



TREASURES FROM THE YALE FILM ARCHIVE

AN ONGOING SERIES OF CLASSIC AND CONTEMPORARY FILMS PRESENTED IN 35MM BY THE YALE FILM STUDY CENTER

SUNDAY

SEPTEMBER 25, 2016

2:00PM • WHITNEY

HUMANITIES CENTER

WHEN WE WERE KINGS

PRESENTED WITH SUPPORT FROM
PAUL L. JOSKOW '70 M.PHIL., '72 PH.D.



"If you think the world was surprised when Nixon resigned, wait 'til I kick George Foreman's behind!"

Kinshasa, 1974: pummeled by the press, Muhammad Ali squares up against the younger, stronger George Foreman and fights against 7-1 odds in an attempt to regain the heavyweight title taken from him seven years earlier for refusing to fight in the Vietnam War. This "Rumble in the Jungle" serves as the subject of *WHEN WE WERE KINGS*, an Oscar-winning film more than twenty years in the making, enhanced by extensive location shooting and a knockout soundtrack, and having at its heart the mighty Muhammad Ali. As Rita Kempley wrote in *The Washington Post*, "No comedian was ever funnier, no fighter ever faster than Muhammad Ali, who is caught at the top of his game in Leon Gast's valentine, *WHEN WE WERE KINGS*."



PRODUCTION: The film was originally intended as a concert film chronicling the Zaire '74 music festival planned in conjunction with the championship match. Director Leon Gast was hired by fight promoter Don King, who was initially reluctant to have a white filmmaker at the helm, but was impressed by Gast's tenacity in working with the Hell's Angels on another project, and the two men agreed that half of the film crew would be black. A delay in the fight meant the festival—and Gast's budget, funded by ticket sales—took a huge hit. The crew was blocked from leaving the country after the festival, and with little else to do, Gast turned his cameras to preparations for the fight. He later sued for and won the 250 hours of 16mm film and audiotape his crew had recorded, but the lack of funding meant he wasn't able to assemble a cut of the film until the 1990s. In the mid-'80s, lawyer and music manager David Sonenberg came on board as a co-producer, bringing his own financing and clearing the extensive music rights. A third co-producer, Hollywood director Taylor Hackford, suggested and shot the contemporary interviews, included to give audiences context for the bout and its combatants.

DIRECTED BY **LEON GAST**
(1996) 88 MINS.

PRODUCED BY **POLYGRAM FILMED ENTERTAINMENT**

STARRING **MUHAMMAD ALI, GEORGE FOREMAN, DON KING, JAMES BROWN, B.B. KING, SPIKE LEE, NORMAN MAILER, AND GEORGE PLIMPTON**

RECEPTION: The film premiered at Sundance in January of '96, and was picked up by Polygram immediately after that screening. It went into limited release that October, and wide release the following Valentine's Day. Between the premiere and the release, Muhammad Ali solidified his status as a secular saint in American sports when, battling Parkinson's, he returned to the public eye to light the cauldron at the Summer Olympics in Atlanta. Foreman too was enjoying a resurgence in popularity, going from having "an almost willful lack of charm" in the film (in the words of *Slate's* Matthew Desseem) to being embraced as a jovial family man thanks to the frequent infomercials for his "Lean Mean Fat-Reducing Grilling Machine" that began running in '94. The film received overwhelming praise from critics and audiences, and went on to win numerous awards including Academy, Critics' Choice, Independent Spirit, and National Society of Film Critics Awards. It was not, however, immune to criticism: many took issue with its depiction of Miriam Makeba as a succubus, exoticizing B-roll, certain comments by Norman Mailer and George Plimpton, and scant examination of Mobutu Sese Seko's role in the 1974 events. Still, it is in the bobbing-and-weaving character study Ali himself that *WHEN WE WERE KINGS* shows its greatest strengths, and this portrait of Ali at his vivacious, dexterous, charismatic peak helps the film hold its title as one of the greatest sports documentaries of all time.

DID YOU KNOW: WHEN PRODUCERS LEON GAST AND DAVID SONENBERG ACCEPTED THE BEST DOCUMENTARY FEATURE ACADEMY AWARD, THEY WERE JOINED ON STAGE BY MUHAMMAD ALI AND GEORGE FOREMAN, PUTTING A PUBLIC END TO THEIR "RIVALRY" WHICH HAD IN TRUTH TRANSFORMED INTO A CLOSE FRIENDSHIP YEARS EARLIER. ONE OF THE PRESENTERS OF THE AWARD WAS WILL SMITH, WHO WOULD RECEIVE HIS FIRST OSCAR NOMINATION FIVE YEARS LATER FOR HIS STARRING ROLE IN THE BIOPIC *ALI*.

NEXT UP: DIRECTOR MURRAY LERNER RETURNS TO YALE 50 YEARS AFTER MAKING HIS DOCUMENTARY *TO BE A MAN*, WHICH WILL SCREEN IN A SPECIAL PRESERVATION PREMIERE, ON **FRIDAY, OCTOBER 7 AT 7:00 P.M.**