength and toughness. William Nack sums up some of the stories that began to emerge following Liston's singular defeat of Floyd Patterson in 1962:

Before the referee could count to ten in that first fight, Liston had become a mural-sized American myth, a larger-than-life John Henry with two hammers ... Tales of his exploits spun well with the fight crowd over beers in dark-wood bars. There was the one about how he used to lift up the front end of automobiles. And one about how he caught birds with his bare hands. And another about how he hit speed bags so hard that he tore them from their anchors and ripped into heavy bags until they burst.²²

Nack's observation suggests that these stories emerged only *after* Liston had taken the title; in other words, his legend began to grow once he had become a well-known figure by his public and impressive display of strength. One can easily find these and other stories recounted by Liston's multiple biographers. A.S. Young cites boxing trainer Monroe Harrison, who attests that he "once saw [Liston] pick up the front end of a Ford" just because

"someone said he couldn't do it."²³ Rob Steen notes that stories about Sonny "quickly metamorphosed into legends," such as his destruction of punching bags: "Speed bags, it was said, were yanked from their hinges, heavy bags relieved of their stuffing."²⁴

More significant is a recollection from St. Louis police captain James Doherty, as related by Nick Tosches: "Five coppers tried to lock Sonny. This ain't no bullshit story. They broke hickory nightsticks over his head. They couldn't get his hands cuffed. He was a monster."²⁵ Doherty's story is notable for two reasons. First, his use of the word "monster" denies Liston's very humanity, transforming his size and strength into something unnatural to be feared. Doherty's story is essentially self-serving—if Sonny was a monster and not a man, then his brutal treatment at the hands of the St. Louis police department can be justified—but it also reveals the racism underlying that treatment. Doherty's choice of words recalls a story related by Leroi Jones of a white cab driver who, after commenting on the size of Liston's fists and the length of his arms,²⁶ declared, "He's like an animal. Jesus! He shouldn't even be allowed to fight normal guys. He's like an animal."²⁷ In each reaction to Sonny, his physical characteristics and the violent nature of his profession are combined with his racial otherness to create the white teller's conception of him as sub-human, a jungle beast to which fear (and, in Doherty's case, violence) is the only appropriate reaction.

The second feature of Doherty's story, even more important from the folklorist's perspective, is his assertion of its truthfulness in the middle of recounting it—"This ain't no bullshit story"—as if the auditor would be inclined to dismiss it as pure fiction. Dégh reminds us that legends are not necessarily recounted as such; often they come in the form of anecdotes, personal stories or rumors, which are frequently accompanied by such attestations of truthfulness.²⁸ Despite his intentions then, Doherty's assertion actually pushes his story further in the direction of legend, rather than toward history.

Liston's reputation as powerful and fearsome has also been preserved and enlarged through literature and song. In E. Ethelbert Miller's sympathetic poem, "Sonny Liston," the fighter, after his first loss to Cassius Clay, recalls a time when "my stare once cut men before they entered the ring / i could smell fear dripping on the lacing of their shoes." Miller's Liston clearly was intimidating once, but the past-tense verbs, as well as the diminishment inherent in the lower-case "i" used throughout the poem, indicate that the speaker is a Liston past his prime and hint at his end: "the world ain't pretty and a lot of people try to hide/too bad the night has a thousand eyes."²⁹ As "The airplane rises over the cemetery/where Liston is buried," in Gary Short's "Flying Over Sonny Liston," the speaker remembers: "What I recall is his bad press—/how he learned to box in prison, / how he hung out with the worst people./His violence & his size."³⁰ Short's speaker does not pretend

to understand Sonny Liston as an individual; he only relates the pieces that have been impressed upon his memory, the same pieces which have become part of Liston's legend.

Mark Knopfler's "Song for Sonny Liston" is more positive in its view of Sonny, but also stresses his physical power with lyrics such as, "he had dynamite in both his hands."³¹ Like William Nack, Knopfler compares the boxer to that most popular and powerful of African American folk heroes, John Henry. "A left like Henry's hammer" is perhaps a fitting simile to evoke the power Liston was said to possess in that one punch—which biographer Rob Steen poetically calls "a sacrilegious Excalibur"³²—but the comparison seems incongruous given Sonny's image. John Henry is a powerful but beloved and entirely benign figure, while Liston was largely disliked and feared. Where the two figures converge, however, is that both can be understood as victims of indifferent social forces; John Henry worked himself to death for a white-controlled industry that had likely replaced him with another anonymous laborer by the next morning, just as Liston labored in a dangerous occupation for his white managers and criminal backers and was unceremoniously discarded once he proved no longer profitable.

Knopfler follows his John Henry comparison with the observation that Liston also had a "right like Betty bam-a-lam." The nonsense rhyme comes from Leadbelly's song "Black Betty," thereby connecting Liston to another legendary figure with a troubled past. A convicted murderer, Leadbelly (Huddie Ledbetter, 1885-1949) was discovered in a Louisiana prison by John Lomax, who brought him to New York following his release and turned him into a folk music sensation. As with Liston, press coverage and promotion of Leadbelly in his time "depicted him as a savage, untamed animal," a primitive somehow living in the midst of modern society.³³ Unlike Liston's image, Leadbelly's popularity grew beyond the bounds of such promotional gimmicks, and he is revered today as a blues and folk music icon.³⁴ Although Knopfler highlights some of the negative aspects of Liston's life and career—"He hung with the hoods/He wouldn't stroke the fans," for example—the power of these positive associations, repeated multiple times in the song's refrain, make his portrait a largely sympathetic one, perhaps in an attempt to elevate Liston to the same folk hero status as Jack Johnson or Joe Louis.

The speaker of William Trowbridge's poem, "Liston," however, does not make such positive associations. "In an allegory, he'd have been Brute Force," the poem begins, "hulking frame, liver lips, blunt stare assensive/as a prowling shark's," calling attention to racial distinctions and once again drawing comparisons to the non-human. The speaker admires what he sees as Liston's elemental simplicity, finding in him:

Everybody's heavyweight stripped down
to the raw essentials: bone and muscle, rage

and felonies; black trunks with white stripes,
 blackout with twinkly stars. We loved the chill
 he gave us, our glowering pit bull we sicced
 on all contenders, our looming shadow³⁵

The speaker's taste for boxing is shorn of what Loïc Wacquant calls the "romance of pugilism"³⁶; rather, it is pure aggression and violence, for which Liston seemed custom-made, that arouse admiration. There is also an uncomfortable sense of ownership in this portrait of Liston; as "our looming shadow," the bestial part of human nature that a "civilized" society wishes to deny, he should be shunned. Yet, when Liston's violence is under nominal control, through the conventionalized violence of boxing, the speaker finds his presence vaguely thrilling, and as "our ... pit bull" he proves useful for drawing blood to entertain the masses. As a result the speaker is profoundly disappointed—"betrayed, diminished, tongue tied"—when Liston proves incapable of conquering the "prattling dancer," Cassius Clay: "We wanted blood, teeth. Nothing fancy."

Occasional dissenting voices point out that Liston was not as menacing as he seemed. Various acquaintances interviewed for biographies and documentaries go out of their way to mention how gentle or good-natured Sonny was, how generous with his money, how much he loved children or playing practical jokes. Interestingly, Benjamin Filene points out similar observations about Leadbelly—by all accounts a gentle, jovial man—from his friends and acquaintances. Compare the opinion of Pennsylvania State Athletic Commission secretary Jack Saunders, who told Doc Young, "The real Sonny Liston is a quiet, sensible guy with mother wit and humor to make a lot of people happy"³⁷ with Pete Seeger's recollection of Leadbelly "as soft voiced, meticulously dressed, and 'wonderful with children.'"³⁸ This similarity between Leadbelly and Liston's experiences suggests that society was interested in African Americans as single-faceted celebrities only; in his public role, neither man was permitted the complexities of character, which would qualify him as a fully human being. But, here again, Liston differs from Leadbelly in that the former never exposed this "softer side." Instead, writes William Nack, "In public Liston was often surly, hostile and uncommunicative, and so he fed one of the most disconcerting of white stereotypes, that of the ignorant, angry, morally reckless black, roaming loose, with bad intentions, in white society."³⁹

As with Jack Johnson, we can see the fear of the "bad nigger" in the public and press reaction to Sonny Liston—it was clearly not just his size, manner, and criminal past, but these factors in combination with the color of his skin, which made him so intimidating. Leroi Jones sums up the "aura of menace" that so many perceived as surrounding Liston. "Sonny was the big black Negro in every white man's hallway, waiting to do him in, deal

him under, for all the hurts white men have been able to inflict on his world. Sonny Liston was 'the huge Negro,' the 'bad nigger,' a heavy-faced replica of every whipped-up woogie in the world."⁴⁰ Unlike Joe Louis, who may have carried blacks' "dreams of vengeance"⁴¹ but hid them behind his deadpan expression, Liston possessed both the physical ability to lash out at white America and a disposition that seemed to make him inclined to do so.

While this may have terrified whites, for many blacks it was cause for celebration. Jones laments the white/good vs. black/evil terms in which the Liston-Patterson fights were promoted, but he clearly revels in Liston's easy victories and what he feels they represented: "Each time Patterson fell, there was a vision that came to me of the whole colonial West crumbling in some sinister silence, like the across-the-tracks House of Usher."⁴² Eldridge Cleaver celebrates Muhammad Ali as "the first 'free' black champion ever to confront white America," but acknowledges that "It was really Sonny Liston who marked the coming of the autonomous Negro to boxing."⁴³ For Cleaver, Liston was not as threatening (and therefore not as desirable as champion) as Ali because he was "nonideological"—that is, he never took a public stand on civil rights issues—but he nevertheless had an independence that whites feared and Cleaver seems to admire.

Liston's white biographer Nick Tosches, who has a weakness for purple prose and unrestrained flights of fantasy, picks up on the concept of the "bad nigger" and runs with it when describing the St. Louis Police Department's vendetta against Liston:

Charles Liston was, of course, the motherfucker they really wanted: the big bad nigger who looked at you like he didn't know whether to drink your blood or spit on you ... And not one, not two of them, could take him alone without a gun, and they knew it, and they hated him for that, the very fact of his existence. Big bad niggers weren't supposed to be that big and that bad, not in St. Louis, anyway.⁴⁴

We can read this passage as Tosches' imaginative recreation of sentiments already expressed by police captain James Doherty, but by making explicit what is below the surface in Doherty's story, he contributes to the growth of the Liston legend and provides raw materials for future myth-making.

We can also read in Tosches' daydream a theme similar to one identified by Frederic Jaher in his article on Jack Johnson. Jaher finds "the fear of the 'black brute,' that envied but ominous counterforce to western civilization" in the reaction to Johnson as "bad nigger." The envy here, according to Jaher, is primarily sexual, and proceeds from a misguided interpretation of the black man as "the id in the white psyche."⁴⁵ Likewise, in Tosches' reading, it is not only Liston's size and badness, but also how small and powerless, how impotent he makes the white police feel by comparison, that draws their

ire. The sexual implications remain below the surface here, but there are other places where the connection is made very explicit. Muhammad Ali's autobiography, for example, includes a discussion of the popular myth that requires boxers to abstain from sex before a bout, quoting one trainer who remembers that "[Liston was] one of the worse [sic] ... Liston used to take his sex drive out on opponents."⁴⁶ Tosches provides the most conspicuous example when, apropos of nothing, he breaks into his narrative to go on at length about the alleged size of Liston's penis and relate stories of his sexual proclivities.⁴⁷ Despite his ironic posturing, which would seem to mock the white obsession with the "black man as sexual threat," Tosches proves every bit as interested in the prurient details of Sonny's anatomy and private life. Liston's sexual exploits are not nearly as important to his story as they are to the story of Jack Johnson, but they appear with enough frequency, and in enough detail, to suggest that they remain a fixation for tellers of his legend.

As with Jack Johnson and Joe Louis, Sonny Liston's legend was also created in part from the historic and symbolic championship matches in which he participated. Unlike the two former champions, however, Liston was a part of no less than *four* such fights, all of them against other African-Americans and each with its own set of racial interpretations. The accepted reading of Liston's 1962 championship bout against Floyd Patterson, as it has come to be incorporated into the Liston legend, is of the good black versus the bad black, of white bourgeois liberalism versus black underclass rage, a "morality play," according to William Nack, with Patterson in the role of Good and Liston as Evil personified.⁴⁸ Only James Baldwin's humanistic "The Fight: Patterson vs. Liston" refuses such symbolizing, steadfastly insisting on treating the two fighters as individual human beings. Baldwin recounts his meetings with Liston and Patterson and finds qualities to admire in both, but ultimately empathizes more with Patterson: "It wasn't that I didn't like Liston," he writes. "I just felt closer to Floyd."⁴⁹ Ultimately, he reads the conflict as one of personalities rather than ideologies—Patterson's "disciplined sweetness" vs. Liston's "outspoken intransigence."

But in the civil rights era, these distinct personalities also suggested two very different approaches to the African American struggle for equality, and so the fight acquired heavy layers of racial meaning as well. That both fighters were black did not lessen the intensity of this racial tension—Nathan Hare has observed that "'white hope' syndrome is so intense as to enter into fights between two blacks"⁵⁰ and Mike Marquese similarly notes that such fights are "valorized by the perceived relation of each fighter to white power."⁵¹ But it was not enough for whites to choose polite, devout, integrationist Patterson—whom Leroi Jones sneeringly dubbed an "honorary" white man⁵²—as their representative. Blacks also had to align themselves with one of the two black men, and for the first time that simple choice seemed to hold great significance.⁵³ According to Tosches, "A champion such as Liston, it

was believed, would bring disgrace and trouble; would impugn and abrogate black respectability; and would be like gasoline to bring white hatred flaring forth anew.⁵⁴

Tosches asks the question of why a simple fight came “to be charged with such meaning and such moment and such madness,”⁵⁵ but the answer largely eludes him. The most likely possibility is the least romantic, and it has nothing to do with racial uplift or the preservation of the moral or social order. Boxing promoters since the time of Johnson-Jeffries realized they could count on a good villain and racial confrontation to increase interest in a fight and thereby increase their profits. So when Young described Sonny Liston as “the most unwanted challenger since Jack Johnson,” he spoke only for the racist whites or for the middle class blacks who took seriously the talk of Sonny’s threat to civil rights progress; for the *business* of boxing, he was a godsend. For his part, Sonny certainly seemed to be aware of his role in the theatre of his sport: “A boxing match is like a cowboy movie,” he told a reporter from *Time* magazine. “There’s got to be good guys, and there’s got to be bad guys ... Bad guys are supposed to lose. I change that. I win.”⁵⁶

The two finally met in the center of the ring in Chicago’s Comiskey Park—ironically, the same venue where Liston’s boxing idol, Joe Louis, had taken the title from James Braddock in 1937—and just two minutes and six seconds later, Patterson lay flat on his back, and the world had a new heavyweight champion, whether it liked it or not. “[Liston’s] demolition job on Patterson was so thorough, so swift, so complete,” wrote Doc Young, “that the near-nineteen-thousand in-person onlookers were simply shocked, stunned, startled into silence.”⁵⁷ One well-dressed man watching the fight in a movie theatre, so the story goes, stood and proclaimed, “God help us,” before heading for the exit.⁵⁸ Yet, for all the pre-fight furor, Liston’s victory had no discernible effect on race relations in America; it certainly failed to buy the new champion acceptance from the media or the public. Jim Murray of the *Los Angeles Times* cruelly wrote that waking up to Liston as the new champion was “like finding a live bat on a string under your Christmas tree.”⁵⁹ Even Joyce Carol Oates, writing more than twenty years after the fact, feels that “to watch Liston overcome Patterson in tapes of their fights in the early 1960s is to watch the defeat of ‘civilization’ by something so elemental and primitive it cannot be named.”⁶⁰ Oates is polite enough to enclose “civilization” in quotation marks, but her observation is otherwise entirely without irony and demonstrates the persistent imprint left behind by these fights, the overwhelmingly negative publicity at the time of the fight that has largely defined Liston’s public image to this day. He was cast as the villain and then brilliantly performed as such, adding to his legend and, as we have already seen, leading to the tall tales of his physical abilities and “badness.” The fight was also the impetus for and the focal point of Sonny’s first biography by A. S. “Doc” Young—a highly sympathetic account subtitled *The Champ Nobody*

Wanted—which makes a case for Sonny as a misunderstood victim of society. In the biographical and historical readings of the legend of Sonny Liston, then, the Patterson fight (and the 1963 rematch, which replayed the same arguments, with the same results) continues to be regarded as a defining moment.

Interestingly, then, of the creative readings of Liston under examination here only two—Thom Jones' short story "Sonny Liston Was a Friend of Mine" and Brian DeVido's novel *Every Time I Talk to Liston*—even mention the Patterson fight. Neither Gary Short's poem, "Flying over Sonny Liston," nor any of the four poems collected by Hedin and Waters touch it. Knopfler's ballad, with eight stanzas plus refrains, references only the pre-fight objections to Liston: "the civil rights people didn't want him on the throne," and the sports writers and boxing insiders "didn't want to have a bogey man" with "lowlife backers and hands like rocks." The title of Jones' story comes from a sequence in which a young amateur boxer, identified only as "Kid Dynamite," visits Liston's training camp before the first Patterson fight. Liston's speed and power are awe-inspiring for the Kid, but even more frightening is the intensity of his presence: "He met Liston's gaze but found it almost impossible to sustain eye contact. Soon it became an exercise in the control of fear." The man next to the Kid whispers, "Bet the farm on this man. Patterson is dead."⁶¹ Although the Patterson fight is the set-up for Jones' scene, it is the portrait of Liston as terrifying brute rather than as triumphant champion that Jones uses here.

DeVido's novel is narrated by a thirty-six-year-old heavyweight pug, Amos "Scrap Iron" Fletcher, who is slowly circling the drain of the fight game until he decides to retire and begin training a younger heavyweight, Rodney "TNT" Timmons. Otherwise a typical entry in the genre of sports fiction, *Every Time I Talk to Liston* is distinguished by its main character's obsession with Liston; Scrap Iron visits the former champion's Las Vegas grave regularly and intertwines stories about Liston with his own narrative. The story of the Patterson fights is recounted briefly as part of the arc of Liston's life story: "The experts were right. Liston knocked Patterson out in two minutes and six seconds. Hit Patterson with a left hook that would have given God a headache."⁶² It is mentioned again near the end of the novel, when Scrap Iron shows video of Liston in the ring to inspire his fighter. The two men watch Liston beat Cleveland Williams and Patterson (both times) and get knocked out by Leotis Martin. "But," Scrap Iron says, "I don't show the Ali fights. Because to me, that wasn't really Sonny. Not the Sonny I know, anyway."⁶³ In neither case is there extended meditation on or discussion of Liston-Patterson I or II; as Scrap Iron observes, "It's funny, but most people remember Liston for the fights lost rather than the fights he won ... [After] the second Ali fight, just like that, Liston faded away."⁶⁴

Indeed, that does seem to be the case. The general lack of attention to the Patterson fights in writing and art about Liston indicates that his greatest moment of success is less intriguing than his failures—his troubled psyche, his unexpected losses, or his lonely and mysterious death. Sonny Liston is most interesting as a subject, it seems, when he is perpetually unlucky and purely tragic. In addition, the phenomenon known as Muhammad Ali is responsible in no small part for the disappearance of “Sonny Liston, Champion” from the public imagination.

Accordingly, Liston’s two other major fights, his defeats at the hands of Muhammad Ali in 1964 (when Ali was still known as Cassius Clay) and his second scandalous performance in 1965, are of much more interest to poets and writers. In their first fight in Miami Beach on February 24, 1964, Clay pranced and jabbed, and survived a fifth round in which he was blinded, possibly by ointment applied to Liston’s shoulders, cuts or, possibly, gloves.⁶⁵ Liston swung away as usual and, not finding his target, grew increasingly frustrated. Over-confident and under-trained, injured and facing a younger, faster boxer, Liston simply decided to give up, quitting in his corner at the end of the sixth round rather than risking further embarrassment. In the Ali hero-tale as it has come to be constructed, Liston in this first fight acts as the “guardian of the threshold,” barring the way of the young adventurer. He represents the first challenge in response to which the hero will either turn back to an ordinary life or will demonstrate his superior nature and become something greater.⁶⁶ Rob Steen quotes boxing expert Bill Cayton, who observes, “Ali went into that fight a good fighter but he came out a great one ... That night he became the fighter who was on the road to becoming the greatest fighter of all time.”⁶⁷

As with the Patterson fight, this match between two black men was still promoted in terms of Good and Evil, with Sonny once again cast as the villain. At the time of the fight, notes Frederic Jaher, Clay was assigned the role of “white hat,” the attractive young good guy who could finally rid boxing of its resident “bad nigger.”⁶⁸ The roles would quickly be reversed in the days after the fight, however, when Clay announced publicly that he was now a follower of The Honorable Elijah Muhammad and would hereafter be known as Muhammad Ali. Former champions Joe Louis and Floyd Patterson joined in the chorus of disapproval that seemed to echo from every sector of American society, and Liston found himself in a completely unexpected role: hero. Murray Kempton of *The New Republic* wrote, “Liston used to be a hoodlum; now he was our cop; he was the big Negro we pay to keep sassy Negroes in line and he was just waiting until his boss told him it was time to throw this kid out.”⁶⁹ Note that no matter how intense their dislike for Ali, his racist rhetoric or his newfound religion, Kempton and others still could not allow Liston the role of “good guy;” at best they considered him

a tool, a blunt instrument that white America could use to hammer down a troublesome nail.

The fighters met for the second time in Lewiston, Maine on May 25, 1965. That disastrous fight, which of course ended with the "Phantom Punch," would forever fix Liston's place in boxing history. It is not so much the loss itself, as the uncertainty surrounding it, which continues to contribute to his legend. Did Liston take a dive for his mob backers? Was he intimidated by Nation of Islam thugs? Or was he really caught by an unanticipated and powerful punch? The "sounding of contrary opinions" continues on all sides. Joe Louis, serving as ringside commentator that night, observed, "That punch was like throwing corn flakes at a battle ship,"⁷⁰ yet Ali and his associates asserted (and continue to assert) that the knockout was legitimate. After the fight Ali would claim it was the "anchor punch, the secret weapon of Jack Johnson as passed on to Ali by Stepin Fetchit, the elderly comedian and old-time movie player," that had caught Liston by surprise,⁷¹ adding yet another layer of folklore to the proceedings by tapping into the legacy of the first "bad nigger" champion.⁷² "The fact of the matter is there was never a fight less fixed," reads Ali's highly dubious 1975 autobiography, *The Greatest: My Own Story*,⁷³ but, for the most part, boxing fans and historians are not convinced. A 2005 article by Richard Carter begins, "every knowledgeable, objective fight fan knows that Charles Liston took a dive," and concludes: "The problem is that Sonny was such a bad actor, his pathetic swoon from a laughable love-tap gave big-time boxing a black eye from which it has yet to fully recover."⁷⁴ Ali, of course, needs the fight to be legitimate to build his reputation as "The Greatest." For Carter, as well as for biographers Steen and Tosches, the fight needs to be fixed to support their primary theses: that boxing is irredeemably corrupt, that it is irreparably damaging, physically as well as morally, to the men who fight, and that Sonny lived his whole life as a slave, respectively.

Liston and Ali's biographers cite a wide variety of eyewitnesses, experts, evidence and theories about the fight but come no closer to resolving the matter definitively, and that same uncertainty is reflected in the cultural representations of Liston. Phil Ochs' 1972 "Ballad of Sonny Liston" is unequivocal, with the final lines asking, "Sonny, Sonny, Sonny, why'd you have to take a dive?/If you don't then you won't stay alive."⁷⁵ Jay Meek's poem "Sonny Liston" recalls:

When he blew
Clay's fight in that Maine mill-town,
too suddenly downed, bartenders said:
"Next time he's gonna fight some fruit
from a garbage scow on the Atlantic.
Out there he can really take a dive."⁷⁶

Meek's Liston clearly threw the fight, but his description of the event as "Clay's fight" suggests that it holds more significance for the myth of Muhammad Ali than for the legend of Sonny Liston. Gary Short's poem "Flying Over Sonny Liston," on the other hand, opens with an image of Liston decisively defeated by Ali—"Sonny Liston is on all fours / trying to rise, a flame of pain / in the center of his head"—and adds later, "One blow/changes everything."⁷⁷ Brian DeVido's account in *Every Time I Talk to Liston* also gives the clear victory to Ali, blaming Liston's early overtraining and subsequent inability, following a delay in the scheduled date of the fight due to Ali's hospitalization for a hernia, to get back in peak condition. In the middle there is William Trowbridge's "Liston," which mentions the "phantom punch" but does not pass judgment on what really happened in the fight, only noting with disappointment that "he sat down/wobbly as a dowager, leaving the floor/to the lippy punk from Louisville."⁷⁸ What the poems and novel share is the sense of a squandered opportunity for greatness. After years of playing "the heavy," Liston was given one chance to be the hero, a challenge he failed due to a moment of either physical or moral weakness.

Thus we see how the truth of a single fight, documented on film and with thousands of people watching, can come to be as mysterious as the origins of any traditional folk tale. But there is something folkloric about much of Liston's life outside of the ring as well, a cloud of mystery that always seems to obscure our view of the man himself, which has also contributed significantly to his legend. The twenty-fourth of twenty-five children, his place and date of birth were never known; Young's biography relates Liston's early years in terms of "consistencies," noting that there is "no one set story" when it comes to his life.⁷⁹ That he had a difficult upbringing is almost certain; Tosches and others frequently cite the coroner's report which found faded scars across Liston's back, most likely reminders of beatings handed out by his father. The frequent invocation of Sonny's scars serves varying purposes, highlighting the poverty in which he was raised as an Arkansas sharecropper's son, linking that upbringing to the brutality of slavery, painting him as a survival from pre-Emancipation times: "Criss-crossed on his back," sings Mark Knopfler, "scars from his daddy like slavery tracks." Even the origin of the nickname "Sonny" is unknown; some claim it was given to him in prison by other inmates,⁸⁰ while others claim it came north with him from the Arkansas cotton fields, from a father who could never remember his children's names.⁸¹

Finally, Sonny Liston's death proved to be as mysterious as his birth, his body discovered by his wife Geraldine in the bedroom of their Las Vegas home on January 5, 1971. Although the official autopsy listed death by natural causes, rumors swirl to this day that he overdosed on heroin or was murdered over some grudge or shady business deal. Brian DeVido's narrator recalls, "People aren't sure to this day, but many say he crossed the mob

and they killed him. It's possible. Hell, in this game, *anything's* possible."⁸² Traces of narcotics in his system, combined with testimony from family and associates that Liston had a life-long fear of needles—a nice folkloric touch—seem to lend some credence to the conspiracy theories, but the truth will most likely never be known. Sonny Liston was buried in Paradise Memorial Gardens in Las Vegas, directly adjacent to McCarran International Airport. After spending his life painted as a criminal, an animal, a monster, and a symbol of black underclass rage, his headstone defiantly reads, "Charles Sonny Liston. A Man."

This uncertainty surrounding Liston's life and, especially, death, is an important part of his cultural image as well. In stark contrast to the poems and songs celebrating Jack Johnson and Joe Louis, the writing about Sonny Liston seems largely to *mourn* the boxer. Multiple poems and songs include the scene of Sonny's death; Jay Meek's poem "Sonny Liston," for example, begins with the ex-champion "Floored in the bedroom of his home/in Vegas, on the table his revolver/in its holster, ready for an enemy."⁸³ Mark Knopfler's ballad paints Liston only impressionistically, calling attention to the ambiguity of his life's story: "They never could be sure about the day he was born,/a motherless child set to working on the farm./And they never could be sure about the day he died/The Bear was the king they cast aside." Liston was not "motherless"—Helen Liston left for St. Louis when Sonny was about thirteen and he followed her there soon after—but the invention adds to the pathos of his tale. Simultaneously it recalls the great African American spiritual, "Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child," once again likening Sonny's condition to the misery of the slave. Meanwhile the song's refrain prophesies over and over again, echoing the bragging of Cassius Clay, "Sonny's goin' down for miles and miles/Sonny's goin' down for miles and miles." About Liston's death Knopfler only sings mysteriously, "There was no investigation as such/he hated needles but he knew too much." Phil Ochs' fragmentary ballad also takes up the question of his death ("Now I don't know how Sonny Liston died/Maybe he killed himself, maybe he even tried/ Or maybe the boys weren't satisfied") but when it comes to conclusions the singer can only seem to shake his head sadly, admitting, "I don't know, I'm sorry I just don't know."

Sonny once told a reporter, "Someday they're gonna write a blues song just for fighters. It'll be for slow guitar, soft trumpet, and a bell."⁸⁴ Such poetic insight was rare from the one-time champion. Unlike Ali, who never ceased talking about himself, Liston never had a chance to tell his own story, or perhaps if he did no one was willing to listen. James Baldwin described him as "inarticulate," adding: "I really do not mean to suggest that he does not know how to talk. He is inarticulate in the way we all are when more has happened to us than we know how to express; and inarticulate in a particularly Negro way—he has a long tale to tell which no one wants to

hear."⁸⁵ In the final analysis, much of the interest in him seems, at least in part, to be an attempt to tell that tale, and by so doing, to right the wrongs done to him throughout his life. Perhaps by singing Sonny's blues, writers and poets hope to restore some measure of humanity to a man thoroughly dehumanized by socioeconomic circumstance, by organized crime and various police departments, and most of all by his disastrous meetings with Muhammad Ali. Even if we ultimately find in his life a sad cautionary tale rather than an inspirational story of achievement, Liston's story, like that of his predecessors Jack Johnson and Joe Louis and his successor Muhammad Ali, will continue to resonate long after that final bell has sounded.

Notes

1. *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed, 1989.
2. Linda Dégh, *Legend and Belief* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2001) 97.
3. Joyce Carol Oates, *On Boxing* (Garden City, NY: Dolphin/Doubleday, 1987) 108-109.
4. William Wiggins, "Jack Johnson as Bad Nigger: The Folklore of His Life," *Contemporary Black Thought: The Best from 'The Black Scholar,'* ed. Robert Chrisman and Nathan Hare (Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill, 1973) 54-5.
5. Al-Tony Gilmore. *Bad Nigger! The National Impact of Jack Johnson*, (Port Washington, NY: Kennikat Press, 1975) 5.
6. Lawrence Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom* (New York: Oxford UP, 1977) 440.
7. Dominic Capeci, Jr. and Martha Wilkerson, "Multifarious Hero: Joe Louis, American Society, and Race Relations During World Crisis, 1935-1945," *The Sporting Image: Readings in American Sport History*, ed. Paul J. Zingg (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1988) 297.
8. Al-Tony Gilmore, "The Myth, Legend and Folklore of Joe Louis: The Impression of Sport on Society," *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 82.3 (1983) 256-7.
9. Although there have been several white (predominately eastern European) champions over the last decade, there has been no "unified" titleholder since Lennox Lewis in 2002.
10. For an insightful reading of portions of the Ali legend that have been self-created, see Gerald Early, "Some Preposterous Propositions from the Heroic Life of Muhammad Ali: A Reading of *The Greatest: My Own Story*," *Muhammad Ali: The People's Champ*, ed. Elliott J. Gorn (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1995) 70-87. Early's consideration of the autobiography as a genre with a tendency to "blend the patently false with the scathingly true" (70) is especially relevant to our consideration of boxers as legends.
11. For Ali as cultural icon, Charles Lemert, *Muhammad Ali: Trickster in the Culture of Irony*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2003). For Ali as symbol of an era, see Michael Marquesse, *Redemption Song: Muhammad Ali and the Spirit of the Sixties*, 2nd ed. (London: Verso, 2005); or Jeffrey T. Sammons, "Rebel with a Cause: Muhammad Ali as Sixties Protest Symbol," *Muhammad Ali: The People's Champ*, ed. Elliott J. Gorn (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1995); or

- Robert Lipsyte, "Covering Ali: Discovering an Era," *Defining Moments in Journalism*, ed. Nancy J. Woodhull and Robert W. Snyder (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1998).
12. Pete Hamill, "The Disintegration of a Folk Hero," *Harper's Bazaar* May 1971, rpt in *The Muhammad Ali Reader*, ed. Gerald Early (New York: Rob Weisbach Books, 1998) 123-5.
 13. William Wiggins, "'I Am the Greatest': The Folklore of Muhammad Ali," *Black Lines: A Journal of Black Studies* 2.1 (Fall 1971) 56-68.
 14. In the category of "critical reappraisal" is Mark Kram's *The Ghosts of Manila: The Fateful Blood Feud Between Muhammad Ali and Joe Frazier* (New York: Harper Collins, 2001.) Kram depicts Ali as easily manipulated and not especially intelligent, as well as racist and mean-spirited, especially in his public treatment of Joe Frazier in the run-ups to their three championship fights. One need only read or view recent interviews with Frazier—see the documentary *Facing Ali* (Lions Gate, 2009) for a particularly poignant example—to know that Frazier has never truly forgiven Ali for those indignities. The timing of Kram's work is also interesting, as it was released the same year as Michael Mann's worshipful biopic *Ali*, which was nominated for two Academy Awards and brought Ali hagiography to heights not seen since 1996 (the year of Ali's surprise appearance to light the cauldron at the Summer Olympics in Atlanta and of the documentary *When We Were Kings*, about the 1974 Ali-George Foreman "Rumble in the Jungle.")
 15. For examples, see Jervis Anderson, "Black Heavies," *American Scholar* 47.3 (Summer 1978) 387-395; or Frederick Jaher, "White America Views Jack Johnson, Joe Louis and Muhammad Ali," *Sport in America: New Historical Perspectives*, ed. Donald Spivey (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1985) 145-92.
 16. Richard Carter, "When Bad Sonny Liston Laid Down for Young Muhammad Ali," *New York Amsterdam News* 96.22 (26 May 2005) 10.
 17. A.J. Liebling, "Starting All Over Again," *The New Yorker* 10 August 1963, rpt. in *A Neutral Corner: Boxing Essays*, ed. Fred Warner and James Barbour (New York: North Point Press, 1996) 234-5.
 18. Norman Mailer, "Ego" *Life* 19 March 1971, rpt. in *The Muhammad Ali Reader*, ed. Gerald Early (New York: Rob Weisbach Books, 1999) 106.
 19. *Sonny Liston: The Mysterious Life and Death of a Champion*, videorecording, HBO Sports, 1995.
 20. Quoted in Nick Tosches, *The Devil and Sonny Liston* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 2000) 71.
 21. Dégh 4.
 22. William Nack, "O Unlucky Man," *Sports Illustrated* 4 February 1991: 66, *Academic Search Premier*, EBSCO, University of Maryland Libraries, College Park, MD, 30 Mar. 2006, <http://www.epnet.com/>>.
 23. A.S. "Doc" Young, *Sonny Liston: The Champ Nobody Wanted* (Chicago: Johnson Publishing Company, 1963) 72.
 24. Rob Steen. *Sonny Boy: The Life and Strife of Sonny Liston* (London: Methuen, 1993) 107.

25. Tosches 99.
26. Although not significantly taller or heavier than other fighters, Liston did possess a huge advantage in the length of his reach, a staggering eighty-four inches. Floyd Patterson's reach, for purposes of comparison, was a mere seventy-one inches; Muhammad Ali, though taller than Liston by two inches, had a reach of eighty inches. *BoxRec.com*, 30 Apr 2010, <http://www.boxrec.com>.
27. Leroi Jones, "The Dempsey-Liston Fight," *Home: Social Essays* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1966) 157.
28. Dégh 4-5.
29. Robert Hedin and Michael Waters, eds, *Perfect in their Art: Poems on Boxing from Homer to Ali* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois UP, 2003) 147.
30. Gary Short, "Flying Over Sonny Liston," *Flying Over Sonny Liston* (Reno: U of Nevada P, 1996) 54.
31. Mark Knopfler, "Song for Sonny Liston," *Shangri-La*, Warner Bros., 2004.
32. Steen 33.
33. Benjamin Filene, *Romancing the Folk: Public Memory and American Roots Music* (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 2000) 59.
34. The title of Leadbelly's 1992 biography makes clear the status of his story: Charles Wolfe and Kip Lornell, *The Life and Legend of Leadbelly* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992).
35. Hedin and Waters 202.
36. Loïc J.D. Wacquant, "The Pugilistic Point of View: How Boxers Think and Feel About Their Trade," *Theory and Society* 24 (1995) 492.
37. Young 121.
38. Filene 61. Note also Leadbelly's 1960 Folkways album, *Negro Folk Songs for Young People* (rereleased by Smithsonian Folkways in 2001 as *Leadbelly Sings for Children*.)
39. Nack.
40. Leroi Jones 48.
41. Singer Lena Horne reflected on Louis in her autobiography: "Joe was the one invincible Negro, the one who stood up to the white man and beat him down with his fists. He in a sense carried so many of our hopes, maybe even dreams of vengeance." Quoted in Chris Mead, *Champion: Joe Louis, Black Hero in White America* (New York: Scribner's, 1985) 198.
42. Leroi Jones 157.
43. Eldridge Cleaver, "Lazarus, Come Forth," *Soul on Ice* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1968) 92, 94.
44. Tosches 46.

45. Jaher 157.
46. Muhammad Ali with Richard Durham, *The Greatest: My Own Story* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1975) 102.
47. Tosches 134-6.
48. Nack.
49. James Baldwin, "The Fight: Patterson vs. Liston," *Nugget* February 1963, rpt. in *Antaeus* 62 (1989) 160.
50. Nathan Hare, "A Study of the Black Fighter," *Contemporary Black Thought: The Best from The Black Scholar*, ed. Robert Chrisman and Nathan Hare (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1973) 80.
51. Marquese 40.
52. Leroi Jones 160.
53. Patterson-Liston was not the first heavyweight championship match between two African-Americans. There had been three such fights between 1949 and 1951, two between Jersey Joe Walcott and Ezzard Charles and one between Charles and Joe Louis, and numerous fights between African-Americans in the lower weight classes. Yet in none of these prior fights did either champion or challenger engender the same hysterics as did Sonny Liston.
54. Tosches 159.
55. Ibid 160-61.
56. Quoted in Tosches 163.
57. Young 206-7.
58. Ibid 53.
59. Quoted in David Remnick, *King of the World: Muhammad Ali and the Rise of an American Hero* (New York: Random House, 1998) 45.
60. Oates 74.
61. Thom Jones, "Sonny Liston Was a Friend of Mine," *Sonny Liston Was a Friend of Mine: Stories* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1999) 21.
62. Brian DeVido, *Every Time I Talk to Liston* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2004) 41.
63. Ibid 175.
64. Ibid 5.
65. Whether the ointment was applied to Liston's shoulder or directly (illegally) to his gloves is yet another point in Liston's biography that may be lost forever. Ali's longtime physician Dr. Ferdie Pacheco points out that earlier Liston opponents Cleveland Williams and Eddie Machen complained of similar tactics by Liston's corner. See Ferdie Pacheco, *The 12 Greatest Rounds of Boxing: The Untold Stories* (New York: Total Sports, 2000) 102. In Thomas

Hauser's oral history, *Muhammad Ali: His Life and Times* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1991), however, the author quotes Ali's trainer Angelo Dundee: "To this day, nobody knows exactly what the problem was. It might have been liniment from Liston's shoulder. My guess is, it was the coagulant that his corner used on the cuts. Probably, Cassius got the solution on his gloves, and when he brushed them against his forehead, it left a layer of something that trickled down with the perspiration into his eyes." (75)

66. See Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, 2nd ed. (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1968): "Such custodians bound the world in four directions...standing for the limits of the hero's present sphere, or life horizon. Beyond them is darkness, the unknown, and danger; just as beyond the parental watch is danger to the infant and beyond the protection of his society danger to the member of the tribe." (77-8) Thomas Hauser identifies Ali's blind fourth and fifth rounds, in particular, as a major milestone. By sending his blinded fighter out for the fifth round with instructions to "run," Angelo Dundee "saved Muhammad Ali's career because, given the social and political climate of the time, if Cassius Clay quits, he loses the fight; he never becomes Muhammad Ali; he never gets another chance to fight for the championship; and boxing history, maybe even world history, turns out differently." Pacheco 102.
67. Steen 182.
68. Jaher 170.
69. Quoted in Jaher 171.
70. Carter 10.
71. Tosches 224.
72. Remnick quotes Muhammad Ali: "I grew to love the Jack Johnson image...I wanted to be rough, tough, arrogant, the nigger white folks didn't like." 224.
73. Ali and Dorson 136.
74. Carter 10.
75. Phil Ochs, "The Ballad of Sonny Liston," *Phil Ochs Lyrics Index*, 1997, Maseeh College of Engineering and Computer Science, Penn State University, 18 Jul. 2009. <<http://web.cecs.pdx.edu/~trent/ochs/lyrics.html>>
76. Hedin and Waters 145.
77. Short 54.
78. Hedin and Waters 202.
79. Young 42.
80. Ibid 59.
81. *Sonny Liston: The Mysterious Life and Death of a Champion*, videorecording, HBO Sports, 1995.
82. DeVido 5.

83. Hedin and Waters 145.

84. Nack.

85. Baldwin 159.

Contributor's Notes

Most recently, **Andrew Brininstool's** work has appeared in *New South*, *Quick Fiction*, and the anthology, *Best New American Voices 2010*. His stories have also received the Sherwood Anderson Fiction Award from *Mid-American Review*, the Editors' Prize from */nor* and runner-up notation from *Playboy's* college fiction contest.

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