

# Reflections on Malcolm X in 1992: A Quartet in B-Sharp (Music for Millions)

by

Abdul Alkalimat

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**SOCIAL CONTEXT: (Local, National, international), (Past, Present, Future)**

## 1. WHO WAS MALCOLM X?

Perhaps even more than most people, Malcolm X was a man in motion. He experienced life so fully and so intensely that in his brief 40 years one has to say that he led several lives. Anytime someone attempts to define Malcolm X without regard to his full development they run the risk of distortion. And worse, this is often done as a cover for sectarianism, claiming Malcolm belongs to one's own political tendency. The responsible answer to this question requires examining his entire life and not one part of it.

Malcolm X, with the collaboration of Alex Haley, wrote a classic autobiography in the great tradition of the slave narratives of Gustavus Vassa and Frederick Douglass, and the autobiographical texts of Booker T Washington and WEB DuBois. This is our greatest single source about Malcolm X.

Malcolm Little (1925 - 1941)

Malcolm was born May 19, 1925 in Omaha, Nebraska to Earl and Louise Little. He was a Georgia born baptist preacher and organizer for Marcus Garvey in the Universal Negro Improvement Association. She was a Grenadian born outspoken activist in the UNIA as well. He had nine brothers and sisters.

When Malcolm was 6 his father was brutally killed after suffering years of racist persecution, and six years later his mother succumbed to the pressure of the welfare system after trying to care for her children in poverty. She was committed to a mental hospital where she stayed from 1937 to 1963.

Malcolm Little was a Black youth alienated from his family through racist violence, and forced into the street to search for his manhood.

#### Detroit Red (1941 - 1952)

After spending three years in a foster home and detention school, and still not escaping institutional racism and individual prejudices, he moved to Boston with his eldest paternal half-sister Ella Collins. In Boston he turned away from what he considered the

hypocritical imitative lifestyle of the Black middle class, and took to the cultural dynamics of the street, the nocturnal fast lane of pop culture.

First in Boston, and then in New York Malcolm explored the full range of illegal alternatives. He did everything that still haunts the Black community today: drugs, prostitution, robbery, violence in many forms. He formed a gang of robbers in Boston, that quickly led to a prison term in 1946. In his 21st year he was a school drop out, a drug addict, and a jail-bird! He put it this way in his Autobiography:

Looking back, I think I really was at least slightly out of my mind. I viewed narcotics as most people regard food. I wore my guns as today I wear my neckties. Deep down, I actually believed...one should die violently.

#### Malcolm X (1952-1963)

It was while incarcerated that Malcolm came to understand how he had been isolated and rendered powerless other than as a source

of vulgar naked violence. In this depth he experienced one of the great reversals of the 20th century, the rehabilitation and conversion of a hardened criminal. He met Bimbi, a prison intellectual, who taught him to respect language, books, and reasoning. Malcolm was introduced by his brothers and sisters to Elijah Muhammad, the leader of the Nation of Islam. These two men guided him to self emancipation, reading and writing his way to intellectual growth, and to a reversal of habits to reenforce a new life style and moral code.

He went into prison a degenerate criminal, and after seven years had become a model of commitment, dedication, and discipline when he was released in 1952. Malcolm was now a man. He was moving in the path of his father, as a Black nationalist organizer attempting to save Black people from the destruction of a white racist society.

For the next 12 years Malcolm became the main leader for the Nation of Islam's growth from 400 to 40,000 members, with Temples organized in virtually every major city in the United States.

Malcolm went to Detroit first, and then to live and study with Elijah Muhammad in Chicago. He was then assigned to organize key cities. He became Minister of the New York Temple and became the National Spokesperson for his organization and leader. He married and had 6 daughters.

Omowale (1964-1965)

Malcolm acted as one of the many sons of Elijah Muhammad, and was an extremely dedicated follower. However, strains developed, and on a personal and a political level the strain turned into conflict and led to separation. Mr Muhammad was alleged to have fathered several children out of wedlock with two very young assistants, and in Malcolm's eye's this was a devastating transgression only exceeded by the cover-up hoax to validate his behavior through biblical reference. Malcolm violated Muhammads mandate to remain silent after Kennedy's assassination with his famous statement "that chickens were coming home to roost." He was simply saying that "those who live by the sword die by the sword" but in Muhammad's eyes this was an intolerable act of

insubordination. Malcolm was silenced December 3, 1963, and he formally announced his independence from the Nation of Islam on March 8, 1964.

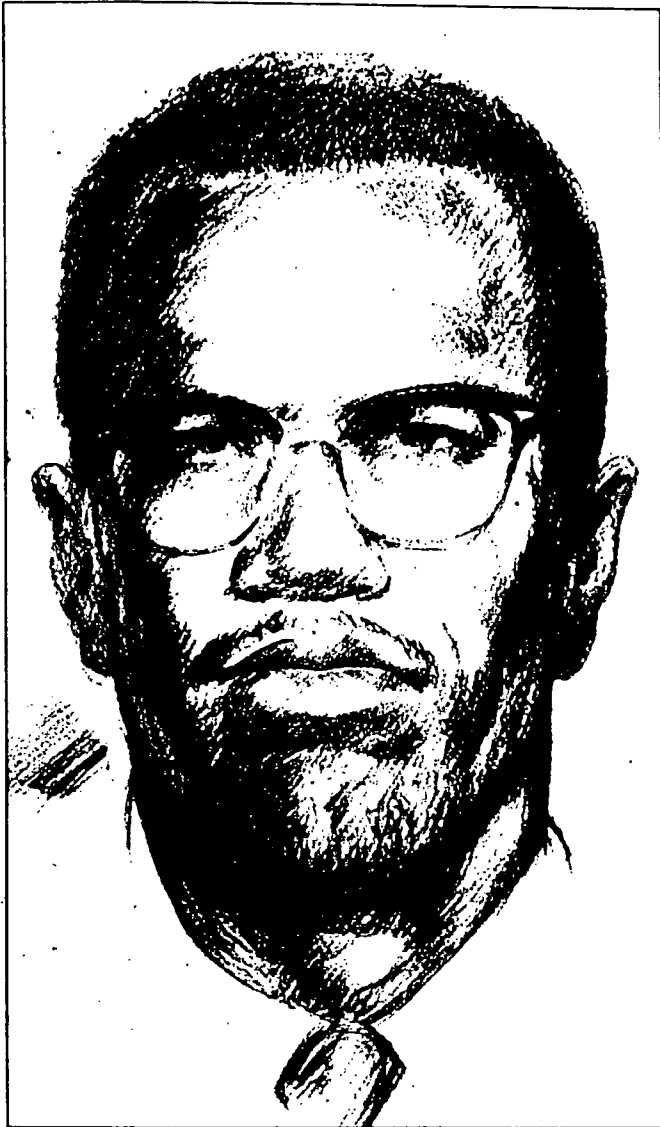
For the next year, Malcolm spent nearly 6 months abroad after announcing the formation of two organizations, the Muslim Mosque Inc. and the Organization of Afro-American Unity. In this last year Malcolm visited and lectured in over a dozen countries and established himself as a theoretical leader of the Black liberation movement. He had become even more dangerous outside of the sectarian Nation of Islam since people from all aspects of the Black community, and from all over the world were searching him out and seriously considering his ideological and political leadership. However, after less than 40 years, Malcolm was assassinated February 21, 1965 in New York City at the Audubon Ballroom while lecturing to his followers. After becoming a man advocating world brotherhood he was brutally murdered.

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## Malcolm X

### A warrior for these times!



By Abdul Alkalimat

**Malcolm X (1925-1965)** has been reborn in the rebellious spirit of youth culture. He is the symbol of militant fight-back against the racist barbarism of life in the United States of America.

The effort to remember Malcolm X has lasted 27 years, but today more people are interested in Malcolm X than ever before. We need to know why.

These are dangerous times

— no jobs, the cops on a rampage, drugs more common than water, AIDS making sex too dangerous to have any fun, etc. When people turn to Malcolm X they are calling for a vision of

a society in which these problems are solved.

These are confusing times. There are more black people on TV than ever before, but they act more like Clarence (Uncle Tom) Thomas than Malcolm X. When people turn to Malcolm X they are calling for bold straight talk, not more BS sweet talk from smilin'-but-lyin' mainstream politicians.

These are serious times — people's lives are in danger, including blacks, Latinos, whites, everybody, especially all poor people. When people turn to Malcolm X they declare their commitment to fight for a better life by any means necessary!

These are fighting times! We've got to get it straight, everybody who wants to talk that

talk ain't gonna walk that walk. Malcolm X was feared because what he said led to people waking up and taking action. And, when people took action he praised them for it.

Malcolm X would have praised the L.A. rebellion of 1992. He would have wanted to be there—a revolutionary general is always with the troops in battle!

Malcolm X was a great leader but he had to work hard to achieve his level of excellence. The only way to learn from Malcolm is to work hard—read the book, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*.

It will be good to see the movie by Spike Lee, it will be good "entertainment." But if you want to be like Malcolm, to

be a revolutionary, then you've got to study, you've got to read the words of Malcolm X for yourself.

My question has to do with the next rebellion, and whether the study of Malcolm X can lead to more youth making the leap from rebellion to revolution. Now is the time, brothers and sisters, now is the time!



Author Abdul Alkalimat

## Inside: L.A.'s community leaders speak



# Malcolm X and the struggle for the future

By Abdul Alkalimat

nity.

**WASHINGTON**—The greatest strength of Malcolm X was his ability to teach people that knowledge was dangerous. He was dangerous to the professional liars in the media and to the colleges because he constantly urged people to think for themselves. He was dangerous to the ruling class because he relentlessly exposed their interests and controlling influence over the misery of our commu-

as a role model. Malcolm X was an internationalist thinker and constantly taught that we have to think globally but act locally. He said "You can't understand Mississippi unless you understand the Congo, and you can't understand the Congo unless you understand Mississippi." He went on to draw examples from all over Africa, from the Caribbean and from China.

Malcolm X argued that a revolutionary storm was building

and that it was not going to be a race war, but a war of the oppressed against the oppressors.

This is obviously coming true. The 1992 Los Angeles Rebellion demonstrates this, just as do the statistics about who has to fight daily just to survive.

The most important realization will be when people see that Malcolm X was not merely a Black revolutionary. He was a revolutionary who at the end of his life had risen to the level of representing everyone in this

society who stood for progressive change.

He had become so dangerous that he was killed for his beliefs. He was killed so that we would forget him and we would be afraid to follow in his footsteps.

This hasn't worked for the last 500 years and it won't for the next 500 years either.

Our message is that if you like Malcolm, forget about dying like him, but do everything you can to live like him!



## LAYOFFS BUDGET CUTS

# 100 YEARS OF RECONSTRUCTION

# Did Spike Lee do the right thing? I think not, and here's why!

By Abdul Alkalimat, 21st Century Books, Chicago

We are in the midst of a spectacle that reflects the great American Dilemma of race and power, a public event that concentrates a discussion of the black experience in the USA. The Spike Lee/Denzel Washington movie about Malcolm X raises hopes for a serious discussion of race, religion, and radicalism. Most media voices have been ecstatic, and most mainstream critics regard this film as a signal achievement. I think not.

Malcolm X (1925-1965) was a leader/teacher of immense significance because of his impact on the political ideology of the Black liberation movement. Furthermore, Malcolm X was the critical voice that linked militant black radicalism to revolutionary forces in the USA and throughout the world. So, a movie about this man is not simply about the black experience, but a radical black message grounded in the "forbidden zones" of the "field Negroes" of the 1990s.

Fundamentally, this movie by Spike Lee is a reductionist exercise in mainstreaming Malcolm X. He might get an A on market-

## The essence of

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this issue that the  
film loses its chance  
for greatness.

ing (though even Spike Lee seems to accept Madonna's leadership in this area), but on my grading scale he gets a D- on political ideology and a C on history. This film tells a story that revolves around the dual axes of race and religion, but in each instance there is deradicalization.

The social and economic conditions of the Black community are worse today than in the 1960s, so Malcolm X should be even more powerful today. The issues that require a voice like Malcolm X today include racism and police violence, homelessness, the deep and severe cutbacks in welfare programs, permanent unemployment from de-industrialization and the crisis of the U.S. being the world's greatest debtor nation.

Malcolm X's time, the nightmare that he saw is right now!

There are omissions in the film: e.g., Ella Collins, Malcolm's half sister, is written out but she was the reason Malcolm was in Boston. In fact, she was the woman Malcolm X confided in during the last year of his life. There are distortions in the film: e.g., the character Baines is actually a composite portrait of several people, and gives an incorrect version of how Malcolm X was recruited to Islam. Spike Lee belittles the role of Malcolm's family. But since art will have omissions and distortion, the overall main issue is interpretation.

The film's main focus is on a Satan to saint transformation, about half on "Detroit Red" (with flash-backs to Malcolm Little), and the remainder on Malcolm X in the Nation of Islam. The very end of his life is portrayed in religious terms, with the CIA as sort of Keystone Kops thrown in without explanation. In fact, Malcolm X was developing an analysis based on class and power, increasingly talking about the negative aspects of capitalism and the "Western power structure" (i.e., imperialism). Mal-

colm X said to the movement, "Put religion in the closet." Why did Spike Lee see fit to make this the main thing?

The essence of Malcolm X's last year was revolutionary politics, and it's on this issue that the film loses its chance for greatness. The link to South Africa was the impact Malcolm had on Stephen Biko and the Black consciousness movement, and not Nelson Mandela, and the African National Congress. This point can be seen in the film when Mandela is reciting a quote by Malcolm X but was unwilling to finish the quote with the phrase "By any means necessary." The film ends with personality posters of the Black millionaires who helped fund the movie. The kind of politics they represent has little to do with Malcolm X, but one must guess they have everything to do with the meaning of this film.

I suspect that this film was carefully manicured to play well in mainstream suburbia, because it replaces radical politics with a

moral universalism. Why should Malcolm X be less threatening to the U.S. status quo today, when the people he represented ("the bottom of the pile Negroes," "field Negroes") are now more threatened, and therefore are more threatening? Are we being conned by this film?

Well, maybe for most people this is an entertaining movie, and I guess there is some reason for the critics finally to support a filmmaker who serves as an ideologist for the new Black middle class, but there is another point of view to be heard. As a scholar and an activist in the Black community for the past 30 years, it is my responsibility to argue in support of a revolutionary reading of Malcolm X.

One has to wonder why black activists who have studied Malcolm X were not consulted on the front end, and are so very critical on the back end of this project. Yes, Spike is right, only a black person could make this film and get away with the con.

## ABDUL ALKALIMAT Activist-Scholar on Malcolm X

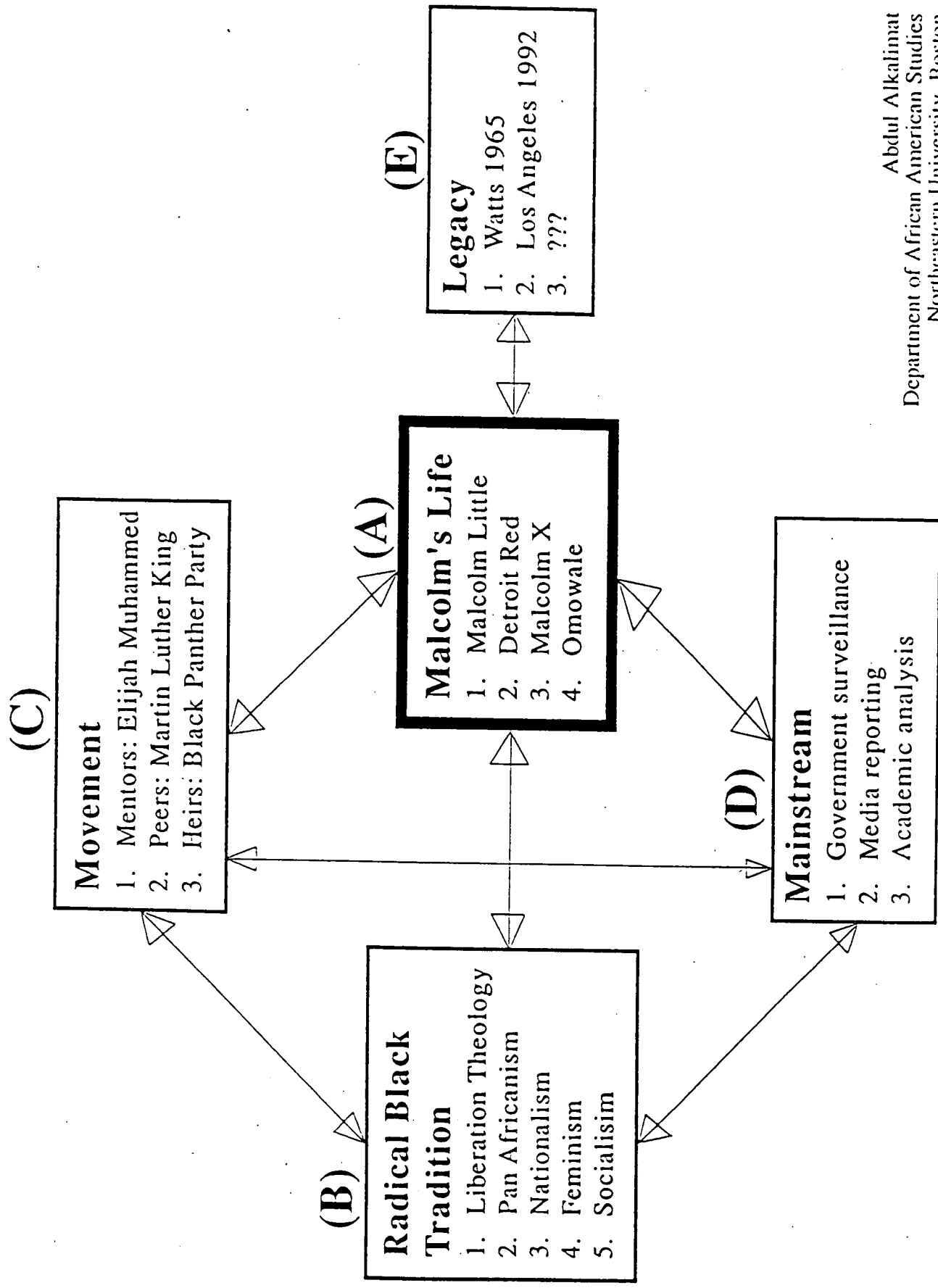
Organizer of the international Malcolm X conferences and author of *Malcolm X for Beginners*, university teacher, former leader of SNCC and senior author of *Introduction to Afro-American Studies*.



GENERAL BAKER

**Voices for New America**  
African-American History Month 1993

# A Framework for How To Read Malcolm X



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