

SPECIAL to TheSweetScience.com, this reprint from Jonathan Rendall strips away the boxing clichés, the usual set pieces. It tells the story of Kirkland Laing.

In the flesh I first saw Kirkland Laing in the mid-Eighties when, as a paying customer, I was watching a boxing card at the Albert Hall. His brother, Tony – a far less skilled, if still very tough, competitor – was boxing a bout on the bill that he was expected to lose. Kirkland wasn't boxing that night. He was just watching his brother from the stalls. Kirkland was an elegant-looking man; lithe – unlike Tony, who was a stocky pressure-fighter – with an excitable and highly intelligent face.

I'd known about Kirkland Laing, of course. About a year earlier he'd beaten the great Roberto Duran, 'Manos de Piedos' ('Hands of Stone'), one of the best fighters of all time, in a non-title fight in America. Laing was already nearing 30 by then. That upset sent reverberations round the boxing world – which was then still a major and almost-correct sporting world – that made the name 'Kirkland Laing' bigger in North and South America in a way that, for example, Prince Naseem Hamed never was.

For some reason he never cashed in. He was inactive for about a year, and then was brought back for a fight against a young, hungry and unbeaten fighter named Fred Hutchings – a totally unsuitable match, in my view, since if you have clawed your way to the serious money level, the last person you want is someone who can fight and is still poor. Hutchings blew Laing away in under three rounds.

This Albert Hall night was not long after that, and a frisson of embarrassed 'I told you so' hung over Kirkland's presence. Talent always gets that. Plus, he'd never sold many tickets. I watched him watching Tony. He was wearing a lightweight suit and short dreadlocks. He was giving himself entirely to his brother's fate – by that, I mean he wasn't pretending to, like most people of fleeting fame, despite their better instincts, do.

I was about 19 then, and probably suggestible. But there are only a few people in life that you run across and – not necessarily for profound reasons – want to take something off, emulate if you like, and Kirkland Laing was one of them. He was a boxer, but he seemed to have that artist's sensibility – of Wilde or Dylan Thomas, say - of living truly in the moment, and letting the chips fall where they may.

Anyway, Tony won, landing a haymaker when things were touch and go. Kirkland ran into the ring in his suit, ecstatic, and the referee told him to get out, wagging his finger at him. Kirkland obeyed, exiting sheepishly. The crowd found this exchange hilarious, joining in on the referee's side. Yeah, get that Kirkland out. Look at him. Mad, he is.

About eight years later I interviewed him for a paper. He was having an unlikely resurgence at the age of 38. He'd become European champion, though he was soon to lose the title in Italy –

Boxing's Gifted One

Written by Jonathan Rendall

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another fight he shouldn't have taken. 'The Gifted One' moniker was invented then: it hadn't existed before. I picked him up outside a pub in Dalston. He had a drink in his hand; a short.

We went back to his flat – a first-floor council flat, on a quite rough estate. His girlfriend was there, an Asiatic woman, about as old as him. She was not from his social milieu. She was a writer or artist, I think she said. I could tell she really loved him, and would look after him come what may, and I hoped he knew that, as he did like to cultivate the image of a ladies' man. I think he did know, though. They were like John and Yoko without the money.

My piece 'went down very well'. 'You really got him.' But now I'm not proud of it. It made fun of Kirkland, slightly. It was their type of piece. Mad, he is. And that wasn't true.

The reason for this is that a few weeks ago Kirkland fell off that balcony in Dalston and is in intensive care. It was a filler in a newspaper, mentioning his partner, 'Linda'. I hoped she was Yoko.

Then there was a programme on the BBC that I thought disgusting – because they'd filmed most of it before the accident, and still screened it afterwards. They'd never have screened it if Kirkland had a few quid.

The premise was a 'search for Kirkland Laing' among the street-drinkers of Hackney, who cited him as 'a lovely fella', without convincing that they had actually met him, conducted by a boxing reporter with whom I have personally got legless on several occasions.

"So, Kirk," the reporter said over-familiarly, as they sat together in the archly chosen venue of a park bench. "What about getting yourself together, cutting down on the drink?" Words to that effect.

Kirkland looked at him quizzically. He was sporting a Methusaleh-like beard which might have confused him as a derelict (and no doubt the close-ups of it were intended to). But, looking at his other garments, and the way he was relaxed, crossing his legs, I knew he wasn't one. It was just his latest look. And very elegant too. Anyway, he wasn't homeless. He had the flat, the flat from which he would fall. I can understand falling, if you are that gifted. It's not that difficult to understand, how you might get 'in a state'.

His reply was beautiful. "Some people mistake generosity for weakness," he said, amused.

So us viewers were brought back to the studio set, where the reporter and his host, John Inverdale, pronounced solemnly and sanctimoniously. But by then it was clear Kirkland Laing had gone way over their heads. Such had already been evident when the reporter asked Laing what he'd do next. Go back into the boxing game? Do a bit of training?

"No," Kirkland said, with a wave of his hand. "I think I'll write a book."