

By Herb Boyd
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Muhammad Ali often proclaimed that he was the greatest of all time (G.O.A.T), but on occasion he also acknowledged that there was one greater than he was – Sugar Ray Robinson. They could very well have shared equal billing to this pinnacle, both having iconic, remarkable records during their careers in the ring.

In common, too, was their magnetic appeal, dashing good looks, panache, and a commanding presence wherever they appeared in public, particularly in the glare of flashing cameras. Like Ali, Ray Robinson was not his birth name, but one given to him at a moment's notice making him eligible for an amateur bout. Not too many fights later given his style and ability, Sugar was added, and that was even more in keeping with the profession dubbed the "sweet science."

Ali's infectious charisma was showcased in a number of film and television appearances, including a starring role in *The Greatest*, a dramatized version of his life. There was also a four-performance run on Broadway with him as "Buck White," and, according to reviews, he "got people on their feet for five straight minutes," longer than the duration of a round of boxing. A couple of decades before, Sugar Ray, after suffering a defeat from light-heavy weight Joey Maxim, was similarly on his way to another stage as a song and dance man. Joe Glaser, who had attained fame as a talent agent, handling such jazz immortals as Louis "Satchmo" Armstrong and Billie Holiday, coaxed him out of retirement and into a less hazardous, if no less demanding, venture in show business.

Preparing for a dance number, a routine rope skipping in time with "Sweet Georgia Brown," and then breaking into song required a training regimen almost as tiring and rigorous as getting ready for ten rounds of boxing. In 1952, Sugar's debut at the French Casino inside the Paramount Hotel on 46th Street, just west of Broadway, was not as auspicious as his first ring encounters. After TKO victory over Joey Echevarria in 1940 at Madison Square Garden, Sugar won 39 successive fights before losing to Jake LaMotta three years later. At the casino, in a musical number backed by showgirls, "long limbed lovelies imported from France," wrote his wife, Edna Mae, Sugar was the victim of a poorly developed skit. "It was if it had been resurrected from a bad show in the days of burlesque. Not risqué, but not funny. I frankly was embarrassed."

To ease his move into the world of entertainment, without Everlast gloves, mouthpiece and silk shorts, Sugar had a dance partner, much to the chagrin of Glaser and Edna Mae, who could speak with authority about stage productions. When her off-off Broadway role in *Born Yesterday* ended, she set aside some of her responsibilities running the various businesses they had, none more challenging than the block long companies on Seventh Avenue in Harlem, to tutor her husband on how to strut, spin, and move gracefully across the stage. Henry Le Tang, a renowned dance instructor was also enlisted to coach Sugar on doing simple rhythm steps. As Sugar polished his movements and improved his stage presence, Glaser was making the rounds, talking up his client's performance skills to club owners and noted impresarios.

Le Tang was a taskmaster, pushing Sugar as hard as any of his trainers, insisting that his legs had to be strong enough, empowered with sufficient stamina to dance throughout the night. "You must understand," Le Tang said repeatedly, "you are telling a story with your feet." Of course, there was more to his performance than dancing, there was the occasional song, the repartee, and even a few jokes. These moments, Le Tang reminded him, had to be perfectly timed between the rhythmic tap and the tails of his swirling tuxedo. It was often so grueling that Sugar was ready to let it go and tend the bar at his club in Harlem. To some extent, Sugar found relief when he was part of a musical extravaganza like the one in Chicago in the winter of 1954 with Count Basie and his band and the Dominoes, a popular doo-wop vocal group. Such a touring assemblage wasn't unusual during this period, possibly a way to attract a widespread audience. Augmenting their nights at the Chicago Theater, they had agreed to a one-night stand at the DuSable High School. Things did not go well. First of all, the first part of the show went far too long, which exasperated folks who had attended mainly to see Sugar. It was almost midnight before Sugar was summoned to the stage.

An article in *Ebony* magazine captured some of Sugar's and the fans frustration. "He zipped through a mediocre performance," the reporter wrote, "insulted an influential Negro disc jockey, ignored a talented nine-year-old dancer who had appeared in the first show and stayed costumed until after 1 a.m. with the understanding that he was to appear with Sugar in the second show. The handful of [admirers] who stayed until the end left Sugar's show firmly resolved never to see him again." One reaction to the Chicago flop was to go overseas where no matter what he did, a standing ovation was guaranteed.

Sugar had a few warmup dates on the Riviera before arriving in Paris for a major appearance. Accompanying him was the pianist and singer Bob Dorough, who had met Sugar at Henry Le Tang's studio. He had won Sugar's approval after a command from Le Tang to play "Green Eyes." "You're going on the road with us," Sugar effused, a trip Dorough relished. They sailed across the Atlantic on the luxurious *Ile de France*, and their performances on board were akin to rehearsals. But apparently they were not enough. "We bombed in Paris," Dorough said, "Larry Adler a harmonica player stole the show." Their show was billed as "The Champ," but they ended up feeling like a couple of chumps. When the tour ended, Dorough remained in Paris, and Sugar, who come to France first class, returned to the states a second class passenger.

From discussions with his friends and associates, Sugar finally conceded to put his rope skipping routine back in his act, and that meant his dazzling feet keeping time with an up tempo, jazzy number and attired in boxing shorts. This was a certain connection to his fans, as well as a way back to those days of training for a fight. Soon, the articles about his ring greatness exceeded those celebrating his arrival on the entertainment circuit. A return to the ring seemed inevitable. Glaser was able to get a few club dates where Sugar could skip rope, but they didn't bring in the cash he needed to hold the creditors, offset the financial problems incurred by bad investments, leeches, and most troubling, the IRS. He began to compare the earnings of one night in the ring with a slew of club dates and pulling on the gloves and hanging up the tap shoes was the only feasible option. On bone-chilling cold night in Hamilton, Ontario, Sugar

returned to a world he knew well with an exhibition fight against Gene Burton, a stablemate. It was a solid tune up for his date with Joe Rindone in 1955 at the Olympia Stadium in Detroit. Rindone was knocked out in round six, and Sugar's 138th victory.

By this time, Sugar had 62 fights left before leaving the fight game in 1965. The Ali-Sugar comparisons alluded to at the start of this essay, had a more substantial meaning in 1964 when Sugar became a member of Cassius Clay's retinue, putting him back in contact with Bundini Brown, who for seven years had worked in Sugar's corner. Bundini was the comic and pressure relief Clay needed to tone down before and during a bout. "Float like a butterfly and sting like a bee," was his most famous advice to Clay. Now Sugar was in Clay's corner, at least inspirationally. When Sugar was not actually by Clay's side, he sat ringside near Sam Cooke and Malcolm X. Interestingly, when Sugar was making one of his last fighting tours of Europe he fought in France on November 14, three days before Malcolm's arrival there. Sugar told Clay that he must be the matador to Sonny Liston's bull. "You can't match strength with Liston, just like I couldn't match strength with LaMotta. He was the bull, but I was the matador and I outsmarted him. You can beat Liston the same way."

This was an easy tactic for Clay to follow since he had, almost from the beginning of his career, emulated Sugar's style and finesse. As we all know now, Clay followed his mentor's orders perfectly, and Sonny had been totally eclipsed by the young fighter who later would announce his membership in the Nation of Islam. Sugar presumed that Malcolm – whom he was never comfortable around – had persuaded Clay to join the NOI and change his name to Muhammad Ali. Sugar quickly packed his bags and left Miami, leaving Ali in the hands of his new hero. That could have been the end of their relationship but Sugar – practically flat broke – found it expedient to reconcile with Ali, desperately needing him by his side in a fight in Kingston, Jamaica against Jimmy Beecham in March, 1965. Ali acceded to Sugar's request and worked in his corner as a second. Ali provided Sugar with the spiritual support and, most importantly, was an added attraction in drawing more people to the fight.

There would be one more episode involving Ali and Sugar. After the fight, Ali was incensed that his wife, Sonji, while attending a party was carelessly allowing her miniskirt to rise higher and higher with each move she made. Ali, infuriated by her indifference to this violation of Muslim decorum, snatched her by the arm and marched her off to a rest room, locked the door, and began loudly berating her. Hearing the exchanges of screaming and yelling, Sugar went to the door and asked if everything was all right. "Listen," Ali barked, "I'm gonna open this door in a second, and if you ain't gone, I'm gonna whip you good. You ain't nothing but a middleweight, so go on, [and] mind your own business." When the couple emerged from the toilet, and as they walked away Sugar could see that their relationship had reached a breaking point, and so had his and Ali's. His marriage to Edna Mae was also unravelling and a divorce seemed the only option left for the former lovers.

The rocky, contentious marriage had consumed much of Sugar's time outside the ring, to say nothing of his developing romance to Millie, his next and last wife. Fighting only sporadically, and IRS hounding him, Sugar immersed himself into the political realm, keeping busy campaigning for mayoral candidate John Lindsay in the summer of

1965. One major stop for Lindsay on the campaign trail was to Rev. Gardner Taylor's Concord Baptist Church, the largest in Brooklyn. Sugar was right by the candidate's side, assuring him of additional attention from the congregants and onlookers. But things soured between them after Lindsay, apparently overbooked, was unable to keep an appointment with Sugar, who stormed out of the mayor's office which drew a headline in a major daily newspaper. Lindsay, Sugar told the press, "seems to have changed since he got elected. I hope I don't regret that I campaigned for him." There was a bit of prophecy in Sugar's angry retort since Lindsay, after he lost the primary reelection bid, would switch his allegiance from the Republican Party to Liberty Party.

On November 10, 1965 in Pittsburgh, Sugar lost his last fight to Joey Archer, a decision that was widely disputed. He received some recompense a month later when the executives at Madison Square Garden honored him for his greatness in the ring. Several of his former opponents – Gene Fullmer, Bobo Olson, and Carmen Basilio – joined Sugar in the ring, all of them taking a separate corner, wearing boxing gloves and a robe. It was a grand opportunity to let bygones be bygones, to talk about their bouts with each other, and generally recount what could no longer happen. When Muhammad Ali and John Lindsay showed up for the tribute, Sugar chatted with them, patching up the rifts that had torn them apart.

Sugar may have no longer possessed, the consistent jab, or the menacing left hook and right uppercut, but the years in the ring had not spoiled his handsome face nor exhausted those spindly but fantastic legs. These bona fides were sufficient reasons to give the world of song and dance another try. In the early sixties Sugar had recorded an album of songs, so he decided to give it a second round, and it included a number of prominent jazz musicians. According to his son, Ray Robinson, II it didn't receive the acclaim he had earned trading punches, though there was general agreement that he could carry a tune and had a pleasant baritone voice in the tradition of Billy Eckstine. "There wasn't a wide distribution of the album," his son said. "I have no idea how many were printed or whether it was ever reviewed." He didn't have great vocal range but he was engaging on up-tempo numbers, which matched his nimble footwork that can be seen on *Youtube* where he's featured on the Ed Sullivan show in 1951.

There was little cash or cachet from his recordings and Sugar then put his acting ability before audiences, including television dramas where he appeared with such actors as Danny Thomas, Mickey Rooney, and Ben Gazzara. Exposure came too from his role in the movie *The Detective*, starring his friend Frank Sinatra. It was only a bit part as a cop, Sugar recalled, but it got him a larger part in the television show *Mission: Impossible* that focused on the underworld's grip on boxing. Sugar, of course, felt right at home in this context. In the film *Candy*, he got even wider exposure since it featured such stars as Richard Burton, Marlon Brando, and Ringo Starr. In the ring, Sugar was the centerpiece now he was reduced to being a bit player in B movies or a celebrity cameo in television productions.

In failing health and trying to get back on his feet economically took what energy and optimism Sugar could muster. But even against a current of setbacks he registered an equal number of triumphs. One accomplishment that was a source of absolute delight for him was the Sugar Ray Robinson Youth Foundation he established once he

moved to Los Angeles in 1969. The foundation was set up to provide underprivileged youth in the community with social, sports, and other recreational activities. However, it sponsored no boxing program. He often appeared at the foundation's various events, if no more than to wave and flash that famous smile. Gradually, the onset of diabetes, hypertension and Alzheimer's would do what very few could do in the ring.

Whether in or out of the ring, in a tux or boxing togs, behind a set of drums or behind the bar at his café – and most certainly behind the wheel of his Cadillac – Sugar was the toast of the town. The “sweet science” never had a fighter sweeter than Sugar.