

# King lords it as he regains the heavyweight throne



**Kimi Zabihiyan**

**T**he most remarkable thing about Don King, the promoter of Lennox Lewis's world title rematch with Hasim Rahman, is not his distinctive hair but his boundless energy.

At 70 and with a serious amount of money in the bank, King could be spending most of his time at his country mansion in Ohio, watching the grass grow. Far from it, as I am all too aware, having spent the past year running after him, wrangling my way into his private meetings with my television cameras.

King loves showing off his private jet to his friends. He bought it for \$20m (£13.7m) cash a week after the FBI had raided his office during a corruption and bribery investigation. He describes it as his "\*\*\*\* you to those elements who, through jealousy, use the arms of the state to . . . persecute me and run business away from me".

King's wife's name, Henrietta, is on the nose of the plane, and his well-worn catch phrase, "Only in America", on the tail. On board, while sharing a drink with his friend Kweisi Mfume, president of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, he reminisces about his childhood in Cleveland running numbers, a sort of ghetto lottery that earned him fame and fortune in the African-American community long before boxing did.

King, a product of racial segregation, the civil rights struggles of the 60s and the black empowerment movement of the 70s, is probably the most recognisable black entrepreneur in America. In Las Vegas, where he made his name, fortune and a lot of other people rich too, King is in his element. Walking through the casino floor, the crowds break off from gambling to seek autographs or just a drunken kiss. He always obliges. "I'm a promoter of the people, for the people and by the people. My magic lies in my people ties."

The former owner of Caesar's Palace, Cliff Perleman, says the impact of King's promotions there is what

this shit," says a delighted Busta Rhymes, grinning from ear to ear.

Almost 30 years after King's famous promotion of Ali v Foreman in Zaire, we travel to Africa as guests of the Nigerian president to celebrate his country's 40th anniversary of independence. King is given a statesman's welcome. Echoing JFK he declares at the airport: "I come here asking not what Nigeria can do for me, but what can I do for Nigeria."

Before the week is out, King has been granted mining rights to several thousand hectares of prime land, a five-star hotel and the promise of participation in the lucrative oil fields of Nigeria. He considers President Obasanjo a friend.

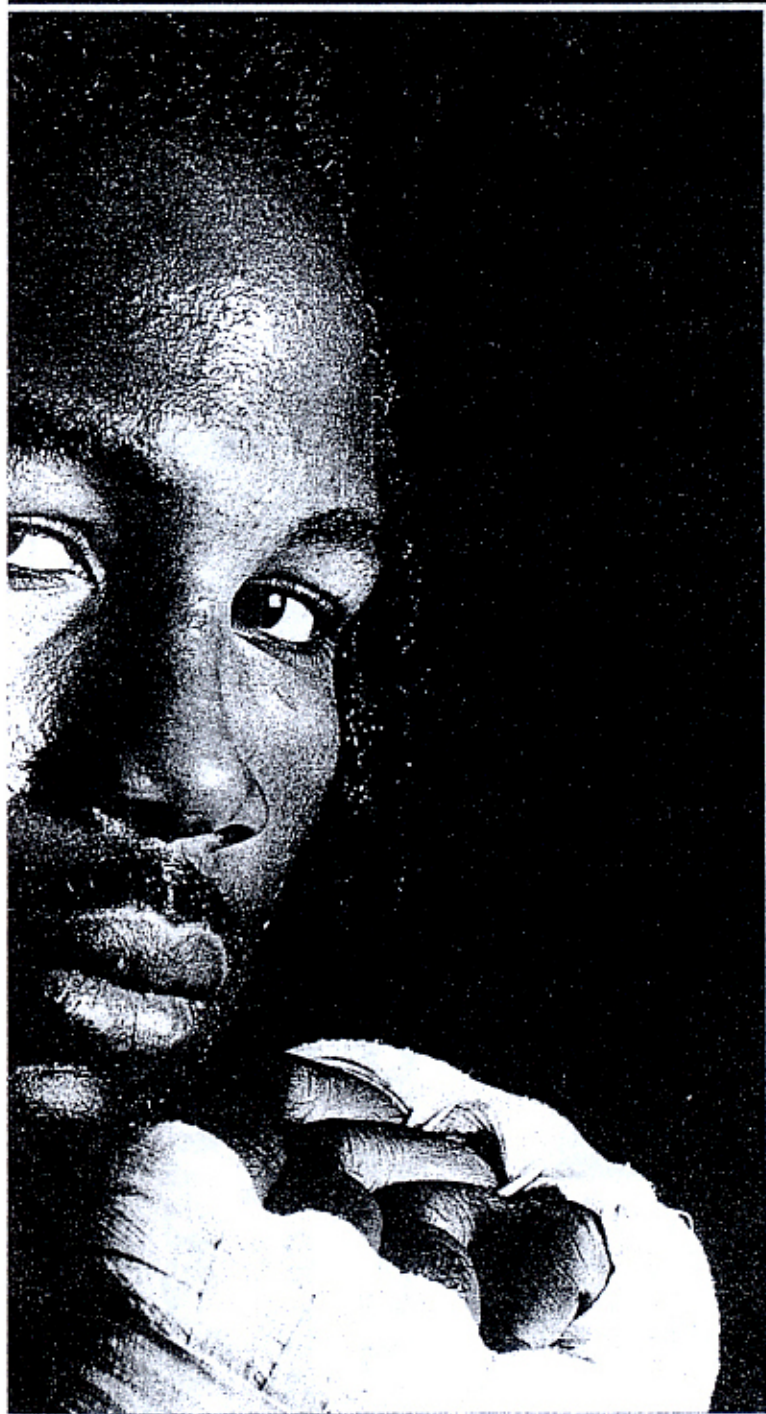
In Beijing for the abortive Evander Holyfield-John Ruiz fight, King salutes the crowd above that painting of Chairman Mao in Tiananmen Square; visits Mao's private hideaway in the hills to take a rest on the chairman's old bed; even swaps Mao stories with a bewildered party loyalist. He eats crispy duck with Chinese ministers, and is mobbed in Tiananmen Square on the night Beijing wins the Olympics bid. At a time when the spy plane incident has put China at loggerheads with the US, he is made a "goodwill ambassador". And King is "lovin' it, lovin' it, lovin' it".

"I've never been received anywhere like I was received in China," he says. "They gave me the Golden Dragon, which they gave to President Bush, and the Tea Kettle and the Donkey, which they gave to President Clinton." Every evening he would sit with his chain-smoking Chinese partners, discussing the problems of communist bureaucracy.

Two weeks into his trip, a call from Lennox Lewis sends King on a 24-hour round trip to Miami. He returns to Beijing with the new US ambassador to China and a deal to promote Lewis's heavyweight title rematch.

Only a year ago, King was not even in the picture for the heavyweight division, the most lucrative bite of boxing's cake. Today he is back in control. Just how he has managed it is a question that drives his rivals to distraction.

In Britain to promote the November fight, he is badgered by journalists as to whether he knows anyone from the mob, and about his prison record. King is frustrated, and as ever the race



forget where they come from, as like David Tua have shown us. With Rahman he may be, but not stop Lewis having some

should definitely fight more, but I'm not around him to know his situation with this injury or whatever. I still say he's the champion of the future. Now is the time when he's doing his learning. Hopefully

part of the promotional tour that included the "ramble in the television studio". To build up to the fight, a nine-week training camp, the longest of Lewis's career, would follow immediately. "I'm

hated name in the world. In Los Angeles for hip-hop's Source Awards, other celebrities walking the red carpet stop to have their pictures taken with King. "Don is the godfather of all

"It's a bitch being a singer," he says, by way of explanation of his treatment. "But it's not too complaining. I just keep going. Trying to atone for my sins and thank God every day that I'm alive."