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"When We Were Kings"

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The year was 1974 and the place was Zaire. The event was the Rumble in the Jungle. The principal characters were Muhammad Ali, Don King, and George Foreman. After nearly twenty-three years the documentary of that happening has made it to the big screen, and indeed it won the Oscar for Best Documentary of the year.

Leon Gast who undertook this project in 1974 has waited all this time to find the financing that would allow him to complete the final editing and develop the narrative. It was worth the wait.

"When We Were Kings," is a film of extraordinary energy, tremendous entertainment value, great insight into both Muhammad Ali and Don King, and appearing as it does now carries an eerie quality in its references to Zaire's Dictator Mobutu Sese Seko and his country. It is also a film that explores a bit too briefly the many facets of the "Sweet Science." Interviews with George Plimpton, Norman Mailer, Spike Lee and others add to the film's insight, while helping to drive the narrative.

Clearly the centerpiece of "When We Were Kings" is Muhammad Ali. His enormous presence dominates the screen in the same way that he dominated life. The speed of his body is matched by the speed of his brain and his mouth. This is a brilliant man, a genius, whose field happened to be boxing, but whose life quickly moved way beyond the ring.

Those who have never seen Ali in his youth will marvel at his presence. Those who have seen him will remember either the joy or anger of that experience. The film offers several glimpses of the very young brash Ali, so facile of tongue, with his couplets and insults, and the ability to charm a snake or an angel in less time than it takes to say Mobutu Sese Seko.

Almost equally fascinating is the young Don King whose career was built on the Rumble in the Jungle, and could just as easily have been ended by it. King was just beginning what would be a two decade dominance of the sport. What you see here on film is the quick mind, the charm, the warmth, the amazing facility with words. At the same time you are reminded that you are watching one of least trusted people in all of sport.

It was Don King who persuade Mobutu to ante up the ten million dollars to stage the fight in Zaire, and it was King who saved

this documentary from being cancelled over issues of race in the days leading up to the fight. It was King who put together a tremendous show by bringing some of the best acts in music to Zaire for this event. The James Brown troupe, whose show is interspersed throughout the film, provides great music and dance, which when inter-cut on film with local Zairian musicians and dancers underlines another theme of the event, namely the return of the African-American to Africa.

Ali speaks frequently about his "return" to Africa, about his rediscovery of his origins and his cultural roots, his sense of being African, and the importance of these experiences to him and the significance of them for African-Americans. At one point flying into Zaire on board a Zairian plane with an entirely black crew, Ali notes that this could never happen in America.

One is struck also by the way in which Ali is worshipped by the people of Zaire, while George Foreman is not. Ali crosses the cultural divide with ease, he leads the crowds who gather around him wherever he goes in chants of "Ali, Kill Him," a chant with a wonderful cadence in French. Ali is admired for his boxing skills, for his defiance of the American government over Vietnam, and for his personal charm. He is clearly seen by Zairians as one of them, and the film gives you the sense of what a tremendous force Ali is as an international hero. Foreman's problems begin immediately when he descends from his plane with a German shepherd, the dog that Zairians associate with the oppression by the Belgians. He never recovers public support.

The climax of the film comes with the fight in which Ali reclaims the heavyweight title in a major upset. The fight footage accompanied by the comments of Norman Mailer and George Plimpton are amazing to watch. Foreman is obviously so much stronger than Ali you can not believe that Ali can survive, and yet with brilliant head games in advance and an equally brilliant strategy in the ring, he does. Foreman is spent by the end of the fifth round, and you can see it. You also see the raw power of boxing, as well as the speed, grace and skill.

This is a superb film. It brings insight to sport, culture and personality, and takes us back to Muhammad Ali in his prime, showing us why Ali is the single most dominating athletic personality in the world in this or any century.

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