

Many wonder what message will emerge from the film about Malcolm X (left), whose views changed and who ultimately concluded that blacks and whites could live peacefully in the same sphere.

Young blacks pin hopes on film about Malcolm X

By Patricia Smith
GLOBE STAFF

In front of a shuttered restaurant on Washington Street in Roxbury, a group of young men huddle together, their backs braced against a sudden autumn gust. In a circle with their heads almost touching, they could be praying. One of them, dressed in a too-thin nylon jacket, blows warmth into his cupped hands.

Michael Craig is the tallest of the group. At 19, he has lived in Roxbury all his life, dropped out of school, fathered three children. There is a thin, perfectly shaven X carved into the back of his hair. The X screams again from each of his red, black and green leather basketball shoes, and once more from a silver ring on the middle finger of his right hand. As the hand gestures angrily, the ring catches and holds what's left of the sun.

"Man, they tried to kill that boy," he says, referring to the Oct. 31 assault in South Boston of Donald Williams, a black man, allegedly by a group of whites.

"They took a bat and tried to bust that man's head up. Just because he was walking in South Boston, on his way to work. How is that different from lynching us, man? How is that different from hang-

ing us from trees? Pretty soon they'll be knocking on our doors in the middle of the night, pulling us out of our cribs, man, stringing us up."

The voices swell in anger and protest and the conversation turns to crushed bones, shattered jaw lines, blackened eyes, cracked ribs. The group recalls Yusef Hawkins, chased down and murdered in Bensonhurst. They remember Rodney King, hunched against the staccato blows of nightsticks, and the city that burned in his name. Then someone raises the name of Malcolm X, a man they all agree would have urged black folks to fight back against a swell of racial violence that threatens their spirit — and, in the case of black men, their very existence.

"Man, I hope the brothers take time out to see that movie," says Craig. "We need to remember what Malcolm said about an eye for an eye. We need to stop letting these crackers beat us down."

Everyone, it seems, is waiting for Malcolm. Thanks to director Spike Lee's \$35 million epic scheduled to open on Nov. 18, one of black America's most controversial heroes will be resurrected, his pulse jump-started by a public eager to dissect and understand

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his seductive, wide-ranging ideologies. While whites may wonder what all the fuss is about, blacks eye the Hollywood hoopla warily, warning that Lee "had better do right by Malcolm."

Waiting for a leader

And in lieu of a flesh and blood leader with Malcolm's fire, many blacks — especially young men like Michael Craig, whose images of the man begin with baseball caps and flashy gym shoes — wait for a pouty and unpredictable Hollywood director to provide them with a leader they can then follow into some vague, undefined revolution. They latch onto the words "by any means necessary," not taking the time to learn that Malcolm was not speaking of retaliatory violence, but of mental and spiritual preparation. With nowhere else to place their hopes, thousands of Michael Craigs wait for a savior in celluloid.

However, their savior is not the man they imagine him to be.

Malcolm X, a voracious reader, a man with a thirst for knowledge, was not a short-fused revolutionary who advocated gunning down whites in the street. He advocated a strict black nationalism that stressed responsibility — and by the time of his death he had come to the conclusion that blacks and whites could live peacefully in the same sphere — if the black man took steps to control his own fate.

On Dec. 3, 1964, two months before his assassination, Malcolm X said "the young generation of whites, blacks, browns, whatever else there is, you're living at a time of extremism, a time of revolution, a time when there's got to be a change. I for one will join in with anyone, I don't care what color you are, as long as you want to change this miserable condition that exists on this earth."

That does not sound like the man Michael Craig says preached about "an eye for an eye" — another phrase that unfortunately, for many, has come to summarize Malcolm X's teachings. Although the leader was still bitter, still angry and still a threatening specter to many Americans, at the time of his death he had moved toward holding both whites and blacks accountable for the American mess.

Which Malcolm?

It is not known which Malcolm — the young Malcolm Little who

Malcolm X is hero to many polled

With a film about Malcolm X set to open and a surge of renewed interest in his life, more than four in five young black Americans in a Newsweek poll say they consider him a hero.

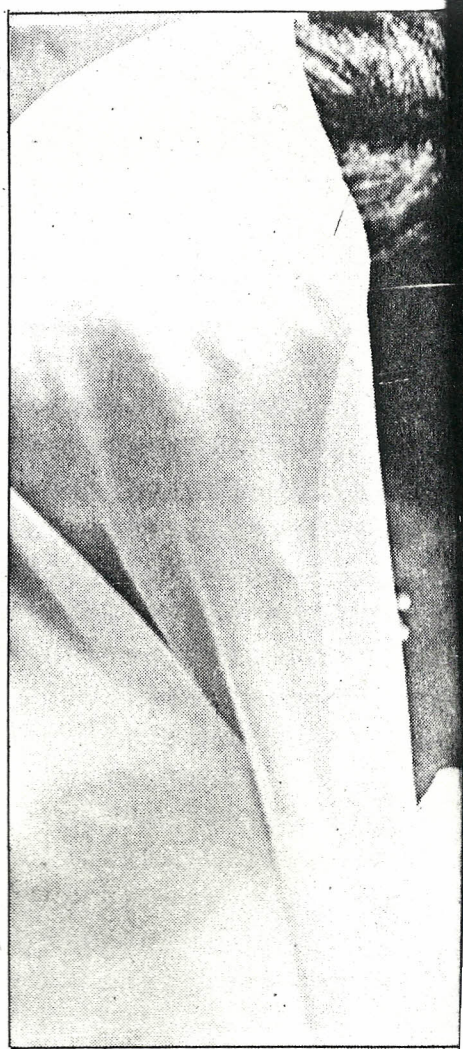
In the national poll of 501 people ages 15 and over, 84 percent of those ages 15 to 24 said they consider him a hero, although only 1 in 4 said they know a lot about him. The percentage who call him a hero dropped to 59 percent among those ages 25 to 49 and to 33 percent among those over age 50.

The poll results appear in the issue of the magazine out today. The survey was conducted Nov. 5-6 and has a margin of error of 6 percentage points.

Among those polled, only 9 percent rated Malcolm X above Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. as a hero, and he was ranked evenly with Atlanta Mayor Maynard Jackson.

pimped and did drugs, the legendary firebrand, or the man who spoke of power through racial inclusion — will be focused on in Spike Lee's film. And the unquestioning faith of men like Michael Craig in the director's ability to recreate Malcolm's life exactly is dangerous because Lee's vision of Malcolm is simply that — Lee's vision. Allowing the filmmaker to define the leader for thousands of impressionable young men has many people worried. One of those people is Julius Lester, professor of Judaic and Near Eastern Studies at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst.

"To have young people waiting for a film to teach them about Malcolm X, that's really painful," he said. "And it's a signal that the despair, the hopelessness I had already thought was worse than any other time in black American history — and that includes slavery — has reached another whole level. I find it very painful that young blacks are idolizing somebody who has been dead for over 25 years. And the person they're idolizing is someone that



In the wedding scene from "Malcolm X"

Malcolm X had outgrown by the end of his life. Malcolm would be horrified to see these young men gobbling up ideologies he had moved beyond. He grew, he learned, and as he learned, he changed. Reading about Malcolm, reading his words, illustrates that. This film may not."

Actor Ossie Davis, who delivered the eulogy at Malcolm X's funeral, also urges black youths to educate themselves about the leader. "If our youngsters want to pick up the gauntlet," he said, "they must first go to the book."

Michael Craig admits that he has not read Malcolm X's autobiography or any of his speeches. "I just know that everybody, black or white, listened to him. He was a bad brother, and now we need a million bad brothers just like him. We need to fight fire with more fire. If that means everything's going to burn, then maybe that's the way it's got to be."

It's been 27 years since Malcolm X was assassinated in New York's Audubon ballroom. A human being took the bullets, but a legend hit the

n film about Malcolm X



WARNER BROTHERS PHOTO

m X," Angela Bassett and Denzel Washington play Betty Shabazz and Malcolm X.

floor. Still, for black people the kingdom did not come. In those 27 years, leaders have emerged, disappeared, been resurrected. Black people have seen their lot worsen as millions of their children live in poverty, their males die in record numbers. Martin Luther King was assassinated. Still, the kingdom did not come.

Now our leaders are filmmakers with huge budgets and wagging tongues. For many, Malcolm X has been reduced to a flurry of marketing madness. Malcolm is rhinestone hatpins and jogging pants. Malcolm is a tasteful display of \$57 baseball jerseys in the window of Macy's. Malcolm is a refrigerator magnet. Malcolm is a movie.

Michael O'Neal, the head of Fathers, Inc. — a Boston organization that teaches young black men about the responsibilities of fatherhood — sees many men like Michael Craig. He is understandably wary about the effects the film may have on them.

"We need to have Spike Lee explaining the movie and then saying, 'Along with this, you need to read up

on the man.' Spike and all the other directors need to know that black folks can't take on that Hollywood mentality when we're talking about ourselves — in this case, the movie just can't be dynamite in terms of cinema but failing in terms of content," O'Neal said. "If he feels he's just making a movie, then Spike should have done 'War and Peace.' But if the message isn't strong in this film, then it's not about Malcolm."

"Another problem I have is, I don't think Malcolm X would tell young black children to skip school to do *anything*. He'd roll over in his grave if he heard Spike telling them to go see a movie instead."

"That reminds me of the kind of hype that Ali used to do before fighting Joe Frazier," said Lester. "I wonder if, in the process of making the film, Spike Lee recognized the responsibility he has. With young black men waiting to be educated by the film, I pray to God he did. But I can't help but wonder if we're being hustled."

"I'm sure there are some people

who have been moved to do some reading and invest time to learn who Malcolm really was. But for the majority, given that we live in a culture that feeds off symbols, this is just another in a series of symbols we use to give ourselves cheap highs. We have the 'X,' and white folks have Madonna's 'Sex.' Both symbols have no substance, and they're both exploiting very real needs that people have."

Meanwhile, even Malcolm X's widow, Betty Shabazz, has said, "I think anyone who is wearing a hat or T-shirt has a basic understanding that Malcolm was for justice, equality and parity for all human beings." She has even hired a management company to license her husband's name and image.

Michael Craig, wearing that name in his hair, on his feet and on his fingers, will be in line Nov. 18 when the door to the theater opens. He will turn his eyes upward to gaze at Spike Lee's resurrected Malcolm and wait for the frustration he feels to turn into a fire that could either inspire or destroy him.