

ALI :

THE MAN, THE MOVES, THE MOUTH

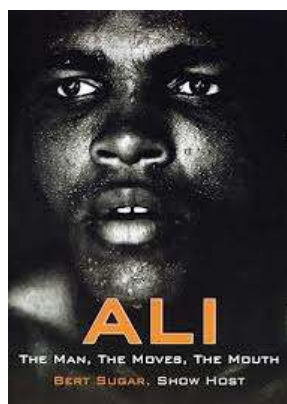
Bert Sugar, Show Host

DVD

MVD5396D

60 min, b/w and colour

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This documentary begins with Mohammed Ali seeing the world in black and white—a simplistic division promoted, of course, by his own nation’s egregious history of racism. Ali was not exactly the most popular pugilist in history even in his prime; he became a beloved icon long after he retired and only when he developed Parkinson’s, reducing the man who could “float like a butterfly and sting like a bee” to a woeful physical ruin—yet a man who grew in nobility and courage. Once derided and abused for his refusal to fight in Vietnam—he went to jail for his beliefs—he has been proved right by history, not only for his political pacifism but for his prowess as a boxer. He boasted—oh, how he boasted!—claiming that he was the greatest in history, raising the hackles of many in the boxing world, but, again, he may have had some justification, though how could anyone really prove who the greatest was or is in any sport? It’s a mug’s game.

Ali is a one-sided documentary, so while it provides a nice overview of Ali’s life and career, it lacks critical objectivity. It covers Ali from the time of his Cassius Clay years: at 12, he took to boxing, developing lightning-fast punches and footwork, and then winning Olympic gold in Rome in 1960 after beating a Polish fighter with over 200 fights to his credit. Once Angelo Dundee took him under his wing, with a prediction that Clay would be world champion before he turned 21, the fighter’s mouth worked as fast as his punches and feet. That was the secret of his success—speed and wit—a wit that skilfully needled his opponents and turned most of them into clumsy, clod-hopping foes who fought unintelligently. But Clay was not impeccable: he was decked by Doug Jones early in his career, winning a highly controversial decision; Henry Cooper sent him to the canvas in the 4th round of their first bout (after Clay had worn a crown to the fight in England); and he almost quit in the ring in the first fight against Sonny Liston because he was temporarily blinded by something on Liston’s gloves. He had already taken to mocking his foes in doggerel and predicting the exact round they would go down to defeat. He was dubbed Cassius the Gaseous, and it got worse once he became a Black Muslim when he rejected his “slave” name, white America, and embraced Elijah Mohammed.

America rejected him in turn because he refused to be invisible or silenced. There was a desperate search for a Great White Hope who could humiliate him. It never materialized, though he was beaten—by fighters such as Joe Frazier, Ken Norton, and Larry Holmes—but only after he was stripped of his title, had spent several years in prison, and regained the crown. The documentary covers all these chapters of his life in the ring, with interesting footage, but it is Ali who gets to do most of the talking. This makes for lots of fun when he shoots out with his rhymes (“I will do to Buster what the Indians did to Custer”) or when he executes his rope-a-dope strategy against Frazier and Foreman, entertaining his fans, riling others, and making tons of money for the business and himself.

The footage of some of his greatest fights is invaluable, especially of those generally blacked out on television, but there is very little of the private Ali—though the documentary’s title tells the truth in

advertising itself as a study of the man, the moves, and the mouth.

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