

INTERVIEW

Basketball legend Abdul-Jabbar salutes his childhood heroes

BY RON WYNN

Kareem Abdul-Jabbar became the greatest scorer in the history of professional basketball by perfecting a game based on finesse, agility and phenomenal shot-making technique rather than brute force or physical bulk. Since his retirement 18 years ago, he's become a fine historian and narrative writer, delivering valuable works on subjects ranging from overlooked African-American World War II veterans to the year he spent coaching basketball on a Native American reservation. Just as his game on the court had a stylized and distinctive flavor, Abdul-Jabbar's books have always done more than simply stating facts by offering his personal insights on events and personalities he's found inspiring.

That trend continues in his latest book, *On the Shoulders of Giants: My Journey Through the Harlem Renaissance*. Rather than giving readers an academic treatise on this important cultural movement, Abdul-Jabbar turns the book into both a memoir and a reflection on the debt he owes to the figures who came before him. Focusing on basketball, jazz and writing, he shows how key people and developments in these areas influenced his life.

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"One of the reasons I chose the Harlem Renaissance period is that it came on the heels of one of the great migrations of black people in America," Abdul-Jabbar says in an interview from Los Angeles, where he's working as an assistant coach for the Lakers. "I also wanted to show people the difference between the fantasy world of Harlem that's often depicted in films and the real community, the place where people were living and working, and where remarkable achievements and cultural and political history was being created. When you consider that what happened in Harlem during the '20s and '30s came during an era when KKK membership was climbing and a major backlash was occurring, it's even more incredible."

Though he's been a student of history, particularly African-American history, since his days as an undergraduate at UCLA when he was known as Lew Alcindor, Abdul-Jabbar acknowledges that he made some unexpected findings while doing research for the book. "I was pretty surprised to discover that the great bandleader Cab Calloway actually tried out for and made the Harlem Globetrotters," he says. "Things would have been pretty different had he decided to play basketball, but it's good he chose music."

The book's early sections detail the sordid history and ugly treatment blacks suffered in the pre-Renaissance period and also outline the scope of the migration from both the South and the Caribbean to Harlem during the early 20th century. In a call-and-response format, co-writer Raymond Obstfeld contributes chapters that summarize the history of the era. Then Abdul-Jabbar shifts the treatment to specific periods and people, spotlighting his artistic and athletic heroes, such as writers Langston Hughes, James Weldon Johnson, Claude McKay and Chester Himes, and the effect they had on him from time he was born in Harlem in 1947.

A key section of the book considers the achievements of the New York Rens, a basketball team named for Harlem's Renaissance Casino and Ballroom, whose 1939 World Championship made them the first black team to win any pro title. Ironically, Abdul-Jabbar himself originally planned to be a baseball player rather than a basketball player. Because baseball was the predominant sport for African-Americans prior to the 1960s, Abdul-Jabbar says, the exploits of many great black basketball players were largely forgotten.

"There was a time when baseball was the main sport among African-Americans, which is why there's so much written about the Negro Leagues," Abdul-Jabbar said. "But without the Rens and other great black teams and players from that period, there's a major gap in the knowledge that many people have about the growth of basketball in the nation."

"Another thing that so many people overlook about the Harlem Renaissance was the boom it triggered in terms of writing and publishing," Abdul-Jabbar adds. "These people were writing and publishing poetry, essays, short stories and books, developing an artistic tradition, yet there were still people in America doubting the humanity of black people. Their resilience, their versatility, their awareness of the importance of art as a political and personal weapon that could be used to help better everyone's lives is something that has always resonated with me. I think some people don't understand how the example of the Harlem Renaissance writers is still influential and important in contemporary times. But so much of what came later, from the civil rights movement to the black arts explosion, can be traced to the Harlem Renaissance."

The son of a jazz musician, Abdul-Jabbar devotes plenty of space to instrumentalists, vocalists and composers in *On the Shoulders of Giants*. The young Alcindor knew such immortals as pianist Thelonious Monk and trumpeter Dizzy Gillespie and has since become a prominent advocate of jazz. He finds links between that style's expressiveness and flair and basketball, while also establishing a connection between the improvisatory elements of jazz and those of rap. "One of the things that I hope young people understand is that nothing begins in a vacuum," Abdul-Jabbar said. "Without people like Duke Ellington, John Coltrane, Miles Davis and others, there wouldn't be any subsequent musical forms. Their emphasis on individuality, on never playing something the same way twice, is a vital part of the African-American heritage and is no different than what's happening in today's music."

"Perhaps the greatest lesson of the Harlem Renaissance is how so many people's efforts, whether in literature or sports, were done on behalf of others," Abdul-Jabbar notes. "Langston Hughes or the Rens or Duke Ellington truly felt what they were doing was vital to improving the lot of all African-Americans and ultimately was also part of helping America become a more just society for everyone. They weren't trying to get rich, they were trying to make a difference."

On the Shoulders of Giants

By Kareem Abdul-Jabbar
With Raymond Obstfeld

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