



My mom running her own consulting firm. She's been in business for over 20 years. To be a black woman in a white man's world, she's got a lot of juice. Grant Hill, Dream Teamer

Louis Farrakhan calling upon a million black people to show up in Washington and getting them to attend. The behavior of the people assembled there rebutted all the hateful, vicious images that are being promoted by the media against black people. Ishmael Reed, author

Musicians giving over their lives to travel with Sun Ra. And Don King's promotions. He's a powerful geezer. Tricky, audio collagist

I was in a car accident a couple years ago where the car flipped over a few times, and I was able to walk away. Faith Evans, torch singer

Don King Productions, headquarters of Don King's multimillion-dollar boxing empire, is a squat pink building across the road from a gas station in a not-so-chichi part of Fort Lauderdale. It's easy to drive past. You'll find no grand DKP sign outside, and no fancy reception area either.

There's not much to look at while you wait: none of the self-congratulatory brochures you might expect, no announcements of upcoming fights or continuous-play videos of past glories, just a few photos of Mike Tyson and King on the walls. It's a stark contrast to the excessive world of a Las Vegas prizefight, where Don King speaks in tongues and holds court, shadowed by immaculately groomed men in sharp suits and fedoras who anticipate his every need. Here at his modest base of operations, when King wants his back scratched, he uses the door like everybody else.

"I've started at subzero. When you say 'ghetto,' I am the ghetto," says King, age 65, dressed in his Sunday casuals—beige slacks and a Coogi jumper. "But I can walk with kings. I've sophisticated myself, so I'm a sophisticated ghettoee. Don't forget I was once the little boy sitting on the stoop in Cleveland, saying, 'That's my car. That's my car,' and now

King got involved in boxing promotion at the age of 40, after being paroled from Ohio's Marion Correctional Institution. During his days as a numbers runner in Cleveland, he'd been convicted of first-degree manslaughter for the fatal beating of an old acquaintance outside a bar. After serving almost four years of a life sentence, he got out of jail in 1971 and began rebuilding his life. His first boxing match was a benefit for a black hospital in Cleveland. King called on an old friend, singer Lloyd Price (of "Stagger Lee" fame), not only to secure Muhammad Ali as the main attraction but also to line up opening performances by Marvin Gaye, Wilson Pickett, Johnny Nash, and Lou Rawls. The first major boxing event promoted by a black man was a huge success. Then in 1973, New York video producer and fight promoter Hank Schwartz was so impressed by King at the Foreman-Frazier fight in Jamaica that he offered him a job. King took the opportunity and ran with it.

King got back in touch with Ali and his manager, Herbert Muhammad, son of Nation of Islam founder Elijah Muhammad. He convinced them to let him promote Ali's bout with the reigning champion, George Foreman. Ali had been offered \$850,000 for another fight

ROPE a DOPE

JUST WHEN HIS CRITICS HAVE HIM DOWN, DON KING COMES OUT SWINGING. BY KIMI ZABIHYAN

I own all those cars." He smiles at the thought without slowing his spiel. "I came out of jail and outplayed my counterparts, who had upward mobility when I had no mobility at all. And outplayed them in their game, because boxing isn't a black game, it's a white game. Blacks are the gladiators in the center of the ring, but they're not in the boardrooms making progressive business deals."

Sitting behind a desk in his simple office—with a bank of closed-circuit security monitors filling one wall—King flips through a stack of papers while talking to a sportswriter for *USA Today* on the speakerphone. The writer is wondering about the possibility of a Lennox Lewis-Mike Tyson fight. He inquires, almost apologetically, if King can ask Tyson for a comment. "I'll see what I can do," King replies before hanging up, but it's clear he has no intention of bothering Iron Mike.

"They tore Tyson to pieces when he was in jail, and then they wonder why he won't talk to them," says King of Tyson's reluctance to deal with the media. King sees parallels between himself and Tyson. "We're both victims of our own success. I used to get good press when I first came on the scene, but as I continued to achieve and speak my mind, they went against me."

King has rolled with the punches all his life, but the past two years have brought a pair of devastating blows. In 1992 King's former accountant released information that led to King's indictment for wire fraud in an alleged insurance scam. Then last year, *New York Post* columnist Jack Newfield published *Only in America: The Life and Crimes of Don King*, a biography that grudgingly admits his genius, but ultimately portrays King as an amoral exploiter who is, in the words of one sportswriter quoted in the book, "easiest to imagine as a disease."

"I'm not a defender and a prover," says King, who faces the very real possibility of prison, depending on the outcome of a trial this fall. "I'm an initiator and producer. Perhaps I should answer my critics, but I just stayed focused and thought that my achievement would speak for itself."

in Madison Square Garden by King's rival, promoter Bob Arum. But King said he could deliver a record-breaking \$5 million apiece to Ali and Foreman. He somehow managed to convince Joseph Mobutu, president of Zaire, to guarantee \$9.6 million of the purse.

Against enormous odds, King pulled off his first championship bout, which he dubbed "the Rumble in the Jungle." It still stands as a boxing milestone. (*When We Were Kings*, a documentary about the event, is due to hit theaters this fall.) Televised worldwide from Kinshasa, Zaire on October 30, 1974, the fight was a global phenomenon and a triumph for the fast-talking outsider. The battered Ali came back to knock out the arm-weary Foreman in the eighth round. But Don King emerged as the key player behind this extraordinary event, almost as compelling a personality as the fighters themselves. "That was the beginning that changed my life," he says now. King's boss, Hank Schwartz, reportedly said, "Pretty soon King will have me riding in the back of the bus." By the following year, sure enough, Schwartz was working for King.

Nonetheless, King has persistently come under attack for alleged underhanded dealings. "Don's specialty is black-on-black crime," said two-time heavyweight champion Tim Witherspoon, whom King paid \$1 million to settle a lawsuit. "I'm black, and he robbed me." Ali also brought suit, claiming King shortchanged him \$1 million, but dropped the case after receiving a cash payment. More recently, King was accused by his own accountant of spending Tyson's winnings while the former champ was in prison. All the stories of Don King chiseling fighters have earned him more jeers than cheers at his own promotions. King says he loves the hecklers—after all, they pay to get in too. And he insists the charges are false.

"They can say whatever they want, but the fighters were getting slave wages until I came on the scene," says King, in his customary outrageous but irresistible manner. "I revolutionized the pay scale and the sport of boxing," he goes on. "I took the blacks and the Latinos and made sure they got paid. The irony is that they're trying to make me sound like the

robber of the fighters when I was getting the box office for them.

"One fighter was telling me that every time he negotiates, he gets his secretary to call and say, 'Don King on the phone.' And he says, 'Damn, that Don King keeps calling me and offering me all this money.' He always gets a hell of a deal using me as a straight man. They all do it. Even the fights on TV—the fighters wouldn't be there without me. So directly or indirectly, I'm responsible for the economic progress these guys are making."

King claims that he's never missed a payroll, for whatever that's worth. "Everyone I've ever done business with I can go back to," he says, "but the propaganda's been contrary to that." He attributes his bad rep to racism. "There's lots of things African-

Americans have contributed to this country that we don't get credit for," in a calm voice. "And I'm a living example of that. I've created new records, I've never been recognized by the boxing writers of America. But it doesn't matter if they don't like me. I say, Don't get mad, get smart. Instead of an excuse that they're doing this to me because I'm black, we're gonna play by their rules, and we're gonna excel. I'm fighting an economics war."

"Everything in this country is done under the auspices of whites. The black participation shows you how difficult it is to break down the barriers in this country. I'm a capitalist, but a capitalist of the downtrodden underclass. Only in America could a Don King happen; only in America do

come from the bottom rung of the ladder as I am now. That's why I truly love this country—that's no stage joke."

King delivers his manifesto in almost one breath. He is masterful at controlling the flow of conversation. More precisely, he doesn't engage in conversation. He's a monologist. It's the same old story that's helped him cut deals with giants from Trump to HBO, from Madison Square Garden to Caesar's Palace—pulling deals out of the fire and again. He says he's "totally eradicated the failure from my vocabulary."

These days, King says he has two business "Tyson business" and "the title business." He's assembled a staff of about a dozen that he handles all his promotions. It's a mixed group: white, Latino, plenty of women and twenty things. "I know my inadequacies, so I surround myself with people who fill in the blanks, with their creed or color," says King. "There's no here for the easygoing. I work hard, and so do who work for me."

In the past two years, he and his team have tiarated furiously on Mike Tyson's behalf. Madison Square Garden told him, "Don King Madison Square Garden, we don't need you," took his promotions to Vegas. He says that Caesar's Palace wouldn't agree to his terms, he down the road to the MGM Grand and cut a deal. When Michael Fuchs, then executive vice president of HBO, told King (according to King), "the elephants, and we crush flies," King inked with Showtime and set up KingVision, which televised Tyson's three postprison fights on pay view to audiences in excess of 1 billion.

"I know my own worth," says King. "We went to HBO, they didn't even have a budget for boxing." That's what the man says. "At ABC I have a system of fights for them. No one can ride back if it ain't bent. I ask for crazy numbers if you don't give it to me, I go out and get it. I know it's out there. In fact, I'm always surprised because there's usually more out there than I thought."

That was certainly the case on August 19, 1991, when Mike Tyson stepped into the ring at the MGM Grand in Las Vegas for the first time since serving three years for rape. Gate receipts for the fight against Peter McNeeley were just under \$14 million, breaking all previous records. The fight itself lasted less than five minutes, but it had plenty of what King likes to call "the magic of excitement."

Some critics have accused King of playing on racial bias. They say he gets the top fighters, from Mike Tyson, because of his race. "I never got a fight because I'm black," King says flatly. "Every fight, including Mike Tyson, came to me after they'd l

EYES ON THE PRIZE

"If we could fulfill our contracts," says King, "we'd be on our way to making Tyson the first billion-dollar athlete."

screwed by the other promoters." Once again, that's what the man says. "Blacks have been so conditioned into a feeling of inferiority that they think a black man can't do what a white man can. We've been set against each other: the kinky hair vs. the curly hair, the light-skinned against the dark-skinned, the people on the hill against the people in the valley. They used to teach that to slave masters: 'You can control these niggers if you keep them fighting each other.' That shit's been working to this day."

Despite these stinging remarks, King says he's proud to have the support of black and white America. But since Mike Tyson may be the most sought-after athlete in the world, King says he expects challenges. "It's like they don't want Tyson and me to get together," says

though he owned all 5,000 rooms. After the weigh-in, he stepped through the deafening chortle of the slot machines, only to be mobbed by a crowd of fans. "Who's that?" a young girl asked. Her father lifted her up and said, "The guy with the hair is Don King."

In his 22 years at the top of a ruthless business, Don King has trodden on some powerful toes. "I suspect there's a lot of people who might want Don King out of the way," he says. "But I don't walk around with a bunch of bodyguards. They can always get you anyway, if they want to."

Don King hasn't bothered to endear himself to the powers that be, but sometimes you can't help but admire his style. When he beat a federal tax evasion

timless crime," he says. "Lloyd's has never brought a charge against me. This is my own government doing this to me."

He's already stood trial on these charges, but the jury was divided, the judge dismissed the case, and the prosecution objected on a technicality. After 26 months of investigation, 19 witnesses, and millions of dollars spent, the prosecution will be doing it all again this fall. Regardless of the retrial's outcome, the financial toll is heavy. "It's not like I get a public defender," King says. "It's a hard pill to swallow, to pay them to prosecute me and then pay another group of people to defend me." Still, King says he doesn't worry about jail. "If I ever have to go," he explains, "it will take care of itself like it did before."

HIS FINEST HOUR
Kinshasa, Zaire, 1974.
Ali won back his title at King's
"Rumble in the Jungle."



King, who started working with Tyson in 1988 after crashing the funeral of his former manager, Jimmy Jacobs. "If we could fulfill all our contracts, then we'd be on the road to making Tyson the first billion-dollar athlete. That's why they're bothering me, but I ain't mad at anybody."

There's no denying that when Don King makes a deal, a lot of people get paid. A week before Tyson's WBC championship fight with Frank Bruno last March, all the 90,000-plus hotel rooms in Vegas were sold out at triple their normal rates. The world's media, from Canada to Indonesia, flew in to cover the spectacle and request a Mike Tyson interview. King hired a press man, who admitted, "I get paid to say no to everybody in different languages." (Bruno was willing to talk, and spoke highly of King: "They fed me all the horror stories," he said. "They made him out to be worse than Jack the Ripper. It's all bollocks, poison spread by jealous people who cannot compete with this boxing giant. I love Don King.")

King walked around the cavernous MGM Hotel casino grinning his famous grin and greeting people as

charge in 1985, King thanked the jury by flying them first-class to sit ringside at numerous heavyweight bouts. By this time, he's used to handling adversity, but he says the waiting is the worst part.

"The interim is excruciatingly painful," says King. "That's the time between the allegation and the exoneration. It's a very dangerous time, a time when you can be destroyed. And I'm in the interim now. I've survived three scandals; most people cannot even survive one, because the media says you're guilty until proven innocent. They go deep into your history and dichotomize everything you've done."

King is currently under indictment for wire fraud. At the center of the case is Joe Maffia, King's former accountant, who told federal investigators that King filed an insurance claim with Lloyd's of London for lost training expenses after a canceled fight and then shorthanded the fighter, Julio Cesar Chavez. The sum involved is \$350,000, and the evidence is contained in nine faxes. If the feds prove that King personally knew how much came in and went out, that constitutes deliberate fraud and King faces prison time. "This is a vic-

Meanwhile, he keeps on planning Mike Tyson's road to reunifying the heavyweight championship: The next opponent is WBA champ Bruce Seldon, another King-promoted fighter. "We've put on 47 world championships while I was under indictment," he says. "Think how much more upward mobility I'd have without that. But you can't feel sorry for yourself. In the evening of my career, they cannot take anything away from me. It's a crowning achievement to take part in the game. And the game is not for those on the side lines but those who get into the center of the ring, who sweat and toil and achieve in spite of the insurmountable obstacles. They blame my success on my hair, or my loquaciousness, the race card, anything—but they never give you credit as a man."

Then King pauses, growing almost pensive. "There's a lot of things you want to say, but you'd just be giving them credibility. For every accusation thrown at me, I've been vindicated, and they just print a little thing in the back of the paper. But while it's going on, every day it's big headlines. If you want to hear about all the good things that I've done, wait until I'm dead." □