

The Observer's obituaries of 2016

Muhammad Ali remembered by Davis Miller

17 January 1942 – 3 June 2016

Davis Miller, who has written two books on his hero, became close friends with the boxer when he visited Ali's home in 1988

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I'm about as agnostic as you can be, but throughout my life it's as if [Muhammad Ali](#) has saved me. We shared a birthday, 17 January. When, as a young child, my mum died, I was nearly catatonically depressed, I didn't speak with anyone. But just watching Ali on television lifted me out of that. Partly because of that experience, Ali influenced me to become a writer, and for much of the last 30 years that I have known him, he has been my principal subject. Without Ali I might be selling cars.

“He always needed to pull up the carpet of the universe and see what was underneath

There are many people who felt like that about him. At the beginning of December, six months after he died, I had an email from his wife, [Lonnie](#), just sharing memories. She had been in love with Ali since she was a kid – their mothers were friends. They first met when she was six and they stayed close over the years. She told me just before his death that she knew at the age of 19 she'd be the last person he would be with, that he would die with her. She didn't seek that, she just knew it would happen. I think Ali would have probably died five or 10 years before, had it not been for Lonnie. She gave him the largest life she could. She dealt with the users and abusers around him, saved what was left of his fortune and did what she could do with his health.



▲ Davis Miller and Muhammad Ali at Ali's home in Berrien Springs, Michigan, September 1992. Photograph: Len Miller

She allowed him to be what he always was, which was a transcendent figure. I think he became an even greater man in his later years. I spent thousands of hours with him and I never once heard him complain about his illness, apart from one time, when he turned to me and said: “Man, just think what I could be doing if I didn't have this!” But that was it. He went from superman to everyman. With the Parkinson's, he became everyone's ailing family member and he had that disease for over 30 years. His trainer, [Angelo Dundee](#), told me that he always thought Ali would beat his illness and, in effect, that's what he did.

His great gift was to be able to step up and outside himself, and make other people do that too. You could see it even in those late fights when he seemed to purposely take a tremendous pounding. Even in the midst of it he could step away from it for a moment, as if to say: “Look at me, I'm the world's greatest punchbag, but you can't hurt me.” By the time I met him, in 1988, he was proving that every day. I asked him: “What does it feel like to be a great man not allowed to be great?” He said simply: “You don't question God. He is showing me and showing you that I am just a man like everyone else.”

There is a perception that he became a Buddha-like figure in those years, but in reality he was no less Ali than he had ever been. I have seen him be insanely narcissistic, as much as Donald Trump, the difference being that Ali had the capacity to let you know that he could be just as interested in anyone around him. Every time I was in public with him, it was the same. He would get out of the car and stand on the street, and in two minutes there would be 500 people, all wanting to make contact with him. He would look deeply at them in return and let them know that connection meant something to him. There must be tens of thousands of people all over the world who will never forget that look.

The last time I saw him was in September 2015. I had seen him a few months before and he looked horrible, and that hit me very deeply. But in September, Lonnie had made sure he gained 20lb and he looked more like Ali. He was playful, doing magic tricks for children, doing the routines, being Ali. He never tired of that, and he knew people wanted it. He was, even then, this kind of cosmic brat: he always needed to pull up the carpet of the universe and see what was underneath. He is a genuinely mythological figure, I think, though not in a pop star way. He is not Madonna. He is not even the Beatles. He is someone the poet Homer would have liked to get hold of.

At the memorial service, I was sitting between [Yusuf Islam](#) (Cat Stevens) and [Steve Wynn](#), the casino billionaire. Afterwards, I walked out in Louisville and there were all these people who looked like they had just come from the burning bush. They wanted to share stories of how they had met Ali at Chicago's O'Hare airport in 1966 or whatever. I got talking to a few of those people. One or two had ended up going to lunch with him. That's what he was like. If anyone had gone up to his door even six months ago, if he felt OK, he would have invited you in, fed you a meal, just like he did with me those years ago. If his grandkids were there, he would have insisted you played with them, and finally you would have stayed the night. He did that every day, and a lot of those people turned up to his memorial, not just to be there, but because they felt they knew him.

Main photograph by Action Images/Reuters

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▲ Mythological figure ... Muhammad Ali. Photograph: Action Images/Reuters

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