

Interview with **Kareem Abdul-Jabbar**

Date: March 3, 1989

Interviewer: Jackie Shearer

Camera Rolls: 2103

Sound Rolls: 247

Team: B

Interview gathered as part of *Eyes on the Prize II: America at the Racial Crossroads, 1965-mid 1980s*. Produced by Blackside, Inc. Housed at the Washington University Film and Media Archive, Henry Hampton Collection.

### **Preferred Citation**

Interview with Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, conducted by Blackside, Inc. on March 3, 1989 for *Eyes on the Prize II: America at the Racial Crossroads, 1965-mid 1980s*. Washington University Libraries, Film and Media Archive, Henry Hampton Collection.

**Note:** These transcripts contain material that did not appear in the final program. Only text appearing in ***bold italics*** was used in the final version of *Eyes on the Prize II*.

[camera roll #2103]

[sound roll #247]

00:00:12:00

Camera crew member #1:

And marker.

[slate]

00:00:22:00

Interviewer:

How old were you when you first heard of Cassius Clay, and what did you and your friends think about him?

00:00:29:00

Kareem Abdul-Jabbar:

I was fourteen or fifteen years old. I was in high school. Well, actually, jeez, I was in grade school when he won the, the Olympic gold medal, and I became aware of him at that point, and his ability to verbalize. I thought that was kinda interesting, and I started following his career at that point.

00:00:53:00

Interviewer:

Now, when, after the Liston fight, Clay announced that he was a member of the Nation of Islam. I'm curious about what you and the kids that you were coming up with thought about that.

Kareem Abdul-Jabbar:

Well, I thought it was a, a bold stand. I didn't really expect anything like that to happen. I just thought he was a, a colorful guy, and then he seemed to have very serious underpinnings that nobody was aware of.

Interviewer:

OK. Let me have that again, but if you could have in your response something about, when he announced that he was—OK?

Camera crew member #1:

[coughs]

Kareem Abdul-Jabbar:

OK. When Cassius Clay announced that he was actually Muhammad Ali and had joined the Nation of Islam, I was—

Camera crew member #1:

Excuse me. Can I, let's have you start again. OK.

00:01:41:00

Kareem Abdul-Jabbar:

When Cassius Clay changed his name to Muhammad Ali and announced his joining the Nation of Islam, I was surprised. I thought that he was just a colorful character, and that seemed to show that he some serious underpinnings beneath all of the, the talk and exterior.

00:01:58:00

Interviewer:

And what about his name change? Did that have any particular meaning to you? Did you understand what that was about?

00:02:03:00

Kareem Abdul-Jabbar:

Only on the surface. I really, you know, when, when he changed his name I, I really didn't have a firm grasp of what the Nation of Islam was about and those types of things. I knew that they had some political leanings and were trying to organize people, but I didn't know exactly what it was about.

00:02:21:00

Interviewer:

But since you grew up on the streets of New York, you must've seen other people from the Nation of Islam around. So, when the media and, and a lot of Americans were acting as though this were a big negative problem, what, what was your feeling?

[background discussion]

00:02:37:00

Kareem Abdul-Jabbar:

Well, the, the media reaction really didn't affect me that much. By the time that he had changed his name, I, by that time I knew a little bit about what the Nation of Islam was about, as I went through high school. But early on, I really didn't understand what it was all about, so it was kind of a mystery to me. I, I enjoyed boxing so much that it, it really didn't bother me one way or the other.

00:03:04:00

Interviewer:

OK. Now, let's go forward in time. You're at UCLA and [background discussion] Muhammad Ali announces his opposition to the war in Vietnam. I'm wondering what you thought of it at that time.

00:03:18:00

Kareem Abdul-Jabbar:

Well, when Ali announced his refusal to accept the draft, I, I thought it was a very brave stand. I had seen a number of people taking that stand, 'cause while I was at UCLA the draft [background discussion] and a lot of issues around the Vietnam War became very prominent in everybody's lives. [background discussion] People were—had to really seriously think

about what it meant to, to be in the armed services and go fight in Vietnam. So, I, I knew it was a political stand. I knew [background discussion] he would take a lotta heat for it.

00:03:51:00

Interviewer:

OK. Now, the year after that you were part of a group of prominent Black athletes who met with Ali. Do you remember that meeting? It was in June '67.

Kareem Abdul-Jabbar:

Yes, I do.

Interviewer:

Can you go back to that meeting and tell me why, why you all decided to call it? How did you first get drawn into the group?

00:04:11:00

Kareem Abdul-Jabbar:

Well, when the meeting to help Ali was called back in 1967, I was a sophomore at UCLA and I'd gotten to know Jim Brown while I was out here in Los Angeles and he felt that I should be a part of the group, just mainly to represent young people, I guess. And being a fan of, of Ali's, I was very happy to, to lend my support. I didn't know what we could do to help him, but I wanted to be involved.

00:04:45:00

Interviewer:

And describe what happened in the meeting.

00:04:48:00

Kareem Abdul-Jabbar:

Well, at the meeting we just basically tried to see what we could do to show support and to help Ali deal with the situation. But aside from legal remedies, there, there was really very little that we as ordinary citizens could do to help him beyond just showing our support.

00:05:13:00

Interviewer:

Did any in the group question the, the extreme nature of his decision? I mean, wa-was there any attempt to sort of pull him back to maybe a more middle-of-the-road kind of stand?

00:05:25:00

Kareem Abdul-Jabbar:

I think when we had that meeting, the more pragmatic people would have advised him to accept it and to just play along with the system, but Ali would have none of that. He knew it was wrong. He knew that he would be used as an example of American support for the war, and because of that, because of the nature of, of the propaganda war that was going on here in this country, he refused to, to be any part of it.

00:06:00:00

Interviewer:

Now, you say that, that you like boxing [background discussion] and you must've admired him as a fighter. Did you feel that he was sacrificing his career? How did you feel about what he was doing?

00:06:11:00

Kareem Abdul-Jabbar:

I definitely thought that Ali was gonna hurt his career and have to start dealing with harassment from the, from the federal government because they were gonna use this case as an example, they were gonna make an example of him. They had tried, through sport, to try to make an example of him, and because of his talent and his courage, they couldn't get him to lose in the ring, so they had to defeat him in the courts and use the courts as, as a means to make him get in line.

00:06:49:00

Interviewer:

And did this meeting have any impact on you? [background discussion] Did, did Ali's presence and, and his position have any effect on you?

00:06:56:00

Kareem Abdul-Jabbar:

Well, I was just happy to meet Ali, I, you know, just as, person-to-person. And it was nice meeting the other Black athletes and having some type of solidarity with them. The meeting

really was kind of futile in that it really, we, we really couldn't do anything, but we let Black people around the country know that we supported Ali. I think by that time Black Americans understood that they were, their present, their presence in Vietnam was [background discussion] highly disproportionate to their percentage of the American population and that the front-line casualties [background discussion continues] were being absorbed by Black Americans in, in much greater numbers than they should have. And this, this impact was, you know, obvious to everybody and I think this kinda heightened that.

00:08:01:00

Interviewer:

Now, as you think back on—

00:08:02:00

Camera crew member #1:

We're getting some of the locker room. Can I cut?

00:08:05:00

Interviewer:

Cut.

[cut]

00:08:06

Camera crew member #1:

Marker.

[slate]

[background discussion]

Interviewer:

OK?

Camera crew member #1:

Yeah.

00:08:18:00

Interviewer:

OK. So, thinking back on that meeting, do you remember any specific words that Ali said? Any, any exchange, any conversation?

00:08:27:00

Kareem Abdul-Jabbar:

Not really. I, I, I don't remember too much what was said. We had a press conference, and the press conference was just a pretty straightforward deal where we just announced our support for him, but I don't remember anything specific that, that was said.

00:08:43:00

Interviewer:

OK. Now, I want you to remember that we're back in the '60s and the whole notion of Black identity was a lot newer, and you were a lot younger. And I want you to think back on what impact Ali as, as a Black man and as an athlete and the combination of the two had on you.

00:09:04:00

Kareem Abdul-Jabbar:

Well, I think Ali's impact on, on young people was, was very formidable. I, I remember when I was in high school the teachers at my high school didn't like him because he was so anti-establishment and he kind of thumbed his nose at authority and got away with it, and they didn't like that at all. The fact that he was proud to be a, a Black man and that he was—had so much talent and could enjoy it in a way that was not seen to be—it didn't have the dignity that they assumed that it should have. I think that was something that really made certain people love him and made other people think that he was, he was dangerous. And, but for those very reasons that, that's why I enjoyed him.

00:09:54:00

Interviewer:

OK. Thank you. Cut.

[beep]

Interviewer:

I think we have it. Do you—

Camera crew member #1:

That was very nice.

[cut]

[end of interview]

00:10:02:00

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