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A Night with Ali

Stephen Orlov '71 recalls being host to—and provoking—“the Champ”

By Stephen Orlov '71

There will never be another like him. And I had the good fortune of sharing a memorable night with the Champ, the greatest sports figure in modern history, at the height of his boxing prowess and controversial career.

Muhammad Ali was then out on bail for dodging the draft. He had been stripped of his heavyweight title, banished from the ring, and he needed money for legal fees. The Champ was touring college campuses across America, lecturing mostly white students about his Muslim faith and the sins of racism at home and war abroad.

I was president of the sophomore and junior classes at Colby, and Ali was my top choice for our annual class speaker that March of 1970. From the moment I had first watched the young cocky boxer on the Ed Sullivan Show skipping rope and brashly spouting in rhyme poetic victory predictions about his upcoming match, he became my sports hero. His charisma in and out of the ring was captivating. Ali's stand against racism and the Vietnam War later inspired my student activism as a leader of the anti-war strike at Colby, provoked six weeks after his visit to our campus by the shootings at Kent State.

Wadsworth Gymnasium was packed that night, and a crowd of students, professors, and town folks who couldn't get a seat stood outside weathering the cold to hear him speak on outdoor loudspeakers set up for the event. The only problem was I couldn't find Ali.

Ali first claimed the heavyweight title with his shocking knockout of Sonny Liston in 1964, the same year Dylan released his protest anthem *The Times They Are a-Changin'*, and 15 months after, he beat Liston again in nearby Lewiston. By the time Ali came to Colby five years later, a tidal wave of counter-cultural rebellion had engulfed the country, empowering the great social movements of the day—civil rights and anti-war; native and gay rights; the United Farm Workers' boycott, feminism and Earth-Day environmentalism.

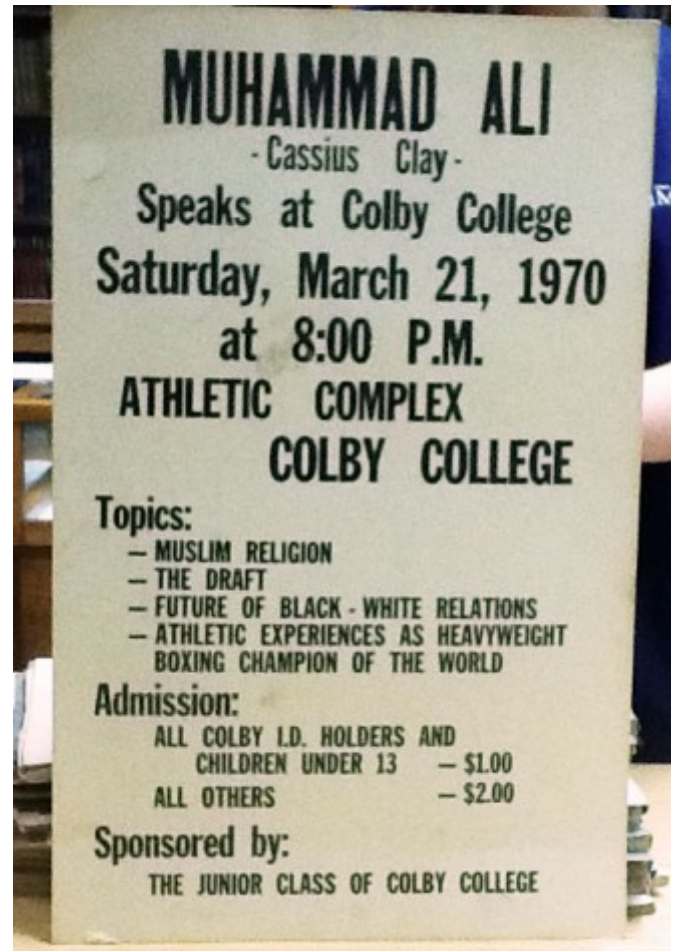
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The Champ didn't like flying, so I had been informed by his booking agent, who charged a thousand dollars for the speaking engagement, that Ali would arrive by car at the local Holiday Inn three hours before the evening speech. I went to the hotel, whose huge neon sign said "Welcome Muhammad Ali!" Thirty minutes ticked off my watch, then 45; finally an hour later, I called the only other hotel in town and sure enough the Champ had just arrived with his entourage of fellow Black Muslim men and women packed into two limousines. I rushed over and met Ali, just as he and his companions were sitting down for a meal at two large round tables.

I must admit I was star-struck, sitting across from my larger-than-life hero, barely muttering a few words to "Mr. Ali," as we dined over a huge meal he ordered for all. When we finished eating, Ali stood up as the hotel manager came over with the bill and said proudly, "I can't thank you enough for dining at our hotel. It's been a great honor to serve you." The Champ replied with a gracious smile, "It's been my pleasure," and promptly walked out without paying the bill. As we departed, I glanced back at the dumbfounded manager, bill in hand, frozen on his spot.

When we arrived at the gym, the crowd was buzzing with anticipation. I knew exactly how I would introduce the Champ. I began with a few rarely quoted lines from Abraham Lincoln's 1858 senatorial debate speech in Charleston, Ill., expressing emphatically that he never believed in equality between the white and black races. Then I simply added, "Ladies and gentlemen, Mr. Muhammad Ali." The Champ rose to a rousing ovation and pulled a speech from his suit pocket, which he never looked at during his hour-long oration, peppered with improvised commentary decrying white racism and support for the Black Muslim cause.

When I stood up to chair the Q&A, I felt tiny next to the towering 6'3" Champ. After a half hour, with great trepidation I took the liberty of posing the last question. *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, based on Alex Haley's interviews with the American Muslim minister and human rights activist who allegedly had been assassinated on orders of Nation of Islam founder Elijah Muhammad, had a formative impact on my life, and I was determined to ask Ali what he thought of those murder allegations against his leader. He turned toward me with a scowl and called me a white honky "this and that," scolding me and the racist media for making such



spurious charges. He said, "I loved Malcolm like a brother, but he was wrong to turn against our esteemed spiritual leader." I wasn't exactly shaking in my boots, but I kept my eye on his clenched right fist.

The 20 or so black students enrolled at Colby had requested front-row seats. Two weeks earlier, they had occupied the College's Lorimer Chapel in protest, demanding more affirmative-action policies and the hiring of a black professor to teach African-American History. When Ali finished his speech, he agreed to meet with the group in a private room. I accompanied the group and sat down among them—until I realized their prolonged silence signaled I didn't belong. I left without saying a word and waited outside to say goodbye to the Champ. Afterwards, Ali hopped into his limo and off he went without spending the night.

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Ali went on to claim the heavyweight title a record three times and became a legend in and out of the ring. The man risked years of imprisonment for his beliefs and his principles, sacrificing his championship crown, the most glamorous in all of sports back then, and millions of dollars that came with it; a far cry from so many sports "heroes" today, who'd rather peddle their trademark shoes than comment on the pressing social issues of our day.

The young boxer who threw his Olympic gold medal into a river as a personal sign of protest against racism in his country became the greatest sports ambassador in American history. He was the most recognizable person on the planet, a champion of peace, justice, and respect for the disabled, inspiring millions across the globe. Like all iconic activists, he provoked society to change toward his call.

Ali was not a saint; he was a complex hero, a product of turbulent times who dared put his career and his freedom on the line to challenge the power brokers of his day. Over the years, as his body and his voice deteriorated from Parkinson's, his social activism continued, marked by a generosity of spirit that spoke eloquently to our humanity. And now in death, his legacy will live on, spanning generations to come.

Stephen Orlov '71 is a Boston-born award-winning playwright whose plays have been showcased in such theater centers as Montreal, Chicago, and London. His allegorical-comedy play Freeze, set during the Great Ice Storm of 1998, has just been published by Guernica Editions. Orlov has recently served on the boards of Playwrights Guild of Canada and Playwrights Canada Press, which in September will publish his play Sperm Count in Double Exposure: Plays of the Jewish and Palestinian Diasporas. At Colby he was president of his sophomore and junior classes and student government.

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