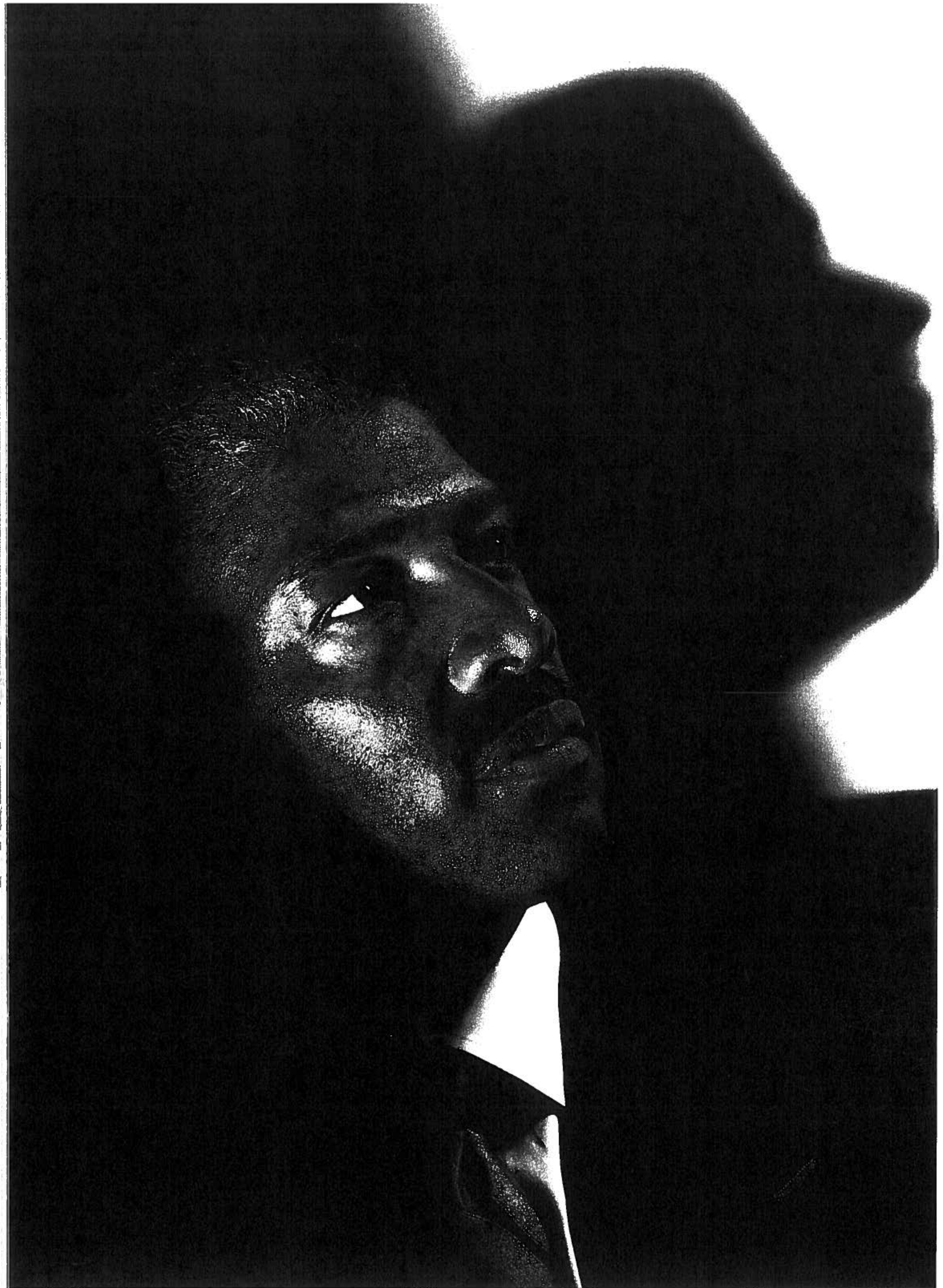
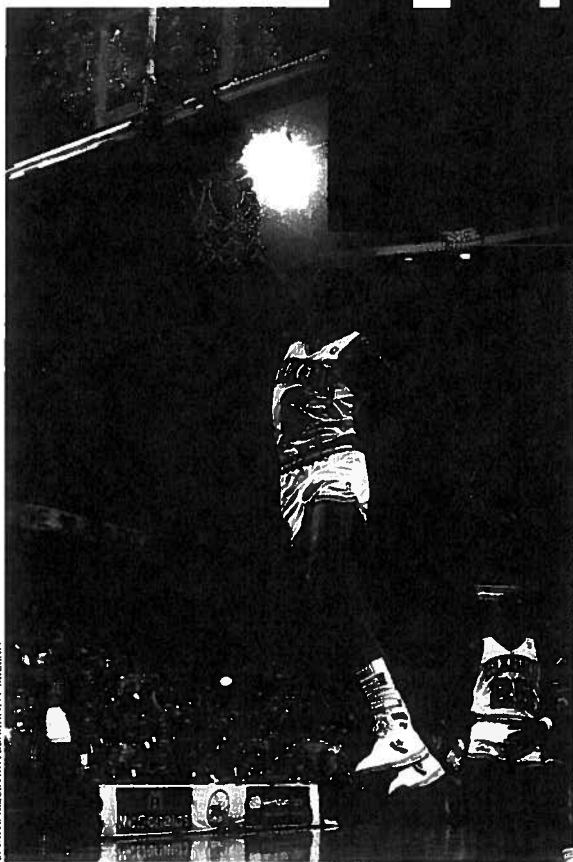


The Graying of Dr. J

Five years after his last dunk, Julius Erving looks back with pride at his legacy and scoffs at the next generation


SPORTS ILLUSTRATED/MANNY MILLAN

"My game was contrary to my personality. My game was revolutionary, and I'm a very controlled person."

By Larry Platt

Julius Erving rises from behind his cluttered desk and moves slowly about his office. Sighing, he plops down onto one of the three chairs normally reserved for guests of the Erving Group, Inc. He methodically removes his shoes and places his size 15 Ds on the coffee table in front of him.

"You never get caught up around here," he says, eyeing the pile of paperwork on his desk. "It's like being a housewife. You clean up, they come home and dirty up again, so the next day you clean up. If somebody asks you why you're cleaning up, you answer, 'So things can get dirty again.'"

Erving pauses and then breaks into a wide grin. "Now, be careful with that quote," he cautions, ever image-conscious.

Throughout his time in the public eye, Julius Erving has always tried to say the right thing, while rarely offering glimpses beneath the surface of his legend. Erving came along in the pre-Magic Johnson, pre-Michael Jordan era when black basketball players—and the entire NBA—had an image problem, and he was the model of propriety. The creativity and spontaneity of his game were surpassed by no one. Yet, off the court, no one was more fiercely self-controlled. He seemed intent on being perceived as a positive role model while so many other stars were checking into drug rehab. During the 1987 parade down Market Street that honored him when he retired, Erving once again came up with the right words: "I didn't hear that

PHOTOGRAPH BY DAVID FIELDS

there was no school today," he said into the microphone after noticing a sea of young faces in the crowd. "After the ceremony, get back to the classroom and take a note from the Doctor."

Since that day, Erving's public persona has been much more in keeping with his low-key side. He has retreated to the Main Line mansion he shares with his wife and four kids, commuting to his Center City office to oversee his diverse portfolio of business interests, which include part ownership of the Philadelphia Coca-Cola Bottling Company. You don't see him at 76er games and he doesn't appear on any talk shows. Erving goes about his business quietly—just this morning, he spoke to a small group at Thomas Jefferson University, where he awarded the Julius Erving Stipend, a cash grant, to five minority students. And, for the last three hours, without fanfare or complaint, he has waded through the papers on his desk.

A decade ago, of course, Dr. J would have been considered among the least likely Philadelphians to ever be bogged down with paperwork. But at 43, the Julius Erving who sits in his office today wearing a white turtleneck, his hair graying prematurely, has little in common with the legend of Dr. J. It is the legend who will be inducted this month into the Basketball Hall of Fame. Yet, at times, Erving says, it seems as if all the accolades and all the glory happened to someone else.

Erving's business ventures—including part ownership of the local Coke bottling company—began in the early '80s when he was still an NBA superstar.

I ask him if he watched the marquee NBA matchup—Knicks-Orlando, Patrick Ewing vs. Shaquille O'Neal—on TV last night. He shakes his head. "No, I was watching *Navy Seals*"—an obscure Charlie Sheen movie. "I hadn't seen it before. I never go out of my way to watch a basketball game. If it's on when I'm flipping channels, I'll check it out, but it's never like, 'Let me stop doing what I'm doing 'cause the game's on.'"

Erving opens a can of Nordic Mist carbonated water and sees that I'm inspecting the label. "This is a Coke product," he assures me as he takes a gulp before continuing. "You've got to understand, I pledged to myself and to my family that we would not be dependent on basketball. I made a very clean break and decided not to look back."

He does, however, take a glance toward the mountain of paperwork on his desk.

IT IS, OF COURSE, A DIFFICULT TRANSITION TO MAKE. AS A SUPERSTAR professional athlete, you peak before 30 and "retire" soon after. In your 40s, few things can replace the thrill of the sellout crowds that chanted your name two decades earlier. Mike Schmidt, for example, has yet to attain the type of personal fulfillment he found during his playing days and can often be heard blasting the Phillies for not reserving a place for him in the organization. Bobby Clarke, another onetime Philly icon, has bounced from front-office job to front-office job while publicly regretting prematurely hanging up his skates in 1984.

Early in his career, Julius Erving became determined to make a graceful transition when it was his turn to relinquish the spotlight. "There are too many athletes who have sour grapes or regrets—leaving too soon, having the career in the first place," he says. "I heard a lot of stories about Joe Louis, and it motivated me early in life. He was always used as an example of somebody who made a lot of money in his life and didn't keep it, and wound up being dependent."

Erving began thinking about life after basketball while still at the top of his game. In 1979, at the age of 29, he founded and incorporated the Erving Group and, not coincidentally, got rid of his trademark Afro and goatee. "I had to go for that corporate, business look," he says.

In fact, Erving always had business aspirations, he says. At the University of Massachusetts, he majored first in marketing and then in management, but his real business education began once he decided to turn pro and jump to the upstart American Basketball Association after his junior year. He came to the NBA and the 76ers in 1976, and a few years later opened a shoe store on South Street that quickly went out of business. Having to close it down stoked his competitive fires; Erving became determined to make it in business as he had in athletics.

Of course, he didn't starve as an athlete—in his last season with the Sixers, he earned $1.49 million. Yet, today, he takes great pride in his business earnings. In addition to his Coca-Cola interest, he owns part of Garden State Cable and a Buffalo television station, sits on the board of Meridian Bank and operates the DJ Group, Inc., the sports and entertainment arm of the Erving Group. (The DJ Group promoted the embarrassing pay-per-view one-on-one matchup between Erving and Kareem Abdul-Jabbar in Atlantic City last year; currently, the Group is producing *Roads to Success*, a syndicated television series profiling African-American role models.) And Erving still has promotional contracts with the NBA, Coca-Cola USA, Converse, Hardees and Advanced Golf Technologies. He also serves as a consultant to a Jack Nicklaus company, Golden Bear Sports Management.

But it was his purchase of the Coca-Cola bottling plant that sent him on his entrepreneurial way. Throughout the 1970s and into the early '80s, Bruce Llewellyn, a prominent African-American businessman, had been trying to buy into the soft-drink bottling business. At the same time, the Reverend Jesse Jackson and Operation PUSH were protesting the lack of minority representation at Coke's corporate level. In 1982, a year before the Sixers won the NBA Championship, Llewellyn and Erving had dinner together in Tuckahoe, New York.

"I thought I had a good shot at getting the Philadelphia franchise, and I told Julius that I thought his name could be of invaluable assistance to me," recalls Llewellyn, whom Erving refers to

PHOTOGRAPH BY DAVID FIELDS

as his "business role model." "We bought in at about $60 million," Llewellyn says, "and Julius became a director and shareholder. It was the first time in the industry for a major minority-owned bottler. Now the franchise is probably worth about five times our initial investment."

Because Erving secured the Coke deal while still an active player, by 1985 the impact was felt throughout the athletic world. To a whole new generation of athletes, Erving became a role model—not for his on-court moves, but for his boardroom success. To this day Magic Johnson, whose entrepreneurial aspirations are well known, frequently calls Erving to discuss deals and business protocol. "I've always picked Doc's brain, and he's always been there for me," says Johnson, whose goal is to own an NBA franchise someday. "He paved the way for athletes to become involved in business. The things he did with Coke set the stage for me to become a businessman."

When the opportunity arose in 1988 for Johnson to invest in Pepsi, he jumped at it, going into partnership with Earl Graves, another prominent black businessman, to become executive vice president and one-third owner of a Pepsi distribution and sales company in Maryland. Unlike Erving's deal with Coke, Johnson is not a bottler; he simply contracts to distribute Pepsi products. But the business parallels between the two former superstars have perpetuated their friendly on-court rivalry.

"We have a good-natured sort of competition going on," Erving says, smiling. "As a matter of fact, when I was at the all-star game this year, Magic was sitting right behind me. I turned around, and there he was, drinking a Minute Maid soda. I said, 'That's a Coke product, my man.' He just wasn't thinking."

Still, despite the ground-breaking success of Erving's Coke deal, Llewellyn, who professes great admiration and affection for him, gets frustrated at his protégé's inability to focus on any one business interest. (When asked about his influence on Erving, Llewellyn laughs and says, "I damn sure didn't teach him how to go out and waste all his time playing golf.") About once a month, Erving meets with plant customers, and his input is heard occasionally on marketing. But Llewellyn would like to see him take a more active role.

"If you call Julius a businessman, I'd have to ask your definition of the term," Llewellyn says. "He's been a good marketing type of person, but he's not a 9-to-5 businessman who hires and fires and negotiates contracts. I've told Julius that if he doesn't get himself involved in something in an in-depth, full-time way, well, where's he going to be? At some point, somebody is going to say, 'Dr. J is coming,' and someone else is going to say, 'Who the hell is that?' With me, Julius has stock, an investment. With the companies he endorses, he has short-term contracts. In the long pull, I keep telling him his interests would be better served to stick with his investments and see to it that they grow."

As he sits in the offices of the Erving Group—a converted three-bedroom apartment at the Academy House on Locust Street—Erving says the diversity was all part of the plan.

"I developed this portfolio because I just didn't want to be consumed by any one thing anymore," he says, accompanying me through the reception area on my way out. A bronze sculpture of his arm and hand palming a basketball sits on the floor. "To be the best in the world at something, and for a time I was considered the best in the world—that has to be all and everything. For 16 years I was Dr. J, and that took on a life of its own. I don't want to just be a Coca-Cola bottler 24 hours a day, be the guy coming down the street dressed in red and white—'The Coca-Cola Man.'"

He stops in front of a collection of Dr. J *SPORT* Magazine covers that grace the wall. "For the first time in my life, I'm a free agent," he says. "I can go where I'm needed and do what I need to do. There's nothing that I wish for that's not available to me."

Erving, quite simply, changed the culture of basketball. Michael Jordan would still be running the three-man weave if it had not been for Dr. J.

IT IS 11 O'CLOCK IN THE MORNING, AND JULIUS ERVING IS AT THE Cherry Hill offices of Score Board, Inc., a sports memorabilia marketing firm that distributes autographed copies of Dr. J playing cards.

He will sit here for the next three hours, signing cards as a company representative monitors the process for authenticity. I ask if his hand gets tired.

"No, man, I'm on automatic pilot when I do this," he says.

The cards he is signing today are from the 1978 season. On the front of each one is an action photo of the Doctor at work, gliding through the air, while an inset head-and-shoulders photo shows off the old Afro.

Looking at him now—business suit, glasses, graying hair—it is hard to fathom what he once was and the impact he once had. In basketball circles today, it has become commonplace to hear harsh revisionism applied to Erving's career, especially in light of Michael Jordan. Indeed, the numbers are not comparable. Erving averaged 22 points, seven rebounds and nearly four assists per game as an NBA player; Jordan, 32.3, six and six. But a statistical comparison misses the point; evaluating Erving in terms of points and rebounds is like judging Martin Luther King on the basis of his administrative skills. Erving changed the culture of basketball—Jordan would still be running the three-man weave were it not for him—and, as only a handful of athletes have done, influenced popular culture as well.

"Julius wearing the Afro was a major statement," says Nelson George, author of *Elevating the Game: Black Men and Basketball* and a noted chronicler of black culture. "I remember when he cut it. The Afro was over when Julius cut his. I always looked at that as a sort of acquiescence to the NBA and the mainstream."

But if Erving's change in hairstyle was a concession to mainstream forces, he made no such accommodations in his game. More than anyone—more than Connie Hawkins, more than Earl Monroe—Erving raised playground basketball to respectability. As the quintessential one-on-one player, Erving's game was antithetical to the below-the-rim version being taught at the CYOs and by the Bobby Knights of the world. Throughout his 11 years with the Sixers, I can't recall Erving ever setting or using a screen; instead, his four teammates would go to one side of the floor to "isolate" Julius on his man while the Spectrum crowd collectively held its breath. Though his outside shot was streaky at best, it didn't matter. He could take anybody.

Turn on any college or pro game today and you can see his legacy. Dunking—once the shot of choice *(continued on page 121)*

THE GRAYING OF DR. J

(continued from page 79)

for "hot dog" or undisciplined players—has become fundamental to the game. They call Atlanta's Dominique Wilkins the Human Highlight Film, but Erving invented the highlight.

Predictably, when he entered the league in 1976, Erving's game didn't sit well with the staid NBA establishment. Celtic "genius" Red Auerbach said, "Julius Erving is a nice kid, but he's not a great player." When the Sixers played the Portland Trailblazers in the finals that season, it was a series rife with racial overtones—white suburban basketball vs. the black street game. The Trailblazers, relying on intricate screening and backdoor cutting, won. (At the time, basketball aficionados read too much into the Trailblazers' victory; the 76ers probably would have won the series had George McGinnis not joined the Bricklayers Union for five of the six games.) The questions back then about how his game would fare in the NBA still rankle Erving today.

"It was just a simple bias," he says. "It was annoying to hear these critiques about black ballplayers. People would say, 'This player has all this natural ability, but driving in there and jumping over somebody for a dunk isn't a smart play. The smart play is to make three or four passes and get a lay-up.' Well, it's a smart play when you get your desired result, you know? Black players would get stereotyped as just having natural ability, but I knew that when I first started playing ball, I couldn't play a lick."

For those first couple of years in Philly, Dr. J truly was the Brother From Another Planet. With the Afro and goatee he looked like a Black Panther, and his street game was just as radical. But his demeanor was not at all consistent with the image, and his nonthreatening, dignified style off the court endeared him to Philly fans and, ultimately, to basketball fans worldwide.

"Yeah, my game was contrary to my personality," he says now. "My game was red, and I'm blue. My game was revolutionary, and I'm a very controlled person. I had to deal with that a lot, because socially, after a game, I would just want to get some dinner, go home and go to bed. But people would be, like, 'Yo, Dr. J is here, he's the life of the party.' And I'd be, like, 'You ain't talking about me.' "

Still, the love affair he had with the fans of this city is a testament to his innate ability to, in his words, "cross over." Coming of age in the '70s, Erving was part of an era that saw black culture—specifically music, with the ascendancy of Motown and artists like Stevie Wonder and Michael Jackson—woo white consumers. A product of his generation, he felt obligated to do the same in his industry. He was, in Nelson George's words, the "Sidney Poitier of the hardcourts," a symbol of the possibilities of integration, a representative of upwardly mobile black America.

"In the late '70s, there was tremendous racial separation in Philadelphia, with the whole MOVE situation and Mayor Rizzo and the strong-arm tactics of that era," Erving says as he watches himself slowly twist the NBA Championship ring he wears on his right hand. "People were just reluctant to leave their neighborhoods. The Fishtowners stayed in Fishtown, Germantowners in Germantown, South Philadelphians in South Philly. You could see the city composed of different pockets of self-interest, and no one was looking out for the whole. I saw this, and my goal was to move about with freedom and respect in all the different communities. 'Crossover' became an important term for me, because it wasn't a black thing anymore. All of a sudden, you had white adults telling their kids to grow up and be like Julius Erving. And it all culminated in the parade of 1983, when we won the championship. I remember coming down

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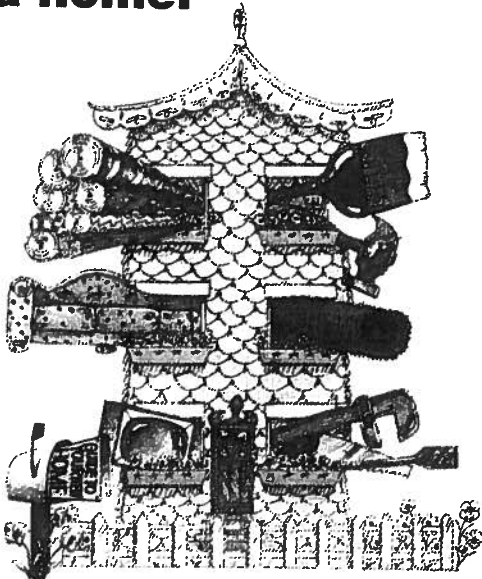

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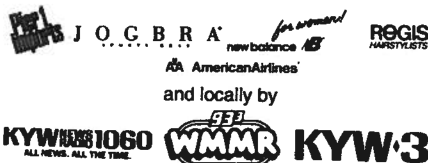

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Broad Street and seeing all these different people and it was, like, 'Wait a minute—they ain't all from this neighborhood. A lot of these people crossed the line to celebrate together.' "

Now, ten years later, a new generation has forsaken the crossover tradition, as illustrated by Charles Barkley's recent in-your-face public persona. The Hip-Hop generation is not as interested in making accommodations to white taste. Last winter, Barkley and Spike Lee's interview in *The Source*, a Hip-Hop journal, was titled "Nineties Niggers." This month in *Playboy*, Barkley talks about the fans wanting black athletes to "know their places." And, a year ago, Craig Hodges, then with the Chicago Bulls, excoriated Michael Jordan and other top black athletes for not speaking out politically. (Over the course of two days, I grilled Erving to no avail on his politics; "I've always had political convictions," he says, "but my business interests handicap me" from discussing them publicly.)

Yet, even Jordan, despite his crossover commercial appeal, does things that Erving never would have attempted. He wears the X hats that have become the symbol of the Hip-Hop generation, hangs out with Spike Lee and even dissed George Bush by not showing up when the Bulls were invited to the White House after winning their first title. In light of the generational surge away from Erving's vision of integration, it would be easy to lambaste him for so smoothly moving into the white establishment—easy, but shortsighted.

"This current generation doesn't know much about Dr. J other than that he's a very revered figure who had a cool nickname," says Nelson George. "But Jesse Jackson says, 'There are tree-shakers, and there are jelly-makers.' Well, Julius is a jelly-maker. He employs African-Americans and underwrites minority scholarships without shouting about it. My impression is that he believes in doing."

And his sociopolitical influence transcended even his own intentions. Throughout the 1970s, Julius Erving was a walking racial discussion even when he was reluctant to speak about the issue; his game itself was the message. In his book *Elevating the Game*, Nelson George discusses the black aesthetic that came to characterize basketball, a style that Dr. J had the largest hand in creating. In the mid '80s, I used to watch the playground ball at 145th and Malcolm X Boulevard in Harlem, keeping a careful distance from the courts to avoid any temptations to embarrass myself. But what I saw, time and again, was the imprint left by Erving. I saw guys who cared about showmanship, who celebrated shots based on their degree of difficulty rather than their results. The quality of their moves always took priority over the score, and the real competition was over who could exhibit the most creativity; it was basketball as art form, a manifestation of the black aesthetic that is Dr. J's legacy.

And, just as important, the joyousness of the playground was infectious and in sharp contrast to the repressed nature of the suburban game many of us grew up playing. It was black athletes who started the celebratory traditions of the high-five and the end-zone spike, as well as the current in-your-face craze of trash talking. But even though his energetic and passionate playground game spawned such posturing, Erving disdains these modern manifestations.

"In the '70s, you were supposed to ignore the cameras," he says. "Now, guys play to the cameras. You've got Michael Jordan shooting foul shots with his eyes closed—that's calling attention to yourself. My game might have spawned the creation of the highlight, but that was for the fan to celebrate, not the player. What's to celebrate? To me, you celebrate when you surprise yourself. Dunking on people for me was the rule, rather than the exception. Before a game, I always knew I'd be dunking on somebody. I didn't have to talk trash or do any of that stuff. We're living in a time of instant gratification, and these kids today want to capture the thrill of the moment."

I tell Dr. J I'm a little surprised how much he sounds like those members of the establishment who couldn't understand his game 20 years ago.

Julius Erving looks up from the cards he's been signing and thinks for a moment. "Maybe it is a bit of a contradiction," he says.

He returns his attention to the pile of cards in front of him. He has an hour to go, and he is on automatic pilot.

IT IS GETTING LATE, AND JULIUS ERVING AND I are sitting in his office. I tell him that despite his fame, my sense is that people still wonder what he's like.

He pauses, no doubt contemplating just how much of himself he wishes to reveal. He says that when you've done things "larger than life," it becomes hard for people to relate to you. He takes a drink from his Coke, still debating whether to say more. "Really, I'm just a guy," he says. "You cut me, and I'm gonna bleed."

He's wrong, of course. He's more than just a guy. He's Julius Erving, and he's the Doctor.

Before I leave, I take out my wallet. I don't even have a picture of my fiancée,

but for close to a decade I've carried around a folded-up black-and-white magazine photo of Dr. J, taken during a 1978 game against the Knicks at Madison Square Garden. He is flying through the air, higher than I've ever seen Jordan jump, eyes even with the rim, dunking over 6'10" Lonnie Shelton while Bob McAdoo runs for cover. For Erving, it is probably just one of a million dunks. I ask him if he recognizes the guy soaring in the photo.

"Oh, my God," he says slowly, leaning forward, eyes locked on the picture. The years begin to melt away, as does his cool veneer. "I'm looking at the rim. I must have been scared, I'm up so high. I remember this play."

The phone is ringing, and Erving stands. I think he's about to answer it, but he doesn't seem to hear anything.

"I remember, after I dunked this ball, it rattled around the rim, and I had to put my hand on the backboard like this to keep from crashing into it," he says, standing in the middle of his office, pirouetting, acting out this 15-year-old memory. I wonder if anyone down on Locust Street happens to be looking up at this image of Dr. J high in the sky, reenacting an old flight pattern. "I landed flat on my feet, like this. They called a blocking foul on Shelton."

Throughout the 1970s, Julius Erving was a walking racial discussion; his game itself was the message.

Ray Wilson, Erving's business manager and longtime confidant, has answered the phone in the outer office and pokes his head in. "Turk wants to know when you'll be leaving," he says, referring to Julius' wife, Turquoise.

Erving doesn't hear. "Look at McAdoo," he says, laughing, still transfixed by the photo. "He's, like, 'You take him!'"

"Julius, Turk wants to know when you're heading home," Wilson repeats.

Erving says nothing.

"Julius?" Wilson says again.

"Just loading up my briefcase, Ray," he says, never taking his eyes from the photo. Then he lets out a low whistle and hands the picture back to me. It's time for Julius Erving, middle-age businessman, to make his nightly commute to the suburbs. ■■

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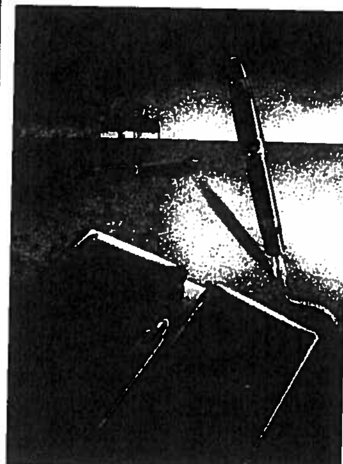

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