

EBONY

**Denzel Washington And
The Making Of Malcolm X**
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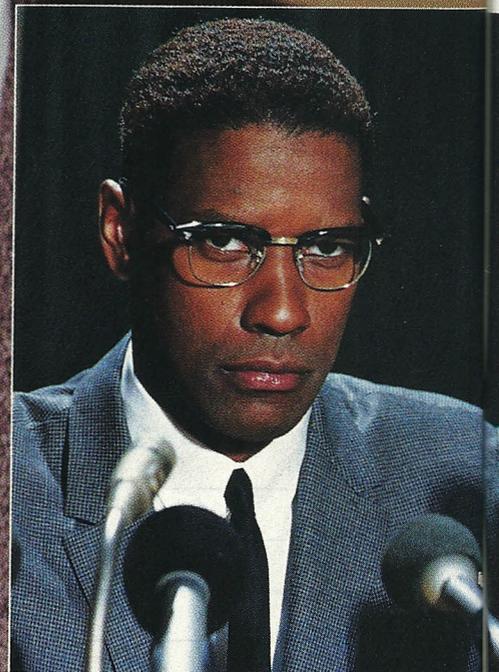
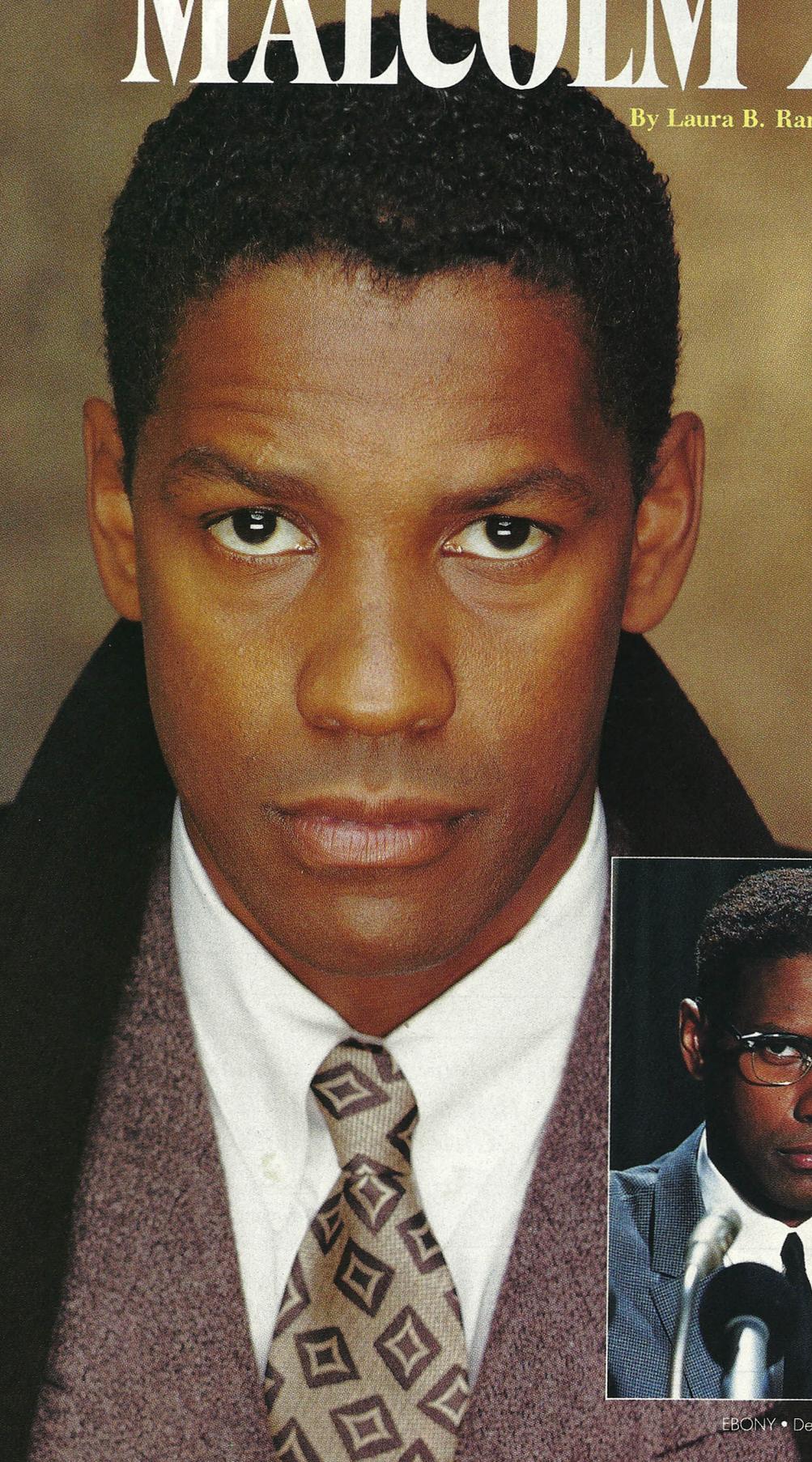
DECEMBER 1992 \$2

And The Making Of

MALCOLM X

By Laura B. Randolph

DENZEL WASHINGTON



Charismatic star takes us behind the scenes of blockbuster film

MALCOLM X. No ordinary man. No ordinary film.

Not for Spike Lee who directed it and who was determined to make it by any means necessary. So much so, in fact, that when funding was cut off during post-production he contributed \$2 million of his \$3 million salary to make sure it was finished.

And not for some of the most prominent Black folks in America who gave Spike the cash he needed to keep the film going when creditors would not back him after costs swelled \$5 million above the original \$28 million budget.

And certainly not for Denzel Washington, the film's star, who deferred his salary to see the movie made and viewed his portrayal of the slain Black leader as nothing less than his fate. His destiny.

"Everything I have done as an actor has been in preparation for this," Washington declares, staring out at New York's Central Park from the window of his suite in the Ritz-Carlton.

"This," of course, is his long anticipated role in what Washington calls "the most controversial film of the decade." To promote it, he has left his family at home in L.A. and caught the red-eye to

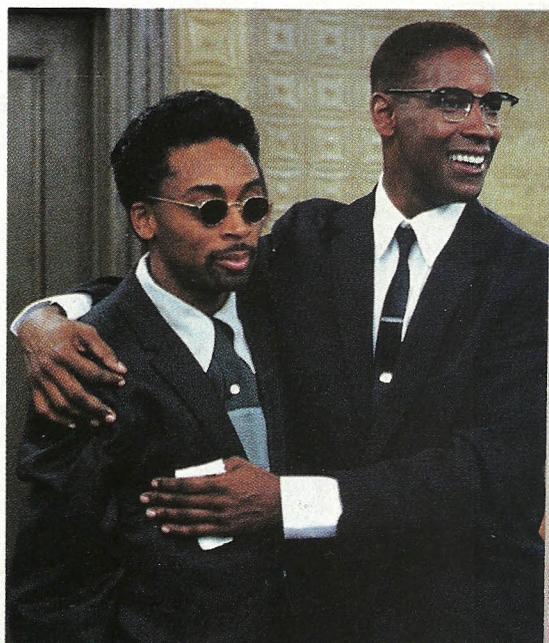
New York where, between bites of a room service breakfast, he is steeling himself for a long day of interviews.

Though he is unfailingly polite ("You want some eggs? How about some coffee?"), Washington makes it clear where interviews fall on his favorite-things list. "I like a low profile," he says with a wan smile.

Actually, there is much more to Washington's distaste for interviews than his well-known affinity for privacy. Insiders say he is the rarest of all species in Hollywood: a bonafide superstar without an ego ("I'm a regular guy") or a need to hype his latest project ("I like my work to speak for me; I don't like to speak for my work").

That's why it is almost impossible to overrate the significance of his assertion that, at 38, all of his work, all of his films, has been a preparation for this one. That's right, *all* of his work: his 1980 film debut in *Carbon Copy*, his six seasons on TV's Emmy Award-winning series *St. Elsewhere*, his 1987 Oscar-nominated depiction of South African freedom fighter Stephen Biko in *Cry Freedom* and everything in between. Even his 1989 Academy Award-winning portrayal of a slave-turned-soldier in the Civil War epic *Glory*. All that, he says, was prologue.

Exaggeration? Hyperbole? Hollywood hype? Not for Washington, who knows better than anyone that he is connected to this role in a way no other actor could be: just as Denzel is giving us Malcolm, it was Malcolm, in a way, who gave

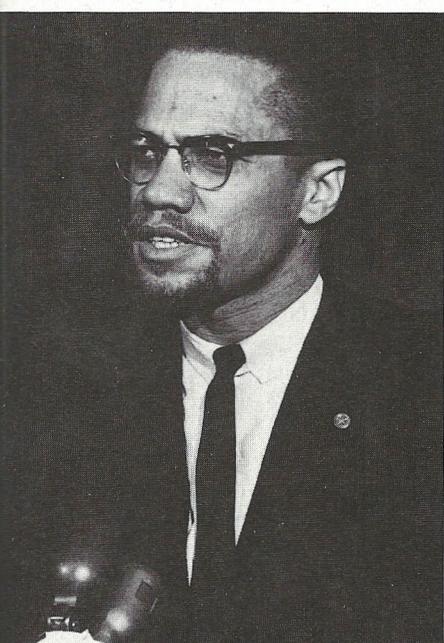


us Denzel.

Having traded in his acting dreams for a government job and a steady paycheck, Washington was headed for 9-to-5 oblivion when he learned he'd won the role of Malcolm in a little-known, off-Broadway play, *When The Chickens Come Home To Roost*. His portrayal was so spellbinding, so *real*, that friends of Malcolm's widow began phoning her with the same impassioned message: *See this play*.

"Everyone was saying to me, 'You should see this kid. He is just absolutely fantastic,'" remembers Betty Shabazz, now an administrator at Brooklyn's

Playing the role of a lifetime, Academy Award-winning actor Denzel Washington (opposite page) stars as Malcolm X in the movie, *Malcolm X*, which centers on the life of the charismatic Black nationalist leader (below, left and right). In a scene during Malcolm's Harlem heydays (above), Washington is joined by Spike Lee, the film's director who also plays the role of "Shorty."





Depicting all phases of Malcolm X's life, Washington portrays "Detroit Red" (above), the aide to Muslim leader Elijah Muhammad (right), played by Al Freeman Jr.



MALCOLM X *Continued*

Medgar Evers College, who was pregnant with twins when she watched her husband gunned down at the Audubon Ballroom in 1965.

Shabazz never did go to see Denzel in the play ("At that time I could not afford emotionally to see it"), but she did agree to be a consultant to this film. "I gave Spike an addendum to the script," she says, referring to the two-decades-old James Baldwin/Arnold Perl screenplay on which Spike based the movie and which he rewrote throughout its production.

In ways Washington isn't able to explain even to himself, since he played the Muslim leader in *Chickens*, he has known in some deep and prescient way

that the day would come when he would again play Malcolm. "When I did that play I said to myself, 'I'm going to do this movie one day. I know it,'" he says.

Washington knew, too, that when that day came, he wouldn't be portraying the prophet of Black pride in some obscure off-Broadway play. He would be portraying him in the motion picture that would bring his life to the screen and, far more significantly, to a whole new generation.

And so he made a promise to himself—a promise he has kept now for more than a dozen years. "I decided then I wasn't going to do anything even dealing with Malcolm X until I did the film about his life."

Perhaps because he had to wait so

long to fulfill that promise, he admits his performance became almost an obsession. He has always done extensive preparation for roles. For *Cry Freedom* he mastered a South African accent, added 30 pounds to his six-foot frame and had the caps removed from his front teeth. For *Glory*, he spent hours pouring over historic records and period accounts. But for *Malcolm X*, his preparation was extreme even by his standards. "I was doing so much work, I just sort of blended into the man as best I could," he says. "That was my desire."

That work included talking with dozens of Malcolm's intimates ("Relatives, friends, enemies, I wanted to hear it first hand"), reading the FBI and prison records ("Sometimes actually finding more information that you really wanted to talk about"), attending Fruit of Islam classes ("They would have us marching and just changing our way of thinking, our state of mind"), learning to Lindy Hop ("I'm from New York so I like to think I can dance a little"), and watching hours and hours of videotape. "I had studied so much," he says, "I knew even what type of glasses he was wearing on a particular day."

He even fasted, he says, "to clean myself up" and, for much of the 16 months he spent shooting, followed the Muslim canon of one meal a day. Finally, when he felt his mental preparation could take him no further, "I just tried to make a spiritual connection," he says.

Some days, particularly those on which he had to deliver Malcolm's speeches, Washington found himself "hoping [Malcolm] would show up that day and help me out. Those were the days I felt the closest to him. I guess because I was actually using his words."

Given the scope of his research, that he would feel close to Malcolm is understandable. But what about that spiritual link he so fervently hoped for? Did he ever feel the connection? Washington picks up his cup and takes a long pull of coffee. When he sets it down, his voice is barely above a whisper. "I really don't like to talk about it," he says turning away and staring out at the New York skyline.

It is clear that Washington is decidedly uncomfortable discussing this metaphysical thing. It is the only subject, in fact, that seems to dislodge his legendary sangfroid. Nonetheless, he recognizes that what he is most reluctant to talk about is what every person who sees this movie most wants to know: *Did he ever feel Malcolm's presence?*

"I remember the first time I had to give one of Malcolm's speeches," he re-



Re-creating marriage of Malcolm X and Betty Shabazz, Washington and costar Angela Bassett dramatize one of happiest episodes in the leader's life. Dr. Shabazz, who played a major role in keeping the Malcolm X flame burning, is an administrator at Brooklyn's Medgar Evers College.

MALCOLM X *Continued*

plies, offering, if not a direct answer, an incident that strongly suggests it. "The day of the shoot it was raining. Ice cold rain. Bitter cold. Two more degrees and it would have been snowing. And Spike said, 'We're setting up, we're shooting.' The crew had to set up lights, mikes, everything in this storm. And do you know that when I came out to start Malcolm's speech the rain stopped. Just quit. And as soon as I finished, *as soon as we left the set*, it started pouring down again. That's when I knew we were going to be all right."

There was certainly reason to wonder. From the beginning, the making of this movie was almost more complicated off-screen than on. By insisting that a White director could never do justice to the complexities of Malcolm's life, Lee wrested the film away from Canadian director Norman Jewison, who was originally slated to direct the movie from a script by Black playwright Charles Fuller.

Before Spike could even shoot one scene, however, he had his own ability to tell Malcolm's story assailed by poet and playwright Amiri Baraka who, speaking for the United Front to Preserve the Legacy of Malcolm X, intimated the filmmaker would "trash" Malcolm's story "to make middle-class Negroes sleep easier."

When Lee heard about it, his reaction was pointedly blasé. "This film . . . is going to be *my* vision of Malcolm X," he

said icily.

And the fireworks kept coming. While Spike was in the middle of editing, the Completion Bond Company, the film's guarantor, threatened to shut down production when the director went \$5 million over budget and Warner Bros. said it would not put up the extra money. Livid, Lee lashed out at the studio charging there could only be one reason for its refusal to come up with the cash: racism.

Rightly or wrongly, racism is an old song for Lee. He is known to sing it whenever he doesn't get what he wants or feels he deserves. In fact, no director has banged heads with the White men who run Hollywood as hard or as much as Lee. But this time, even the normally politic Denzel Washington backed Lee to the hilt.

"Warner Bros., they didn't come up like they should have come up on this—pure and simple," he declares. "And they've come up for a lot of other garbage. But that's par for the course—They come up for White folks. They don't come up for us—ever."

Rather than relinquish creative control of his film, however, Spike asked some of the richest Black people in the world to donate the funds he needed to salvage the movie. "I cannot call [studio executives] Terry Semel and Bob Daly anymore and say, '*Please Mr. White Man. Can't you find [more money] in your liberal hearts?*'" he sneered.

Within days, Lee received checks from Bill Cosby, Oprah Winfrey, Magic Johnson, Michael Jordan, Prince, Janet Jackson and Duke Ellington School of the Arts Founder Peggy Cooper Cafritz. Cash in hand, Spike didn't suppress even slightly the impulse to gloat.

"Next time I'm gonna [. . .] Hollywood. I'm gonna go straight to these people . . .," is how he put it, clearly buzzing on his triumph. "This is an important precedent."

A momentous coup is more like it, says veteran actor Ossie Davis who delivered the eulogy at Malcolm's funeral and, at Spike's request, accompanied the filmmaker the day he stunned Hollywood's moneymen with his keep-your-cash announcement.

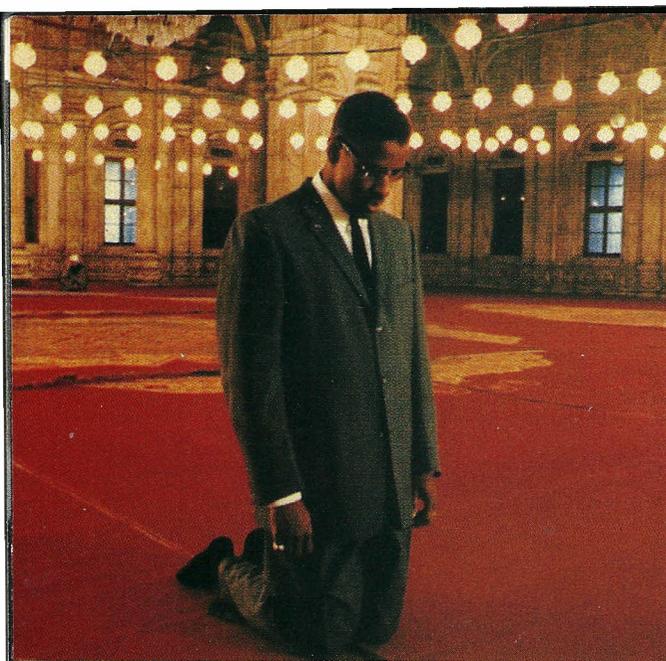
"We suffer from our own belief that Blacks often operate like crabs in a basket . . .," Davis says, explaining why Spike's action is so significant. "And here comes Spike who reaches out and touches important people in the Black community—people with resources who offer them to Spike in copious quantities *not* as an investment, *not* as a loan, but as a way of affirming Black solidarity, one with the other. Let that fact alone be known by *all* Black people, especially Black youth . . . And let it forever lay to rest that thing we say about ourselves: that we can't ever cooperate, that we are born and die fighting one another. With this one action, Spike has laid that to rest forever."

It is worth nothing that, not long after Spike told the world about his unprecedented plan for financing the film's completion, Warner Bros. started writing checks again.

Not that Spike's feud ended there. Hardly. Once Hollywood brass saw the film, Round Two began. First, they made it clear they were troubled by the film's opening sequence which features footage from the Rodney King beating and an American flag burning into an X. Then, they pressured him to cut the movie's 3 hour and 20 minute length.

Spike addressed their concerns in typical maverick style. "We ain't making no movie for TV . . .," he scoffed. "JFK was three hours so no [expletive] from Warner Bros. when it comes to us." As for the Rodney King footage and the burning American flag, suffice it to say it remains in the film.

Though some see the opening sequence as another example of Spike pushing the edges of the shock envelope, Washington believes it demonstrates how strongly Malcolm's message reverberates today. In the past three years, sales of *The Autobiography of*



Triumph and tragedy are reflected in movie scene of pilgrimage to Mecca (left) and real-life shock of Betty Shabazz and friends and aides who witnessed the Black nationalist leader's assassination in 1965. The demands for justice that Malcolm X made are still crucial issues in contemporary America.

MALCOLM X *Continued*

Malcolm X have increased 300 percent and, given the disturbing state of race relations in America, Washington says it doesn't take a genius to figure out why.

"People are hungry for the truth," he says. "People have been Watergate-ized, Irancontra-ized and Rodney King-ized. You talk about the crimes that are committed in the streets. They pale in comparison to the crimes that are committed in Washington on every level. I don't even know if leaders can exist nowadays. They'd shoot you down. If not with a bullet, then with character assassination. You're reduced to the 20 second bite."

As Washington sees it, however, that is only part of the problem. At the heart—at the very core—of the troubling state of race relations in America is, he believes, the nation's unwillingness to deal with the reality and residue of four centuries of racism.

"This is the other thing I learned that Malcolm really tapped into," he explains. "No one has dealt with the psychological scars of . . . four hundred years of brutality and slavery. We legislated a little love in the sixties but . . . I don't think we've really dealt with [the effects of racism] to the degree that we should. And White people *sure* haven't dealt with it. They say, 'Oh, it wasn't us. It was our great, great-grandparents.' But that doesn't mean it's going to go away. If a girl is raped when she is six years old, the man she married . . . had nothing to do with it, but he has to help her get through it.

"There was so much brutality and hatred toward us by these people that just because one day somebody says it's over,

doesn't mean that it is. It's *got* to be dealt with . . . We have to discuss it. We have to find out how we feel . . . Black folks and White folks need therapy because of what has happened in this country. And you just can't say well because my grandfather did it, it ain't got nothing to do with me when you're living on his land."

The resonance of Malcolm's message 27 years after his death may help explain why, when filming wrapped in January, Washington found it so difficult to flip off the emotional switch. "It took me quite a while to get back to myself . . ." he confides. "You can't let go of the truth once you hear it."

It has helped, of course, that since shooting ended Washington has been awash in work. Already, he has completed the Shakespearean film *Much Ado About Nothing* and he's currently shooting director Jonathan (*Silence of the Lambs*) Demme's next film, *Probable Cause*, in which he plays a homophobic lawyer who must defend a gay colleague.

At this point in his career, Washington says he is far more interested in art than money. "I just can't do any old movie anymore. I did a couple of those. I did what I thought would be box office. But now I have to do films that I believe serve some positive purpose or I'm out of the game," he says.

When he isn't working, Washington says he spends his time at home in L.A. with his family—his wife of nine years, Pauletta Pearson ("My best friend"), and their four young children. Surprisingly, he says he doesn't have any close friends ("I just don't have any time") and de-

scribes a perfect evening as "going to the basketball game and sitting on the floor."

Watching the Lakers courtside is about as close as Washington wants to get to hanging with the Hollywood glitterbugs. When he isn't working, he says he much prefers to spend his time doing "regular guy things like go over to a friend's house to barbecue or coach my son's basketball team."

He is known, in fact, to bring the same intensity to fatherhood that he brings to his work. Early this year, for example, he caused a car accident when he ran a red light because he was so absorbed in conversation with his son. "It was pretty scary, but an hour later he was playing football in the yard," he says.

When it comes to detaching himself from *Malcolm X*, Washington's recovery powers haven't been as swift. It's been almost a year now since the movie wrapped, yet he admits he is still feeling its effects.

"There's no middle ground with Malcolm X. You love him or you hate him . . .," he says. "He and Stephen Biko have what I call a concentrated dose of life. They're not here for a long time and everything that happens to them happens in a big way. And they are examples for us to follow by agreeing or disagreeing. They're examples etched in stone for eternity."

Having spent the last year and a half of his life portraying the Muslim leader, how does he feel about Malcolm X?

"I love him," he says of the Muslim leader. "I love him for his search for truth and his willingness to speak it. I mean I *love* him. That's all I can say."