

SOCIAL CLASS, ETHNIC, AND URBAN FORMATIONS

The African American Experience as Seen Through Popular Film Biographies of Boxers

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Movie producers love boxing more than any other sport. The popular source book 1993 *Moviehound's Golden Movie Retriever* lists 96 popular boxing films, all but four or five feature white fighters, most of whom are Italian.

The films which feature African-American boxers have most often been biographies of heavyweight champions, the three most well known are *The Great White Hope* (1970), *The Joe Louis Story* (1953), and *The Greatest* (1977). Each of which falls well short of the mark of successfully capturing the African-American experience or even being good films.

The Great White Hope (1970) is a semi-fictionalized account of the life of Jack Johnson, released in 1970 following a long run as a Broadway play. It was one of a number of films of the 1970s featuring tough African-American male leads. The strengths of the film were of course the story of Johnson as a hero, and James Earl Jones in the lead role. The downfall of the picture was it did not translate well from stage to film.

The Joe Louis Story (1953) was caught in the confluence of two trends in film history. First, it was one of a series of films in the late 1940s and 1950s in which racial issues were explored and African-Americans were real characters rather than just singers, dancers of stereotyped comic relief. Second, it represents one of a series of sanitized, hero worshipping biographies of athletes.

The Joe Louis Story, filmed by an independent studio with a predominantly African-American cast was an attempt to portray Louis himself and African-Americans in a positive light. Its strengths are that both Coley Wallace in the title role and James Edwards as Louis' trainer Chappy Blackbum offer credible acting jobs. And five of Louis' actual fight films are neatly woven into the film. The film's weakness is that it is a grade "B" movie with a weak script

and poor production values. Moreover, it presents a very sanitized version of both African-American life and boxing in the 1950s.

The Greatest (1977), the film biography of Muhammad Ali based on the book with the same title, is not very good. Its major problem is that it dealt with very complex issues in a superficial manner. The best parts of the film are Ali playing himself and the fight scenes of actual bouts. He is good; the movie is not.

Hollywood seems unable to deal well with film biographies of African-American boxers despite the fact that the subjects have interestingly complex personalities and stories. The problem in this instance seems to be more the inability of the film industry to deal with race rather than with sport as a secondary focus. Movies often have problems dealing with race in an evenhanded way, but when strong physical African-American male characters are the focus of the story the movies invariably goes down for a ten count.