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LEE**
ON MALCOLM X

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If ever Spike had to nail one, this is it. "We all knew - everyone who worked with it - that this was not just any film. It required the best. If you want to make a sports analogy, this would have to be our career season."

The voice, distinct and confident, as recognizable as any in contemporary popular culture, is filmmaker Spike Lee's, and the product of his "career season," *Malcolm X*. No other film in recent years has been so often and so publicly discussed, debated, praised and damned in its pre-production and production phases, and few have been as eagerly awaited. The movie about the life of the charismatic and controversial Black Nationalist leader, starring Denzel Washington and recently cut to under three hours, will be released in November.

Though Lee takes the moniker "filmmaker" (rather than "director") largely because he has written his own screenplays for previous films, he chose to base this movie on an earlier screenplay by James Baldwin (the late author of such classics as *Go Tell It on the Mountain* and *The Fire Next Time*) and Arnold Perl.

"I was in a rare position. I got to do this film," says Lee, matter-of-factly. "In my opinion the best thing to do was not to start from scratch, but to take the best script and work on that.

"Baldwin's one of the literary giants of the 20th century," he explains. "How could I just come in saying, 'Baldwin ain't shit. I'm gonna throw the whole thing out'?"

"You can't do that. I wouldn't want to do that. You want to leave your impression, but at the same time you have respect. And that was the way I approached the Baldwin/Perl script. I was there to make it better, but at the same time, very respectful, knowing that this idea did not originate from my mind."

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by WILLIAM STEPHENSON
illustrations by JOE CIARDIELLO

SPIKE LEE FROM 86

Jazz fans, whatever their interest in the script and its social and political ramifications, should be pleased to learn that in *Malcolm X* Lee also shows great respect for music and musical history. The film features not only a soundtrack by trumpeter Terence Blanchard but copious source material from such varied artists as Duke Ellington, Billie Holiday, John Coltrane,

and Jr. Walker.

"What we wanted to do with the source music," says Lee, "was tell the history of black music. You know, let songs define eras and particular decades. Because this film goes from the 1930s all the way up to the present day."

For example, Lionel Hampton's "Flying Home" is the musical centerpiece of an

early scene which features "a big jitterbug, Lindy hop dance number" at the Roseland in Roxbury in Boston during the war years. Ella Fitzgerald's "Drop Me Off in Harlem" supports a Harlem celebration of Joe Louis's knock-out of Billy Conn, and Jr. Walker's "Shotgun" plays while assassins case Harlem's Audubon ballroom on the night before the murder of Malcolm X.

John Coltrane's "Alabama," written specifically as a memorial for four young black girls killed by racial violence, takes an even more prominent position. "We used that song overlaying a montage of all the atrocities that were inflicted on black folks during the whole civil rights movement of the early sixties," explains Lee.

Music has always been integral to Lee's films. Consider the affecting and oft repeated "Nola" in *She's Gotta Have It*, or EU hit "Da Butt" and the Broadway-style throw-down showdown between "Jigaboo" and "Wanna-bee" in his only overt musical, *School Daze*. Similarly important were Public Enemy's "Fight the Power" in *Do The Right Thing* and Stevie Wonder's breezy pop wrapper for *Jungle Fever*. The *Mo' Better Blues* soundtrack, featuring the Branford Marsalis Quartet and the prominent horn of Terence Blanchard, was as much what the film was "about" as anything that appeared on screen, and it garnered a Grammy nomination in 1990. With every production, Lee has shown that he understands and appreciates music as much if not better than any popular director of recent times.

"What they do now," says Lee, "when they want to do a soundtrack, is they go through *Billboard* and they see who the hottest producers are. Then they get the ten hottest acts and say, 'Write me a song.' Songs which then (surprise!) have little or nothing to do with the film.

"I mean, we all wanna sell records," Lee admits, "but at least let the songs be part of the same world as the film. [A] lot of filmmakers really underestimate music," suggests Lee. "Because for the most part they don't know anything about music."

Lee, on the other hand, does know music. And his credentials begin as a family heritage obtained from his father, a respected jazz bass player, pianist, and composer, who has scored many films for his son.

"I'm very fortunate in being the son of a great jazz musician, Bill Lee. I was raised with music. I was raised in a jazz household. So that's why music is always an important part of my life: I was exposed to it at a very young age. When I do a film, I

Trumpeter **CHET BAKER**'s untimely death

in 1989 cut short a fruitful series of collaborations with several jazz

luminaries, including guitarist **JIM HALL**.

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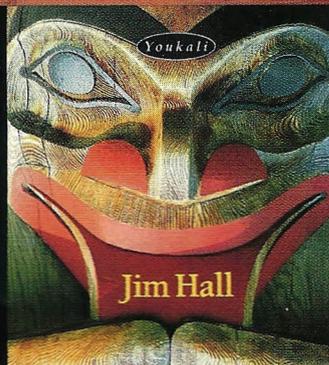
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BONEY JAMES

BY JONATHAN WIDRAN

CONTINUED FROM THE NEXT GENERATION OF SAXMEN

it at a very young age. When I do a film, I give the same respect to the music as I would the script, the cinematography, the set design, the costumes. All those elements have to be treated equally.

"A lot of filmmakers," the director continues, "shoot a film, and then it's like, 'Oh, well, now we have to put the music in.'"

"Hold on. How do you start a film and not know who your composer's gonna be? When you're in preproduction you get your production designer, you get a costume designer, you get the person to cast the film, you get your editor, your D.P., and your cinematographer. So why not get your composer at the same time? It's just as important.

"I don't know how people just wait till the last minute, after everything's done. I mean, that's backwards. When I make a film it's not really a movie, it's not really complete till I see it with the score. When you have a great score, a great composer, it just takes your film to another level."

Lee is now in the process of taking music to another label, his own, a new subsidiary of CBS/Sony, called, like his filmworks, 40 Acres and a Mule. (In this case, however, the logo features a mule pulling not a plow but a gramophone.)

"I've had a lot of success with the music in my films, so it just made natural sense eventually to get a label," insists Lee. "Plus I've always felt there's a lot of talent out there that doesn't get heard because the artists make music that's not within the narrow confines of what black radio plays. This label is in direct opposition to that."

The first releases on 40 Acres and a Mule are by State of Art, a duo composed of ex-Chic members Raymond Jones and Norma Jean Wright, and Senegalese vocalist Youssou N'Dour. A third, by singer, songwriter and actress Lonette McKee, is soon to be released.

"It's all people I believe in," says Lee. "We're talking about people who are artists, who have vision."

Though *Malcolm X* is only his second film score, Terence Blanchard is another artist Lee obviously believes in. "I think he definitely should have been nominated for an academy award for his score to *Jungle Fever*," insists Lee, "but it will be very hard for those people to overlook him on this one. Very, very hard."

Blanchard, well aware of the extraordinary responsibilities imposed in the making *Malcolm X*, returns the compliment: "I think it's far beyond anything else that he's done. People will see the difference. In everything. Everything about it. I can't wait, and I

The age old question, "What's in a name?" applies perfectly to the moniker and music of instrumental music's latest up-and-coming sensation, funk-oriented saxman Boney James. Granted, it's a more marketable sounding name than James Oppenheim, but unlike famous folks like Elton John and Engelbert Humperdinck, who changed their names for strictly showbiz reasons, James came by his stage persona as a joke, by running out of cash while on tour in Norway with Randy Crawford.

"When I told Wayne Lindsey, her keyboardist, that I was just about out of per diem money to eat, he said that'd make me 'Boney James,' and it stuck. And I'm not even that skinny! It took a long time to get used to calling me that," laughs the well-respected sideman, who doubles as a keyboardist both on tour and in the studio with big-name artists.

The combination of the terminally cool name and the rich R&B-influenced stylings gracing his Spindletop debut *Trust* may lead many listeners to believe James is a street-wise, inner city hepcat rather than an upper middle class kid who went to Beverly Hills High and graduated from UCLA with a degree in history. But being raised in a colorblind way on a steady diet of Earth, Wind & Fire, Barry White, and Grover Washington, Jr. helped him gravitate towards more urban rhythms when it came time for James to cultivate his own voice on the horn.

"I believe that both jazz and black-oriented music comes from the same source, and both have certain chords, harmonies, and grooves you don't hear in rock or pop. I've always had a real affinity for those kinds of rhythms, so when I started writing songs, that's what naturally came out," he says.

His disposition towards the street vibe has led him to amass a resume chock full of soulful names like Morris Day (who he toured with off and on for five years), Randy Crawford, Ray Parker Jr., Vesta Williams, the Isley Brothers, Bobby Caldwell, Angela Winbush, and Martika. Despite all the acclaim and success in those circles over the past seven years, his was a classic example of the artist trying to emerge from the heart of a musician for hire. Having his own album, he says, is clearly the fulfillment of a longtime dream.

"Don't get me wrong, I love doing sessions, creating certain lines that were never there before," he insists. "But as years have gone by, I've started to feel frustrated with being strictly a sideman. I'm obsessed with the sax, and I wasn't able to play it enough on the jobs I had. In order to get work touring, I had to double up a lot on keyboards, and I didn't enjoy that. I wanted to play sax all the time! It's my therapy most of the time."

Though James was playing clarinet by age eight and sax by ten, it was more of a hobby even through high school, when he led the fusion outfit Line One. But James "didn't have the passion then," and enrolled at Berkeley as a history major.

James transferred down to UCLA, balanced college with music for several years, and delivered pizza in 90210 before an audition with Morris Day led to his induction into the ranks of the professional R&B world. While James admits he was a late bloomer and is now making up for it by taking lessons and working endlessly on improving his chops, he feels that such a late emergence and a "non-Berklee" education insures that he doesn't infuse as many cliches into his music and playing style.

"You can't avoid being influenced by other sax players, but you don't want to copy anyone. I'm going back and studying more players now than ever before," he explains. "To play well, you need a vocabulary, a history, and an understanding of sax technology. It's like learning a language. In order to make your own statement, finger-wise and hearing things, you need to have that and then transform it within yourself so when you spit it back out, it still sounds uniquely like you. Doing all that and keeping the emotional content of a song is a definite challenge." ●

Malcolm and Music

Terence Blanchard knows from hard experience the paradoxical rule of artistic limits: coherent expression requires respect for the boundaries you choose, growth demands challenging those you no longer have use for.

Over the last four years, Blanchard has suffered frustrations, met obstacles, shattered old boundaries, imposed new disciplines and now stands at the verge of artistic success wider and more fulfilling than even his considerable achievements as half of the celebrated Harrison-Blanchard quintets in the mid to late '80s.

"You know, a lot of people had written me off," states Blanchard, simply and without bitterness, as he leans away from a borrowed desk in a small, cluttered office in the Rockefeller Center. "But I knew that I was on course."

The problem was that the route had become unexpectedly slow and difficult. Or to use a related metaphor, Blanchard had found that his method of driving was never going to get him to the destination he had in mind. "I could have played the way I'd been playing for the rest of my life, but I wouldn't have been able to make any strides, artistically. I know that. I would just be the same guy."

It was his embouchure. He had unconsciously learned to play with his lower lip drifting over his bottom teeth, a position that led to frequent cuts and, he gradually realized, a firm upper limit to technical progress. The solution would have to be radical or not at all. It wasn't just a matter of practice, he did plenty of that. It was more like learning to play all over again.

At first he tried to do it without giving up the quintet, working on the new embouchure during the day, performing the old way at night. But it was a lost cause.

"I said, 'Wait a minute. This is not gonna work.' Because the old one was deteriorating. It was breaking down. But the new one wasn't strong enough. I said, 'Man, I got to take some time off.'"

Bye, bye, Harrison-Blanchard.

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Terence Blanchard

BLANCHARD FROM 87

Hello, woodshed. And, gradually, a gig here and there: chances to play out, timetables for progress. If he knew he had to play in two weeks, he could use the fourteen days to accomplish some particular goal.

Then, after several months, he got a phone call. Spike Lee - for whom he'd done

some playing on the soundtrack to *School Daze* - wanted his talents, both as musician and as trumpet coach for Denzel Washington in *Mo' Better Blues*.

Remembering the offer, Blanchard smiles, laughs and claps his hands together. "I said, 'I'm there.' It was something else for me to

work towards. Plus my bills were paid. It worked out great for me, really great."

It worked out great for Lee, too. Blanchard laid down some stunning performances, and he took his teaching commitment seriously. "Terence had a great responsibility," the filmmaker recalls. "Because if he was not successful in conveying to Denzel how to look real fingering or playing a trumpet, then the whole movie would have gone down the tubes. He had a tremendous burden . . . and he came through."

When it was time to make another movie, *Jungle Fever*, Lee asked Blanchard to write the score, his first. At his disposal Blanchard had 55 strings, 69 musicians total. It was hard work, a real challenge, and at the same time it was Disneyland.

"It's totally different from what I do normally," he explains, "because I have this whole palette of tonal colors to draw from. I mean, it's amazing, man. The budgets are enormous. If you say, 'Look, I'm hearing this,' they say, 'Ok, we got it.'

"Or you say, 'I'm hearing this.' Really? Ok, we'll get that."

"Well, I need twenty tubas . . ."

Talk about expanding boundaries.

You might expect that when Lee asked Blanchard to apply his talents to yet another film, a long anticipated treatment of the life of Malcolm X, the trumpeter might pull out all the stops, use every trick, throw every color in the spectrum at his massive canvas.

You'd be wrong. It was time for new limits. He spent couple of weeks in "on the job training" with composer Miles Goodman who was then scoring and recording *Housesitter*. He cut down the size of the orchestra, started thinking about what he could do with a limited set of themes. He even rejected at the last minute an intention to incorporate jazz textures into the soundtrack.

"I figured that *Malcolm* was such an important movie I didn't want to risk that," explains Blanchard. "For a number of reasons. First of all, this is the second film that I've done, so I really needed to get a handle on doing film period, before I really became too innovative. And, secondly, once I sat down and looked at the film, I really didn't hear that anymore."

What he heard, more and more, was a group of leitmotifs, two for Malcolm, one for his wife, Betty Shabazz, one for the Nation of Islam, one for a prison house orator called Bimbi. (Blanchard had the most difficult time writing a tune for Laura, young Malcolm's Lindy-hop partner. "I

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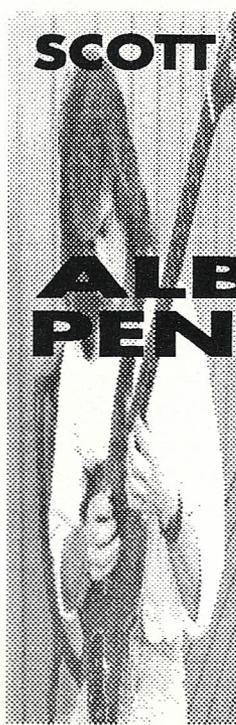
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mean, another 'Laura's Theme,'" he says, grimacing comically and shaking his head.) The challenge was in sorting it all out, combining the themes carefully, timing entrances and emphases with videos of completed scenes, constructing sonic textures that were emotionally precise and affecting without being too obtrusive.

"The first thing that I had to learn was that the music's never going to be more important than the film," he asserts. "You've got to get over that little trip quickly."

It was a question of priorities, of maturity. For Blanchard, now 30, the designation "young lion" is rapidly losing its appropriateness, and he refuses to use it as a refuge from responsibility.

"We're getting at the age now where it's time to get serious," he insists, speaking suddenly for his influential jazz generation. "I constantly think about that now. That's the reason why I changed my embouchure."

He's changed his emphasis as a bandleader, as well. Listen carefully to his latest Columbia album, *Simply Stated*, and you'll hear the direction. As the title suggests, Blanchard is responding to the hard-won expansion of his technical capacities with a new set of self-imposed rules. Blanchard's latest work isn't about flash. It isn't about innovation for the sake of innovation. But it isn't a mindless veneration of tradition, either.

Simply Stated, he explains, is about "reconnecting myself to the fundamentals of playing. Trying to be expressive by playing a simple melody." It's also about writing "in the tradition of swing, as opposed to trying to obliterate that and come up with something different."

Listen for instance to his languorous reading of the Herb Ellis ballad "Detour Ahead." Blanchard makes his way through the track's dozen minutes compellingly, caressing the melody like a precious gift. The performance is a strict exercise in subtlety, but one that reaches for the emotive possibilities of narrative rather than the intellectual satisfactions of etude.

Other tracks on *Simply Stated* are direct attempts to pay renewed attention to the lessons of Art Blakey, with whom he spent four years as a Jazz Messenger, lessons about making clear and concise musical statements, about saying your piece and getting out of the way.

Blanchard worries about younger musicians who may never benefit from the training of someone like Blakey. The apprenticeship system in jazz is, he fears,

becoming a casualty of the star system. "It's just a sign of the times," laments Blanchard. "There's no bands for them to play in. Festivals now are not bringing in bands, they're bringing in all-star bands. So the people in the all-star bands don't have their own." It makes it hard for the old masters to pass along their knowledge to younger musicians who aren't yet all-stars.

The musicians just get signed earlier and earlier. It's good for their careers, maybe, Blanchard concedes, but "it's more difficult artistically. It may take them years to learn something they might learn in a week from an Art Blakey."

"When we hit the scene," Blanchard continues, "nobody was a star. None of these guys. Nobody. We wanted to play jazz because we really loved the music. I mean, we didn't think all of this was gonna happen. But we had a passion for playing jazz. And that's what motivated us."

"I hear some younger musicians and they talk about when they gonna get a deal, you know, when they gonna get this endorsement. And that doesn't have anything to do with playing music. Nothing. At all. You don't even have to have a record. You don't have to have that to be a great musician. Not at all. Not at all."

What you have to have, it seems, is sincerity and commitment, two kinds of discipline that Blanchard has scrupulously maintained. Such dedication is paying off. As a bandleader he sees "much better records to come, much better," and he is so pleased with the *Malcolm X* score that he finds it difficult to retain his habitual modesty.

"I never say this," he begins. "Most people who know me, they always say, 'Man, how come you never say anything?'"

"I don't know. But this is one of the first projects that I'm really proud of. I really am. I'm glad I worked on it. Proud to put my name on it. I can't wait for it to hit."

"This project is so far ahead of *Jungle Fever*, man, they don't even relate."

"It's motivated me to practice and really make strides with the band. I've got things we're gonna be working on in Japan [his next tour stop]."

Blanchard pauses to laugh.

"The guys think they're gonna be hanging out. No, no, no, no, no."

"Oh, man, I wanna buy me a new stereo."

"No, you got rehearsal. Come back here. This way." •

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