

Missoulian

ONE BLOCH OVER: Et tu, brute? — Tyson is more an artist than we give his mouth or fists credit for

By BEN BLOCH for the Missoulian | Posted: Thursday, June 23, 2005 12:00 am

I wonder how many people paid attention last week to what truly might have been Mike Tyson's last time in the ring ... for real. I admit I did, and when it was over I felt a strong yet indefinable sadness.

The Mike Tyson story, which spans the last 20 years and somehow seems married to the trajectory of my 30-something generation, has by now become something of a tragedy on the Shakespearian level.

I remember as a high schooler joining the many who were in awe of this chaotic yet powerful figure who seemed to come up out of nowhere and bring an energy to boxing that had been lost for many years. He rose to superstardom in a snap, winning the title and the elegant actress Robin Givens. He charmed the public and the press with a voice that was in and of itself a paradox: high and childlike, yet spouting about "eating your heart." Iron Mike, he was called. At his prime, the Nintendo game "Mike Tyson's Punchout," was a phenomenon in and of itself. He seemed to be all powerful—possessing physical strength, the love of his fans, and wealth.

Nowadays, bring up Mike Tyson and many seem ready to dismiss him as a dumb brute, a criminal and a loser, not to mention a fool for getting in the ring again. Since his glory days, he has been in jail for rape, bitten off Evander Holyfield's ear, gained and lost a veritable fortune, and tattooed a large portion of his face. Since getting out of prison he has made one after another fruitless bids to reclaim some of his past glory. For those who have a love of the human drama that is boxing, and the characters it draws, it is difficult not to find some compassion in Mike Tyson's journey.

"Who am I? Why are these people clapping for me?" he said in an interview after losing the fight last week. "I don't feel like I'm that guy anymore. I don't have the desire to hurt anyone anymore. I see a fly, but I don't have the nerve to get up and kill it. I'm (screwed) up. One of my goals is that I'm not going to kill anything anymore because everything wants to live. ... This is it, man. I don't know where I'm going or what I'm going to do, but I'm just so happy it's over."

Reading this, I was struck. Mike Tyson has always been surprising. And this element of surprise has frequently worked to his advantage in captivating the public's attention. In the midst of his unabashed anger and seeming insanity, he always expressed himself with an odd combination of violence, honesty, egotism, bravado and humor. At any time he could suddenly produce quotes that would make a great writer envious. A testament to their profundity (and entertainment value), they can be found all over the Internet.

On himself:

"I'm just a dark shadowy figure from

the den of iniquity. A dark shadowy figure from the bowels of iniquity. I wish I could be Mike who gets an endorsement deal, but you can't make a lie and a truth go together. This country wasn't built on moral fiber. This country was built on rape, slavery, murder, degradation and affiliation with crime."

"At times, I come across as crude or crass, that irritates you when I come across as a Neanderthal or a babbling idiot at times. But I like to be that person. I like to show you all that person because that's who you come to see."

"I'm not Mother Teresa. But I'm also not Charles Manson."

On boxing:

"I just want them to keep bringing guys on and I'm going to strip them of their health. I bring pain, a lot of pain."

"My power is discombobulatingly devastating. I could feel his muscle tissues collapse under my force. It's ludicrous these mortals even attempt to enter my realm."

On his mental health:

"I don't react to anything tragic happening anymore. I took so many bad things as a kid and some people think I don't care about anything. It's just too hard for me to get emotional. I can't cry no more."

"I'm on the Zoloft to keep from killing y'all."

These are just the tip of the iceberg. Some of the quote lists I saw go on for pages, each quote more surprising in its phraseology and content than the last.

How is it that a man like this comes to be, who with little education cultivated a life story that could fill 15 gripping novels, who with the naivete of a child and the viciousness of a beast is clearly a deep and appealing figure, despite his faults and transgressions.

I cannot help but find a kind of artist-figure looming within him (and not only the obviously physical art that is boxing), a person who is surprisingly open to the most intense human forces in the world, who risks everything with an uninhibited tongue and fist that can only bring the highest of highs and lowest of lows, humiliation and glory, poverty and riches. His honesty can be plain heartbreaking, and over the years he has discussed his own pain with as much flair as he has discussed inflicting pain on others.

If we make art to show that we have lived, to reveal the scope of our potential experience, then Mike Tyson has done that on a grander scale than most. The Irish philosopher George Berkeley famously said that "to be is to be perceived." Mike Tyson seems to have understood this as well as any struggling artist.

"There are nine million people who see me in the ring and hate my guts," he once said in a press conference. "Most of them are white. That's OK. Just spell my name right."

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