Interview with Kevin Powell
Poet, author, political activist, public speaker, hip-hop historian, former senior editor *Vibe* magazine

**INTERVIEWER**
How would you define “hip-hop generation”?

**KEVIN POWELL**
Rather to say “hip-hop generation,” I prefer to say “hip-hop community.” When we think about hip-hop, we can agree that someone who came from Jamaica in 1967 is one of the founding fathers of hip-hop. And he's now in his mid- to late forties—like Afrika Bambaataa and Grandmaster Flash. So that's one generation within the community. Then folks, like myself, who were born in the late '60s early '70s—we're now in our late twenties or early thirties—we came of age with hip-hop in the late '70s, early '80s; I think that's the second generation. Then there are folks who are in their late teens to maybe 24, 25—I think that's another group whose sensibility was shaped by hip-hop in the 1990s. And then clearly you now have kids who are 8 and 9 years old who love Lil' Bow Wow and Lil' Romeo. And so I prefer to say “hip-hop community” as opposed to “hip-hop generation,” understanding that there are probably four generations at this point within the hip-hop community.

**INTERVIEWER**
Describe one of the first Malcolm X musical references in hip-hop and relate how he is represented.

**KEVIN POWELL**
Well, I think the most striking musical reference for me in terms of Malcolm X was Public Enemy's “Bring the Noise,” when they sang at the beginning, “too black, too strong,” which I believe came from “Message to the Grassroots,” his speech in 1963 in Detroit. Malcolm X never actually said, “too black, too strong,” but a lot of us actually thought he did say that. What the Imperial Grand Ministers of Funk and the Bomb Squad, Public Enemy's producers, did was just kind of put the two phrases together to start the song, which I thought was brilliant and was very much in the spirit of Malcolm X, because, as we know from his speeches, he was sampling historical stuff. He was sampling the language of the streets. He would break down a class analysis by using the language that people spoke so they could understand it, house Negro versus field Negro. He would make references to prison using his own prison terms. He would make references to songs because obviously music was a big part of his life. That was the one that really stuck for me. I think that introduced Malcolm to a lot of people back in 1988.

**INTERVIEWER**
Describe some of the political and social contexts for that kind of Malcolm X reference in hip-hop.

**KEVIN POWELL**
I remember going to college in '84, '85, and walking into the anti-apartheid movement on college campuses nationwide. The whole thing was about protests against schools that were connected to business that were investing in South Africa. At that time, Jesse Jackson was running for president in 1984, and that had a huge impact on a lot of us.
The rise of Louis Farrakhan and the Nation of Islam had a huge impact on our lives. That's just because we had never heard—at least not my generation—someone speaking like that. We didn't know that people like Malcolm X existed or that Dr. King existed past 1963 and the “I Have a Dream” speech. That had a big impact on us.

The invasion of crack into our communities obviously was fragmenting our communities. The rise of yuppyism and buppieism in the 1980s had a big effect on us. And obviously the AIDS epidemic was starting to kick in in a way that we didn't know was going to really hit our community. But it was definitely going that way. And so, with all those things, with the climate at that time, I think it was inevitable at a certain point that hip-hop, really, would be the soundtrack of young people, just like rock and roll, when you had Chuck Berry and Elvis, Little Richard, Jerry Lee Lewis, and people like that. But I think it was inevitable in the '60s that you would get Bob Dylan; you would see the evolution of the Beatles from the pop stuff to songs like “Revolution.” Same thing with hip-hop in the 1980s. It was inevitable that we would start to go towards Public Enemy and Boogie Down Productions and X-Clan and Poor Righteous Teachers. A song which, to me, remains still the most important racial-profiling song is [Body Count’s] “F**k the Police.” And I think the reason why Malcolm came back is because he was a fearless voice; he was uncompromising, as someone said earlier. And he spoke the truth to the times. And hip-hop was the same way and remains the same way. Whether we like it or not, it speaks to the immediacy of our times. And that's what Malcolm X represented. And, sadly, Dr. King was the one that we were given to represent that. So I think it was inevitable for Malcolm to begin to be sampled by a lot of hip-hoppers.

INTERVIEWER
In terms of Malcolm X's life phases, what phase most closely represents hip-hop culture?

KEVIN POWELL
I don't think the distinctions were clear in hip-hop in terms of the various phases of Malcolm's life, because a lot of us don't read. This is just truth. A lot of Americans don't read, and that includes those of us in the hip-hop community, those of us in the black or Latino community. And so, I think, as a result, people weren't thinking about the different stages. I think what we were thinking about is the one who said the white man's the devil, the one who was too black and too strong. That was the Malcolm that a lot of us grabbed onto. It took me a while to even accept the post-Mecca Malcolm. I wanted to stick with the Nation of Islam stuff. But you have to remember that those were the times that we lived in. If you're under attack in America by the Reagan policies, if you're in New York City and Mayor Koch has been in office for 12 years, 1977 to 1989, that particular Malcolm speaks to you and your conditions and your time, more so than post-Mecca Malcolm. We were, like, “This is the guy who's saying the stuff we need to hear right now.”

They taught us in the Nation of Islam that we should look at the glass as half full as opposed to half empty. I want to do both. Half full, a lot of young people had never really heard of Malcolm X, didn't know anything about him, never heard his speeches. And so, what the film did represent on that basic level was an introduction, if you will. Unfortunately, some people stopped there. It became a trend. And once the Malcolm X trend was over, people kind of left him behind. People have to remember that Malcolm's film was the culmination of the hip-hop community embracing Malcolm for many years. It
was the culmination, as we talked about earlier, of that incubation of activism—intellectuals pushing Malcolm for many years, people who felt it was important to carry his message on. When I got to college freshman year, there was an older student who said, “Here’s Malcolm X’s album, Message to the Grassroots.” This was before the whole thing became popular. This is 1984. So I’m clear about that. And so Spike’s thing is the culmination of that. And I think the sad thing about that film is that it’s, in my opinion, a mediocre film. I think it was sad that Spike Lee’s the first person you see on camera when the film begins. I think it’s sad that he put himself in the film. I have to say it. It’s the truth. And I think it’s sad also that the nationalist community—I agree with them being critical and trying to have a conversation with Spike, but the old school nationalists’ positions back in their day were very confrontational. And they didn’t understand the time that they were in. He’s a huge filmmaker [and they] pissed him off. And I think if it would have come with a different approach, you might have had a better film.

**INTERVIEWER**

We have talked about the early references to Malcolm in hip-hop. What about the references to Malcolm X in the ’90s, such as in Spike Lee’s film *Malcolm X*?

**KEVIN POWELL**

The most famous one to me was [Lee’s] focus on Malcolm and the white woman and Malcolm as the gangster. There was an overemphasis on that, I felt. I felt it could have been balanced. I never thought Spike was a great writer. I wish he would have hired another writer to work on that film with him, because it could have been balanced. You can’t ignore Malcolm and the white woman and Malcolm as a gangster, but you’re going to deal with him as a Nation of Islam member only by doing his speeches over and over again? I’ve seen biographies that were well done where they showed the totality of a person’s life. I don’t feel like we got that.

But one thing that was positive—that a lot of people picked up *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. It ended up on the *New York Times* best-seller list. This helped to sell lots and lots of copies of the book. I think it produced a lot of good writings. People like Joe Wood collected an anthology of pieces about Malcolm X. In fact, I would say that Joe Wood’s piece on Malcolm and Denzel in *Rolling Stone*—it was the cover story for *Rolling Stone* back in 1992—was one of the most brilliant pieces that I read about Malcolm X and the making of the film. And I actually thought it was better than the film. That film really, to me, crystallized the mystique of Malcolm X, the things that people want to hang on him.

Because the nationalist community was trying to get their thing done and the Spikes of the world were trying to get their thing done, those of us at the bottom asked, “What are these guys fighting about?” The irony is that Amiri Baraka is the father of Lucy Jones. And at one point Spike and Lucy Jones were dating. So it was all overlapping, but it also showed that there’s such a handful of people in our community actually doing the work. And it’s sad to see that people could not come together and try to make this a more enjoyable experience.

I totally disagree that the film needed to be done by a committee. I heard people say that we need to have a committee to do the film. And I was, like, “Come on, man,” because I’m an artist, I’m a poet. I’m not going to have someone co-write a poem with me. At the
end of the day, I think I've come to appreciate the film more now, years later, because this is all we really got on a feature-film level. I don't know if anyone else will ever get that opportunity again. And I think people forget that Spike had a huge struggle with Warner Bros. to get the film made in the first place, how he had to kind of hijack the film until they gave it more money, had to go to certain black entertainers to get some funds. People forget all this stuff that was going on. So that whole film and the making of it is how desperately disorganized our communities are. And I don't think it's a coincidence that that film marked, also, the end of that whole nationalist period in hip-hop.

During the 1960s, 60 percent of people read newspapers. Today, only 20 percent do. That's saying a lot about the history of this country. So why would we know Malcolm X? Why would we even know the context of him saying “by any means necessary,” what the “ballot or the bullet” meant? Why would we know that stuff? I'm not surprised that the tastemakers, the pop culture, in this country would just pull references. This is what we do in this country—we sample from all over the place. It's not new; hip-hop is not the first entity to do that kind of stuff. I think that's why it's doubly important that this project exists at Columbia University, because someone has to protect the integrity of Malcolm X and what he represented. Someone has to say, here's the archive, here's the biography, here's the Internet project, here are the CDs, here's all the stuff that's happening, because otherwise people are just walking in the dark, just bumping.

But I discovered the Columbus effect—just placing it anywhere and not realizing you're participating in cultural and political genocide. That's what happened to Malcolm, to me. And I think that Malcolm is safer where he ends up on "My So-Called Life" or in X-Men, because you're not getting the full thrust of what he represented. But at the same time I think it's kind of ironic that the ["My So-Called Life"] character's looking at him for an interpretation of self-hatred. When we look at the history of America, we see that people of color have always represented some of the most important moral issues in this country—like "What do we do with the slaves?," the decision to make them three-fifths of a human being and putting that in the Constitution. That was a moral issue when the country was grappling with slavery or freedom. That was a moral issue. The civil rights movement was the great moral issue of the last century. So I don't think it's a coincidence that Malcolm X would have popped up for someone trying to figure out this issue of self-love and they don't even come from the world that he comes from. Because still he spoke for everyone, even though he's specifically of the black experience.

INTERVIEWER
In "My So-Called Life," the white character sees things in Malcolm. Seventy percent of the hip-hop audience is white. We see whitening of hip-hop and of Malcolm. What is the political possibility of hip-hop becoming like jazz, meaning the expropriation of Malcolm and the white consumer base of hip-hop?

KEVIN POWELL
I think to answer it, Malcolm said it best: "The history is the People's memories of God and man and the progressive man and woman are demoted to the lower animals." I mean to say, if we, again, just look at American life over the last 100 years—be it the dance, the Charleston, jazz, rock and roll, soul music—it gets watered down and they call it disco, you know what I'm saying? You can see why this is happening with Malcolm X today. I think it speaks to capitalism, white supremacy, and patriarchy. People don't want to talk about it—the need to control the cultural or political output of the particular
group of people, regardless of who those people are. It speaks to the need to control the dissent from that particular community. So what better than to take Malcolm, repackage him, and sell it back to you? I think it speaks to a certain kind of cultural disconnect that white people in this country have always had. Because what the hell is whiteness anyway? When people came over here, they were Irish, they were Italian, Germans. Some were Anglo-Saxons, some were Catholics, some were Jewish, and all of a sudden you become white within the American construct. That's been some certain level of confusion to me. And so I'm not surprised that so many white people during the years have embraced rock and roll, have embraced hip-hop, have embraced Malcolm X. Because, if anything, the thing I don't get from a lot of people is “Oh, this is so pure, it's so unfiltered.” This is stuff that I hear, just like you see a lot of white folks that turn to the East spiritually and embrace things like Buddhism. But I see the same thing happening with a lot of white people. A lot of our white sisters and brothers don't realize (which I guarantee Malcolm would have talked about) that you come from a certain kind of skin privilege.

And that mixed in with capitalism leads to the appropriation of my culture, you know. People don't want to talk about that. And that's what's happened with Malcolm X, in my opinion. He pops up on television; he pops up on a poster stand. People are not afraid of the Malcolm X movie because they're, like, “That's not Malcolm X, that's Denzel and he's safe and I like him because I just saw him in these other films.” People don't want to deal with that kind of stuff, because you begin to give up the crux of what this country was founded on, skin privilege: the wealthy having power and blacks and Native Americans and working-class whites and women not having any power whatsoever. Howards End talked about this. And you fast-forward right up to Malcolm, who was working class, who spoke for the masses of people, who at one point did advocate a certain kind of black supremacy, but at another point realized, “Hey, if we all began to look at the world in a certain way regardless of our background, if you were blond-haired and blue-eyed and I'm a black person, maybe we can come together if we see each other as equals.” What better way to keep people separated—if the black people still think he's the Nation of Islam Malcolm and the white folks think, “Oh, he's safe now, he's at a poster stand.” But no one really deals with the meat of what he was about.

(Conducted August 27, 2001 at Columbia University)