

Pretty, Fast, and Loud: The Audible Ali

Tara

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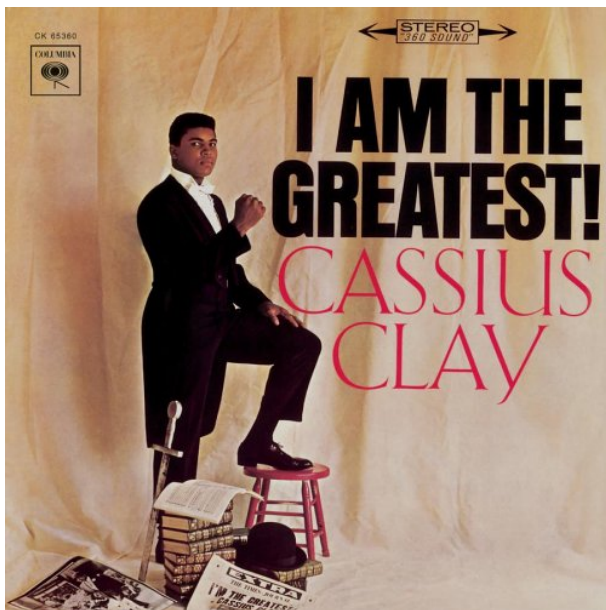
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Abstract

Aaaaaaaaaaaaaand NOW. . .in SO!'s corner. . .writing for this month's "Sound and Sport," we have the scholar. . .the poet . . .the "Wordsmith of the Web" Taaaaaaaaaara Betts!

Keywords

Music (Subfield), American Studies, Archival, Article, Black Studies, Identity



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Aaaaaaaaaaaaaand NOW. . .in SO!'s corner. . .writing for this month's "Sound and Sport," we have the scholar. . .the poet . . .the "Wordsmith of the Web" **Taaaaaaaaaaaaara Betts!**

In today's post, she shares how listening influences her creative process AND knocks us out with an analysis of the importance of Muhammad Ali's voice to his sports career and historical legacy.

For an instant replay of last month's post, click **Melissa Helquist's** "[Goalball: Sport, Silence, and Spectatorship](#)." Next month's rematch will feature **Josh Ottum's** research on sound and skateparks. But now, let's get ready to ruuuuuuuuummbbble! —**J. Stoevers-Ackerman, Editor-in-Chief**

Plap of glove against glove

Shush of scuffle and slide.

Rebuildin', repeatin', rebuildin'

All this repeatin', getting' up again & again

Discipline, routine and I keep

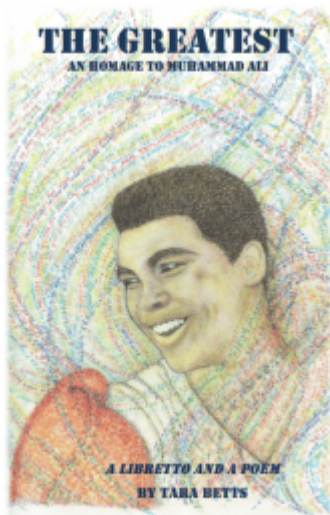
doing new things to prepare

my mind, my body, so my pretty

mouth keeps up with all my rhymes.

*—Tara Betts, from "Repeatin'" (scene 8, **The GREATEST!**)*

The recent Peggy Choy Dance Company [production of "The GREATEST!: A Hip Dance Homage to Muhammad Ali" in April 2013](#) gave me cause to rethink the key events in Muhammad Ali's life, particularly his burgeoning political awareness in the 1960s. As I wrote the libretto for the performance—which combined athletic dance performance with images, poems, and quotes from Ali—I kept thinking about how Ali had one of the most recognized, quoted, and distinct voices ever heard in the boxing world.



In the libretto, I tried to capture the nuances of black vernacular and the southern hallmark of Ali's hometown, Louisville, Kentucky (he was sometimes referred to as the "Louisville Lip"), vocal sounds that signify an African American experience. Is there a southern drawl? A bass-filled bravado? There are certain words that sound fuller and cut short based on the vernacular that was spoken during the time period of Cassius Clay and well into his evolution as Muhammad Ali. While many of the materials that I visited for inspiration and historical context were books, to capture the look, feel, and speech of the 1960s and 1970s, I had to crate-dig for some vinyl.

A copy of a 1963 spoken word album *I Am The Greatest!*: Cassius Clay and the 1997 documentary film *When We Were Kings* served as two such sources. Both recordings represent an audible Ali, at once a man whose iconic voice sounded as familiar to me as people who I've known personally and a historical figure whose vocal grain content embodied his shifts in political consciousness. The difference between Clay's 1964 recording and the samples woven into the *When We Were Kings* soundtrack is more than the changes that gradually developed over time. These recordings reveal how Ali's confidence is constructed around creating an affirming, critical identity, rather than merely promoting his athletic prowess. At first, he merely sounds cocky; later he sounds as if he is fighting for a group of people that he wants to inform, serve, celebrate, protect, and uphold. My libretto was deeply impacted both by the sonic continuities in Ali's voice across time and space, as well as its audible shifts.

The champ ain't nobody but me!

Pretty, fast & loud, I'll shake the world,

with a lion's might.

My children will lift

their fists and fight

—Tara Betts, from "By Any Means necessary: If they met in Harlem" (transition from scene 14, The GREATEST!)

Before Cassius Clay joined the Nation of Islam and changed his name to Muhammad Ali, he recorded a spoken word album on the Sony label in 1963. *I Am The Greatest!* was released in 1964 before Clay's two key fights with Sonny Liston and Ali's eventual victory for the heavyweight crown. The album included [original liner notes from modernist poet Marianne Moore](#) and New York Post sports journalist Milton Gross, but it was telling that comedy writer Gary Belkin and Cassius Clay were the co-authors of the spoken word material—which is more comedy than poetry or interviews. Belkin was a comedy writer for well-known comedians such as Carol Burnett and Sid Caesar, and the comedy show *Car 54, Where Are You?* So, Belkin was clearly accustomed to writing sketch comedy, but Clay was used to being humorous outside of a recording studio with a staged audience.



Overall, Clay's delivery seems to be slower—both less fluid and more staged—than his impromptu recitations at boxing-related events outside the recording studio. Clay seems to anticipate that sound effects such as roaring crowds and clanging bells will be inserted into the tracks, so he over-enunciates and pauses. Each track begins with a bell ringing as if boxing round is about to begin, and there are eight “rounds,” probably because Clay insisted that any fight with Liston would be shorter than eight rounds. As I listened, I wondered if Ali was comfortable recording this album or if he considered it simply another way to promote and market one of the world's best known boxers? To my ear, it lacked some of the speed and ease I associate with Clay's speech in other settings. In the boxing world, his speeches mentally challenged his opponents and

entertained crowds. The recording studio left less room for spontaneity, fluidity, and even the visual interplay of sound with his quick motion.

Cassius Clay in the studio recording I Am the Greatest! with Sam Cooke, Image from newblackman.blogspot, courtesy of Michael Ochs Archives/Getty Images";"created_timestamp":"0";"copyright":"","focal_length":"0";"iso":"0";"shutter_speed":"0";"title":""}" data-image-title="Sam_Cooke" data-image-description="

UNSPECIFIED – MARCH 03: Photo of Sam Cooke. (Photo by Michael Ochs Archives/Getty Images)

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Cassius Clay in the studio recording I Am the Greatest! with Sam Cooke, Image from newblackman.blogspot, courtesy of Michael Ochs Archives/Getty Images

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Cassius Clay in the studio recording I Am the Greatest! with Sam Cooke, Image from newblackman.blogspot, courtesy of Michael Ochs Archives/Getty Images

The eight rounds/comedic sketches lean heavily on Ali's signature boisterous braggadocio in his loud, deliberate voice, using canned laughter and other voices setting up Clay to talk about his excellence. Otherwise, they are a grab bag of influences and sound effects. These other voices and sounds create an artificial environment that is not the same as being surrounded by boxers, trainers, and others in the athletic arena. In fact, these sounds and the sources sound quite different from Clay himself. "Round 1: I Am The Greatest" and "Round 2: I Am The Double Greatest" are accompanied by violins that sound more like a serenade than a classical composition. In "Round 4: 'I Have Written A Drama,' He Said Playfully," a lute plays in the beginning that hints at a spoof of a Shakespearean-style drama about defeating dragons complete with affected British accents, including one actor speaking with the theatrical lisp. The knight "Cassius of Clay" enters with the audible clanking of armor.

https://soundstudiesblog.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/04-round-4_-_i-have-written-a-drama_he-said-playfully.mp3

Clay reveals a shift in tone when he sings on the last two tracks. He begins with “Stand By Me”—a cover of Ben E. King’s classic song/then recent hit—with fervor. In the last song, “The Gang’s All Here,” Clay follows some of the words of Tin Pan Alley lyricist Theodora Morse set to Sullivan’s tune from *Pirates of Penzance*.



https://youtu.be/E03mTh5_We4

Clay tries to pick up the energy lost by his less-than-enthusiastic singing. “Is Memphis with me? Is Louisville with me? Is Houston with me. Ain’t I purty?” Each question is answered with a crowd enthusiastically shouting a “Yeah!” Here Ali relies on his enthusiastic, improvised rhymes, departing from the song’s traditional lyrics to include himself in a song that does not come from an African American writer or the Black experience.

The same country that refuses to let people eat

or use the bathroom in the same places

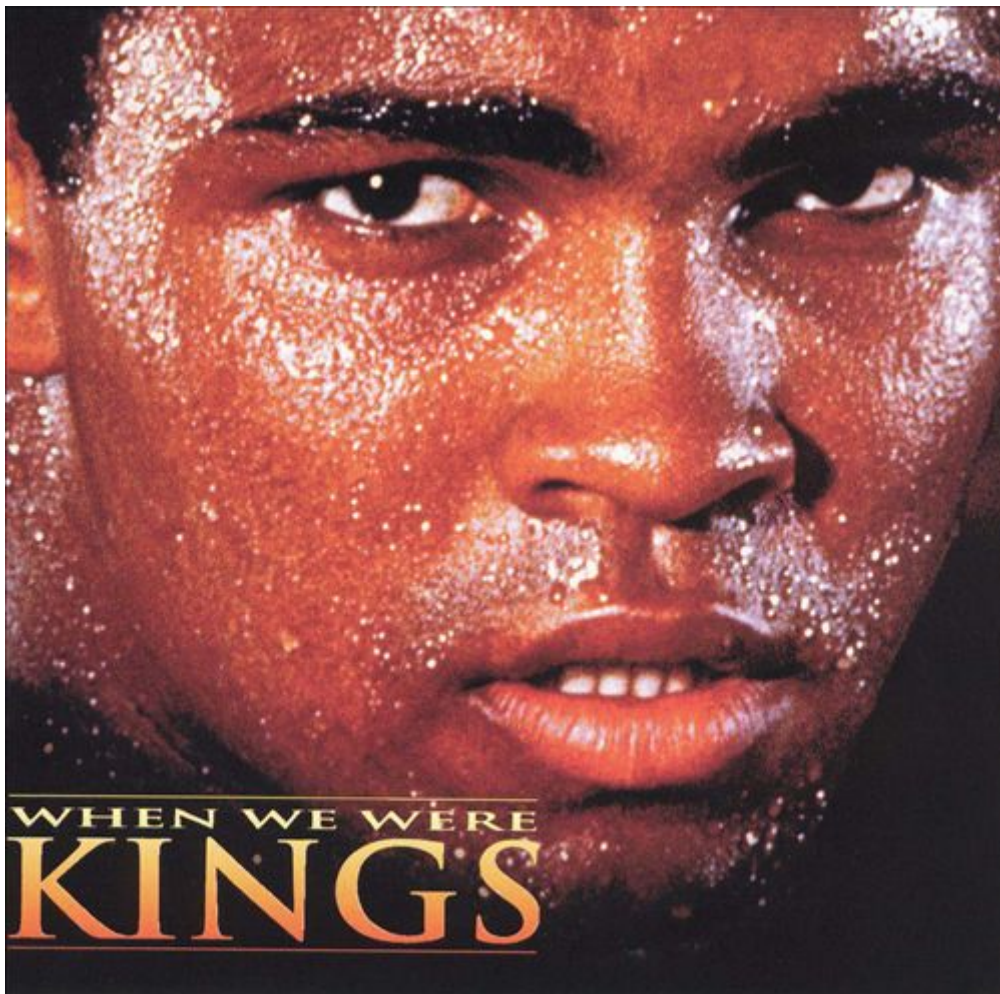
wants ME to go and get killed?

What does THAT sound like?

—Tara Betts, from “The Same Country” (scene 15, *The GREATEST!*)

Almost 35 years later, there are clear sonic differences between Cassius Clay’s debut on Sony and the soundtrack to [When We Were Kings](#), the 1997 documentary of the 1974 heavyweight championship between George Foreman and Muhammad Ali. This retrospective record is decidedly more centered on black experiences and black voices that speak musically, politically, and spiritually, particularly about the Black presence in Islam. There are no comedic monologues, sketches or Greek choruses; it sonically represents Ali after his conversion to orthodox Islam, after his friendship with and separation from Malcolm X, and after his opposition to Vietnam. Every

spoken part on this album affirms the multiplicities of a Black presence in blues, R&B, and songs recorded live on the African continent; the huffs and rhymes are cheered for by a live African audience. As I listened to *When We Were Kings*, I could hear Ali's comfort and his freedom of movement, audibly in contrast with his other album.



When We Were Kings records his time in Kinshasa, Zaire where he trains and eventually fights George Foreman. It does not simply focus on Ali's voice, but is sonically rich with music, interviews with people who witnessed that fight and those who knew Ali personally; the soundtrack reflects these interconnections in its continuous uninterrupted flow. The role of these sounds endeavors to document what was heard in Zaire in 1974, but it also includes Ali in the surrounding sonic environment as one person who becomes a focal point for the musicians and speakers who also articulate black identity on the record.

The first thing I heard was Ali's voice:

I'm gonna fight for the prestige, not for me, but to uplift my little brothers who are sleeping on concrete floors today in America, black people who are living on welfare, black people who can't eat, black people who don't know no knowledge of themselves, black people who don't have no future. I want win my title and walk down the alleys and sit on the garbage cans with the wineheads...

This opening sample of Ali sets the soundtrack's tone, and kicks off the only hip hop song on the album, a sonic shift that signals a new generation/genre in black music in 1997, more than 30 years after Ali's spoken word album as Cassius Clay. Ali's quote also informs listeners that the emphasis of this album has little to do with comedy, especially since the soundtrack draws from nonfiction, rather than setting Clay/Ali in fictionalized sketches. The focus is on black people and their struggles.



<https://youtu.be/yLQWFHBQSn4>

In the first song, emcees look back and tell the story of “The Rumble in the Jungle” but the verses also hail Ali as a hero. When The Fugees, A Tribe Called Quest, and Busta Rhymes rap over a fairly standard bassline, their presence on this soundtrack is an important signal of Ali's influence and the recurring engagement between artists and Ali during his athletic heyday such as James Brown.

In Jeff Chang's *Can't Stop, Won't Stop* (2005), Afrika Bambaataa points out repeatedly how Brown became a consistent presence in hip hop when New York radio stations simply refused to play his music, particularly in the 1970s. After decades of infusing a variety of soul singers and Brown's stylistic turns on “the one” and messages of black pride into the genre of hip hop, the presence of “The Rumble in the Jungle” on this soundtrack completely makes sense. As more than a wellspring for samples throughout the large, growing body of hip hop music, Brown was also embodying and representing black consciousness in music with a Black voice, much in the same way that Ali utilized Black speech. In some ways, Ali's couplets predate rap lyrics and perform in a similar manner; Bambaataa [cites him as an influence](#), along with Malcolm X.

<https://youtu.be/78991xxbhj0>

James Brown and many others flow seamlessly into the event and its soundtrack in a way that reflects the immediacy and proximity of these events. The “Black Woodstock” of the Zaire 1974 music festival that accompanied Ali and Foreman's fight set the tone and soundtrack in real life, not just in the documentary. In fact, the festival itself was documented in the 2008 release *Soul Power* directed by Jeff Levy-Hinte. At this point, it's clear that there is a continuum for hearing the connections between black voices across oceans and continents.

Following “Rumble in the Jungle,” the record samples Ali and Drew “Bundini” Brown (Ali's assistant trainer and cornerman), snippets taken directly from the documentary footage. Brown is a slower, more deliberate speaker; he uses rhyme like Ali. He talks about the fruit returning to the root and Ali claiming his crown back home. For African Americans to return to Africa post-slavery, this trip and clip sonically reinforce the cultural significance of Ali's trip. Such pilgrimages fortify the idea that black people have a homeland, a continent, and a cultural continuum, much in the same way that this soundtrack constructs.

“Ali, Bombay!” in a sea of faces just like mine,

my brothers, my parents, my cousins.

I want to go home and tell the people

in the streets this is what we come from,

what we could be.

—Tara Betts, from “The Hard Road to Zaire” (scene 21, *The GREATEST!*)

When African girls chant to celebrate Ali’s arrival, they reassert how this is a homecoming for Ali, a welcome and a reconnection that fuels Ali’s determination. The chants seem to encourage the first sample of Ali when he issues his threat: “When I get to Africa we gon’ get it on cause we don’t get along. I’m gonna eat him up...” This sample segues into James Brown’s “The Payback” as it was performed before the fight, then another chant performed by Mobutu, named after Zaire’s controversial leader, Mobutu Sese Seko.

When Ali concludes the soundtrack, he interrupts chants of “Ali, Bombay!” with huffs and a brief exhortation of knocking you out, “sucker.” These last words fade into a snippet of African chant. This constructs a very different narrative that looks back at Ali’s career, long after the younger Clay established part of his image with hyperbolic bravado. Ali has cultivated a Pan African, global, political awareness that includes black people in America from his hometown in Louisville, KY to across the globe.

Hearing Clay and Ali—their continuities and their differences—gave me an insight into the familiar voices of some of my older relatives (and their blues records), and it also helped me channel that voice in poems of my own. It allowed me to imagine how hyperbole helped encourage Ali to energize and cheer himself on, so much that others began rooting for him as well. It did not matter what arena he was in, Ali would use his voice, his fists, and his will to conquer it. As I wrote the libretto, I thought about how I might unearth that determination in a way that respectfully embodied his tone, cadence, vocabulary, and ebullience. One of the definitions of greatness relates to the defeat of time and distance, and in the words that I wrote about Ali, I found that listening to him, and hearing his significance grew over time, helped him transcend both.

Every mile, every turn of the rope brings

me closer to telling him he’s nothing.

I hate every minute of training,

but I say

Don’t quit.

Suffer now

and live your life

as a champion.

I am a myth, and a man,

of my own making.

—Tara Betts, from “The Hard Road to Zaire” (scene 21, *The GREATEST!*)

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Tara Betts is the author of the poetry collection *Arc and Hue*, a Ph.D. candidate at Binghamton University, and a *Cave Canem* fellow. Tara’s poetry also appeared in *Essence*, *Bum Rush the Page*, *Saul Williams’ CHORUS: A Literary Mixtape*, *VILLANELLES*, both *Spoken Word Revolution* anthologies, and *A Face to Meet the Faces: An Anthology of Contemporary Persona Poetry*. Her research interests include African American literature, poetry, creative writing pedagogy, and most recently sound studies. In the 1990s, she co-founded and co-hosted WLWU 88.7FM’s “The Hip Hop Project” at Loyola University while writing for underground hip hop magazines, *Black Radio Exclusive*, *The Source*, and *XXL*. She is co-editor of *Bop, Strut, and Dance*, an anthology of Bop poems with Afaa M. Weaver. In April 2013, she published the libretto “*THE GREATEST!: An Homage to Muhammad Ali*” (*Winged City Press*) written for the live performance directed by *Peggy Choy*.

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