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A Picture Perfect Life

By Glenn Minnis
BET.com Sports Columnist

If the eyes truly are the windows to the soul, then Howard Bingham's collection of ever-flicking, always-on-the-ready high-speed cameras merely serve as eyewear, the lense through which the 61-year-old Mississippi native has come to see and know the world so much more concisely.

For it is during those times, when man and instrument commune to the point of becoming one, when all in the world seems most just to him.

When, in his mind, countless lives have taken on shape, images have transposed into the form of their intent and experiences have neatly nestled into world view and history.

"Love's for one's craft is something only a fellow artist can understand and appreciate," said Bingham, offering just a hint of his famous stutter. "It's something that's everlasting, something that endures forever. Shooting is and has always been my life's work. When I pick up a camera today, I still get the same thrill and adrenaline rush that I did the first time I picked one up almost 40-years ago."

Truth be told, it's a union that was consummated some 38-years ago. One that has endured all the ups and downs you might expect when time is so thoroughly tested.

It's been a relationship that's paved the way for Howard Bingham to see the world a few times over, often times in the company of the sort of dignitaries and celebrities he could once only envision from afar.

"I've been blessed to have some great assignments," muses Bingham. "Any artist or creative type person will tell you that to do great work one has to have great material. And I've had some of the best material in the world to work with."

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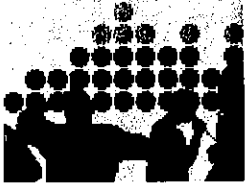
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There's been the benefit of a nearly four decade long buddy-buddy, almost sibling-like relationship with Muhammad Ali, one that even predates that name, back to his days as Cassius Clay. There's been his world renowned coverage of the Civil Rights Movement and of the Black Panther Party movement of the turbulent 1960s, replete with shots of their arsenal of high-powered artillery, for Life Magazine. Spliced around it all, Bingham has still found the time to shoot for such respected publications as Sports Illustrated, People and Ebony Magazines and for such famous people as admired as Bill Cosby, Nelson Mandela and the Beatles.

And yet, one gets the distinct feeling this is not all that has sustained Howard Bingham. This body of work, no matter how regal or impressive, is far from the total essence of the man the world has quietly come to almost demand such grace and elegance from.

"People know and recognize me because of my work and the fact that I'm Ali's best friend," said Bingham. "But what's opened those doors for me is the way I've tried to conduct myself and live my life. I'd like to think people have come to know they count on me to do the things I say I will. Whatever those things may be."

Even when the forces of the scoop-crazy, media machine might dictate otherwise. Bingham estimates that over the course of his nearly 40-year career he's turned at least a hundred or so overtures from media outlets offering him large sums of money for private photos he's taken with Ali and other celebrities.

"With Ali, they were looking for shots of his early days as a Muslim," he said. "Photos of him meeting with Malcolm, Elijah Muhammad and the like. They knew I was the only one in the world close enough to him to have them and they wanted them. I told them they could keep their riches. I've never been a person consumed by all that."

Thus Bingham's response was much the same when over-eager, not to mention insensitive, media types came calling for photos he took for the Cosby family, also close personal friends of his, at the funeral of their son, Ennis. "I told them the same thing I told the hounds that were after Ali," he said. "Just maybe a little more emphatically."

That would be true to the form that is Howard Bingham, a man so true to his values that he still resides in the same South Central Los Angeles home he has since 1969

and still drives the same battered Toyota Camry that he has for the last decade.

"Howard has an authenticity about himself that you can't package or manufacture," said Linda Lee, a research assistant at UCLA's Fowler Museum of Cultural History, where Main event: The Ali/Foreman Extravaganza Through the Eyes of Howard L. Bingham was once featured. "It comes across in his work and I think that's a big part of what leaves people so mesmerized."

"With me, what you see is what you get," said Bingham, displaying a modesty hardly befitting of his accomplishments. "I think that's what enables me to have such a good rapport with people. I try to treat people the exact same way I want to be treated. I think that's the best rule of thumb one can live by."

That's not to say the years have not been without change for Howard Bingham. "I'm far more wiser now and I'm a much better judge of people. Right away now, I'm able to decipher between people that are of character and those that are simply characters."

Bingham first met Ali in 1969 and right away he could see and tell the difference. "He had a brashness about himself, a certain degree of bravado but, in the very first conversation I had with him, I could sense that there was a sincerity about him not easily found in people. If he believed something, rather you thought it was right or wrong, you knew he believed it with all his heart and soul. He was true to himself and that made it easier for him to be true with others."

Some 31-years, nearly a million snapshots and countless conversations later, the two have forged such a bond that when Universal Pictures decided to bring the Muhammad Ali/Cassius Clay life story to the big screen one of the first calls studio executives made was to Howard Bingham.

"This is one of the few projects made about his life that had his blessing," said Bingham, who served as one of the film's executive producers. "I've been as close to him over the last three decades as anyone on earth. That's not bragging, nor is it anything I set to make happen. I only bring it up to say that this movie thing was something Ali wanted to do so I was willing to help out. That's all it is. I don't seek the limelight. Never have."

But it always, somehow, seems to find Howard Bingham. Not long ago, his collaboration with award-winning

investigative journalist Max Wallace produced the novel Muhammad Ali's Greatest Fight (Cassius Clay vs. the United States of America). Before that, his critically acclaimed photo essay Muhammad Ali: A Thirty Year Journey was published by Simon & Schuster.

As always, Howard Bingham took it all in stride. And while it is true that a certain degree of his celebrity-like status is born of his ties with Ali, he remains every bit his own man.

"I've never been afraid to stand up to him or any famous person I've come in contact with," said Bingham. "I think he's always respected and admired that. That it allowed him to put down his guard and be himself around me. With that, we've been able to constantly and consistently build on our friendship."

All that between two men who have never truly had an understanding, let alone an affinity, for what the other sees as his life's work.

"He used to ride me all the time about taking my cameras with me everywhere I went and snapping them in people's faces. 'What's the point of all that, what are you trying to find,'" he would ask.

Bingham, on the other hand, has never had a fondness for boxing--- and that way of thinking holds truer today than ever before.

"I'm not a boxing fan never have been and never will be," he said. "I think it's sick sport. My whole involvement with has been solely due to my friendship with Ali. I was willing to open up my mind and tolerate it because I knew it was important to him. All these years, I've tried to look at it through his eyes. For the 20 or so years I was around that he was fighting, that was the only way I was able to stomach it."

And it's those pictures, those images and memories, that have helped turn Howard Bingham into the man he has become. A picture of grace and elegance.

