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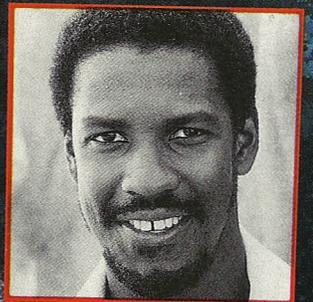
MALCOLM X

'Son of the Caribbean'

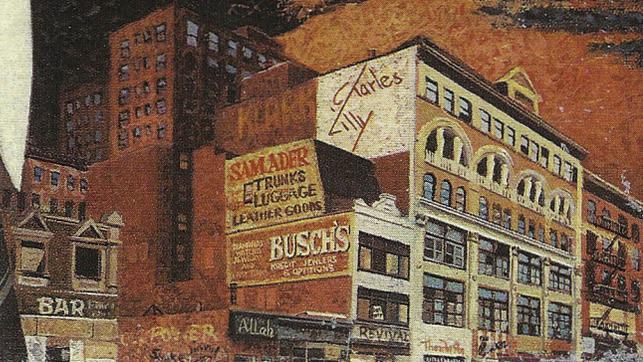
"My father's West Indian background enabled him to reach out to everyone of African descent so that they can come together as one," says Malikah Shabazz, 26, of her . . .
Cont. on page 32



SPIKE LEE



DENZEL WASHINGTON



COVER STORY

Continued from **COVER**

father Malcolm X. It is interesting to note that in the numerous discourses on Malcolm, his Caribbean heritage and its influence on his life has not been a main issue, if indeed noted at all.

His mother, Louise Norton, who died in 1990, was a native Grenadian. For her children, she always stressed the importance of self-awareness and the development of one's character. "It's that sense of self and that confidence that enabled him to speak out for everybody," says Malikah, who intends to visit Grenada to fill in some of the gaps in her family tree. "I think that my father's backbone came from my grandmother."

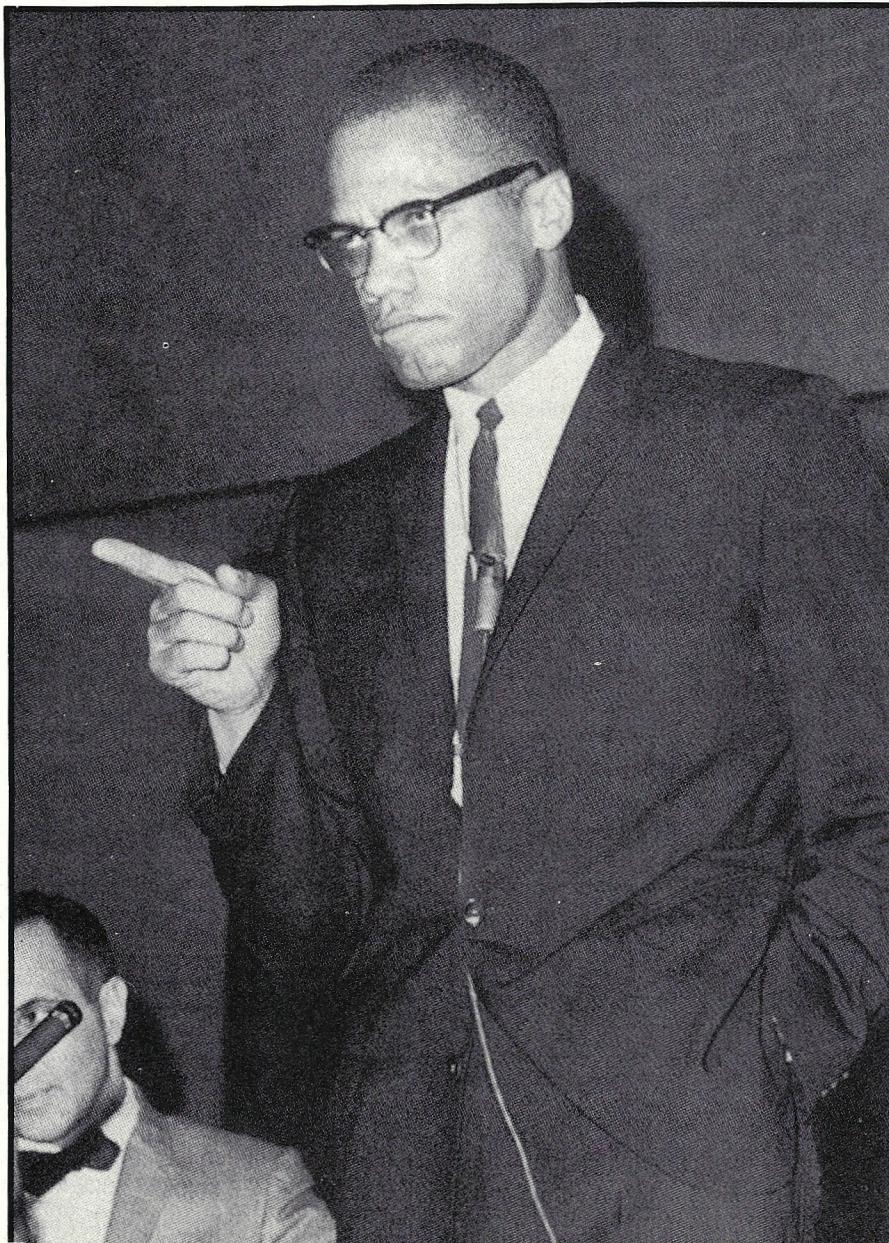
She emphasizes that though her father was very proud of the various facets of his heritage, he did not separate them. He would define himself as an "African in America" since, despite the differences in the roots from which we came and the routes we all took to get here, we are ultimately all from one place—Africa. Very much her father's daughter, in appearance as well as insight, Malikah observes, "We can't separate ourselves because that separation allows the problems that exist to continue."

MALCOLM X THE REEL DEAL



Photo: Peterson Grosvenor

Malcolm X's daughter, Malikah Shabazz, pictured with CLASS publisher's daughter, Katurah Elizabeth John-Sandy



Malcolm X Photos: Courtesy Pathfinder Press

It was 27 years ago that Malcolm X was assassinated, yet his legacy is causing as much furor and controversy as he did when he was alive. During his lifetime, an event-filled 39 years, Malcolm Little underwent several transformations. Most of his biographers like to chop his life up into four stages: Malcolm Little, Detroit Red, Malcolm X and Omowale or El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz. These names are indicative of Malcolm's ever-evolving political awareness and spiritual growth.

Malcolm's life, with its humble origins and meteoric rise to international acclaim, has a storybook quality to it. If his days with us have become a memory larger than life—something too many are rushing now to commercialize—to deify it is perhaps understandable, albeit distressing. That Malcolm would have wanted such adoration is unlikely, given his often self-effacing love for the people. Still, like the fish that fought over the dismembered Orpheus, Malcolm's legacy is the subject of all sorts of artistic endeavors, and subsequent debates, and there appears to be no end in sight.

There was a minor dispute in 1989 among the cast of *X*, the opera based on the life of Malcolm X. Some members of

the cast disagreed with the composer's interpretation of certain events. This past summer, Dr. Betty Shabazz (Malcolm's widow) and Pathfinder Press brought a lawsuit against a writer and publisher for copyright infringement. They claimed that Dr. Abdul Alkalimat and Writers & Readers Press failed to get their permission for material used in the book, *Malcolm X For Beginners*.

Perhaps the biggest tiff surrounding the legacy of Malcolm X involves filmmaker Spike Lee and a number of New York City-based militants. In an open letter to Lee several months ago, the radicals warned that if the filmmaker violates Malcolm's image or impugns his integrity, they will lead a massive boycott at every theater across the country "to see that the masses of Black people are informed about these distortions and what must be done to oppose them."

What seems to bother these activists—who, led by the noted poet/playwright Amiri Baraka, hand-delivered the letter to Lee—is the filmmaker's track record. Of central concern to them is the way in which Lee has satirized, ridiculed and otherwise made a mockery of Black militants in his films. They contend that none of his five films has had a strong male character with any of the political consciousness, acumen and integrity of Malcolm X. They assert that Lee's nationality is not enough "to tell us whose side he's on," and his past films are clearly part of a "retrograde trend."

Not at all cowed by his detractors, Lee lashed back, telling them that he "was going to make the kind of film" he wants to make. "While I respect the concerns of the writers of the letter," he said in an interview with this reporter, "this film will not be made by a committee."

That a film on the life and times of Malcolm X is being made at all is somewhat miraculous, given the rather troubled and circuitous history of the project. And while there is legitimate concern from the activists about protecting their icon who "is not just another commercial property" from an "unqualified" filmmaker and the peculiarities of Hollywood, Lee, according to many concerned parties, should be allowed an opportunity to give us his artistic impression of this hero's life. Alex Haley, the famed author of *Roots*, who assisted Malcolm in compiling his popular autobiography, is reluctant to take sides in this controversy, but insists that the critics should wait and see what



With Fidel Castro; Harlem, September 1960.

comes of Lee's efforts and then voice their criticism. "Lee has every right to make his interpretation of his vision of Malcolm," Haley told writer Betty Winston Baye.

But it is ironic that Lee is catching flak from elements of the Black community after his chance at this project came following his denouncement of the producers who had chosen a white director for the film. "Malcolm is one of our most treasured heroes," Lee told a reporter at *Mother Jones* magazine. "To let a non-

most significant aspect. What will be his focus? How will he handle Malcolm's complex, ever-changing life? Does he possess the resonance and vision to capture the essence of Malcolm? Will he be able to chip away the myth and legend which have already hardened around the man we need to know?

Obviously, these were some of the obstacles that baffled and stymied the previous writers and their efforts. Lee will be revising a script that was authored by the late James Baldwin and Arnold Perl.



After the firebombing, February 14, 1965.

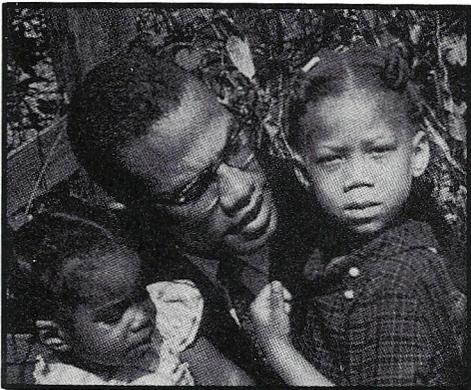
African American do it is a travesty."

It is certainly hoped by all that the project won't go from "travesty" to tragedy under Lee's direction. And much of the blame will fall on him since, as in his other films, Lee has the responsibility of developing the screenplay, which is the

This script was apparently never completed, though, for the most part, it was approved by producer Marvin Worth, who optioned Alex Haley's *Autobiography of Malcolm X* from Dr. Shabazz 20 years ago. After Baldwin's attempt, there were at least four other writers, including



New York news conference, 1964.



Malcolm with daughters Qubilah (left) and Attallah, 1963.



In Harlem (December, 1964) with Abdul Mohammed Babu, leader of 1964 revolution in Zanzibar.

David Bradley and Charles Fuller, and two directors Sidney Lumet and Norman Jewison who took a crack at the project and fell short.

"What people have to understand," Lee said, "is that Malcolm is many different things to different people and there's no way in the world I'm going to please everybody. All I can do is offer my version of Malcolm's life, what he meant to me."

He insisted that the film was not up for community approval and that "there will be no input from anyone other than those I have chosen to see." One of the

people Lee has seen is historian John Henrik Clarke, who was very close to Malcolm X. Lee concedes that this meeting was very brief, but there were longer sessions with Dr. Shabazz, Malcolm's brothers Wilfred, who lives in Detroit and Robert, who is the director of the Child Welfare Agency in New York City. "And I've also talked at length with Ossie Davis who delivered the eulogy at Malcolm's funeral," said Lee.

The real challenge, he said, was to make a film that would depict a believable version of Malcolm without the normal Hollywood cliches, which often destroy biographies. It is a movie based on fact, he insisted, not fiction. "This is not a documentary," Lee asserted. "The critics seem to be thinking that this is a documentary, but it isn't. I'm putting everything I've got into this film and they will have to wait and see what I do."

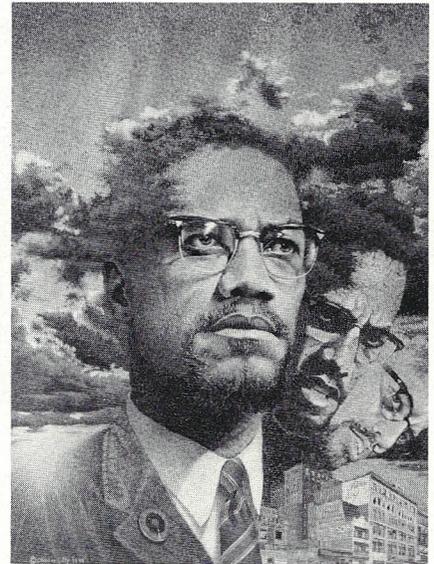
According to several viewers who were invited to see early rushes of the film, what Lee has done is certain to provoke further debate. Supposedly, some of these clips seem to dwell excessively on Malcolm's relationship with a white prostitute and show him in bed with her. Other clips are equally unflattering, if we are to take the opinions of some who have seen the previews.

A recent interview with Spike's father, musician Bill Lee, was also very revealing. The bassist, who has been responsible for composing the music for his son's films, said he is not involved in the film on Malcolm's life. "I have nothing at all to do with it," he said with a huff, "and I have no idea what Spike is doing, nor am I interested."

Spike, who has already visited Africa, is reportedly again on the continent working on the film, although his father is not sure about the purpose of the visit. It has been rumored that Lee has returned to Saudi Arabia to complete scenes depicting Muslims making the Hajj to Mecca. This will be the first time in history that the Saudis have allowed a company to film this sacred event. Shooting of the film, which will feature Denzel Washington as Malcolm X and Al Freeman as Elijah Muhammad, began in September, more than enough time for the controversy to rage, to simmer and then to be translated into box office dollars. He said the film will be released Christmas 1992. Until then he has more research and, as Ossie Davis told him, "lots of praying to do."

- Herb Boyd

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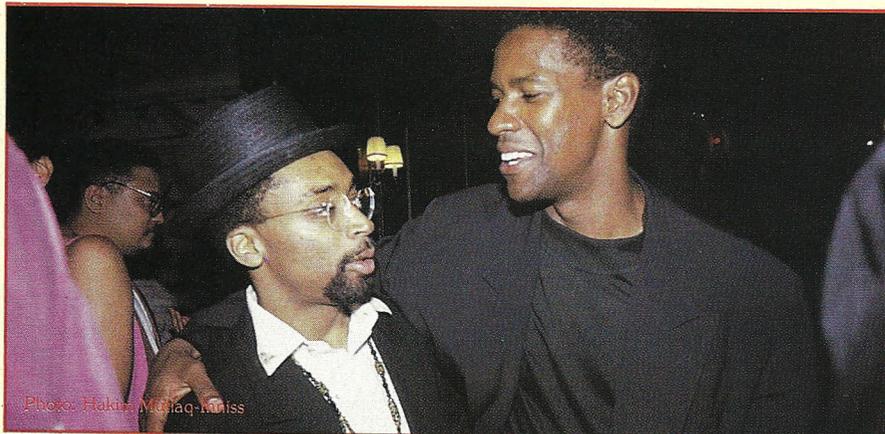
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Class 3/4/92



SPIKE LEE

HE'S GOT IT LIKE THAT!



Spike Lee and Denzel Washington at the *Jungle Fever* premiere party.

By all accounts—journalistic and cinematic—Spike Lee is an enigma. In writing and public speaking, he often has verbal diarrhea, but one-on-one reports suggest a lack of communication skills.

Of course, all the hype now is about his work in progress, the *Malcolm X* film. What will it be? How will it be? Will it be politically correct? Will it do justice to the memory of Malcolm? Will it, will it, will it?... And still, Spike ain't talking. At press time, he, with cast and crew in tow, was in South Africa filming Malcolm's pilgrimage to Mecca.

So what do we really know about Spike Lee? His family moved to Brooklyn from Atlanta when Lee was just a boy, so his major influences are Brooklyn-based. He evidently, was not one of the boys in the "hood," however, and his jazz musician father and deceased teacher mother appear to have been upwardly mobile. At 35, Lee is the eldest of five children, a graduate of Morehouse College and the New York University film school. He's short, thin, brown skinned, wears glasses and, as far as anyone I've met knows, is single and childless. He also believes in nepotism, having used his father and his sister, Joie, on some of his films.

First hand knowledge confirms that Lee is stingy with interviews and photos. One writer reports having made multitudinous phone calls and groveling for her interview. This writer can also report having done much the same before, finally, mentally clutching a four-letter word, followed by "you."

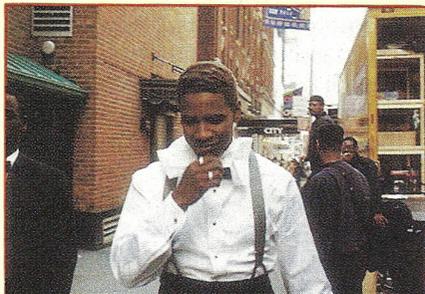


Photo: Hakim Mutlaq-Inniss

Denzel Washington on the set of *Malcolm X*

On a more positive note, a woman who encountered Lee at the 1991 New York Black Expo said he was abrupt and cranky when asked for an autograph (which he gave on a CLASS magazine tote bag). But when she happened to mention that a relative had gone into a master's screenwriting program after hearing him speak at the University of Pennsylvania, the woman said he broke into a warm smile. From this account and the fact that he participates in many film workshops and seminars, we can surmise that he is interested in people. He is also interested in his community, since he continues to make his headquarters in Brooklyn. His boutique draws visitors who would never go to Brooklyn otherwise—there'd be no need to.

Finally, and most importantly Spike Lee is a fine filmmaker who seems to improve with age. He has led the pack into the theatres and living rooms of mainstream America. He makes the movies he wants to and defies intimidation and categorization. He's got it like that!

—Cema

THE DRAMATIC DENZEL WASHINGTON

In late 1980, New York critics and audiences alike were lauding the off-Broadway production, *When the Chickens Come Home to Roost*. The play was about Malcolm X and starred a young actor by the name of Denzel Washington in the lead role. A few months later a movie called *Carbon Copy* was released and starred George Segal and Washington as his illegitimate son by a Black woman. No Oscar-caliber here, but a nice first time out for DW—and a hint of things to come. A few years later came the film *A Soldier's Story*. Everyone was clamoring for the star, Howard Rollins, and Denzel Washington, whom few had heard of (he played Jenkins in the film), occupied the back seat in all the Hollywood hype. But Washington had only begun to strut his stuff, and times do change.

Since then, Rollins who was considered the new Sidney Poitier, has become complacent in his TV role of Virgil Tibbs in *The Heat of the Night*, and that slow starter has become the top black box office draw. Washington is now working on the film *Malcolm X*, directed by Spike Lee. Amidst all the hoopla about what kind of film this will be, the one predicted certainty is that the man from Mt. Vernon, N.Y. will come out smelling like a rose.

A recipient of the Best Supporting Actor Oscar for his portrayal of Trip in the film *Glory* (1989), this husband and father of two has created many diverse characters, both on film and on the stage. His greatest gift is the intensity which he can summon and indeed work to his advantage. Another memorable character that has been "fleshed-out" by Washington is a slick Washington lobbyist for the Arab oil interest. The 1986 film, *Power*, though not widely viewed, was directed by Sidney Lumet and Washington co-starred with Richard Gere. In this outing, Washington gives yet another in his repertory of fine dramatic characterizations. At one point, Billings describes certain of his activities as "merely dramatic illustrations." And, perhaps this is the essence of Denzel Washington—the dramatic illustrator.

—Cema