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1992: YEAR OF THE X

by Herb Boyd

Like Zorro's Z so prevalent in the early sixties, the letter "X" was plastered everywhere last year. Some were as tiny as those x-ing out lines on the numerous literary contracts seeking to capitalize off Malcolm's fame, and some were as large as the one that covered the side of a building near Times Square heralding the release of Spike Lee's film. "X's" glowed in silver from bus stands and subway walls, and they came at you in waves on the street, adorned on wearing apparel of every description. There was such a splash of "X's" that one comedian took to wearing a cap and t-shirt with an "O" on it — "to block the X's he quipped.

What is the "X" storm all about? Is it merely another opportunity to watch the wheels of capitalism spin as consumers rush to purchase items associated with this latest fad on the market? Or are we on the verge of a cultural renaissance and a surge of nationalism in black America that seems to recur every thirty or forty years? Perhaps what we have here is a combination of impulses, a mixture of developments with Wall Street, Madison Avenue and Hollywood fattening their coffers while creating a veritable cottage industry around the name and legacy of Malcolm X while black America is left to vibrate off the spirit of it all. Of course, there would be nothing new or unusual about such an arrangement.

But, before attempting to place this "X" factor in cultural and historical context or analyzing its ramifications, it might be instructive to review just what has been going on.

Well, in the beginning was Spike, and the letter was "X." Months before anyone was aware of his moves, Spike (just as he is moving now to nail down a deal on a Miles Davis biopic) had his eye on a Malcolm film. Some aspects surfaced in two of his previous films: "Do The Right Thing" and "She's Gotta Have It." Recall that Nola Darling's birthday, May 19, was the same as Malcolm's.

"I did not put those quotes from King and then Malcolm at the end of "Do The Right Thing" to promote myself as director of 'Malcolm X,'" Lee explains in *By Any Means Necessary — The Trials and Tribulations of the Making of Malcolm X*, (Hyperion) a book he coauthored with writer Ralph Wiley, "but it was because of 'Do The Right Thing' that a man named Marvin Worth — who had the rights to the material on Malcolm's life — sent me a letter saying that he wanted me to direct the film, or would at least like to discuss with me the possibility of doing it." Lee said he never received the letter, but Worth later showed him a copy. Meanwhile, after his missed appointment with fate, Lee was informed that Worth had brought in Norman Jewison to direct the film.

"When it got out that Norman was going to direct this film, that's when I started to speak out about it," Lee writes. At this juncture the media entered the fray and soon it was widely reported that Lee was badmouthing Jewison. Lee felt that no white man should direct a movie about Malcolm, that "he [Jewison] would be unable to get the cooperation from key Black informants," Lee told the press. That's when Worth got in touch with Lee about directing the film.

Lee asserts: "We didn't want it to seem as if we just Bogarted him or bum-rushed or steamrolled over Jewison, who is a fine director who has done good work. But at that point there was nothing for him to feel attached to with Malcolm X. For me it then became only a matter of choosing which script I wanted to do, whether I wanted to rewrite Marvin Worth's existing script by James Baldwin and a collaborator named Arnold Perl (both of them now deceased). . . . I knew about Malcolm X, but I would have to really get to

know him, and those people who knew him intimately, much better before I could feel comfortable shooting the film. I felt that was the only way to do the matter justice."

As soon as the word got out that Lee had his "X" under contract, a backlash snapped from among disciples of Malcolm X and community activists, led by poet/playwright Amiri Baraka, who believed that Lee was just as unfit for the assignment as Jewison. None of his previous films, the detractors claimed, possessed any characters of political substance. "The film will be another Spike Lee joint," they chanted at several demonstrations in Harlem. "He ridicules radicals, and he will never capture Malcolm's resonance and integrity," others cried. In short, Baraka noted, "Spike is part of a retrograde trend." Later, in an interview with *Newsday*, Baraka declared that "Shorty the hustler is alive and well in Hollywood, and his name is Spike Lee."

During the time Lee was completing the final editing of the film, the feisty director was also busy meeting retort with retort, never cowering from his attackers. "This film will not be made by a committee," he told me on several occasions. "No one tells Baraka what kind of plays to write, so he has no business trying to dictate what kind of film I make. There are many Malcolms and I will make my version of him. And if they want to continue to criticize me, I suggest they pay their \$7.50 and see the film first."

With the hype about the film percolating, a profusion of "X" merchandise suddenly began to emerge. The first sign of Malcolm's legacy was emblazoned on caps, then jackets, T-shirts, watches, key chains, cups, refrigerator magnets, cushions, trading cards, medallions, and countless other gadgets and accessories. For those with a nose for the "X" bouquet there was an air freshener available. And, if you had a bad case of the munchies, for a quarter you could purchase a bag of Nubian mix "X" potato chips. "X stands for the unknown," reads the inscription on the back of the chips next to the list of ingredients, "the unknown language, religion, ancestors and cultures of the African American. X is a replacement for the last name given to the

slaves by the slave master. We dedicate this product to the concept of X." Larry Depte, a spokesperson for Snak-Pak, the maker of the chips, insists that the company is not exploiting Malcolm's name. "We're not trying to market anybody's name or likeness," he said. The chips have no preservatives but, given Malcolm's fiery rhetoric, they could be a little more spicy. But let's not knock the chips because they at least give us some explanation of what "X" means; nowhere in Lee's film is this done.

Before the release of the film there were so many "X" items on the market — 200 at last count — that Dr. Betty Shabazz, Malcolm's widow, was forced to hire a licensing agency to protect the rights of the estate. Contrary to Curtis Management Group, Ms. Shabazz's agency, many merchandisers felt that the letter "X" was not the exclusive property of Malcolm or his estate. Long before the "X" adorned baseball caps, Onowale Clay of Harlem claims to have first used the logo. Clay told the *New York Amsterdam News* that he had been using the "X" symbol before the Malcolmania craze began. Even Lee, with all sorts of merchandise bearing the "X" logo in his stores, had, until only recently, refused to honor the agency's claims.

"I hope we can avoid legal action," Mark Roesler, chief executive of Curtis Management, told a reporter at the *New York Times*. "We have a lot of leverage." At this time Lee and Curtis were negotiating, and the sticking point blocking an agreement was the payment of royalties on unlicensed merchandise already sold. Eventually a deal was struck, but there has been no report about the details. What has been widely reported, however, is the rumor that Curtis Management's Roesler is related to a South African businessman who retains a controlling interest in the company. When Dr. Shabazz was told of this connection, she said she was not aware of the association and that she would look into it. This was just the latest incident in a controversy that found Lee at the vortex.

The stories commanding the most attention focused on Lee's determination not to kowtow to Warners Brothers and cut provoca-

tive scenes from the film's opening of an American flag burning into the shape of an "X" or footage of Rodney King being beaten unmercifully by Los Angeles cops. Also, there were financial problems: A completion bonding company was threatening to take over the project after Lee had gone over budget. "Malcolm X," Lee said in an interview with Henry Louis Gates, Jr. for *Transition*, an international review, "is a \$32-33 million movie, but Warner Brothers only put \$18 into this film. And Largo bought the foreign rights for \$8 million; so it's 6, 7 million over budget. . . . So we went in knowing that somewhere down the line, we'd have to find some extra money. But we had to get the film made then: it's been two decades, and we had to seize the opportunity."

When Warners refused to fork over more money, Lee took his plight to the Black megastars with megabucks, Bill Cosby, Oprah Winfrey, Janet Jackson, Prince, Magic Johnson, and Michael Jordan were among those who raised the additional funds needed to complete the film. According to statements from Lee, the donors kicked in more than \$5 million, although several music trade magazines doubted the veracity of this claim, suggesting instead that Warners capitulated to Lee's demands. Whatever the case, the bonding company was kept at bay, even if the media were unable to resist rushing madly after Lee's hype parade. His dazzle must have overwhelmed the reporters because, in Lee's opinion, they misquoted him on his statement about black children skipping school to see his film. "I never said young black Americans should skip school," Lee countered. "But it's important for families to take their kids early, because this is the most amount of money ever spent on a movie in black history, and we had to fight to get the amount we got."

A few days later, after I reported in the *Amsterdam News* that Lee and Warner Brothers would not be previewing the film at the Apollo Theatre in Harlem where Malcolm X gained national prominence, Lee was again on the front pages. (Eventually a compromise was reached, allowing the Apollo to have a benefit screening two days after the film's world pre-

miere at the Ziegfeld.) Only the disturbing news that the Alex Haley estate was preparing to auction off valuables, (including the original manuscript of *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*), was a bigger story in the black press. After the manuscript as well as three never published chapters were acquired for \$100,000 by Detroit attorney, Greg Reid, Lee was asked why he had not bid on the property. "I am not interested at this time," he told the press.

Lee may not have been interested in the literary aspects surrounding the Malcolm revival, but numerous authors and scholars were. At last count, there were nearly thirty new books on or about Malcolm from those who knew him intimately to those who were not even born when he was assassinated. Among those gaining the most notoriety are Joe Wood's anthology *Malcolm X: In Our Own Image* (St. Martin's). What is least rewarding about this book is the opening salvo from Amiri Baraka with more of his relentless screed against Lee, which is based not on the film but a draft of the screenplay. Solid essays by Arnold Rampersad, Patricia Collins, Robin Kelley, and Adolph Reed save the day. Because of its psycho-history analysis and Freudian spin, Bruce Perry's often meticulously researched biography *Malcolm: The Life of a Man Who Changed Black America* (Station Hill) is the source of much consternation. Most troubling is Perry's skewed reading of Malcolm's life and his basically unsubstantiated charges of homosexuality and a bizarre interpretation of Malcolm's motivations.

Journalist Karl Evanzz in his *Judas Factor: The Plot to Kill Malcolm X* (Thunder's Mouth Press) offers a compelling scenario of the government's role in the assassination of Malcolm. But his theory that Gene Roberts, an undercover cop and Malcolm's bodyguard, fired the fatal bullet is farfetched. The hole in Roberts' coat — which he told this writer — was the result of a bullet fired by Talmadge Hayer, who was later convicted for his part in the brutal murder. A more balanced survey of the assassination is provided by Mike Friedly in his *Malcolm: The Assassination* (Carroll & Graf), though much of what he presents is a retread of Peter Goldman's earlier revelations.

Perhaps now that there is new evidence surfacing a thorough unbiased examination of Malcolm's murder can be conducted. There is also a need for an anthology of essays that combine the conclusions of Malcolmites and detractors. Thus far, the spate of books have offered either one point of view or the other.

Along with recent books by James Cone, Benjamin Karim, Bernard Doctor, and Thulani Davis, there is the trove of books issued by Pathfinder Press, especially the work of George Breitman, which remain the touchstone in the field. Of course, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* is indispensable for readers who want it straight from the source, albeit, here and there with a little fudging, writer Joe Wood recently noted. And obviously many people are curious about the real deal since nearly a million copies of the autobiography have been sold this year. This brings the total sales to 3 million copies since the book was first published in 1965.

The bulk of these readers rushed to get their copy of the autobiography in late November after the film was released to glowing reviews. Except for *Time* magazine and a few irascible, hard to please film critics with an agenda, it was thumbs up from the mainstream critics across the country. "X-traordinary," cried Lee's supporters. "X-crement," replied the dissenters. Old opponents now had a new battleground, and Michael Eric Dyson saw some value in the division. "No matter how (Malcolm) is pigeonholed, his stature derives as much from his detractors' exaggerated fears as from his admirers exalted hopes. He has become a divided metaphor: For those who love him, he is a powerful lens for self-perception, a means of sharply focusing political and racial priorities; for those who loathe him, he is a distorting mirror that reflects violence and hatred."

In my opinion the film is indeed a powerful work of art, although by failing to consider Malcolm's dynamic last year — in which he crammed almost five years of meaningful living and learning — Lee stopped short of making a truly great film. During his final year Malcolm traveled twice to Africa and visited with all the progressive heads of state, includ-

ing Nasser of Egypt, Obote of Uganda, Nyerere of Tanzania, Kenyatta of Kenya, Azikiwe of Nigeria, Nkrumah of Ghana. This significant phase of Malcolm's life, his growing eminence as a black American leader, was glossed over completely. It was in these final hours that Malcolm's anti-imperialist, pro-socialist leanings were sharply emerging, and some of this new perspective is clearly evident in the Organization of Afro-American Unity (OAAU) documents which, to a large extent, must stand as Malcolm's last will and statement. It would have been rewarding to see how Malcolm functioned with his comrades in shaping the OAAU's policy and objectives.

Almost simultaneously with the release of the film, Lee was raging about the absence of black writers at major white publications. Whether this was a genuine concern for the predicament of black writers or just another gimmick from the hypemaster — "only Madonna can best me at self-promotion" — to stir the embers of controversy is debatable, but at least one publication took him seriously and hired a black reporter. Still, there were more than a few writers of color who were pissed off at Lee who, in their estimation, made himself exceedingly available to white reporters while "dissing" them. They expressed no sympathy for Lee when he was lambasted by these same white writers and editors in such magazines as *Esquire*. A similar complaint would come later from editors and owners of black newspapers and magazines who beefed that while white publications were receiving full page ads for the film, black publications were lucky to get an eighth of a page. With his usual aplomb, Lee dismissed these charges, telling the disgruntled that he had nothing to do with the placing of ads. "That's Warner Brothers' responsibility," he said.

Of more importance to Lee were the increasing number of complaints from filmgoers that tickets purchased to see Malcolm X were actually tickets for other films. In late December Lee called a press conference in downtown Manhattan to address the issue. "Filmgoers should make sure their ticket stubs are marked Malcolm X," Lee warned. "We worked our butts off on this film and we want all dollars that should rightly be coming to us." The problems seemed to be limited to multiplex theaters where five or six films are shown

simultaneously. While Lee was busy watching the box office and overseeing the creation of "Bat Squads" to confiscate bootleg copies of his film, a movement of sorts was afoot by black conservatives to confiscate Malcolm and remake him in their image. That Malcolm was an ardent proponent of self-determination and a scourge on liberals have led these conservatives — Robert Woodson, Shelby Steele, Alan Keyes, Glenn Loury, et al. — to suggest that if Malcolm were alive he would be in their camp. "I think Malcolm X was essentially a black Republican by today's standards," TV commentator Tony Brown told Juan Williams in *GQ*. "I use two basic criteria to come to that conclusion. Number one, Malcolm was for individual opportunity. Number two, he was for self-help. This is a Republican philosophy. It is right in line with (Marcus) Garvey, Elijah Muhammad, Booker T. Washington, and most of all, Malcolm X. And that philosophy stands in contradiction to those who believe in integration and in the government as the first and last resort of the black man."

Malcolm X was also a man of principles and integrity who saw the family as crucial in community stability. The conservatives can also claim him on these grounds if they choose. But these values alone, though pertinent, are not sufficient to constitute a full blown philosophy. What about Malcolm's opposition to racism, capitalism and imperialism? What about his stance on self-defense and his strong identification with things currently labeled Afrocentric? Any one of these elements is more salient to one's philosophical makeup than self-reliance or individuality. Malcolm, to his death, was a revolutionary black nationalist and this alone should be enough to give him considerable distance from the conservative tar brush. The truth of this ideology is very apparent in the statement and objectives of the Organization of Afro-American Unity. No word yet from Lee on the conservatives' reclamation project.

To date the film has made \$36 million, according to a press release from Forty Acres

and A Mule, Lee's company. Denzel Washington has been honored by the New York Film Critics Circle for his performance and some Academy Awards would appear to be a certainty, particularly for the remarkable cinematography and supporting cast. Malcolm X as a dead icon has outstripped the popularity he had when he was alive. School children will never make the mistake again of asking "Who is this Malcolm the tenth?" His image has been resurrected — trivialized, stylized and co-opted some insist — and, despite those who would keep him sacred and safe from the "defilers," Malcolm now belongs to the world. While the swirl around his memory and the film will eventually die down, it is sure to gather momentum once more in several months when PBS airs a documentary on Malcolm produced by Henry Hampton and Blackside Productions. It was they who assembled the phenomenally rewarding series "Eyes on the Prize." In addition, we can expect a rather definitive treatment of Malcolm's life when Manning Marable's biography appears.

It is this writer's belief that the ever-evolving Malcolm was on the verge of becoming his most compelling incarnation, one who would have been prepared to embrace a broader humanity without forsaking any of those revolutionary principles that makes him eternally attractive. Lee and his cast made a gallant attempt to harness this essence, as have a number of scholars and artists, but this may never be done. No amount of merchandise in the marketplace can signify Malcolm's profound love for his people. For those who have studied or followed Malcolm, the "X" represents the unknown, the Malcolm we may never know but only feel. The "X" represents a political and cultural legacy to be passed on to a new generation. And, although to sport an "X" is quite fashionable today, it should also serve as a stimulus, a catalyst to research its significance. Because years after the "X's" have peeled from the caps and garments, when the symbol is frayed and tattered, the substance of Malcolm X and his life will retain a permanent place in the annals of history.