

MAIN EVENT

HOWARD BINGHAM ON PHOTOGRAPHING THE GREATEST OF ALL TIME

Bingham discusses his career, 40 years of friendship, photographs and Ali—the movie

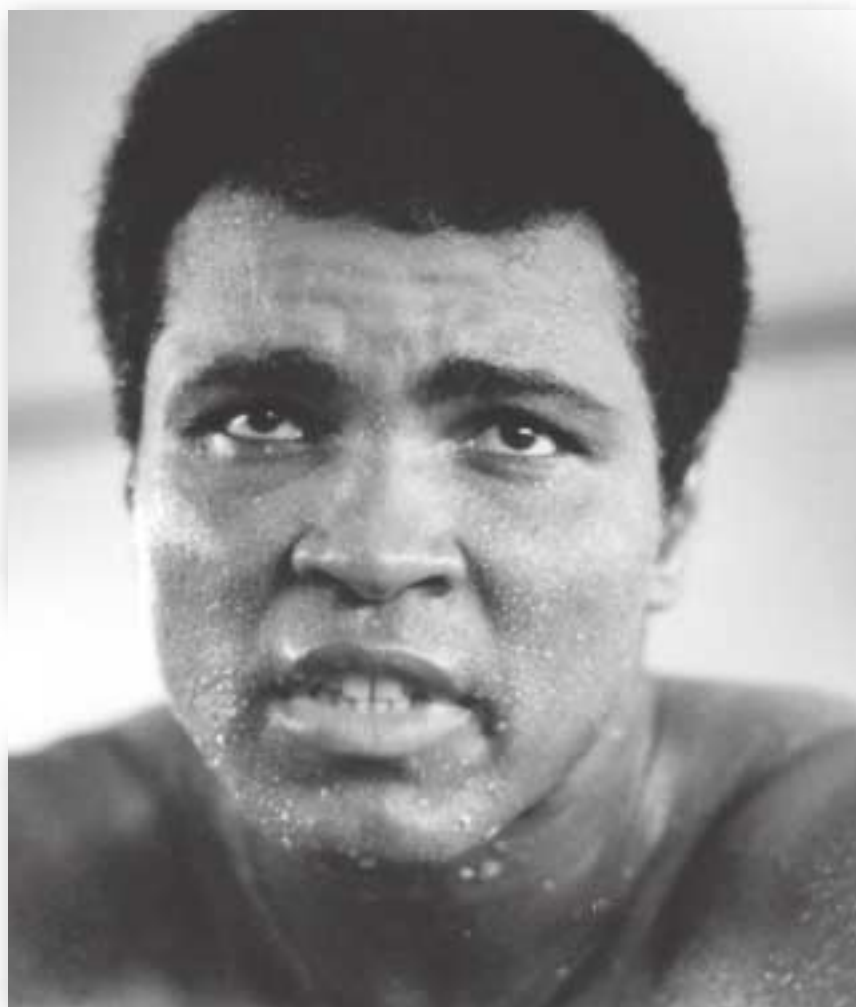


PHOTO BY HOWARD BINGHAM

The beginning of Howard L. Bingham's photography career wasn't pretty. He flunked the first photography course he had ever taken and was fired from his first official photography job.

"It really hurt me. But looking back, that was the best thing in the world that happened to me," Bingham says, in retrospect, of his first photography job at the *Los Angeles Sentinel*, a black newspaper. "In the time that I was there, I met Muhammad Ali, then Cassius Clay. The assignment was to cover this loud mouth, big mouth coming to town."

Bingham says he didn't have a clue who Cassius Clay was, partly because he had no interest in boxing. "My assignment was to cover the news conference. I introduced myself, photographed him and left."

Later that same day in 1962, Bingham spotted Cassius Clay and his brother, Rudy, on the corner of Fifth and Broadway "just looking at the girls go by and wasting time."

Bingham offered the two a ride in his nearly new 1961 Valiant and, after running errands, showed the brothers the town, with stops at the Los Angeles City College, a black-owned bowling alley in Compton, home to meet his mother and a few other places. »»

Howard Bingham

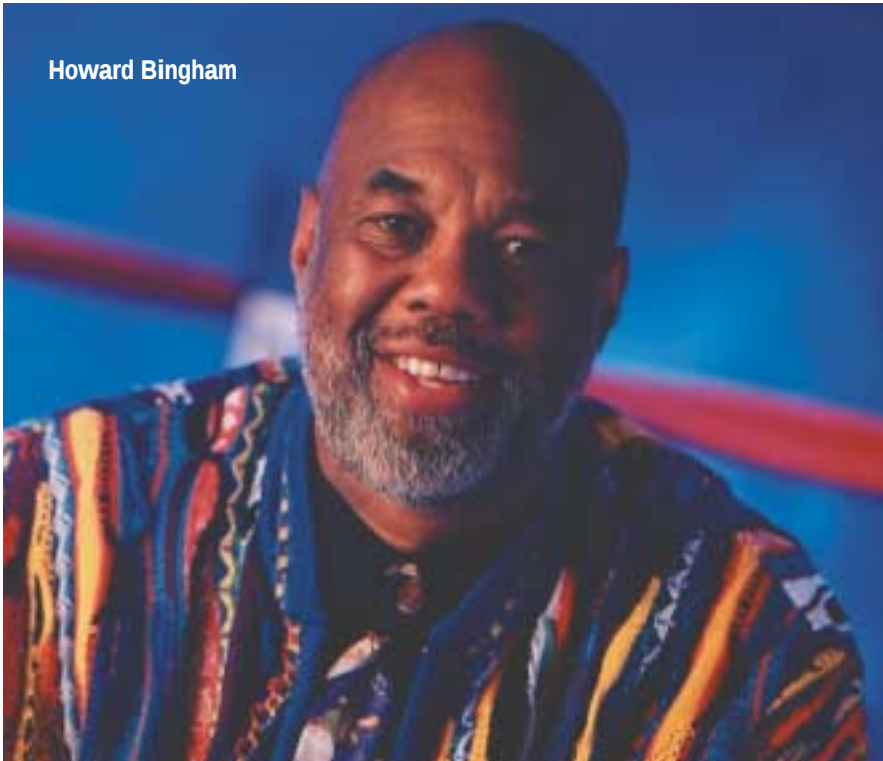


PHOTO BY NEIL LIEFER, COURTESY SPORTS ILLUSTRATED

"It was the luckiest day of Muhammad Ali's life meeting me," Bingham says with a chuckle. It also was the beginning of a friendship that has lasted for 40 years.

The brotherly relationship with Ali has made life for Bingham "a little easier," he says, agreeing that fate brought them together.

The oldest of seven children, Bingham was born in Jackson, Mississippi. When Bingham was four years old, his father, a minister and mother, a housewife and domestic worker, moved the family to Los Angeles in search of a better life.

Bingham recalls his strict religious upbringing. "There were things I couldn't do sometimes because of the religion — like dances. I never did go to dances and things like that in school."

He graduated high school in 1956 and enrolled in Compton College, where he was a music major, who made mostly Ds and Fs, he says, because he didn't focus or apply himself. "I was just having fun, a nonchalant type of life."

Because low grades made suspension from school inevitable, Bingham took a job

mopping floors at a local grocery store chain. "I never did like that too much because it was a lot of hard, manual work."

Bingham repeatedly approached the grocery store chain's managers about reassignment to an easier job as a grocery box clerk. The promise that it would happen "the next month" never materialized, so Bingham left the job.

In the interim, he made daily visits for a week to the *Sentinel*, where he would ask for work in the photography department. The persistence got Bingham his first shot — working for free, running errands and doing odd jobs.

Bingham was eventually hired at the *Sentinel*, where he made \$60 a week as a staff photographer. He admits he was learning on the job and often returned from his assignments with "no film, out-of-focus film, over exposed film, under exposed, but I always had an alibi for it. It was really on the job training. I learned very, very fast from my mistakes. After a while, I was doing real good."

To make ends meet he set up side jobs, photographing weddings, socials and debu-

tante balls. When the *Sentinel* got wind of Bingham's side gigs, he was fired. "The reason why they fired me was because I was hustling on the side."

That side hustle shuffled him down a fateful path to chronicle, in photographs, kings, queens and the life of a man who proclaims himself The Greatest of All Time — Muhammad Ali.

Now 62 and still shooting photographs, Bingham suspects that he has millions of pictures of Ali. Rare glimpses of 123 photographs from Bingham's collection are on display through March 31 at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C.

The photographs capture the excitement of the Ali/Foreman boxing match, "Rumble in the Jungle," which took place on Oct. 30, 1974, in Kinshasa, Zaire. The images address the politics of sport, celebrity journalism, the rigors of training, the devotion of fans, and the relatively quiet interludes between public activities, rather than the events in the ring.

A ringside seat in the center of Ali's life is what Bingham continues to share. PROUD Publisher Vele Keyta Redding recently pulled up a chair to hear the flashbacks.

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Vele Keyta Redding: *How would you describe your friendship with Muhammad Ali?*

Howard L. Bingham: It depends. It depends on what day it is. It depends on if I'm mad at him or something.

Redding: *You actually get mad at Muhammad Ali?*

Bingham: Of course. We fuss.

Redding: *How long does that last?*

Bingham: Doesn't last long.

Redding: *How many photographs do you have of Muhammad Ali?*

Bingham: I've been taking photographs since 1962. I don't know. I've never just sat down to count them.

Redding: *What would your guess be?*

Bingham: A lot. Millions.

Redding: *What do the photographs mean to you?*

Bingham: They mean everything. That's my life.

Redding: *You've photographed other very prominent people. Of those people that you've photographed is Muhammad Ali tops?*

Bingham: He's tops, but who would come in second in that list would be The Cosbys — Bill and Camille. I've been working with them since the '60s. I work with them still, now.

Redding: *What did you first do with Bill Cosby?*

Bingham: I met him when he was doing *I Spy*. Cassius was in LA in 1964 after he won the championship and we went over to visit Bill on the set. That's how we met. Then, later on in 1967, Bill's office called because Newsweek wanted to do a story on him and Bill said 'you have to call Howard Bingham to take the picture. And so that's how it happened.

Redding: *When you're looking through your lens at Muhammad Ali, who do you see?*

Bingham: I see a guy that I'm very proud to have known, a guy I'm very proud that I've had the opportunity to meet. A guy who has made my life a little bit easier, a little bit better. A guy that is loving, a guy that loves people, loves life.

Redding: *How successful would you have been had you not met Muhammad Ali?*

Bingham: Oh hell, I might have been a millionaire by now if I had not met him. (chuckles abounding).

Redding: *Do you think it was fate that you met Muhammad Ali?*

Bingham: It has to be. Look at the history. Look at the 40 years. For me, for a guy who comes from Mississippi, for a guy living in South Central LA — still living in South Central LA — it's been remarkable for me to have met and to become friends with the most famous, recognizable face on earth. When people want to contact him, they call me. I've been all over the world with him. We met kings, queens. And you know what I found out in doing all this? These people are just like me and you. They're just a little bit luckier than we are — well, I am.

Background: Howard L. Bingham, 62, began his photography career at the *Los Angeles Sentinel*, a black newspaper. In his more than 40-year career he has photographed kings, queens, dictators and the man who proclaims himself The Greatest of All Time — Muhammad Ali. He lives in Los Angeles, but frequently travels, dividing his time between commercial assignments and documentary work.

Photo Album: Included in Bingham's collection are **millions of photographs of Ali**. Other notable photographs in his album include Bill Cosby, Nelson Mandela and Malcom X, among others. Since 1960, Bingham has captured in pictures nearly every urban uprising of significance. His work has appeared in *TIME*, *SPORTS ILLUSTRATED*, *LOOK*, *PEOPLE*, *NEWSWEEK* and *EBONY* magazines.

Booked: *Ali: The Movie and The Man*, a book co-authored by Bingham, was released in December 2001. The book is the official companion to the film starring Will Smith as Muhammad Ali. In 1997, Bingham joined forces with Max Wallace to co-author *Muhammad Ali's Greatest Fight: Cassius Clay vs. The United States of America*. Ali wrote the book's foreword. In 1993, Bingham authored *Muhammad Ali: A Thirty Year Journey*, a pictorial history book chronicling the life and daily activities of one of the world's greatest athletes and humanitarians.

Decorations: Bingham is the 1997 recipient of the **ASP International Award**, which was presented by the American Society of Photographers. The award is given to a person or corporation selected by the Society as having made significant contributions to the profession of photography. Bingham also is the recipient of the Kodak Vision Award, among other distinguished honors.



Muhammad Ali and Malcolm X walking on 7th Avenue in Harlem in 1964.

PHOTO BY HOWARD BINGHAM

Redding: *Is there anything you won't do for Muhammad Ali? Or vice versa, is there anything Muhammad Ali won't do for you?*

Bingham: Ali will do anything for anybody. Ali does not care for himself; he cares for others. He tries to do things for other people. I'll do almost anything for him.

Redding: *How often do you talk to Muhammad Ali?*

Bingham: Almost every day.

Redding: *What is it like for you, as his friend of 40 years, to watch him deteriorate with the disease that he has?*

Bingham: It's not fun. It's not a deterioration. First of all, let me say, Ali has a disease called Parkinson's syndrome. Ali's mind is 100 percent. His motor functions just do not function as they used to and once did. I think things can be a lot better at times, and the reason I'm saying that is because Ali does not do what he's supposed to be doing. He does not do any kind of physical exercise these days. Me either (chuckles) ... Ali is a human being that the world looks up to and I'm always arguing with him to do the right things. If Ali's going to come to New York, people are going to come and say 'ooh, I'm going to meet Ali.' When they come see Ali, they don't see the Ali that they remember. And, naturally, he's not the Ali that they remember because he's older. Everybody's older.

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PHOTO BY HOWARD BINGHAM

Comedian Bill Cosby pictured with Nelson Mandela on Robben Island in 1997. The two were in Mandela's jail cell.

Redding: *How do you like sharing the spotlight with Muhammad Ali?*

Bingham: What's the saying, 'when somebody speaks, everybody listens?' When Ali's there, everybody looks.

Redding: *What do you want people to see when they look at you?*

Bingham: A guy who has been (Muhammad Ali's) friend for years. You know I get so many emails and things from people thanking me for being his friend, thanking me for preserving history, thanking me for being there to show (that history to) the world. It's a really wonderful feeling.

Redding: *Based on the relationship you've had with Muhammad Ali over the years, how would you describe the true meaning of friendship?*

Bingham: Giving. Helping.

Redding: *Were any of your photographs used in the movie, Ali?*

Bingham: None of my photographs were used in the movie. A lot of my photographs were used to design the movie [sets].

Redding: *What did you think about Ali, the movie?*

Bingham: The movie was good. I'm just sorry

it was a limited audience. It was an R rating. A lot of history in there, though. Will Smith (who played Ali in the movie) is unbelievable. This guy works hard. That's why he's who he is. He put himself into the character. He worked out one whole year before the film started just to get in shape and learn. I never heard this guy complain about the work, the takes on the movie, and he was never late.

Redding: *Did you have any flashbacks at all of Muhammad Ali as a young man?*

Bingham: Just his voice, his tone. He (Will Smith) reminds me so much of Ali because he's funny, he's crazy, he likes to have fun. He's a practical joker.

Redding: *Is there anybody that you would have like to have captured in photographs that you haven't?*

Bingham: One of the people that I wish I had had the opportunity to meet with is Princess Di. She reminds me so much of Ali. The reason people liked her is because she was real. There was nothing phony about her.

Redding: *What is the one thing you know for sure?*

Bingham: That nothing is promised. 12