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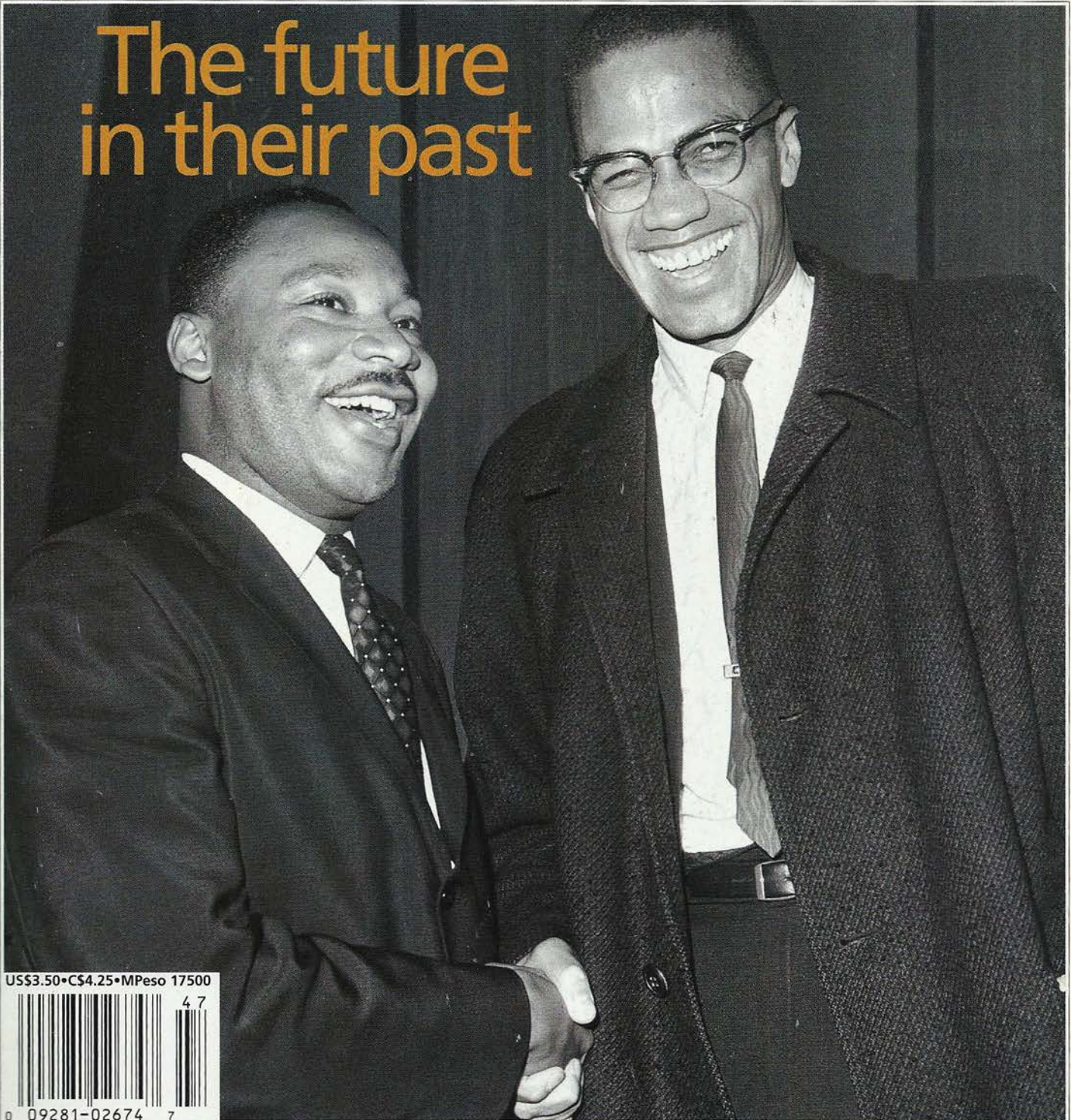
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Hollywood's black bard

ARRIVING after more than a year of hype and hassles, Spike Lee's "Malcolm X" could only be a let-down. Although hardly even-handed, it is not incendiary; although too worthy and worshipful, it is not hagiography. At three hours and 21 minutes, it is an over-long, standard Hollywood epic. But that, oddly enough, makes it an extraordinary achievement.

As recently as five years ago, it was impossible to imagine timid Tinseltown making a \$35m movie about Malcolm X, let alone handing it over to a black director whose five previous films, put together, have grossed less than \$100m in America. The change can be put down almost entirely to Mr Lee, who is now arguably the most powerful black man in Hollywood's history.

And it shows. During his brief career Mr Lee has evolved into a prize prima donna, and hence a lightning-rod for critics who think him more talented as a marketer—of himself as well as his films—than as a movie-maker.

His trademark attitude towards the (mainly white) press, displayed with panache at a press briefing in New York on November 18th, is boredom tinged with disdain. He squawked loudly at Cannes when his last film did not win there, and called Time Warner, the company behind "Malcolm X", a "plantation" when it refused to put up more cash after he went over-budget. Executives there grumble, though privately, that the only reason "Malcolm X" is so long is that Mr Lee was determined to exceed Oliver Stone's three-hour-and-eight-minute "JFK".

Such shenanigans are hardly unknown in Hollywood. Of course Mr Lee is a relentless self-promoter; but so is Madonna. Of course he is hoping to cash in on "Malcolm X" by selling X-hats and X-shirts (and by selling them from a store on Melrose Avenue in Los Angeles, which is as far as one can get from South Central without being in Beverly Hills); but it is a bit rich for those who so fervently advocate black enterprise to knock Mr Lee for doing well at it. Of course he has a monstrously big ego; what director has not?

Yet there is more at stake for Mr Lee than fame and fortune. The struggle between competing American myths is now fought not in history books but in the arena of popular culture. For decades, blacks have been bit-players in the white story. But recently a new generation of black artists and pop entrepreneurs—from television producers such as Keenan Ivory Wayans to rap groups like Public Enemy—have proved spectacularly successful at changing that. To them it is not enough that black stories get told; blacks must be the people who tell them.

Few have done more to advance that goal than Mr Lee. "Malcolm X" is nothing if not a grand attempt at myth-making. But Mr Lee has not just taken on the mantle of Hollywood's black

bard; he has also managed, through a combination of talent and chutzpah, to push open doors in Hollywood that have let in a flood of black movie-makers: John Singleton ("Boyz N the Hood"), the Hudlin Brothers (the "House Party" films) and many others. It is possible, to be sure, that the boom in black cinema will be a passing phase. But probably not, for Hollywood has discovered that financing and promoting black films not only makes it look nicely liberal; it also brings in stacks of cash.

This fact will not surprise anyone who can remember sitting in a cinema showing one of Mr Lee's first films. On the screen were black characters who were not hustlers, or drug dealers, or buffoons. Instead, they were ordinary people—housewives, grandfathers, architects, fraternity brothers. From the largely black audiences the shock of recognition was palpable, indeed audible. Suddenly, they saw themselves.

In part the appeal of—and hence potential market for—such entertainment is best captured by Public Enemy's Chuck D, who calls rap music "black America's CNN". Yet, by an irony, the main audience for all forms of black pop-culture is white. Ritual viewing by white teenagers has made "Yo MTV Raps" one of the network's highest-rated shows. Their mothers' purchase of \$150 "Air Jordan" trainers has made Michael Jordan, the star of the Chicago Bulls, a millionaire many times over. And it will be the turnout of whites at suburban shopping malls across America that will determine how much money "Malcolm X" eventually makes.

White fascination with black culture is nothing new: witness jazz or Motown. But because so much of what comes across in

black records and films now claims to be more than entertainment, that fascination has a serious side. Many white parents cheer the fact that their young children seem to make little if any distinction between their black heroes and their white ones. Although many different factors shape the racial attitudes of children—not least parents and school—any respectable account of the racial progress that America has made since the 1950s would include popular culture as a big factor. A case could be made that "Fat Albert", a Saturday-morning cartoon show produced by Bill Cosby in the 1970s about a jolly band of ghetto kids, did more to influence race relations in later years than all the Supreme Court's preferential-treatment decisions from the same time. "Roots" boosted not just black pride, but white understanding.

That is another reason why the new black pop-culture matters. America is a far less racist place than it was 30 years ago. But white animosity towards blacks is still all too common. If giving a black hero the same treatment that Hollywood gives white ones reduces that animosity by even the tiniest amount, putting up with Mr Lee's self-promotion will have been a small price to pay.

