

WHERE IS AMERICA GOING? Special 28-Page Pullout Inside

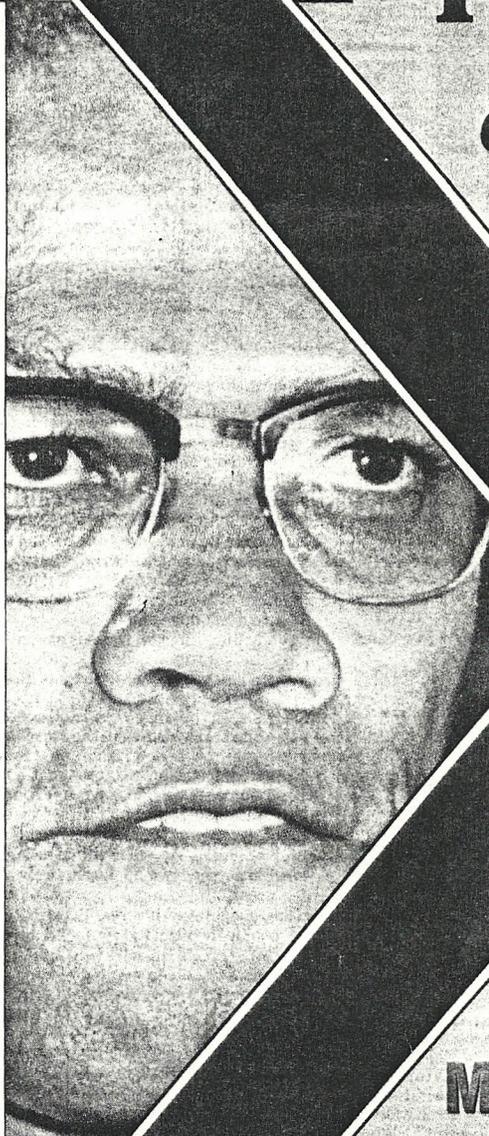
SUNDAY

New York Newsday

EDITION

SUNDAY, OCT. 25, 1992 • ONE DOLLAR

The Selling OF 'Malcolm'



**Spike Lee's
Movie & The Battle
Over a Cultural Legacy**

Pages 4-5

UPI / Bettmann Photo

Photo by Stephen Trupp / Galella Ltd.



Denzel Washington as Malcolm X in film biography that opens Nov. 18.

In Death, A \$100-Million Business

By Edward R. Silverman
STAFF WRITER

IT'S A TWIST of capitalism even Spike Lee might appreciate: Many of the baseball caps and garments carrying Malcolm X's name are being manufactured and sold by Korean-owned companies.

In Lee's movie "Do the Right Thing," a Korean-American grocer pleads with angry African-Americans not to trash his store because, like them, he's just a struggling minority. Now some Korean-American merchants are seeking to cash in on a craze inspired by Lee's latest movie, "Malcolm X," scheduled to open next month.

They aren't the only ones hoping to get a piece of a market expected to reach \$100 million in sales. Nor are they the only ones involved in controversy around the licensing of Malcolm's image. But at a menswear trade show at the Jacob Javits Convention Center last week, many of the Malcolm items on display — including baseball caps with the letter X and hooded sweatshirts bearing his name — were being offered by Korean manufacturers and wholesalers. And most of them acknowledged they weren't licensed by the company that says it has exclusive rights to market Malcolm's image.

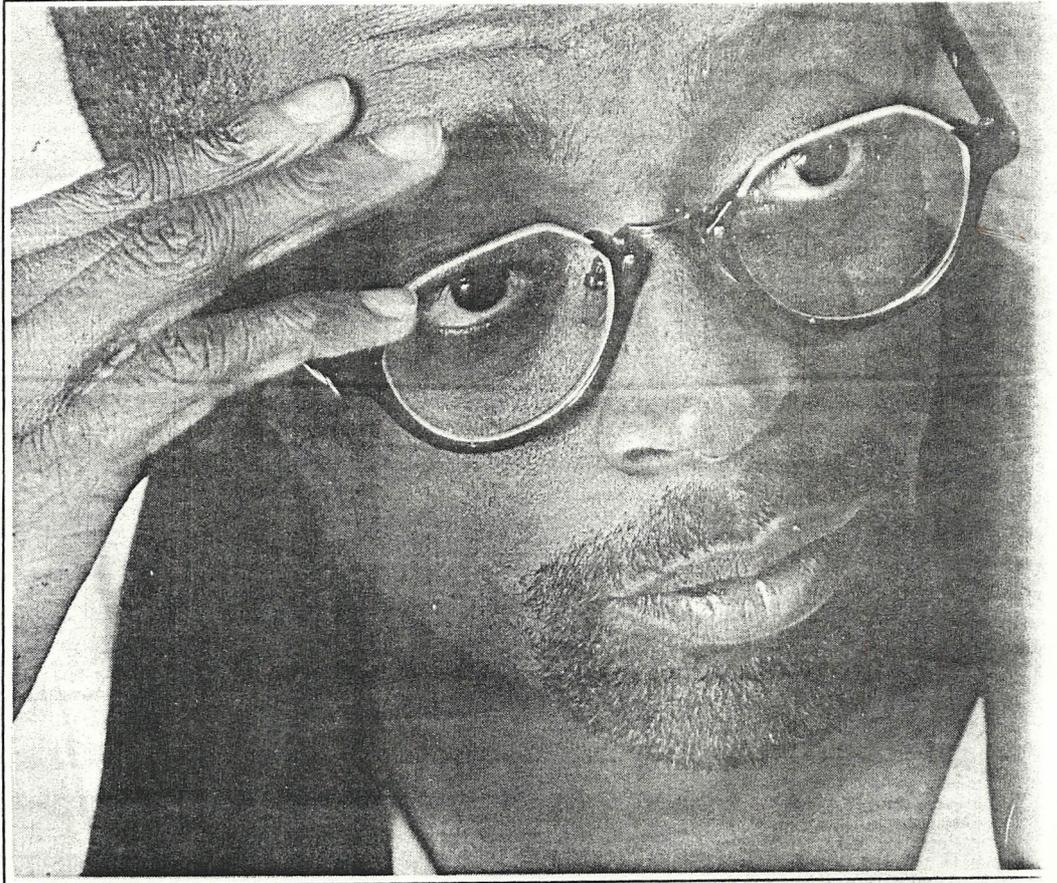
"Everybody is making them and selling them, so we have to also," said Paul Kim, a salesman for Headway International, a Manhattan-based, wholesale company owned by Korean-Americans that was featuring caps with Malcolm's name. "It's competition."

Added a salesman for 99 America Trading Corp, a Korean-owned manufacturer that designed its own Malcolm X hooded sweatshirt: "What license? You don't need a license."

But Curtis Management

Please see **SELLING** on Page 42

The Selling of



Nowaday / Erica B.

'I made the best film I could make. Let the chips fall where they may.'

— 'Malcolm X' director Spike Lee

From Malcolm Little to Al Hajj Malik Al-Shabazz

A chronology of key events in the life of Malcolm X:

1925. Born Malcolm Little on May 19 in Omaha.

1940. Moves to Boston, where he gets involved in the criminal underworld.

1946. Sentenced to jail after conviction on burglary charges. In prison, he is introduced to the Lost-Found Nation of Islam, an American-based black Muslim religion led by



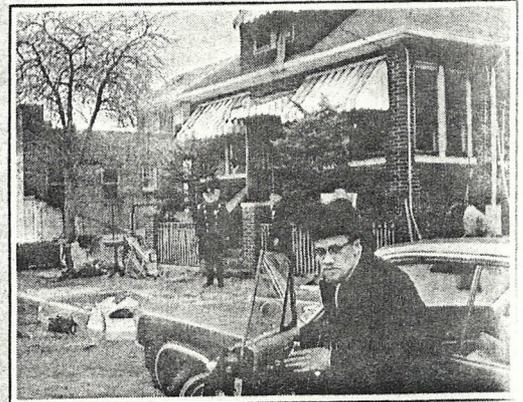
AP Photo
Elijah Muhammad

President Kennedy's assassination was an example of "chickens coming home to roost."

Elijah Muhammad. Paroled in 1952.

1954. Heads Nation of Islam's New York mosque in Harlem. Draws attention to the movement with speeches on racial separation, black self-defense and western decadence.

1963. Suspended from organization after his statement that



UPI/Bettmann Photo

Outside his East Elmhurst home after 1965 firebombing.

Malcolm X

Re-examining the man, the myth and his legacy

By Elaine Rivera
STAFF WRITER

TWENTY-SEVEN YEARS AFTER he was assassinated in an auditorium in upper Manhattan, and less than a month before he is resurrected on the screen in Spike Lee's \$34 million epic, Malcolm X is once again at the center of controversy.

A battle over his legacy — and over millions of dollars of profits from the sale of products bearing his name and likeness — is being waged as fiercely as the battle that raged during his lifetime over his militant, eye-for-an-eye views.

Although Malcolm X — who spent the last months of his life living in Queens, struggling to support his wife and four daughters — received a meager advance for his autobiography, his life story has become the basis of a multimillion-dollar industry.

Lee's film, based on the autobiography, is being released Nov. 18 by Time Warner, the largest media conglomerate in the country. Macy's is selling \$52 baseball jerseys with an X on the back as a fashion tie-in to the movie. Even the original manuscript of the book, written with Alex Haley, fetched \$100,000 at an auction last month.

The revolutionary black leader, who spent much of his life attacking white America, is suddenly big business.

"Hollywood could have made this movie 25 years ago," said Hazel Carby, a Yale University professor of English and Afro-American Studies. "Why are they making it now? Because they see Malcolm as marketable. Malcolm's politics have nothing to do with it."

It is the fear that Malcolm's message will be lost in the process of his becoming a Hollywood hero that concerns Carby and other black intellectuals.

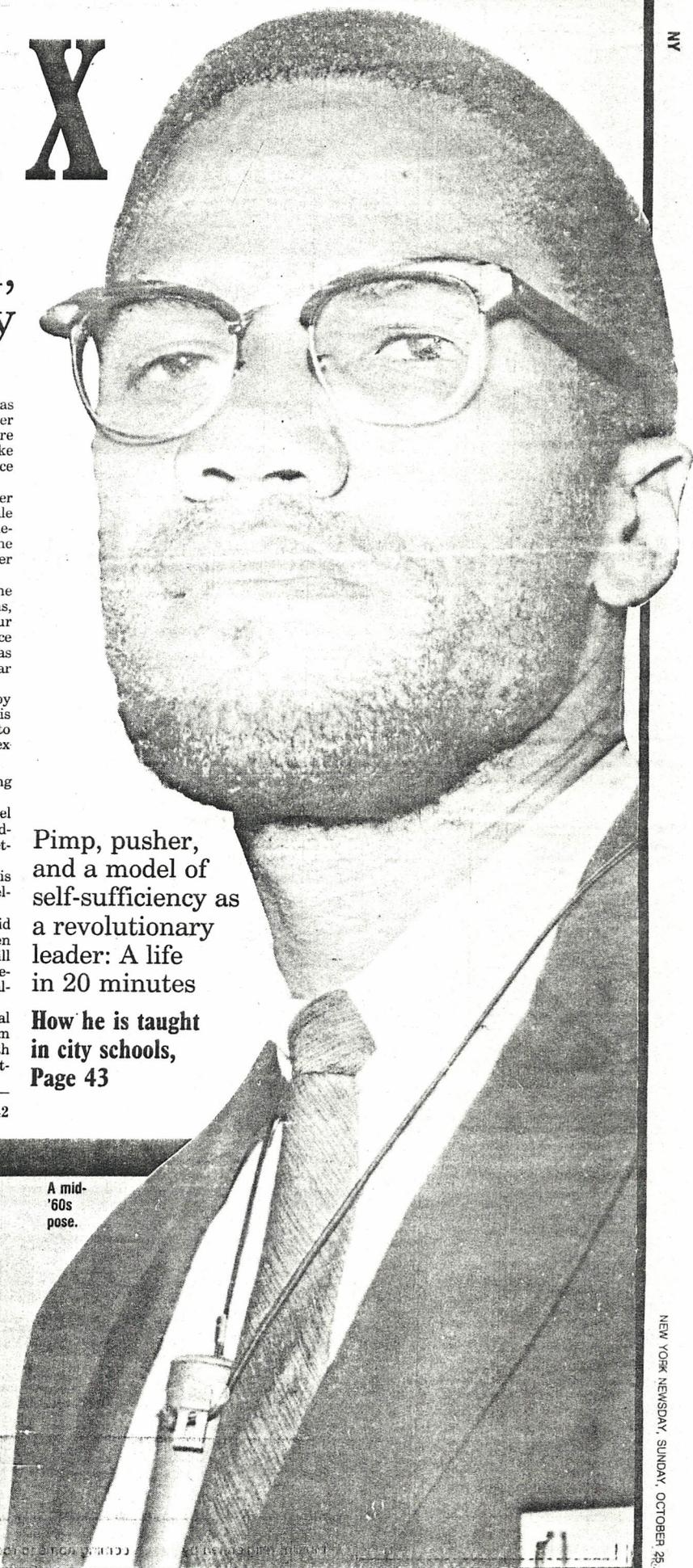
"Unfortunately, a lot of people will take this film as gospel," said Amiri Baraka, a prominent playwright and activist who has not seen Lee's three-hour film but has read the script. "I'm just afraid that it will be one of these black hustler flicks with a twist: dope person who becomes a Muslim and fights racism. The political dimensions of Malcolm's life will not come through."

But the director of "Malcolm X," who has also made such controversial films as "Do The Right Thing" and "Jungle Fever," bristles at criticism that he is only capitalizing on Malcolm's image and not concerned with his message. Lee, who was only 7 years old when Malcolm was assassinated, says his love for the slain black leader is reflected in the film.

Please see X on Page 42

Pimp, pusher, and a model of self-sufficiency as a revolutionary leader: A life in 20 minutes

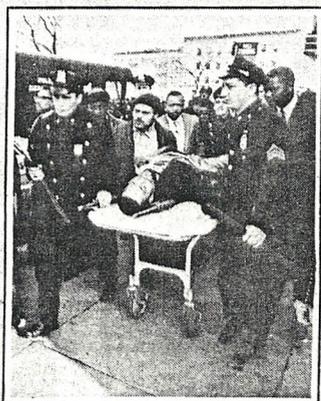
How he is taught in city schools, Page 43



1964. Announces split from Nation of Islam after learning of charges that Elijah Muhammad fathered several children out of wedlock. Makes pilgrimage to Mecca, Saudi Arabia, changes name to Al Hajj Malik al-Shabazz and adopts a more interracial view. Forms his own Organization of Afro-American Unity.

1965. Home in Queens is firebombed Feb. 14.

1965. Assassinated Feb. 21 at Audubon Ballroom in upper Manhattan. Three Nation of Islam followers are later convicted.



UPI Photo

After fatal shooting in 1965.

A mid-'60s pose.

27 Years Later, A Battle Over His Legacy, Largesesse

X from Page 5

"I would hope that people will reserve comments until they see the film," Lee said in an interview last week. "I made the best film I could make. Let the chips fall where they may."

Just what Malcolm's message is, and how he should be portrayed, remains a matter of some dispute. He began life in Omaha, Neb., as Malcolm Little, transformed himself into a street hustler known as "Detroit Red," went to prison where he was introduced to the teachings of Elijah Muhammad, became a leader of Muhammad's Nation of Islam, which espoused a black separatist philosophy, then broke away to pursue a more international and interracial vision of human rights.

But the Nation of Islam, which Malcolm denounced in the last year of his life and which is now headed by Louis Farrakhan, is still selling Malcolm X tapes at its Harlem mosque. And some who condemned Malcolm for his militant views in the 1960s — or who have little idea of what he stood for — are now embracing him.

"I see some people wearing the paraphernalia who see it as a fashion statement and who might not understand his message," said Robert Little, Malcolm X's younger brother, who heads the city Child Welfare Administration. "I don't get any pleasure from seeing my brother's image in various forms all over the place. I would get more pleasure out of seeing what he believed put into practice — getting an education, learning the potential that each of us has to grow and change through experience."

But Betty Shabazz, Malcolm X's widow and an administrator at Medgar Evers College in Brooklyn, says there is nothing wrong with marketing her husband's image.

"People want to be a part of Malcolm, and this is a way for them to do it," said Shabazz, who, as executor of her husband's estate, has hired a management company earlier this year to license his name and likeness. "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."

Thulani Davis, who wrote the libretto for an opera about Malcolm's life, says it's all part of the process of transforming a man into a myth.

"This is about myth-making," said Davis, who has seen the movie and defends Lee's work. "Malcolm is a modern-day myth and a powerful one. If Spike is doing anything, he's making a movie about a hero."

The commercialization comes with the territory, Davis said: "It's inevitable. If you have an impact on the culture, you're going to be processed and marketed." At least, in this case, she added, a black artist is in control of the product.

To Baraka, the commercialization of Malcolm is not surprising. But he said he believes that the slain leader,

if alive, would have been infuriated by what Hollywood is doing to his legacy.

"They're trying to water him down," said Baraka, who met Malcolm X twice and described him as an uncompromising man of deep intellect and integrity. "They want to make him Martin Luther King II. These corporations already use King like the anti-vampire forces use the crucifix: They wave his picture to cool black people out. And now that's what they're trying to do to Malcolm."

The Nation of Islam is also concerned about Malcolm's legacy, although for different reasons. In his autobiography, Malcolm bitterly attacked Elijah Muhammad for fathering a number of children out of wedlock, and Lee's film suggests that officials of the Nation of Islam were behind Malcolm's assassination.

At a recent opening of a Nation of Islam restaurant in Harlem, where copies of the autobiography were on sale, Conrad Muhammad, the organization's New York regional representative, declared: "The Nation of Islam made Malcolm X who he was. Without the honorable Elijah Muhammad, he still would have been Malcolm Little."

Conrad Muhammad wouldn't comment on Lee's film. But an article in a recent issue of *The Final Call*, the organization's newspaper, had this to say about the commodification of Malcolm: "In 1992, blacks again are witnessing the murder of Malcolm X, but this time it is the man's legacy the enemy is destroying; and they are doing it with the approval of black consumers."

The battle over Malcolm's legacy will likely heat up in coming weeks. Baraka says he plans to see the film, then make up his mind about Lee. But he says many people who rejected Malcolm when he was alive "are pimping off of him now."

"We'll see with Spike," he said. "The 'p' is already there, and the 'i,' 'm' and 'p' are still dashes."

Lee says the charges of exploitation are unfair. "You don't see Spike Lee endorsing Malcolm X potato chips," he said.

And he says it is unreasonable for people to assume his version of Malcolm X will be the only one to endure or that he has any special responsibility as a black artist to portray the black leader one way or another.

"This is not a PBS documentary," Lee said, "This is a Hollywood movie. Why put the burden on this film? It's educational — and it's entertainment at the same time."

But Yale's Carby fears the film may give many people ignorant of Malcolm's goals of international brotherhood among oppressed people a false sense of knowledge.

"It will not make many people question for one minute the other aspects of their lives, which is living in a segregated society," she said. "It's just there for consumption, not change."



A Korean merchant displays an 'X' hat in his Harlem shop. Newsday / Richard I.

Malcolm Craze Pays Off

SELLING from Page 4

Group, the Indianapolis-based company that controls the rights to Malcolm's image, disagrees. It has already filed suit in Las Vegas against four manufacturers (none of them Korean-owned) who were selling Malcolm garments without a licensing agreement.

Curtis, which also represents the estates of James Dean, Humphrey Bogart and Babe Ruth, entered into an agreement earlier this year with Malcolm X's widow and executor, Betty Shabazz, to market Malcolm's image. So far, about 40 companies manufacturing 160 different items — from mugs and leather jackets to T-shirts and calendars — have received licenses from the Malcolm X estate, said Curtis president Mark Roesler. In addition, Warner Bros., which is distributing Lee's film, has paid the estate a fee so it can sell Malcolm merchandise.

Roesler wouldn't reveal terms of Curtis' agreement with Shabazz, and Shabazz didn't return numerous calls to her home in Westchester.

But Roesler said sales of Malcolm X gear could reach as much as \$100 million this year.

Companies licensed by Curtis typically pay royalties of 8 percent to 15 percent of their wholesale revenue, Roesler said. Licensing experts said Malcolm X's estate would probably receive about 5 percent of all sales.

Curtis still has not reached a licensing agreement with Lee, who has been merchandising his own line of X-wear, including caps and T-shirts, at the Brooklyn store he owns and through a dozen Macy's outlets.

Roesler wouldn't comment on whether his company has been having with Lee over the past several months, but a company spokesman said that Lee was to blame for the delay. Officials at Lee's company, 40 Acres and a Mule, didn't return repeated phone calls.

Sources say it's likely a deal will be worked out before the film debuts Nov.

18 because both sides are trying to avoid negative publicity from a lawsuit that the public may perceive as a battle over greed.

Despite Curtis' efforts to stamp out unlicensed Malcolm merchandise, preventing counterfeit goods has been difficult. One problem: Anyone can sell product with the letter X on it.

"It's possible to trademark a letter only if it's designed in some unique way," said Gil Weidenfeld, a spokesman for the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office.

Roesler said the estate has applied for federal trademark for Malcolm X's name and likeness. That would bar someone from selling a garment with Malcolm's name or picture on it, but not on just with the letter X.

There are indications, however, that the sales of Malcolm-wear may have already peaked, in part because garments have been on sale for more than a year, an unusually long lead time for a movie tie-in.

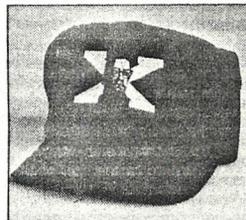
One manufacturer of leather jackets with the letter X stitched on the back that sold for about \$220 in stores has already halted production. "It's gotten to the point where there's so much of them that the kids who want the jackets have it," said an executive of the company, who didn't want his name used.

But others hope that the movie opening will result in a spurt of sales.

The Korean companies displaying their Malcolm-wear at the Javits Center last week are also banking on the fading.

But their move into the market has angered at least one black New Jersey apparel maker. Spencer Perry, president of BAMN, which takes its name from Malcolm's oft-used line, "by any means necessary," said the idea of Korean-American merchants profiting from Malcolm's name was ironic.

Said Perry: "Here's a man who is revered and, during his lifetime, stood for black economic empowerment being used to enrich [another minority]."



Newsday / J. Conrad Williams Jr.
Hat bears the 'X' sign and Malcolm's image.