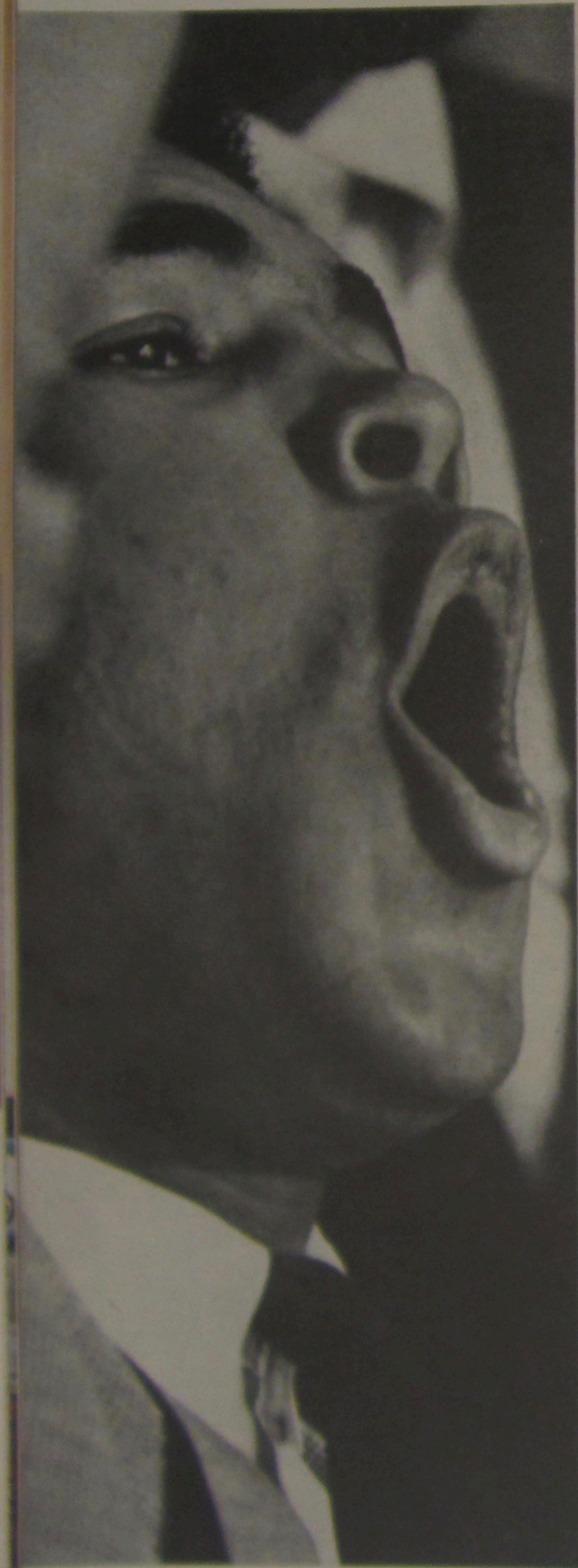


A RUEFUL DREAM COME TRUE



Proclaiming his greatness, Cassius Clay...

Ruing the day, the man from Cassius Clay's Louisville Sponsoring Group chewed his lip while the boxer with the florid signature and the rococo personality signed the dotted line. "We did not want this fight so soon," the man said, "but Cassius insisted and we had to give in. After all, wise or unwise, it's his decision and his career." Far removed from such morbidity, the irrepressible Clay slapped down the pen in a Denver hotel last week after agreeing to fight Sonny Liston for the world heavyweight championship next February. "Somebody pinch me," he exulted while visions of dollar signs danced before his big brown eyes. "If I'm not asleep, this is a dream come true."

The dream can still become a nightmare—a few days later Clay got a stiff note from his draft board summoning him to a preinduction physical. A deferment probably will take care of that ("The government will make a couple million dollars out of a title fight," said Cassius, "so they'd be smart to let me go on"), but Sonny Liston will not be so easy. Although widely acclaimed as the savior of boxing, undefeated Clay, by sprinkling fulminating powder over his 19 so-so fights, has made himself the official—if illogical—challenger to the brutish Liston.

So, announcement of the title fight brought anguished protests from all over. Rocky Marciano hinted Clay ought to have his handsome head examined, and a California boxing expert working for the state said the fight "is a mismatch of the first magnitude." Even Clay's own lawyer, Gordon Davidson of Louisville, was an unwilling accomplice. "But," he said, "there was no putting Cassius off. We argued that he needed more experience, that Liston was too strong right now. No use. He wasn't listening. We finally concluded Cassius does not try to learn anything from one fight to the next and really doesn't care about becoming one of the finest heavyweights who ever lived. All he wants is to be the richest."

Whether or not Clay will ever realize his financial ambitions, he was well on

the way last week. Under terms of the contract, he will get 22½% of every ticket and every hot dog plus 22½% of the fighters' share of closed-circuit TV receipts. Liston, as champion, will get 40%, but Clay's cut reportedly will be the biggest ever paid a heavyweight challenger. He will gross close to \$1 million. And to reap that and future harvests, his backers will sink \$40,000 into the "most intensive, most expensive training program ever." Would that do the trick? Odds-makers were prepared to lay 10 to 1 Clay's group should save its money.

Still, win or lose, Clay may be wise to go ahead with the fight now. His acute business instinct tells him that his name has been in decline since his bout with Henry Cooper last June. And his image has become like emery paper: it sparkles a little and grates a lot. He has gained nothing, for example, by welching on a promise to fight George Chuvalo ("He might butt my pretty face") or by attending meetings of the Black Muslims—about whom he understands virtually nothing. Equally unbecoming has been his recent criticism of his long-suffering trainer, Angelo Dundee, whom he childishly calls a "bum." Thus, having reached a point of diminishing returns, the time to strike was at hand, and Clay last week was in perfect form.

Although Clay had actually signed the contract in late October in the privacy of Gordon Davidson's office, a mock signing *cum* press conference was set for Tuesday, November 5 in Denver, Liston's latest home town. There was some nonsense about Clay traveling incognito to heighten the drama, so he drove west in a newly purchased, gaily decorated, second-hand airport bus that bears on its aging sides legends like "Sonny Liston Will Go in Eight" and "World's Most Colorful Fighter" done in assorted colors. Pulling in Monday evening, he later wheeled over to Liston's house at 1 a.m. Liston lives in a swank neighborhood (where 32 for-sale signs were put up a week after he moved in last May), and he passes his time mowing the lawn and watching TV. Carefree—a nagging \$100,000 assault

While his backers wring their hands and the heavyweight champion goes weak with laughter, Cassius Clay signs for a title fight with Sonny Liston in February, probably in Las Vegas

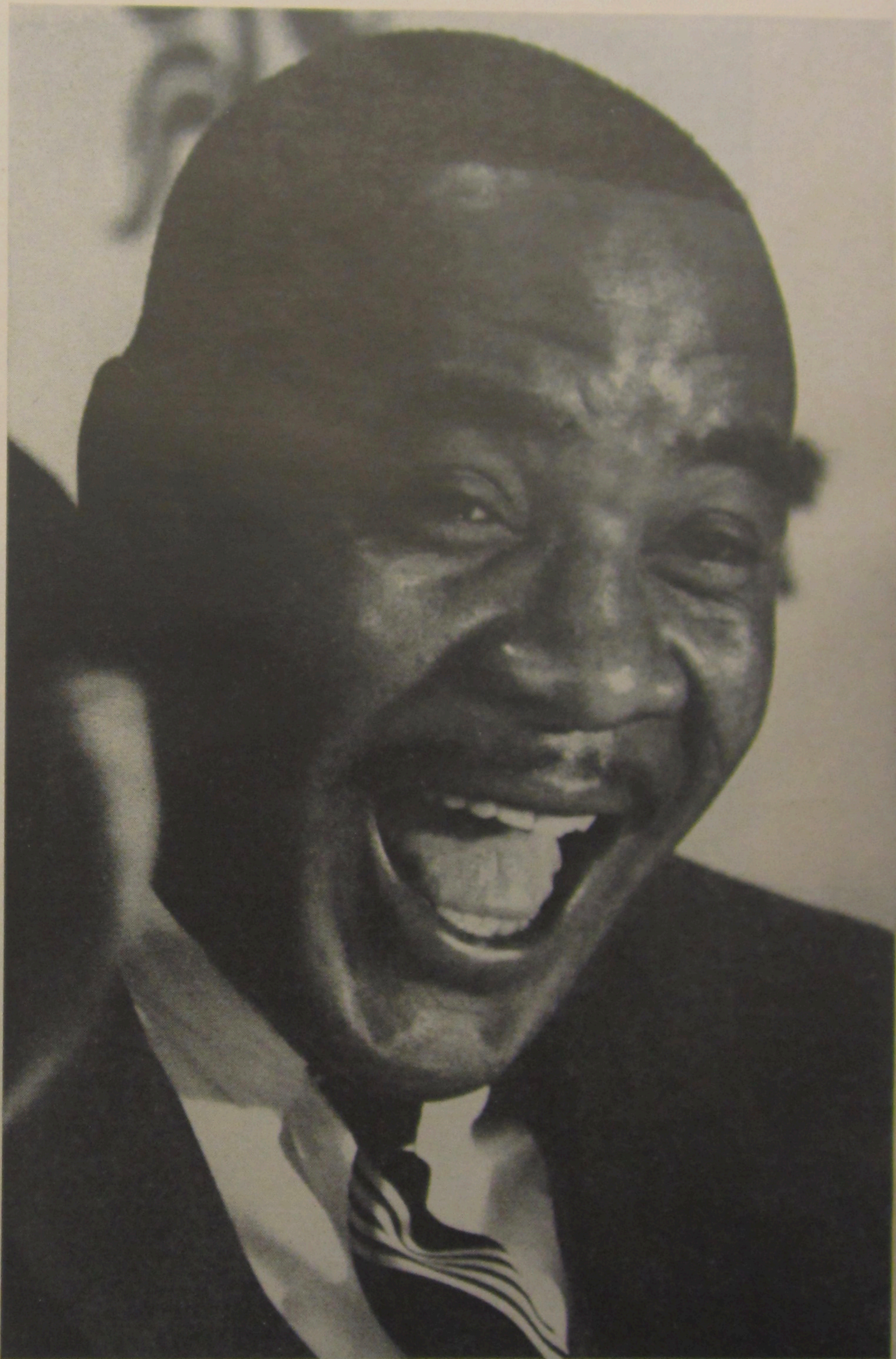
by HUSTON HORN

suit brought against him by the wife of an ex-bodyguard was settled out of court just the other day—Liston had gone to bed when Clay drove up. So Cassius leaned on the horn and shouted invective into the night air. Those neighbors who had had the moral courage not to move out when Liston moved in also had the wit to call the police. For Clay, that was it for the night.

Recharged, he arrived at the 2 p.m. conference next day a fashionable two minutes late and piped, "I'm ready to go to war." There followed lots more of the bombast he passes off for humor until it became abundantly clear that 1) Clay's material is wearing pretty thin and 2) some of it is still brand-new to Liston. The world's meanest man dissolved into rib-racking, eye-watering laughter. "I'm the champ of fightin'," he spluttered, "but you the champ of talkin'." Then, collecting himself, he got in a few more licks: he gave Clay his photograph for "protection" and produced a pair of fur boxing gloves which he uses, he said, against the likes of Cassius. After the ebullient press party broke up, Clay shut up, but Liston turned it on in earnest while Clay put away a plate of chicken. "You eat like you headed to the electric chair," Sonny chortled. "The fight ain't tonight." Clay ate and said nothing.

Not knowing exactly when or where the fight will be, Clay ducked out of his \$52 hotel bill next day and headed his bus for New York; Liston went to Las Vegas. Liston has a case of crap-shooting fever, but theorists said he was on more important business this trip. Las Vegas is one of a handful of cities bidding for the fight, and Liston has connections there. "Everybody is supposed to be getting a fair hearing," said a man close to the plans, "but in my gut I feel it's going to Las Vegas. California doesn't think much of Liston's background, and an eastern city's time zone would foul up the theater-TV people."

So that left only a couple of things unsolved. Will the Louisville draft board give Cassius a deferment and, if it does, will the Army, asks Sonny Liston, "want the boy after I'm done with him?" **END**



sends normally ma evolent Liston into a laughing fit that brings tears to the champion's eyes.