



Interview with **Muhammad Ali**

Date: February 16, 1989

Interviewer: Sam Pollard and Judy Richardson

Camera Rolls: 2092-2093

Sound Rolls: 241

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.

**Preferred Citation**

Interview with Muhammad Ali, conducted by Blackside, Inc. on February 16, 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 #2092]

[sound roll #241]

00:00:12:00

Camera crew member #1:

Mark one.

Camera crew member #1:

It's all yours, Sam.

Interviewer #1:

Y'all ready?

Camera crew member #1:

Yeah.

00:00:17:00

Interviewer #1:

OK Muhammad, first question. What were Elijah Muhammad and Malcolm X saying that attracted you to the Nation?

00:00:25:00

Muhammad Ali:

When I first went to the Islamic Temple, he called me in, in Miami. I heard Malcolm X, and what attracted me, he says, Why we called negros? Chinese are named after China. Cubans are named after Cuba. Russians after Russia. Germans after Germany. All people are named after their country. What country's called Negro? I said, Man, that's so true. He said, We don't have our names. So, I said to him, Weinstein, you know it's a Jew. Here come Lumumba, Africa. Here come Chang Chow, a Chinaman. Here come Red Cloud, Indian. Here come George or Ji-Jim, he could be Black or White. We all got the same name. We don't have our names. They named us in slavery, so I got me a name from Elijah Muhammad - Muhammad Ali. And as soon as I said the name Muhammad Ali, I've been recognized and welcomed all over Islamic world.

00:01:33:00

Interviewer #1:

OK, let's just cut. That's good.

Interviewer #2:

Yeah.

Interviewer #1:

That was real good. That was good. Let's go for a little medium shot here Mike, next one.

[cut]

00:01:44:00

Camera crew member #1:

Speed.

Camera crew member #2:

Mark. Mark two.

[slate]

00:01:49:00

Interviewer #1:

What was your first impression of Malcolm X when you first met him?

00:01:54:00

Muhammad Ali:

My first impression was how could a Black man talk about the government, White people, and—so bold and not be shot at? Talking about just a whole movement, totally different from others and so bold. How could he say these things? Only God must be protecting him. He'd say and do so many things that, I never saw a civil rights leader or a Christian do and they're gettin' bombed and beat up, and Malcolm X called 'em devils and everything, don't fly the flag he was so [unintelligible] at that time, and yet he walked with no bodyguards, fearless. That's, that really attracted me.

00:02:48:00

Interviewer #1:

That's great. When you joined the Nation, did you think it would hurt your, your career as a boxer? Were you concerned about it hurting your career as a boxer?

00:02:56:00

Muhammad Ali:

Well, I figured they would pressure me if I revealed it, so I kept quiet for about three years. I sneaked in meetings, sneak in the back door, look around for the police officer [unintelligible] before I go in. But after beating Sonny Liston, after getting world recognition and my power finally straight, I said, I'm gonna—I told 'em that night I fought Liston. I revealed it after that fight.

00:03:28:00

Interviewer #1:

So, when had you joined the Nation?

Muhammad Ali:

1961. The fight was in '64.

Interviewer #1:

So you joined it—

Muhammad Ali:

Three—

Interviewer #1:

You decided to join the Nation.

Muhammad Ali:

Three years I sneaked around, keeping it quiet. Act, act, acting like I was crazy.

00:03:47:00

Interviewer #1:

OK, let's cut. That was good.

[beep]

[cut]

[wild sound]

[laughter]

00:03:52:00

Interviewer #1:

I'm ready. We're ready.

Camera crew member #1:

Mark three.

[slate]

00:03:57:00

Interviewer #1:

Now, did you purposely act like you were crazy in those days?

00:04:00:00

Muhammad Ali:

Well, I knew to draw money, to make people, the people were the rich people, mainly the White people at the time, could buy ringside seats. So I had to talk, act crazy, supreme. I am the greatest of all times. I'm pretty. Talk jive, you win in five. They said, The nigger talks too much. Nigger needs a good whoopin'. So that's what made me so attractive, a Black man sayin', I'm the greatest. We, we weren't taught like that. We were taught the Black had the bad luck if I threaten you I'm gonna blackmail you, in college you get black-balled and Black was, Black, Black was good, or Black was bad and White was good. So, me being Black, I'm, I am the greatest. I'm pretty. That gave more people confidence, and put me on such a spot, I had to fight to back up my words. So, I realized Blacks were supposed to be humble. Me, and by me being supreme, well, they showed us a White Jesus, all the Last Suppers are White, all the angels are White, Miss America White. Tarzan came from Africa, he's White. Angels became White, devil became chocolate, and here's a Black man, I'm the greatest. I'm supreme. Superior, superior attitude, this made me so hated by many Southerners, Whites and Blacks. But just being confident and cocky and different, that's what made me so popular.

00:05:41:00

Interviewer #1:

Right. That's fair. Whe-when you fought Floyd Patterson, what was so special with that fight? What, what made you feel so good about that fight, when you were fighting Floyd?

00:05:50:00

Muhammad Ali:

Me and Floyd, the, the fight's over now and I don't say nothin' bad about nobody, but I just, he was different, he was different from me. So, he wouldn't call me Clay, he says, his mama named him Clay—He wouldn't call me Ali—His mama named him Clay, he gonna stay Clay. So I took that and said, I'm gonna whoop you until you tell me my name. And round one I said, What's my name? He didn't say nothin'. So round two, round three, I hit him, hit him with my right hand. [claps] He said Muhammad Ali, Muhammad Ali.

00:06:32:00

Interviewer #1:

That's good. Cut.

[laughter]

[beep]

[cut]

00:06:38:00

Camera crew member #1:

Mark.

Camera crew member #2:

Mark four.

[slate]

00:06:43:00

Interviewer #1:

Now, at a press conference in Miami in '66, you said, Keep asking me, no how lo—no, no matter how long on the war in Vietnam, I sing the song. I ain't got no quarrel with the Vietcong. Now, why'd you say that?

00:06:56:00

Muhammad Ali:

'Cause it's true. At that time, I could see they were wrong, the war was wrong, and my conscience wouldn't allow me to kill them people, so I really was going to jail. The Supreme, Supreme Court said I was right, because they recognized me as a minister, but, what was your question?

00:07:19:00

Interviewer #1:

Why did you say, I'm not gonna fight the Vietcong?

00:07:22:00

Muhammad Ali:

'Cause I wouldn't, and I didn't, and it was wrong. But if America got in trouble and it really was a war, and it was a just war, I'd go. But I wasn't the only one. Many people protested, some went to jail, but me being so famous, it was publicized. But now, I'm right. The war is wrong, we, we, we pulled out, and now they've admitted it was bad. I saw it then.

00:07:54:00

Interviewer #1:

All right. Let's cut there. That was good.

[beep]

[wild sound]

Interviewer #1:

To go through to deal with the problems they had to deal, we had to deal in the country. You got three minutes?

Camera crew member #1:

Yeah.

Interviewer #1:

Let's go.

[cut]

00:08:11:00

Camera crew member #1:

Mark.

Camera crew member #2:

Mark five.

[slate]

00:08:17:00

Interviewer #1:

How did you feel about seeing, you know, other Black men go over to Vietnam and fight in that war then come back to the, the racism in America?

Muhammad Ali:

I felt bad and I felt sorry for 'em and just wished I could talk to 'em. I wished they believed like I did 'cause they came back to, they wasn't recognized and it didn't make us no freer, and I realized that, and I knew they would soon find it out. But basically, I just felt bad knowing that they went there and many got killed, got lame, and then come back and co—they were co-considered wrong.

Interviewer #1:

Right. Right.

00:09:00:00

Muhammad Ali:

I saw that early. I said, If America was in trouble and a real war came, I'd be on the front line, if we'd been attacked. But I could see that wasn't right. And what happened? The boys, Black and White, when they got back it was farther proof that I was right.

00:09:20:00

Interviewer #1:

Let's cut. That's good. You ready?

Camera crew member #2:

Mm-hmm. Yeah

[beep]

[cut]

00:09:27:00

Camera crew member #1:

Mark.

Camera crew member #2:

Mark six.

[slate]

00:09:30:00

Interviewer #1:

The day you were, you went for induction in Houston, that day in '60, '68, '67, what were you thinkin' that day and how did you feel?

00:09:43

Muhammad Ali:

I felt happy 'cause I knew I wasn't going and people didn't think I had the nerve, or they don't have the nerve to buck the draft board or the government. And I almost ran there, hurried. I couldn't wait to not take the step. And then when I did that, all the boys looked surprised. The, the guy who asked me to take the step looked surprised, and we went in the back room and they talked to me, told me what's gonna happen. If I go, I don't have to fight, I could just do exhibitions and things. I told them I still won't go because that's leading more boys to death. And I says, I'd rather go to jail. So they say, You're, you gonna regret it. And I never did. How I felt going to the, the world was watching, the Blacks mainly, lookin' to—if I had the nerve to buck Uncle Sam, and I just couldn't wait for the man to call my name, so I wouldn't step forward. I enjoyed that day. I loved it. And after I left, said, Look it everybody. He didn't go. He's goin' to jail. I said, I'd rather be in jail fed than in Vietnam dead. See, I know if I'd probably went to the Army, somebody woulda said, I'm gonna to get the nigger now. I might have got shot accidentally. I was just that controversial.

00:11:19:00

Interviewer #1:

OK. It's great.

Interviewer #2:

Mmm.

Interviewer #1:

OK. It's good. Cut.

[rollout on camera roll]

[wild sound]

[beep]

00:11:24:00

Interviewer #1:

It was good.

00:11:24:00

Muhammad Ali:

'Cause I'm a bad nigger.

Interviewer #2:

[laughs]

[camera roll #2093]

00:11:30:00

Muhammad Ali:

That tickle?

Interviewer #2:

[laughs]

00:11:31:00

Interviewer #1:

Yeah, that tickle.

[cut]

[wild sound]

00:11:34:00

Muhammad Ali:

—eleven, answer mail, watch the news, around eleven, retire.

Interviewer #1:

Mm-hmm.

Muhammad Ali:

So, sleep from eleven to two.

Interviewer #1:

Right.

00:11:43:00

Camera crew member #1:

OK.

[cut]

00:11:47:00

Camera crew member #2:

Mark.

Camera crew member #1:

Mark seven.

[slate]

00:11:50:00

Muhammad Ali:

[snores]

Interviewer #2:

[laughs]

Muhammad Ali:

You're boring.

00:11:54:00

Interviewer #1:

This is, this is my last question. Why was it important to you, and I know why but I want you to tell the audience, to change your name from Cassius Clay to Muhammad Ali?

Muhammad Ali:

Well, why it was important to me, when I first had heard the teaching that when Blacks came here, the people watching this interview, now what's your name?

Interviewer #1:

Sam.

Muhammad Ali:

Sam what?

Interviewer #1:

Pollard.

00:12:16:00

Muhammad Ali:

Sam Pollard's White. He's originally got a European name. I met a brother last week had dashiki, African robes, sandals, real Black. I said, What's your name? He said, George Washington. He had an afro, named George Wash—said, Mr. Clay had twenty slaves they called Clay property, so the Jones is Jones. These are names that identified as property of certain masters. But today you're free. You don't belong to Clay and Jones. So, you know how you look, goin' to Africa? What's your name, George Washington? They'd—Africans all in America, they don't look for negro Christians to hang out with. They're all over Chicago. They're in California. Africans, other people. And then, how do White men look? What's your name? Chang Chong. A White man named Chang Chong. That's Chinese origin. That's their culture's origin. So, when I took the name Muhammad Ali, all of a sudden they start saying he's the world's most known man. It's not because I box. Sugar Ray is good, Floyd Patterson's good, Joe Louis is good. Because Muhammad Ali is in Africa, all over Africa. The name's in Ethiopia, Morocco, Syria, Indonesia, Pakistan, Turkey, Algeria, Saudi Arabia. Muhammad Ali is common when I traveled. Muhammad is the most common name in the world. There are more people on Earth, every third person is a Muslim in the world. So when I took the name Muhammad Ali and I fought, say it's Floyd Patterson, In this corner, Muhammad Ali! All the people go like this, What? The whole world jumped 'cause it's a common name. You mean in America we have a Muhammad Ali fightin'? So, my father name was Cassius Clay. His father name Cassius Marcellus Clay. And my great-granddaddy, who was a slave, worked for the original Cassius Clay from Kentucky. So, we know [background noise] I'm not no slave now. It's funny, so, the one name, the one name fits a lot of people in my history and my culture. You, you saw Roots? Alex Haley? He, Alex

Haley know that we was made slaves. He knows that these, this happened, they took our names. But after making that movie, I was surprised to see he still kept the name Alex Haley. So, if I say, Here come Chang Chong, you'd look for a Chinaman. Here comes Lumumba, Africa. Here come Weinstein, Jew. Here come Morningstar, Indian. Here come Miltenberger, German. Here come Jones, don't know what color he is till you see him. So we don't have our names. Ain't that something, about the American Black people still got slave names. And I hear that, I love truth, I don't care if it's—I don't care if I'm in church, a mosque, a synagogue. I don't care if you're Baptist, Catholic, Methodist. I don't care what you are. [background noise] When I heard the, the, that truth, I even heard this, people watching this interview now got slave names if they're Black. And so, Muhammad Ali, you go right now, go to Syria, Indonesia, Africa, [unintelligible] they won't know you—who you are till you tell 'em your name. What's your name? George Washington. They say, He's a Negro. Man, nobody can argue with this. I challenge anybody watching the show, I'm gonna embarrass you and mention it. Prove I'm wrong. If you're Black and you got a European name, that's not your name. Now, have you heard of White people in the government, or somebody tell me, You ain't Muhammad Ali. You're wrong. No, nobody never said that's wrong. So, if you leave this country and go to Asia and Africa, all you hear is names Hassan, Omar, Ishmael, Elijah, Muhammad, Ali, Akbar, Aha. These are names of dark people. And so, when we were made slaves in America and, we took their names. But our people are still slaves mentally. We can hear this, you can hear what I'm saying, I don't know, you might or might not, but you might keep your name when you leave here. How did—this, this is a known fact. It's a White man's slave name. Then, yeah, you're free. Why not look in a book or something and pick you a pretty name to fit your ab—Black people? Some people, are dead, dead mentally. Dead man can't hear. So, why don't we wake up? We all want a beautiful name. My daughter, one's named Rasheda, not Sue-Ellen or Mary. One daughter named Jamillah. One named Laila. One named Hana. One named Miya, Kaliah. Pretty names that fit our people. So, that's why I changed my name.

00:17:25:00

Interviewer #1:

That's an answer.

Interviewer #2:

Mm-hmm.

Interviewer #1:

K. That's good.

Camera crew member #1:

Cut?

Muhammad Ali:

Yeah, yeah, [unintelligible].

[beep]

Interviewer #2:

[laughs]

Interviewer #1:

That's nice.

Muhammad Ali:

Thank you.

Interviewer #1:

That was an answer.

Muhammad Ali:

Thanks.

Interviewer #2:

Yes.

Interviewer #1:

That was a good answer.

Muhammad Ali:

That's 'cause it makes sense.

Interviewer #2:

Mm-hmm.

Interviewer #1:

Makes sense.

Muhammad Ali:

And it's true.

[cut]

[wild sound]

00:17:40:00

Interviewer #2:

I'll tell you what, no, let me ask him what I'm gonna ask and then we can roll.

Camera crew member #1:

K.

Interviewer #2:

What you thought you were doing, particularly for young brothers and sisters back then.  
Yeah.

[cut]

Camera crew member #1:

Mark.

Interviewer #2:

OK.

Camera crew member #1:

Mark eight.

[slate]

00:17:54:00

Interviewer #2:

What kinda role model and image did you present for young Black people back then?

00:17:58:00

Muhammad Ali:

First, I wasn't, I was thinkin' about myself first, and then my people, White people. All of our people are brothers and all need help. Mainly to my people I liked being who I was 'cause they'd sh—put me on television, and when I say, I'm the greatest, I'm pretty, it means little Black children and people who felt like they were nothing, We got our champion. Look what he's doing, look what he's gettin' away with. So, when they see, they go to the store, they see White Owl cigars, White Swan soap, King White soap, White Cloud tissue paper, White Rain hair rinse, whew, it's a White Tornado. Tornadoes are black. You can see them coming, but they made them white. They say Jesus was White, the Last Supper White, all the angels are White, Miss America White, Miss Universe. The man in glad rides in, has a white horse. Instead of me being White, it means for me to come along, I'm the greatest of all time. That's unusual. A Black man saying he's the greatest and "you'll fall in five!" and do it. I got—this is why I use boxing to promote that idea. And many people see me today say, I feel so bad. When I was a kid didn't never think [inaudible] the way you act, helped me in school, made me feel better. I get people today telling me that. I'm still the greatest of all times. Of all times.

00:19:36:00

Interviewer #2:

Cut. [laughs]

00:19:37:00

Muhammad Ali:

Ju-just, just that. Little Black kid, little Black kids, little Black kids see that.

Interviewer #2:

[laughs] That is perfect.

[cut]

[wild sound]

Muhammad Ali:

Thank you.

Interviewer #2:

Now, I'll tell you what, before you get up, say—

[beep]

[cut]

[end of interview]

00:19:48:00

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