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Andrade: Abdul-Jabbar Doc to Explore Jazz Era NBA

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Music and athletes have always held hands in the world of big-time sports and entertainment. In the NBA that connection has played a huge part in the marketing of the game, particularly through the 1990's and the new millennium when hip-hop culture and rap music were used to push the sport to new heights of popularity, driving it into the homes of the new generation. These days the league is scaling back it's use of hip-hop in its marketing strategy in an effort to appease the corporate gods, but it isn't the first time professional basketball has abandoned its musical roots. Now one man is on a mission to tell the story.

Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, one of the biggest icons in sports history, is producing a documentary aimed at exploring the relationship between jazz music and basketball. From the streets of his hometown of Harlem, New York, to the hardwood courts of the NBA, jazz has played an important role in the culture of basketball in America just as hip-hop has done over the past twenty years. It was part of the soundtrack that accompanied Black America through one of its most will-testing chapters.

"The early days of professional basketball sports were segregated," explains Abdul-Jabbar. "One of the professional teams that was considered to be the best team played out of Harlem. They played out of the Renaissance Ballroom and Casino, which was a dance hall and a place where prominent jazz musicians played. The Renaissance team would play before the main attraction when they played their home games. They would play one half of the game, then they would have one minor band, then they would play the second half of the game and then they might have Duke Ellington until 3AM."

Ellington is considered to be one of jazz music's genius', perhaps the early-day equivalent of rap star Jay-Z casually performing a concert after a New York Knicks home game. How lucky would you be?

"We're doing a documentary, and hopefully it will have a very strong music element," explains the Lakers legend. "We want to show how hip-hop, which kind of fuels today's basketball stars, is directly related to jazz. When we show that connection we find that things haven't changed at all."

For Abdul-Jabbar the connection between Jazz and basketball runs deep, the relationship between the two weaved through his development as a person and as a player in different ways. He wasn't the only one and its influence on ballers of his era is something he feels can't be ignored.

"I was born in Harlem, and when I was a kid one of the guys that played on the team was Dolly King," recalls Abdul-Jabbar. "He played at LIU and then he played for the Reds. He was an official at my games during high school, and was a basketball official for the high schools of New York City."

NBA players often prepare for games by enveloping themselves with music, headphones creating a barrier between the world around them and the one they are about to enter; the zone, the hardwood, that 94 by 50 foot rectangle where it all plays out. Arena's with juiced surround sound blare artists like Eminem telling them to "lose yourself in the music" during warm-ups. For Abdul-Jabbar it was a different voice preparing him for battle.

"As a kid I often envisioned myself as Miles Davis or John Coltrane," says Abdul-Jabbar, the NBA's all-time leading scorer. He chuckles when he mentions this, but remembering his swooping hook shot and his graceful footwork, it's clear the jazz was always there. Any different than an Iverson shake and crossover?

"They've gotten a more modern look," he says of the new generation. "But they really haven't changed in the slightest bit."

In that sense, with the NBA undergoing a long-lasting image clean up, Abdul-Jabbar's effort to explore the musical umbrella that hung over basketball during one of the most turbulent periods in American history is right on time

Now a coach with Phil Jackson's Los Angeles Lakers, Abdul-Jabbar's influence still continues to grow and stretch across the NBA. His tutelage of Lakers youngster Andrew Bynum was huge in the second-year pros development this season. Off the court his project is still in the production stage, filming the necessary interviews and compiling the often hard to locate archival footage from venues like the Renaissance Ballroom and Casino, and others. As the league continues its campaign to lessen the presence of hip-hop in its offering, no doubt Abdul-Jabbar's upcoming documentary on jazz and basketball will show that not only is it vital to hold onto music's influence on basketball, but that it would be a mistake to downplay the importance of its contributions to the development of the sport as a business and entertainment power.

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