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# American Visions

## **Spike** **Speaks**

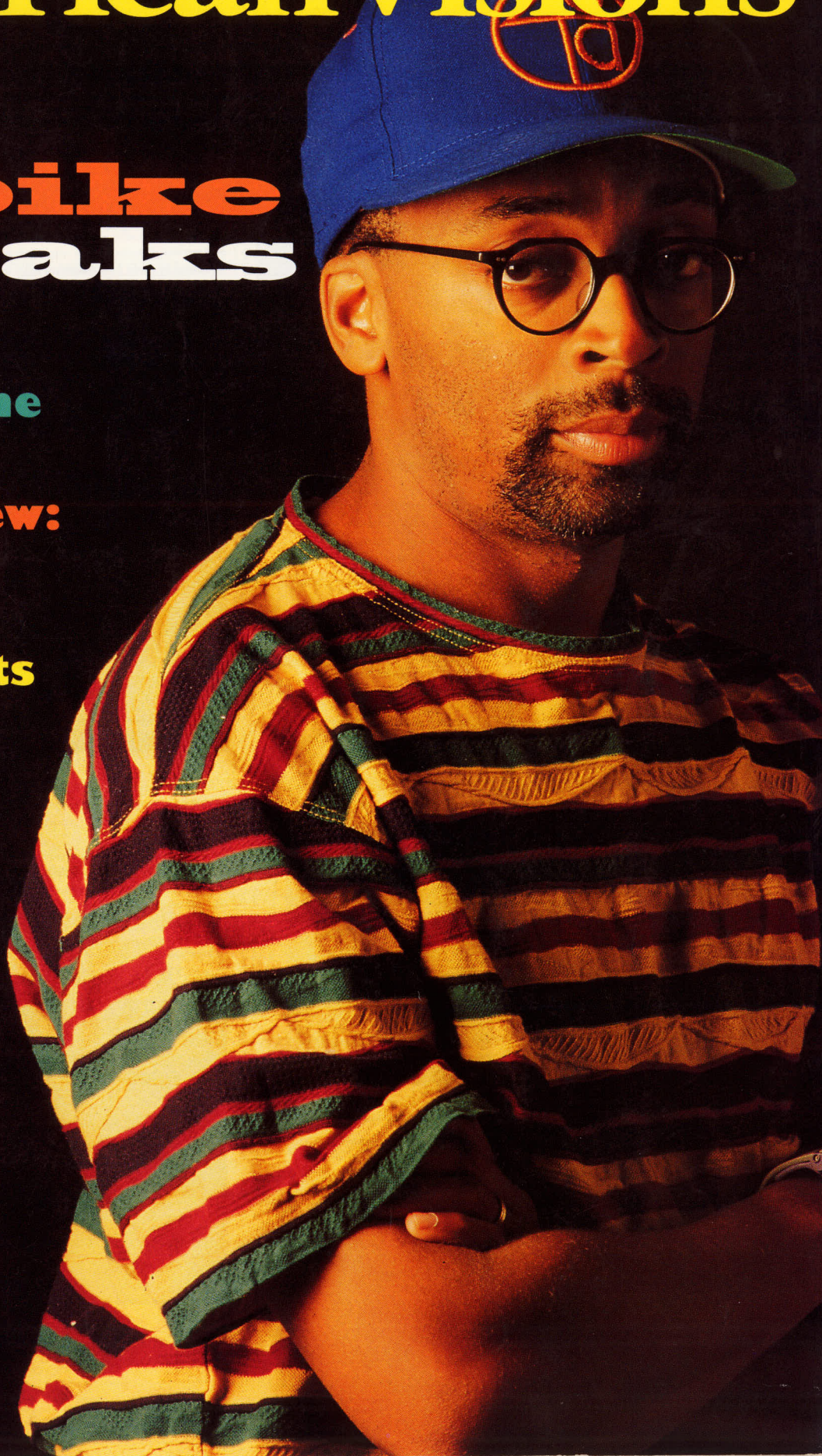
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# Spike Lee

## Fast Forward

by Sharon Fitzgerald

**T**he walls of 40 Acres and a Mule Filmworks fairly shout how far Shelton "Spike" Lee has traveled, and how quickly. Mounted, framed and hanging opposite the front door are three courtside tickets to the NBA championships, a leisure status symbol of modern moviemakers. At \$550 a pop, the VIP value of seat 9, row AA, court 28 at Madison Square Garden is indisputable. Extended alongside last season's tickets are front-page clippings confirming that this spectator is a headliner.

New York City's leading tabloids are all represented here. *Newsday* quotes "Spike Lee on Reggie Miller: I Thought the Brother Had More Class." The *Post* exclaims, "Spiked!" The *Daily News* retorts, "Thanks a Lot, Spike." All three refer to Lee's trash talk with the Indiana Pacer—court-to-curb action that spurred Miller on to a fourth-quarter, 25-point miracle in last year's NBA Eastern Conference playoff games against the Knicks.

Between 40 Acres' second-floor office and third-floor conference room, assorted posters present more of Lee's tastes and accomplishments. In gilded frames are the signs of 1970s film fare, such as *Hit Man*, *Mandingo*, *The Education of Sonny Carson* and *Cornbread, Earl and Me*. A *Jurassic Park* poster is inscribed, "For Spike—Roarr," and signed by Steven Spielberg; the one from *Taxi Driver* is autographed by Robert De Niro. Although the hometown advantage is maintained by posters from such Spike Lee joints as *Malcolm X*, *Mo' Better Blues* and *Do the Right Thing*, there is also an array of retro images promoting French translations of American films.

The large, well-lit office is a multipur-

pose expanse without walls to separate the staff's wood desks or to interrupt their nonstop activities. Topics of conversation—the sizes of promotional T-shirts, phone calls to be made or answered, schedules and guests for movie screenings, the quality of that day's cord of edited film—continually shift. On a front burner bubbles *Girl 6*, which opens next year; the story of baseball legend Jackie Robinson simmers in pre-production. Not surprisingly, the background music is the 40 Acres and a Mule Musicworks soundtrack of *Clockers*, Lee's current movie release.

On the room's horizon, upon a slightly elevated platform, is the desk of the 38-year-old mastermind. Lee's is a panoramic view of the creative kingdom—a director's view. Separate but not inaccessible, he can work the phones, review the paperwork, and make eye contact with everyone who enters. On first take, he appears relaxed with his roles both in and out of the spotlight.

It helps that he has chosen a low-key demeanor and raised it to an art form, an expertise revealed when he is the focus of a camera. To start with, he does very little blinking. This is a rather tricky fact to observe behind those dark-frame eyeglasses that ID him as clearly as the goatee, baseball cap and diamond stud in his left earlobe. When they do move, his heavy eyelids fall and rise on a low shutter speed.

Second, Lee's fashion choices, at least on this day, appear to be influenced by the what-you-see-is-what-you-get school of design: wrinkled T-shirt, denim shorts, tube socks and sneakers. It is a cool inner tempo that keeps him on point, his arms folded behind him, while a makeup

Photo by Joe Grant





# **With "School Daze," complaints zeroed in on Lee's comic approach to the thorny issue of color consciousness among blacks.**

artist dabs, a photo assistant adjusts, and a photographer begins clicking away.

After taking several sphinxlike shots, the photographer tries livening things up. "Hey, Spike," he says, "you can be animated if you like." Lee's right eyebrow arches slightly as he considers the invitation. He shifts one pound of body weight from his right to his left foot. A smile starts—and stops—at the left corner of his mouth. "That's as animated as it gets," he says.

It has been 10 years since the summer of 1985, when this stealth bomber surprised Hollywood body counters with *She's Gotta Have It*. The exploits of Nola Darling, a homegirl with sexual attitude, rocked and tantalized audiences. However, the lion's share of attention was paid to the film's director-producer-writer-co-star, a hefty hyphenate, even by Hollywood standards. Lee's pithy Brooklynese invited comparisons to fellow Knicks fan Woody Allen, but the folklore embellishing his against-the-odds achievement was more akin to the spin that propelled Sylvester Stallone. Not since *Rocky* had American filmgoers been as stunned by the arrival of a heavyweight.

Still, for young black filmmakers, Spike Lee represented more than a

bankable name; he was a torchbearer, a homey who brought some to get some. He seemed to open the door for a league of independent directors: John Singleton, Robert Townsend, the brothers Hudlin and Hughes.

With characteristic aplomb—outspoken yet soft-spoken—Lee separates fact from fiction. "In every interview I do," he says, "this whole thing comes up about a black renaissance. The way I see it is this: I'm not the first African-American filmmaker. Those who torched this path for me were people like Oscar Micheaux, Gordon Parks, Michael Schultz, Melvin Van Peebles, Ossie Davis. I just picked it up.

"Filmmaking is what I love. I love doing it, and I am very grateful and blessed that I have been able to really go from film to film to film, which is something that not too many African-American film directors have been able to do."

With *Clockers*, Lee will have gone "from film to film to film" eight times since the debut of *She's Gotta Have It*. True to its lineage, *Clockers* will undoubtedly provoke controversy and push button after button.

On its surface, *Clockers*—co-produced by Lee, Martin Scorsese and

Jon Kilik and based on the best-selling novel by Richard Price—offers an intimate and violent look at the inner-city drug trade. The turmoil is revealed through Strike (Mekhi Phifer), a 19-year-old around-the-clock crack dealer who—after the brutal murder of a rival and the arrest of his hard-working older brother—is forced to rethink the dangerous circumstances of his life.

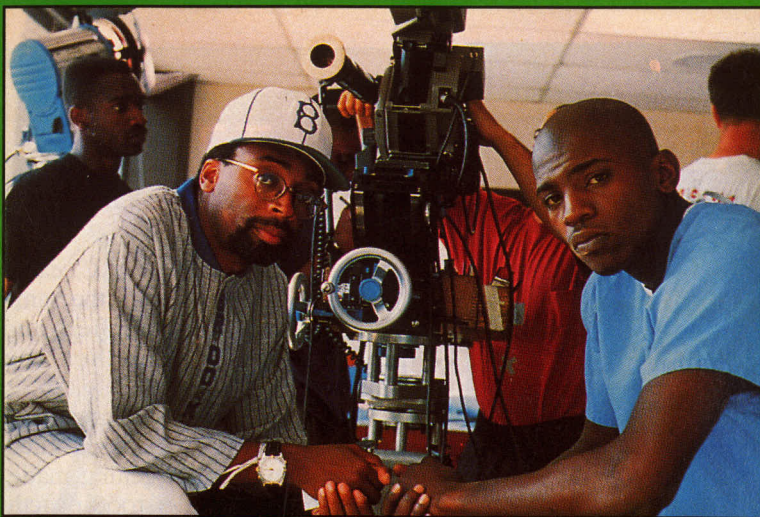
Strike remains the pursued in the film's multilayered game of cat-and-mouse. Rocco Klein (Harvey Keitel), a homicide detective, prods him for the truth. Rodney Little (Delroy Lindo), the elder drug dealer, demands his undying allegiance. Andre the Giant (Keith David), a housing policeman and local figurehead, warns him to end his corrupt influence on the project's community.

In Price's novel, the experiences of Strike and Rocco command center stage; in his initial screenplay, contracted by Universal for director Scorsese and actor Robert De Niro, the focus was on Rocco's police investigation. When Scorsese and De Niro opted for the movie *Casino* and Universal asked Lee to take over *Clockers*, he agreed, but shifted the emphasis. The new screenplay, co-written by Price and Lee, makes Strike the epicenter of the dramatic quakes, and the bonds connecting black men underscore the tragedies.

"I really wasn't as much into that cop stuff as I was in the relationship between the two brothers," Lee says. "One is clocking and the other is on the up-and-up. How is it that two brothers that are brought up in the same household—where everything they are exposed to is the same—why is it that one brother goes left and the other goes right?"

"But another interesting thing was the whole struggle, this battle between Rodney, played by Delroy Lindo, and Andre the Giant, played by Keith David. You have these two strong black male figures in a com-





Photos by David Lee (2)

Spike Lee and Mekhi Phifer on the set of *Clockers*.



Ronald "Strike" Dunham (Mekhi Phifer) with his brother, Victor Dunham (Isaiah Washington) in a scene from *Clockers*.

munity in which there are not a lot of men in the households. You have all of these generations of young black kids that are longing for father figures, and these two guys are out there.

"Unfortunately, most of these kids are going to want to choose Rodney because he has the cash and the flash, and they don't see Andre driving a fancy car or throwing money around. They see him going to work as a housing authority cop, and they definitely don't want to be a cop. In close-up, you see they are fighting for Strike, es-

entially for Strike's soul."

His affinity to the urban parable still intact, Lee has sallied onto the gritty terrain usually the province of gangsta films, a genre he has been inclined to avoid. "That was really one of my main concerns when Universal called me to do *Clockers*," he says. "I did not want to further contribute to the genre. It is not the total expression of our experience in this country, and it has been beat to death. I'm tired of it."

"It is still my hope that we black filmmakers as a collective group will put that genre to rest, to bed, and

try to tell all the other great stories that are out there. In doing *Clockers*, we hoped that we would execute what we wanted to say so well that it would be like the final nail in the coffin."

However, if Lee has learned anything over the past years, it is that his work rarely goes down quietly. "I'm not surprised anymore," he says. "In doing *Do the Right Thing*, I never expected people to say that I was trying to start an uprising among black folks and burn this country down. In *Mo' Better Blues*, I never expected the *New York Times* to label me anti-Semitic because of the portrayals of Mo and Josh Flatbush. All I want to do is tell the story. When I write a script, I'm not saying, 'Uh-oh. I'd better leave that out because I might get into trouble.' I really don't operate like that."

The aftermath, he admits, can be exhausting. "When *Do the Right Thing* came out, I had to go on *Nightline*," he says. "People were saying it was an irresponsible film; therefore, that was going to have a direct effect on the box office, which it did. At the beginning, I used to spend a lot of time defending my work, but as I got older and I did more films, I just resigned myself to letting the films speak for themselves. At a point, if you don't stop, you can kill yourself from always defending your work."

"As far as critics go—and this might be true for audiences, too—I sometimes think that they let the persona of Spike Lee get in the way of enjoying or really understanding the films that I make. I mean, it shouldn't be about whether you like the Knicks or not, or that you don't like my commercials or that you don't like Spike. I hope they don't let that color things. Just go and see the film."

In short, he wants to be treated like any other serious artist. "The first movie Woody Allen made after that thing with what's-her-name



# **"Do the Right Thing" was accused of promoting urban violence.**

got great reviews," he says. "The fact that he might be labeled a child molester never came up. They separated that part of his life from Woody Allen the filmmaker. I think that sometimes they don't do the same for me."

Could it be because his work is so controversial? "I don't know," he says. "One thing it has to do with is the fact that some of the media has portrayed me as being a racist or prejudiced. One of the worst things that has happened was that *Esquire* magazine cover which was titled 'Spike Lee Hates Your Cracker Ass.' People thought that was a quote out of my mouth. If I was white and I saw Spike Lee's face on the cover of this magazine and it says, 'Spike Hates Your Cracker Ass,' why would I want to see his films?"

In an industry that devours talent—both the dark and the light meat—the bottom line is survival. From the beginning, Lee sprinkled his sound bites with the word on black powerlessness in Hollywood. He also fought this exclusion head-on—demanding creative control, hiring interns to cut their teeth behind the scenes, launching 40 Acres and a Mule Musicworks to produce his films' soundtracks, opening T-shirt emporiums in Brooklyn and Hollywood, and following up film releases with books describing how he got the job done.

His marketing and entrepreneurial savvy is almost legendary, and so is his support of black artists. "The checks have never bounced,"

says composer Raymond Jones, who wrote the opening music for *Clockers* and has contributed to Lee's films since *School Daze*. "Spike ups the ante every time. He sets his expectations very high, and you want to meet them. Plus, he's insightful; he hears things from a combination of perspectives."

Early on, Lee challenged other power brokers, including Eddie Murphy and Whoopi Goldberg, to use their clout to help open doors for African Americans. In the past year, he has backed up rising filmmakers as the executive producer on the movies *Drop Squad*, *New Jersey Drive* and *Tales From the Hood*. In his estimation, the reluctance of African-American artists to form strong economic alliances is the result of a divisive historical experience, which must be overcome by any means necessary.

"It all really has to do with slavery," he says. "We have been taught over hundreds of years not to trust each other, and that is still with us today. Spielberg, [David] Geffen and [Jeffrey] Katzenberg have all gotten a lot of money, and they said, 'We'll get more if we pool our resources and work together.' We as a people have not really found out how to do that yet, but we will."

"The only reason that Warner Brothers gave in and started to fund *Malcolm X* again was when Tracy Chapman, the artist formerly known as Prince, Michael Jordan, Magic [Johnson], Oprah [Winfrey], Bill Cosby, Janet Jackson and Peggy

Cooper Cafritz down in D.C. came together on a joint venture the same way that Katzenberg, Geffen and Spielberg came together on DreamWorks.

"That's some heavyweights, and that's what it took, because otherwise that film was not getting made. Warner Brothers understood exactly what it was to have these people writing checks for me to continue. Two days later, they started funding us. That is power."

"But I will acknowledge—and I think that everyone knows, this is not a revelation—that Hollywood is just like any other place in America, and the playing field is not level. So if you're an African American, you know that you have more hurdles thrown in your way, more obstacles. And you can bitch and moan about it, or you can try to jump those hurdles and smash those obstacles. And it's not fair, and that's the way it is."

Not content to rely on the rewards of the film industry, Lee has carved a position for himself in the culture's commercial landscape. Mars Blackmon may not have nabbed Nola, but he was nobody's passing fancy, and neither are those Nike ads, nor those "X" caps and other 40 Acres promotabilia. "I've always felt that if opportunities came to me, I should take advantage of them," says Lee. "I was not going to limit myself by saying that I would not do anything outside the movies."

Thus, in extraordinary fashion, Lee is achieving what few artists—black or white—have been able to master: He speaks his mind and maintains a popular persona. All the while, the hype factor is not lost on him. He seems acutely aware of the dangers that accompany his high profile. He is also quick to admit that there are African-American artists among his detractors.

"I've never really thought of myself as a spokesperson for 35 million African Americans," he says, "and I've never tried to present my-



# Cries of anti-Semitism were roused by the jazz club owners in "Mo' Better Blues."

self that way. All my views have been solely my views, and I think that there are African-American people who agree with me, but we also have African Americans who don't agree. I think this is a good time to state that it is a fallacy that all of my critics are white, because that is not the case either. I have a lot of black critics, people like Stanley 'Crotch.'

He evenly recalls how his role as director of *Malcolm X* brought him under fire, most notably from Amiri Baraka. "His whole criticism centered around the idea that I was bourgeois and all these other things, too middle-class," says Lee. "I had to be a card-carrying member of the Socialist Party."

"I just look at it like a lot of people had their own agendas, and I think with Baraka, a lot had to do with jealousy. He considered himself the father of the black arts movement, and he's been given his due. But, you know, black artists now are able to make a whole lot more money, and I think we are in a lot more control of our art than they were back then. We get a lot more publicity, too. So I think that might have something to do with it."

Lee's ninth film, *Girl 6*, scheduled to open in several months, will be of particular interest to those who have questioned his presentation of female characters. ("bell hooks thinks that I am a man hater, I mean a woman hater," he says.) The movie chronicles the endeavors of a struggling actress, intent on achieving success because of her talent and not her appearance, who takes a job as a phone sex operator to earn the money to make that big move West.

Word-of-mouth describes the film as a funny, lighthearted look at sex and what women have to put up with to get ahead. The movie's fantasy sequences will feature cameo appearances by the likes of Madonna, Halle Berry and Quentin Tarantino.

"I know that you have Julie Dash and Leslie Harris," Lee says, "but I feel that the only way that African-American women will be fully satisfied with the portrayal of African-American women in cinema is when African-American women write the screenplays that African-American women are directing. Then I think that women will probably get a portrayal closer to the one they like. As long as men are doing it, even if they are black men, I don't think that women are going to be satisfied. I have acknowledged in several interviews that that is something that I have to work on—not just the portrayals, but to try to really give women characters as much depth as the male ones."

"But don't you think that there is a male world and a female world and then a place where we intersect? I think that we are really different and that there are a lot of misunderstandings, particularly between black men and black women. That's something that needs to be addressed also. I don't think that you do that by calling black women hos or bitches or skeezers; that's for sure."

With *Girl 6*, Lee apparently decided to begin by reforming the basics. "There were mostly women in the cast and crew," says Ina Mayhew, the artistic director of both *Girl 6* and *Clockers*. "It must have been very interesting for Spike to work with so many women, when

he's used to being around men most of the time."

One cannot help wondering about the impact of Lee-the-filmmaker on his old neighborhood of Fort Greene, Brooklyn. Even with the boutique Spike's Joint down the block, DeKalb Avenue doesn't look any different from other New York thoroughfares. There's a takeout Chinese joint, a grocery, a fruit stand, the usual day-to-day, hand-to-mouth institutions. It may be a few more years before the artist emerges who admits that he was influenced by the comings and goings of his homeboy Spike Lee. But one only has to ask to discover what remaining on his turf has meant to the filmmaker.

"It keeps me grounded," he says. "I grew up here, and I think it makes me a better filmmaker. Living where I live, I'm not out of touch. I mean, Fort Greene is not like Brooklyn Heights. You have people here who have money; you've also got people here on welfare. Across the street on Myrtle Avenue are the Fort Greene projects. So you have this vast spectrum—people making it, people struggling to make it, people in between."

"I'm very observant. For the most part, I don't even talk; I just watch and listen to people. I think if Spike Lee moved to Hollywood—if I had a house in Beverly Hills or Bel Air or Malibu—sooner or later you would see that reflected in my films. It would have to be."

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