

Interview with **Jabir Herbert Muhammad**

Date: June 4, 1989

Interviewer: Sam Pollard

Camera Rolls: 2129-2131

Sound Rolls: 261

Team: C

Interview gathered as part of *Eyes on the Prize II: America at the Racial Crossroads, 1965-mid 1980s*. Produced by Blackside, Inc. Housed at the Washington University Film and Media Archive, Henry Hampton Collection.

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Interview with Herbert Muhammad, conducted by Blackside, Inc. on June 4, 1989 for *Eyes on the Prize II: America at the Racial Crossroads, 1965-mid 1980s*. Washington University Libraries, Film and Media Archive, Henry Hampton Collection.

**Note:** These transcripts contain material that did not appear in the final program. Only text appearing in bold italics was used in the final version of *Eyes on the Prize II*.

[camera roll #2129]

[sound roll #261]

[wild sound]

00:00:12:00

Jabir Herbert Muhammad:

My wife is coming. I don't know how she want to [unintelligible]—

Camera crew member #1:

Take one is up.

Jabir Herbert  
Muhammad:

—so she might run in here and try to open this door.

Interviewer:

That's all right. We'll just cut.

Jabir Herbert Muhammad:

OK.

Camera crew member #1:

Frame. Speed.

Interviewer:

All right?

Jabir Herbert Muhammad:

OK. I get a hundred dollars a minute. So, you better hurry up. [laughs]

[cut]

00:00:30:00

Camera crew member #1:

OK. Marker.

Camera crew member #2:

Marker

[slate]

Interviewer:

You ready?

Camera crew member #1:

Yep.

00:00:37:00

Interviewer:

Mr. Muhammad, my first question to you is the Nation of Islam attract a lot of young men like Cassius Clay. Why, why did it in the early '60s attract such young men like Cassius Clay?

00:00:46:00

Jabir Herbert Muhammad:

Well, the Nation of Islam had a great attraction to not only young mens of, of athletes, boxers, they had, it had a attraction for, I would say more or less, the downtrodden people that feel that they are being oppressed by their society and especially White supremacy in the society. So, they was attracted to the Nation of Islam because the Nation of Islam gave them hope that this wasn't something that was gonna prevail all the time, that God had, had came to deliver, deliver them from the oppressor.

00:01:26:00

Interviewer:

Great. OK. When did you first meet Ali? How did you first meet Muhammad Ali?

00:01:30:00

Jabir Herbert Muhammad:

Well, I first met Ali sometime after he fought Sonny Liston. But my first acquainting with him was, he used to come to our affairs especially our national meetings and I would see him in the crowd, and I saw what is known as, as Muhammad Ali, the fighter. He hadn't fought Sonny Liston and then when it came time where he was fighting—

00:01:51:00

Interviewer:

He was known as Cassius Clay, the fighter at the time.Jabir

Herbert Muhammad:

I beg your pardon?

Interviewer:

Had his name been changed already?

00:01:55:00

Jabir Herbert Muhammad:

No, his name was Cassius Clay. Thank you. His name was, was, since—

00:01:58:00

Interviewer:

Why don't you start at the top?

00:01:59:00

Jabir Herbert Muhammad:

Yeah, was. OK. You want me to start at the top and go back?

00:02:03:00

Interviewer:

The first time you met Ali.

00:02:04:00

Jabir Herbert Muhammad:

OK. The first time I met Ali was after he had fought Sonny Liston. But his name then was Cassius Clay before then and it was at one time and I was in my studio, I had my own camera studio. *My father called me that night and asked me did I know how to get in touch with Cassius Clay* and I told him, Yes, I can call somebody in Miami. He said, Well, get in touch with him and let him know that his name is not Cassius Clay no more. His name is Muhammad Ali, and also his brother Rudy, Rock, Rock, Rudy, his name was—

00:02:38:00

Interviewer:

Let's cut.

[cut]

[wild sound]

00:02:40:00

Jabir Herbert Muhammad:

Rudy. I'm forgetting [inaudible]. Rudy, wasn't it?

Interviewer:

Yeah. [unintelligible]

Jabir Herbert Muhammad:

Rudy Clay. But no, his name was not Rudy. Rudolph. That's his name.

[beep]

Jabir Herbert Muhammad:

—I was trying to save that for another interview.

Interviewer:

[inaudible].

Jabir Herbert Muhammad:

[laughs] No, another person's interview.

Interviewer:

[laughs]

[cut]

Camera crew member #1:

Mark.

Camera crew member #2:

Marker.

[slate]

00:02:57:00

Interviewer:

OK, Mr. Muhammad, tell me the story about when you first met Ali. Take your time.

00:03:00:00

Jabir Herbert Muhammad:

Oh, yes. Well, I first, when I first met Ali he came by my studio. I had a studio called Star Studio on 79th and near, near Ca—what's, 79th. Take it off again.

00:03:14:00

Interviewer:

Let's cut.

Jabir Herbert

Muhammad:

Champlain.

Camera crew member #2:

[inaudible]

Jabir Herbert Muhammad:

It's been so long.

Interviewer:

[unintelligible] Jabir

Herbert Muhammad:

I put the wrong grease on my hair today.

[beep]

[cut]

00:03:19:00

Interviewer:

Take a deep breath.

Camera crew member #2:

Marker.

Camera crew member #1:

Mark it.

[slate]

00:03:24:00

Interviewer:

OK, tell me about the first time you met Ali.

00:03:27:00

Jabir Herbert Muhammad:

The first time I met Ali was in 1964. I—my studio, I was a, a photographer and I had a studio and he came in and he said, I heard that you was the greatest portrait photographer, so I thought you ought to shoot a portrait of the greatest. Well, I was flattered at that time because I, I was the greatest photographer, that was no joke. Like he's saying he was the greatest, I really felt that I was the greatest portrait photographer. So, I shot his picture and it came out very well. Now, if you wanted me to tell the story behind that picture then—OK.

00:04:04:00

Interviewer:

OK. Tell me about why members in the Nation changed your name and your father telling you that you should have Ali. He gave Ali a new name.

00:04:12:00

Jabir Herbert Muhammad:

Yes, because firstly, the Nation of Islam under the leadership of my father, Elijah Muhammad, it had a great attraction for the down, for the downtrodden people, those people that feel that they was oppressed from a White supremacist society. That's why most of the people was of the Blacks and was of the more or less the unlettered man at first. Ali personally was attracted by it because the philosophy and the teaching itself. The philosophy was that he saw that this was a Black, Black group, calling a Black man calling all White people devils and then he say he went back home and he looked on his, picture on his wall where he had Jesus and all of the twelve disciples of Jesus, The Last Supper, and he noticed everybody was White. And so, so then he started having a conflict in himself about what, what effect would this be on the White society if it was reversed. If these people was all Black, and they had to live with a Black Jesus and a Black, what we call disciples, what kind of effect would it be on their, their mind? And he come to the conclusion that this would definitely have a bad effect on any society use, using racism in, in, in divinity. So, then he saw that this wasn't right. And he joined my father because that this little Black man was, he was bold enough to tell the world that they was all Whites was devils. Then he got bold enough to tell everybody he was the greatest and he can beat any man on, on the, alive. So, this promoted him into saying he was the greatest 'cause my father's philosophy with the

Blacks was the greatest and they was the, the greater, you know, human beings, then physically and then and mentally if they were given the chance to express themselves.

00:06:03:00

Interviewer:

Great. Great. Let's cut. That's good. That was a good answer. Now, what I want to ask you is—

[beep]

[cut]

00:06:07:00

Camera crew member #2:

Marker.

Camera crew:

Do it.

[slate]

00:06:12:00

Interviewer:

Tell me, Mr. Muhammad, members of the—when people joined the Nation and they had to change their name, what was the reason behind that?

00:06:18:00

Jabir Herbert Muhammad:

Well, before, we was carrying the names of our slave masters and that we feel that if we was free, we shouldn't be identified with our slave master in our names. That if I marry a young lady and her name is Boba Tanga and I, and my name is Suwana, then her name should be from a free person, and I'm, and the White and the Black person's supposed to been free. So, they went back into their own names—

Interviewer:

And—

Jabir Herbert Muhammad:

—and not identify them with their oppressors or their White slave masters, or any derivative from them. You have to realize in this context now, this was in the context of the '60s. A lot of the things that we know is not going on in our society that went on then. And now we don't call White folks devils just because they're our oppressors still in some form.

00:07:10:00

Interviewer:

OK. Tell me the story about your father talking to you about calling Cassius about changing his name.

00:07:15:00

Jabir Herbert Muhammad:

Yes, yes. Why, when my father called me on the phone about changing Cassius Clay's name to Muhammad Ali, Ali was in training for this upcoming Sonny Liston fight. ***And he told me to get in touch with him if I could and let him know that his name was, has been changed. He was changing his name from Cassius Marcellus Clay to Muhammad Ali.*** And that this name will connect him with five billion Muslims all around the world. And they will rally behind him and he will become like a Statue of Liberty in Harlem, New York. That everyone will want to see him, and everyone will want his autograph, and this had become a fact.

00:07:55:00

Interviewer:

OK. Let's cut a second. I want to ask you that one again—

[beep]

[cut]

[wild sound]

Interviewer:

—and what I'd like you to try and—let me try that at a different angle this time.

Camera crew member #1:

Take five.

Jabir Herbert Muhammad:

Ah. [inaudible] go, go again.

Interviewer:

You can do it.

Camera crew member #3:

You good. [laughs]

Jabir Herbert

Muhammad:

No, yeah, this ain't, this ain't my shot. I don't hear these things. I really don't. You haven't seen me on television. All these years. I don't, I don't get on no TV, no talking on no TV. They don't pay nothing.

Camera crew member #3:

[laughs]

Jabir Herbert

Muhammad:Shit.

Interviewer:

Let's try.

Camera crew member #1

Roll.

[cut]

00:08:25:00

Camera crew member #1:

Marker.

Camera crew member #2:

Marker.

[slate]

00:08:33:00

Interviewer:

OK, Mr. Ali, Mr. Muhammad, tell me about your father talking to you about calling Ali about changing his name, Clay.

00:08:40:00

Jabir Herbert Muhammad:

Yes, my, my father called me concerning to change Mu—Cassius Clay name at the time to Muhammad Ali. Because in our religious organization at that time, we, our philosophy was that the Black people, the once slaves should not carry the name of their once slave masters. But they, they name should be identified with their origin. And since Muhammad Ali was a Muslim, he should carry a—

[rollout on camera roll]

[wild sound]

Jabir Herbert Muhammad:

—Muslim name. And that name he give him was Muhammad Ali. And he told him if—

00:09:12:00

Interviewer:

That was good. It ran out.

Jabir Herbert

Muhammad:

Ah.

Interviewer:

That was good. That was good. We ran out.

Camera crew member #1:

[inaudible] think—

[beep]

[cut]

[camera roll #2130]

00:09:17:00

Camera crew member #1:

Marker.

[slate]

00:09:21:00

Interviewer:

OK, Mr. Muhammad, tell me about your father call, talking to you about calling Clay and changing his name and why he had to change his name and what it would mean.

00:09:30:00

Jabir Herbert Muhammad:

Yes. My father called me, this was in the early '60s in February, when Ali was at that time called Cassius Clay, but he was getting ready for his upcoming fight against Sonny Liston. My father called me and told me that, to call Ali and get in touch with him, and let him know that his name should not be Cassius Clay. That Cassius Clay identifies him with his slave master. And since he's a Muslim, he's a free man and he's a free person and he's a Muslim and it, it identifies him with five billion Muslim all around the world. And his name would be known as Muhammad Ali from now on. And—

00:10:11:00

Interviewer:

OK. What did he say it would do? What would Muhammad, I mean, people would do what?

00:10:15:00

Jabir Herbert Muhammad:

Yes, he, he informed me that, let him know that the people, by his name being Muhammad Ali, all the Muslim around the world would rally around his, his name and rally around him. And they'll see him as the Statue of Liberty and that when they come, they would want to get

his pictures and autograph. And then that'd be a good way for him to let the world know that he's a Muslim from the Nation of Islam.

00:10:39:00

Interviewer:

Very good. Excellent.

Jabir Herbert  
Muhammad:

Mm-hmm.

Interviewer:

Excellent. Now, you and Ali went to Europe, went to Africa in '64? What, what was some of the nations you went to and who were some of the leaders you met? What was, what was the reception like from the people?

00:10:50:00

Jabir Herbert Muhammad:

Well, before Ali, when Ali met me, I was in my studio, and this is how he came to meet me personally after I had informed him about his name. And he came in my studio and at just about a week before then, I had shot the, a photograph of his first wife, Sonji Clay. And I had delivered her picture to him, to her about two days after I met Ali. And so, she signed an autograph on, and never meeting Ali, but she signed her picture, eleven by fourteen, from one champ to another and never seen Ali. That's his first wife, Sonji Roi, Sonji Roi at that time. And Ali from right then, Ali told me that he was invited to go, to make a African tour. And did I come, I care to come along. He went to my father and asked me, I said, Ask my father, because I was working there with my father. My father told him, Yes, that I would be the one to go. And I think these are the words that tied me with Ali for twenty-five years now. My father told him, That my son, Herbert, my name was called Herbert then, Herbert Muhammad, and he said, My son, Herbert, would be the one to go with you. Because he knows how I would answer any question that you want to ask me. Just ask my son, Herbert and he would tell you. This was a bounding, binding factor from me and Ali career from that date to this. That Ali knows that when he speak and he ask me a question that I would answer him like my father would answer them to him, and this is the person that really Ali love and follow in his career.

00:12:20:00

Interviewer:

So, when you went to Africa, where'd you go in Africa?

00:12:22:00

Jabir Herbert Muhammad:

When we went to Africa, we went to Ghana.

00:12:23:00

Interviewer:

Start again. I'm sorry. I jumped on top of you.

Jabir Herbert Muhammad:

Hmm?

Interviewer:

I jumped on top of you.

Jabir Herbert  
Muhammad:

OK.

Interviewer:

Go ahead.

00:12:26:00

Jabir Herbert Muhammad:

OK. Well, when we went, went to Ghana and we went to Nigeria, we went to Egypt, and they was the three main country we went to at first. And by me, had been traveling those same path already in 1959 with my father, that's also the reason my father told Ali I should go with him. Because Gamal Abdel Nasser, the, the president of Egypt, when they got there, they, he had an invitation for Rock, for Rahman and Ali to come visit him and the security, they would not accept me. They say, he just say, Bring Ali and, and his brother. So, but when Ali got there, the, Nasser asked him, Where is Herbert Muhammad? And he said that, He's not here. He said, Y'all go back. I won't see you until, I won't see you until we, you, you bring Herbert back. So, the next day, they brought me back. And that's how the trip went from then on. Ali saw that the Nation of Islam through the leadership of my father had, it was respected over there, because his son was respected. So it's—

00:13:27:00

Interviewer:

How was he received by, by the people in the country?

Jabir Herbert Muhammad:

He was received by the people—

Interviewer:

I'm sorry. I jumped on top of you again.

00:13:32:00

Jabir Herbert Muhammad:

Well, Ali was, and the people received Ali very good. ***They received him as though he was a president of their country, a king, actually.*** And most people say that Ali got more attention from the pub, the masses than their president or their king gets. So, the people were very warmly received and also the kings and President receive him also very great.

00:13:52:00

Interviewer:

Let's cut.

[cut]

00:13:54:00

Camera crew member #1:

Mark.

Camera crew member #2:

Marker.

[slate]

Interviewer:

Ready?

Camera crew member #1:

Yep.

00:14:00:00

Interviewer:

OK. Mr. Muhammad, tell me the, the, name the three countries that you and Ali went to when you were on your tour of Africa and how was he received?

00:14:06:00

Jabir Herbert Muhammad:

Yes, in 1964, Ali was invited to go to several African countries. The three that I remember very distinctly is, is Ghana and Nigeria and Egypt. And he was received very well from all the mass of the people. They came out in the hundreds of thousand. ***In fact, in Ghana, I thought I might even get killed. There was so many people was running to Ali, I ran away from him to get, to save my life. And the same thing happened in G, in Egypt.*** They almost turned over the cars that Ali was in. They just, it just, we, you just really can't believe how it was. It was worse than they show the Beatles when the people come out to the Beatles or Michael Jackson. Yes, it was very, very good.

00:14:52:00

Interviewer:

Great. Let's cut. That's good. Very good answer. [unintelligible]

[beep]

[cut]

[wild sound]

Jabir Herbert Muhammad:

Say it's better than truth, but this is the truth. [laughs]

Interviewer:

[laughs]

Camera crew member #1:

Take eight.

[cut]

00:15:03:00

Camera crew member #2:

Marker.

[slate]

00:15:06:00

Interviewer:

OK, Mr. Muhammad, Ali had been told he needed to go before the Illinois Athletic Commission to apologize if he was gonna, if they were gonna sanction the fight with Ernie Terrell. What did you counsel, what was your counsel toward Ali before he went before the Commission?

Jabir Herbert Muhammad:

Oh, my counsel with him before he went—

Interviewer:

You gotta include Ali's name.

Jabir Herbert Muhammad:

Yeah. Yes, yes, Muhammad Ali.

Interviewer:

You say, like, you know, I counseled Ali before—

Jabir Herbert Muhammad:

Yeah, yeah.

Interviewer:

—he went before the Commission, and what I said [unintelligible]—

00:15:32:00

Jabir Herbert Muhammad:

Yes, my counsel, my discussion with Muhammad Ali before he went before the, the State Commission was that he was, you know, he must stand up for what he believe in, and that if he, he believe in Islam, and he was following my father, then it must be reflected in his decision that he make, he make today. And then, he, then he's taken the, the stand that he did where everybody know. That he had no quarrels with the Vietcong. He was not going to be a party to anybody killing innocent womens and childrens and thing or even being associated in a hospital, nothing like that. So, he told them, "Clean out my cell, and take my tail to jail" before I do something like that.

00:16:13:00

Interviewer:

OK. Tell me about what you were saying that you were soldiers and, and no one, nobody that was a member of the nation spoke to your, your father about what they should do.

00:16:21:00

Jabir Herbert Muhammad:

Oh, yes, being when like Muhammad Ali, or myself, or anyone else, I was also in that time and my brother Wallace who's now the head of our community. He went to jail. My, I had three or four brothers went to jail before we even saw Ali. So, everyone knowed at that time. There's no need to go and ask the Honorable Elijah Muhammad what should they do because that would show that they was weak in their faith. They will believe that I must be weak in, weak in my faith. After I know my leader done taken a, a stand in his life and spent five years in jail for not going to the Army. Then how can I feel to go and ask that same leader, What should I do? His record speaks for itself what he should tell you. So, but he wouldn't get a, my father would not let hisself be a party to that because then they know that that was, that person can go and tell the draft people that the Honorable Elijah Muhammad say, I'm not going, I'm not going, then they'll go and charge my father. So, my father would never give them a answer what they should do, said, Do whatever your conscience leads you to do. Follow your own conscience.

00:17:21:00

Interviewer:

Great. Let's cut.

[cut]

00:17:24:00

Camera crew member #2:

Marker

[slate]

00:17:29:00

Interviewer:

This is right before Ali went to the Houston Induction and so I know you spoke with him constantly all the time.

Jabir Herbert Muhammad:

Yeah.

Interviewer:

What was some of the counseling that you gave Ali before he was supposed to appear, appear before the Houston Induction Board?

Jabir Herbert Muhammad:

Well, before he was to appear before the Induction Board—

Interviewer:

Before Ali.

Jabir Herbert Muhammad:

Before Ali was—

Interviewer:

Say it, start again, because I jumped [unintelligible].

00:17:47:00

Jabir Herbert Muhammad:

OK, yeah. *Before Ali was to appear before the Induction Board, he called me that morning, as he do most mornings or most nights and he was asking me, you know, like, What do you think gonna happen? Not that what he should do. I think Ali was already*

*convinced in his own conscience that he was gonna stand up for his principles, but he always liked to bounce it off to me, how I felt about it. Because we also realized the repercussion that this could have about his career.* So, he had made up his mind that he was gonna stand up for his principles and that what, what else can he, I, I tell him? I said, No, you just must be, you know, convinced in your own mind and conscience that what you are doing is right, 'cause whatever come after it, you gonna be the person that is required to, to get any reward or any punishment. So, he, he had made up his mind. He was convinced that he would take a stand on the side of what we call then justice, that he would not be a party to an unjust war.

00:18:43:00

Interviewer:

Great. Cut. Good?

Camera crew member #1:

Good.

[cut]

00:18:46:00

Camera crew member #2:

Marker.

[slate]

Interviewer:

Ready, [unintelligible]?

Camera crew member #1:

Yep.

00:18:49:00

Interviewer:

So, tell me the kind of reaction he was gettin', I mean, calls, people shooting at his house, when he had made his anti-Vietnam statements.

00:18:58:00

Jabir Herbert Muhammad:

Yeah, you say, when Muhammad Ali made a anti-Vietnam statement, I think he made a pro-Vietnam statement. When you say anti, against it, you say he was against the, you mean, the war? Anti-war statement there.

00:19:13:00

Interviewer:

Anti-warfare.

Jabir Herbert  
Muhammad:

OK. That he was against the war on them.

Interviewer:

Let's do it again.

00:19:17:00

Jabir Herbert Muhammad:

OK. [laughs]

00:19:18:00

Interviewer:

OK. When Ali made his anti-war statement, what was some of the reaction he was getting? The phone calls—

00:19:22:00

Jabir Herbert Muhammad:

Yeah. *When Ali made his, his statement that he was not gonna be a party to an unjust war against the Vietcong, Vietnam, the Vietcong people that it was a backlash from the White community. Some of them would call him all times at night, threaten to blow up his house, they would throw rocks at his house. Some even drive by in cars, hollering and drunk and shooting at his places and different things like that.* And then he had a lot of bad press. Some of the people like Dick Young, they would always write very bad and negative about what he was doing. So, he had a lot of, you know, things of overcoming. They would go out

on the street and some of the people would curse him and call him outta his names. Yes, a lot of things like that happened.

00:20:06:00

Interviewer:

And he had phone calls and what were the phone calls like?

00:20:08:00

Jabir Herbert Muhammad:

The phone call was threatening calls. They would, they would threaten Muhammad Ali on, by make, making calls that, someone would call him all about his name, all kind of derogatory name you can think of back in those days in the '60s that a White person would call a Black person that they didn't like. So, he got all the, the, the whole nine yards of it. So, it didn't affect him in no way because he always felt that these people had a devilish nature anyway.

[rollout on camera roll]

[wild sound]

00:20:34:00

Interviewer:

OK. So, was this, was this White people? Did he get a reaction from the Black people? A negative reaction from Black people?

[beep]

[cut]

[camera roll #2031]

00:20:40:00

Camera crew member #1:

Mark.

Camera crew member #2:

Marker.

[slate]

00:20:44:00

Interviewer:

OK. So, this is the wrap-up. This is, this is the last one. I just want you to tell me again the kind of reaction he was getting when he made these anti-war statements? The kind of calls he was getting, people, you know, coming to his house and stuff like that.

00:20:58:00

Jabir Herbert Muhammad:

Yes, well, Muhammad Ali, when he made his statement that he will not have anything to do with the Vietnam War, that he began to get a lot of statements from different people in the White community, especially the White community. They would throw rocks at his house, they would shoot his house at night. They would give, they would call him all times of day and night because they, they, they was very hurt themselves because they're, some of their family members, or their associates, or their loved one had been killed in, in the war and they didn't feel why did Muhammad Ali can make this kind of money in, off the people in United States and he don't go to war. You know, and then so they would threaten him. Shoot, shoot at his house, do all these kind of things. On the street, they would spit on him, spit at him or something, call him out of his name. They'd do a lot of bad things and this didn't affect Ali in no way and, against the peoples because he know that there was some people had that kind of men-mentality.

00:21:58:00

Interviewer:

Great. Thank you. Cut.

[cut]

[end of interview]

00:22:06:00

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