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THE LEGACY OF MALCOLM X

HOME TECH ‘93: A CONSUMER’S GUIDE
The legacy of Malcolm X

He terrified whites and turned Negroes into African Americans

“We're not Americans. We're Africans who happen to be in America. We were kidnapped and brought here against our will from Africa. We didn't land on Plymouth Rock—that rock landed on us.”

— Malcolm X, 1964

In his day, Malcolm X was not widely regarded as an admirable figure. Except in Harlem, the man who rose from poverty and prison to the pulpit was virtually unknown until CBS's Mike Wallace, in a 1959 television documentary entitled “The Hate That Hate Produced,” showed him leading an ominous “rise of black racism.” Six years later, thousands of mourners attended Malcolm's Harlem funeral, but outside America's poorest neighborhoods few tears were shed. A New York Times editorial dismissed the murdered minister as “a twisted man” who turned “true gifts to evil purpose.” Time termed him “an unashamed demagogue.” Columnist Walter Winchell called him “a petty punk.” Nor was the Negro press, as it was known in those days, any kinder. The Washington Afro-American described the black nationalist leader as “a professional race-baiter.” Malcolm X, the Michigan Chronicle concluded, “reaped the harvest of his own philosophy.”

Now, 27 years later, the man who called himself “the angriest Negro in America” is an inner-city icon. Malcolm X's grim visage bedecks sweatshirts, jackets and even the sides of buildings. Caps with a symbolic X are worn by millionaire athletes and the homeless, by the mayor in New York and by looters in Los Angeles. Malcolm's unusual life—“You wouldn't believe my past,” he once said—is the basis of plays, operas and books. This week, the craze that one scholar dubbed “Malcolmania” is bringing forth Spike Lee's “Malcolm X,” a long-awaited movie that will do much more than usher in a new tide of Malcolm products, including wristwatches, air fresheners, refrigerator magnets and trading cards. The epic, which opens with the video of Rodney King's beating and ends a fast-moving 3 hours and 21
minutes later in a sea of black faces in current-day Soweto, also will serve as a reminder that, for many, the struggle for civil rights did not end in the '60s. "Most of white America and even elements of middle-class black America are not listening to the rumbles from below," says Manning Marable, a historian at the University of Colorado at Boulder, who is writing a biography of Malcolm X. "They aren't listening to the voices of anguish and alienation. That's what Malcolm's popularity is about."

The movie is sure to shape and reshape the ways in which millions of people view a man who was one of his generation's plainest speaking but most-misunderstood personalities. "Malcolm X was a far more complicated figure than any of us knew in the '60s," says Robert O'Meally, an American-studies professor at New York's Barnard College. "If you look at the whole range of his career, you can see some pretty good Malcolms in the barrel with the bad ones."

Lamb and chicken. During the early '60s, the media presented one bad Malcolm after another. "If I had said 'Mary had a little lamb,'" he once complained, "what probably would have appeared was 'Malcolm X Lampoons Mary.'" But the press did not have to exaggerate Malcolm's rhetoric to make it frightful. All white people were devils, he declared, the members of an evil race created thousands of years ago by a mad black scientist. Hell was not something in the hereafter, Malcolm preached, but was what blacks endured every day on Earth. All of this, he warned, would soon be set straight by a global revolution of dark-skinned people—a "lake of fire," a "day of slaughter... for this sinful white world." When John F. Kennedy was assassinated, Malcolm talked cheerfully about "the chickens coming home to roost." He hailed as "a very beautiful thing" the crash of an airliner full of white people—a case in which God got "rid of 120 of them at one whop.

Those headline-making utterances came from "the pre-Mecca Malcolm," the messenger who blindly followed the teachings of Nation of Islam founder Elijah Muhammad and thus, in one historian's words, "scared the bejesus out of white people." Less noticed was what occurred in Malcolm's final year. Breaking with Muhammad, Malcolm traveled to Mecca and discovered Muslims "of all colors, from blue-eyed blonds to black-skinned Africans." He returned to America preaching brotherhood and a hostility to bias in any form. "In the past, I have permitted myself to be used to make sweeping indictments of all white people," he said. "I no longer subscribe to sweeping indictments of one race."

James Farmer, the civil-rights leader who headed the Congress of Racial Equality in the '60s, remembers a revealing conversation shortly after Malcolm's return from Mecca. Malcolm vowed to devote the rest of his life, Farmer says, to practicing Malcolmania along the sidewalks of New York City. His father, a one-eyed Baptist preacher named Earl Little, was a recruiter for Marcus Garvey, the 1920s black nationalist who claimed that blacks could never win freedom in America and should create their own nation in Africa. Soon after Malcolm's birth in Omaha, the Littles moved to Lansing, Mich., where, Malcolm's autobiography suggests, Earl Little was murdered by white vigilantes. Malcolm's mother went on welfare and suffered a mental breakdown. Her eight children were scattered as wards of the state. Malcolm, at 12, went to a detention home, where he often was called "Rastus." But he excelled in school. His classmates, all of them white, chose him as seventh-grade president—he was their "mascot," he explained. A year later, he told a teacher he wanted to be a lawyer. "You've got to be realistic about being a nigger," the teacher responded. "Why don't you plan on carpentry?" Malcolm recalled: "It was then that I began to change—inside." The week he finished the eighth grade, he boarded a Greyhound for Boston, to live with his half sister Ella in Roxbury. It was 1941, and he was 15.
Malcolm preferred the young "cats" at the pool halls. He got a job as a shoeshine boy at the Roseland State Ballroom, popping his rag to the rhythm of Count Basie's band and whisk brushing "white cats" for nickel tips. He "conked" his naturally red hair—straightening each strand with a scalding mix of eggs, potatoes and lye—bought a shark-skin zoot suit and orange Florsheim shoes and got himself "a fine white woman." At 17, he was a hustler in Harlem—pimping, peddling dope and running numbers. Musicians and five-joint patrons knew him as "Detroit Red." At 18, he toted a pistol. At 19, he appeared at an Army induction center in his wildest zoot suit and said: "Daddy-O, I want to get sent down South. Organize them nigger soldiers, you dig? Steal us some guns and kill up crackers." His ploy worked: The Army refused to draft him. To support a $20-a-day cocaine habit, he turned to burglary, lifting wallets and jewelry from bedrooms as his victims slept. At 20, he was caught and sentenced to 10 years in the penitentiary.

Deeming Roxbury's middle-class blacks "snooty," Malcom then preved the young "cats" at the pool halls. He got a job as a shoeshine boy at the Roseland State Ballroom, popping his rag to the rhythm of Count Basie's band and whisk brushing "white cats" for nickel tips. He "conked" his naturally red hair—straightening each strand with a scalding mix of eggs, potatoes and lye—bought a shark-skin zoot suit and orange Florsheim shoes and got himself "a fine white woman." At 17, he was a hustler in Harlem—pimping, peddling dope and running numbers. Musicians and five-joint patrons knew him as "Detroit Red." At 18, he toted a pistol. At 19, he appeared at an Army induction center in his wildest zoot suit and said: "Daddy-O, I want to get sent down South. Organize them nigger soldiers, you dig? Steal us some guns and kill up crackers." His ploy worked: The Army refused to draft him. To support a $20-a-day cocaine habit, he turned to burglary, lifting wallets and jewelry from bedrooms as his victims slept. At 20, he was caught and sentenced to 10 years in the penitentiary.

Malcolm knew that Schwerner and Goodman were white and Jewish," Farmer recalls. "For a black nationalist and a Muslim to say that those two white Jews were his brothers was a real confession and real change. I asked him why he had not expressed that view in his rallies in Harlem. He said, 'If a leader makes a sudden right-angle turn, he turns alone.'"

When Malcolm began preaching in the '50s, black Americans were represented on radio and television mainly by servants like Jack Benny's Rochester and bumbling connivers like Amos and Andy's Kingfish. The only African hero most black moviegoers saw was a white Tarzan. "You know yourself that we have been a people who hated our African characteristics," Malcolm told a Detroit audience. "We hated our heads, we hated the shape of our nose... we hated the color of our skin, hated the blood of Africa that was in our veins... Our color became to us a chain." What Malcolm started—"a cultural revolution to unbrainwash an entire people," he called it—bears fruit today in music, dress, art and literature, all brimming with self-respect and pride in an African heritage. It was Malcolm's influence, many scholars say, that turned "Negroes" into "black people." He fathered the black-power movement that started within a year of his death. Long before the movement faded in the '70s, its disciples were hailing "St. Malcolm."

Many young Americans caught up in Malcolmmania are familiar with the highlights of his life. They devour Pathfinder Press's collections of his speeches and are largely responsible for the 300 percent jump that occurred since 1989 in sales of "The Autobiography of Malcolm X," as told to Alex Haley. But many other Malcolm fans know little about him. Until a year ago, some black students were asking their history professors, "Who is this Malcolm the Tenth?"

Whites often know even less about the civil-rights era. Alan Stone, president of Michigan's Alma College, says his students "are surprised to learn that separate drinking fountains existed barely 25 years ago. They seem to think these things happened at the turn of the century."

"By any means..." Much of what young people think they know about Malcolm comes from rap music. The rap group Public Enemy, in its "Shut Em Down" video, shouts, "Screw George Washington," then knocks the first president off the dollar bill and replaces him with Malcolm X. In Prince Akeem and...
Celebrating May 19. Malcolm gets the seat of honor at this 1992 birthday bash.

Chuck D’s “Time to Come Correct,” Malcolm is shown speaking and then lying dead in his coffin while the words “by any means necessary” flash across the screen. Those four words — now Malcolmania’s No. 1 slogan — are also the title of a Boogie Down Productions album, the cover of which has lead rapper KRS-One peering out a window with a semi-automatic rifle, just as Malcolm did in an Ebony magazine photo in 1964.

Malcolm’s oldest daughter, Attallah Shabazz, says too many youths believe that “by any means necessary” means using a gun. Shabazz, who at the age of 6 saw her father shot to death, favors another interpretation. “Any means,” she says, can include reading books and studying hard. Malcolm himself always used the term ambiguously in telling how to achieve justice and equity, and he let friends and foes alike interpret as they wished. But his message about self-improvement was plain. “Without education,” he warned, “you are not going anywhere in this world.” Spike Lee says he made his movie in hopes of ending a disturbing trend in inner-city schools: Blacks who make good grades, he notes, are assailed by peers as acting white.

The color line. It was not easy to be black and contented in the 1960s. The Supreme Court had outlawed school segregation, but nearly every Southern classroom remained either all-white or all-black until late in the decade. Hotels, eating places, theaters, libraries, buses, ballparks, zoos — all were segregated. The typical Southern service station provided three restrooms: “Ladies,” “Gentlemen” and “Colored.” In some counties, blacks who tried to vote risked losing their jobs or their lives. Outside the South, local laws banned discrimination and politicians spoke of brotherhood. But millions of blacks lived in crumbling, rat-infested housing with no hope of moving to the white suburbs, and their children attended schools as segregated as any in the old Confederacy. Police floggings were commonplace in the North and South alike.

Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X looked at what black people were up against and reached totally different conclusions on what should be done. King, focusing initially on the South, believed a campaign of nonviolent protests would end segregation, changing white people’s hearts as well as their laws. “We are simply seeking to bring into full realization the
American dream—a dream yet unfulfilled," the Baptist minister explained. By contrast, Malcolm X found nothing in America worth saving. "I see America through the eyes of the victim," he said. "I don't see any American dream. I see a nightmare." The pre-Mecca Malcolm said King was a "chump" and an "Uncle Tom" for pursuing integration. The real answer, Malcolm said, was the voluntary but permanent separation of the races, with whites in one place and blacks in another. The government, he said, should "give us part of this country." He grinned that someplace sunny, like Florida or California, would do fine.

Malcolm mocked the civil-rights movement's nonviolent approach, which King patterned after Mahatma Gandhi's successful campaign against British colonialism in India. "This is no revolution," Malcolm said. "This is a beg-o-lution. You 'Toms' are asking the white man for a cup of coffee at a lunch counter." Holding hands with white people and singing "We Shall Overcome," he said, is laughable. "You don't do that in a revolution. You don't do any singing, you're too busy swinging."

King dismissed Malcolm's words as "fiery, demagogic oratory" that "can reap nothing but grief." Nonviolence, King told one audience, disarms the oppressor. "It weakens his morale" and "exposes his defenses. And at the same time, it works on his conscience. And he just doesn't know what to do. Now I can assure you that if we rose up in violence in the South, our opponents would really know what to do, because they know how to operate on this level. . . . They control all the forces of violence." A lot of blacks would get killed, King warned, and whites would have an excuse to do nothing about oppression.

**Ballots and bullets.** Black people in those days clearly preferred King's course. In a 1964 New York Times poll, 3 of every 4 New York City blacks named King as "doing the best work for Negroes." Only 6 percent chose Malcolm, who, plainly irked, said to Alex Haley: "Brother, do you realize that some of history's greatest leaders never were recognized until they were safely in the ground?" In that year—his final year—Malcolm quit attacking the civil-rights movement and offered to help it instead. Once apolitical, he now urged blacks to vote. He traveled to Alabama and spoke in support of King, who was in jail for leading a protest. Malcolm continued to say scary things, calling for black people's rifle clubs and threatening to have the United Nations convict the United States of genocide. But he insisted that his fire-eating rhetoric was making King's job significantly easier. "When the Black Muslim movement came along talking that kind of talk that they talked, the white man said, 'Thank God for the NAACP.' " Malcolm explained. "A lot of people who wouldn't act right out of love began to act right out of fear."

After Malcolm died, King began moving toward Malcolm's pessimism. With the civil-rights movement's Southern goals in place, King turned to the cities of the North. He soon discovered that many Americans dream—a dream yet unfulfilled," the Baptist minister explained. By contrast, Malcolm X found nothing in America worth saving. "I see America through the eyes of the victim," he said. "I don't see any American dream. I see a nightmare." The pre-Mecca Malcolm said King was a "chump" and an "Uncle Tom" for pursuing integration. The real answer, Malcolm said, was the voluntary but permanent separation of the races, with whites in one place and blacks in another. The government, he said, should "give us part of this country." He grinned that someplace sunny, like Florida or California, would do fine.

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Glad rags. Denzel Washington in “Malcolm X,” with Spike Lee playing his pal of the Northern whites who supported his campaign against racism in the distant South saw nothing wrong with what was happening in the nearby ghettos. Blacks rioted in the Watts section of Los Angeles, shouting “Burn, baby, burn!” and “Long live Malcolm X.” The war in Vietnam, which both King and Malcolm bitterly opposed, was escalating. King quit talking about his dream. “I saw that dream turn into a nightmare,” he said.

Forward, backward. Malcolm and King today would see both a dream and a nightmare. In the generation since their deaths, black America has both progressed and regressed. The black middle class has quadrupled, and the top 20 percent of all black households now averages $61,000 in income. But much of the swelling middle class has fled the inner cities, leaving behind a poor but bloated underclass. “Whatever the measure – median income, health care, life expectancy – problems in the central cities have gotten worse,” says the University of Colorado’s Marable, “and a majority of African-Americans continue to be locked out of the promise of the American dream.” Nor do they have an effective spokesman, now that Jesse Jackson’s influence is on the wane and other black politicians are courting conservative whites. “Black people need a leader who speaks the truth even when white people don’t want to hear it,” says Stanford historian Clayborne Carson. “Malcolm X is filling that role.”

Many young blacks who admire Malcolm deem King passé. “Black youth are more in tune with the street ethic than the middle-class ethic,” says James Farmer. “If any man hits you, hit him back—the big fist wins. When I travel to colleges, black youth tell me that ‘nonviolence may have been all right for Dr. King and y’all in the ’60s, but this stuff that’s coming down now, we have to fight.’ They’re referring to the resurgence of racism, the rise of the Aryan supremacist groups, the campus graffiti.”

If violent rage is all that Americans detect in Spike Lee’s movie—and they shouldn’t because the film offers much more—the woes of the inner cities will surely worsen. Already, says James Cone, author of “Martin & Malcolm & America: A Dream or a Nightmare,” many young blacks “with no respect for themselves or for anybody else are dropping out of school, joining gangs, selling drugs, going to prisons and killing each other with a frequency that boggles the human imagination.” Cone, who teaches theology at New York’s Union Theological Seminary, hopes fellow blacks will pick up a far more useful message: respect for black life. “Malcolm’s life and teachings on black self-esteem are the medicine the African-American community needs to prevent its self-destruction.” Whites also will understand Malcolm better, Cone says, if they read his speeches and debates. “Malcolm wanted for blacks only what whites wanted for themselves, no more and no less.”

By Lewis Lord and Jeanne Thornton with Alejandro Bouipo-Memba