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[Contents of Issue Menu](#)

[Click Here](#)

[Home](#)

Malcolm X and the Music **By Norman (Otis) Richmond** BlackCommentator.com **Guest Commentator**

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El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz (Malcolm X) was assassinated 44 years ago, on February 21, 1965, because of his attempt to internationalize the AfricanAmerican liberation struggle.

Malcolm was born 83 years ago on May 19, 1925. While it is unlikely that U.S. President George W. Bush will acknowledge these facts, people from Cape Town to Nova Scotia and Brazil to Brixton definitely will. African Americans in New York City have made a pilgrimage to Malcolm's gravesite every year since February 21, 1966.

Contrary to popular belief, it was Malcolm, not Martin Luther King, who first opposed the war in Vietnam. Malcolm was the first African American leader of national prominence in the 1960s to condemn the war. He was joined by organizations like the Revolutionary Action Movement and the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee. This was in the tradition of David Walker, Henry Highland Garnet, Martin R. Delaney, Bishop Henry McNeil Turner, W.E.B. Du Bois, Marcus Garvey, Ella Baker and Paul Robeson. Malcolm continued to link the struggles of African people worldwide. King came out against the Vietnam War after his famous April 4, 1967 speech at Riverside Church in New York City. Malcolm spoke against this war from the get-go.

Musicians did their part to keep Malcolm's name alive. Long before Spike Lee's 1992 bio-pic, "X," hip-hop, house, reggae and R'n'B artists created music for Malcolm, high-life and great Black music (so-called jazz) artists first wrote and sang about Malcolm. The dance of Malcolm's time was the "lindy-hop" and he was a master of it. The Autobiography of Malcolm X, which Malcolm wrote with the assistance of Alex Haley, gives a vivid description of his love of dancing.

Years later, on a visit to the West African nation of Ghana, Malcolm spoke of seeing

Ghanaians dancing the high-life. He wrote: "The Ghanaians performed the high-life as if possessed. One pretty African girl sang 'Blue Moon' like Sarah Vaughan. Sometimes the band sounded like Charlie Parker."

Malcolm's impact on Ghana was so great that one folk singer created a song in his honor called "Malcolm Man."

Malcolm Man, Malcolm Man
You speak your tale of woe
The red in your face like our
Blood on the land
You speak your tale of woe
Malcolm Man, Malcolm Man
The anger that you feel
Will one day unite our people
And make us all so real
Malcolm Man, Malcolm Man.

After Malcolm's death, many jazz artists recorded music in his memory. Among them, Leon Thomas recorded the song, "Malcolm's Gone" on his [Spirits Known and Unknown](#) album; saxophonist-poet-playwright Archie Shepp recorded the poem, "Malcolm, Malcolm Semper Malcolm" on his [Fire Music](#) album. Shepp drew parallels between Malcolm's spoken words and John Coltrane's music. Said Shepp: "I equate Coltrane's music very strongly with Malcolm's language, because they were just about contemporaries, to tell you the truth. And I believe essentially what Malcolm said is what John played. If Trane had been a speaker, he might have spoken somewhat like Malcolm. If Malcolm had been a saxophone player, he might have played somewhat like Trane."

Shortly before Malcolm's death, he visited Toronto and appeared on CBC television with Pierre Breton. During the visit, Malcolm spent time with award-winning author Austin Clarke talking about politics and music. Time was too short to organize a community meeting, but a few lucky people gathered at Clarke's home on Asquith Street. Clarke had interviewed Malcolm previously, in 1963 in Harlem, when he was working for the CBC. Clarke recalled they "talked shop," but also discussed the lighter things in life, like the fact that both their wives were named Betty.

It is not surprising that Malcolm made his way to Canada. His mother and father, Earl Little, met and married in Montréal at a Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) convention. Both were followers of Marcus Garvey. His mother, Louise Langdon Norton, was born in Grenada but immigrated first to Halifax, Nova Scotia and later to Montreal in 1917.

Jan Carew's book, [Ghosts in Our Blood: With Malcolm X in Africa, England, and the Caribbean](#), documents this aspect of the life of the Pan-Africanist. I suggest that Carew's volume be read to commemorate the anniversary of Malcolm's assassination.

While on a visit to Nigeria Malcolm was given the name Omowale, which means in the Yoruba language, "the son who has come home". It was this period of his life that he visited Nigeria, Ghana, Liberia, Senegal, Morocco, Algeria, Egypt, Ethiopia, Kenya, Guinea and Tanzania. It was during that period that he met with Osagyefo Dr. Kwame Nkrumah, Julius K Nyerere, and Nnamoi Azikiwe, Sekou Toure, Jomo Kenyatta, Dr. Milton Obote and others. During this visit he also met Ras Makonnen, a legendary Pan-Africanist from Guyana, Richard Wright's daughter Julie Wright, Maya Angelou, Shirley Graham Du Bois, the wife of W.E.B. Du Bois, and the Chinese Ambassador

Huang Ha.

Malcolm was the chief organizer of the Nation of Islam and the founder of the group's newspaper Muhammad Speaks. He split with the nation and its leader Elijah Muhammad in 1963. At the time of his death he headed two organizations. The secular group the Organization of Afro-American Unity (OAAU) was his political arm. He also organized the religious group, Muslim Mosque Inc (MMI), which practiced Sunni Islam. Today Islam is the second largest religion in the United States and Canada. Many credit Malcolm with helping spread Sunni Islam as well as revolutionary African American Nationalism and Pan-Africanism among African people in the Western Hemisphere.

Like Augusto Cesar Sandino of Nicaragua or Sun Yat-Tsen of China, Malcolm was embraced by all sectors of the African American Nationalist and Pan Africanist movements. All Nationalists and Pan-Africanists claimed to follow his example. Revolutionary Nationalist groups like the Black Panther Party, and the League of Revolutionary Black Workers emerged in the late 1960's, after Malcolm's death. Even after the BPP and the League embraced Marxism, Malcolm was still their man. The cultural Nationalists who maintained that the Cultural Revolution must precede the political one also embraced Malcolm.

He was a controversial figure. Actor Ossie Davis eulogized him as our "Black Shining Prince" while the director of the U.S. information agency Carl T. Rowan referred to him as "an ex-convict, ex-dope peddler who became a racial fanatic." He was loved by the oppressed and hated by the oppressors. Malcolm spoke about the MMI and the OAAU in these terms: "Its aim is to create an atmosphere and facilities in which people who are interested in Islam can get a better understanding of Islam. The aim of the OAAU is to use whatever means necessary to bring about a society in which the twenty-two million Afro-Americans are recognized and respected as human beings".

At the time of his death Malcolm was not nearly as well known as he is today. Each year his stature grew. By 1992 Malcolm was the subject of a major motion picture, "X" by Spike Lee. Lee's film was as controversial as Malcolm's life. Lee was attacked from the left, right and center for his portrayal of Malcolm. And he marketed the hell out of the movie. His campaign began with the marketing of "X" caps. He gave the first cap to basketball icon Michael Jordan. And as they say, "the rest is history." Many who uphold the Black radical tradition fought Lee over the film. They accused him of "pimping and sampling" Malcolm. Lee responded with a book, *By Any Means Necessary: The Trials and Tribulations of the Making of Malcolm X ... (While Ten Million Motherfuckers are Fucking With You!)*.

[*The Autobiography of Malcolm X: As Told to Alex Haley*](#) and other books by and about Malcolm continue to sell worldwide. Some of his books have recently been published in Cuba. Malcolm was one of the few African American Nationalist leaders that welcomed Cuban leader Fidel Castro to Harlem in 1960. Many Nationalists didn't want to be identified with communism. But African people in the West could easily identify with the slogan, "When Africa called Cuba Answered." Kwame Ture (Stokely Carmichael) was fond of reminding us that the only place in the United States that Fidel felt safe was in Harlem.

Toronto-based journalist and radio producer Norman (Otis) Richmond can be heard on Diasporic Music, Thursdays, 8-10 p.m., Saturday Morning Live, Wednesday 9 - 11am. on CKLN-FM 88.1 and on the Internet at www.ckln.fm. Click [here](#) to contact Mr. Richmond.


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