

**HIGH HOPES: CLINTON GETS STARTED**

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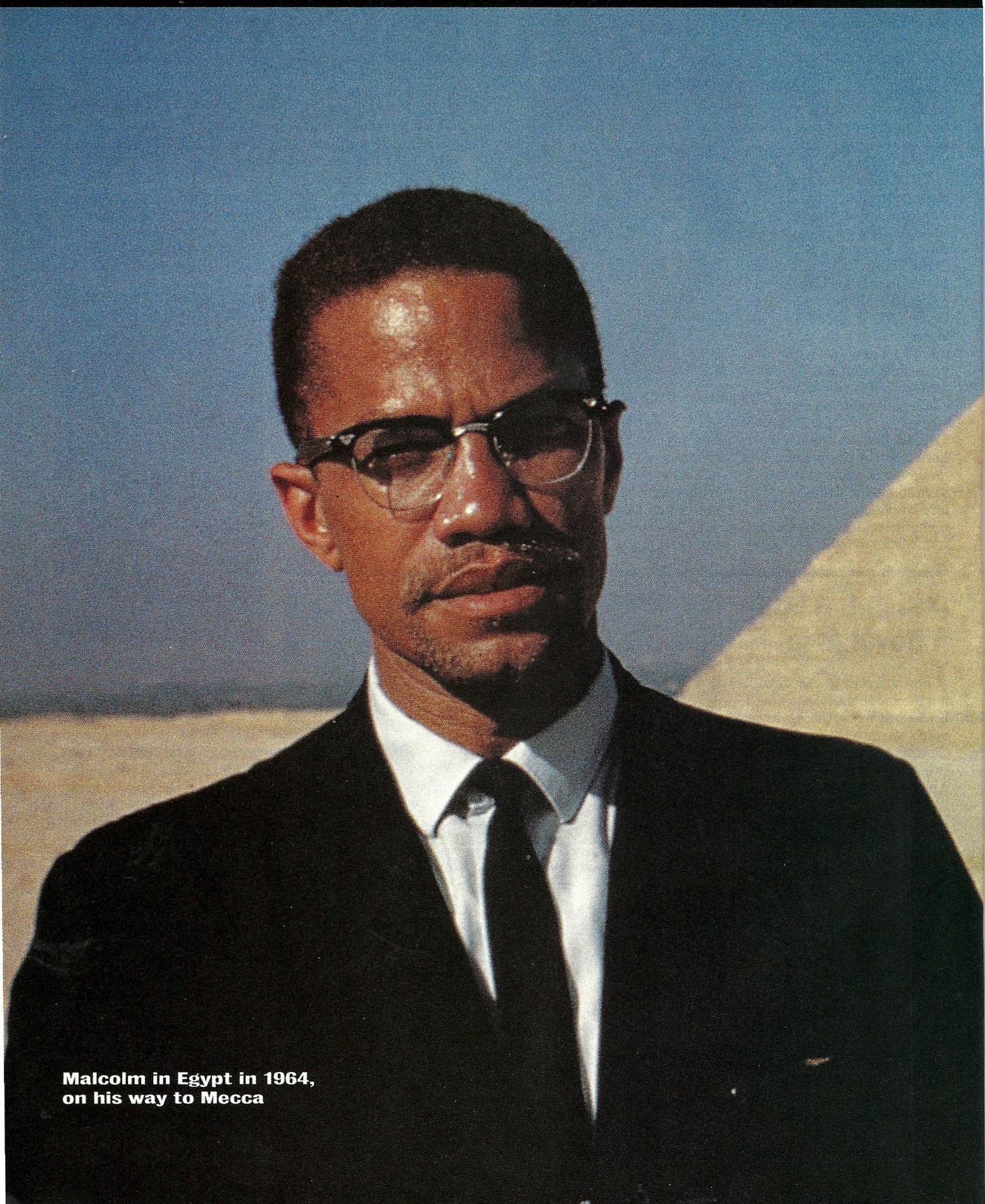
**THE MEANING OF  
MALCOLM**

# **X**



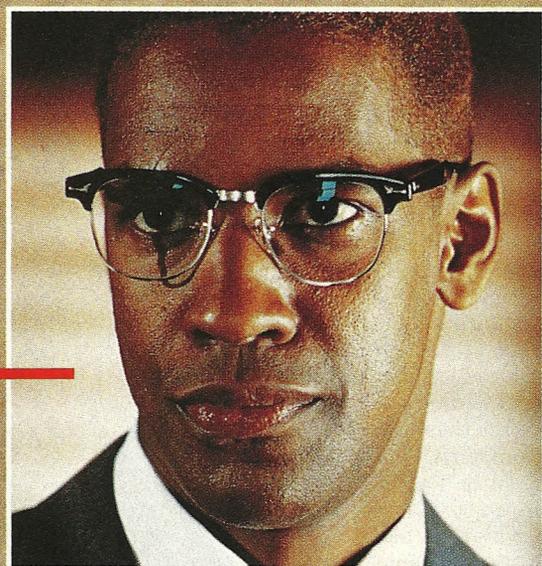
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# MALCOLM



**Malcolm in Egypt in 1964,  
on his way to Mecca**

The black martyred hero still haunts our conscience. A new film burnishes the myth.



Denzel Washington as Malcolm X

**X**... X... X... X... X/Now that Malcolm's dead.../We all love Malcolm;/Malcolm's alive.../Though His body's been Dead/Damn near Thirty Years Now.../Yes... I'm sure Malcolm loves/His name scrawled all over/Drug peddlers backs/X... X... X marks the spot/X... Gang Violence/X... Babies having babies/X... Illiteracy is kool/I'm sure Brother Malcolm loves/The way his philosophy/Is held in those young black fists/Delivering fiery resolve/To trivial issues...

As a black kid growing up in Harlem, poet Benson Wheeler heard only about The Bad Malcolm X. He went with his family to see Malcolm speak once, and he remembers they seemed frightened by the tall, red-haired mulatto who called white people devils. For years after Malcolm X was killed in 1965, Wheeler

had an image of a "reefer-smoking, gun-carrying ex-con, a mad, angry Black Muslim." Then he went to college and read Malcolm's speeches and autobiography. There, he discovered The Good Malcolm—the eloquent advocate of black "enlightenment," self-respect and self-reliance. Now a performance artist and community activist in Boston, Wheeler tries to capture that Malcolm in his rough-edged street poetry. But around the neighborhood, he sees a lot more interest in X clothes than in Malcolm's ideas. "The large majority of folks don't know where to tell you to find a copy of 'Malcolm X Speaks,'" he says. "But ask them about an X hat: you can get one on every corner."

In life, Malcolm X was a numbers runner, thief, prison convert, anti-white demagogue and, finally, globe-trotting seeker of a new multiracial truth. In death, he's become a martyr, a myth and a fashion



FREEMAN—JALAPA

## MALCOLM X

**'What Malcolm did was to help empower black men to speak up, to challenge whites in ways that were not done before . . . These guys could stick their chests out because Malcolm was articulate, he was a brother who'd been in prison, and on the streets, and he knew what the real deal was.'**

— U.S. Rep. Maxine Waters

statement. Now director Spike Lee and actor Denzel Washington are about to turn him into something even more improbable: Malcolm the Matinee Idol. Lee's much-awaited 3-hour 21-minute movie, "Malcolm X," won't be in theaters until next week, but already it's given rise to a media and marketing blitz that's part history lesson, part retailing bonanza. At least six national magazines have already put Malcolm, Spike or Denzel on their covers. In the next year, several new biographies and a PBS documentary are due out. Lee himself has written a companion volume, "By Any Means Necessary—The Trials and Tribulations of the Making of 'Malcolm X,'" about the hurdles he faced in bringing his \$34 million project to the screen (page 71). Looking to cash in on the inevitable boom in caps and T-shirts, Spike has even opened two new boutiques in Los Angeles to sell his own line of clothes.

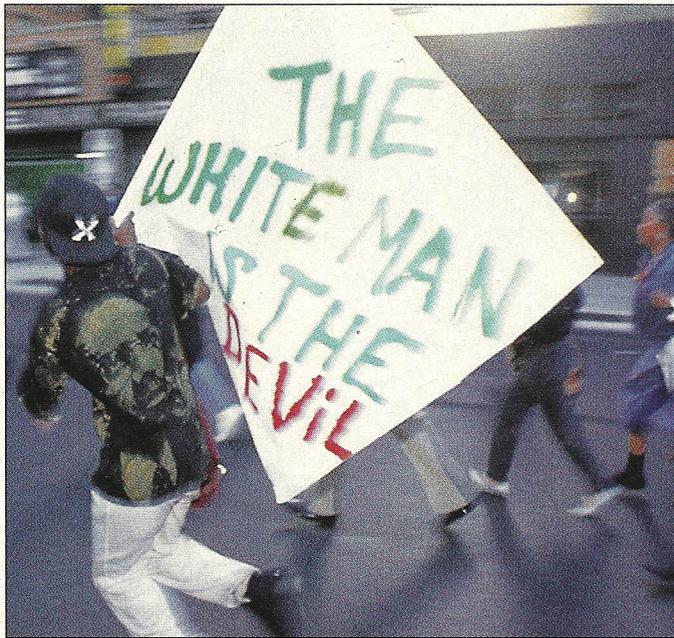
**Spinoffs:** The movie's distributor, Warner Bros., is also pursuing any means necessary to maximize its return on Malcolm's memory, hiring Uni-World Group, one of the nation's largest black advertising firms, to market the movie to black consumers. But the studio whose parent company, Time Warner, took so much heat for distributing rapper Ice-T's incendiary "Cop Killer" is also mindful of the passionate emotions that Malcolm can still stir on both sides of the color line. To reassure older whites who may remember Malcolm only as a militant troublemaker, Warner Bros. has prepared movie trailers that portray the film character as a relative moderate. It has also scheduled special screenings for L.A. Mayor Tom Bradley and other city officials across the country to allay worries that "Malcolm X" might set off the kind of unrest that another Warner Bros. release, "New Jack City," did last year.

Within the black community, the sense of possessiveness over Malcolm's legacy is so intense that Lee came under attack simply for making the movie. Writer Amiri Baraka charged that Lee was too "bourgeois" to do justice to Malcolm's story. Others who have found Lee's earlier films a little too self-indulgent wondered whether he could tell Malcolm's story straight. Yet after almost two years of work, Lee has managed to produce a film that achieves the sweep of an old-fashioned Hollywood epic and still captures the complicated intellectual and personal odyssey chronicled in "The Autobiography of Malcolm X" (page 74). Alex Haley, who coauthored the autobiography, saw a print of the movie before he died. "Malcolm would have loved this," he said.

Lee relies on a subsequent trail of investigative reporting to tell the story of Malcolm's brutal death. At the time, a group of Muslim extremists were found to have acted alone in gunning

down Malcolm gangland style as he gave a Sunday-afternoon speech in Harlem's Audubon Ballroom on Feb. 21, 1965. Yet later digging unearthed strong evidence of at least indirect orders from Malcolm's former mentor, Black Muslim leader Elijah Muhammad. Lee points strongly to the larger conspiracy and even hints that the FBI had knowledge of the plot and at best did little to prevent it. But Lee isn't out to play Oliver Stone and retry the case on the screen. He keeps his focus on Malcolm's life and his remarkable series of transformations. "It was that evolution that fascinated me," Lee says.

For all its appeal, Lee's movie can't fully explain why Malcolm X continues to be such a figure of fascination—why he still "haunts America's racist conscience," as Detroit-based scholar Paul Lee puts it. Recent surveys suggest that most whites today know and care little about Malcolm. Even among African-Americans, a NEWSWEEK Poll found, only half have a clear knowledge of who he was and what he stood for. Yet, fully understood or not, Malcolm still holds a powerful grip on blacks' imagination. A majority of African-Americans—and an overwhelming 84 percent of young blacks—say they consider him a hero. Most rank him only after Martin Luther King in his importance to the black community today. And surprisingly, most who admire him say it's not because they think that blacks are worse off now or that today's black leadership is lack-



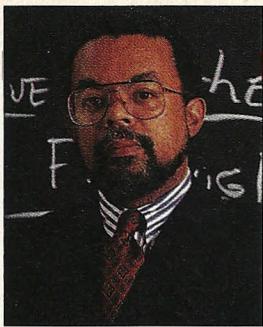
JOHN VAN HASSELT—SYGMA

**A demonstrator at the United Nations on Malcolm's birthday, 1992**

ing. Clearly, many blacks believe that Malcolm's indictment of racist attitudes is still relevant today, but his appeal goes even deeper than that. To understand it, black scholars say, requires an appreciation of just how many things Malcolm X stood for. As Kansas City, Mo., Mayor the Rev. Emanuel Cleaver puts it, he was a man with "10 different personalities and 11 messages to be learned from them."

Although there's been much talk of "a rediscovery" of Malcolm in recent years, black scholars insist that his influence never really faded. In fact, "Malcolm has always been popular within the black community," says Paul Lee, who served as a consultant on the movie. A decade before Martin Luther King's birthday became a national holiday, blacks in Washington, D.C., celebrated Malcolm X Day on May 19; for years, there have been similar unofficial commemorations in Philadelphia, Cleveland and Harlem. Mayor Cleaver has 25-year-old memories of getting together with school friends to listen to and analyze records of Malcolm X's speeches. To hear young blacks today discussing Malcolm, Cleaver says, "is like the '60s all over again."

When Malcolm X was alive, he was portrayed in the national



FRIEDMAN—BLACK STAR

MALCOLM X

'What's superficial is people running around with X hats on who ain't gonna read the autobiography, who don't know anything about Malcolm, who embrace him as a figure of rage. They've emptied him of his complexity. They see him like Ice Cube, the ancestor of the most rage-filled rap.'

— Harvard professor Henry Louis Gates

press mostly as an apostle of violence, a kind of vengeful antithesis to Martin Luther King and his creed of nonviolence. Yet unlike the Black Panthers and later militant groups, Malcolm and his followers never made a fetish of preparing for armed conflict. Before he made his famous call for blacks in Harlem to form "rifle clubs," he consulted lawyers about just how far he should go in wording the statement. His real intent, many students of his speeches now agree, was not actually to supplant the pacifist tactics of Dr. King with a more violent battle plan; it was to offer a psychological alternative: a way of talking back, if not fighting back. As long-time Chicago political activist and friend of Malcolm's Timuel Black puts it, "Violence was not his theme, but his position was 'You don't turn the other cheek'."

It was for that undaunted ability to talk back to The Man that so many blacks adored Malcolm, no matter what some thought of his more extremist rhetoric. At a time when most black folks had to weigh every word they said around white people, Malcolm stood up before crowds and TV cameras and uttered thoughts that most African-Americans gave voice to only in private: that whites would never really accept blacks as equals, and that the promise that blacks could get ahead if only they acted "more white" was a cruel illusion. Even more gratifying, Malcolm told off the white man with an eloquence, wit and confidence that was a match for any white orator. "People were afraid of Malcolm, but they loved Malcolm," recalls Abdul Alkalimat, a Northeastern University professor who is writing a book on "How to Read Malcolm X." "They loved Malcolm as the young warrior who dared to say things."

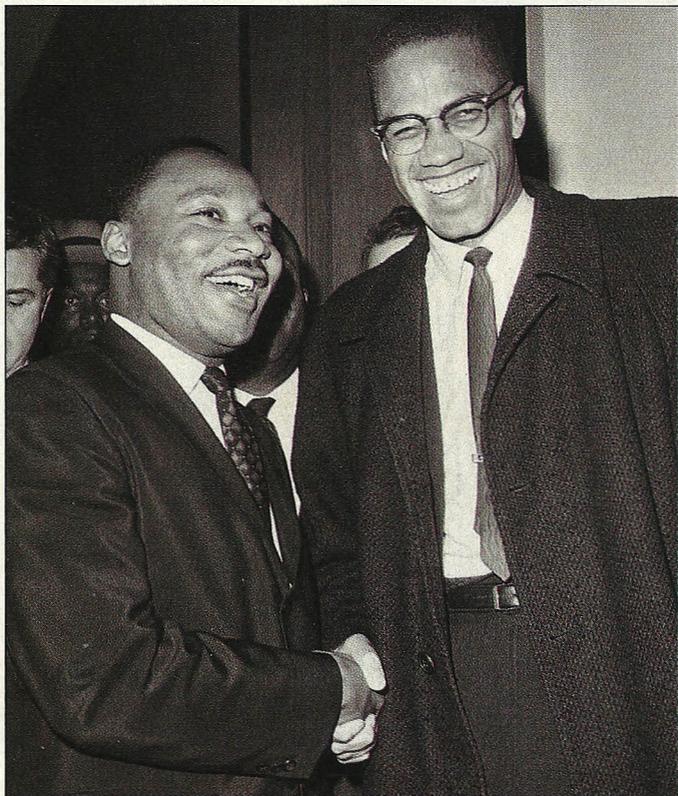
Malcolm was able to talk so defiantly to white people partly because he didn't want anything from them. In Lee's film, there's a poignant moment when a well-meaning white student approaches Malcolm as he arrives to give a speech at Harvard University. She insists she's a good person despite being white, and asks what she can do to help his cause. "Nothing," Malcolm replies coldly, walking away. In the last year of his life, Malcolm was to rethink that position and express a willingness to cooperate with sympathetic whites. But even then, his message was that blacks had to stop waiting for whites to solve their problems and start helping themselves. Long before Jack Kemp or Daniel Patrick Moynihan entered the debate, Malcolm articulated the need for blacks to start

their own businesses, break free of welfare, keep their families intact and provide positive role models for black children.

He also emphasized the importance of instilling "self-esteem" in black kids decades before it became a trendy educational buzzword. It was Malcolm who insisted that blacks start calling themselves "Afro-Americans" as a symbol of pride in their roots and a spur to learn more about their history. In the period when he was a spokesman for the Black Muslim doctrine of racial separation, he portrayed it as a way for blacks to discover their own worth, free of the images of white beauty and success that pervade main-

stream culture. Malcolm later abandoned full-scale separatism as impractical—but his notions about separate education still live on in the current debate over establishing special programs and schools for black inner-city kids. In Minneapolis, Dr. Willarene Beasley cites Malcolm as an influence in her push for an experimental all-black junior-high school that is now part of the city-school system.

**Black manhood:** Asked to sum up what Malcolm and his message represented to them, blacks through the decades have come back to one word: "manhood." In the beautiful eulogy that actor Ossie Davis gave at Malcolm's funeral—and that he reads over newsreel footage at the end of Lee's movie—he proclaims, "Malcolm was our manhood, our living, black manhood! This was his meaning to his people." It was how Malcolm himself used to taunt white people: "I am the man you think you are." In an age when white men wanted to be John Wayne or Steve McQueen, Malcolm offered an im-



With Martin Luther King at the U.S. Capitol in March 1964

AP

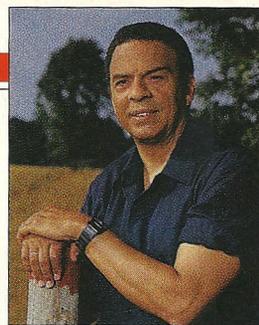
age of black gunslinger to his people—a man who was gentle and upright with family and friends but fearless toward adversaries. Former Atlanta mayor Andrew Young recalls that simply seeing Malcolm in action had a therapeutic effect for many black people. "He did, really, what a psychiatrist does," Young says. "He made them proud of themselves and proud of being black."

When black kids in the inner cities put on their X caps, that's what they're identifying with, says Ojo, at 43 a kind of elder statesman in the Disciples street gang in Chicago. "They don't really know what Malcolm's message was. They just know that he was one of the first real outspoken black men." On the street, most kids have heard enough about Malcolm to know that he was one of them—a city punk who grew up poor, got in trouble, did time and kicked drugs. Today, a staggering 23 percent of African-American

## MALCOLM X

**'Part of the difference between Malcolm and Martin Luther King is that Martin didn't lead black people. He led white people . . . His job was to educate white folks . . . Malcolm spoke directly to black people. He changed individual lives, but Martin changed the whole damn world.'**

— Ex-mayor of Atlanta Andrew Young



STATES—SABA

males between the ages of 20 and 29 are in prison, or on parole or probation, and millions more are only one more wrong move away. For them, Malcolm X is one of the few "role models" whose life stories have any resonance. As Rep. Maxine Waters, whose district includes South-Central L.A., site of this spring's riots, puts it, "They know [Malcolm] knew what the real deal was. He was a brother who had been in prison, he'd been on the streets."

If some young blacks now consider Malcolm X more of a hero than Martin Luther King, it's a testimony to both the success and the failure of King's dream. King's crusade for legal equality

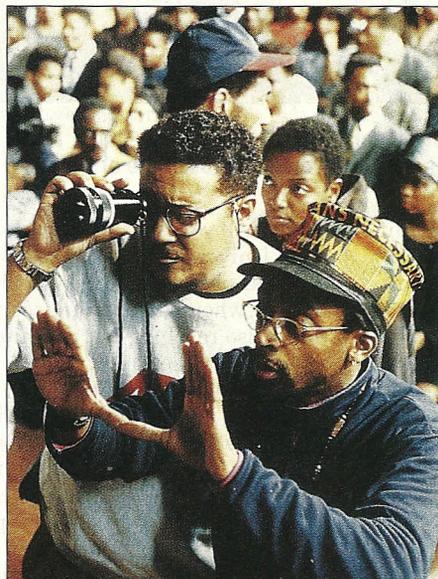
and greater opportunity has made life better for millions of blacks, allowing them to get better jobs, move to the suburbs and enjoy many of the same comforts that white Americans do. But that exodus has had the cruel effect of making those left behind—the kind of poor urban blacks who grew up like Malcolm—even worse off. One reason for Malcolm X's enduring appeal "lies in the simple fact that we have not yet overcome," says Duke University professor C. Eric Lincoln, who was a friend of Malcolm's. "For many of the kids in the ghetto we are right back where we were. The few advances that have been made have not reached them. So if we didn't make it with

## Spike's Mo' Better Moviemaking Blues

About a year ago, as Spike Lee tells it, he was setting up a rally scene for "Malcolm X" on a Harlem street when an empty car suddenly came hurtling toward him and his crew. Although the car crashed before injuring anyone, its interior chilled the blood. "Someone," says Lee, "had tied a brick to the accelerator and gunned it in our direction." No one ever found out whodunit—but talk about symbolic moments. If getting a movie made sometimes resembles the art of war, the making of this film was a two-year display of Spike Lee's audacity, ingenuity and sheer endurance.

Upon winning the director's job after a public campaign arguing that Malcolm's story could be filmed only by an African-American, Lee found himself under attack from black nationalists who questioned his ability to portray their hero correctly. Nation of Islam head Louis Farrakhan was most concerned about how the film would treat spiritual leader Elijah Muhammad, from whom Malcolm X broke after a bitter dispute. "I will wait and see what is done and how it's done," Farrakhan told Lee.

Meanwhile, the director clashed with his studio, over both the epic length and the



DAVID LEE

Lee's audacity and tenacity framed his epic

budget. Lee wanted \$33 million; Warner Bros. agreed to put up only \$20 million. After picking up \$8 million more by selling the foreign rights, Lee began shooting, hoping that Warners would make up the shortfall. When it didn't, and the project went \$5 million over budget, the bond company that insured it took financial control of production.

Typically, Lee vented the dispute in the press, upsetting Warner Bros. executives by re-

ferring to the studio as "a plantation." It was all part of his strategy—to shame the company into ponying up more money

by playing things out "in full view of the public, specifically African-Americans." When even that didn't work, Lee took a page out of the Malcolm manual: do for yourself. He appealed to wealthy blacks for contributions to help finish the movie, successfully tapping Bill Cosby, Oprah Winfrey, Michael Jordan, Janet Jackson, Prince and others. "They saved 'Malcolm X,'" he says. Lee also says he plowed most of his \$3 million fee back into the production. "White directors don't have to

do that," he complains, conveniently forgetting moviemakers like Francis Ford Coppola.

Throughout, Lee constantly reworked the screenplay, originally co-written by the late black writer James Baldwin. He also did new research, interviewing Malcolm's children and his widow, who signed on as a consultant. For the scenes of Malcolm's pilgrimage to Mecca, Lee wanted to dispatch an Islamic camera crew to Saudi Arabia. The bond company

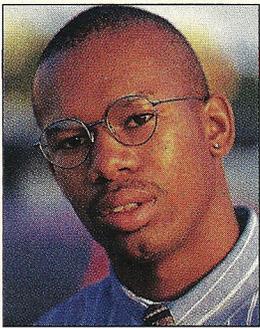
countered with a thriftier proposal: how about the New Jersey shore? In the end, they went to Mecca, becoming the first film crew ever allowed inside the holy city during the hajj.

To link Malcolm's message with the current struggle for racial justice, Lee wanted Nelson Mandela to appear in his epic. "Since Malcolm always talked about Pan-Africanism," he says, "I wanted to end the film in Africa, to make the connection between Soweto and Harlem." After Mandela read the script, his first response was no, then yes, then maybe.

Hoping that Mandela would find it harder to turn him down face to face, Lee packed up a film crew and traveled to Soweto. (When the bond company balked at paying his travel expenses without a written agreement from the ANC leader, Lee "told them to kiss my ass. We're going anyway.") Sure enough, Mandela agreed, and the movie concludes with his recitation of Malcolm's most famous speech—a vow to achieve racial equality. But mindful of the volatile situation in his homeland, Mandela stopped short of speaking Malcolm's final words: "By any means necessary."

So Malcolm himself thunders the words in a spliced-in clip. It's hard to imagine a more fitting tag for this film—or for its maker.

HARRY F. WATERS with  
VERN E. SMITH



BURROWS—GAMMA-LIAISON

## MALCOLM X

**‘I was fascinated by the “X.” Was this the guy’s real last name or what? I stayed up all night reading the autobiography. It allowed me to see a picture of Malcolm. His imagery was so powerful . . . He was what pushed me over the edge. I said, “Hey, let me get back in school”.’**

— Ricky Troupe, 21, Los Angeles student

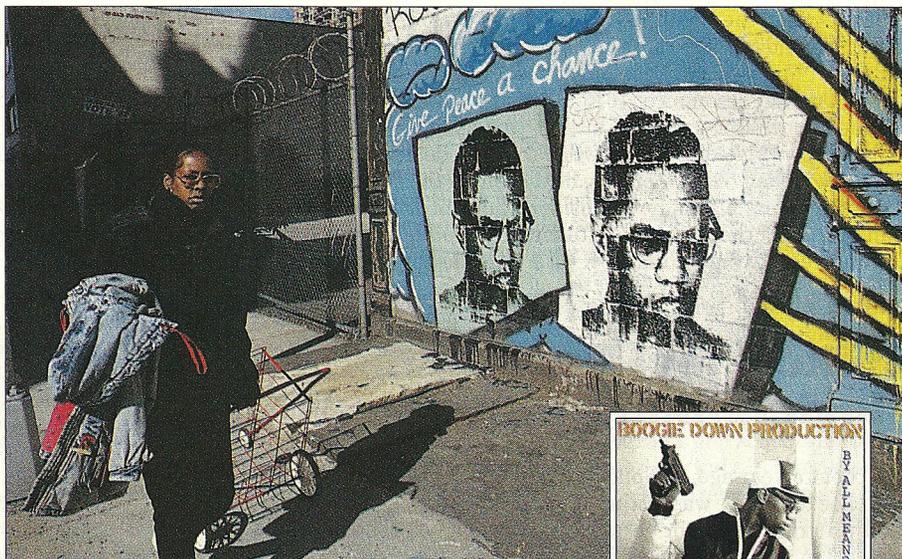
King, what have we to lose? We might as well make it with Malcolm.”

What are the chances that Spike Lee’s movie will get through to those kids? The director is hoping that, at the very least, it will give them a greater understanding of what Malcolm X stood for, and of the role that education played in turning his life around. “We’ve got to turn this backward thinking around where ignorance is champion over intelligence,” Lee says. “Young black kids being ridiculed by their peers for getting A’s and speaking proper English: that’s criminal.” The movie ends by encouraging viewers to read “The Autobiography of Malcolm X,” and Warner Bros. plans to send a study guide to the movie to high-school teachers in America’s 100 largest cities. In South-Central L.A., Congresswoman Waters hopes to form a reading group to study the book. And Malcolm X scholar Manning Marable of the University of Colorado at Boulder has called on Warner Bros. to donate 1 percent of the film’s gross profit to set up public forums, archives and

an oral-history project to promote the study of Malcolm’s life. **Stern advocate:** Yet some black leaders are worried that the movie may only serve to turn Malcolm into more of a commodity. So many companies have taken to making caps, T shirts and other products with Malcolm’s name or image on them that Malcolm’s widow, Betty Shabazz, has hired a management group to seek license fees. The firm has already sued five companies, and has hinted that it might be contemplating a lawsuit against Spike Lee’s retailing operation. After seeing the movie, many kids will

just want to rush out and buy the clothes, predicts Eric Ellison, a psychology major who runs an “Afrocentric” bookstore at Michigan State University and refuses to stock the X caps. The danger, says Harvard historian Henry Louis Gates, is of “a lot of people running around with X caps who ain’t read the autobiography and ain’t gonna read the autobiography. They’ve emptied [Malcolm] of his complexity.”

Ultimately, the film’s impact will depend on which of the many Malcolms it portrays will remain fixed in the audience’s mind. Will it be the firebrand who goaded white people and talked up armed self-defense—the image of Malcolm that many kids have gotten from rappers like Public Enemy and KRS-One? Will it be the stern advocate of black self-discipline—the Malcolm who “would want young African-Americans to build a strong family, develop African-American economic institutions, devoutly practice a religion and nurture the next generation,” as black au-



MARK PETERSON—JB PICTURES

**Manhattan mural and cover of rapper KRS-One’s ‘By All Means Necessary,’ based on a famous photo of Malcolm**

thor Shelby Steele of San Jose State University puts it? Or will it be the impatient seeker of the last year of Malcolm’s life—a phase, a bit too telescoped in Lee’s version, when he was trying to intensify his fight against injustice while also reaching out to white Americans and other people of color around the world?

Or, in the end, should it be all three? For as historian Paul Lee points out, the real message of Malcolm’s life is about “the ability to change.” That, certainly, is the lesson that Ricky Troupe learned from Malcolm. At 15, Troupe came to L.A. as a ward of the court and all but dropped out of school and started to steal and deal drugs. One day he picked up “The Autobiography of Malcolm X.” “I was just going to read a little part of it,” he says, “[but] I stayed up all night trying to finish that book.” It gave Troupe hope that if Malcolm could emerge from the streets and turn his life around, so could he. He went back to school, and now, at 21, he’s pulling A’s in a paralegal program at a community college and hoping to get into a four-year program and eventually to law school. “I’m constantly setting high goals for myself,” says Troupe. “That all ties into the effect Malcolm had on my life.” It’s a story that’s still all too rare. But in today’s Black America, it’s tribute enough to Malcolm’s legacy.

MARK WHITAKER with VERN E. SMITH in Atlanta, CAROLYN FRIDAY in Boston, FARAI CHIDEYA and MARC PEYSER in New York, JEANNE GORDON in Los Angeles, VICKI QUADE in Chicago and bureau reports

### NEWSWEEK POLL

**Do you consider Malcolm X a hero for black Americans today? (% saying yes)**

ALL BLACKS	AGE GROUPS		
	15-24	25-49	50-PLUS
57%	84%	59%	33%

**Does Malcolm X represent the following: (% saying yes)**

- 84% Blacks helping one another
- 82% A strong black male
- 74% Black self-discipline
- 62% Blacks as part of a multi-cultural society
- 50% Arming blacks for self-defense
- 40% Black separatism
- 29% Violence as a means to black goals

For this special NEWSWEEK Poll, The Gallup Organization telephoned 501 blacks age 15 and older Nov. 5-6. Margin of error +/- 5 percentage points. “Don’t know” and other responses not shown. The NEWSWEEK Poll © 1992 by NEWSWEEK, Inc.