

## THE MAN — THE MYTH — THE MOVIE

## X

## THE REBIRTH OF MALCOLM'S MESSAGE

By LARRY HACKETT

Daily News Staff Writer

SEAN GEORGE CAN RECITE the details of Malcolm X's life as if they were his own. George, an Erasmus Hall High School junior, has read "The Autobiography of Malcolm X" twice — the first time as a 12-year-old with a dictionary on his lap — and has broken with the crowd he used to hang out with.

"He showed us that you could go back and change your ways," said George, 16, "and become a positive influence in society."

George can count on one hand the number of students who have read the autobiography, a dismaying statistic to Zaharazah Moulta Ali, head of the Erasmus parents association.

"These kids running around with X hats, and X shirts and X shoes don't know the first thing about Malcolm X," Moulta Ali says.

The debate over Malcolm X is not only over how much young African-Americans know about the assassinated black nationalist and Muslim leader, but *what* they know about him. On the eve of Spike Lee's anticipated film biography, the message of Malcolm X is as contested as it was the Sunday afternoon in February 1965 when he fell dead on the stage of the Audubon Ballroom in Washington Heights.

"The tendency here is to reduce him to a nice sound-bite, but you can't," said Prof. James Turner, a Malcolm X expert at Cornell University. "What's made him so attractive and ... enduring has been the richness of his ideas."

## A RENAISSANCE

Scholars, regardless of their views of Malcolm X, agree his renaissance stems from the foundering of the civil rights agenda during the Reagan-Bush years, the mixed record of integration, and the growth of an urban underclass untouched by any black political progress.

The conditions of the Afri-



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can diaspora have not improved," said Betty Shabazz, Malcolm's widow. "Young people reading and studying Malcolm have found some answers."

But to which Malcolm are they listening? He advocated at all or different times: Islam, black nationalism, pan-Africanism, black pride and self-defense — and a strong distrust of women that he began to dilute before his death.

His defenders say he was a visionary, while his detractors maintain that much of his philosophy was, in the words of Howard University Prof. Russell Adams, "old-hat black barbershop analysis" that often had only "surface validity."

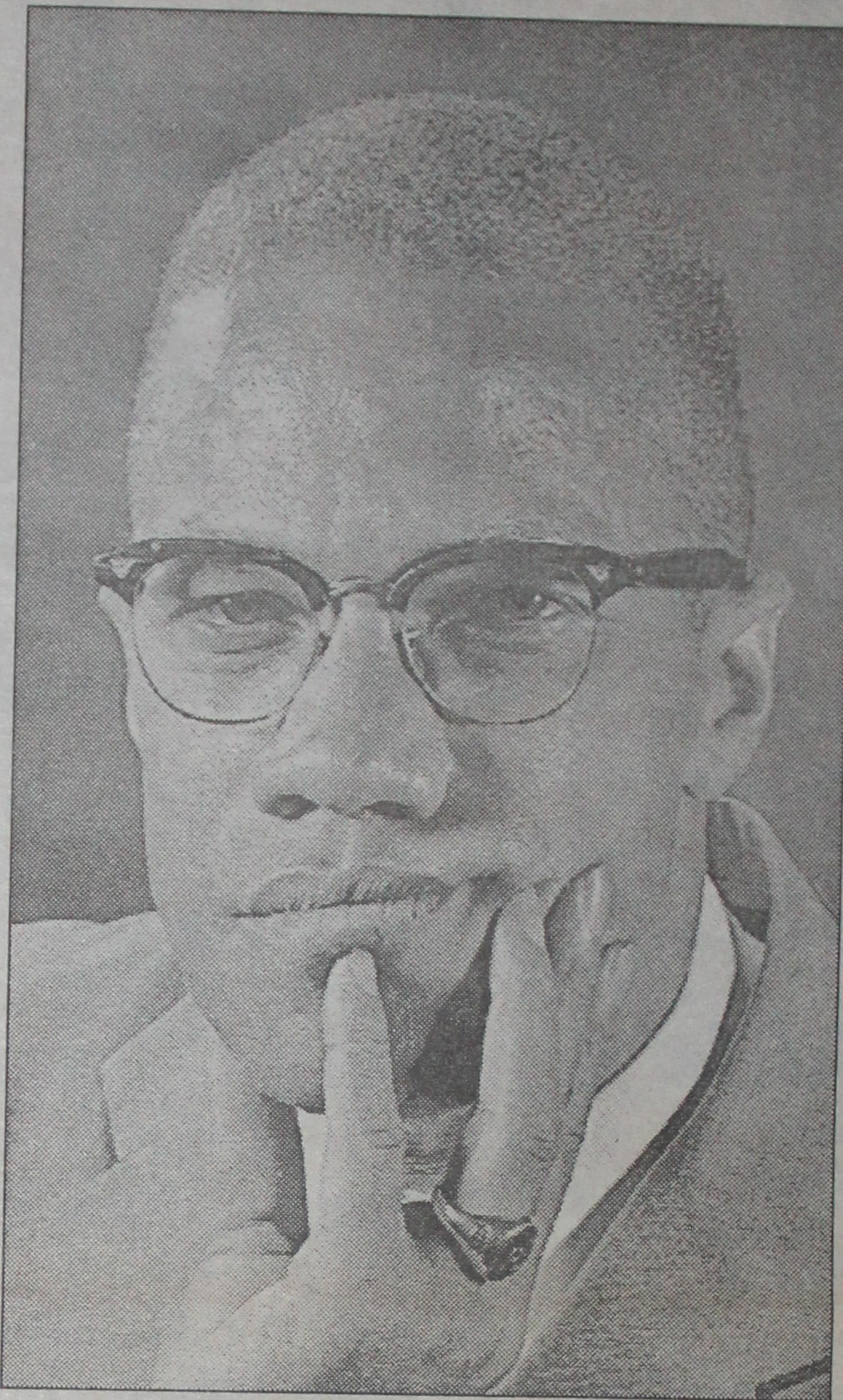
"Malcolm made it simple," Adams said. "If America

doesn't shape up, let's raise hell."

Paul Lee, a Malcolm X scholar and the historical consultant to the film, said Malcolm had a "rapidly expanding consciousness" that in his last year was constantly modifying his early declarations. Weeks before he died, Lee said Malcolm bemoaned how he was falling in the cracks between moderates and militants.

## NEW SQUABBLES

Since his assassination, Malcolm has become an intellectual buffet, with different groups feeding upon various tenets of his teachings, Lee and others said. This has led to the squabbles over what Malcolm was about — squabbles that peaked in the summer of 1991 when poet Amiri



AP

**REVIVAL** of interest in Malcolm X (above) is reaching to a new generation of young blacks, such as Sean George, 16 (photo left), who sees the slain black nationalist as providing a positive influence on society.

Baraka warned Spike Lee not to "distort" Malcolm's life.

But one recent biography, "Malcolm," claims Malcolm himself distorted his own story, papering over an abusive father and a tyrannical mother. Author Bruce Perry calls Malcolm a self-hating "chameleon" who tailored his comments to different audiences.

With sales of the "autobiography" increasing, his words laced through rap songs and his image a pop icon, the debate over Malcolm's message or messages will continue.

What ultimately makes him attractive, experts say, is his defiance.

"Black young people are reaching back into history and elevating a figure who speaks clearly of black anger against racism and black inequality," says Manning Marable, professor of history and political science at the University of Colorado.

What ultimately makes Malcolm X invaluable, some say, is his life.

Young people "need to understand they have redemptive qualities," says Shabazz. "Malcolm can be a metaphor for a whole generation. If he can make it, so can they."

## Xploitation spells profit

By LARRY HACKETT

Daily News Staff Writer

**M**EET Malcolm X, the growth industry. Sales of X gear, from hats to beach towels, are expected to generate \$100 million in coming months.

Film maker Spike Lee has been selling X hats and shirts from his Brooklyn store, Spike's Joint, for two years, and has boutiques set to open in more than a dozen Macy's stores.

Betty Shabazz, Malcolm's widow, has hired Curtis Management, an Indianapolis-based licensing firm, to police the use of her husband's image. Curtis has filed suit against four apparel companies for manufacturing X gear without permission.

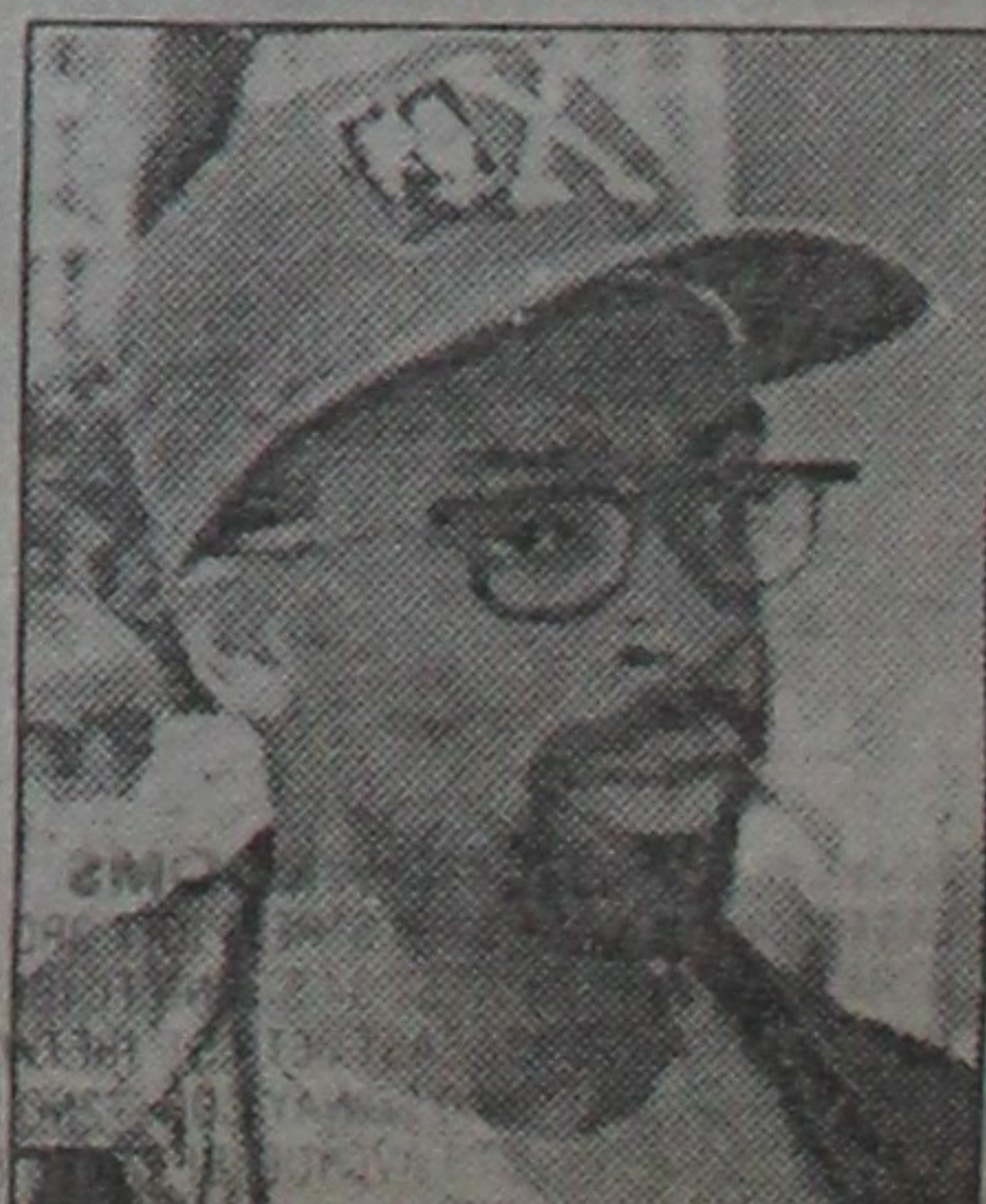
The licensing firm and Lee, who began selling his products before Shabazz hired Curtis, have reached an agreement "in principle" under which Lee will pay some royalties to the Malcolm X estate, said Curtis promotion director Stephanie Osha.

Since Malcolm's message is so contested, it's no surprise controversy has surrounded his ascension as a pop icon. "The worry is that you will get his message reduced to simple-minded phrases," said Prof. James Turner of Cornell University.

Forty companies are set to license 160 products that include necklaces, medallions, air fresheners, book marks, basketballs and beach towels. Shabazz will earn an undisclosed percentage from the merchandise's sale.

"Dr. Shabazz does feel an obligation to the public that his message be carried on, but how she commercially exploits that is only her decision," said Curtis chief Mark Roesler.

Gerald Early, professor of African-American studies at Washington University in St. Louis, said the merchandising is no big deal. "That's how people manufacture heroes."



Spike in X hat