

00:00:00	Music	Transition	Gentle, trilling music with a steady drumbeat plays under the dialogue.
00:00:01	Promo	Promo	<b>Speaker:</b> <i>Bullseye with Jesse Thorn</i> is a production of <a href="http://MaximumFun.org">MaximumFun.org</a> and is distributed by NPR.
00:00:12	Music	Transition	<i>[Music fades out.]</i> “Huddle Formation” from the album <i>Thunder, Lightning, Strike</i> by The Go! Team. A fast, upbeat, peppy song. Music plays as Jesse speaks, then fades out.
00:00:21	Jesse Thorn	Host	It’s <i>Bullseye</i> . I’m Jesse Thorn. Kareem Abdul-Jabbar is my guest this week. He is, of course, one of the greatest basketball players of all time, a Hall of Famer, a 6-time MVP, a 19-time All Star. The master of the skyhook.
00:00:37	Sound Effect	Transition	Music swells and fades.
00:00:38	Clip	Clip	<i>[The crowd roars with cheers.]</i>
00:00:43	Sound Effect	Transition	<b>Announcer:</b> ... sends it to Kareem. Skyhook up—in! <i>[Shouting.]</i> What!?! Lakers win! Music swells and fades.
00:00:44	Jesse	Host	A key part of the legendary showtime era Lakers and an NBA veteran who, believe it or not, made one three-point shot in his entire career.
00:00:54	Sound Effect	Transition	Music swells and fades.
00:00:55	Clip	Clip	<i>[Muffled sounds of the crowd.]</i>
			<b>Speaker 1:</b> Two to three pointer!
			<b>Speaker 2:</b> Oooh! He’s going to!
			<b>Speaker 1:</b> Kareem, it’s THREEEEE! There it gooooes! That’s the first one of his life! Did they count it three?
			<b>Speaker 2:</b> I didn’t see the official.
00:01:03	Sound Effect	Transition	<b>Speaker 1:</b> I didn’t either. Music swells and fades.
00:01:04	Jesse	Host	Since retiring from basketball, Abdul-Jabbar has shown he has talent and skill far outside the paint. He’s written books, columns. He even worked as a writer for <i>Veronica Mars</i> . He’s acted on screen opposite Bruce Li and Leslie Nielsen. In short, he is a very interesting guy. Lately, Kareem Abdul-Jabbar has been lending his voice on the documentary front. Last year, he narrated a film on the History Channel called <i>Black Patriots: Heroes of the Revolution</i> , which earned him an Emmy nomination. This year, he’s back with another History Channel doc— <i>Fight the Power: The Movements that Changed America</i> . It just premiered. Here’s a bit of it. In this clip, Abdul-Jabbar talks about his memory of the lynching of Emmett Till.
00:01:49	Sound Effect	Transition	Music swells and fades.
00:01:50	Clip	Clip	<b>Music:</b> Pensive, quiet music.

**Kareem Abdul-Jabbar (*Fight the Power*):** I'd seen so many examples of violence against, you know, Black people. It was not a shock. I was eight years old when Emmett Till got murdered. And I couldn't understand why that happened. I asked my parents; they didn't have the words to explain it to me. So, from that point forward, I was just looking for the answers. Why are people who look like me at risk in America? What did we do? The protests over the George Floyd killing has forced us to deal with a real problem that needs to be corrected. And I think that urgency really will serve us in a positive way.

00:02:36	Sound Effect	Transition	Music swells and fades.
00:02:37	Jesse	Host	Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, welcome to <i>Bullseye</i> . I'm so happy to have you on the show.
00:02:40	Kareem Abdul-Jabbar	Guest	Well, it's nice to talk to you.
00:02:42	Jesse	Host	I like your UCLA hat, there. I'm glad that you fly the colors all these years later.
			<i>[They chuckle and Kareem agrees.]</i>
00:02:51	Kareem	Guest	It's a—it's a lifelong commitment, I suppose. It can be! You know, especially if you—if you took it seriously. So. I kind of did. So. <i>[Chuckles.]</i>
00:03:00	Jesse	Host	I find myself wondering—it was something that I hadn't thought about before I was preparing to interview you. But if you're athletic and you're as tall as you are—like, every force in your life is pushing you towards playing basketball. And I wonder if you ever, as a kid or as an adolescent or even when you were a young adult, thought seriously, "I'm going to do something else with my life."
00:03:30	Kareem	Guest	Well, you know, when I started athletics, I wanted to play baseball. I was a Brooklyn Dodgers fan. <i>[Chuckles.]</i> So—but, you know, basketball—everything that I did with basketball just was—seemed to come easier. Basketball never was too big of a challenge. So, you know, I stuck with that. But my first love was baseball, yeah.
00:03:53	Jesse	Host	Did you ever think about not being a professional athlete? I mean, like as a career goal?
00:03:57	Kareem	Guest	Yeah. I thought maybe I would teach history or something like that. But by the time I was in tenth grade, basketball was paying bills and opening up opportunities. So. I stuck with that.
00:04:15	Jesse	Host	How did you decide to go to UCLA?
00:04:19	Kareem	Guest	Well, my junior and senior year in high school, UCLA won the NC2A tournament. And they didn't have real big teams. You know, they had John Wooden's very first NC2A championship team. The tallest guy on the starting team was 6'6". So, it wasn't about height. It was about other things. And I thought I had those skills... pretty much nailed down and I figured that I should play for Coach Wooden. And I never regretted it.
00:04:52	Jesse	Host	When you got to college, the world was kind of turning upside-down and it was happening in places like UCLA. My father was a couple years older than you and went to UC Berkeley and it took me years to understand. And he was in the service right out of high school, so he was in college at a similar time to you. It took me years to understand how much was going on <i>[chuckles]</i> on his campus, when he was going to college. Like, I was doing improv when I was

in college. *[Laughs.]* And, you know, he was organizing. You know what I mean? And it wasn't just that, you know, the civil rights movement was happening. You know, he was involved in the—in the veteran's anti-war movement. His best friend was involved in the independent living movement. You know. All these things were happening at once.

Was that something that you had already seen when you were a teenager living in New York and felt comfortable with? Or was it something that turned your world upside-down as it was, you know, the rest of the world at the time?

00:06:02	Kareem	Guest	Well, I think the issue was that it got more and more intense as the '60s went on. You know? It wasn't too bad in '64, but by 1967 it was very intense and, you know, people in the streets. Then you had the democratic convention of 1968, Tet Offensive. And I don't know how we survived 1968. Look at all that happened.
00:06:33	Jesse	Host	You had been raised a catholic. Were you a faithful catholic?
00:06:38	Kareem	Guest	No, I got tired of it when I realized the role that the catholic church played in the slave trade. So, you know, I gave that up pretty quickly. And you know, I found that Islam made a lot of sense to me. I still believed in one supreme being and Islam seemed to make sense.
00:06:58	Jesse	Host	I mean, when you were going to church as a kid, were you onboard? Like, did you—
00:07:03	Kareem	Guest	Yeah. You know, the nuns told you so and so and so, you better believe it. You know? <i>[Laughs.]</i> That's what it was about. And then, you know, going to high school you start to see how religion really doesn't play a big factor in people's lives. You know. Many kids see that during their high school years and become cynical.
00:07:29	Jesse	Host	Did you feel cynical?
00:07:31	Kareem	Guest	Of course. You know, because the things that make for a moral life make you treat people like they're human beings and in America, that often depended on the color of your skin. So, you know, there was something that wasn't adding up there.
00:07:48	Jesse	Host	Were there particular moments when that not adding up became very clear to you? Or was it mostly just an accretion of pains?
00:08:00	Kareem	Guest	Well, no, there are a lot of moments where it was very obvious. And then there was, you know, the daily grind. I mean, just the daily insults, the expectation that you do not—you do not see yourself in the same position as your other fellow citizens who have a different color of skin. I mean, that's something that wears on you.
00:08:26	Jesse	Host	That must be particularly true when there is an expectation that you are going to go out and perform for everybody. That, you know, you're the—you're the—you were the star of your teams when you were in high school as well. And like, you can't not show up for the game. You know? And you have to look at all those people in the stand and think, "Which of these people—which of these people cares about me as a human being? And which of them sees me as a—you know—a subject?"
00:09:00	Kareem	Guest	Yeah, I had to deal with that a lot. And Coach Wooden started to notice a few things about the way I was treated. And it really helped him understand what Black Americans have to deal with. I don't think, prior to coaching me, that he got it as to know how bad it could be. So, that's something he often spoke to me about throughout our friendship.
00:09:27	Jesse	Host	What's something in particular that he talked to you about?

00:09:32 Kareem Guest Well, just that he didn't—he did not believe in bigotry or anything like that. Of course, Wooden played professional basketball and for a team in Indianapolis. And he talked to me—one time he went to Chicago. They played the Globetrotters in Chicago and he said that he was gonna go to the train station and get back home to Indianapolis after the game, but they had it at the Chicago Savoy. He said the food was fantastic and they had Cab Calloway's band, so he and his wife had to stay *[chuckles]* 'til 3AM and they got home a day late, but they had a wonderful time. You know, Coach Wooden was like that. You know. He watched Negro League baseball and was friends with some of the guys on the teams.

He was that kind of guy. And he learned a lot just watching what I had to deal with. There'd be times when, you know, I'd sign autographs after a game or on my way to the bus so we could go to the hotel, and it was fine as long as I was signing autographs. And then when I had to get on the bus, some of the parents would start using the 'N' word and saying that I was uppity. But no, I was getting on the bus like I was supposed to. Things like that really got through to him and made him a lot more aware of what the civil rights movement was all about.

00:11:05 Jesse Host And you also bear the burden of, you know—with somebody like Coach John Wooden, one of the most legendary coaches in basketball history for whom you played at UCLA—even a person of good will needs your help to understand your experience in an authentic way. Right? Like that's a guy who stayed late to see Cab Calloway, but that doesn't necessarily mean that he gets it.

00:11:31 Kareem Guest No. Well, he got it after a while. You know. He—let's see. The first time it started to get through to him had to do—when I was a freshman. It was after the season. He took me out to dinner one night, 'cause he just wanted to get to know me and, you know, figure out who I was. And we went to a restaurant and had a nice dinner and on our way out, we were waiting for our car to be brought up and there was an elderly lady—a grey-haired, elderly lady came up to Coach Wooden and said, "Excuse me. How tall is he?" And Coach Wooden told her how tall I was. And then she—using the 'N' word, she said, "I've never seen one that tall." And then walked away.

And it really shocked Coach Wooden. And he was like, "What?" And it really affected me. You know. I was stung by it. It was a slap in the face. And Coach Wooden wanted to somehow make it not be as bad as it was. And he—you know, he was trying to find words to deal with it and he couldn't, and it was ugly. And I think that really was the beginning of him getting a better insight into the lives of Black Americans.

00:12:50 Jesse Host I think to me the most sickening part of that story, in a way, is that this person could only address you through a White intermediary.

00:13:06 Kareem Guest Yeah. She wouldn't talk to me. You know what I'm saying? *[Chuckling.]* Too dangerous.

00:13:13 Jesse Host Yeah, well I mean it would involve acknowledging your humanity.

*[Kareem agrees.]*

Like it would, again, make you less than—make you more than a subject. You know what I mean?

*[Kareem agrees.]*

00:13:33	Kareem	Guest	So, I just turned 40 years old. I remember you playing for the Lakers very vividly. You were in your 40s by then. That was right before I retired.
00:13:35	Jesse	Host	<i>[They chuckle.]</i> Yeah, it was! I mean, I remember when you retired. And I wonder why you chose to play as long as you chose to play? You—at the—you know, 10 years in—or 12 years in or 14 years in—you could have retired and, you know, you still would have been one of the greatest basketball players of all time. You still would have, you know, been able to make a great living for the rest of your life. So on and so forth. So... what drew you back every year?
00:14:09	Kareem	Guest	Well, for me, I enjoyed the challenge of trying to be the best center in the NBA. You know? And I—that's what I shot for every year. And it enabled me to be very pertinent to my team and they needed me to be able to make that kind of money into your 40s is a good thing. You know? It enables you to retire and not have to actually have any serious worries, because hopefully if you saved your money and paid your taxes and invested wisely, you don't have anything to worry about.
00:14:48	Jesse	Host	There's a point in one's life—and even in your life—where there's no way that you can be the best center in the NBA anymore.
			<i>[Kareem affirms.]</i>
00:15:12	Kareem	Guest	I mean, when you were 38 or 39 you were still a great player, but it's tough for a 39-year-old to be the best player in the NBA. You played 'til you were 42, I think. Yeah. And we won world championships when I was 40 and 41. We went back-to-back. And almost did a threeppeat, but in my last year, for the playoffs, our starting guards—Magic Johnson and Byron Scott—were hurt. So, we couldn't be healthy in the finals, and we got swept. But it was worth it. You know? It was nice to go out like that.
00:15:40	Jesse	Host	Did you enjoy being an elder statesman, the last few years of your career?
00:15:47	Kareem	Guest	I didn't like thinking of myself in those terms, but you know, I had to accept it. I had to—
			<i>[They chuckle.]</i>
00:15:55	Jesse	Host	It was okay. I mean, one of the things about it is I feel like you've always had the temperament of an elder statesman. I was watching an interview that you—a video interview with the AP that you did sitting the Bucks Arena in Milwaukee in—I think it was 1974 or something like that. And I thought, "Well, this man is nothing if not statesmanlike. Like, this is not—I don't know if I would rely on him to go into the clubhouse and get everyone pumped."
00:16:20	Sound Effect	Transition	Music swells and fades.
00:16:21	Clip	Clip	<i>[In the background, the sound of balls bouncing and a small crowd talking.]</i>

**Interviewer:** You have an interesting philosophy. I wonder if you would share that with us.

**Kareem:** Well, exactly—you're gonna have to be a little bit more specific.

**Interviewer:** Ooh, I understand that—for example, that you're a very private person. You enjoy your privacy.

**Kareem:** Yeah, I do. I find—well, actually, it's really necessary because—you know—I spend all my professional life in the public and... more or less I've become like public property. And kind of need to—some time to yourself just to keep things in perspective. Music swells and fades.

00:17:01 Sound Effect Transition

00:17:02 Jesse Host

You—*[chuckling]* you had the temperament of a—of a thoughtful, middle-aged man as a—as a 26-year-old or whatever it was, sitting on that bench with a man putting a microphone in your face.

00:17:12 Kareem Guest

Well, you know, I—on the court, you can do it with your actions and, you know, people don't have to listen to your words. They can see what you're doing and how you're doing it and they wanna contribute. And that, you know—that's a type of leadership. And you have emotional leaders. You know, like—someone like Magic Johnson or Chris Paul. You know? So, when you get leadership from so many sources like that, you have a better team.

00:17:41 Jesse Host

What did you learn from Magic Johnson when he joined the team as a 6'9" or 6'10" point guard who had been this college phenomenon and, you know, you by then were—you were already well into your career. You were even well into your Lakers career.

00:18:03 Kareem Guest

What did you learn from seeing him play and playing with him? Well, I think it's best exemplified in the very first regular season game we had. We played the Clippers in San Diego. And we won the game because I hit a—hit a hook shot at the—at the buzzer, which gave us the win. And this was Magic's first regular season win and he went crazy. He—you know, he's jumping on me and—Music swells and fades.

00:18:27 Sound Effect Transition

00:18:28 Clip Clip

*[The roar of the crowd.]*

**Speaker:** And Magic Johnson is out there celebrating like they just won the NCAA championship! *[Inaudible]* is out there, we've got Magic Man and Kareem Abdul-Jabbar—Abdul-Jabbar just threw in a tremendous hook shot!

00:18:41 Sound Effect Transition

Music swells and fades.

00:18:42 Kareem Guest

—hugging me and screaming and everything and I was like, "Wow." So, we get in the locker room and go over to Magic and, you know, I say, "Listen, Magic, we got—you got 81 more games, man. If we're at this type of emotional level for every game, we're not gonna make it past Christmas."

And, you know, he kind of calmed down and was kind of—you know—a little bit maybe embarrassed. But for me, there was also a lesson in that—in that I should take the time to enjoy the roses as we go by and enjoy the victories and enjoy the moments. And, you

know, he made it possible for me to do that because—in two ways. His personality and the fact that him being on the team meant that we won and when you're winning you can be a lot more congenial and approachable.

*[They chuckle.]*

When people aren't asking you, *[grumpily]* "How come them Lakers aren't losing? Why aren't you doing your job?" You know? So. There you go.

00:19:39 Jesse Host

I mean, I think one of the most interesting things about the two of you being a team—and there were many other great Lakers during that time, but you know, both you and Magic Johnson are among the greatest basketball players of all time. Like, one of the most interesting things about it is that Magic Johnson's exuberance is what people understand about him more than anything else. Right? You know, he has a beautiful smile, and you can see it on a television broadcast of a basketball game immediately. Right?

*[Kareem confirms.]*

And you are a thoughtful and shy man who played basketball very seriously. You know? And that read immediately. And I thought what an odd experience it must be for you, as a—I don't know how old you were when the Lakers drafted Magic. Like 30 or 32 or something like that. Um. To have this man like step in and you're like, "Well, he's an extraordinary basketball player, sure." But he just—people read him so differently. You know what I mean? Like, just—even when he's on the court. Not—forget when he's talking to a fan or talking to a reporter or whatever. Like, he just reads differently. It must have been an odd experience for you, as somebody who had been playing for so long and done so kind of—in such a considered manner.

00:21:14 Kareem Guest

It was—it was interesting. It was—I started thinking about things like generation gap and stuff like that. *[Chuckles.]* But Magic, you know, he was into music. You know. I'm into jazz. It was just a generational thing. It didn't necessarily mean that we were separated by anything. You know. It's just we were connected in odd ways, but it was real.

00:21:46 Jesse Host

It's interesting that you mention that generation gap. I don't think I had thought of it in those terms, but you're someone who remembers as a child the news about Emmett Till. You're someone who was in college, you know, who was a high school student during the—and a middle school student during the civil rights movement who was in college, you know, when the world turned over. Somebody who's just five or ten years younger than you has a very different experience of the world.

00:22:19 Kareem Guest

Yeah, that was amazing to me. You know, 'cause I go through the '80s and I'm playing with guys raised in the south and they're going to integrated schools. They hadn't seen the colored restroom or the colored drinking fountain. I had. You know? I had to use them. You know. My mom—my mom was from North Carolina. She took me down there a couple of times. You know, when I was a child. So, you know, it's something that was not unfamiliar to me. And you know, my perspective on things was a little bit different.

00:22:58 Jesse Host We've got so much more to get into with Kareem Abdul-Jabbar. Still to come, he played for most of his career while suffering from migraine headaches, which is—and I cannot *[chuckling]*—I cannot overstate this—unimaginably difficult. We'll talk about how he got through it after the break. It's *Bullseye*, from [MaximumFun.org](http://MaximumFun.org) and NPR.

00:23:18 Promo Clip **Speaker:** This message comes from NPR sponsor Fidelity Wealth Management. VP Dylan Sanders shares why it's important to understand clients' values.

**Dylan Sanders:** People quantify dreams differently. So, it's essential to be able to sit with a client and listen and ask questions and just begin to understand what it is in their life that they wanna pursue and help them create a roadmap to get there.

**Speaker:** To learn more, go to [Fidelity.com/wealth](http://Fidelity.com/wealth). Fidelity Brokerage Services LLC, member NYSESIPC.

00:23:52 Promo Clip **Music:** Muffled police radio chatter which fades into somber music.

**Speaker:** An officer pins a 16-year-old to the ground and punches out his teeth. But are there any consequences for the cop? For the first time, we take you inside the secret investigations that show how police protections in California shield officers from accountability. Listen to *On Our Watch*, a podcast from NPR and KQED.

00:24:14 Promo Clip *[Music fades out.]*  
**Music:** Three bouncy beats.

**Graham Clark:** Hi! My name's Graham Clark, and I'm one half of the podcast *Stop Podcasting Yourself*, a show that we've recorded for many, many years. And, uh, at the moment, instead of being in person, we're recording remotely. And, uh, you wouldn't even notice. You don't even notice the lag.

*[Long pause.]*

**Dave Shumka:** That's right, Graham! And, uh, the great thing about this—

**Graham:** Uh—

**Dave:** Go ahead.

**Graham:** No, you go ahead.

**Dave:** Okay, and—

**Graham:** Okay, go ahead.

*[Someone stifles laughter.]*

**Dave:** And you can listen to us, uh, every week on [MaximumFun.org](http://MaximumFun.org).

**Graham:** Or wherever you get your podcasts.



**Dave:** Your podcasts.

**Music:** Three bouncy beats.

- 00:24:59 Jesse Host You're listening to *Bullseye*. I'm Jesse Thorn. My guest, Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, narrates the new History Channel documentary, *Fight the Power: The Movements that Changed America*. It just premiered on the History Channel. Let's get back into our conversation.
- When I watched the History Channel documentary, I had assumed that you were the narrator of the show, 'cause that's how you were billed. And you were the narrator of the show. But there's also a fair bit of kind of your personal testimony in the documentary. There are these interspersed moments of your experience, your personal experience. Did you—was that part of the deal when you signed up?
- 00:25:46 Kareem Guest Well, you know, it—I thought it went very well, because Deborah Morales, my co-executive producer, figured that she could handle this stuff in the script and that I could handle the narration and my own personal take on my own experiences. So that—you know, I wasn't afraid to do that.
- 00:26:08 Jesse Host Why do you think you wanted that to be part of it?
- 00:26:12 Kareem Guest Well, because it's neat to see how it affected someone who was involved and who was personally—I was personally involved in the 1968 Olympics. You know, I went and demonstrated when Dr. King was assassinated. I was on campus. You know, there was some bad blood between two different groups, and it came to a head on the UCLA campus. It was a group called Us and then the Black Panthers and they had a shootout. It—there was some very scary moments in all of this.
- 00:26:51 Jesse Host Forgive me if this is a dumb question, but—as a guy who has lived his life being one or two heads taller than almost everybody around you except possibly when you're on the team playing—did you feel extra worried going out into a demonstration or a protest or a march knowing that like you were physically conspicuous and vulnerable in a way that that was unusual?
- 00:27:25 Kareem Guest Well, yeah. I certainly worried about that. The very first time I experienced street violence, you know, I was a... it was between my junior and senior year in high school, and I experienced the Harlem riot. And you know, I said, "Geez, I'm too tall to be out here with, you know, stray shots going off."
- [Jesse chuckles.]*
- And I got my butt on home, after that. And you know, had a little bit more caution about me, because when you get out in a circumstance like that, you realize how vulnerable you are. So, I think you're absolutely right that—you know, and that got through to me *[chuckling]* pretty quickly.
- 00:28:08 Jesse Host One of the moments in the documentary that most affected me was when you talked about Matthew Shepard, the gay man who was tortured and killed in the late 1990s. Have you been able to, over the course of these decades, synthesize your own experiences of bias and oppression and pain with understanding of folks who suffer those things for other reasons?

00:28:46 Kareem Guest Oh, absolutely. And you know, what you mentioned just now about Matthew Shepard really was the—was the issue, because when I saw—you know, I read the article about his murder and to me it was—it was very plain that that could have been a Black guy that some drunks just said, “Let’s harass the Black guy.” It could have been him. It could have been a Native American, it could have been a Hispanic person, it could have been an Asian person and they would have ended up just as dead for the same idiotic reasons. So, yeah, it really helped me understand what the real issues are and why marginalized groups have to understand that we’re all in this together.

00:29:33 Jesse Host I wanna ask you about something completely different. You suffered from migraine headaches in your life. Was that something that you always dealt with? Did you get migraines as a kid?

00:29:43 Kareem Guest Yeah, I got migraines as a kid like from fourth grade on and finally, they figured out that I needed to do a sleep study and they found out that I wasn’t processing enough oxygen when I slept. And that was a problem. So, I started doing oxygen at various times and had some surgery that opened up my breath passage so it could open at night, and I haven’t had that problem ever since then.

00:30:18 Jesse Host How old were you when you—when they figured that out?

00:30:22 Kareem Guest That was like right after I retired. I was in my early 40s.

00:30:25 Jesse Host I mean, that’s a big deal, to go through an entire 20-year professional basketball career dealing with migraine. How frequent were—

*[Kareem laughs.]*

00:30:35 Kareem Guest How frequent were the headaches?  
No, you—I’m laughing now because the doctor—the doctor said, “Hey, listen, you can’t breathe at night. How’d you play basketball for 20 years?”

*[They chuckle.]*

00:30:46 Jesse Host I mean, that’s the truth, but that’s not even talking about the pain—I mean, I suffer from migraine as well, and like I can barely keep it together to host a public radio show and *[chuckles]* you know, I don’t wanna—

00:30:56 Kareem Guest I’ll tell you one thing that will help you right now: get an oxygen tank and a mask. As soon as you feel it coming on, start doing just pure oxygen. It’ll chase it. It will chase the headache away. I’m not a doctor but try it. You’ll see. And you can get a prescription for oxygen from your doctor very easily. It’s not a big deal. If you want, I’ll come over to your house ‘cause I know how to work the tanks.

*[They laugh.]*

00:31:28 Jesse Host I’m into it, Kareem! I live in LA. *[Laughs.]*

00:31:31 Kareem Guest Hey, listen, it’s serious, man! And it will seriously help you if you get oxygen therapy. You know, you may need surgery or something, but the oxygen helps, absolutely. I’m not lying.

00:31:46 Jesse Host You must have had to play with headaches.

00:31:48 Kareem Guest I had—let me see, one playoff series against Philly, in ‘83. I was—I was coping with it and then in ‘84 just for one game. And then, right there in 1990 is when I had this sleep study done and I haven’t—I haven’t had any problems since then.

00:32:11 Jesse Host Did the headaches scare you? They can be pretty scary.

00:32:15 Kareem Guest Yeah, they can. But you know, if you know the process, you know when they're coming on and you can like go lay down or—you know—intense sunlight can make it worse. I see you nodding your head, so you know. *[Chuckling.]* I believe you. Yeah, but try the—try the oxygen. It's great. It's not gonna interrupt your life in any way except, you know, when you start to get a headache and you put the mask on, you'll feel a lot better.

00:32:45 Jesse Host Were you afraid when you had quadruple bypass surgery?  
00:32:49 Kareem Guest Yeah, that was scary. And it's funny, Dr. Scheman, my doctor, told me that the only reason I was alive is because of a lifetime of exercise. You know. I had arterial blockages. My heart was very healthy, but the arteries leading to them were full of junk and they had to be reamed out, I guess.

*[They laugh.]*

00:33:21 Jesse Host A quick Roto-Rooter and you're on your way. *[Laughs.]*  
00:33:24 Kareem Guest Yeah, right?  
00:33:26 Jesse Host What kind of exercise do you do in your life now? I mean, you're in your early, mid-70s now.

00:33:32 Kareem Guest Yeah. I still jump rope a little bit and I walk. I swim.  
00:33:37 Jesse Host I like to—I like to hear that you're jumping rope out there.  
00:33:40 Kareem Guest Yeah, jumping rope really works. You know. It's—I use a weighted jump rope and it's upper and lower body at the same time and it really keeps your heart strong.

00:33:52 Jesse Host I wanna tell you that as soon as you said that you jumped rope, I immediately imagined you doing double Dutch. 100%, you were doing double Dutch as soon as you said that.

00:34:02 Kareem Guest I was never able to do double Dutch 'cause there was no one tall enough to turn for me.

*[Jesse cracks up.]*

The ropes would hit me in the head and I—you know, so. I needed some seven-foot guys to turn.

*[They chuckle.]*

00:34:16 Jesse Host I looked at some pictures in an old *Sports Illustrated* of you dancing roller disco and I was like, "Yes. That is what's up. That is what I wanna see. I wanna see Kareem doing roller disco."  
00:34:27 Kareem Guest Roller boogie was fun! Yeah! It was. It's like disco, but you get to go around the rink there and mess with your friends and they play disco music. It was great! It was—it was a nice evening out. You get some exercise and have a few laughs. I enjoyed it a lot. The—I heard that the rink that I used to go to, Scooters, has opened up again.  
00:34:56 Jesse Host Really?

*[Kareem confirms.]*

I'm a Midnight Rollaway man. That's up there in—I guess it's Glendale or Burbank. It's right on the edge of LA.  
00:35:05 Kareem Guest Okay, yeah. Where you go—is there a rink up there?  
00:35:09 Jesse Host Yeah. Take my kids sometimes. I mean, my experience of roller disco was watching it in the park in San Francisco, 'cause there were guys that, you know, had started in 1977 or whatever and it

was their life. You know? It was—this was 2002. These guys are still out there in their 70s.

00:35:29 Kareem Guest That was a lot of fun, though.

00:35:31 Jesse Host I read in one of these old articles that I was looking at—there was a little detail that I loved seeing, above and beyond the picture of you doing roller disco. And that was—you know how in these profile articles, they’ll say like, oh, you know, “Cameron Diaz said, as she was munching on her crab Rangoon,” or whatever. Right? Like, there’s these little things sprinkled in there. And one of the little things in this old article about you from—I guess it must have been the early ‘80s—was that you were flipping through a copy of *Heavy Metal Magazine*.

*Heavy Metal* was like a sci-fi and fantasy magazine. It wasn’t about rock music. Like, a sci-fi thing.

00:36:16 Kareem Guest Métal erlant.

00:36:18 Jesse Host [*Laughs.*] Yeah. And, I mean, it’s probably most famous today for its pictures of bodacious babes riding dragons or whatever on the—in bondage gear, on the cover.

00:36:32 Kareem Guest There was a really great artist that did a number of cartoon stories for them named Mobius. I really liked his work. I enjoyed his stories and stuff. There was a character he had called Arzak—some guy that flew around on a pterodactyl. [*Chuckles.*] It was really good science fiction stuff. My dad was into science fiction. That’s how I got into it.

00:36:59 Jesse Host Do you still pick up new things to—for lack of a better word—nerd out about?

[*Kareem confirms.*]

Like are there still things that you—you read a magazine, you’re like, “Oh, this is my new thing. I’m deep on this.”

00:37:12 Kareem Guest Well, I’m a very strong believer in the adage that life is short, but it’s real wide. So, I wanna see all the things I can see before I have to check out. You know?

00:37:24 Jesse Host What’s your new jam, Kareem? What—[*chuckles*] what’s the thing that you’re about to talk to a librarian about getting you some books about?

00:37:31 Kareem Guest Geez. Uh, right now I’m doing research for one of the stories that I wanna do for a movie, a documentary. ‘Cause there’s a dramatic treatment of the Underground Railroad that’s on right now that’s very popular and getting really great reviews. And I’d like to get the opportunity to get all the facts behind the—behind the entertainment, because people are really getting into it and the Underground Railroad is something we won. You know? Black Americans won that one. There’s no question. So, I really enjoy the facts about it, and I think it’s something that all Americans can rally around, because it ended up moving us in a good direction.

00:38:29 Jesse Host Kareem, have you ever done a pilgrimage to Mecca? Have you ever gone on the Hajj?

00:38:33 Kareem Guest I’ve gone on Umrah, which is the lesser pilgrimage, ‘cause I was never free during Hajj. So, I’ve gone twice on the lesser pilgrimage, which is when you go to Mecca and it’s not the month of Hajj.

00:38:48 Jesse Host Have you thought about doing it during Hajj?

00:38:51 Kareem Guest Yeah. Yeah, I’d maybe take some of my children and stuff if they wanna go.

00:38:56 Jesse Host Do your kids practice? Do they go to—did they go to mosque with you when you were a kid? When you were—when they were kids?

00:39:01 Kareem Guest I used to—I used to take my boys, but you know, they’ve grown away from it. I haven’t been very strict on them, because I wanted them to have a moral foundation. I got good kids. They’re morally okay and if they don’t go to the mosque every Friday, I’m not gonna get upset.

00:39:17 Jesse Host Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, I’m so grateful to you for taking all this time to talk to me.

*[Music fades in.]*

00:39:24 Kareem Guest What a pleasure and an honor it is to get to—get to speak with you. Well, it’s been a pleasure and you can tell your child that she can hang, now.

*[They laugh.]*

00:39:31 Music Music Funky, upbeat music.

00:39:37 Jesse Host Kareem Abdul-Jabbar. His new documentary, *Fight the Power: The Movements that Changed America*, is airing on the History Channel. You can check their website for local air times or watch it in the History Channel app.

That’s the end of another episode of *Bullseye*. *Bullseye* is created out of the homes of me and the staff of Maximum Fun, in and around greater Los Angeles, California. Here at my house, my daughter has just informed me she’s working on a new film. It’s called *Creepy Tales About Movie Studios*. And it’s based on the book by Grace Thorn—that’s my daughter’s name. We’ll see how that comes out.

The show is produced by speaking into microphones. Our senior producer is Kevin Ferguson. Our producer is Jesus Ambrosio. We get help from Casey O’Brien. Our production fellows at Maximum Fun are Richard Robey and Valerie Moffat. Our interstitial music is by Dan Wally, also known as DJW. Our theme song is by The Go! Team. Thanks to them and to their label, Memphis Industries, for letting us use that. Watch out for The Go! Team’s new record, just around the corner.

00:40:57 Promo Promo You can keep up with *Bullseye* on Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube. We post all our interviews in those venues. And I think that’s about it. Just remember: all great radio hosts have a signature signoff. **Speaker:** *Bullseye with Jesse Thorn* is a production of [MaximumFun.org](http://MaximumFun.org) and is distributed by NPR.

*[Music fades out.]*