

# Making Waves

BLACK SURFERS AND DEMAND FOR INCLUSION AND DIVERSITY IN THE WATER

AN INTERVIEW OF RHONDA HARPER BY NAJI ALI

*"I was 15 in 1984. So if I'm trying to be a pro-surfer in 1984 and go to Hawaii with a hope chest full of surfing magazines, I can go through each one of my magazines and not see anybody like me. And I learn how to surf there, and I now want to be pro. Who am I going to? Because in the magazines, there's no one."*

*"So who I am now is who I needed when I was young and I had that vision of, 'I want to be this person. I want to be this surfer. I want to be a pro surfer.' So that's who I try to be right now for all of my girls. It doesn't matter what stage you're in, whether you're in your beginning stages or you're in your latter stages of your career, we try to facilitate whatever need that is."*

*"And that is the birth of Black Girls Surf, because we knew that just by the numbers alone, we knew there was a need out there. And then you start connecting. We put our IG together, and then women were just coming from all around the world."*

RHONDA HARPER, FOUNDER OF BLACK GIRLS SURF



**“So who I am now is who I needed when I was young and I had that vision of, ‘I want to be this person’.”**

**RHONDA HARPER**



Visionary, activist, surfer and founder of Black Girls Surf, Rhonda Harper has been working diligently to change the culture of surfing for women and girls, while creating a platform that unites people. Harper’s love affair with surfing, however, is not a typical one. As a child, Harper would walk a couple of miles from her home to a predominantly white community pool to swim laps, despite feeling unwelcome. At the age of 10, her family moved to California where the realities of being a person of color were far from idyllic and, at the time, beaches remained segregated (until the 1960s). Although she loved

the ocean, she didn’t get on a surfboard until she was 15 years old, when her parents sent her to live with her sister who was attending a university in Hawai’i, on Oahu’s North Shore. It was there that Harper bought a secondhand surfboard and taught herself to stand up and ride a wave. From that point on, she was in the water every chance she could get, riding her board and feeling free.

At the age of 18, Rhonda moved back to California. One afternoon, when she returned from the beach to the parking lot, she found someone had written “Go home” with a racial slur on her car with surfing wax.

That incident, coupled with the fact that surfing has long been a white-dominated sport, inspired her to change the look of surfing. While working in the fashion industry in Los Angeles, Harper came up with a surf brand tailored toward Black surfers and named it Inkwel, after Inkwel Beach, one of the few beaches open to Black people during public segregation.

In 2014, Harper founded Black Girls Surf, to help girls and young women of color become elite surfers and compete on a professional level. Today, with locations in the United States, Africa, Jamaica and Brazil, Black Girls Surf is an inclusive organization that works to further the future of females in surfing. Its goal is to ensure that anyone who has ever wanted to surf is given the chance to learn, along with the opportunity to get an education (via its sponsorship programs).

Rhonda spoke with Naji Ali for an interview that aired on *Crossing the Lane Lines*, Ali’s podcast series. They discussed the paddle-outs (a spiritual symbol of surf culture that pays tribute to the life and legacy of those who have passed) following the death of George Floyd. Ali asked Harper if she thought white surfers understood what Black surfers have had to endure and if taking part in the paddle-out was more of “a movement or a moment” within this community? Harper replied, “This remains to be seen. I tend to look at things from one surf season to another (March through September marks a season in the sport), and if something like this can last from one surf season to the next, I think it is a movement.” She went on to say, she sees it now as a trend and she believes it’s genuine.

*Crossing The Lane Lines* is dedicated to giving voice to the Black swim community, featuring coaches, swimmers, authors and activists.

Says Ali, “I learned to swim [at age 43] because I wanted to actually swim in open water. When I was 13 years old, I had a summer job in San Diego, where I grew up, at a place called Scripps Institute of Oceanography. And I worked with a marine biologist.

“I remember that day being incredibly clear. It was very, very hot. And 20 miles out, the water was literally flat and glassy, never happens that far out in the ocean. And I had to know, because I’ve swum out in the ocean

many times, and even on the good day and stuff, I’m going to have to deal with something.

“And I remember after they had caught two tuna, one of the crew members decided to strip down to his shorts and go for a swim. So, he jumps off the side. They start swimming around and he’s doing the crawl. He’s doing backstroke, he’s doing a little breaststroke and some butterfly and then he climbs back up. And it’s telling off, and keep in mind, I’m 13 years old, and I’m fascinated. I’m watching this, I’d never seen this before.

“And I run up to him and I said, ‘Oh, wow, that’s really cool. I’m wondering if you could teach me that.’ The guy puts on his arm around me and he laughs and says, ‘Oh, kid, Black people don’t swim.’ And everybody on the boat laughed. And I just walked off. And I never brought that situation up for 30 years. I didn’t say anything about it to anyone.

“Fast forward to 2008, and I’m watching the second night of Michael Phelps trying to capture his eight gold medals. And it was the men’s four by 100-meter relay, the greatest men’s relay ever ran in the Olympics, as we all know... What fascinated me most about that whole race was the third leg of that relay, when a young man from North Carolina State, Cullen Jones, jumped in the water. First African-American I’d ever seen swim at the Olympics in my life.”

Naji Ali is a Black open water swimmer and coach who has made it his mission to create an environment where access to swimming is the norm, not a barrier. Learning to swim at the age of 43 sounds uncommon for most people, but it was better late than never for Ali. “I was determined that I wanted to swim,” Ali said. “I didn’t care what it would take. I was going to do it.” Ali’s podcast series, *Crossing the Lane Lines*, amplifies a diversity of voices into the public space outside the exhibition doors. Visitors to POOL are invited to sit down, look out at the Schuylkill River, and listen to Ali and his guests.

To hear the full interview between Naji Ali and Rhonda Harper visit: <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/making-waves-Black-surfers-demand-for-inclusion-diversity/id1524804967?i=1000494161335>.

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