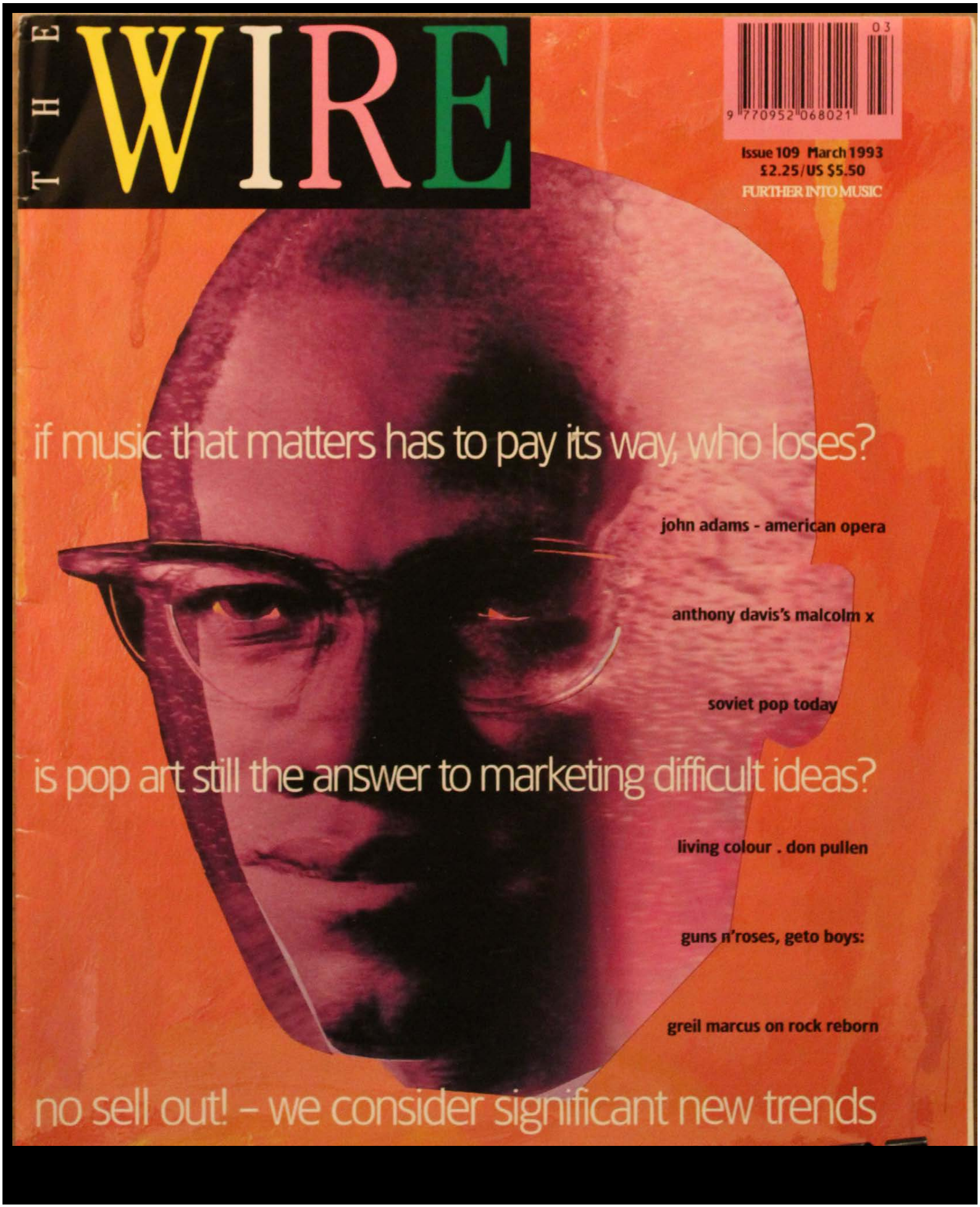
THE WIRE
9 770952 068021 03
Issue 109 March 1993
£2.25/US $5.50
FURTHER INTO MUSIC
if music that matters has to pay its way, who loses?
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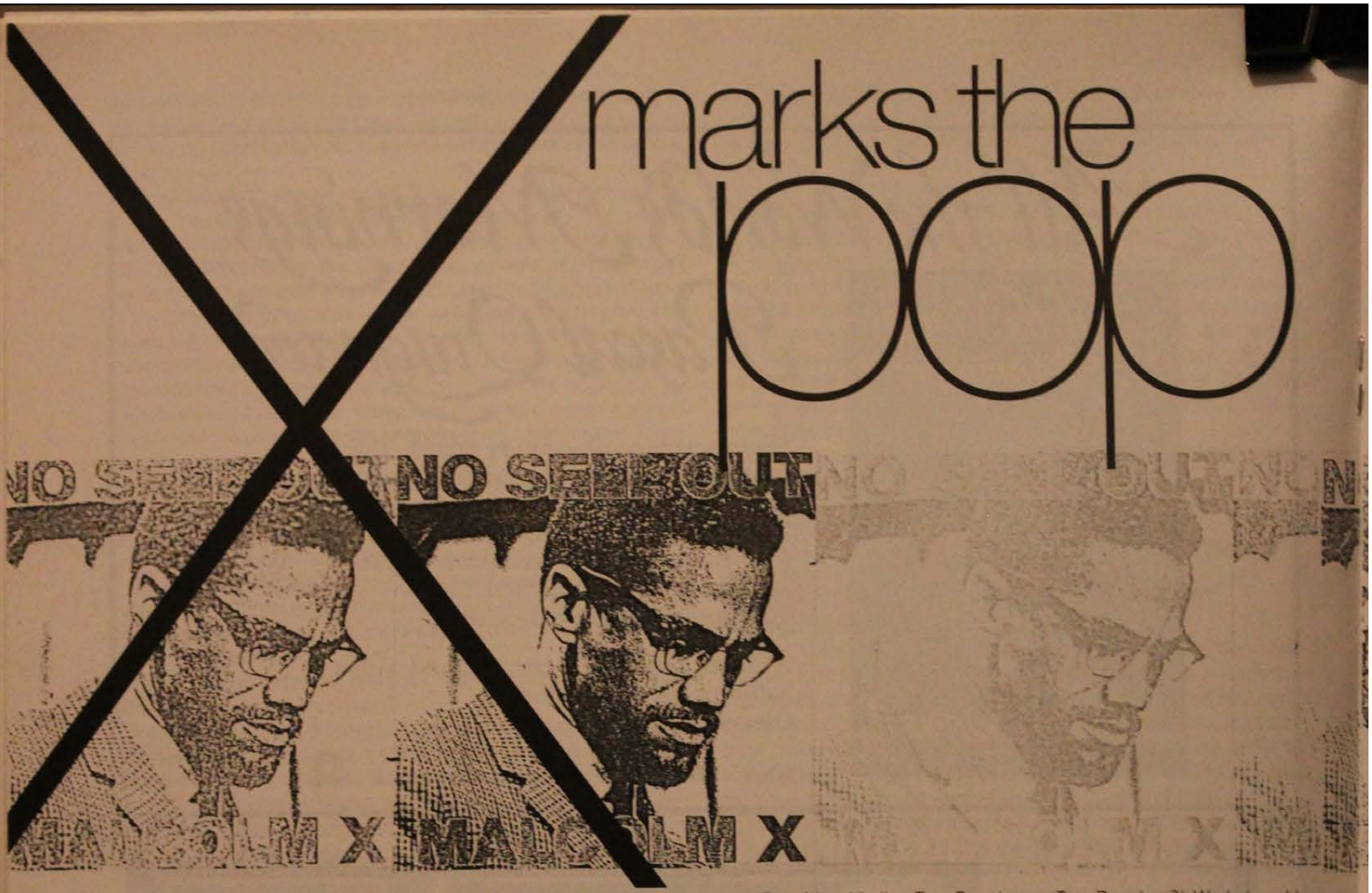
X marks the pop



As a recording, Keith LeBlanc's 1983 "No Sell Out" isn't especially Great, and it isn't especially Lost either. It was a catalyst, though (better word: vector) for things both Lost and Great. Because it threw Malcolm X's voice — and his face, thanks to the sleeve — in to the then-present, and (same thing) into the pop mainstream. Almost two decades after X's assassination, if records of his speeches hadn't actually vanished, they certainly weren't readily obtainable everywhere. The robot-beats on the 12" scratchmix sound ten years thin now, tiresome and rinkydink, but once they gave forceful notice of a particularly thrilling political rediscovery, for a leaderless, ungrounded generation. Public Enemy — and Spike Lee, currently available everywhere — followed.

Hung on this all-too-careful soundbyte-sculpture, the record's title, repeated over and over, rings out more like worried question than statement: "Malcolm X: No Sell Out?" As if the makers were wondering whether its main subject, this epitome of Black implacability, could really be turned into a hip and radical cut-up groove without something getting lost, without the whole idea mutating towards the ultimate rebellion-into-money thing.

Which, in a moment awash with X caps, X bow-ties, X comic-books, X potato chips, seems almost quaint; a likeable little reservation shadowing the rigid brutality of those beats. Serious commentators, along with every hack who never mentioned Malcolm before now, query the ethics 'n' effects of Lee's movie-promotional tactics thus: does the deeper meesage come across, or is it smothered in hype, ego, Hollywood? Must the trivial always devour the valuable? If X marks a spot at all, is it the beginning or the end of a treasure hunt?

We could bring up Warhol here — and the mass manufacture of banality, and Pop Art's multiple screenprint icon-images as substitute for inspiration (Elvis, Mao, Marilyn, Troy Donahue — Troy Donahue?). Warhol would play pop 45s, over and over, as he ran out his Soup Cans. And we can go further back into highbrow history, and recall Walter Benjamin, a figure as romantically forceful (and tragically dead-before-his-time) as Malcolm, recall Benjamin's theories of art and value, and argue, with him, that machine age repetition, even as it trivialised, even as it brought about the death of you-had-to-be-there value in Classical Art, nonetheless also freed up the masses to respond in their own way. Because it gave them access, all unspoiled by the usual learned responses, that make priests and curators of even the best old-guard critics.

But every dutiful disciple of Cultural Studies can parrot this line. Benjamin is also mechanically repeated, in the production lines of MultiCult academia. And besides, writing in the 30s, before chrome dioxide, before cut-and-paste studio possibility, he paid no mind to records, the one medium where his prophecy came unequivocally true. He was talking about paintings, postcards, photographs and film. And records, being more than simply paintings in sound, or photographs or postcards or film, deserve their own analysis.

LeBlanc's idea was not original: from the mid 70s, DJ Afrika Bambaata had spun discs of Malcolm X speeches over the breakbeats in his seamless all-night groove-marathons. But the very fact that "No Sell Out" now seems not so well done after all is a measure of the richness of the field it opened up, and the speed with which subsequent innovators poured into it — though at the time, rap (even Bam's own groundbreaking work) seemed more novelty than not, as likely to lead back to The Smurfs as The Last Poets; after "Malcom X: No Sell Out" anything less than confrontational — or at the very least symbolically turbulent — seemed less than cutting edge.

Suddenly Malcolm X is everywhere, subject of movies, operas, comic-books, rap songs — and essays. Hopey Glass wonders if pop cultural forms will ever do him justice, and if "serious" forms will continue to miss the point?

Rap's aesthetic today, this thick chaos of warring community perspectives, this layered babel of possessive urban demons inside and out, is facilitated by magnetic tape and by digital sampling: it's a technique enabled by the technologies of its time. This LeBlanc and Da Lench Mob and Hank Shocklee and many others have convincingly demonstrated.

But the roots go back to the beginning of African American 20th century tradition. Perhaps it surfaced in our time when Bam, a non-musician musician, made a particular creative thing of spinning juxtaposed and superimposed records, but Ralph Ellison was riffing on this very notion 40 years ago (in *The Invisible Man*, the alienated hero of that fractured masterpiece retreats into a hidden basement and fantasises armies of gramophones all playing the same Armstrong record at once). The physical nature of records — the actual things you can do with them — is the heart of the possibility of the rap aesthetic: but records have been the shellac vessels and the vinyl portals of the true soul of the African American tradition since Armstrong's Hot Five spoke to the world.

Because, let's face it, as often as we're told that the essence of jazz is in live performance, we know deep down that its initial reach and subsequent development only occurred because it was the first music that grew to maturity in the age of the stylus. The fact that it was available far from its birthplace, for one thing; and the fact that the best thing to do with a 78 that has just stopped spinning, is put it on a second time, and a third, and so on. They are made to be played over and over and over again: which is why it's the details that dig deep.

We're talking repetition now, which Cage argued would be the fundamental principle of 20th Century Art. Repetition as it manifests in Pop Art: its central, unnerving power, to unearth questions — about pop as art and art-pop, about art as pop and art against pop, about what might be that pop has and art needs, or wants.

But also repetition as it manifests in the African American tradition — which is only sometimes the same thing as Pop Art. Records, after all, repeat at three levels: more than postcards, or photos, or films. Firstly, yes, records are mass-produced and meant to be: so that owning the "original" is of no consequence. Secondly — as Warhol did — you can and will play them over and over again: and because you can always reaccess that first epiphany, there's no notion of "the truest performance" to confuse you. Because they repeat exactly, you rewire your aesthetic responses to things that signify with time and repetition, to textures, buried allusions,. small details.

And thirdly, ever since Miles Davis and James Brown transferred their primary creative space from stage to studio, the most successful musical form in the popular arena has been the dance-groove: where cycles of rhythm, circling ever back to their beginnings, allow for small shifts and changes within the structure to bring with them remarkable shock-force. Meaningful improvisation can only develop through repetition (think about it); and the same goes for its opposite, the folk-wisdom proverb. Malcolm's inventiveness in both areas puts him right up alongside these two solid race-uplift capitalists (his Hustler past emphasises the point — while the Nation Of Islam's practical commercial wisdom completes the circle). If repetition is the tool and the end-result of a world run by commerce, there are ways in which this has been, shall we say, rerun through the most evocative and fiercely dissident of dissident pop art-forms.

What Malcolm had to sell always included himself: his face, his race, the way that he walked. Like any PopCult icon, he succeeds because he puts across a profound complexity in the guise of simiplicity. Take that dauntless intransigence — it's also the vehicle for the integrity of his changes of mind, of his ceasless self-questioning.

This in particular you would't always know. Sometimes it seems his appeal, rooted in unflappably sober staunchness, and his insistence that, if it comes to it, violence may also be necessary, might make him no more than the Black John Wayne: "a man's got to do what a man's got to do ...." If you didn't know otherwise, you could imagine this as one of Malcolm 's own soundbytes.

Intransigence, after all, has always been a saleable American pop cultural value: as has appointing yourself your own unimpeachable moral arbiter. Wayne's the proof of it. And Chandler's Marlowe, and Clint Eastwood's Man With No Name. And — latterly, more perverse by the minute, strong silent, violent types all — Dirty Harry and RoboCop and Hannibal Lecter and just-retired LAPD chief Darryl Gates.

So it's actually to save him from the dark side of all this that New York critic Greg Tate — cheekily, brilliantly — recently tagged Malcolm the "Elvis of Black pop politics". Meaning, among other things, that he's protean, in himself and in his signification: that his apparent deathlessness stems from the near-infinite variety under that always direct, coolly amused, FBI-agent besuited surface.

Of course there's another kind of cultural war going on here also. A war of respect due — a war about the plausibility of the kinds of seriousness manifested in the rival pop cultures of film and music. Film is deemed to have grown up — in film, the European Canon is already here. In music, once we're outside certain very constrained zones, no such regard is acceptable.

The instance that matters here goes to the heart of the representation of a life, a career, a person's ideas, the very process of iconography itself Film icons are vast, singular, monolithic — the same actor appears in different films, with different names, always casting the same shadow, conjuring the same dreams. Music icons are by contrast multiple (with Elvis the polymorphous model for them all): personalities-of-voice, ▶ *to p.71*

his dreads had fully grown out, Marshall produced his own *I Admire You* (CD HB 57), which shows off his admirable falsetto. Of the Studio One discs, **Willie Williams**'s *Armagideon Time* (CD 3509) — with its monstrous title cut — is perhaps most satisfying, the Marvin Gaye-like arrangements betray Dodd's love of Stateside rock, pop and soul, but the production has a uniquely Jamaican depth-of-field.

in brief clubtrax

Kodwo Eshun has several notions under a groove

Apache Indian Arranged Marriage **(ISLAND PROMO 12")** Apache Indian is a critical lure. Because he's more interesting in theory than in hearing, people don't realise how dull he actually is. Just as Smiley Culture was enlisted to celebrate an 80s hybrid of Blackness and Britishness with his single "Cockney Translator", so Apache Indian has been factored into an Asian British/Black British convergence. That mix tends to be written of as necessarily utopian. But Apache's presence can't divert attention from his sluggish delivery which drags behind a tabla trying to break free of its form.

Headspace Savage Culture EP **(FORWARD BLOC FB001 12")** Headspace's debut joins with The Moody Boys and Digidub in making connections between the mantric drive of Techno and the warm sonar pulse of dub. There's an Indie, dole-ridden inflection/infection to the voices of Dr. Das and NMC, which gives a boxed-in, cranked frustration to tracks like "Doomdaba" and "Zamana". Altered by percussion, bagpipes and Indian distortion, Headspace are the sullen and angry sons of the abandoned ethnodelia of 23 Skidoo. This EP registers a militant dubwise sensibility — a new music coming into shape before our eyes.

MC Solaar Qui Seme Le Vent Recolte Le Tempo **(TALKIN' LOUD PROMO 12")** Fact: Public Enemy sell three and a half times as much in France as they do in Britain. Which is to say that Paris/Senegalese rapper MC Solaar isn't the quirky sideline to Anglophone connections that he's being made out to be. His UK debut pleases because of its caressing clarity. Relieved from the position of critical judgement, you're given over to the joys of misrepresentation and irresponsible mishearing. Solaar frees the UK monolingual listener from the immediate pressure of meaning then returns you to it through his articulation of anger and melancholy.

PLZ Build A Wall Around Your Dreams **(GO FOR THE JUGGLER WHITE LABEL 12")** The vocals here run on from rapper to rapper as if they were passing their voices like a baton. The chorus of the title track is an exhilerating finish line, while the second track "Play" trades off a sample from Sly Stone's "Poet". The electricity of men together which HipHop revels in crackles through PLZ with a gravity defying fullness.

Underworld Mmm...Skyscraper I Love You **(BOYS OWN BOIX13 12")** This record is impressively high. All its elements seem to converge at a point way above your head. Usually it's Ambient dub which generates such a sense of stretching space definition, but here it's acheived by running cyclical synths and timbral runs against a mournful vocal until a pensive romance takes shape in the track's final two minute sequence. This wipes out the disaster of 1989's Indie dance farce and maybe suggests a new starting point.

11.59 The Ruff Life EP **(TICKING TIME WHITE LABEL 12")** There is some exceptional HipHop here which gains its force through a series of positive negations of today's musical limits. "Ruff Life" is ghosted music in which the keyboard refrain carries the spiritual weight of Fabian's roots classic "Prophesy". Throughout the four tracks the soundscape is haunted, elements echoing and playing off each other. "Question Of Justice" is a poignant mediation on the LA riots, a bleak, memorable audiomemorial to the death of hope and the uprising of health through hate. A wonderful EP.

▶ *X from p.39* constructed, like the records they star on, by th... 'n' mix principle.

HipHop in particular has formalised this multiplicity: not simply in its edit-torrent approach to sound, but in the ways rap groups present themselves. As gangs, of course: pop groups have always been gangs. But as gangs engaged in street-theatre now, in the raging call and response of community mini-drama. Again, this idea is latent — and sometimes not so latent — in all forms of 20th century Black music, insofar as collective group improvisation is never far from the surface. But HipHop takes it all further. For example, it also compacts the dialogues that 45s at their most urgent have always engaged in, in the charts, on release, onto single LP tracks. Its reach into the modern hi-tech media is such that it turns all, TV and LP, chatshow and news broadcast and cartroon, from historical resource into player in the drama — as fanfare, as *mise-en-scène*, critical aside, bitter allusion or butt of the joke, or indeed whatever delivery any one character might require for his line to have meaning in the play.

Does film ever achieve such an explosive community-carnival effect? Perhaps so. Spike Lee's *Do The Right Thing* ("a man's gotta do ...") is the prime example. Of course, this is also a movie where rap itself has become a player in the drama — as fanfare, as *mise-en-scène*, as critical aside, and all the rest. This is a film which draws so fully on the HipHop aesthetic that it makes no sense without it. Hollywood values are mocked and sent packing.

Sadly, *X* doesn't dare what *Right Thing* dared. Hollywood beats out HipHop as structuring principle, and Malcolm is divested of something very important in the process. Not his Blackness, exactly, nor his seriousness: but any sense of the way that these might interract in a way *never so far seen* on the Silver Screen.

Of course this isn't such a surprise. HipHop has shown little notion of character in complex, isolated depth, of anything other than cartoon subjectivity. Its "characters" remain one-dimensional: the richness comes, if at all, from the dramas they figure in. Since "No Sell Out", Malcolm has only figured as a single voice among many — if a recurrent voice, and a revered voice never to be gainsaid (unlike, say, Martin Luther King's). If Lee had opted for this form of HipHop babel in his movie, the times would have starred more forwardly than the people who made them: Malcolm would have had a walk-on part in his own story.

What Lee should have done — and didn't dare, and who can blame him? — was to import the HipHop aesthetic into film, and then drive it beyond its present limits: call up a full-on HipHop drama as it were *within Malcolm's head*, a whirl of fragmented subjectivity, of multiple voices, of raging argument inside. Stirring things up, not tamping them down: a HipHop movie about Malcolm would also have to be about HipHop, of course — and you can begin to guess who this might enrage. *X* has been received ecstatically by all those film critics who baulked at *Right Thing*. Only the Black community seem to have their doubts this time around.

"Malcolm X: No Sell Out" was a purely mechanical invocation — but in its way it worked, because it really did invoke. *X* uses all the tricks of humanist narrative construction — and fails. And that failure could have been predicted: imagine - I ask because I know you can't — a Hollywood Biopic that deals with Miles in such dreary linear narrative, or Brown? Those cycles and circling repetitions, those grooves and flashbacks, those improvisations out of screwed-back beat-drone, those salty flashes of ancient but effortlessly replayable wisdom - if the way you tell the story leaves these out, it isn't *their* story.

These figures are — after all — bigger than Hollywood. Aren't they?

You wouldn't have to call this principle HipHop, if the trendiness of that offended you (though being on it when it mattered is also always part of this story). You could call it Bebop: we all know the first Bebop movie hasn't been made yet. Or you could call it *neo-hoodoo* or *original godfather cyberfunk* or (even) *Black Pop Art*.

But let's see if we can't get it on-line in time for the Panthers movie. □