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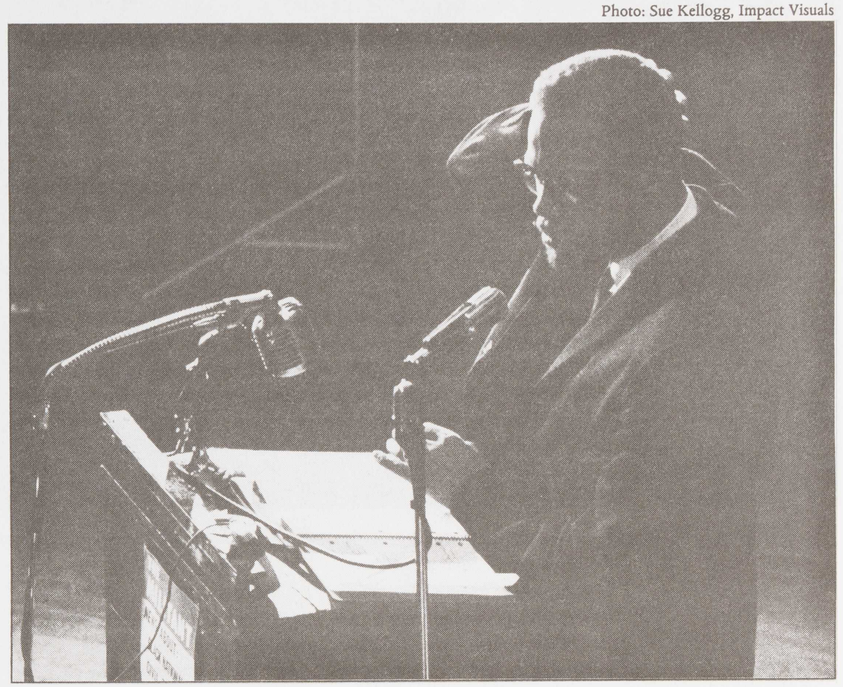
Spike Lee, Malcolm X & Me

by Andrea Lewis

heard in the 'hood

Photo: Sue Kellogg, Impact Visuals



Malcolm X speaks at a 1965 event sponsored by the Militant.

My father is the only person I've ever heard utter the words "I hate Spike Lee." It's Spike's in-yo'-face-with-what-I-think-it's-gotta-be-da-shoes attitude that gets to Dad. His very "Spike-ness." Of course, no one in my circle of colleagues and friends, and, well, general age group, would dare use the word "hate" about the name Spike. For whatever weaknesses he may have as a filmmaker, it's impossible to ignore what he has achieved. His films have almost single-handedly put Black culture and Black attitudes about race in the frontal lobe of the nation's brain.

Before Spike, films with Black stars spent most of their time trying to present characters who would be acceptable to a large segment of white America. Films like *Claudine, Car Wash,* and *Beverly Hills Cop* gave Black Americans a chance to see a fairly recognizable picture of themselves, while offering White America comfortable, non-threatening images of Blacks. In the Age of Spike, Black films have begun to say, "this is our view of who we are, and we don't care what white America thinks." Initially the Hollywood establishment tried to dismiss Spike's successes, and held tightly to the line that white America wouldn't accept films without major white characters that they could identify with. (Hence that spate of films a few years ago about racism in South Africa as seen through the eyes of the Afrikaaners.) Ultimately, the proof has been in the box office receipts. As his skills as a filmmaker have grown, Spike's power at the box office has grown as well.

GOTTA HAVE HER

From the release of the first Spike Lee Joint, *She's Gotta Have It* (which would have more appropriately been called "They've Gotta Have Her") through *School Daze* (one of those films that lots of white folks just didn't get,) Spike's view of urban black culture was fresh and powerful. With *Do the Right Thing,* Spike revealed the contemporary realities of urban race tensions like they had never been seen on film before. Now there is *X.*

Spike's struggle to present his version of the larger than life figure of Malcolm X has been played out in virtually every