trans atlantic cultures
Cultural Histories of the Atlantic World 18th–21st Centuries

ISSN 2739-6614
transatlantic-cultures.org



The Rumble in the Jungle: Muhammed Ali versus George Foreman (October 30, 1974)

Loïc Artiaga

The Muhammed Ali-George Foreman match for the world heavyweight title in Kinshasa was a "Black happening". It was broadcast live at a time when the aspirations of the African-American sports and artistic elites and the hopes born of independence converged.

PUBLISHED	December 19, 2022
ORIGINAL LANGUAGE	French
AVAILABLE IN	English, French
TOPICS	Sport
SPACES AND PLACES	Africa · North America
PERIODS	The Atlantic Space Within Globalization
KEYWORDS	boxing, black atlantic, decolonization, global spectacle
PERMANENT LINK	https://transatlantic-cultures.org/en/records/rumble-in-the-jungle-mohamed-ali-contre-george-foreman-30-octobre-1974/

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Loïc Artiaga
Maître de conférences en histoire · Laboratoire EHIC (Espaces humains et interactions culturelles) · Limoges · France

Loïc Artiaga is an historian. He works on popular and media culture.

The Muhammed Ali-George Foreman fight for the world heavyweight title on October 30, 1974 in Kinshasa was a world event. Dubbed "the Rumble in the Jungle," it was the last in a series of events that had begun with the Zaire '74 music festival in September. For weeks, artists, athletes and journalists from

the United States gathered in Zaire, a place most of them were visiting for the first time. The bout was broadcast live at a time when the aspirations of the African-American sports and artistic elites and the hopes born of independence converged. The Black Power movement brought activists on both continents closer together while in the United States, sports was a backdrop for the civil rights struggle. Ali spoke out on discrimination and the lack of Black coaches, campaigned for civil rights, opposed the Vietnam War and joined the Nation of Islam. In 1974, the Black Panthers made him their standard-bearer and, by extension, the Third World's. Meanwhile, Foreman was seen as a black athlete only too keen on waving the star-spangled banner and channeling the national propaganda.

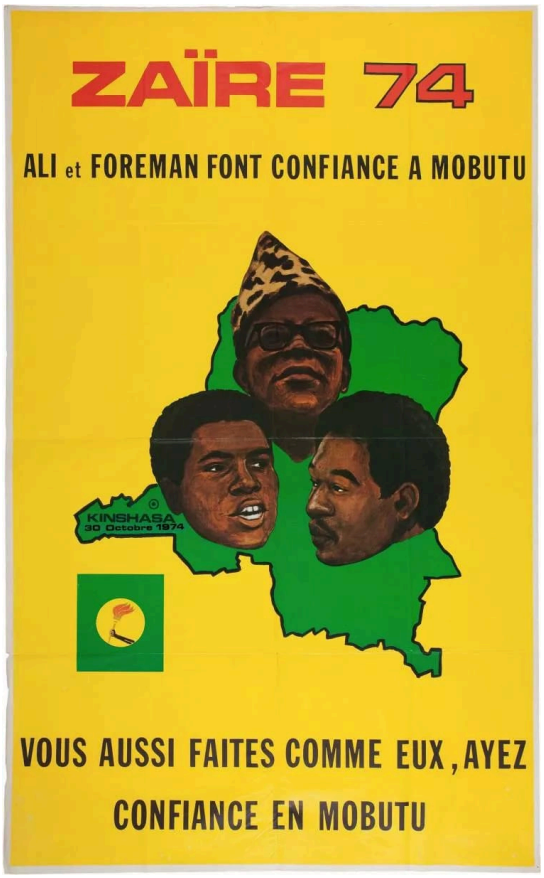
The match neither lessened the North's domination of the South in world sport nor challenged the Mobutu regime. The dictator was still backed by the United States government, which deemed his predecessor Patrice Lumumba a Soviet puppet and had him eliminated. In 1974, Black athletes and artists rejoiced at a "homecoming" solidifying the Back-to-Africa movement at two mass events. The match, one of the last highlights of Ali's boxing career, revealed the lines of media power of the Black Atlantic.

Boxing for the Black Atlantic

The fight's soundtrack, the Zaire '74 music festival, was all about Black pride. Stewart Levine and Hugh Masekela organized concerts featuring about 15 local stars and as many international ones. Franco, Tabu Ley Rochereau and Miriam Makeba shared the stage with the likes of B. B. King, James Brown, Bill Withers and The Spinners. The original plan was for both events, the fight and the festival, to take place together but they were split up after Foreman sustained an injury. At Zaire '74 attendance was sparse until the last day, when admission was free.

Transcontinental influences were limited to the music. Foreman and Ali cared little about Zaire's homegrown martial arts, *libanda* and *mukumbusu*, which developed in reaction to Western models. Boxing is a global spectacle, but its champions and geography are predominantly Western, if not American. Since the 1950s, most title matches had taken place in New York or Chicago. But Ali was a global star and, as Mike Marqusee noted, he owed as much to the Black Atlantic as he helped the Black Atlantic enter popular awareness.

Don King was the event's main organizer. The boxing promoter envisaged a "Black happening", in which Mobutu quickly saw an interest. It could help show Zaire as a modern nation with the infrastructure required to stage a global event. Billboards in Kinshasa vaunted "a fight between two Black men in a Black nation, organized by Black people and watched around the world," concluding: "It's a victory for Mobutism." [1]



Zaire 74 poster: "Do like them, trust Mobotou"

Source: Panafrican Music

A world event

The history of boxing is inextricably linked to race. The search was always on for a "Great White Hope" capable of taking the championship away from African-Americans. In 1974, Ali, who wanted to recover a title he had lost after being suspended for his politics, cast himself as the "Great Black Hope". He endowed boxing with a symbolic meaning: the issue of domination and overturning it echoed the situation of Blacks in the United States and peoples' movements in the global South.

Video Techniques (VT) was in charge of broadcasting the match. In partnership with King, its owner Schwartz participated in manufacturing sport and media products: besides "The Rumble in the Jungle," they produced the "Sunshine Showdown" in Kingston, Jamaica (Joe Frazier vs. Foreman, 1973) and the "Thrilla in Manila" (Ali vs. Frazier, 1975) in the Philippines. The matches became full-fledged shows with their own narratives and aesthetics featured on posters and in derivative products. VT kept some of the exclusive rights to manage the event's tourist aspect. Zaire's government organized the arrival of spectators from the various provinces by bus. One hundred thousand spectators attended the match, which took place in the middle of the night so that it could be watched live in the United States.

VIDEO

View online: https://www.youtube.com/embed/55AasOJZzDE?start=1205

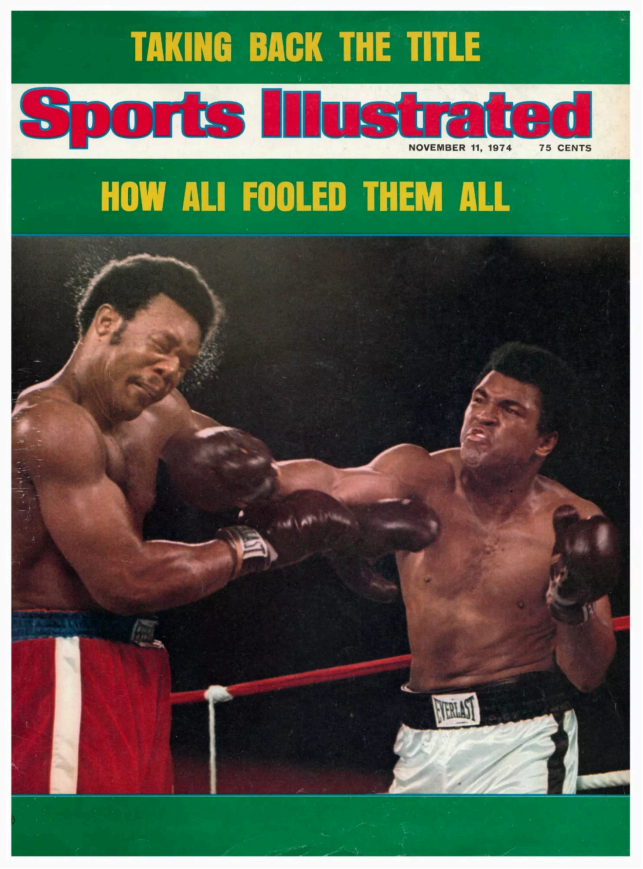
The Ali Foreman Match

Source: Youtube

Tens of millions of people viewed the fight on television, in cinemas or at drive-ins. In London, 50,000 boxing fans watched it in cinemas. In New York, the relatively high prices of tickets for a match whose outcome seemed like a foregone conclusion—Foreman was a three-to-one favorite—made it a show for the privileged, excluding disadvantaged urban Blacks. Many cinema seats were empty. The broadcast's technical quality was so poor that some viewers left before the unexpected end.

Ali's trick

Since winning his first title in 1964, Ali had been his own spokesman, defining his opponents depending on the context. He was particularly ruthless with his Black adversaries, deeming them Uncle Toms. His fight with Foreman was a contest between generations and styles. The young champion, who had won 40 out of 40 matches, unleashed brute force in the ring, contrasting sharply with Ali's "float like a butterfly" agility. But the challenger situated the confrontation on different terrain: "If he wins, we'll be slaves for another 300 years. If I win, we'll be free." In the media show orchestrated by Ali, Foreman was cast as representing Belgium, the former colonial power, "oppressor of the Black nations." Foreman, a hero of the 1968 Games, where he defeated a Russian, found himself caught up in a war of nerves, while Ali shook hands with enthusiastic crowds who shouted, "Ali bomaye!" ("Kill him Ali!" in Lingala), which became a slogan.



William Leggett "Sharp jab to the Pocketbook", *Sports Illustrated*, november 11, 1974

Source: Vault

Predicted as the loser by bookmakers and even his entourage, at 4:00 a.m. Ali strode into an arena that was already on his side. Contrary to what he had announced, he did not dance but walked towards Foreman. Ali attacked first before resting on the ropes. A trap closed in on Foreman: the rope-a-dope. The reigning champion wore himself out hitting his opponent, who took and blocked the blows as the springy ropes absorbed some of their energy. Ali only came off the ropes in the last seconds of each round to land his punches. He exhausted Foreman, knocking him out in round eight.

Nearly 600 journalists covered the event and 300 to 500 million people watched it worldwide. The match was Ali's crowning achievement: he took back the world championship title. Billed as his last fight, it was actually the first in a series of bouts ending in the early 1980s. two documentaries featuring archival footage, *When We Were Kings* (Leon Gast, 1996) and *Soul Power* (Jeffrey Levy-Hinte 2008), ensured that the match and the music would go down in history.

NOTES

1 Norman Mailer, *The Fight* (New York: Random House, 2013 [1975]), 43