“….we got a thing goin’ on…”

The first time I laid eyes on Roy Jones Jr. was on NBC’s Sportsworld. It was a Sunday afternoon twenty years ago and Jones was fighting the “Stormin’ Mormon” Ron Amundsen, a club fighter with a respectable record of 16-1-1. By the second round, my curiosity about Jones had turned to amazement. By the fourth, amazement became infatuation. I was in love with his fighting style. Amundsen tried as valiantly as the next thirty-one men Jones would face, and like those thirty-one men, he never had a chance.

The wave of public support Jones surfed after the 1988 Olympics crested early. After several professional bouts, Roy Jones was being called “the best kept secret in boxing.” His exposure to eager fans was dimming in step with the refusal of his father –also his manager, promoter, and trainer to allow his son to face a fighter who wasn’t a has-been, a never-was, or a not-as-advertised. In the summer of 1990 Jones made quick work of a “Derwin Richards” whose record of 18-1 turned out to be as fraudulent as his name. The opponent was actually Tony Waddles. His actual record was 0-2. Many began to look askew at a talent that was evidently being wasted. The executives at NBC took note and terminated his contract early. Roy Jones Sr. proved immune to the criticism. After all, Jones was barely 21 years old in 1990 and the objective was to groom him for greatness, not throw him to the lions. Big Roy pointed to Andrew Maynard –a gold medalist from the 1988 Olympics who turned professional, was managed by Sugar Ray Leonard, and was as hot as Jones. But Maynard was rushed. A few weeks before Jones fought the fraud, Andrew Maynard got knocked out by Bobby Czyz. His career never recovered.

The Percy Harris bout was Jones’ first appearance on HBO –and his second without his father as manager. In fifteen seconds Jones landed an overhand right that sent Harris, a ranked contender, down in sections. Harris spent four rounds about as upright as a man atop a raft on a stormy sea. It was over before the fifth. Charley Burley, perhaps the greatest of history’s uncrowned champions had died only weeks before at the age of 75… or had he? Jones’ blazing, feinting, springing, blasting unorthodoxy was so eerily similar to Burley’s style I thought voodoo was afoot.

Six months later Jones stepped into the ring against Bernard “The Executioner” Hopkins.

Hopkins was a twenty-eight year old middleweight and already a full-blown technician. He was far more aggressive then than now, though he was shy about engaging Jones, perhaps realizing that Jones’ had a penchant for pole axing rambunctious opponents. Hopkins made the mistake of standing off and boxing Jones instead of neutralizing his speed with aggression. He may as well have been trying to catch a hornet with chopsticks. He lost 116-112 on all three official cards. Hopkins would not lose again for a dozen years but this loss had much to do with his obscurity for the next decade. He toiled and boiled in the shadow of his conqueror. The experience wasn’t without benefits because Hopkins realized that being a technician without a

strategy was akin to an engineer without a blueprint. That knowledge, conspicuously absent in his most important fight, is still serving him well in middle age. Jones stayed busy, made a trinket defense against Thomas Tate and then stepped up for the most serious challenge of his career.

James “Lights Out” Toney (44-0-2) was boxing’s angriest super middleweight, a thug with a hair-trigger temper and an eating disorder that would eventually see him swell-up to Pillsbury proportions as a heavyweight. A complicated study, he also had a master’s degree in the Sweet Science, with a slipping and sliding style sophisticated enough to check even the veteran Mike McCallum. Launched into stardom by a left hook that put stars in the eyes of Michael Nunn and took the stars out of the eyes of Nunn’s Hollywood backers, Toney was coming off a career-best performance against former light heavyweight champion Prince Charles Williams. This high-risk challenge was a tune-up for Toney. It didn’t matter. Jones had an easy night. By moving away from Toney’s right, leading with left hooks instead of jabs, and destroying his timing, Jones made Toney look like Charlie Brown. The gulf on the scorecards was wider than it was in the Hopkins fight.

With this win, Roy Jones Jr. was crowned king of boxing and I won a gentleman’s bet.

“…we both know that it’s wrong…”

King Roy became known as “Reluctant Roy” in the mid 1990s. It wasn’t undeserved. In 1992, Roy was in a rush to make up for lost time. In 1995 he changed his mind. According to a source whose reliability is a mystery, Jones demanded $3 million to fight Michael Nunn, who would earn a paltry $125,000. Avoiding real challenges became even less disguised.

Nigel Benn, Chris Eubank, Steve Collins, and Frankie Liles were all active super middleweights circa 1994-1996. Like Jones, they had titles. Benn was a titlist from 1992 until March 1996, Steve Collins took Chris Eubanks’ title in March 1995 and held it until he retired in 1997; Frankie Liles had his title from August 1994 until 1999. The Ring rated them and Jones in the top five during that two year window. Jones was at his peak at 168, had a belt, and yet never sought to unify the title. He was the superstar, he called the shots, but he didn't fight them. Not one of them. Armed with an HBO contract that guaranteed millions regardless of whom he fought, Jones fought an assortment of secondary contenders and municipal workers.

Collins and Liles were both trained by Freddie Roach. Roach tried to set up fights with Jones but his calls were not returned. After Collins turned thirty-years old, he became twice the fighter he was, grew a goatee and dubbed himself the “Celtic Warrior.” Dangerous enough to defeat Eubank and Benn twice by the end of 1996, he had a shillelagh with Jones’ name on it. When Jones cruised to a stoppage of a 39-year old moonlighting police officer, Collins defiantly climbed into the ring. As Larry Merchant was interviewing Jones, Collins said “I’m here, Roy.” Merchant ignored Collins but apologized to the HBO audience for the sorry fight. “I always thought Jones was chinny,” Collins told Boxing Monthly, “From the way he fought, Jones himself knew, if he got caught flush, he’d go, and shied away from certain scenarios in the ring.”

Some critics will tell you that Jones had already revealed a pattern of avoidance, that the early

termination of his contract with NBC was merely the opening act to a career where maximum gain would be sought for minimum risk. They overlook the fact that Jones heard this criticism before, fired his father, and soon afterwards faced down two all-time greats in Hopkins and Toney. Yet the question remains, why didn't Jones face the iron at super middleweight after 1994?

The answer is found in the aftermath of the Nigel Benn-Gerald McClellan war on February 25, 1995. This bout happened only four months after Jones-Toney and ended in tragedy. McClellan slipped into a coma and emerged from it blind, almost completely deaf, brain damaged, and in a wheelchair. Jones and McClellan were amateur rivals (McClellan holds a Golden Gloves victory over Jones) and Jones shared a bond with him that only ring rivals can understand. He will not visit McClellan until he retires, though he has donated generously to the McClellan trust fund. Jones was haunted by what happened for years. He became less willing to hurt anyone and less willing to get hurt himself. "I don't need to [visit Gerald]. It would make me quit boxing," he once said. Glory began to taste too much like blood so he began to distract himself with safer pursuits like rap music and basketball. "If I fought like I was looking for a place in history," Jones said in an interview with Esquire in 2003, "it would ruin me as a person."

His entry into the light heavyweight ranks was not the stuff of legend. His first challenger was Mike McCallum who was three weeks shy of his 40th birthday. His next bout was against Montell Griffin. Eddie Futch, the 10-1 underdog's chief second, had done his homework –probably in the same yellowing notebook where he deconstructed the undefeated Ali on behalf of Joe Frazier and Ken Norton and the undefeated Evander Holyfield on behalf of Riddick Bowe. Like Stevie Collins, Futch saw clues to Jones's psychology in his style that suggested an unusual fear of getting hit, so he instructed Griffin to feint and bull him. Jones was not comfortable, ended up losing by disqualification, and old Eddie Futch ruined another perfect record.

Boxing aficionados still talk about the body shot that caved in Virgil Hill's ribs. What is less remembered is the fact that Jones refused to fight Hill as late as 1996. Hill lost his belts to the undefeated Dariusz Michalczewski in 1997 and suddenly Jones signed …to fight the loser. Michalczewski was the linear light heavyweight champion from the moment his hand was raised in victory over Hill, but instead of fighting him to assert dominance Jones was content to scavenge his vacated trinket belts.

Then the ghost of Bob Fitzsimmons, a middleweight champion who ascended to the heavyweight throne, blew a trumpet across a century and all doubt turned to dust. Roy Jones Jr. completely dominated John Ruiz despite being outweighed by thirty pounds. The heavyweight titlist charged Jones in the first round, and a shoot-out at the end of it saw Ruiz clinching Jones after the smaller man landed the bigger shots. He charged less in the next three rounds, and after a flush right made his knees knock, Ruiz, like Hopkins and Toney, fought Jones as if Jones was King Kong.

Antonio Tarver was no Fay Wray but he rained down shots like the air force. When Tarver became a number one-ranked contender in the light heavyweight division, Jones' manager, Murad Muhammad wrote a letter questioning Tarver's credentials to be number one. Read

between the lines. Jones didn't want to face Tarver –and didn't for three years. There is a pattern here that raises an eyebrow. Jones allegedly priced himself way out of a Michael Nunn fight. He didn't fight fellow super middleweight titlist Frankie Liles although he held close wins over him in the amateurs. Then he tried to block Tarver, a fellow Floridian, from challenging him for the title in the light heavyweight division. Now ask yourself what these three had in common: All three were tall southpaws with skill.

The first bout with Tarver was competitive, and I saw no controversy in Jones' winning. Tarver did. During the pre-fight instructions of the rematch, Tarver lobbed an unforgettable shot across the bow: "I got a question –you got any excuses tonight, Roy?" The lanky southpaw would leave room for none after a left hand rendered superman semi-conscious and the fight was stopped in the second round. Mortality beckoned closer in his next fight. Glen Johnson went straight at Jones with hooks and malevolence, never allowing the stylist to dictate the pace. In the ninth round, a horizontal Jones looked like he was dead.

By then, my infatuation with Roy Jones had long since ended. Nine years stood as a gulf between the great victories over James Toney and John Ruiz, and those weren't nearly enough to justify the dim-bulb comparisons between Jones and Sugar Ray Robinson tossed around by myopic commentators. Ruiz, I believed at the time, was just a plumper cherry picked from a tree in the meadow of Jones' casual career and once Jones was finally tested by two skilled and gritty fighters, he was ruthlessly exposed. Roy Jones a warrior? I perished the thought.

"…but it's much too strong to let it go now…"

I was wrong. Roy Jones is a warrior. He began to prove it the moment he fought and survived Antonio Tarver in their third argument. Most civilians get bit by a dog once and get the jitters around a Pekinese –not Jones; he was knocked out twice and returned seeking to avenge one of them at thirty-six years old. That's courage.

The embers of my dormant feelings glowed.

This champion's comeback is more impressive when you look closer. Roy was never a technician despite the common error of many analysts who claim otherwise. Jones was however among the greatest pure athletes to ever grace the ring. He had timing, rhythm, flash, and demon speed backed up by shocking power. His leaping left hook needed no microphone to pick up the THWAP. But there's a cost to such gifts: athletes like Jones typically have shorter primes than technicians; the latter of which are less dependent on the powers of youth. Amazingly, Jones hasn't even made any substantive changes to his style. He's a step or three slower but still showboating, still shooting from the hip, and yet had enough left to drop Joe Calzaghe in the first round. And just in case anyone is left who believes that he fears punchers, he thoroughly tamed Jeff "Left Hook" Lacy –with his hands down.

Next up is Danny "The Green Machine" Green, a cruiserweight.

Jones has an illuminating message for Green: “I’ve got something to prove.” Indeed. Old Jones is raging against the dying of the light. He is on redemption’s path, rebuking critics (like me) who accused him of avoiding dangerous fighters during his prime …and perhaps, just perhaps, performing private penance for doing exactly that. As the conclusion of his career draws near, I’ll be watching –an old fan, a new fan, a critic with baited breath.

We gotta be extra careful

that we don’t build our hopes up to high

because he’s got his own obligations

and so, and so, do I

…Me and Mr. Jones…