

SportsLetter Interviews

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Todd Boyd

Dr. Todd Boyd is Professor of Critical Studies at the University of Southern California's School of Cinema-Television. The University of Iowa grad has published four books - including "Am I Black Enough for You?: Popular Culture from the 'Hood and Beyond" — and he co-edited (with Aaron Baker) a set of essays entitled "Out of Bounds: Sports, Media and the Politics of Identity."



Boyd also served as writer-producer for the feature film "The Wood." Writing in a style that he calls "the fusion of the formal and the vernacular," Boyd has emerged as a unique voice. As the title of his forthcoming book — "Young, Black, Rich and Famous: The Rise of the NBA, the Hip Hop Invasion, and the Transformation of American Culture" (Doubleday) - suggests, Boyd mines the landscape located somewhere between basketball, hip hop, and race. "In Young, Black, Rich and Famous," Boyd chronicles the recent history of the NBA, beginning in the early 1970s, or about the time that African-American players began to dominate the league. This transition period is rich with material, including such topics as the image of basketball players as overpaid drug addicts and the aesthetics of Julius Erving. In writing about the contemporary NBA, Boyd delves into such subjects as Michael Jordan's cross-over ascension, the deeper meaning of Allen Iverson's "gangsta" image, and the hip-hop stylings of saggin' shorts, tattoos, and cornrows. SportsLetter recently caught up with Boyd on his summer vacation. He was putting the finishing touches on the manuscript as the Kobe Bryant arrest became known. Boyd lives in Los Angeles, but still roots for his beloved Pistons.

— David Davis

SportsLetter: Is it getting easier for academic types to admit they study the culture of sports?

Todd Boyd: I write about what I want to, so I don't know. It's never been hard for me. I guess it depends on what discipline you're affiliated with and the structures of that discipline. Older and more traditional disciplines tend to be more dismissive of sports. But I don't think it's possible to talk about American culture without talking about sports. It's one of the most significant forms of entertainment within our culture. Whoever's serious about defining American culture can't hesitate to study sports.

SL: The number of African-Americans playing baseball has plummeted — to about 10 percent in the Majors. In the book, you write that “Baseball, as America's national pastime, is just that, past time.” What happened to baseball? Why has basketball replaced it as the sport of choice among African-American youth?

TB: I think if you look at the three major sports — football, baseball and basketball — basketball has always been the most urban sport. Baseball, in its origin, was pastoral. Football is more popular in southern and mid-western states. You need a lot of space for football, and it requires a great deal of equipment. Same with baseball. Basketball courts are plentiful, and someone always has a basketball. These conditions make basketball the perfect sport for urban America.

Baseball is a sport that was conceived — and reached its zenith — before television was around. There was a time when watching this slow, tedious game unfold was popular, but people don't live that way now. Today, the game's not suited for the way people live their lives. The other thing is, baseball is very Republican. It's so invested in tradition to the point where tradition hinders the game from growing.

Basketball is more contemporary, more suited to the aspirations of contemporary African-American youth. An individual player can make a huge difference for his team and elevate himself in society as a whole. Look at Larry Bird: Boston had nobody before he came along. Michael Jordan by himself made the Bulls a playoff team.

SL: You connect elements of basketball with jazz and with hip hop. How is basketball like jazz and how is it like hip hop?

TB: I talk about the one-ness of the art form: A hip hop m.c. in a room with his headphones and notebook. It's a singular process — he comes up with the style and lyrics in isolation. Like basketball, it can be one man doing his thing.

I think the soundtrack for the contemporary NBA is clearly hip-hop. The players and the hip hop world are shaped by similar forces, and you see a lot of guys who represent that hip hop energy. Recently, I was at an NBA party given by one of the agents. Every player from the league had cornrows and was wearing the throwback jerseys. I thought, this could be a hip hop video.

When you talk about jazz, it's an older form. Fewer and fewer of today's players are connected to jazz. But, the fluid motion of the game — and the improvisational moves within the action — that is evocative of jazz.

Someone like Kareem Abdul-Jabbar was evocative of jazz aesthetics. One of the reasons Kareem didn't smile and get involved in extra preening — he just went out and played his game — was that he was molded in Miles Davis' image. Miles didn't play to the audience: he played it cool, without affect.

SL: In the book, you call the Magic Johnson-Larry Bird rivalry a “race war.” How did their rivalry galvanize the league?

TB: I think they saved the NBA from itself and put it on the path to becoming the global phenomenon it is now. Let's face it: black-white conflict is embedded in America's history. Over time, it's taken on different forms. This was one of the last real black-white sports conflicts in the 20th century.

Remember, this was the early '80s, when Ronald Reagan was elected president and racial tensions were high. This was part of the transition from the 1960s and 1970s; America was a different place. Here's Bird in Boston, a town with a dubious racial history, playing for the Celtics and

their traditional, Irish working-class fan base. And Bird is the great white hope. He represents the return to glory for the white athlete at that time. The Lakers, on the other hand, epitomized the continuing influence of street ball in the NBA. Magic, as fundamentally sound and as smart as he was, brought razzle-dazzle to the court every night. He was exciting to watch, and he was part of a star-studded team with a photogenic coach — just the opposite of Boston.

So it's not controversial to say that the Lakers were perceived as the black team, and the Celtics as the white team. When they played, you were choosing sides. If you were a Lakers fan, you were making a statement about your politics.

It was great for league to be invested in this healthy competition at a time when the NBA was really struggling. It drew attention to the game. The next thing you know, here's Jordan, and now people are attracted for the art of the game.

SL: You compare Magic's persona in the 1980s and early 1990s to both Bill Cosby and Michael Jackson. How was he Cosby and how was he Jackson?

TB: I guess what I meant was that he was very likeable. In the 1980s, when not every black icon was likeable, here were guys who cut across racial lines and were at the top of their games. You're talking about a realignment of superstardom that transcended race. That was really profound when you consider that you're talking about the number-one pop music star, the number-one basketball star, and the number-one television star being black. That's a substantial accomplishment.

What happens is, black culture is starting to be accessible in places it hadn't been before. It's a precursor of what is happening now. You have a culture where people aren't making the distinction between black and white stars, between, say, Eminem and Jay-Z. So what you've got in those three figures is an early indication of the ubiquitous-ness of blackness.

SL: How does Michael Jordan fit into all of this?

TB: Jordan as a basketball player was amazing. We know this. He took the league by storm because of his skills. If he was a Brad Sellars, he would not have become a race-transcendent figure.

His timing was perfect. He comes along in the late 1980s, after Magic and those guys opened things up. Over time, he drew fans to himself in a way that, for a long period of time, he was arguably the most popular American.

Let's face it: Popular culture is maybe America's biggest export. That happened from the 1980s — and Jordan's ascension is tied to that moment. He rode the wave of American culture becoming more accessible. He's the guy who took the game to where it is now, because of his basketball skills and the commercials he was in. You can look at the NBA now as this huge global phenomenon because MJ penetrated into areas that hadn't been approached before.

He was thought to be perfect. And then the gambling allegations come out. Over time, people look at him less in the perfect mold and see him for the great athlete and cultural figure he was.

SL: You write that you wear Allen Iverson's jersey and that you "love the fact that he has become the nigga you love to hate on the basketball court." Why do you revel so in his game?

TB: Short answer: I'm a contrarian (laughs). First, Allen Iverson is a great basketball player. I think people under-estimate his ability. He's 6-foot-tall — maybe — and weighs 150 pounds soaking wet with a brick in his back pocket, and single-handedly has made his team into a contender. How can he win a championship with those players around him? The fact that Philly made the finals and won a game was impressive. And yet all I hear is, he's selfish.

Iverson is an authentic product of hip hop culture. Because of the way he does things, he gets under a lot of people's skins, black and white. He has never tried to be anyone else, and he has never listened to those who say he should get rid of his cornrows or get rid of his buddies. He doesn't want to be your loveable mascot. He's not interested in conforming. He doesn't think, "Let me grin and see if I can get on 'SportsCenter.'" He says, "I don't

give a f***. And I have the money to do what I want.” AI represents the quintessential black man’s disposition: No matter how much you f*** with me, I’m not going to change. Bottom line, his approach and his persona are pure hip-hop. He gives the game drama.

SL: You write that, in the post-Jordan NBA, Iverson and Kobe Bryant have emerged as the most interesting, promising superstars. What’s the difference between the two?

TB: Iverson and Kobe are the modern-day version of Magic and Bird, where class becomes more relevant than race. For all intents Kobe is a white man in the NBA. The spot that he fits — and this may all change [due to the recent rape allegations] — is the spot reserved for white players. The energy that was directed to Larry Bird is now directed to guys like Kobe and Tim [Duncan]. When you compare them with Rasheed Wallace and Iverson — or the other players who fit the mainstream definition of ‘thugs in the NBA’ — then the contrast is intensified.

Since this incident with Kobe happened, it’s real clear that when I talk to black male friends of mine that they dislike Kobe . . . He just violates all the unspoken codes of black masculinity. You do not get on stage, crying and begging. Just like you don’t walk off the court after [losing to] San Antonio and start crying. It’s like, c’mon dawg, you ain’t representin’. You look like a punk.

SL: LeBron James enters the NBA as the most heralded rookie since, maybe, Wilt Chamberlain. Is he capable of taking on the mantle of “the next Michael Jordan”? Should he be asked to take on that load?

TB: The problem has always been, who will carry the mantle as the next Jordan. We can name guys who were supposed to fill that role - from Grant Hill to Vince Carter to Penny Hardaway to Harold Miner. Any guy who was 6-7 and athletic. No one can live up to the label. There are no more MJs. He’s one of one. That road has already been trod. LeBron is a great basketball player. He’s also joining a team that should be fun to watch, with good young talent: D-Miles, Ricky Davis, Carlos Boozer, Dajuan Wagner. Plus, I think they got a steal in Paul Silas as their coach. So LeBron comes into a situation with a team that could be competitive.

He's going get his looks.

If he sustains himself the way he seems to have so far, he's going to be impressive. There's a lot of pressure on him. He might not have the impact as quickly as people want. His ability to deal with that will be telling. I mean, the guy's 18. But I'm excited. It's the way I used to feel when college basketball was good and the draft could change a team instantly. You don't get that anymore. LeBron's the first guy to bring that sort of energy in a long while.

SL: NBA clubs are increasingly pursuing European prospects: Is that a positive development for the game, or is it (as some have noted) a subtle ruse by owners to keep the league from becoming "too black"?

TB: Clearly, David Stern has pursued marketing the league globally - and done an incredible job, going back to the Dream Team in the 1992 Olympics. It's just like globalization in any other walk of life. New formations emerge and older models disappear. White players will now be from Croatia or Turkey or other places. The league's gone global.

I think the league's in a great position. You bring in Yao Ming, you have access to viewers in China. You bring in Nene Hilario from Brazil, same thing. And Emanuel Ginobili from Argentina.

I do think the class issue is important. The "bad guys" of the NBA — the Ruben Pattersons, the Isaiah Riders, even Iverson — the league's uncomfortable with that. They want to stem the tide. Stern talks about setting an age limit [for pro players]. Well, the Europeans are pros at an earlier age. That's a big contradiction.

People around the NBA talk in code. They say the Europeans are "coachable." That's code in that African-American players have been perceived as being difficult to coach. They say Europeans have "good fundamentals." That's coded language, with the implication being that black players play street ball.

To this point, there's been no foreign player that's had a major impact in making a team successful. These guys are not dominant enough. You can

talk about Dirk Nowitzki. He's a great offensive player, but if he was Dirk Nowitzki from Cleveland, how much would he be criticized for shooting so damn much?

It'll be interesting to see how this racial issue plays out. I think people are too quick in making assumptions, though. We live in a time when nationality is very important. I don't think Americans are going to rush to embrace non-Americans, as opposed to African-Americans. Maybe this is informed by living in L.A., but what always fascinates me is how many people into hip hop aren't black. They don't make those distinctions anymore.

SL: The trend of young players entering the NBA from high school — or after a year or two of college — doesn't seem to be abating, despite commissioner Stern's wish to set an age limit. What's the future of college basketball?

TB: It will survive because the game appeals to a different fan base than the NBA. People who are big college basketball fans aren't big NBA fans and vice versa. There was a time when the audiences were closer to each other. That's no longer the case. But the college game will always survive because there's so much invested in it, with alumni and traditions and rivalries and the Final Four. People will always watch this. College has done a good job of making the game palatable to mainstream taste. They didn't like the overwhelming trend of basketball becoming "blacker," and they put in measures to stem some of these. Now, as someone who used to be a huge college basketball fan, I have not watched college basketball in many, many years, since just after the Fab 5. It holds no interest for me.

SL: Finally, let's talk about what your favorite subject. The Pistons took Darko Milicic in the draft and hired Larry Brown to replace Rick Carlisle. Will Detroit finally be able to beat the New Jersey Nets? Did they make a mistake in not choosing Carmelo Anthony?

TB: I'm going to say something crazy. I think they were a better team than the Nets even though they lost. The Nets had been to the Finals the year before, and that experience really helped them. Plus, [Pistons guard] Chauncey Billups was injured in the series.

As for the draft, I like Carmelo's game — he brings some offensive punch, which the Pistons could use. But they already have Tayshaun Prince, who has the promise to be a Scottie Pippen. Do you bring in Carmelo with two guys playing the same position? I trust [general manager] Joe Dumars. He saw Milicic and raved about him. I hope he's right, because when he picked this guy, who hasn't played that much basketball, Dumars put a lot on potential.

I thought that Rick Carlisle was a good coach and, certainly, to win the division and to win 50 games was impressive. As the die-hard Detroit fan that I am — with my NBA season pass so I could watch the team all year — I didn't think he was a good situational coach or very good at match-ups. I mean, he buried Tayshaun on the bench all year, until the playoffs.

With Larry Brown, we have the second best coach in the league. This is his type of team: they play good defense and don't have any superstars. It's clearly his last stand to win a title. My only problem is, every team's making moves this summer, and they're standing still.