

Rolling

Stone

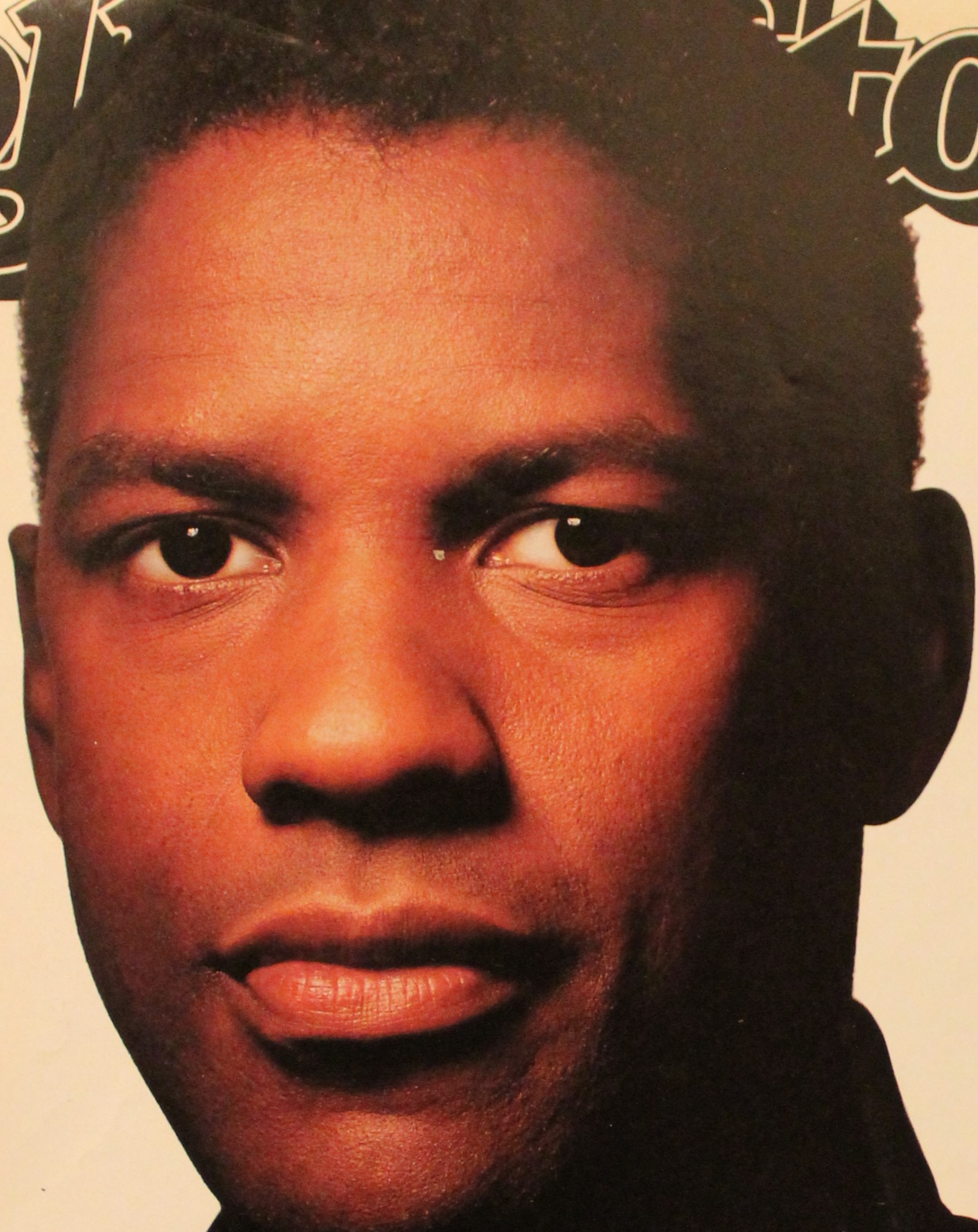
**DENZEL
WASHINGTON**

**MAKING
MALCOLM**

X

**LOVE THAT
BOB**

**THE
DYLAN
TRIBUTE**



**ALICE
IN
CHAINS**

**NENEH
CHERRY**

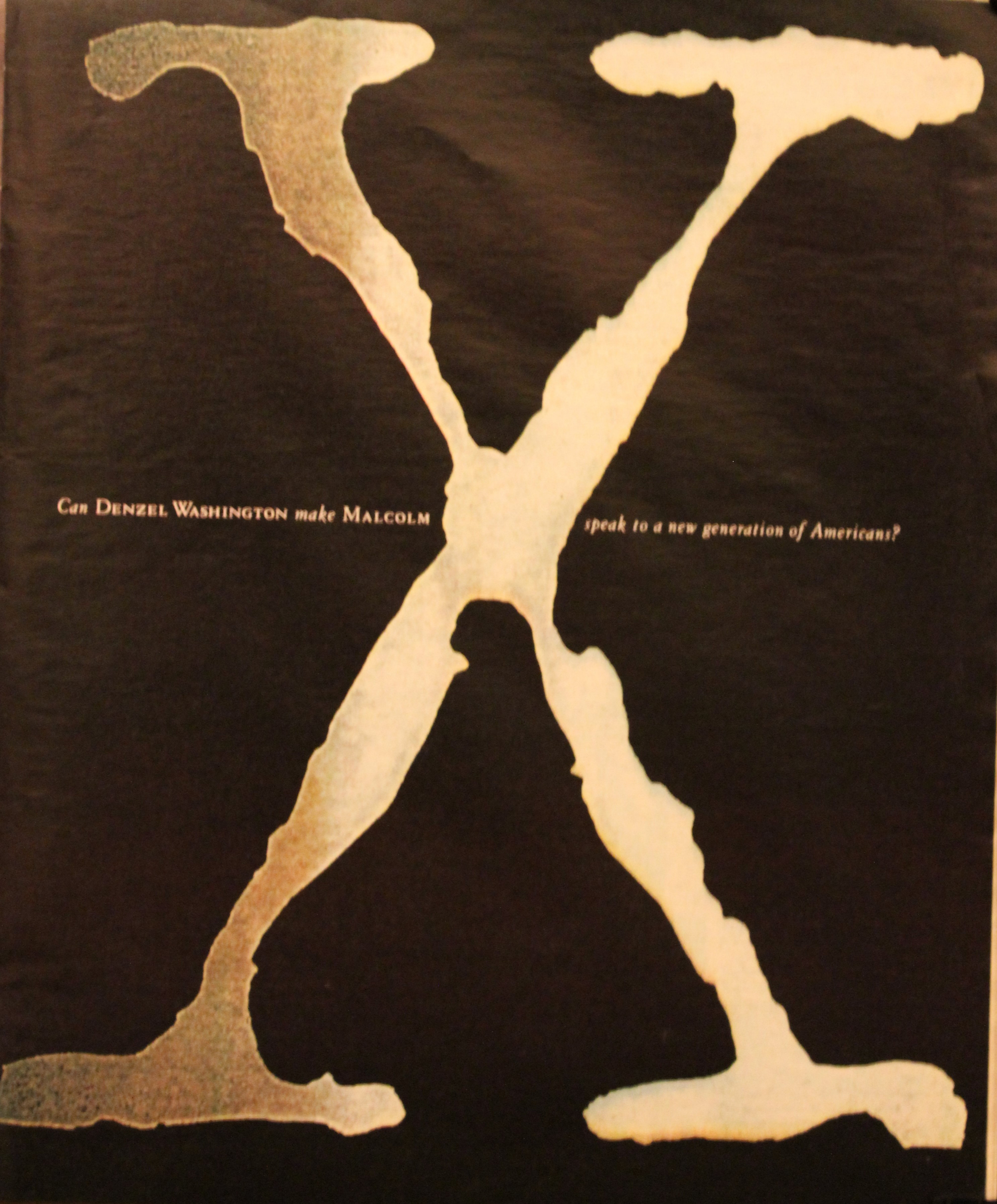
**SOUL
ASYLUM**

**OUR
LIVES
OUR
MUSIC**

**BY THE
ROLLING STONE
READERS**







Can DENZEL WASHINGTON *make* MALCOLM

Speak to a new generation of Americans?

"My desire is that this film will make people understand more about themselves through MALCOLM X: He's the jump-off point, the wake-up call."

BY JOE WOOD

At daybreak Spike Lee was barking Arabic, and the eleven-dollar-a-day extras were shuffling on cue, and the white boys playing CIA agents were lurking behind the children. The medina was appropriately busy for the cameras, but afterward, at lunch time's end, our corner of Cairo was all shadows and ancient buildings, as still as a Sunday in Georgia. We'd filled our bellies with lunch, then watched as most of the crew packed and went on to the next location. Left to ourselves under the tent, bunched at the end of a long table, we talked barbershop style about the persecution of our people and the insanity of the world today and about the things we let our hearts believe. We were Denzel Washington, novelist John Edgar Wideman, journalist Ralph Wiley and me. One actor and three writers: four Americans, four black men, four brothers, putting our knives — our thoughts, voices, eyes — on the table. Cutting heads. ¶ Denzel was chief barber; we had come to observe him so that we could go back home and tell the story — it was his house, and we were only scribes. When I was a boy, my father would take me after church to get the peas cut off my head, and I would wait in the chair with tears at

the ready, fearing the barber's clippers and listening with the extra clarity fear gives you. Hair, tears, fell, and Dad and the barber and the preacher would blur. Barbershop became church, church became barbershop, and in this way, minute by minute, Denzel the barber became Denzel the preacher and, more gradually, like the man he'd played earlier in the day, Malcolm, flexing knowledge about some of the hard rocks in the Nation of Islam.

"That Philadelphia mosque, they was gangstas," said Denzel.

"Yeah?"

"That's what I heard."

"Yup."

"Yeah."

"They weren't playing."

"Yeah?"

"They were serious."

Denzel assured us: "We talked to some of those brothers." He had studied up on Malcolm, and now he was teaching, and I listened, then joined in the talk: about the Nation, the state of black America, faith. "It's spiritual warfare," he was saying. "On every level. Good and evil . . . I have faith in God and hope in man." The driver came, and Denzel offered us a ride in his yellow limousine. After we got to the hotel, someone said, "Denzel was sure weird when he got on that spirit number, boy, he's got some strange ideas." I thought: "Yeah, maybe, but so what? At least he knows he isn't the point."

NEXT DAY THE SHOOTING IS IN THE desert. Some buildings — the city — are close behind us. The desert ahead is a road, some tents, some production vehicles, a bumpy plain of sand for miles, empty as a chalkboard. I write and try to make sense of how a black star and a black director and a black cinematographer and a black producer have managed to bring millions of dollars and a bunch of black crew members to Africa to make a *Lawrence of Arabia*-size epic about a dead black man most Americans reviled in life. This puzzle hangs in the air, and the writers try fighting it off. We talk, play brothers with each other, switch and play fathers, too, speak from the places we know. Test each other with fakes like basketball players do.

Someone tosses out the idea of doing one united

piece, a sort of unified black voice to mess with the white publications that paid for our flights here. Ha, ha, ha, yeah, we should. I laugh — it's a joke, but I kind of like the idea. Spike insisted on black writers, and our talks with him and Denzel have been made easier by our



THE TWO FACES OF MALCOLM X: DENZEL BEFORE A MURAL IN NEW YORK CITY

blackness. We also share maleness: Sometimes our discussions include women crew members, but we never talk about what they feel as women. We share assumptions — the worth of black struggle, for instance — and experiences: nasty white cops, cabdrivers et cetera. We share community — our belonging had brought us to Africa, the desert, to see Spike try to see us through.

THE DESERT IS COLD IN THE MORNING, AND THE extras have been asked to wear the skimpy white frocks Muslims wear on the hajj, the pilgrimage, to Mecca. The people who've shown up are brown, black, yellow, white, to represent the faithful Malcolm encountered when he made his trip to Cairo in 1964 and began, he said, to rethink the Nation's teachings about white devilishness. Malcolm wrote: "Throngs of people, obviously Muslims from everywhere, bound on the pilgrimage, were hugging and embracing. They were of all complexions, the whole atmosphere was of warmth and friendliness. The feeling hit me that there really wasn't any color problem here. The effect was as though I had just stepped out of a prison."

The sun rises and fades as we watch Denzel's Malcolm dining alongside his white Muslim brothers, chanting praises to Allah with his black African brothers, throwing rocks at a replica of Islam's Devil's Stone. We observers take photos of each other with each other, with the crew, with Spike. At first Denzel, his white pilgrim's garment dangling from underneath a long tweed overcoat, stands off to the side, looking straight as a general into the desert, oblivious to our cameras, looking for something else. Soon he comes and joins us.

ULTIMATELY, I THINK, WE ALL CAME to Africa looking for Malcolm. He had gone to Egypt to experience a rebirth; we followed, scouting, hoping to see his latest reincarnation — to see our Egyptian scarab, our black symbol of rebirth, return.

Born in 1925, Malcolm Little was a child of the Depression. His father's premature death and his mother's subsequent breakdown destroyed the family; Malcolm and his siblings were ushered off to separate foster homes. After being told by a white teacher that he shouldn't aspire to being a lawyer, Malcolm slid into a life of drug dealing, pimping and petty thievery. These activities landed him, at twenty, a six-and-a-half-year stay in Massachusetts's prisons.

Prison was the stage for Malcolm's most dramatic metamorphosis. Once locked away, Malcolm read everything he could get in his hands, kicked his drug habits and converted to Elijah Muhammad's Nation of Islam. By 1959 he was the organization's most visible and effective spokesman and had become one of Elijah's closest advisers, almost a son. Yet his evolution didn't end: No longer a public enemy, a young black man behind bars, no longer a zealous convert to the Nation of Islam and its narrow brand of black nationalism, the Malcolm who ventured to Cairo in 1964 was moving toward a vision of America capable of blurring the racial borders he had taken for granted as long as he cared to remember.

I'd gotten off my flight hoping to be greeted by the Egypt Malcolm had seen when he traveled here. North Africa, I knew, isn't innocent of racism: I'd been to the region before, and I'd seen that. Still, this time I came with Malcolm's eyes. Thirty minutes into Cairo, I was at my hotel and noticing that the bellhops were the only Arabs I'd seen as dark as me. I felt a dull anger: home, its madness, a familiar contempt. The bellhop asked to take my bags, but I shook

P H O T O G R A P H S B Y A L B E R T W A T S O N

my head and hauled them to the elevator alone, thinking Malcolm hadn't told the whole story.

THE CREW AND ITS HANGERS-ON WERE INVITED TO the tony home of Mr. Kenton Keith, the public-affairs officer at the U.S. embassy, the evening of the medina scenes. We were served casseroles, fine wine, elegant salads. Keith said that he'd been a King man in the Sixties but that he'd liked Malcolm's spirit. "We all listened to him, even those of us who disagreed with him," he said. I nodded, drained my glass, asked what public-affairs officers do. He handed me a forgettable answer, and I gave up. A person in Keith's position, I figured, can only say so much.

Malcolm X, of course, isn't able to say anything today; it's left to the living to make sense of him. Dead folks' spirits can be molded to fit many different political agendas: Americans as dissimilar as Clarence Thomas and Anita Hill have called Malcolm a hero. Amiri Baraka, who as LeRoi Jones claimed Malcolm as an inspiration for the quasi-nationalist Black Arts Movement he helped found in the late Sixties, argued that Malcolm's true spirit is being stolen by brothers like Spike to help accommodationist "middle-class Negroes sleep easier." Spike responded by stating the obvious: People have a right to understand Malcolm as they want. And besides, everyone knows that the movie will be only Spike's understanding of Malcolm.

But Spike's Malcolm comes complete with Spike, who is so palatable these days that the *Wall Street Journal* practically endorsed *Jungle Fever's* putative conservatism and so embraceable that the public-affairs officer of a government hostile to his latest film's dead subject bent over backward trying to show him a good time. Hollywood doesn't hand over \$35 million to just any black filmmaker: Spike has become someone the studios trust. Which isn't to say Spike's sense of Malcolm's spirit is any more compromised than Baraka's, or Keith's, or Denzel's. Malcolm's spirit wears the face of each of its interpreters — each is marred by flaws, distortions. Still, as I wiped my mouth of the fine meal, I considered how little of Malcolm's spirit I was sensing at Keith's and how satisfied the faces had been.

Spike certainly seemed content: He had stuffed down the elegant meal, spent the evening whispering smiles with crew members, appeared uninterested in the party's irony. What I couldn't see was how much he'd been worrying. By the time Spike landed in Egypt, he'd put the script through more than ten revisions, even allowed Denzel a hand in scripting some of the speech scenes: Spike was looking for help. There were so many people to please. Spike's interpretation had to answer to the Nation's followers, who didn't want to see Elijah trashed; to "family values" black folk, the majority, who wouldn't stand for an R-rated Malcolm; to activists like Baraka who didn't want their symbol of black pride challenged; to the Hollywood community, which had difficulty seeing Malcolm as a subject worthy of a treatment as lengthy and costly as Oliver Stone's *JFK*. The noise, left uncontained, would have made it impossible for almost anyone to think, much less create. The challenge Spike faced was to listen to all the voices, especially the quiet ones, then to make a Malcolm all his own, Malcolm as he understood him, not a colorized version of the dead leader's autobiography.

As it turns out, Spike was making so many compromises with the loudest voices that his own vision of Malcolm was suffering. The film's Malcolm-as-hustler sequences, for instance, never venture beyond a fuzzy PG-13 realm — ridiculous if you consider how rough

JOE WOOD is the editor of *'Malcolm X: In Our Own Image,'* essays by African Americans, from St. Martin's Press.

DENZEL ON MALCOLM

After finishing the film, do you feel as if you know Malcolm X, the man?

We went down to Rahway, New Jersey, to film. There was tension — some of the brothers were Muslims. And I said, you know, I can't be Malcolm X. No way. It's bigger than Malcolm X. He's an example of a way of life and how one can change. But I believe the same spirit that moved Malcolm can move me. I believe the same God that affected him can affect me.

Does the rage that moved him move you? A lot of people think of Malcolm as the original voice of black rage.

He sure wasn't the first. I am reading this book now, *The Black Jacobins*, by C.L.R. James. About [eighteenth-century Haitian slaves and revolutionaries] Toussaint and Dessalines and Christophe. . . . They was operating. Because you know their backs were up against the wall, and they were getting busy. Malcolm was basically handcuffed by the organization that he belonged to. But he could talk. I've found his most vicious speeches a lot of times came at the heels of his inability to do something after a particular incident, whether it was brothers beat up in Harlem or brothers beat up in Los Angeles, and he would go at 'em. Pray that their planes fall out of the sky, you know, pray that their babies have this and that. And it's like "Wow, brother! Is that what you really think?"

I think that came from his frustration. And also his frustration with . . . who he was. Being the only fair-skinned child. That's historical. . . . That goes back.

How's that going to work in the film? Because you're dark-skinned.

That's an aspect of the film that in color I can't portray. In understanding I can. Like any other part of the film. I'm not Malcolm, so all that I'm having to interpret.

But would you have chosen you to play Malcolm if you were directing?

What you're asking me is, is being light-skinned important? Listen, am I black?

Yeah.

Am I an African or an African American?

You're African American.

So was he. Bottom line. My mother's oldest sister's father was white. You know? Without a doubt, him being fair-skinned affected him. I mean, you look at what's happening with Ice-T — and I'm not saying this negatively, 'cause he's my man — but it's an interesting parallel: Ice-T's rage and Malcolm's rage. It's interesting that Ice-T is probably the most fair-skinned rapper out there.

That's true. I think about some of my friends back at school.

The light-skinned brothers were always the most serious. My man who ran the black-student union back at Fordham University. [Laughs] Fair-skinned brother.

And Malcolm talked about it. He said he hated that blood in him [Malcolm's grandmother was raped by a white man]. That was passed down to him. In that sense it affected him more than it might me. But I understood that about him, so . . .

So you think you could bring that understanding to it.

I hope so. At least I can say I understood it.

What have you learned from Malcolm?

He opened my eyes like he opened millions of people's eyes. He made sense of nonsense. It's like the first time I went to Africa and I saw my people, black people, flying the planes, running customs. At the hotel, running the hotel. I was in shock. I was like "Wow! Black people doing everything." When the riots happened in L.A., I went down there the next day. We were directing traffic, helping to clean. We were, for the first time, in control. We weren't even in control when we were burning and looting. We were in control when we were cleaning up. Because when you looked out there on the street and there's somebody who looks like you pointing the traffic in the right direction because the street lights are going out, it gave you a feeling of brotherhood.

So Malcolm gave you a better sense of yourself as a black man?

Well — everybody gets it from somewhere. Elijah Muhammad got it from Fard, Malcolm got it from Elijah Muhammad. Just take a look around. You'll get it. I say: "Learn your history. Take the time and effort to find out who you are." You know, again, take it from Malcolm. If you're taught all your life you've never done anything, then you can never do anything.

In what ways do you feel mashed by white supremacy in this country?

I was mashed from the gate. And every moment, every second, from then till now. Been victories, and yes, I'm here and all of that, but . . . being angry is an easy choice. Knowing yourself takes a little more effort.

Doesn't racism play a role?

You know what? Racism is a given. The question becomes, How do you deal with it? You could spend the rest of your life trying to figure out who's a racist and who's not. So what, who cares? Get busy wit' yourself.

What are you doing in terms of that?

I'm developing and producing films. I have four different films now that I've got going at one particular studio, one or two at other studios. Right now I'm doing a film with Jonathan Demme

— I'm playing a lawyer who represents a gay guy. I'm going to direct my first short film [for HBO] in the spring. So I'm just about getting something done.

You know, this is what I like about Spike. Yeah, he talks about racism, but he doesn't dwell on it. Man, Spike's busy. And I like that. Go do something. You cannot legislate people into loving you. You can spend the rest of your life trying to analyze why they don't like you, or you can get on with doing your own thing. Damn them!

What do you think about the commercialism of the movie — the hats and T-shirts? Do you think that's okay?

Well, I'm not involved. I don't make a dime off of anything like that, and it's not something I would do. But people like the fashion. Half the people walking around don't even know that the X has anything to do with Malcolm X. Probably think it's Xavier University or something. Fashion is fashion. But that's really got nothing to do with our film. I mean, ain't no X hats in this picture.

Is 'Malcolm X' going to fill things out for people? Or is it . . .

Well, the hat goes on top of the head, and we're trying to put something between the ears and in the heart.

Spike was saying you guys had problems during 'Mo' Better Blues.

Yeah, we started off bumpy, arguing and stuff a little bit — actually, before we started shooting . . . but that got smoothed out, so by the time we got to *Malcolm X*, it was no problem.

So there wasn't any of that at all.

We got too big a job to do, man.

Getting Malcolm's spirit?

There's no way we could capture it all. It's only a movie. It's only three hours. Three hours isn't long enough, and that's the most frustrating part. But there's enough knowledge there. There's enough for a start. It's a crying shame that a movie has to be the start or be a reference point.

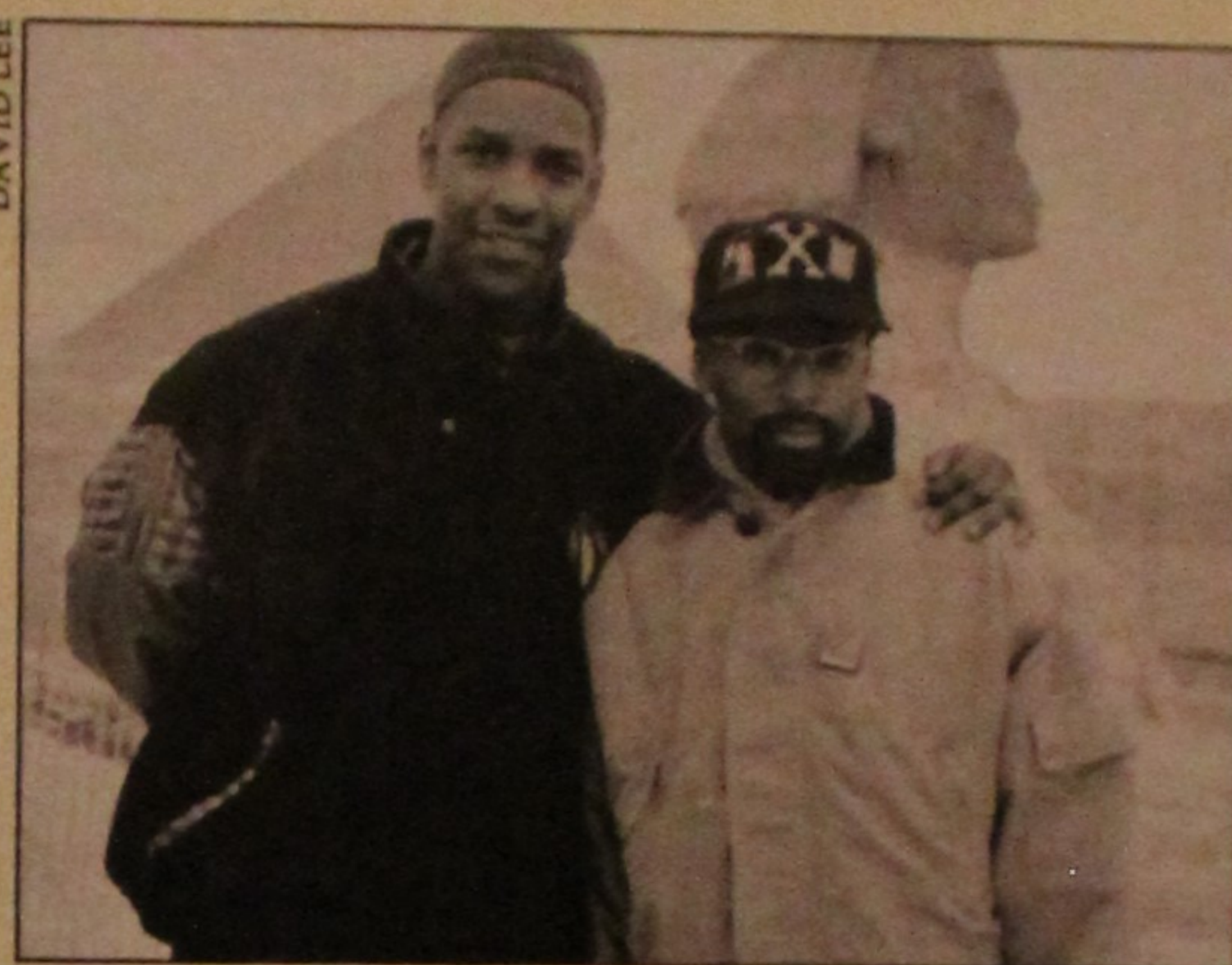
How's the film going to change your career?

I don't worry about stuff like that. I'm jamming right now.

Well, how do you think the audience is going to react to the film?

The press said that people were going to riot on *Do the Right Thing*, and nobody rioted. They usually way out of step. They couldn't see the L.A. riots coming. And they couldn't see any other. They just react after the fact: "Oh, this is going to upset people, ignite people. They're going to riot, they're going to uprise."

I want this movie to wake people up. That's what it ought to do. Nature alone is waking folks up. We done had three hurricanes or so in the last year or two. The ground is shaking in California; it's shaking in Missouri. They had a tremor in South Carolina the same day or the day after the hurricane in Florida. Something's happening, man, and it's happening in America. . . . — J.W.



DENZEL AND SPIKE ON LOCATION IN EGYPT

"SPIKE talks about racism, but he doesn't dwell on it. Man, SPIKE'S busy. I like that. Go do something. You cannot legislate people into loving you."

"You're up there speaking the great truths that MALCOLM spoke, and the extras are responding honestly, because what he said then makes sense now."

Malcolm was during those years. The hype — the hats, T-shirts, Spike's loud comparisons with the way Warner Bros. had coddled Stone's film — ensured *Malcolm X* a huge audience but only if the film was not offensive to too many sure friends: churchgoing black people, for instance. The auteur's vision was blurring with his perspectives as community activist and marketeer, but I could not see this then, in his little man's eyes, behind the dull sheen of his spectacles.

At the party the struggle had been disguised for the moment. The work, after all, was getting done: *Malcolm X* was being shot, I was editing my Malcolm book, Wideman and Wiley were writing their essays, and so on. Malcolm's spirit was being reinterpreted and remade, and each of us was doing his part, like brothers holding Dad's coffin aloft. Our eyes were also on the feast ahead — we had bellies, and each of us would make sure to get his share. Our own Malcolm and its spoils. Even the spirited attacks of Amiri Baraka, a father figure, culturally speaking, to most young black artists I can bring to mind, clearly served Baraka before anyone else. We remembered once Baraka was LeRoi Jones, his generation's Spike Lee, but the attention had gone away. We knew this had something to do with Baraka's howling, and in fact, that in all our differing, varying, individual Malcolm interpretations lay a similar, selfish rivalry.

DENZEL STAYED HOME THE NIGHT OF KEITH'S FETE. His wife, Pauletta, was along for the trip; she'd always thought she was Egyptian, so she wasn't going to miss it. Pauletta is a down-to-earth woman, an earthy sister, more like Ethel Waters than like Diana Ross, real folks. She, Denzel and their children are an authentic family, and Denzel, a preacher's son, is a self-described "family man" who picks his parties wisely. "I may go out every now and then," he says. "But ain't no regular group of people I'm calling up, like 'Let's go do this.'"

At thirty-seven, Denzel Washington is Hollywood's premier serious black actor, the certified, approved, anointed African American male lead, our Sidney Poitier for the Nineties. In person he is a regular guy with ten pounds or so extra on his waist, courteous and polite and friendly almost to a fault. Before rising from the table to hit the bathroom, he turned off my tape recorder; during our conversations, when any of his acting acquaintances appeared at the restaurant, he waved them over to chat like a comrade; when the waitresses and ladies and other admirers smiled for autographs, he dutifully passed out witticisms and signatures and quiet sighs of fatigue. Denzel's charm is constant and genuine — it never stopped — but it is also an ancient form of image control, a veil to keep privacy.

The Washingtons live in Los Angeles but stay away, by and large, from Hollywood society. Denzel claims he doesn't actively shun the Hollywood scene — Columbia chief Mark Canton took him and John Singleton to a basketball game, he reports — but he spends nearly all of his time between projects with Pauletta and their children (the eldest of whom, John David, has a cameo in the film's climactic classroom scene featuring Nelson Mandela). He and Pauletta are concerned enough about the atmosphere that they pulled a son from his school to send him to a place where he could "be around more black people." The L.A. most movie stars enjoy doesn't afford much of that, and for Denzel and for his children, what they were seeing wasn't enough.

Denzel was reared in Mount Vernon, a middle-class, mostly black suburb of New York City. His father was the minister of a Pentecostal church ("Every time Dad came over it was like being at a church service," Denzel says, laughing); his mom a beautician. The future actor played ball with some of the brothers around my way, Baychester, a neighborhood in the Bronx just inside the

county line. But much of his schooling took place outside of either neighborhood at mostly white schools, where he was one of a very few black children. "I remember in fifth grade," he says, "we were in English class, or spelling, and the word *Negro* was up on the list, and I was checking the heads, like counting the people in front of me, to see if *Negro* was going to come up for me, if I had to spell that word. I didn't know how to describe it when it was happening to me: being like an alien."

But being on the outside didn't keep Denzel from doing well enough to gain admittance to the Bronx's Fordham University. It was there that he took up acting. In 1981 he tried out for and won the role of Malcolm X in the Negro Ensemble Company's *When the Chickens Come Home to Roost*, the story of an imagined encounter between Malcolm X and Elijah Muhammad. Denzel got another major break with his award-winning performance in the Ensemble's production of *A Soldier's Play*, subsequently landing a part in the film version (*A Soldier's Story*) and a regular spot on TV's *St. Elsewhere*. Such films as *The Mighty Quinn*, Spike's *Mo' Better Blues*

tensive preparations for his role immediately after finishing *Ricochet* last spring. Traveling to New York to soak up the city Malcolm made his home, Denzel spent twelve hours a day reading speeches, reviewing films and videotape and, as the first day of shooting approached, taking "boot camp" classes with the Fruit of Islam, the Nation's security wing. "In the evening, brothers would come by and set up class," he says. "They'd set up like a mosque or temple and go through with it. We had to march, we had to learn our general orders. There would be a subject that this main speaker would speak about, or they would ask someone to come speak — all kinds of things like that. So it just gave it the right orientation, as well as an education." The actor hired an orthodox Muslim assistant to instruct him in Arabic and Islamic tradition; he even stopped drinking alcohol and limited meals to one a day, without meat, in Muslim fashion. His final night partying, he says, was the Fourth of July.

Two days after Denzel came to New York, his father died. "When that happened, I wanted to use that," says Denzel. "I'm dealing with the spirit of Malcolm, and I'm



DENZEL AND SPIKE (SEATED) PREPARE FOR THE FILM'S BARBERSHOP SEQUENCE.

and *Mississippi Masala* cemented his reputation as a romantic leading man. But two political roles showed more than a passing resemblance to Malcolm X — *Cry Freedom*'s Stephen Biko and *Glory*'s headstrong Trip (for which he won an Oscar as Best Supporting Actor). Denzel sees no grand scheme behind it; Malcolm was not on his mind when he began acting.

Before *Chickens*, in fact, Denzel had no idea of who Malcolm X was. "When I took that job, it was strictly \$125 a week, and I needed the money," he says. "And one guy's name was Malcolm, and the other's Elijah — bet. Let's get busy. Which one am I?" He hadn't read Malcolm's autobiography, and no one in school or the hoods talked about him — Malcolm hadn't been in the air, even at home. Like Nick, the charmed, successful black man he plays in *Ricochet*, Denzel was raised a preacher's kid, a King man, not a Malcolmite. But *Chickens* had captured Denzel's conscience; the first time Denzel read Malcolm, his head turned. When Spike stirred the dust around the issue of whether a white filmmaker (Norman Jewison was originally slated) or a black one (Spike) should direct the film, Denzel — already signed on to the project — was a believer. He began in-

dealing with the spirit of my father, too. That's who I always thought about, those two men." The conflation fit into Spike's understanding of Malcolm as "someone always looking for a father figure" and for truth. In the movie, as in life, each of Malcolm's fathers fails him — Elijah, Baines (a composite figure who recruits Malcolm into the Nation), West Indian Archie (a hustler who takes young Malcolm under his wing) and his own dead father. In Spike's reckoning, the failures "crushed" Malcolm; while truth and growth may have set Malcolm free, it lost him fathers, too. Denzel sees it slightly differently. "Ultimately, [Malcolm] reached the ultimate father, God," he says. "Anyone's quest in life is the truth. I think that was Malcolm's quest — for understanding, for God. I interpret it as that evolution."

Whether he'd been crushed or found truth, Malcolm's search ended with his fratricidal assassination in the winter of 1965. Two years earlier Malcolm had been the second most popular campus lecturer in the nation after Barry Goldwater. His stardom caused friction within the Nation; his breakup with the organization was officially precipitated, in fact, by his famous proclamation that JFK's assassination had been "a [Cont. on 80]"

Soul Asylum

[Cont. from 31] didn't write.' So in a sense I think: 'Dan, I need one of those. Get going.' But he's got a full-on life to deal with. Dan has his shit together. That's why while the band is totally together, I'm a mess at all times."

The relationship between Murphy and Pirner — two friends in a band full of close friends — perfectly demonstrates the Soul Asylum aesthetic. Murphy owns a business; Pirner doesn't even own a car, television or CD player. For Soul Asylum, while one foot is solidly in the here and now, the other is usually planted in the amusement park.

"I have to actually look over at Danny occasionally to make sure things are still together onstage because I don't even know," says Pirner. "And that is our relationship. It's chemistry, and it's unique. I think at first he just thought I was kind of retarded. Now he accepts that that's really the way I am. And vice versa. He's not just acting like he's on top of things to make me feel inferior."

Fame drawn from well-articulated alienation, however, has its drawbacks.

"It's insulting when an old friend comes up and says, 'You're some kind of a big rock star now,'" says Pirner. "It always ends up being an old friend who is, like, a lawyer. They're a lawyer now, and we're the same age. What do I have to show for it? I got shit. When this is over, I go back to fry cooking. I'm not qualified to do anything. You don't sit around and say, 'What's going to happen when this all ends?' You don't talk about it amongst yourselves, because you're all afraid of it."

So, nine years and countless tour miles down the road that led Soul Asylum from Minneapolis to the rest of the world, the only prospect scarier than achieving success is finding out the terms. With *Grave Dancers Union*, Soul Asylum is still very much a band on the brink. Now, however, it's a band on the brink of stardom.

"Guys at the record company talk about 'the product,' and all of the sudden you think, 'They're taking my life and making it a commodity,'" says Pirner, staring intently into his beer. "So you try to rise above it by making it so good that nobody can fuck with it. God knows it was a lot easier for Woody Guthrie. I'm sure he had his problems, but he sure didn't have to compete with MTV." ■

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Malcolm X

[Cont. from 40] case of the chickens coming home to roost." Elijah Muhammad had specifically ordered all ministers to refrain from comment on the murder, but Malcolm spoke anyway. By this point he had begun to lose faith in Elijah, the man who'd raised him in the Nation; it was becoming clear that rumors of Elijah's fathering illegitimate children were true. After breaking with the Nation, Malcolm traveled to Ghana, Nigeria, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, in pursuit of new ways to better his understanding of the world, becoming a sort of perpetual pilgrim, always seeking truth, until he was killed by members of the Nation of Islam, more than likely with assistance from the U.S. government.

Truth, true spirit, to the Christian faithful, can be seen only in glimpses. "I had a lot of strong spiritual folks around me," says Denzel. "And I had studied some of those speeches so that I could take concepts from one [and] tie ideas back in and go back to something else of his." In the Pentecostal congregation of Denzel's father, believers would speak in tongues when they felt the spirit. Malcolm's words would come out of Denzel just this way, blindingly full, and they'd have a revelatory effect on everyone listening. "You're up on the podium," Denzel says, "and then you're speaking the great truths that Malcolm spoke, and the people, the extras, are responding honestly, because what he said then makes sense now. You didn't have to work with the extras, all you had to do was do the speeches, and they'd go off." This was theater, in its ancient sense, true democratic theater and, to Denzel, church. Father becoming son, son becoming father. The spirit was overwhelming.

AND NOT. WHEN THE SPIRIT CAME TO light in this church of fathers and sons, it found a theater of brothers and a barbershop, a man's refuge, our sanctuary. In this demos women were silenced. No mothers, sisters, daughters: The women were silent, boys were leading the way alone. In the film, Angela Bassett plays Malcolm's wife, Betty Shabazz. "Have we ever had a fight, Malcolm?" she asks. "No," Denzel's Malcolm offers. While this version is faithful to Malcolm's account in the autobiography, it isn't to Betty's. "All my stress was over the fact that I wanted to work and he wouldn't even entertain the idea," Betty said recently. "He didn't want anybody to have any influence over me that would in any way compete with his. Each [of the three times] I left him, that's why I left."

Back in the desert, on the set, in the church, there wasn't much talk among the boys about what women think. Our community was male, our conversation was father-and-son stuff: We leaned in and

talked about gangsta toughness. Our knives. We were barbers, cutting heads, getting cut down. We were brothers and fathers and sons. We were in the barbershop in which Spike begins the film, complaining about women, dressing ourselves inside our refuge. When in Malcolm's story the women do talk, the story changes: It is young women, for instance, who turn Malcolm's vision of Elijah upside down. In the desert, as we jockeyed, we had not considered this.

My first few days on the set I watched as Angela Bassett reenacted Betty's reaction to Malcolm's assassination. Take 1, take 2, take 3, and she wailed, screamed, really, and in that screaming I felt tears, as heavy as my childhood barbershop tears, and I bent my head under the load. The screams — this too was theater; Bassett's voice carried an essential portion of Malcolm, of his spirit. The fear: Malcolm and Betty had feared this moment with all their might, and it had come like a herd anyway and torn through the fear and left a lifeless body and an exhausted woman and her crying babies. Betty's grief over the bloody mess she was holding, its warm red sliding from the body, sticking to clothes, soiling the floor. The anger Betty felt when the cops stumbled in, batons and guns hanging at their knees like broken limbs. Betty's confusion, even relief — it is all over now — and Betty's anger at Malcolm: Why have you let them do this to me? Your family. Your children.

For all of this is Malcolm, too: mothers and daughters and sisters and lovers. "This [film] is just the tip of the iceberg," Denzel tells me. "My desire is that this film will make people want to read more, study more, understand more about themselves, through Malcolm maybe — he's the jump-off point. He's the wake-up call." Bassett's screams would wake the dead, woke me way before I heard Denzel speak any of Malcolm's words. Myself, any self — it's in the voices of the others who know me, especially the quiet ones. The portraitist, who must become a vessel for these voices — to hear them in their subtle confusion and to imagine and fashion his own flesh-and-blood human of all that's there — has a nearly impossible task. Had Spike heard the quiet voices, beyond the noise, beyond his own hype? Have we ever had a fight, Malcolm? No. The truth? Women's Malcolms and their spoils — this is Malcolm, too.

BY THE TIME WE WERE TO LEAVE Egypt, I was as sick as a dog and more than ready to go. A day or two before departure, the crew and the writers visited the Egyptian Museum to celebrate the Africanity of the people who'd created ancient Egyptian civilization. Stone monuments and precious trinkets whispered a plainly black story to us: No matter how light and thin lipped the

Egyptians were, they resembled us more than they did Swedes or Germans or the Irish or the English or the Dutch or the French. A guard approached one of the sisters in the crew and said: "You are ancient Egyptian." And he was correct, right down to her golden color and ovaline eyes. When she told us, she smiled the contented way you do after a long sleep.

We had all agreed to leave the museum at a certain time, and with five minutes to go, I was trying to jam in everything I hadn't seen. Then I ran into a group of Americans on a walking tour. The Egyptian guide was explaining Tutankhamen's possessions; the Americans, all white, looked blankly interested. "This image — the skin color is black," said the guide. She went into a detailed explanation of the significance of the color black to ancient Egyptians, assuring us: "We have the mummy, and it doesn't look like this. The dark skin is the silt of the Nile. The dark skin means the . . ." The Americans stood still, their faces blank. I felt home again, and at that moment, I remembered the Malcolm X that white hatred had created, the one who would have lashed out at that guide, with an urbane and satisfying thoroughness. I kept this vision, brought it with me to the airport, slept with it on my mind during the long flight home. It was almost enough. ■

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