

# KUNHARDT **FILM** / FOUNDATION

KAREEM ABUL JABBAR INTERVIEW  
*A CHOICE OF WEAPONS: INSPIRED BY GORDON PARKS*  
KUNHARDT FILM FOUNDATION

**Kareem Abdul Jabbar**  
**Writer and activist**  
**November 14, 2019**  
**Interviewed by John Maggio**  
**Total Running Time: 26 minutes and 32 seconds**

START TC: 01:00:00:00

CREW:

Marker.

ON SCREEN TEXT:

Kareem Abdul Jabbar

Writer and activist

## **Role models**

01:00:15:00

KAREEM ABDUL JABBAR:

Uh, a real important role model for me was Bill Russell and just his dignity and competence really—that spoke to me, you know. ‘Cause he was very excellent, he was the best player in the NBA, and he had pride and a way of carrying himself that, you know, I wanted to emulate that. You know, there

were a couple of people that I saw that had that quality. There was a guy that I met that played for the Knicks and then got traded to the Celtics, Willie Knowles.

01:00:51:02

KAREEM ABDUL JABBAR:

Yeah, he went to UCLA and Willie was like a mentor and you know, people like that really had a positive influence on me as far as how to carry myself because there was a lot to be angry about in those days. And you know, he'd go out and all people see is your anger and they don't understand it, that makes for a really negative—negative atmosphere for communication. So it was really important to understand that.

## **Writing**

01:01:29:02

KAREEM ABDUL JABBAR:

Yeah, I was a writer in grade school. The nuns sent me to like essay contests and stuff like that. I took part in a mentoring program in the summer of '64, and Dr. King addressed the people in our program. It was called the HARYOU-ACT or the Harlem Youth Unlimited, and basically it was designed to challenge us to figure out how we were gonna make Harlem a better place. Start thinking about that, you know, what can you do as someone from this

community to make it better and start—started thinking in those terms and what was my community and why was it important?

01:02:09:10

KAREEM ABDUL JABBAR:

You know, until you understand those issues, you don't really know what to do. So I really think that summer helped me, and after Dr. King spoke to all the participants in the program, you know, he did a little press conference and I was in a journalism workshop, so I got to go with the journalists to interview him and I was able to ask him a question and I spoke to him and didn't realize how important that was in my life, you know, but over the years it's been a connection that has been more and more important to me.

### **Gordon Parks' photography**

01:02:52:08

KAREEM ABDUL JABBAR:

I remember in *Life Magazine* there was a shot he did of a gang member, and I was trying to figure what that was all about. There was a book by Claude Brown, *Man-Child in the Promised Land* and I think Gordon did some photography in association with that book.

01:03:17:20

KAREEM ABDUL JABBAR:

Gordon's photography really captures the essence of the community. You know, it depicts the people in Harlem where they live in real terms, you know, not... you know, distorted terms, you know, just showed them coping with what they had to deal with.

01:03:39:11

KAREEM ABDUL JABBAR:

I think Gordon's ability to state things simply and with the reality of it really, that was his strength.

### **Muhammad Ali**

01:03:59:11

KAREEM ABDUL JABBAR:

I met Muhammad Ali when I was a freshman at UCLA, I was 19. He was on Hollywood Boulevard doing magic tricks just for people walking by, you know. I was on Hollywood—I had some friends that lived up there, and we were on Hollywood Boulevard and we saw him. I said, "Hey wait, that's Muhammad Ali." I mean, he was just—he enjoyed just appearing and doing stuff like that. And then about a week or two after that I saw him at a party and we talked and started a friendship.

01:04:33:06

KAREEM ABDUL JABBAR:

I always thought that he was incredible just because of how he dealt with Sonny Liston. You know, I was in high school when he, you know, he had the fights with Sonny Liston and you know, the time that he went to Sonny Liston's camp and had Sonny chasing him around. It was like he was amazing, you know, I was in love with him at that point, you know, I just thought the world of him. And he was like that in person, you know, he was for real. He was very genuine and—but then like the year of me meeting him that was Spring of 1966. Spring of 1967 we did the Cleveland Summit.

01:05:14:14

KAREEM ABDUL JABBAR:

The guys that were there just wanted to understand where he was coming from, and it was very obvious to me at least he was very comfortable in his confrontation with the federal government and he believed in what—he—what he said his position was, he believed in it. And he was gonna—live or die, he was going to take that path.

01:05:42:03

KAREEM ABDUL JABBAR:

I was particularly honored to be invited to just observe, you know, and that's all I was doing. I guess, you know, we had just won the NCAA tournament so I guess my prominence as far as people who were into basketball realized who I was, so maybe that gave me a little bit of cache to be invited to it. But I was very happy to go, you know. I'd known Bill—I've known Bill Russell since I

was 14 years old and you know, I felt comfortable around him and I really understood where he was coming from with regard to civil rights.

01:06:26:01

KAREEM ABDUL JABBAR:

Well, he just said, "I'm not going over to Vietnam to fight the Vietcong. The people that I feel most threatened by live in the United States." That was his statement. He said the people that I have the most issues with are living in the United States and I'm gonna deal with it here.

01:06:48:06

KAREEM ABDUL JABBAR:

He was always very genuine; he told it like it was. He didn't waste any time, didn't waste any words. And I think the clearest that he said, "Ain't no Vietcong ever called me nigger." Wow. That crystalized it for all Black Americans. Why are we going over there to fight them when the people that oppress us live in America and don't think that we're human? So you know, he was able to make it very clear immediately.

01:07:23:01

KAREEM ABDUL JABBAR:

People that took risks kind of made Gordon probably squeamish. People who were too confrontational or, you know, not confrontational enough. I mean, there's a fine line there and you know, everybody has their own idea of what

that is. So I'm sure Gordon must have gone through it with Ali because he was all over the place at times, you know?

01:07:46:23

KAREEM ABDUL JABBAR:

At the time that Muhammad Ali was opposing the civil—the Vietnamese war, he was very controversial, and most White Americans thought that he was racist and anti-American, and he really surprised people when he said that he was taking a stand for himself and for all Americans who did not support the war and that probably blew a lot of peoples minds.

01:08:20:22

KAREEM ABDUL JABBAR:

I think Gordon's photographs really showed Black life with all the nuance and you know, I think that's what Gordon gave us, you know. He gave us the whole picture, you know, with nuance and well, that's very important. You know, his photographs will live because of that.

### **Boycotting the Olympics**

01:08:53:12

KAREEM ABDUL JABBAR:

I feel that I had the courage to take a stand because of the examples that I had seen and that would have to include, you know, uh what I had learned about

Jessie Owens, Jackie Robinson, Bill Russell; it made it easy for me to do that. I stood on their shoulders, I followed their example.

01:09:14:15

KAREEM ABDUL JABBAR:

You know, I think back to like how I couldn't understand why they killed Emmett Till. I was eight years old when Emmett Till was murdered, and I did not—I—what—what was that all about? I could not understand it. And finally as it became clearer to me, I figured out what I wanted to do about it. And I think one of the people that had a profound effect on myself and most Black Americans was James Baldwin. *The Fire Next Time*, you know, I read that, I was 13 years old. It was profound because all that confusion and uncertainty about what was happening and why, James just wrote it out in plain English. It enabled me to orient myself and figure out what I wanted to do.

## **Emmett Till**

01:10:16:00

KAREEM ABDUL JABBAR:

I saw Emmett Till's photograph in *Jet Magazine*. I'll never forget it and—and the thing that gets me, just recently you got people going down there taking shots at the Emmett Till memorial where they threw him in the river. And you know, these are just—these actions are done by people who just want to uh



twist the knife, you know. They take pleasure in twisting the knife, and they don't know how pathetic they are.

### **Civil Rights Movement photographs**

01:11:02:10

KAREEM ABDUL JABBAR:

Some of them I get—I still get very emotional. The photograph of the um... marchers crossing the Edmund Pettus Bridge and right when they see the police officers coming down to beat on them, that one, oh man. And you know, I've spoken to John Lewis; I've had that privilege. And he just said he had an apple in one pocket and his Bible in the other and he just braced himself. That kind of courage is incredible.

### **Comparison to Black Lives Matter photographs**

01:11:55:07

KAREEM ABDUL JABBAR:

They're a direct result of the Civil Rights Movement, they're an extension of it. It's just what we have now in terms of images and ideas about what's going on that the—starting back basically when at the end of World War II when Black Americans figured that they could do it.

**Dealing with racism scars**

01:12:23:08

KAREEM ABDUL JABBAR:

Well, I think it's just having to deal with all of these really tough memories. I mean some of those photographs... Gordon got it. He absolutely got it.

**Being leaders**

01:12:47:12

KAREEM ABDUL JABBAR:

I think everybody contributes to the—to the effort however they see fit. I think that's what happens. I remember when I went to the memorial for Muhammad Ali and all the people that were there, that brought back all these memories. Oh my goodness. And Howard Bingham was still alive and you know, it just—the power and urgency of that movement, we can't forget that because it's—we need it.

**The Cleveland Summit**

01:13:43:22

KAREEM ABDUL JABBAR:

Well, when I got to the Cleveland Summit, I was just really—it was thrilling to see a Black mayor coordinating with Black men that had some kind of economic power and social power, you know, Black athletes. This wasn't just another timid effort; it had some teeth in it. That's what appealed to me I mean, these were people that a lot of people respected and who are used to getting things done, and my hopes were that the, you know, the community would gel around that.

01:14:30:04

KAREEM ABDUL JABBAR:

I always thought Jim Brown was kind of a progressive guy. He was always talking about the next step. You know, he said, "I can't play pro football forever, I'm gonna be an actor." And you know, he wasn't talking about just fading into the background. He wanted—he saw himself as being worthy and capable of anything and you know, that type of confidence is contagious, so I—I have a lot of respect of him—for him for that reason. Bill Russell was a lot quieter on those subjects, you know, so you had a lot of different viewpoints. But they all helped encourage Black people to have the will to stand up.

01:15:18:02

KAREEM ABDUL JABBAR:

There were some Black athletes who felt that we were not going to achieve anything by rocking the boat. But I thought the hypocrisy of it all really demanded that somebody make a statement about the Olympics because the

type of racial harmony that the United States wanted to project in the Olympics didn't exist in the country. You know, people were dying; Dr. King had just been assassinated. The fact that Dr. King had just been assassinated and you have Avery Brundage still the chairman of the Olympic committee. Avery Brundage is a guy that didn't want Jews to compete in the Olympics in 1936 because it would annoy Hitler, and I wasn't gonna go and you know, participate in the Olympics where he was in charge. I wasn't gonna do that.

**Colin Kaepernick**

01:16:13:00

KAREEM ABDUL JABBAR:

Colin Kaepernick, I think, is the person that they tried to scapegoat and he didn't buy into it and I thank you Colin, thank you for your courage and thank you for your persistence. I talked to Colin. You know, I know Dr. Ed Woods, he was working with the 49ers and he had a chance to talk to Colin. And Colin understood what he was doing and understood what it would cost him, but it was important to him and I'm glad to see that—I hope that he gets a shot and gets a chance to play a couple more years. He's a talented athlete, he deserves a shot.

***Shaft***

01:16:57:16

KAREEM ABDUL JABBAR:

It was still interesting seeing a Black man portrayed as a private eye doing those kinds of things and in that sense it was intriguing and interesting. I—it was very entertaining in that sense.

01:17:12:23

KAREEM ABDUL JABBAR:

He had some authority, had some respect, commanded respect. I think that's really what the assertion was all about. And now they have—there's a new *Shaft* movie with Samuel L. Jackson. It's kind of hard, you know, because that's not the reality of the Black community. But the whole thing of pimps and drug dealers and *Superfly*, you know, it's a world that doesn't really exist. But I guess that satisfied people's idea of what the Black community should be about. That's kind of hard to figure out.

01:17:58:17

KAREEM ABDUL JABBAR:

I think Gordon's photography gave us a sense of perspective. And if you look at it and date it, you see the evolution of the Civil Rights Movement and Black Americans finally becoming involved in the political process and you know, different barometers of success. I think, you know, if you look at his photographs, it's a great chronological record of just what the 20th century was about for Black Americans.

***Life Magazine***

01:18:44:11

KAREEM ABDUL JABBAR:

I think Gordon's photographs really made America realize that Black Americans have been part of the American experience from day one. Even if they don't want to acknowledge it, there we are, there we've been; here are the photographs. I think that— that chronological depiction of our participation really is important, and Gordon really saw to it that we got the right type of attention, you know, that they showed us then as we really are.

**Meeting Gordon Parks**

01:19:33:10

KAREEM ABDUL JABBAR:

Yeah, I met him in a—they had a—they did a movie about a Black tank battalion, and they debuted it in Lincoln Center and I knew—one of my dad's friends was in that unit. They liberated Dachau; they liberated Gunskirchen and Mauthausen death camps and really didn't get any recognition, so I was very interested in the story. So that's when I met Gordon, he was there. Lena Horn was there, there's a whole lot of people that were very prominent in the Black effort during World War II, a lot of them were still there, so it was very—very moving evening for me.

01:20:20:00

KAREEM ABDUL JABBAR:

Gordon was everything that I expected. You know, I knew who he was. He—the pictures he took of Adam Clayton Powell Jr., all those things. I wanted to talk to him about all that stuff, but it was such a busy evening, I didn't get a chance to, but it was nice meeting him.

### **Favorite Gordon Parks photographs**

01:20:48:12

KAREEM ABDUL JABBAR:

The ones that he took in various places—the ones on 125th Street I always—you know, 'cause you know, going on—right. We moved from Harlem, but just out to the edge of Harlem. Just up a mile north of Harlem, I lived in Northern Inwood. I don't know if people are familiar with Manhattan, alright. So I—as a kid, I had to go to Harlem and get my haircut. I had to go to Harlem—my mom when she shopped, she would go down to Harlem, you know. So I was always going in and out of Harlem and so I'd see images of 125th Street, I just feel at home.

01:21:30:15

KAREEM ABDUL JABBAR:

I think of my mom's friends that we would visit or accidentally run into on 125th Street. It was just a whole experience that was like going to the middle of the city. Downtown, you know, was for White folks, but 125th Street was ours, you know. And so Gordon's photographs of that area, that you know, that always is gonna make my heart beat faster, you know.

## Harlem

01:22:07:10

KAREEM ABDUL JABBAR:

Harlem wasn't utopia, but in the New York metropolitan area you could get a job and you know, that's what happened. But it wasn't heaven but-- for example, Louis Armstrong comes to New York and plays a writer from *The Herald Tribune*. I think heard him and said, "There's some really great trumpet player up in Harlem." And it's that type of thing where all of a sudden, Harlem represented some place where Black people could be acknowledged and appreciated for real things and important things, not just the stereotype image of Black Americans.

01:22:58:00

KAREEM ABDUL JABBAR:

I mean, Harlem gave Black Americans a chance to be appreciated like that. I think that was the importance of it. My family represents both ends of the great migration. My grandfather came to New York in 1917 from the West



Indies and my mom came to New York 1939 or '40 to work as a domestic-- You know, that's the beginning and end of the two ends of the great migration. And my dad met my mom and that was that. But Harlem represented a place where you might be able to find an opportunity where it wasn't just closed the way the South was, and I think that's the importance of Harlem.

01:23:46:23

KAREEM ABDUL JABBAR:

Gordon showed Black people succeeding. Josephine Baker, Duke Ellington, Louis Armstrong, he got all of the—Bill Robinson, who loved the Harlem community, built parks, did stuff. Bill Robinson gave Jackie Robinson a Cadillac after he was Rookie of the Year. I mean, just incredible stuff used to happen in Harlem. The fight between Joe Lewis and Max Schmeling, I mean just Harlem took part in some really fantastic moments.

01:24:24:18

KAREEM ABDUL JABBAR:

One that I remember, the photographs he got—they told—Castro had to come to the United Nations. The FBI told him, alright, you have to live—you have—you can't—you can stay in Manhattan. You can't stay any place other than Manhattan. So, Castro stays at the Hotel Theresa on 125th Street, and you know, Gordon got pictures, you know, and I just remembered that.

Gordon was in tune, he knew what was going on, you know, and he was always there.

01:24:55:19

KAREEM ABDUL JABBAR:

The Hotel Theresa in New York and the Dunbar Hotel here in Los Angeles. That's where all the famous Black people--they had to stay in one of those places. They traveled to those two cities because there weren't a lot of hotels that would accept Black patrons.

## **Basketball**

01:25:23:09

KAREEM ABDUL JABBAR:

Basketball definitely was something that allowed me to make a statement that I could be excellent and successful, and that I had some dignity and pride, and I hoped that it would be acknowledged and I tried to conduct myself in a way where it would be acknowledged and respected.

01:25:48:00

KAREEM ABDUL JABBAR:

Yeah, and my writing. There's a whole lot more to that, you know, but when you think about all the things that we didn't have back then when Gordon

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first started, it's amazing what, you know, Black Americans have achieved, but you know, we still have a lot of—a lot to do.

01:26:09:12

KAREEM ABDUL JABBAR:

I think that um... Some of the victories, you know, people understand now that we are human beings and we deserve some acknowledgment of our humanity, that's starting to get through to people now, and that wasn't always the case so gotta thank Gordon for that, yeah.

END TC:01:26:32:11