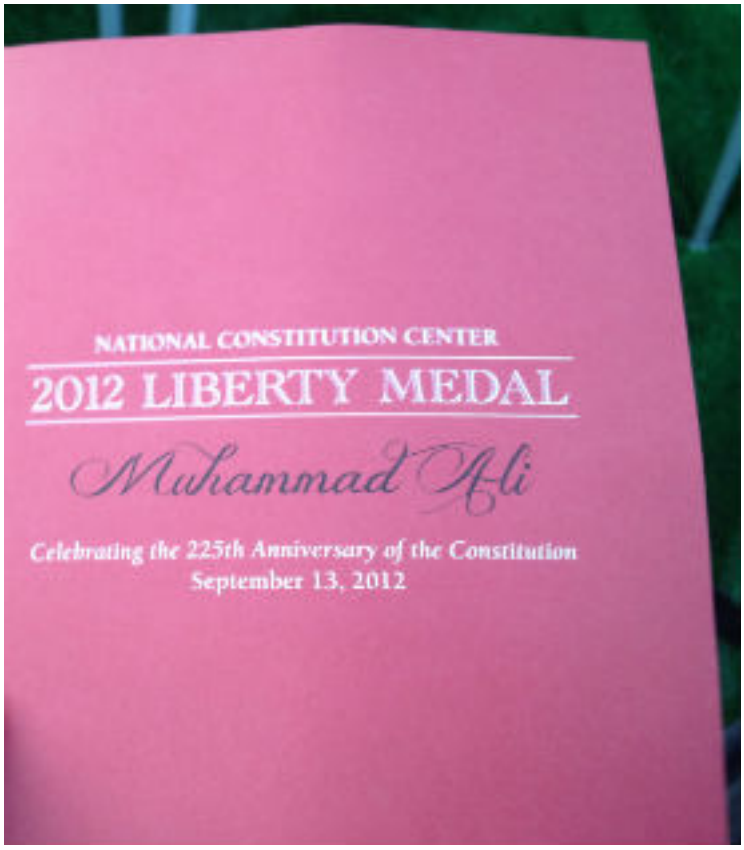
Written by Bernard Fernandez
Monday, 17 September 2012 11:54



The taped music that preceded the official festivities for Thursday night's Liberty Medal ceremony in Philadelphia, in which boxing legend Muhammad Ali joined a list of previous honorees that included former presidents, Supreme Court justices, international dignitaries and other non-athlete advocates of the principles of freedom, was a mixed bag if ever there was one.

What, exactly, did *Hail to the Victors*, the University of Michigan fight song, have to do with Muhammad Ali? Or *Old Man River*? Those were two of the more curious selections that serenaded a crowd of approximately 2,000 spectators on the front lawn of the National Constitution Center, in addition to a couple of golden oldies by the Supremes and the Temptations. But those at least made a little sense; everyone loves Motown, right?

And so does, it would seem, an increasing majority of folks who have come to see Ali as not only possibly the greatest heavyweight champion of all time, but as an "ambassador for peace and justice worldwide," a "tireless humanitarian and philanthropist" and a "symbol of hope and catalyst for constructive dialogue." Those were just some of the glowing descriptions of "The Greatest" in the printed program for the 2012 Liberty Medal ceremony, which celebrated not only Ali but the 225th anniversary of the ratification of the United States Constitution.

No one, not even his harshest critics in another era, when Ali was perhaps the most polarizing figure in America with the possible exception of Jane Fonda, would dispute that, in the ring, Ali was a mesmerizing, magical fighter whose balletic movements and blurring hand speed transformed a brutal sport into an art form. To my way of thinking, and to more than a few others who remember what he was on what many believe to be the most dominant night of his career, Ali was to boxing what Michelangelo was to the painting of ceilings.

On Nov. 14, 1966, in Houston's Astrodome, the sleek, 24-year-old Ali retained his WBA championship by disassembling the dangerous Cleveland "Big Cat" Williams, the knockout sequence a rapid-fire combination that had the challenger's skull vibrating like a bobblehead doll.

Two fights later, a seventh-round stoppage of Zora Folley on March 22, 1967, in Madison Square Garden, Ali was again the picture of pugilistic perfection. And the scary thing is, he just might have become even better had his not career come to a screeching halt because of the suspension handed down for his refusal, on religious grounds, to be inducted into the Army during the Vietnam war. It would be 43 months until Ali, his boxing license restored as the result of a favorable Supreme Court ruling, fought again, a third-round stoppage of Jerry Quarry on Oct. 26, 1970, in Atlanta. But that Ali, although still a superb fighter, was different – a bit heavier, a smidgeon slower, more apt to absorb punishment and fight through it than to slip punches with almost casual ease.

Ali before the layoff was a better fighter than Ali after," his late trainer, Angelo Dundee, said in 1995. "What a lot of people don't realize, and it's sad, is we never saw him at his peak.

"The Ali who fought Cleveland Williams and Zora Folley was the best he could be at that time, but he was getting bigger and stronger and more experienced in the ring. What was he, 25 years old when they made him stop? Those next three years would have been his peak. If he had continued getting better at the rate he was going, God only knows how great he would have been."

But Ali's antiwar stance – "No Vietcong ever called me nigger," he pronounced – made him a role model to the growing counterculture movement, if something less than a hero to, say, members of the Veterans of Foreign Wars who viewed him as something less than a role

model. From the seeds of those opposing viewpoints did Ali morph into an international symbol of more than boxing excellence, and the foundation of his current renown beyond the ring was laid.

In November 2005, Ali -- who by that time at undertaken missions to developing countries to deliver food and medical supplies, in addition to serving as a fundraiser for Special Olympics and the Muhammad Ali Parkinson Research Center in Phoenix – received the Presidential Medal of Freedom from President George W. Bush in Washington. Forgotten, or nearly so, was his cruel taunting of such opponents as Joe Frazier, whom he derided as “a gorilla,” an “Uncle Tom” and “ignorant,” and his denouncement of white people as “devils.”

Interestingly, the Liberty Medal awarded to Ali – who at 70 increasingly is showing the ravages of Parkinson’s disease, which he was diagnosed as having in 1984, three years after his retirement from boxing – is viewed through a softer, more forgiving prism in this, the 13th year of the 21st century. A parade of speakers – ranging from Pennsylvania governor Tom Corbett, a conservative Republican, to Philadelphia mayor Michael Nutter, a liberal Democrat – strode to the podium to praise Ali as everything that is fine and decent and praiseworthy.

“Like my father when you entered the sport of boxing, the world was in turmoil, much as it is today,” Joe Louis Barrow II, son of Joe Louis, said, nodding toward Ali, who was seated off to the side wearing dark glasses and a dark suit. “The two of you made opposite choices – my father choosing to volunteer in World War II and you, for religious convictions, refusing to serve in Vietnam. In different ways, you both defended the ideals of the Constitution. But time has shown you were both on the right side of history.”

Laila Ali, the daughter of Muhammad Ali and a renowned boxing champion in her own right, told of a softer side of her father that not many ever get to see.

“He’s such a strong and powerful man,” Laila said. “Courageous. But as a child I remember seeing him cry all the time. He’d be at home, watching the news, and he’d see a sad story, whether it was children in Africa who had nothing to eat, or if he’d see a homeless family on the street, he would cry. He taught me so much about compassion.”

Closing the one-hour ceremony was Lonnie Ali, Muhammad's fourth wife who has become the voice of her frail and all-but-silenced husband, who arrived in a wheelchair and no longer can even stand without assistance.

"Muhammad often challenged laws, policies and social norms in this country, but it is this country's founding principles that enabled him to stand up for his personal principles," she said. "And for that, he is eternally grateful but aware that these freedoms should never be taken for granted."

Joe Louis Barrow II's take of how history ultimately will treat Ali remains to be seen; history is like an amoeba, constantly changing form to fit time and circumstance. It is a matter of conjecture how future historians regard Ali, at least that part of him outside of the ring, after another 20 years or so pass. The guess here is that the shinier image of him, for the most part, will stand up well into the future, and possibly forever.

But no member of the Joe Frazier family apparently attended the Liberty Medal ceremony, which, ironically, came one day after the announcement that the long-rumored statue of Philadelphia's most celebrated fighter would finally be created and given a place of honor at XFinity Live!, close to the stadiums and arenas where the Eagles, Phillies, 76ers and Flyers play.

Some hard feelings, it would seem, can't be completely erased by the passage of time.

Comment on this article

Radam G says:

WONDERFUL! That says it ALL! Holla!