Gorgeous Cassius

Ali wows 'em with poetry, history

By BARRY KAPLAN

Mainstream is his medium.

The word is out: He's the greatest.

Muhammad Ali, heavyweight champion of the world, poet, egotist, preacher, and addicted to a standing-room-only crowd in the Weiss commons on Friday January 20, has found a new audience of fans.

Picking up a variety of questions ranging from his draft status ("What about the draft? It's not cold. Does somebody feel a draft?") to the future boxing ("What will happen to boxing after you retire?") to "They'll have to bury it."), Ali showed an easy mastery of the art of pleasing a crowd, and a lively wit that is almost entirely spontaneous.

Bad History

Only in the field of the Muslim sect did he falter the least bit, the praise quibbled left in the minds of many of the hearers being his indifference to historical fact and his hyperbolic use of population figures. (By his calculations, there would have to be something like eight million people in the world.)

The Champ is extremely aware of the media in which his performances (and even the private side of his life) take place, and can apparently gear his delivery to the different situations in which he faces the public.

He even composed two different poems a propog to the fight against Ernie Terrell, coming up on the 6th of February, one for the people who would see the fight, either on television or in person; and one for those unfortunate who can only manage to listen to it on the radio. One of the most hilarious of his efforts, it begins with a resounding "DING!")

Gorgeous.

He recognizes the need for a successful performer to have a gimmick, and told at some length of his borrowing of the technique of the late wrestler Gorgeous George. Having observed the manner in which Gorgeous managed to alienate all the members of the audience in a television interview, Ali (then Cassius Clay) proceeded to the arena to bo the hunch.

The ball was packed with people, howling for George's blood, but there was a lesson in it for the young, just-turned-pro Clay: "Everybody was against him, but the catch was, they had to pay to get in."

Valid History

The rest is history. Howling "I'm the greatest!") playing a huge vanity into a drawing card, Clay proceeded to become heavyweight champion at a very early age and to retain the crown, remaining thus far undefeated in his professional career.

A boxer because "somebody told my grandfather at the age of twelve," Ali became a Black Muslim out of what is evidently a strong personal conviction, and not as any of the other publicly professed he was always to get the people curious.

He is obviously convinced that the destiny of the black people is not bound up with that of the non-black people of the world, and makes a strong point of the lack of a national identity among the blacks. He shuns the word "Negro" because "there's not any country called Negro," and bata on the Koran as vociferous preachers the world over (especially in emotional sects) emphasize the works of their own particular prophet.

Heaven, for Ali, is where you are if the conditions are comfortable, and he is obviously in his heaven.

An established man at the age of 25, "I'm the only heavyweight in history that had turned down a million dollars from Gillette because I'm too young to shave." Ali plans to retire to a quiet life of leisure and preaching, and said that he was offered the "Tonight" show, but he thinks that it will be another twenty years before "things are integrated enough" to assure his success in show business.

Ali is quite at home with his fame and his money, perfectly at ease with notice and ill-will, and a perfectly fascinating public speaker. Sporting the famous Ali smile and wearing the Weiss tie presented to him as an honorary member of the College, he shuffled out to the applause of the assembled multitude, a crowd that obviously voted him the greatest.