

1965-2012

# RODNEY KING

*Forever haunted by a beating 21 years ago, he put a face on police brutality and*



Los Angeles, April 30, 1992. King's beating sparked one of America's worst riots.



The beating footage, filmed by Los Angeles resident George Holliday, became a media sensation.

**A**bout once a year, Rodney King would be watching TV in the living room of his Rialto, California, bungalow when a program would flash the infamous footage of him being beaten nearly to death. The amateur video, which careened King into America's—and the world's—consciousness in 1991 and would be the catalyst for the 1992 Los Angeles riots, shows members of the LA Police Department surrounding King following a high-speed car chase, and hitting him with batons more than 50 times. “I just smile because I survived it,” he told WHO in April during publicity for his auto-biography. “What has really helped me has been the worldwide support. When I understood that lots of people cared about my case, that gave me the strength to keep moving on.”

On June 17, in his swimming pool at his

modest home just outside Los Angeles, King's troubled journey came to an untimely end. After his fiancée, Cynthia Kelly, discovered King, 47, at the bottom of the pool at 5:25 AM on the Sunday morning, responding officers pulled him from the water. The father of three was pronounced dead at a local hospital. Police said there were no signs of foul play and they

**“He was a symbol of civil rights”**

—Reverend Al Sharpton

are now conducting a drowning investigation. At press time, a cause of death had yet to be determined. King, a construction worker who battled alcoholism, “was a symbol of civil rights,” said civil-rights activist Reverend

Al Sharpton. “It was his beating that made America focus on the presence of profiling and police misconduct.”

On the night of the beating on March 3, 1991, King, who was then on parole after a robbery conviction, had been drinking and was driving home with friends. Fearing he would be sent back to jail when police began to pursue the speeding white Hyundai, the 25-year-old tried to flee. He eventually pulled over near an apartment block in LA's Lake View Terrace, where four officers surrounded him. He was tasered when he resisted arrest and a nearby resident filmed what followed. The video showed two of the officers delivering 56 baton blows as he attempted to rise. King said they also shouted racial abuse at him. “I can still remember my scream,” King told WHO in one of his last interviews. “It was like a death scream.”

After all four white officers involved were initially acquitted in 1992, riots erupted in South Central Los Angeles. During the violence, King issued what became a famous appeal for peace: “People, I just want to say, can we all get along?” By the time order was restored three days later, 54 people were dead, 2,000 were injured and the city had sustained \$1 billion in damage. “The viciousness and violence were unnerving,” said the then Governor of California, Pete



“I can still remember each of those blows,” recalled King (on March 6, 1991).

## POLICE BRUTALITY

After 56 baton blows and six kicks, LAPD officers placed King under arrest. He was then taken to hospital. He suffered fractured facial bones, a broken ankle

and other injuries. Says King: “When I was inside the hospital, a lady told me, ‘Baby, don’t worry, we saw it all on TV. Somebody videotaped it.’”

# KING

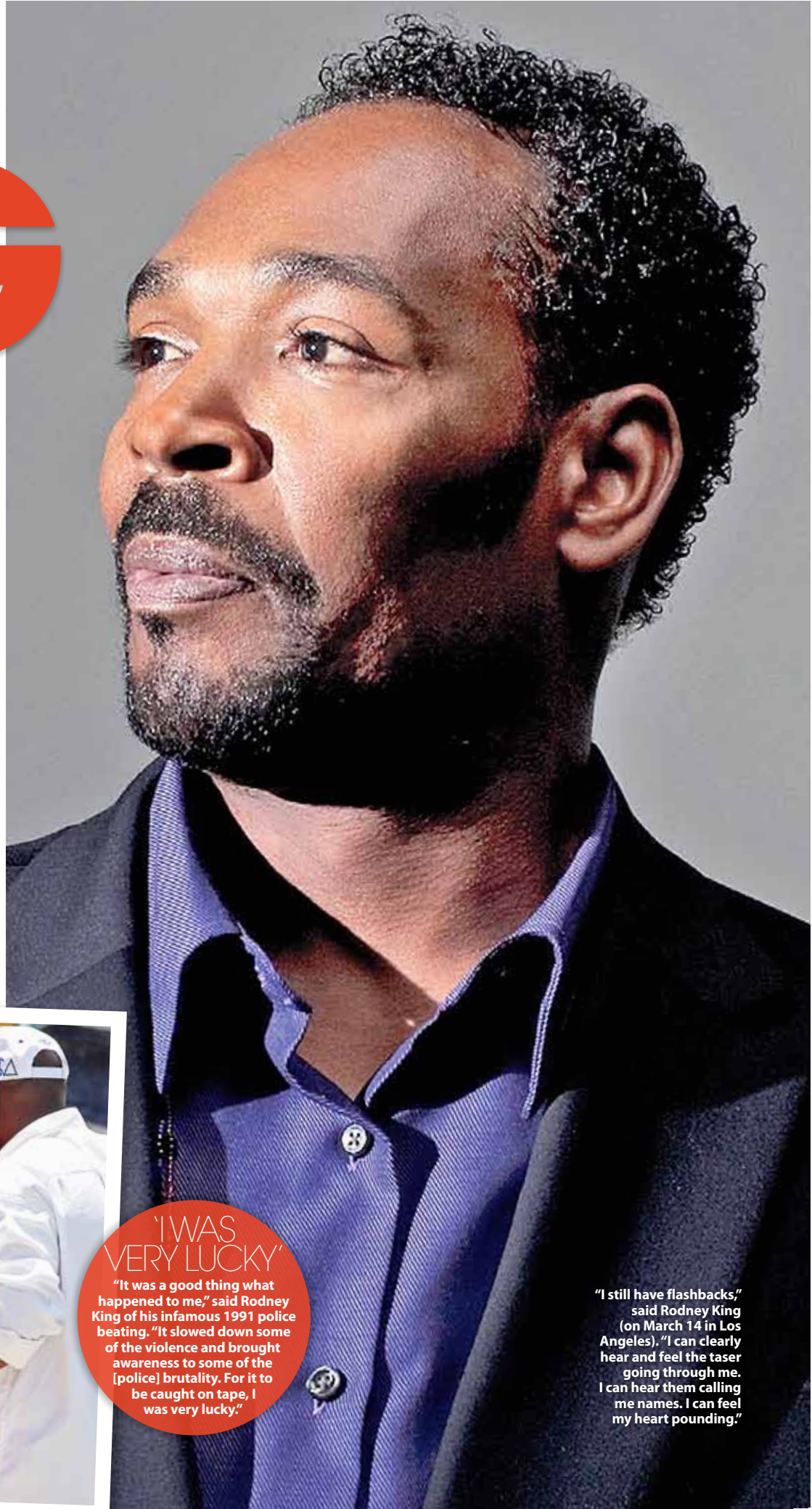
## racial tension in America

Wilson. "It scared the hell out of a lot of people."

What followed was an overhaul of the LAPD, and a federal trial that found two of the officers guilty of violating King's civil rights. They were sentenced to 30 months' prison. In 1994, King, who was a high-school student when he discovered his alcoholic father dead in the bathtub, received \$US3.8 million in damages, much of which he says he lost on the stock market after 9/11. Said King: "If I were anywhere else in the world, I would never have received justice."

Just weeks before his death, King published his memoir, *The Riot Within: My Journey from Rebellion to Redemption*, and was dabbling in acting. He had begun to take control of his alcohol problem, explaining that he was no longer drinking "as much as I used to," following a 2011 drink-driving arrest. Next year, he planned to marry his fiancée, who was a juror in his 1994 civil trial, and was spending his days watching his grandkids splash about in his pool. "I've got no complaints, I've always been lucky," said King. "I finally found peace in my life."

■ By Johnny Dodd and Michael Crooks



CLOCKWISE FROM RIGHT: JAY L. CLENDENIN/LOS ANGELES TIMES/CONTOUR BY GETTY IMAGES; AAP (4)



King's daughters Lora (facing front) and Candice consoled each other near King's home in Rialto, California, on June 17.

### 'I WAS VERY LUCKY'

"It was a good thing what happened to me," said Rodney King of his infamous 1991 police beating. "It slowed down some of the violence and brought awareness to some of the [police] brutality. For it to be caught on tape, I was very lucky."

"I still have flashbacks," said Rodney King (on March 14 in Los Angeles). "I can clearly hear and feel the taser going through me. I can hear them calling me names. I can feel my heart pounding."