

HE MOVES LIKE SILK, HITS LIKE A TON

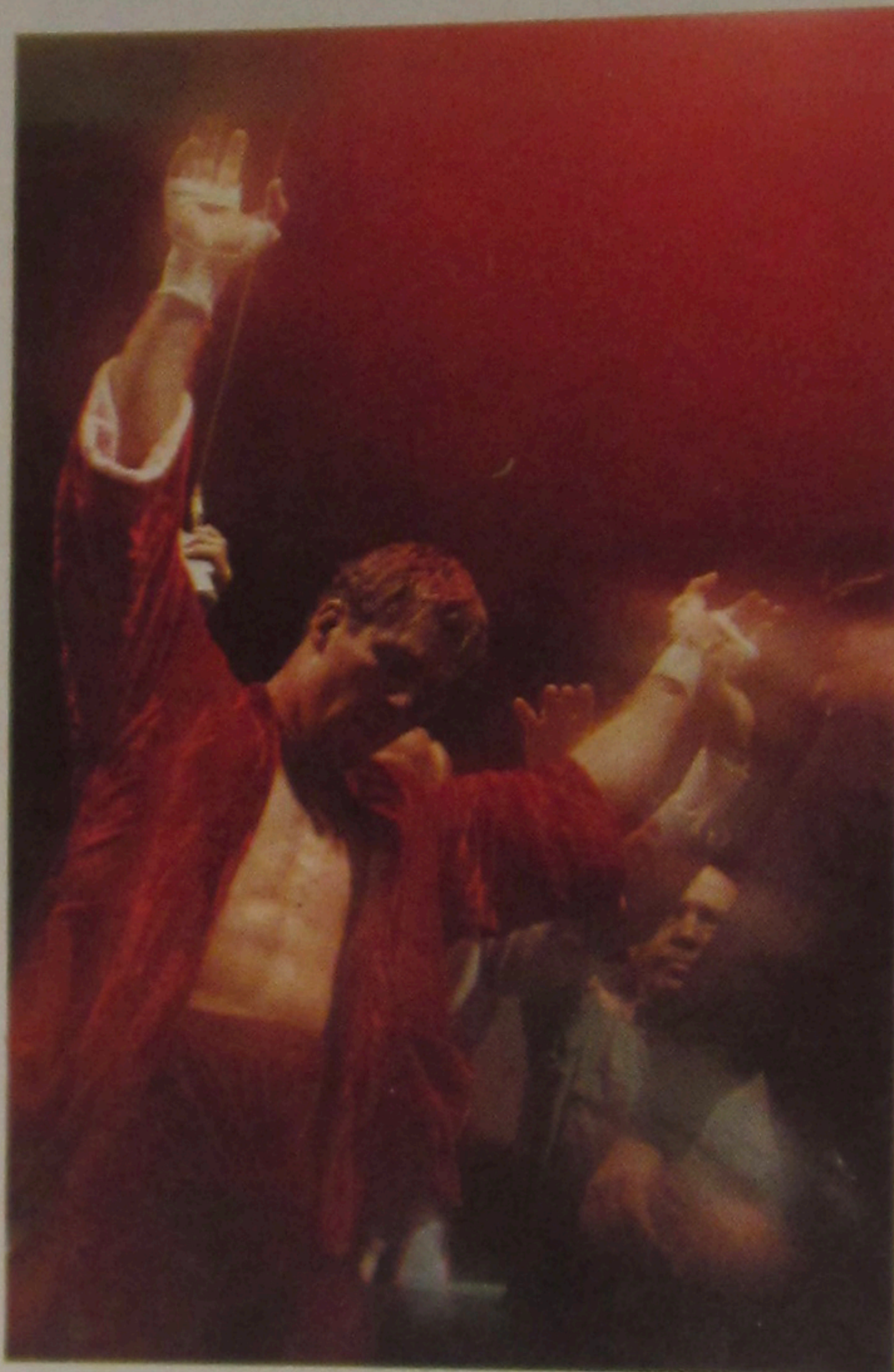
In short, Muhammad resembles the Ali of old, which means Jerry Quarry should expect to have a hard night of it in Atlanta by MARK KRAM

Move back time two years to a windy fall day on Broadway. Muhammad Ali is strolling along, signing autographs, and generally succeeding in turning a simple walk into an event. Suddenly he starts sprinting down the street and screaming: "Jack Johnson! JACK JOHNNNSON!" He had caught a glimpse of James Earl Jones, the powerful lead in the drama *The Great White Hope*. Reaching Jones, he shouts: "The line! Gimme the line." Startled, Jones puts down his shopping bag full of books and, summoning a vast wave of defiance, recreates Jack Jefferson, the name given Jack Johnson in the play's script. Damning his oppressors and telling them that if they want his title they will have to come to Mexico and fight for it, Jones holds his fists over his head and rages into the Broadway wind: "Here . . . I . . . is!"

"That's the line," cries Ali, laughing and slapping his sides. "That's it. That's me. You can see it's me, can't you?"

"Yes, Muhammad," says Jones, "that is you."

"Oh Lord, brother, you're too much," says Ali. "Isn't that somethin'? You're here doin' this Jack Johnson story at the same time they steal my title from me, just like they did Johnson. History all over again. Except I'm a clean Jack Johnson. They can't say I mess with white women, or drink whiskey or go to them nightclubs. See, there's nothin' dirty they can lay on me. I'm the clean All-American image. They can't say I'm bad and that makes 'em angry. They know I'm not gonna lose my title in the ring. Now that drives 'em out of their mind. So they take my license away. Now ain't that somethin'? As if a little old boxin' license is important. I'm fightin' for 22 million black people. I'm fightin' for their freedom, and that's really



Quarry represents the end of exile to Ali.

big. I ain't losin' nothin', but gainin' the world."

Nothing is the same anymore, not even the king of the world himself, the only champion whose title seemed to have a quality of the universal, or, as Bundini Brown calls him: the Blessing of the Planet. "Everything changes," says Muhammad Ali. "Governments change, kings fall, people change. I've changed." He sits in the back room of the Fifth Street Gym in Miami Beach, back where he began 10 years before, once again, so it seems, one with the thin coat of dust on the windows, the dirt neatly piled in corners, that smell of dead dreams. "It's been so long," he says, beginning to dress. "I never thought I'd be back again, here again. Back in my old life again. All those years."

The gym and its people mark the

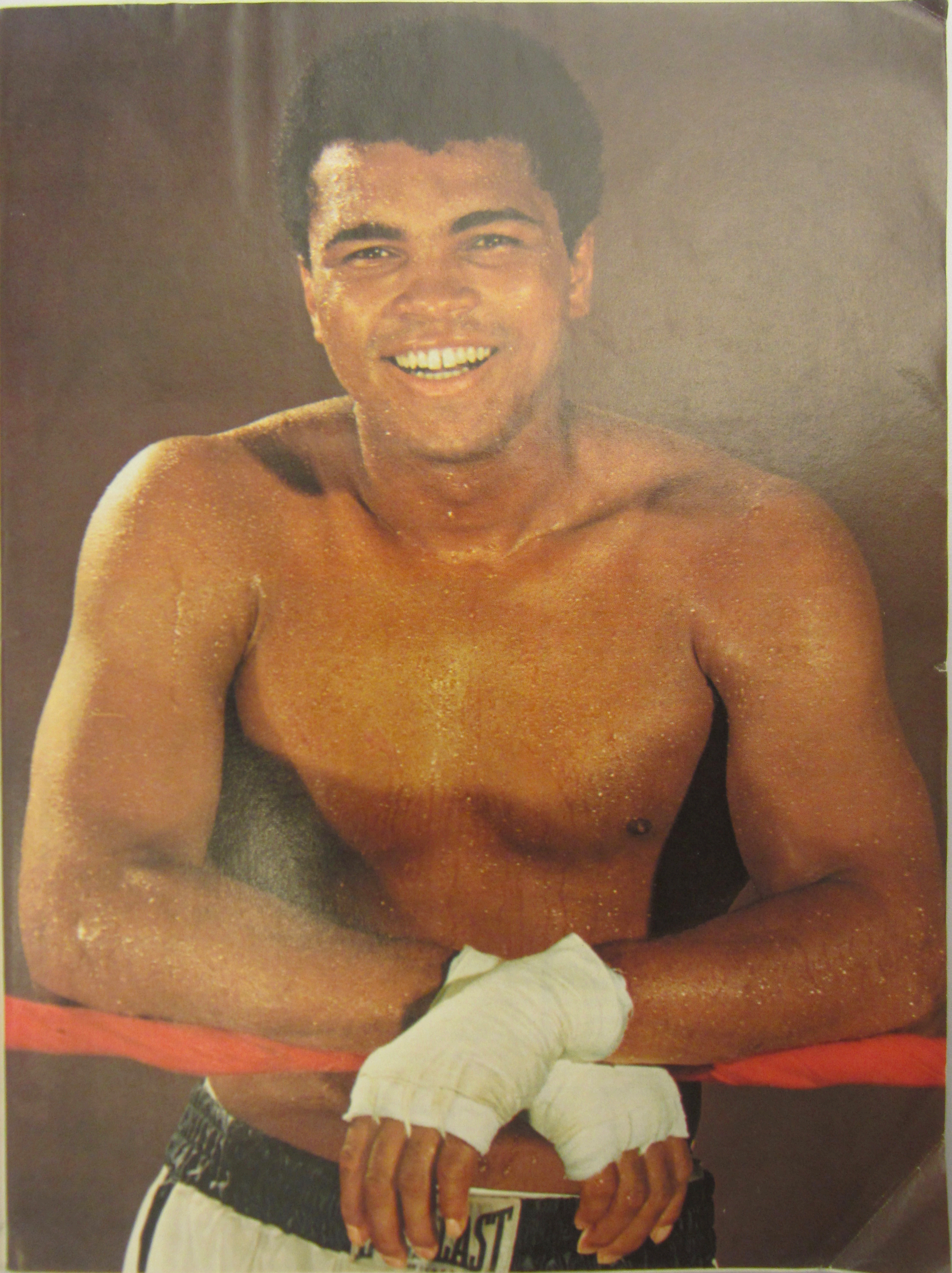
stretch of time. The posters on freshly painted walls of cheap whitewash tell of new names and where they have been, and an American flag frames the dressing room door. The old face of Luis Rodriguez, with its wondrous nose, is now an old, old face. The look of Angelo Dundee, the only constant figure in Ali's professional history, is one of weariness, of too many nights in too many corners in too many faraway places. Even Bundini seems worn, no longer ageless or robustly emotional. Only Muhammad, the visual Muhammad, seems to have taken Time and held it off by the throat, the condition of his body now dramatically saying what he will not say: "Here . . . I . . . really is!"

The dressing room door swings open, and out move Bundini and Ali. Bundini sings: "Look out, give him room. Here he come now, the king of alllll he see." Muhammad moves in front of a mirror, looks long and hard at himself and then begins. Jab, jab, jab, dance, quick shuffle, several trunk twists and then, coming out of the twists, the jabs explode again, and then three rights within a microsecond. Jumping into the ring, he works 10 rounds with two sparring partners, concentrating on fluidity of movement, and absorbing punishment to the body. "Like lightning," says Dundee. "Big man . . . he moves like silk, hits like a ton."

Ollie Wilson, who has spent a lifetime in gyms, says, "He's like nobody else I've ever seen. Like no other fighter in the history of the world. Gone three and a half years, and nobody can touch him. Just a few weeks back in the gym, and nobody can touch him. He does what he wants in a ring. He trains the way he wants. He's the only one in the gym that doesn't wear gloves on the bag, and he's never had any real trouble with his hands. Everyone else drinks hot tea right after a workout, but not him. Ali, he'd rather have a large glass of ice water. He'll lay over the ropes day after day and allow the sparring partners to beat him to the body, and as a result he takes the best body shot I've ever seen. You got to say the big man knows what he's doin'." I don't

continued

No longer jowly or flabby, Ali relishes his remarkably speedy return to fighting trim.



know what makes him what he is. He's human, but hey—maybe he ain't."

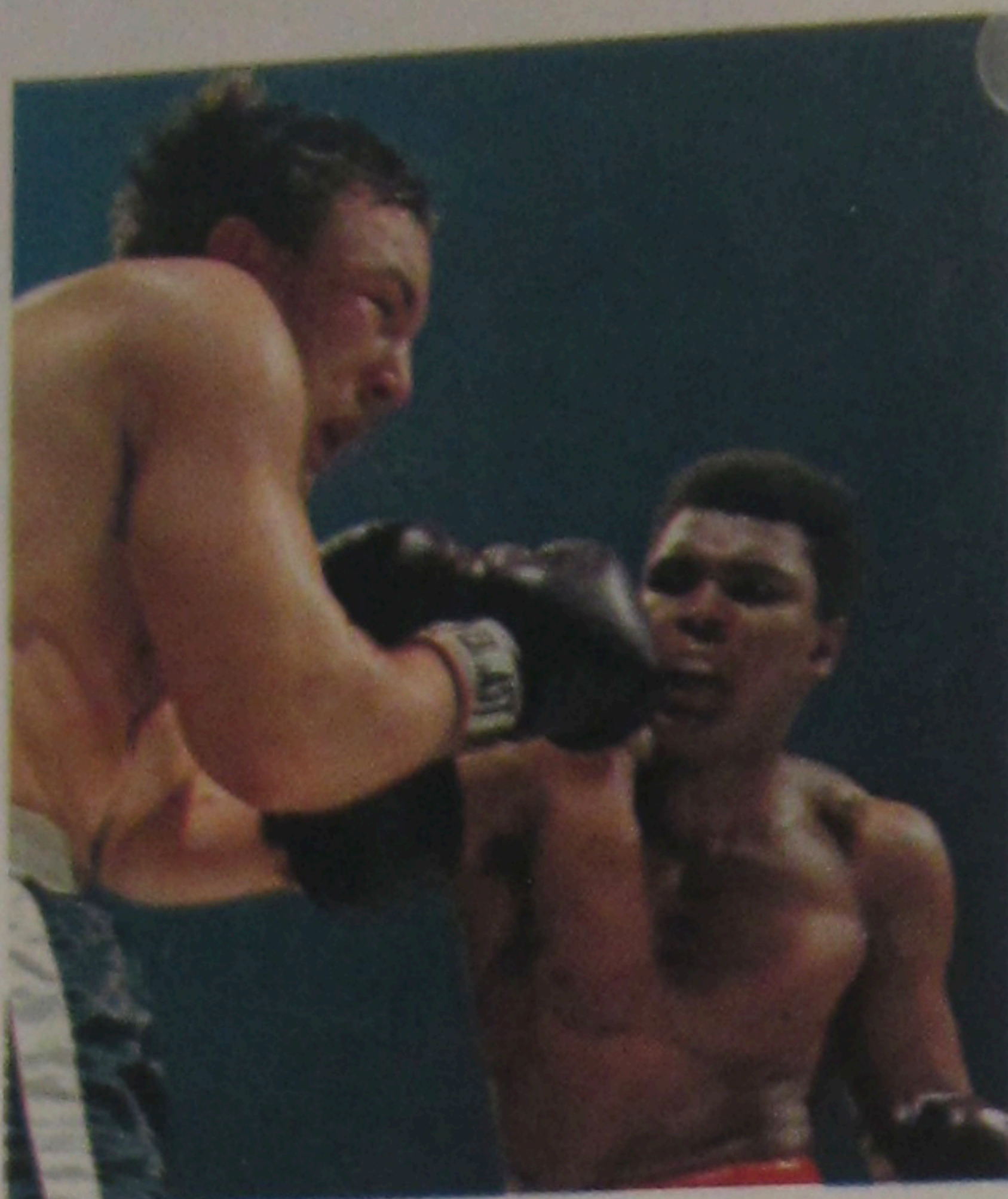
Finished for the day that began at 5 a.m. with six miles of roadwork, his weight now down to a hard 214 pounds, he returns to his small, dim hotel on the ocean, an obscure Jewish retreat during religious holidays where old women sit rocking and looking on the porch and others sit nodding in a half-sleep in the lobby. It is here that he prepares his own dinner, spends almost all of his time in his room where—usually in a Muslim robe, and hands extended—he prays toward the East three times a day. It is an ascetic atmosphere, one that reflects the immense sacrifice being endured by a man who cannot stand restraint of any sort. To help himself, he repeatedly gazes at a picture taped to a mirror. It is a picture of Ali taken five years ago before the second Liston fight.

Interrupting his deep study of himself on the mirror, Muhammad asks an old trainer in the room: "How you fight Quarry?" The trainer looks at Angelo Dundee. "Yeah, you answer him, that's what I want, somebody else to give him an opinion," says Dundee. "You beat Quarry with the jab," says the old man. "What else do you do?" presses Dundee. "Always move behind the jab and don't come straight at him when he's in the corner," replies the trainer. "That's it!" shouts Dundee. "The left handles Quarry. Bob-bop-bop, slip, slide, move out. But you don't fall in. Then Quarry's dangerous, a short, quick, hard counter puncher with either hand. Keep him in the middle of the ring and make him lead. Then he reaches, lunges with his punches." Muhammad mutters "un-huh," and returns to the picture.

"That's when I was at my top condition," Ali says, looking at it, then measuring his sides with his hands, pinching the small amount of extra flesh on his stomach and checking his jowls. "See how narrow and trim I was. Maybe I'll never look like that again. My weight's not much different, but everything else is broader, fuller, my face, my arms, my legs. How do I look? Am I trim?" He is, he says, ready for what he calls his day of judgment. "I run harder, sacrifice more. There'll be no mistakes preparin' for this fight.

"I'm crazy with loneliness, though," he says. "Durin' all the years I was away, I was never lonely. Oh, I had a ball, drivin' to the colleges and stayin' at the

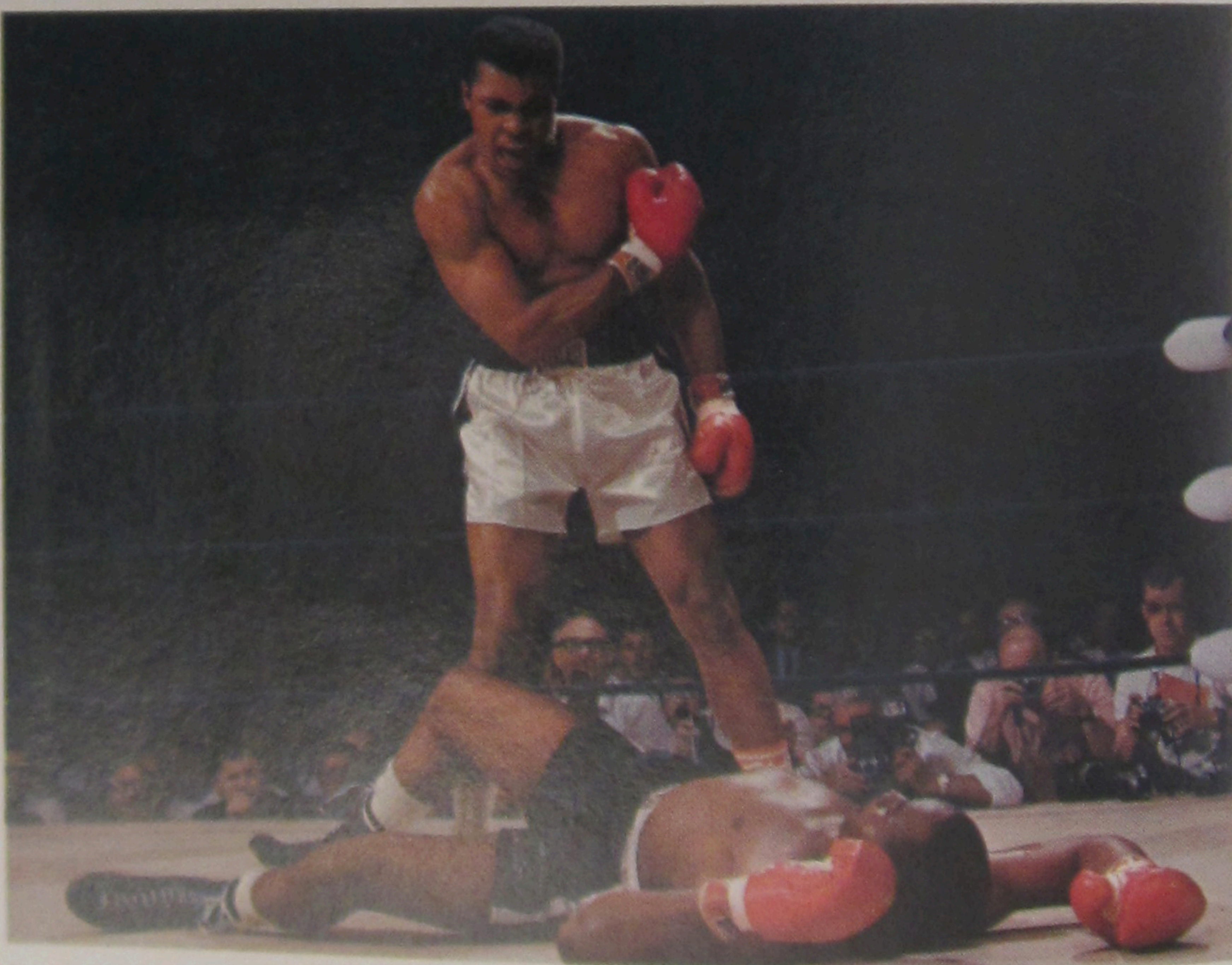
THIS WAS ALI AS THE UNDEFEATED CHAMPION



One of the few he never floored was Chivalo, but he pounded him for 15 rounds.



Knockout of Folley in March 1967 was Ali's last defense before his banishment.



The first-round execution of Liston in Maine led to this famous photograph.



Bigger, stronger and faster, Ali seemed to be amusing himself with Patterson.

inns and meetin' students, the black power groups, the white hippies, and we'd all have sessions on what we was gonna talk about and dinner was then planned in the hall, and we'd go to the student union buildin' and have the meetin' and they'd ask me questions, all the boys and girls, black and white. Like what should we do, or what do you think is gonna happen here, you know—just like I was one of those sleepy-lookin' Senators up in the capital. Now I'm just all by myself. Up at 5, to bed by 10 at night. No lunch, no breakfast, my stomach burnin' with hunger, fightin' temptation, women of all races callin' me on the phone, and the only thing keepin' me from goin' out that window there is thinkin' of that short walk to the ring, and all those faces there, lookin' at me and sayin': 'Why it's a miracle! He looks sooooo beautiful.'

"They're all waitin' for me. Fans call me up, write me letters, telling me they worry about me, like will I or won't I be able to beat Jerry Quarry. The great Joe Louis got beat when they brought him out of retirement to fight Ezzard Charles and Jim Jeffries got whupped by Jack Johnson. People tell me it can't be done. You can't come back. I git letters from black brothers beggin' me to be careful. Like Quarry's too tough, he's been active and Ali you've been away too long. Take another fight first, they say. All that just makes me more stubborn, and I know I've got to do it. And all those people who say I was over-rated before, and that Jerry Quarry will prove it now. All this leaves no time for poems, jokes and gimmicks. Nobody has to tell me this is serious business.

"I'm not just fightin' one man, I'm fightin' a lot of men, showin' a lot of 'em here is one man they couldn't defeat, couldn't conquer, one they didn't see get big and fat and flat on his back. Lose this one and Quarry'll be a movie star. By beatin' me, he'll be so valuable. He'll be in big cinemas, probably playin' in a top Western, the man who defeated Muhammad Ali. Like the man who shot Liberty Valance. He'll be a great man. It won't be just a loss to me. So many people'll be rejoicin' and jumpin' up and down and hollerin' and just rollin' under beds and chairs. Then again, so many millions of faces throughout the world will be sad, so sad they'll feel like they've been defeated. All of this, just over a bout. If I lose I'll be in

jail for the rest of my life. If I lose I will not be free. I'll have to listen to all this about how I was a bum, I was fat, I joined the wrong movement, they misled me. So I'm fightin' for my freedom.

"I don't anger toward the commissioners, or the American Legion, or the Foreign Legion, or all those arena owners. They did what they thought was right according to their beliefs. I don't resent them. If a man is a real athlete he don't get mad because another man wins. He had his chance and lost. I've always felt like that. Nobody ever heard me protest over losin' in anything. I don't regret the past, never been disappointed. I wasn't dependin' on plays [he was in *Buck White*] or that computer fight with Marciano, or boxin', or court decisions to determine my life. It's Allah, it's God, and what he wants. Whatever Allah wills is gonna happen, and I just try to please Allah, even if it means this man's law is broken, or this man's gonna put me on the firin' squad. That's all right, just so I'm right with Allah and the Islamic law."

[Ali says his most serious mistake was displeasing Elijah Muhammad, which quickly drew censure from Elijah, "because he showed more love for the ring of sport than he has for the circle of Islam, which he had been preaching as a minister. I had told him that Allah said he would give us money, good homes, friendships and all good things. Well, Muhammad Ali disbelieved Him. I will allow him to return when his morals change!"]

It is difficult, even more so than ever before, to extract what really is on Ali's mind as he begins to write another page in his history that far transcends the dimensions of a ring. The suspension by Elijah seems to have jolted him into extreme caution; a need and desire for money so that he can ensure the future of his family seems to have made him conscious of the practical aspects of the world. Where he was once one of the indefatigable consumers anywhere, a one-man war against recession, he now behaves like a careful prince of commerce. Even his camp, once so virulent with contempt for others, is of a different character. Cap'n Sam, Ali's bodyguard and inspired white hater, is gone, and Ali's craftily obedient brother is obviously absent. Only Bundini, his phrasemaker and "witch doctor," remains.

"All I think about now," says Ali,

"is providing for my family so they won't have it as difficult as I did. So my three little darling girls can git a good education and learn from the beginning how to read and spell. Not like me."

That quote, it seems, would never have come from the man who was, many believed, the first symptom of a national nervous breakdown, a man who was swept by a movement out of the boxing arena and carried along as a symbol of black nationalism and antiwar sentiment. The swift pace of events and currents of thought have certainly altered that picture of Ali. For one thing, by the present climate of black radicalism, Ali is a moderate, and the Muslims are hardly revolutionary. Muhammad avoids discussion of the politics of his past, or the sometimes gross character he brought to his fights. Like the clever dramatist he is, Ali is creating a new theme for his fight with Quarry, totally parallel to the onetime hysterical brashness versus malevolence (Sonny Liston); the holy wars (Terrell and Patterson); and finally, the black prince on the lam (Mildenberger, Cooper and London). Nostalgically, he says, "The artist returns, like, say, what ya call him . . . yeah, Rimbrindt back from exile."

For all the impossible contradictions that he is, considering his penchant for saying what he does not think, one guess is that some change *has* occurred within Ali. Yet it is of a strain that is hard to grasp, and it is unlikely that even he himself can define it. Who knows what his innate gift for bombast and drama will visit upon us next? Only this seems clear—his impatience for the hunt again. Perhaps the lines of Saint-Exupéry relate to what is on his mind. Quoting a gardener, Saint-Exupéry wrote "You know, I used to sweat sometimes when I was digging. My rheumatism would pull at my leg, and I would damn myself for a slave. And now, do you know, I'd like to spade and spade. It's beautiful work. A man is free when he is using a spade."

Or then again, it could simply be that Ali finally understands the exchange he once had with Herbert Muhammad, son of Elijah. "I am looking for Allah to do something," he said to Herbert. "I am his servant. *Allah*, they're punishing your *servant!*" Herbert replied "Yes, Ali, Allah will provide. We also believe, you know, that Allah helps those who help themselves." END