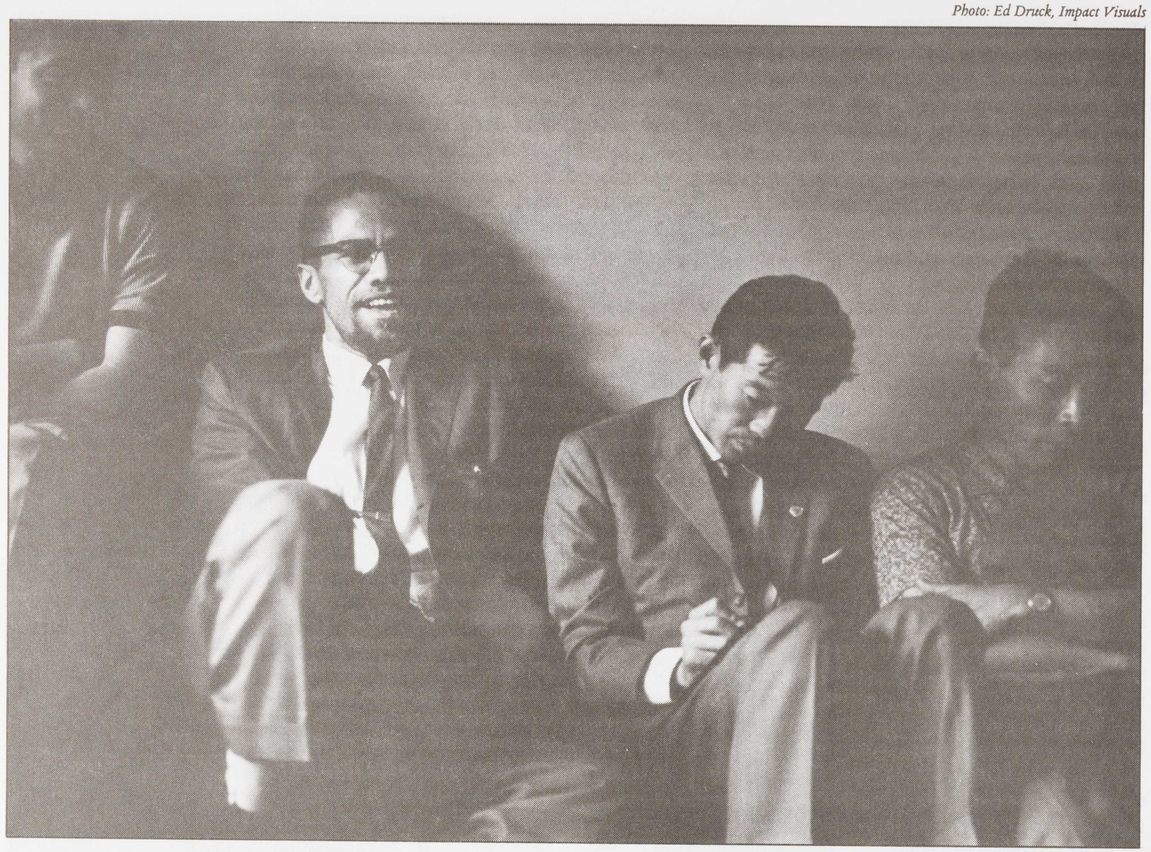
Photo: Ed Druck, Impact Visuals



Japanese Americans protesting testing of atomic weapons called on members of the African-American leadership for support. Malcolm X was the only one to respond.

media market imaginable. Many white critics have moved from scratching their heads in confusion about why a former pimp and hustler would be so revered in the black community, to cringing at the directness of Malcolm's angry rhetoric toward whites. Spike was unswayed by lack of studio financial support and by criticism from both blacks and whites about Malcolm's life. But as one friend of mine said, you have to give Spike his propers. The extended story of Spike's struggle to make the film has brought about the second coming of Malcolm. Malcolm, the cover man of 1992, X the fashion statement of 1992, *Malcolm X*, the most talked about film of 1992.

So, Spike gets his propers. He got the film made, Generally, he stayed true to *The Autobiography of Malcolm X,* the book on which the film is based, and he created enough interest in the film for lots and lots of people to go and see it. You can also see Spike's growth as a director with each of the films that he has made.

STILL ANNOYED

Still, there is some part of me that identifies with my father's annoyance with Spike. There is always a part of me that is impressed, yet slightly annoyed when I am watching his films. In many of Spike's earlier films, the annoyance was easy to identify: Spike Lee seemed to be clueless about women. His female characters were often like badly sketched cartoons. Their dialogue was unimaginable for real human females.

In *Malcolm X*, the character of Betty Shabazz was one of the most developed and realistic of any of Lee's female characters to date, but during the first half of the film, I was still very aware of a nagging annoyance. I realized that no matter how much I tried to immerse myself in the life of Malcolm X, I was always being distracted by someone else. It was Spike. It wasn't just his casting of himself as Malcolm's pal Shorty, zoot suiting around, doing the jitterbug, hanging around in Harlem. These scenes were great to look at, and we know from School Daze that Spike knows how to direct his way around a dance and musical sequence. It wasn't just Spike's usual high decibel soundtrack that often obliterates the dialogue. It wasn't just that Spike insisted on filming a preachy, South African epilogue of the film, while eliminating virtually any reference to Detroit, a major city in Malcolm's life, and a historically important center for urban Blacks in the U.S. It was all of it together. A package of pesty items that make you ever aware of Spike Lee. It's his in-yo'-face-with-what-I-think-it's-gotta-be-da-shoes attitude. His very "Spike-ness." Only in the latter half of the film, when Shorty has disappeared and Malcolm's oratory (and Denzel Washington's uncanny delivery of it) takes over, that you are completely drawn into the story of Malcolm X without feeling like Malcolm is trapped in a Spike Lee Joint, with the gnat-ish presence of Spike Lee buzzing around him all the time.

I wanted *Malcolm X* to be a great film. Instead, I felt like I saw a good film about a great man. When Spike is able to indulge himself less as a director, and indulge the subjects of his films and his audience more, I think that he will rightfully earn the reputation of a great director.

Heard in the 'Hood is a forum for opinion and commentary. Views expressed in this section do not necessarily reflect the perspective of **Third Force**.

THE POST-SPIKE LEE MALCOLM X

by Rahdi Taylor

In *Do The Right Thing*, Spike Lee's most political film preceding *Malcolm X*, Spike gives his perspective on poverty, unemployment and police brutality. But by spotlighting the skin color or ethnicity of shop keepers and pizzeria owners, *Do The Right Thing* shows little appreciation for the institutional nature of power, instead appearing to blame all the ills of racism on inter-ethnic conflicts. His exploration of the problem is not deep enough for us to develop any understanding or vision, leaving him and us confused at the end of the film, and stuck with the feeling that nobody is gonna really do the right thing.

Alex Haley provided the historical context for Malcolm X, but Spike's limited political vision becomes a critical barrier preventing us as viewers — and as a nation — from understanding what Malcolm X's life means today. Spike renders the first half of Haley's autobiography to celluloid with almost religious accuracy, but loses the thread after Malcolm goes further than Spike has yet been able to do.

GRIOT FOR A GENERATION

Don't get me wrong, I think Spike has accomplished wonders with his films. It is my belief, however, that Spike Lee, a filmmaker and griot for a generation, has a responsibility to embrace the highest level of consciousness and understanding possible, and to make real Bertolt Brecht's slogan that "art is not a mirror to hold up to reality, but a hammer with which to shape it." It was Malcolm's later voice that challenges us as a nation as we search for vision with which to follow current events such as the racist Persian Gulf War or the Rodney King trial and the uprisings that followed, and Spike simply does not do justice to those years.

We have the hindsight of almost three decades since Malcolm's death, we have transcripts of his last speeches and critical studies and reviews galore. With these tools, Spike could have filled out the last chapter of Malcolm's life and shared with us Malcolm's revolutionary and transformative vision.

But Spike is too narrow in focus. His nationalist politics prevent him from embracing the Malcolm X who returned from Mecca to charter a new organization, the Malcolm whose vision altered so dramatically that not only the Nation of Islam, but also the CIA wanted him dead. Who was this new Malcolm and why was he so dangerous to this enormous plantation known as America?

Spike Lee, I believe, will never be able to share with us the revolutionary content of Malcolm before he died. In a recent interview Spike comments on Warner Brothers' reaction to the making of the movie, and explains that the studio preferred the second half of the film — the post-Mecca Malcolm who doesn't refer to whites as blue eyed devils.

Spike clearly gets the first half. But it seems as if he doesn't quite know how to handle the post-Mecca Malcolm, whose internationalism was so much more revolutionary and who offers us a vision of uncompromising political change.