

Oct. 30, 1988----

LOS ANGELES You hear Ike Turner but see Hurricane Henry Armstrong, a forgotten featherweight boxer who died a couple of days ago on a bed of noble dreams.

Armstrong slept in boxcars and ate doughnuts and wine during the Depression. When he turned to boxing, he took on all comers - those in his own class, as well as lightweights and middleweights.

Then you see Ike Turner, another neglected fighter.

There were false reports in 1985 that Turner died, victim of a shooting in the dim streets of Los Angeles. The ghetto drama seemed to fit, and the memory of Turner was resurrected, like a long-ago, once-famous boxer.

But Turner is alive and mounting a quixotic comeback that may be questionable on talent, but long on heart. He'll be playing guitar in front of nuggets such as "Proud Mary" and "I Can't Believe What You Say" with a three-piece band and four new Ikettes on his 57th birthday (Nov. 5) at Biddy Mulligan's on the far north side of Chicago.

Turner has the swagger of an old featherweight boxer as he moves around the lounge of a Hollywood hotel. His frame is diminutive but firm, his hairline is receding a bit and there's salt in that sordid goatee.

And there's fire in his eyes.

"I'll tell you: in 1982 I stuck a Magnum in my mouth and snapped it," Turner said while sitting down to a snack of Coca-Cola and chicken wings. "But I'm glad it didn't shoot. Maybe next time I won't be quite as fortunate. (He grinned). I don't know if I was fortunate or not. I feel pretty good about myself now."

Turner just got out of an 11-day stay at the Schick Shadel Hospital in Santa Barbara, where he was undergoing sodium pentothal and shock treatment for his 18-year cocaine addiction. There's talk of a book I Ike: The Flip Side (a takeoff on his former wife's I Tina), a companion movie (Ike says Eddie Murphy may play Ike) and a new record. It's hard to say where the projects currently stand - Turner dumped his manager the day before we spoke.

The 1980s haven't exactly been Pee-wee's Playhouse for Turner. He has been arrested and charged numerous times for possession of guns and drugs, and assault. In 1987 he was arrested on a cocaine charge in West Hollywood. He had only 11 cents with him. Earlier this year, Turner pleaded guilty to possessing cocaine for sale and is on five years' probation.

He has been married 10 times. Asked if he was presently married, he said, "I think so . . . I don't know."

"The last girl I married - Ann Thomas, who used to be an Ikettes - she's a reborn Christian. The last time I talked to her I asked, 'Ann, are we married or not?' She didn't know. I don't know. But I don't care. I don't want no woman."

Women are the least of Ike's problems.

"The last five years have been hell," he said. "Most of the stuff you've read has been lies. They say Ike Turner shot his paper boy. Damn paper boy was 49 years old, 6-foot-7, slapped my old lady three times, and he had a gun. They don't put that in the paper. It gives me a bad image."

In late August, Turner decided to check into Schick because drug testing is a condition of his probation. "They wanted to put me in live-in rehab for six months, but that would have killed my career," he said. Instead, he went through grueling shock treatment, portions of which were shown on local television here.

Turner admits he is intimidated by the thought of picking up the pieces of a noble career that includes the discovery of Little Junior Parker, the hiring of a ringer named Jimi Hendrix and the development of a singer such as Tina Turner.

"It is real scary," he said. "I've had years to think and my expectation of myself is so far above the public's expectation."

In a 1985 Spin magazine interview, legendary rhythm 'n' blues singer and local disc jockey Johnny Otis said, "Ike Turner is a very important man in American music. The texture and flavor of R & B owe a lot to him. He defined how to put the Fender bass into that music. He was a great innovator. I like Ike."

But does Ike like Ike? Turner's 57 years have been a fast 15 rounds of street-wise shadowboxing. He grew up in Clarksdale, Miss., helping his parents pull through the Depression by working on chicken farms. When Ike was 9, he ran away to Memphis, Tenn.

"I left home on a bicycle, grabbing on to the back of a truck," he said with a proud laugh. "I did that for about 30 miles. I got a job cleaning doors as a hall boy at the hotel across the street from the (luxurious) Peabody Hotel. I slept in the back where they kept the Coke crates. I remember taking the bottles out of the crates, turning them upside down so I could sleep on them."

The gritty existence proved too tough for young Turner and after four days, he hitchhiked back to Clarksdale. He would cut school to hang out at the local pool hall and listen to a boogie-woogie piano player named Pine Top Joe Willie. His resolute style inspired Turner to learn piano. By the time he was 13, Turner was playing the edgy piano behind Sonny Boy Williamson and Robert Nighthawk.

B. B. King gave Turner his first big break. "I had gotten the Kings of Rhythm together - first they were the Top Hatters, when there were 32 of us," he recalled. "We went down to Greenville (Miss.) for a Sunday matinee and on the way back I saw a sign for Riley (B. B.'s real name) King. We stopped and I saw B. B. on stage. We got up and played our songs. Even today you can't tell him I play guitar. He don't believe I play nothing but piano. But he was impressed. He made an appointment for me to see Sam Phillips (at

Sun Records in Memphis). We were excited. And we got arrested on our way over to Memphis. The policeman who arrested us had an 88 Oldsmobile. That's how I came up with "Rocket '88."

In 1951, Turner cut "Rocket 88" with saxophonist Jackie Brenston for Sun Records. When the strident piano parts met the replete horns under Phillips' seminal production, the table was set for rock 'n' roll.

After gigging as a talent scout in Memphis and sampling life in Los Angeles, Turner moved to St. Louis in 1954. His sister had married and moved North, so Turner followed.

Turner made two important discoveries in St. Louis and in the more wide-open East St. Louis - Jimi Hendrix and Annie Mae Bullock, who became Tina Turner.

"Jimi was in East St. Louis in the late 1950s," Turner said matter-of-factly. "I had made this sound board and he'd stay up all night messing with that crap. He'd experiment with fuzzes. I couldn't understand who would want to listen to all that distortion. I'd be trying to get clarity."

Turner gets more excited talking about Tina, with whom he performed from 1960 to 1976. "Her sister was going with my drummer," he recalled. "I was going with another girl named Pat. We were playing in East St. Louis. I was sitting onstage messing around with the piano and a girl took the mike off and gave it to Tina. And she started singing. After that, Tina started going with my saxophone player. Tina and I got to be real tight buddies for four years."

Turner said he was onstage one day and saw Tina jitterbugging on the dance floor, wear a sequin dress that he had bought for her. "I thought, 'Boy, that chick can dance.' I got drunk and we went home," he said. "She was wearing one of those little short things I had got her from Frederick's of Hollywood. She was trying to wrestle me and make me drink black coffee. I felt I was going to bed with my sister. I didn't want to mess around. We were always more sister and brother than husband and wife."

Turner contends he was never legally married to Tina. He said they were mass "married" with two other couples by a tourist photographer in Tijuana.

"Every word that ever came out of her mouth came straight from me," Turner said. "All the steps onstage, the arrangements, the bookings, the management. I did it all. I have a good imagination. I'm a good organizer."

That's why Turner was crushed when Tina wanted out in 1976. The couple were divorced in 1978. "When she split, I didn't think it would be one of those things that would drag on for a long time," he said. "She didn't want anything to change with the band - she just didn't want to be my wife anymore. I didn't accept that. Then the lawyers got involved. I wasn't able to pay my bills. The name Ike and Tina was always bigger than the money that was coming in. It dawned on me I wouldn't have these \$13,000-a-week airline tickets, because I didn't have the band anymore. I got real scared. I've talked to her three times since then.

"As far as her career is concerned, it don't mean nothing to me. I don't have any thoughts, positive or negative. I really don't know the woman I see now. The one I know is a totally different person. Pardon the expression, but this one to me is totally white. She forgot about her race, period. And I don't like it. I'll always love Tina, but I don't like the one she is now. I don't like nothing she stands for."

Tina's side of the story paints Ike as a mentally and physically abusive husband and producer. "She was doing that to get sympathy from the public," Turner said with a sigh. "At the time I didn't think much about it. Now I do. It has damaged my reputation. It's hard for me to get jobs. Nobody believes I need to work. I'm human. We had our fights like everybody else - maybe more than the average person. But the average person is only around (his spouse) 12 hours a day. We were around each other 24 hours a day. I think it was difficult for her to separate our personal life from our careers. As an employee, she was always told what to do. She had a confusion that was never worked out within herself. It's been very hard to get started again. I'm going to send her a letter to stay off of me."

Ike then recited lyrics to a new song, which is an answer to Tina's "What's Love Got To Do With It." He said he won't record it because he doesn't want to exploit her.

"You say you didn't know what love had to do with it.

"Then why when you got it, you didn't want to quit it?

"Now you want to do like the farmer do the potato.

"You want to plant me now and come back and dig me later . . ."

It's the featherweight who always fights to the final bell.