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Here's a hook: Kareem pens book on Harlem golden age

By Steve Springer, Times Staff Writer
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Mention the name Kareem Abdul-Jabbar and the image is immediate and distinct, a tall, graceful athlete, his right arm extended above his head so far it seems to touch the top of the arena, a basketball about to glide off his fingertips, launching yet another skyhook.

But there is another side to the Hall of Famer, the NBA's all-time leading scorer, a side he reveals in his newest book, "On the Shoulders of Giants, My Journey Through the Harlem Renaissance."

Abdul-Jabbar, who will be in New York on Saturday for his first book signing, says the Harlem experience shaped the person he has become.

As a 17-year-old, Abdul-Jabbar, taking part in a journalism workshop that centered on Harlem, got to attend a news conference for the Rev. Martin Luther King. It was 1964, the time of the civil rights movement.

Abdul-Jabbar's brush with history proved to be a profound experience for him, he said, launching him into a journey of self-discovery that goes on to this day.

Abdul-Jabbar said he has written this book, his sixth, in hopes of educating people, especially young people, about the Harlem Renaissance of 1920-1940, which featured writers like W.E.B. Du Bois and Marcus Garvey, artists like Aaron Douglas and William H. Johnson and musicians like Duke Ellington and Louis Armstrong.

"The 1920s are known to this day as the Jazz Age," Abdul-Jabbar said. "That is a direct result of the Harlem Renaissance."

Music, in particular, exerts a big pull on Abdul-Jabbar's heart because his father, Ferdinand Alcindor, was a trombonist who often played in Harlem.

Through his father, Abdul-Jabbar was introduced to Sarah Vaughan backstage at the Apollo Theater when he was only 4 years old.

"I wanted to write this book," Abdul-Jabbar said, "with the hope that young people today will get an understanding of what to do with their energy and ambition because their generation has been raised on a guide of get rich quick or die trying. That's taken them in a very unhealthy direction.

"If I can contribute something that makes them think differently, if they can get motivated by the people and events of the Harlem Renaissance, then I've done something very positive."

Yes, there's a lot more to Abdul-Jabbar than just the skyhook.

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