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## Malcolm X: Special Edition (1992)

WARNER



### MOVIE INFO

**Director:**

Spike Lee

**Cast:**

[Denzel Washington](#), [Angela Bassett](#), Albert Hall, Al Freeman Jr., Delroy Lindo, Spike Lee, Theresa Randle, Kate Vernon, Lonette McKee, Tommy Hollis

**Writing Credits:**

Alex Haley (book, "The Autobiography of Malcom X"), Malcolm X (book, "The Autobiography of Malcom X"), Arnold Perl, Spike Lee

**Synopsis:**

Spike Lee brings the life of African-American leader Malcolm X (an intense Denzel Washington in an Oscar-nominated performance) to the big screen in this sprawling, epic biographical drama. Born Malcolm Little, son of a Nebraska preacher, on May 19, 1925, he became one of the most militant leaders and charismatic spokesmen of the black liberation movement before his assassination at the Audubon Ballroom in New York City on February 21, 1965. The film sweeps through his early life as a small-time hustler and thief with his friend Shorty (Lee), his conversion to Islam in jail, and his subsequent life as a controversial spiritual leader and husband of Betty

Reviewed by [Colin Jacobson](#) (February 3, 2005)

1992's *Malcolm X* sounded like a perfect match of filmmaker and subject. It started with the story of Malcolm X, probably the most controversial black civil rights leader in our history, and wound up in the hands of Spike Lee, likely the most controversial black filmmaker the industry's known. At this point, it's tough to remember what a lightning rod for criticism Lee was back in the late Eighties and early Nineties. His films caused a ruckus, and his outspoken views turned Lee into a "love him or hate him" character.

That factor meant Lee's name didn't pop up much at awards time. The most egregious example of this came when his incendiary *Do the Right Thing* didn't get a nomination for a [Best Picture](#) Oscar. 1992's *Malcolm X* also failed to get Oscar love, which seemed inevitable. Would the film have gotten more recognition with someone else at the helm? Probably, for though it's a flawed piece, it's still a strong examination of its subject.

*X* opens in Boston during World War II, as we meet Malcolm "Red" Little (Denzel Washington). We get glimpses of his life as a moderate ne'er-do-well, and the flick cuts between that period and his childhood. We watch the ways that whites abused and eventually murdered his father (Tommy Hollis) back in Nebraska. We also see that the government eventually declared his mother (Lonette McKee) incompetent and took all the kids from her.

The Boston sequences focus on Malcolm's relationships. He dates chaste Laura (Theresa Randle) but gets his jollies with white Sophia (Kate Vernon). Eventually Malcolm winds up in New York, where he attracts the attention of hustler "West Indian Archie" (Delroy Lindo). After some good times, Malcolm eventually runs afoul of Archie and hightails it back to Boston, where he starts his own crime ring with his old buddy Shorty (Lee).

However, this also causes problems, as both Malcolm and Shorty get arrested and sentenced to eight to 10 years in prison. This term starts in February 1946, and it causes massive ideological changes in Malcolm. He meets a Black Muslim named Baines (Albert Hall) and becomes educated in a number of areas. Primarily he gets turned onto the teachings of Elijah Muhammad (Al Freeman, Jr.). This leads Malcolm to become a radical and denounce the "white devil".

From there, we see what happens to Malcolm when he gets out of prison. He works for the cause and rises through the ranks of the Black Muslims. He also encounters Betty Saunders (Angela Bassett) at a meeting and they slowly romance, in a stiff Muslim way. Mostly the flick focuses on Malcolm's work and status as well as the controversies he causes.

When *Malcolm X* works - and it does so most of the time - it owes much of its success to one man: Denzel Washington. In a career marked by consistently solid work, Malcolm stands as Washington's greatest single performance. It's become a cliché to state that a powerful actor doesn't play a part, he inhabits it and becomes that person, but it's absolutely true in the case of Washington's Malcolm. He thoroughly transforms himself into the leader and overcomes all the role's potential pitfalls.

Indeed, Washington's performance easily could have become sour. Actors who play famous figures must walk a thin line between portrayal and simple impersonation. Washington doesn't need to simply mimic Malcolm, but the role requires him to create enough of an

Shabazz (Angela Bassett). Malcolm's tragic assassination is presented as a conspiracy of Nation of Islam leaders; the film shows how his philosophy has been realized in the lives of others who have been moved by his words. Filmed with great visual flair by Lee, the film is a work of entertainment as much as it is a historical artifact. Washington captures the spiritual conversion of the hero with a sincerity that is entirely as believable and ultimately moving as it was in the book that inspired the film, "The Autobiography of Malcolm X".

**Box Office:**

Budget  
\$34 million.  
Opening Weekend  
\$9.871 million on 1124 screens.  
Domestic Gross  
\$48.169 million.

**MPAA:**

Rated R

**DVD DETAILS****Presentation:**

Widescreen 1.85:1/16x9

**Audio:**

English Dolby Digital 5.1  
French Dolby 2.0

**Subtitles:**

English  
French  
Spanish  
Closed-captioned

**Runtime:** 202 min.

**Price:** \$26.99

**Release Date:** 2/8/2005

**Bonus:**

- Audio Commentary with Director Spike Lee, Director of Photography Ernest Dickerson, Editor Barry Alexander Brown, and Costume Designer Ruth Carter
- "By Any Means Necessary: The Making of *Malcolm X*"
- Additional Scenes with Introductions by Spike Lee
- 1972 *Malcolm X* Feature-Length Documentary
- Trailer

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**EQUIPMENT**

illusion to allow us suspend disbelief. Washington does this extremely well and really turns into Malcolm.

It's a truly dazzling turn. The role requires many different facets as Malcolm goes from dandy to street hustler to hardened criminal to radical to more open-minded crusader. In less skilled hands, the transitions easily could have become jerky and awkward, but Washington allows them to move smoothly and naturally. Never does Malcolm's progress seem forced. Instead, Washington turns the character into a fully-realized person. How in the world he didn't snare the Oscar for Best Actor will remain a mystery. Washington didn't offer just the best performance of the year; his Malcolm is one of the all-time great pieces of acting.

As for the ever-controversial Lee, he mostly handles the story well. At first, I thought he made things heavy-handed. It doesn't help that the movie's start intercuts footage of the Rodney King beating with audio of a Malcolm X speech and a burning flag. The speech and the flag visuals work well and were more than enough for the opening. The King material, however, feels too overtly symbolic and makes the movie feel a bit dated.

As for other seeming heavy-handed moments, I initially thought that Lee interjected too many of his own political beliefs. The flick pushes various concepts on us in a forced manner, and it feels like these echo the filmmaker's own ideas. However, as the movie progresses, it becomes more obvious that the movie's tone is meant to echo Malcolm's viewpoint at the time. When he becomes extremely radical, that's the reality we're meant to accept. When he turns more moderate, the tone calms. It's a clever way to treat things, as it allows us to get inside Malcolm's head.

One example of this comes when Malcolm delivers a speech that denounces "ignorant Negro preachers", and Lee cuts to a shot of Martin Luther King. Initially this feels like editorializing on the part of Lee; it seems like his own pro-Malcolm opinion overrides objectivity. However, we later realize that this image exists to illustrate Malcolm's point of view and nothing more.

*X* runs into a few problems along the way, partially due to some meandering story telling. The movie tends to ramble at times, particularly in the third act. Lee also doesn't give us a great sense of time and place. The flashbacks to his childhood work effectively, but we don't see the arc of his life clearly, as the flick tends to wander around without much definition.

Another problem comes from the score. Terence Blanchard's music often goes for a sappy, syrupy bent, and that tone drags down many parts of the film. It doesn't help that too much music pops up throughout the film. There are plenty of scenes in which the score becomes a major distraction. Less is often more, but the preponderance of music often annoys rather than embellishes.

As usual, Lee doesn't know how to end his movie. Many of his flicks conclude in awkward, unnatural ways, and that occurs here. Oddly, the film concludes with a classroom speech from Nelson Mandela, and this feels more like a civics lesson than anything else. It's a strange and enervating way to finish a powerful story.

Despite these flaws, *Malcolm X* mostly provides an effective look at its subject. Occasionally it drags and rambles, but it includes enough strengths to make it a success. If nothing else, a stellar performance from Denzel Washington makes it a must see flick.

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### The DVD Grades: Picture B/ Audio B/ Bonus A-

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*Malcolm X* appears in an aspect ratio of approximately **1.85:1** on these single-sided, double-layered DVDs; the image has been enhanced for **16X9** televisions. Occasionally the flick showed some concerns, but mostly it presented a satisfying picture.

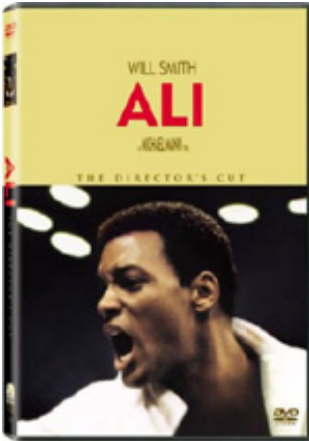
For the most part, sharpness seemed positive. A few wider shots looked just a little undefined, but those examples occurred infrequently. Otherwise, the movie offered a nicely developed and crisp image. I noticed no issues with jagged edges or shimmering, and only a smidgen of edge enhancement popped up during the movie.

Sony 36" WEGA KV-36FS12 Monitor; Sony DA333ES Processor/Receiver; Panasonic CV-50 DVD Player using component outputs; Michael Green Revolution Cinema 6i Speakers (all five); Sony SA-WM40 Subwoofer.

The main problem that marred *X* stemmed from print flaws. Periodically through the flick, I saw examples of specks, grit, marks, blotches, and nicks. The movie also looked a little grainy at times. I never thought the defects become overwhelming, but they seemed somewhat heavy for a relatively recent film.

Colors fared well. From the first act's lush, nostalgic tones to the more natural and realistic look of subsequent sequences, *X* consistently presented concise, vivid hues. Blacks were dense and tight, while low-light scenes seemed smooth and well-developed. *X* could use a little cleaning, but I found the movie to remain more than satisfactory most of the time.

## RELATED REVIEWS



I didn't expect any slam-bang audio from the **Dolby Digital 5.1** soundtrack of *Malcolm X*, and the film delivered a generally subdued experience. Most of the material stayed focused on the forward channels. Music displayed good stereo imaging, while effects usually stuck with general environmental information.

The track went with atmospheric audio much of the time, though it flared up occasionally. For example, in scenes during which houses get torched, the flames spread all around the room. Crowd scenes also broadened neatly. The surrounds didn't have much else to do, however, as they favored reinforcement and not too much more. Given the focus of the story, that was fine.

The quality of the audio was good. Speech always sounded distinctive and crisp, and I noticed no signs of edginess or issues connected to intelligibility. Music was smooth and vivid, as the generally jazzy score offered well-defined qualities. Effects appeared accurate and clear. No distortion or flaws marred the presentation, as it represented the elements well. Not a lot of ambition popped up here, but the results were perfectly solid for this material.



Whereas the original DVD of *Malcolm X* that came out in 2000 included virtually no extras, this two-disc special edition tosses out a good array of components. Spread across both platters, we start with an **audio commentary** from director Spike Lee, director of photography Ernest Dickerson, editor Barry Alexander Brown, and costume designer Ruth Carter. Each recorded a separate running, screen-specific track; this piece edits them all together.

As one might expect based on the roles of the participants, technical areas dominate the commentary. We get notes about the film's visual looks and cinematographic issues, costumes, editing and pacing, research and factual elements, the cast, Washington's approach to his role, and other general topics. Surprisingly, Lee proves to be the least informative and interesting of the participants. Much of the time he simply narrates the movie or names various performers. Often when he launches into an interesting subject - such as the pressure he felt to deliver a product worthy of Malcolm's legacy - he discusses it too briefly to tell us much. The others more evocatively get into their material, though the emphasis on the nuts and bolts tends to make this a dry track. It's worth a listen, but don't expect to be glued to it.



On Disc One, we also find a new documentary called **By Any Means Necessary: The Making of Malcolm X**. This 30-minute and 20-second program presents the standard assortment of archival materials, movie clips, and interviews. We find notes from Lee, Dickerson, Brown, Carter, filmmaker Martin Scorsese, Reverend Al Sharpton, Warner Bros. Executive VP Worldwide Production Lucy Fisher, composer Terence Blanchard, co-producers Preston Holmes and Jon Kilik, producer Marvin Worth, casting director Robi Reed, Malcolm X's daughter Ilyasah Shabazz, and actors Ossie Davis and Denzel Washington. They discuss the desire to bring Malcolm's story to the screen and how Lee got the gig, conflicts between the filmmakers and the studio, adapting Malcolm's life to the screen, various production decisions, casting, specifics of the shoot, locations, post-production challenges and controversies, and the film's reception and legacy.

Tight and relatively light on self-congratulatory material, "Means" nicely complements the commentary. While that one stuck largely to technical topics, this one gets into all the problems that came along the way. It delves into issues slightly skirted in the commentary, such as the campaign Lee led to take the film away from original director Norman Jewison. We get a good examination of the concerns and obstacles in this solid documentary.

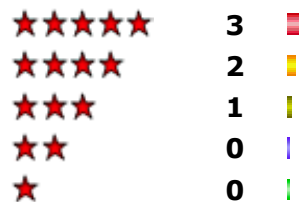
DVD One concludes with the movie's **theatrical trailer** plus nine **additional scenes**. These come with introductions from Spike Lee and last a total of 21 minutes, 35 seconds. Nothing terribly fascinating pops up here, as the majority consist of fairly brief character bits. They're fun to see but they don't add much. Lee's intros give us background about the clips that help put the moments in context, though he doesn't tell us why the snippets failed to make the final cut.

As we head to Disc Two, we discover one major piece: a 1972 documentary entitled **Malcolm X**. It runs 91 minutes and 35 seconds as it presents archival footage and narration from James Earl Jones as he reads from *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. Essentially this makes the movie into *Malcolm X: In His Own Words*. A few comments from others appear as well, but between Jones' occasional narration and the many snippets of Malcolm, he dominates the piece. Of course, it covers all of the same subjects examined in Spike Lee's movie, but it goes into these elements via actual footage. That makes it very compelling to watch, as it's quite interesting to compare what we saw in the theatrical flick with this documentary examination.

It also reinforces the notion that Denzel Washington perfectly captured his character in *Malcolm X*, as the footage of the actual man is spookily similar to the actor's performance. Washington deserved the Oscar for his work, and I consider his turn here to be one of the all-time great pieces of movie acting. The rest of *Malcolm X* isn't as good, but the film nonetheless succeeds more than it sputters and it acts as a solid examination of Malcolm's life. The DVD presents good but unexceptional picture and sound. While we don't find a large collection of extras, everything of the disc offers useful material, so consider it a triumph of quality over quantity. Despite some erratic moments, I do recommend *Malcolm X*.

**Viewer Film Ratings: 4.3333 Stars**

**Number of Votes: 6**



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