



## When We Were Kings

Director: Leon Gast

©: DAS Films

Presented by: PolyGram Filmed Entertainment,  
DAS Films

Executive Producer: David Sonenberg

Producers: David Sonenberg, Leon Gast,  
Taylor Hackford

Producers (Concert): Stuart Levine,  
Hugh Masekela, Lloyd Price

Co-producers: Vikram Jayanti, Keith Robinson

Line Producer (Concert): Chip Monck

Unit Managers: St. Clair Bourne, Ossie Brown

Production Manager: Barrie Singer

Festival Co-ordinator: Alan Pariser

Production Co-ordinators: John Ginnes,  
Louise Marshall

Co-ordinators (DAS Films): Bill Durborow,  
Eileen Greene, Andréa Timpone

Post-production Supervisor: Robert Warmflash

Cinematographers: Maryse Alberti, Paul Goldsmith,

Kevin Keating, Albert Maysles, Roderick Young

Additional Cinematographers: Bob Fletcher,

Joseph Galloway, Wardell Gaynor, Jack Harris,

Roy Lewis, Roland Mitchell, Karma Stanley,

Burleigh Wartes

Lighting Director (Concert): Bill McManus

Editors: Leon Gast, Taylor Hackford,

Jeffrey Levy-Hinte, Keith Robinson

Titles: Cynosure Films

Music Supervisor: Scot McCracken

Post Music Mixing: Acme Studio, Peter Denenberg

Music Premix: Rick Rowe

Location Sound Recordists: Gene Defever,

Petur Hliddal, Ed Lockman, Tony Miller,

Mark Paturet, Randal Shepard, Richard Wells,

Shane Zarrantash

Sound Recording (Concert): Gary Kelgern,

Alan Manger, Chris Stone

Audio Post-production: Bill Markle

Mixed at: Todd-AO Studios East

Mixer: Frank Morrone

Sound Editor: Robert Cardelli

Technicolor Adviser: Joe Violante

With:

Muhammad Ali

George Foreman

Don King

James Brown

B.B. King

The President of Zaire Mobutu Sese Seko

Spike Lee

Norman Mailer

George Plimpton

Thomas Hauser

Malik Bowens

Lloyd Price

The Spinners

The Jazz Crusaders

Miriam Makeba

USA 1996

89 mins

Digital

## The Cinematic Life of Boxing

# When We Were Kings

Leon Gast's 23-year odyssey in bringing *When We Were Kings* to the screen, and his fortuitous teaming with David Sonenberg, is a story with as many surprise turns as the events the movie documented.

'It started in the fall of '73,' Gast recalls. 'I contacted the fight promoters and asked if they'd be interested in making a movie about this music festival that was going to happen in Zaire. I'd already done a couple of music pictures and I was convinced this was a rich source from which to draw another one. So, I was beating down their door to convince them to give me the rights to do it. What I didn't know was that people like Roman Polanski, David Wolper and (president of Motown Records) Berry Gordy had also put in bids to direct this movie.'

'There were going to be 32 hours of music shot and recorded. Besides the 14 major artists that we were bringing over from the U.S., Hugh Masekela had just gone around Africa signing the major acts on the continent at the time to perform at the festival. Of the 32 hours, about half was to be indigenous African music. The plan was that we would also spend some time with both the fighters and intercut footage and interviews from them.'

Whilst the delay of the fight due to Foreman's cut was frustrating to the combatants and the promoters, it proved an unexpected opportunity for Gast.

'When Foreman got cut four days before the fight, everyone had to decide whether they were going to stay or go back home,' recalls Gast. 'We decided to stay on and, as it turned out, we were lucky because we were able to spend a lot of time with Ali.'

'I had enough money to shoot the film – and I insisted we shoot everything – but I had no idea how we were going to be able to afford to process and edit it all.'

Money would not be Gast's major hurdle in Zaire, however. Before he began shooting any film, he faced a challenge from African American members of his own production team.

'The first day we got to Zaire, the U.S. crew – who were Black – were very demonstrative in expressing their feelings about having returned to the land of their ancestors,' recalls Gast. 'The Africans were a bit more reserved, figuring "You're all Americans."

'But within a couple of days I was called to a meeting in Don King's suite, where some of the Black members of my crew were arguing that a white man couldn't make a movie about Africa, that a white man couldn't capture the sensibility and experience of a Black man returning to the land of his fathers. I said to them, "Do you mean, if this was a movie about murder, I would have to be a murderer to capture the experience?" No one said anything. Don King had given me a chance to confront the crew rather than making an easy, political decision behind my back. For that I will always be grateful to him.'

After shooting 300,000 feet of film, Gast returned to the U.S. flat broke. Over the years, he was able to strike deals with New York labs, from time to time, to process small amounts of the voluminous footage. It took him nearly 15 years to pay off his lab bills.

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Mon 30 Mar 20:40; Sat 11 Apr 12:10

### Season Introduction Talk + World Premiere:

**Learning the Ropes** + Q&A with director Ryan Pickard, actor Ray Winstone and former World Middleweight Champion Darren Barker  
Tue 31 Mar 18:15

### Raging Bull

Wed 1 Apr 14:30; Sat 11 Apr 17:50; Sun 19 Apr 15:15; Mon 20 Apr 20:15 (+ intro by season curator Dr Clive Chijioke Nwonka)

### Fighters

Wed 1 Apr 20:40; Tue 28 Apr 18:00 (+ Q&A with boxers Jimmy and Mark Tibbs)

### TwentyFourSeven

Thu 2 Apr 20:50; Tue 21 Apr 18:15 (+ Q&A with director Shane Meadows)

### Rocco and His Brothers

Rocco e i suoi Fratelli  
Fri 3 Apr 14:00; Sat 18 Apr 14:10; Sun 26 Apr 14:45

### Rocky

Fri 3 Apr 20:30; Thu 30 Apr 18:00 (+ intro by season curator Dr Clive Chijioke Nwonka)

### When We Were Kings

Sat 4 Apr 14:50; Sat 25 Apr 18:20

### The Boxer

Sat 4 Apr 17:50; Tue 14 Apr 18:00 (+ Q&A with boxer Barry McGuigan)

### Fat City

Mon 6 Apr 12:00; Mon 27 Apr 18:10

### Ali

Mon 6 Apr 14:15; Fri 17 Apr 20:00

### Million Dollar Baby

Wed 8 Apr 20:30; Wed 15 Apr 18:20 (+ discussion with broadcaster and athlete Jeanette Kwakye and boxing writer Ruth Rapper)

### The Fighter

Thu 9 Apr 20:45; Sun 19 Apr 18:30

### The Hurricane (unconfirmed)

Sun 12 Apr 17:50; Fri 24 Apr 20:15

### Jawbone

Thu 16 Apr 18:15 (+ Q&A with actor and writer Johnny Harris); Tue 21 Apr 20:50

### The Happiest Day in the Life of Olli Mäki

Hymyilevä mies

Fri 17 Apr 18:10 (+ intro by season curator Dr Clive Chijioke Nwonka); Sat 25 Apr 15:15

### Creed

Sat 18 Apr 16:30; Mon 27 Apr 20:20

### Journeyman

Mon 20 Apr 18:15; Wed 29 Apr 20:45

### UK Premiere: The Featherweight

Wed 22 Apr 18:10

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**SIGHT AND SOUND**

In 1975, Gast screened a small portion of the Miriam Makeba material for the singer – who was then a West African representative to the U.N. – and some other U.N. officials.

'It was quite an eclectic international audience for a movie test screening,' Gast recalls. 'Don King was also there. The reaction was all very positive and encouraging. But no one was prepared to come up with the necessary completion funds.'

In the ensuing years, Gast made numerous attempts to find completion financing. In 1989, Gast joined forces with David Sonenberg, his former attorney, who was developing into one of the music business' most influential talent managers. Later that year, the pair received an offer of \$1 million from Island Records executive Chris Blackwell to buy Gast's footage. But Sonenberg urged his partner to turn down all offers that did not afford the director the opportunity to make his movie on his own artistic terms.

'I knew how hard Leon had worked on this and that there was still so much work to be done,' relates Sonenberg who, by then, had already invested over \$400,000 of his own money in the project. 'I felt we had something very special here and I knew Leon could do justice to the material. He had much more invested than money and I was confident that, in due time, the money would come. The important thing was getting a completed film that we both would be proud to put our names on.'

Gast moved into Sonenberg's management offices, where the producer set him up with an off-line editing system. Over the next six years, Sonenberg and Gast put together eight different versions of the film.

'Every time we made a cut, I'd show it to Ali,' says Gast. 'He was tremendously supportive. When you're dealing with hundreds of hours of material, you can obviously make several different films. Originally, the film was conceived as an Afro-American *Woodstock*. But as interesting as that might have been, it didn't compare to a film centring on the incomparable Muhammad Ali.'

So, Gast and Sonenberg set about the task of acquiring additional fight footage and archival clips to build their story around the legendary champion. After the two men completed the film in 1995, they brought in Taylor Hackford, who shot the new interview footage contained in the film and helped intercut the interview footage into the finished product.

The result is a documentary that depicts events of a not-so-distant time with a perspective that the public is only now coming to understand.

'Muhammad Ali is one of my few genuine heroes,' relates Sonenberg. 'His intelligence, charm, wit and grace are so extraordinary that I still get goosebumps watching him on the screen. After putting the film together, I discovered something that stunned me. Many of my young rap artists had no idea who Ali was. They knew he was a fighter but that was basically it. 'It became important to me to make a film that would reach a young Black audience. The perfect way to do this would be to present Ali as he first appeared to me... "The Original Rapper."'

Production notes