

AdAge

MELVONE FARRELL ON MUHAMMAD ALI AND A LIFE JOURNEY COME FULL CIRCLE

The makeup artist writes about working with the boxing legend after idolizing him growing up



Credit: Courtesy of Melvone Farrell

*Ad Age is marking Black History Month 2024 with our fourth-annual Honoring Creative Excellence package. ([Read the introduction here.](#)) Today, guest editor **Helen Hollien** turns the spotlight to makeup artist **Melvone Farrell**, who writes about taking inspiration from Muhammad Ali—and then working with him on a Newsweek shoot.*

As a makeup artist in the industry of TV commercials, I'm truly honored to be part of this world which I have been in for over three decades.

Born and raised in England by West Indian parents, as a young girl the only thing I knew was the four walls in the council flat we lived in. Back then we had a small black-and-white TV that the whole family sat around together and watched. In 1971, there was a lot of excitement when Muhammad Ali was going to fight Joe Frazier. Ali was the first major Black person I'd seen on TV, and I was blown away. He was not only handsome but eloquent, a poet, an artist, an entertainer.

Watching him stirred something deep within me. From that day, I started to dream; instinctively I knew there was more for me outside those four walls. I had always felt different—no one around me reflected what I felt on the inside. But after seeing Muhammad Ali, all I knew was that when I was old enough, I was going to figure out how to find my way in the world.

I knew I had a special drive for something, I just didn't know what it was. But I knew I was destined for bigger things.

Eventually my parents immigrated to America. I've always had a love for fashion, and after graduating high school I set my sights on becoming a fashion model. At that time there were only a few Black models. After eight years of relentlessly pursuing my dream, I realized it wasn't going to come to fruition, but it led me in a different direction. It was really hard for me to accept that I didn't fit the mold, that I wasn't what they were looking for. After a couple of difficult years, I started working as a waitress in New York City. I met so many different people in New York—artists, writers, poets, painters, photographers, designers. People who reflected what I felt on the inside. People with the same desire for more.

While waitressing, I found that I had a passion or a knack for makeup. I decided if I could not be in front of the camera, I could be behind it. So off I went in pursuit of another dream.

It was not an easy road. It took me a while to figure out how to maneuver in this industry. My pursuit took me around the world—I worked in Europe and America. Back then, in the late '70s, there were only a handful of Black makeup artists in the industry. I started working in editorial, which eventually led me into the world of TV commercials. In the beginning, I had to fight hard to be seen and heard, and it took a while to prove that I was just as good as the next person.

The highlight of my 30-plus years in the industry was meeting Muhammad Ali—the same man I saw on TV as a young girl, who ignited within me the possibility of more.

In the early '90s, I got booked on a job for Newsweek to work with Muhammad Ali. We were flown to his hometown and I sat in his kitchen eating the chili that he made and offered to the crew. But I could barely even eat because I could not stop crying.

He was so gracious. Ali came over to me and asked what was wrong. I said, “I can’t believe I’m sitting here, in your kitchen, eating your food and working with you.” Lovingly, he said, “Stop the crying and eat the food.” It took my mind back to when I was a young girl in my mother’s house, watching him on the TV—and here I was sitting in his house.

I will never forget this. I’ve had other highlights working with other celebrities in my career, but this one took the cake. It will stay with me for the rest of my life. I will always be in awe to have worked with one of the greats. And it goes to show you that what you asked for, and what you want in life, you can achieve.

Everything had come full circle, which showed me I was where I was supposed to be. Meeting Muhammad Ali validated the journey I had taken. I’m glad I never gave up on my dreams.