



## Kareem shows a renaissance touch

By Jeff Faraudo, STAFF WRITER  
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HE WON three NCAA titles at UCLA and became professional basketball's all-time scoring king during a 20-year NBA career. Now, two months shy of his 60th birthday, Kareem Abdul-Jabbar still is involved with the game, serving as an assistant coach with the Los Angeles Lakers.

But the 7-foot-2 retired center doesn't define himself as a former athlete.

"I used to play basketball," he wrote in "On the Shoulders of Giants," his recently published history of the era in the 1920s and 1930s known as the Harlem Renaissance.

"Since retiring as a professional basketball player 18 years ago, I've done many things ... but the occupation I feel most defines all aspects of who I am at this time in my life is writer."

"On the Shoulders of Giants" profiles and puts into historical context African Americans who congregated in Harlem to influence culture and politics through writing, music, art and sports.

Abdul-Jabbar will appear at a book signing Friday at 7:30 p.m. at Diesel bookstore at 5433 College Ave., in Oakland. Guests must purchase the book from Diesel, Friday evening or in advance, and the line to meet Abdul-Jabbar will begin forming at about 6:30 p.m.

In a wide-ranging interview, Abdul-Jabbar talks about his writing, his book, coaching young Lakers center Andrew Bynum, state of the center position and his famed skyhook.

Q. What pleases you most about your new book, "On the Shoulders of Giants?"

A. I've been able to show people the relationship between all the different parts of (the Harlem Renaissance). Sometimes you can do that, and sometimes you can't. It seems to work in this book.

Q. A fascinating collection of people were part of the Harlem Renaissance. If you could pick one of them to interview, who would it be?

A. The remaining player from the (Harlem Rens) 1939 championship team is still alive. John Isaacs is 94 years old. He's pretty sharp — he goes to work every day at the Boys and Girls Club in the Bronx. He told me he used to come and watch me play me when I was in high school. It's amazing how small the world is.

Q. You describe yourself in the book as a writer, not merely a celebrity who has written a book. Does it surprise you that this is a path you've taken?

A. No, in all probability it's what I would have done if I had to have a real job. I was a history and English major at various times. Writing books about history is what I learned to do in college and what I had a real intense interest in in high school and grade school.

Q. Who do you hope reads this book?

A. I hope a lot of young people read the book. So many of our young kids are caught up in this idea of "get rich or die trying." They don't have any values to ascertain whether the ambition and energy is going in the right direction. That's a failure that needs to be overcome. I hope they can look back and see how a lot of things developed in the Harlem Renaissance helped formulate Dr. King's idea of where we needed to go. Malcolm X, Adam Clayton Powell Jr. — they all benefited from seeing what happened during the Harlem Renaissance, what political and social change was needed in terms of goals and tactics.

Q. Do you think today's NBA players have any appreciation of the history of Harlem and its lasting impact on the culture?

A. No, I doubt it very seriously. That history has faded, very much so. It started right after World War II. People started moving in a new direction, and all the past got more or less tossed out. It kind of went hand in hand with the death of the Big Band era. There were new movements as the quest for civil rights went forward and inroads were made into the monolith of white supremacy. People forgot everything that happened earlier.

Q. How many players in the league today have even heard of Bob Douglas? What should they know about this Caribbean immigrant who created the Harlem Rens professional basketball team?

A. They should understand that what he did made it possible for the NBA to come into existence and be integrated. He's in the Hall of Fame, but I would be surprised if anybody knew his name. They would just shrug their shoulders.

Q. Talk about your role on Phil Jackson's staff. I presume you are working with the big men?

A. I work with Andrew Bynum primarily, and anybody else who wants to know something I might know. Andrew is a great kid. He understands that he doesn't know everything, and he's starting to learn how to play defense. He thought if he was 7 feet tall and stood in the paint that was playing great defense. We had to get him to understand he has to be active and reacting to things on the court. He's a fast learner, he's smart and dedicated. It's been a real pleasure to work with him.

Q. Kobe Bryant is scoring about seven fewer points per game than a year ago. Has his game grown in other ways?

A. People portray Kobe as some gunner. That's not Kobe's focus. Kobe wants to win. He has the talent to be able to take over a game. When no one else is doing it, he will step to the forefront. That willingness to be the guy kind of makes him seem like that's what he wants. He's a team player.

Q. Aside from Shaquille O'Neal, what's your assessment of the state of the center in the NBA these days?

A. There's not too many guys around that want to play center. A lot of them want to play high post center. They want to play 2 guard, shoot 3-pointers. It has to do with just the appeal of styles. Playing in the paint with your back to the basket isn't as appealing as being able to shoot jumpers or make exciting drives to the basket. I know when I was in the eighth grade, I wanted to be Elgin Baylor. Just transferring it a few generations to now, I can understand why guys would want to be Michael Jordan or Dr J. I realized my skills were more in tune with the way Bill Russell played the game or Wilt, and I started to understand the guy who plays closest to the basket can really affect the game.

Q. You made the skyhook an unstoppable weapon. Why did it basically retire with you?

A. People don't see themselves as shooting it. Someone like me or George Mikan ... that's where people go with it. Andrew (Bynum) saw it might be a good thing for him to learn, and he's starting to get it.

Q. What's the state of your skyhook these days? Can Bynum or Kwame Brown get anywhere near it?

A. I could shoot it on them more or less at will. But my game is very rusty.

Q. What player in the NBA today would you pay to see?

A. I like Kevin Garnett. I like Jason Kidd. They really understand the game. Ray Allen, people like that. Kobe's worth the price of admission, certainly.

Q. Now that Karl Malone has retired, is your all-time scoring record safe? Who's out there that could pose a threat to it?

A. Geez, I don't know. Anybody that is the focus of an offense that scores a lot and will remain that for a long period of time will have a shot at it. I just don't know how long these guys will play. They make so much money ... playing into their 40s doesn't seem to be what will happen. My record might endure. But I won't be surprised when and if it happens.

Q. Do you have much contact these days with John Wooden? What is your relationship with your old UCLA coach?

A. I talk to coach pretty regularly. I'm just glad he's still around (at age 96), and I have a chance to talk to him from time to time. He's amazing. He's a wonderful man and a very important man in my life.

Q. Besides basketball and writing, is there anything else you'd like to tackle?

A. I'm doing a documentary film on the same subject (as the book). We hope to have that out in June. We haven't gotten a distribution deal yet. We have interest. A lot of people want to see it.