

Ideas & Trends

Malcolm X, in the Eyes Of Different Beholders

By FELICIA R. LEE

"MY whole life has been a chronology of changes," Malcolm X told Alex Haley, his biographer, the year before he was shot to death on Feb. 21, 1965, in the Audubon Ballroom in New York City. His life with its wholesale leaps of faith and thought has led to continual resurrections and numerous reincarnations as the ideological brawl for his legacy continues.

In his 39 years, Malcolm was constantly evolving, complicating the claims of those who seek to be his spiritual heirs and the interpreters of his philosophy. That he was many things to many people is reflected in his range of admirers, who include rap artists like Public Enemy, Justice Clarence Thomas of the Supreme Court, and the filmmaker Spike Lee. Mr. Lee will reveal his version of the black nationalist's life when his already controversial film "Malcolm X" opens this month.

Malcolm X was variously a drug dealer and thief and an Islamic family man whose ascetic life forbade drugs and alcohol. As the spokesman for the Black Muslims, he preached the moral inferiority of whites, self defense and black separation from America's political and social mainstream. He later parted with the Black Muslims, repudiated racism and acknowledged that if racism was eradicated, this could be a country where people could lead decent lives.

The question for some scholars is whether the Malcolm X resurrected by black youth hungry for a symbol of their inchoate rage or the Malcolm X resurrected by the star-starved media represents the true Malcolm X. Because he did not leave an extensive body of work, press for a specific political agenda or build a lasting organization, his legacy has been his own persona, open for interpretation. As a result, while praised for his intelligence and bravery, Malcolm X has been criticized for casting the quest for equality as one for black manhood, and for being racist.

"The legacy is a highly contentious one, no doubt about it," said Cornel West, professor of religion at Princeton University and the director of the Afro-American Studies Department. "He has endured because the saliency and visibility of the rage he articulated exists more than before."

Julius Lester, professor of Judaic and Near Eastern Studies at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, has called Malcolm X's legacy a complex and disturbing one that "includes black racism, anti-Semitism and a belief in the inferiority of women." Mr. Lester said he

saw the nationalist's extremism as comforting to hopeless black youth.

"There is something in the metaphor of the X that has a romance to it that gives them an identity," Mr. Lester said. "Who Malcolm was that led him to the Nation of Islam — his despair — also mirrors their condition. It is a clarity that is illusory. What he left, pretty much, was warmed-over black nationalism. What makes all the difference in the world was that he was assassinated. It made him a deity."

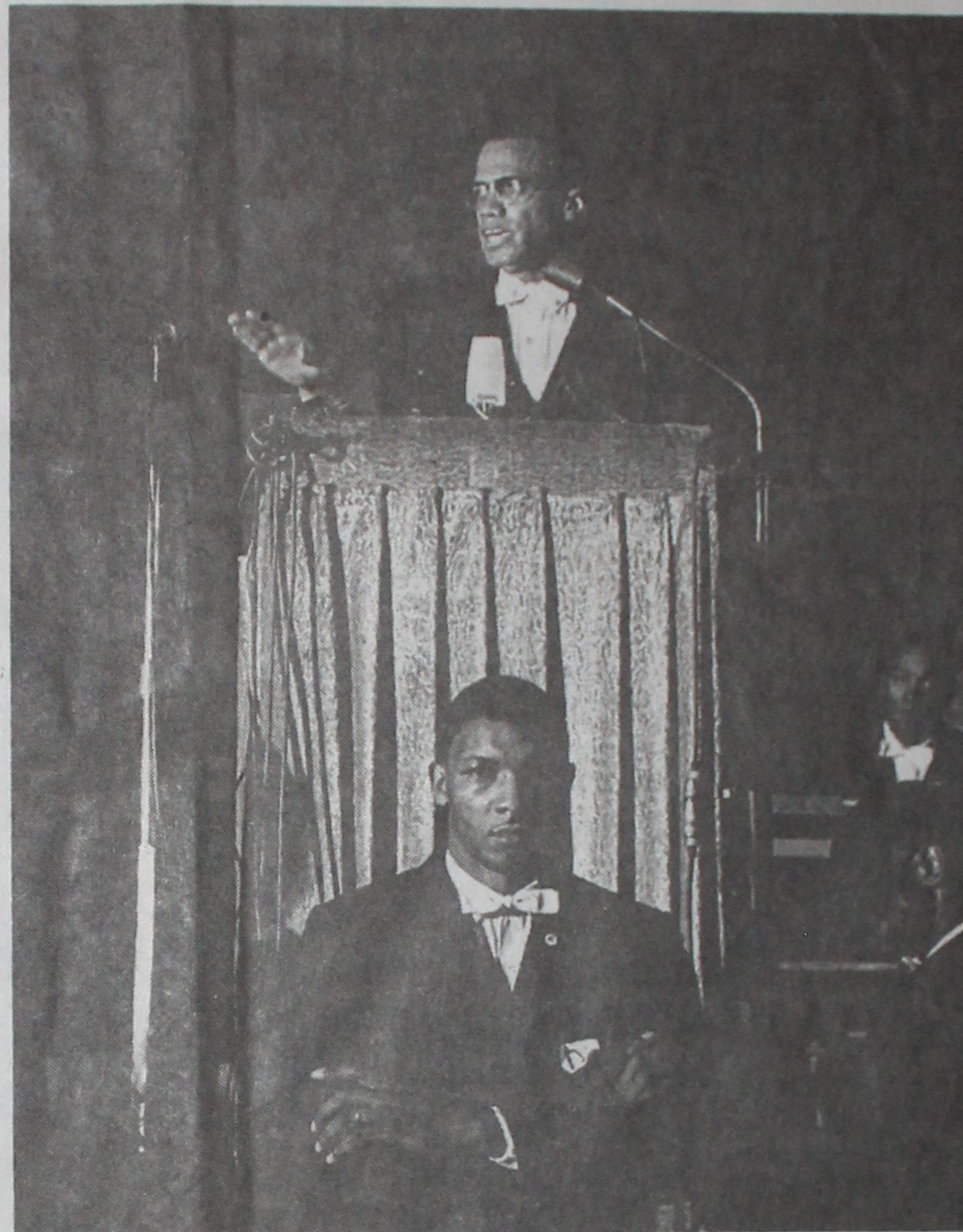
Articulated Rage

Other scholars, and certainly Malcolm X's admirers, reject that assessment. They say Malcolm X challenged blacks not merely to integrate America, but also to change it and to redefine how they saw themselves. He challenged all Americans to come to terms with a nation that preached liberty on one hand yet treated its darker citizens with violence and hatred on the other, they say. Malcolm X also openly articulated an anger among blacks: many had suffocated while hoping that things would change or despairing that they ever would.

"He taught black people what to think about themselves as an African people, culturally and politically," said James H. Cone, a theological professor at Union Theological Seminary who is the author of "Martin and Malcolm and America: A Dream or Nightmare?"

"Malcolm began to make a resurgence in the 80's, when Ronald Reagan became President and Malcolm's message about America being a nightmare became symbolized in Ronald Reagan.

"Probably the rap artists come closest to articulating the rage, although they don't always understand the complexity," he said. "People who see the early part of his life as a black nationalist don't always realize the changes. And those who see the changes don't recognize



Eve Arnold/Magnum

Malcolm X urging his listeners to respect women at a rally in New York in 1961.

The slain black nationalist is at once a near-deity and shallow media icon.

the continuity."

Manning Marable, a professor of history and political science at the University of Colorado at Boulder who is completing a Malcolm X biography, said the renewed interest in the man is symptomatic.

"It's a commentary on black leaders today," Mr. Marable said. "It also speaks to the growing marginality of young African-Americans.

"What young people have done is instinctively gone back into history to elevate a figure who seems to capture the militancy, fiery rhetoric and

spiritual commitment which they do desperately desire today."

Others fear that the man and his message will be trivialized by an indiscriminate popular culture.

"Malcolm X has long been popular among black people," said Amiri Baraka, the poet who is a professor of African Studies at the State University of New York at Stony Brook. "What we have now is white people exploiting the image for their own gain. Seeing young people

Black intellectuals plumb his ideas; youths, his anger.

wearing the X-baseball caps is one thing, but seeing Malcolm X in Bloomingdale's boutique is another matter."

Mr. Baraka is among the naysayers who have attacked Spike Lee's film, afraid that it dwells too much on the early Malcolm — Detroit Red — who exploited women sexually, straightened his hair and ran numbers. Despite the protests of Mr. Baraka and others, the icon-making machine churns, producing books, magazine articles, baseball caps, shirts and rap records.

Mr. West agreed Malcolm X's latest incarnation is partly a market phenomenon, but he said it also reflects a real rage among the young.

Too often, scholars say, the gains of the civil rights era have bypassed the poor, and violence has been the result. South Central Los Angeles first burned on Aug. 11, 1965, only five days after Congress passed a major voting rights law that would register thousands of disenfranchised black

Southerners. Just months ago, South Central Los Angeles ignited again, fueled by much of the same despair and fury. Since 1967, according to the Census Bureau, the proportion of black families living at the lowest income level grew by 50 percent.

Many black intellectuals say few black leaders today can match Malcolm X's ability to reach those at the bottom. His contemporary, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., while revered by many black people, was a child of the middle class whose measured appeals to white morality and whose integrationist blueprint for change could only go so far, they say. What many young people are seeking in Malcolm X is some reflection of themselves and their own experience as quintessential outsiders. So Malcolm X perseveres as a paradigm for the black underclass, capable of transcending economic frustrations and societal dislocations.

Listen to Omar Jerome, a 17-year-old New Yorker who dropped out of school and works in the City Volunteer Corps as he seeks his general equivalency degree.

"Malcolm X is like every black man," Mr. Jerome said. "He's been through things that every black person has been through — drugs, poverty, going to jail. We love him because he rose above it all and became a leader."