

Heroes or Villains?

Muhammad Ali

Born: 1942

Died: 2016 (age 74)

On the occasion of the issuance of the U.S. postal stamp honoring Muhammad Ali on Jan. 15, 2026, USA Today quoted him as once joking that being on a stamp would be “the only way I’ll ever get

licked.” (No worries, Ali. The stamp is self-adhesive — no licking.)

Ali was a humanitarian and a world champion boxer, handsome, charismatic, a bullying competitor with a soft voice who used poetry to boost his image and intimidate opponents. (“Float like a butterfly, sting like a bee.”) At one time, his was the most recognizable name and face on the planet. In 1999, he was named Sportsman of the Century by *Sports Illustrated*, Sports Personality of the Century by the BBC. That year he also made Time magazine's list of the 100 Most Important People of the 20th Century.

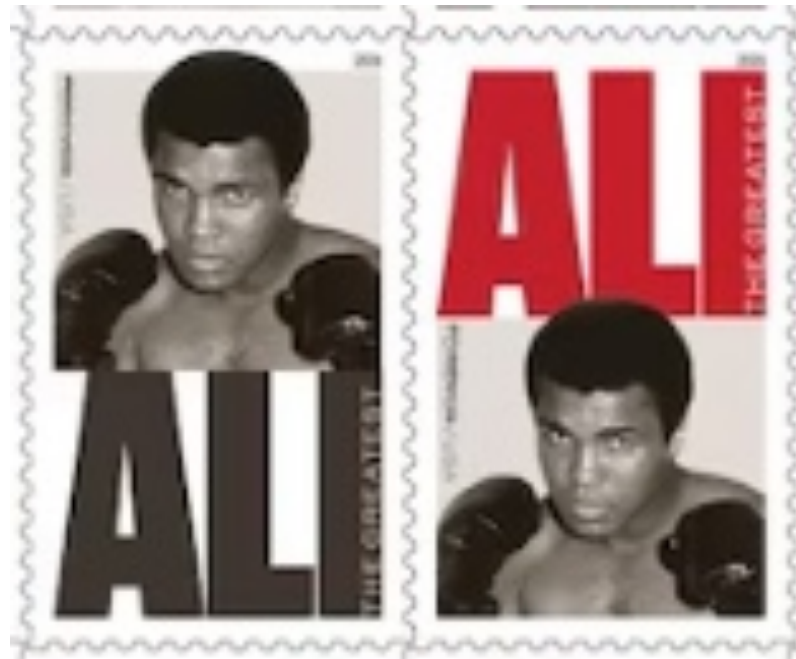
He started life as Cassius Clay, and grew to become a controversial figure, a lightning rod in battles over racism, pacifism, anti-Vietnam War protest and Islamophobia. According to USA today:

He won his first world heavyweight championship title on Feb. 25, 1964, beating Sonny Liston. The following month, he announced he was a member of the Nation of Islam, and the Nation of Islam leader gave him a holy name, Muhammad Ali.

On April 28, 1967, Ali refused to serve in the U.S. army during the Vietnam War due to religious reasons. He was convicted of draft evasion, sentenced to up to five years in prison, fined \$10,000 and banned from boxing for three years.

Ali did not go to jail. He appealed to the U.S. Supreme Court, which overturned his conviction in 1971. He went on to defeat all comers, regain the championship and evolve into a beloved global ambassador for peace — until sidelined by his long bout with Parkinson’s disease that ended with his death in 2016. Given the universal acclaim, one wonders why it took a decade to honor him on a stamp.

Perhaps our society needed that time to come to terms with the unsettling ghosts of Ali’s past. As Ali summarizes: “Muhammad Ali faced major criticism during his career for refusing the Vietnam War draft, his polarizing conversion to Islam, and his aggressive trash-talking. Many people viewed his actions as unpatriotic, arrogant, and a threat to established social norms.”





Heroes or Villains?

Jose Ferrer

Born: 1912

Died: 1992 (age 80)

Born into a wealthy family in Puerto Rico, Jose Ferrer won both a Tony and an Oscar for playing the title role in "Cyrano de Bergerac." While his Wikipedia bio outlines his brilliant career as an actor and director, it says little about his leftie

sympathies. Hints at his deeper ideology come from his edgier films. He played Toulouse Lautrec in "Moulin Rouge," Alfred Dreyfus in "J'Accuse," and Iago in "Othello." He also starred in "The Caine Mutiny" and "Ship of Fools." In the TV movie "Truman at Potsdam," he played Stalin.

Ferrer was among the influential Hollywood elites who passionately backed the Loyalist side in the Spanish Civil War, backing communist-tinged groups with names like the American Committee for Spanish Freedom and Spanish Refugee Appeal. After the civil war ended in 1939 and the anti-communist Franco took over, show business folk who supported the lost cause became targets of McCarthy-era investigators.

When the anti-communist blacklist book "Red Channels" appeared in 1950, it cited the groups as subversive or communist fronts. Jose Ferrer was among 151 show people listed, with a dozen citations linking him to the National Council on the Arts, Sciences and Professions, the Wallace for President Committee, and the Joint Anti-Fascist Refugee Committee.

The next year, Ferrer was called before the red-hunting House Un-American Activities committee. Film historian Rick Winston picks up the tale:

... (H)e was repeatedly questioned about his support for

JOSE FERRER

Actor—Stage, Screen, Radio, TV
Reported as:
American Committee for Protection of Foreign Born
Artists' Front to Win the War
Joint Anti-Fascist Refugee Committee
National Council of the Arts, Sciences and Professions
Sponsor of dinner, House Un-Am. Act. Com., Appendix 9, p. 348.
Sponsor, House Un-Am. Act. Com., Appendix 8, p. 575.
Program Chairman, Spanish Refugee Appeal Benefit, Ziegfeld Theatre, New York City, 2/27/49. Advertisement, *NY Times*, 2/13/49.
Speaker, Spanish Refugee Appeal, "Salute to Republican Spain," Madison Square Garden, New York City, 9/24/45. *Daily Worker*, 9/25/45, p. 2.
Sponsor, Committee to Abolish House Un-American Activities Committee. *NY Journal-American*, 12/30/48.
Sponsor of New York Council, "Theatre Pre-Conference" Rally for Cultural and Scientific Conference for World Peace, Hotel Diplomat, N.Y.C., 3/16/49. Leaflet.
Vice-chairman of New York State Council. *Daily Worker*, 6/11/48, p. 2.
(References to organizations listed begin page 161.)

Here is a portion of Jose Ferrer's listing in "Red Channels."



the Republican cause in Spain. Did he give a speech at a fund-raising event for the Joint Anti-Fascist Refugee Committee in 1944? Did he appear on behalf of the Spanish Refugee Appeal in 1945? Was he a sponsor of the American Committee for Spanish Freedom in 1946? And, pressed the counsel, Frank Tavenner, "Weren't you aware of the Communist Party infiltration into these organizations?"

Ferrer claimed naïveté, saying "However negligent I may have been, my actions have never been other than anti-Communist and pro-American... . At this point, I have publicly repudiated all Communist links and sympathies."

By this time, the civic red-hunters were on Ferrer's trail. When the film "Cyrano de Bergerac" came to Syracuse, N.Y., a local protest drew coverage in The Post-Standard. The newspaper article noted that while Ferrer had testified before the HUAC and declared his patriotism, he had not been officially cleared.

Ferrer seemed to be one of those major talents who could withstand the blacklist — like Burt Lancaster and Marlon Brando. In 1952, he was featured at the new Astor Theatre in Syracuse with the film "Anything Can Happen." American Legion Post 41 identified him as a "notorious fronter" and took note in its newsletter's "Monthly Box Score": "Jose Ferrer — Maybe we should not see his new Motion Picture & how come the big LIFE Mag. spread?" On April 27, legionnaires gathered outside the Astor Theater at noon, ahead of the matinee performance of Ferrer's film. "It was unfortunate that a brand new theater in Syracuse ... had to receive the first picket line in the city," wrote John Dungey in Spotlight. "The American Legion has talked and the movie industry have talked, but nothing, or at least very little, has been done to clean the Commies, fellow-travelers and fronters out of the picture business. It appears that the only way this can be accomplished is by hitting them in the pocketbook. When it no longer is profitable to use fronters and Commies, you can rest assured they will not be used."

The pickets were withdrawn after a token protest. As Dungey explained, "a new business is entitled to at least one mistake and also because the following week they were showing the anti-communist film 'My Son John.' "

After the Legion launched pickets against "Moulin Rouge" in December, 1952, Ferrer and director John Huston reaffirmed their patriotic, anti-communist credentials in such a convincing way that by January of 1953, the Legion announced that "they are displaying the type of cooperation we have requested in the past."

Whether Ferrer should be remembered as an Oscar-winning performer and director, a Commie, fellow-traveler or fronter, or perhaps a sell-out, has been decided by the philatelic fates. A postage stamp honoring "Jose Ferrer, Actor" was issued in 2012, 20 years after his death (see above), granting him a niche in the Pantheon of Philatelic Honorees.

TO BE CONTINUED