

The Kimball Chronicles: Don King's Victory Tour

Written by George Kimball
Saturday, 04 July 2009 19:00

You may not see Don King moon-walking on the July 11 Showtime telecast, but before the night is over you may see more of the World's Greatest Promoter and the late Michael Jackson than you do of Joseph Agbeko and Vic Darchinyan.

King celebrated the Fourth of July a day early, hosting a barbeque at his Deerfield Beach offices last Friday, eight days after Jacko's death and eight days before the bantamweight title bout down the road at the BankAtlantic Center in Sunrise, and announced that his plans to turn the latter occasion into a Michael Jackson tribute.

"I was shocked and saddened when I learned of Michael's passing," said King. "One never knows how they will react to something like this, and I found it hard to do media interviews or even issue a statement. Like so many other people around the world, I have been trying to find a way to remember this musical genius, who I loved and was a good friend of mine. My next boxing event is on July 11, so I have decided to pay tribute to him there in any way we can think of."

How? King said that he had searched through his archives and found some "rare, behind-the-scenes video clips" depicting himself and Michael from the star-crossed 1984 Victory Tour, and plans to show them at the boxing event as a tribute to the Gloved One.

Now, the cynic might note that the advance sale for Agbeko-Darchinyan had heretofore been just about what you'd expect for a fight between one guy from Ghana and another from Armenia in South Florida in the hottest month of the year, and that even 25 year-old Jackson videos might help.

The Victory Tour is not exactly remembered as a high point of Michael Jackson's career, but King may recall it with more fondness than anyone, with the possible exception of Robert Kraft.

DK was just about the only non-Jackson who didn't lose money on the Victory Tour, and as for Kraft? Well, suffice it to say that if King hadn't struck his alliance with Michael Jackson that year, Kraft probably wouldn't own the New England Patriots today.

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King had ambitiously eyed the music business since the moment he got out of prison in 1971. His relationship with Lloyd Price had been a conduit to access to Muhammad Ali, and while King is recalled as the face of the "Rumble in the Jungle," the actual money man behind the 1974 Ali-Foreman fight was an Englishman named JohnDaly. King's involvement centered around staging the high-profile musical entertainment surrounding the fight in Zaire – a concert most boxing fans were unaware of until "When We Were Kings" belatedly hit movie theatres, 22 years later.

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When King contracted to stage the "Victory Tour" in 1984 he no doubt saw it as the first step to becoming the biggest promoter in the world of entertainment. "Thriller" had come out the year before, and Michael Jackson was the biggest name in show business. For King it was like getting his hands on the keys to Fort Knox.

King might have seen the Victory Tour as his entrée, but Michael Jackson's view differed dramatically from that of the promoter. He had broken into the business as the youngest member of the Jackson 5, only to abandon his siblings when he embarked on a solo career that had now firmly established himself as "the King of Pop." By reuniting the Jackson Five for a once-in-a-lifetime reunion tour, he hoped to mend fences with his disaffected (and possibly jealous) brothers, throwing a few financial breadcrumbs their way and allowing them to share in his reflected glory. (The other Jacksons no doubt hoped that the Victory Tour would be the springboard that might kick-start their own comeback hopes.)

But by the time King approached Chuck Sullivan about making Sullivan Stadium the Boston-area stop on the Victory Tour, he already realized that he had a dog on his hands. Michael Jackson might have been the biggest thing in show biz, but it turned out the kids who bought records, videos, and, most importantly, concert tickets absolute hated the Jackson 5's music, which they considered insipid and hopelessly outdated.

And the Jacksons had been guaranteed a million dollars a show.

King could only hope that Chuck Sullivan was unaware of these developments, and banking on the Harvard-educated lawyer being as star-struck by the notion of being associated with Michael Jackson as he himself had been before the early numbers started rolling in.

By the time they emerged from their meeting, the oldest son of Patriots' founder Billy Sullivan had acquired the promotional rights to all 15 east coast stops on the Victory Tour. The grandiose announcement was accompanied by one revealing that Chuck also had exclusive rights to flog Michael Jackson designer jeans at the concerts.

In exchange for taking the eastern dates off King's hands for a mere \$41 million, Chuck Sullivan pledged as collateral the 13 year-old stadium in which the Patriots played their home games. The privately financed facility had originally been constructed at a cost of \$7 million in 1971, but following a contentious relationship with Stadium Realty Trust, Chuck Sullivan had engineered a buy-back of Schaefer Stadium, a transaction which left his family \$11 million in the hole even before undertaking what would be \$15 million in capital improvements to the by-then rechristened Sullivan Stadium.

Chuck was going to have to sell an awful lot of Michael Jackson Jeans to make that up, but Don King was unapologetic for having hornswoggled the lawyer. In fact, DK himself seemed to marvel that Chuck had so readily swallowed the bait.

At a press conference a few years later, Leigh Montville, then of the Boston Globe, waited for the room to clear, and, finding King uncharacteristically alone, approached and asked, point blank, "How did Chuck Sullivan lose all that money on the Michael Jackson tour?"

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"King started laughing," Montville recalled the occasion yesterday. "He went into one of those Falstaffian rolls about how much he always had been impressed by Harvard University, the light on the hill, the fountain of knowledge, stuff like that. He said not much impressed him any more, but Harvard always did. He threw in some alliteration, some five dollar Don King words. Perfect.

"Then," said King, "I met Chuck Sullivan. And I said 'This mothertrucker went to Harvard?'"

Montville said by then he was laughing so hard tears were coming out of his eyes, but he finally said 'But how did he lose all that money? I was laughing really hard, tears coming out of my eyes. I finally said, 'but how did he lose all that money?'

"No," King rephrased the question. "This mothertrucker went to Harvard?"

According to the World's Greatest Promoter, it sounded as if the entire netherworld of the music business, not just himself, had gotten together to pick Chuck's bones clean.

"The ticket scalpers, the t-shirt vendors, the concessionaires, everybody," said King.

Several dates had to be canceled and money refunded because the huge traveling stage the Jacksons had specially constructed for the Victory Tour turned out to be too big to fit into many of the stadiums (Ironically, Sullivan Stadium was one of them.)

We all know what happened after that. The Victory Tour bombed, but King walked away whole and within two years had entered into what would be a decade-long relationship with Mike Tyson. Within five years, the otherwise-homeless Chuck Sullivan had taken to sleeping and changing his clothes in an unoccupied Sullivan Stadium luxury box as the debts continued to mount.

By 1988 the creditors had foreclosed, and a group headed by Robert Kraft purchased Sullivan Stadium for \$25 million at a court-ordered bankruptcy sale. In doing so Kraft also acquired the lease binding the Patriots to the stadium, which he was able to use to forestall several attempts to move the team out of town, and in 1994 he was able to use the now-renamed Foxboro Stadium as leverage to buy the New England Patriots at a cost of \$175 million.

Fifteen years, nine postseason appearances, three Super Bowl titles, and one new stadium later, the franchise is valued at \$1,325,000,000. Robert Kraft must get down on his knees to thank Don King and Michael Jackson every day.