

Summer in the city, New York City, and the place smells. Hot times, an expected high of 90 today, and more than the back of my neck is dirty and gritty. The garbage is rotting, the subway trains are breaking down. The sanity of the citizens of Manhattan is under strain; they grit their teeth to stop turning into the Son of Sam.

In Times Square, what you see is what you get. If the old ladies lining up for cheap Broadway tickets looked a bit harder they could see the drug supermarket in action just across the street. Pause a second at 42nd and Broadway and the hustle for takeaways is slicker than McDonald's: *Smoke, smoke? Coke, dope? Try before you buy...*

But the B-Boys in their day glo sneakers and checkerboard flat-tops don't take any notice either. Leather medallions -- maps of Africa in green, yellow and red -- have replaced the gold chains round their necks, and determination is on their faces.

Yo! Where you goin' with that briefcase in your hand. To the Marriot Hotel, for a summit meeting on *Afrocentricity*. Say what?

Prize Fight

It's the 1989 New Music Seminar's summit meeting on black consciousness. The hitmen of black culture are about to fight the power.

The conference room is packed with business-like B-boys, and on the platform are their leaders: Chuck D of Public Enemy, Vernon Reid from Living Colour, black music journalists Nelson George and Harry Allen, "Afro styling entrepreneur" Bill Lester, Lisa Williamson of the Committee for Racial Equality (and MC Lyte's manager), South African promoter and activist Duma N'dlavu. Right Thing came out two weeks ago and eclipsed the impact of *Batman*. The room is edgy with anticipation, like Madison Square Garden before a prize fight.

Nelson George, whose book *The Death Of Rhythm & Blues* was another significant event in black culture this year, opens proceedings with a quote from Sun Ra: "We've got a White House -- there has to be a Black House." He then sets the agenda. "All this talk about self-determination in Afro-American music, the African medallions -- is this just radical chic? How do we keep the new consciousness?"

The Hustle

"In the 60s," says George, "there



Spike Lee, film maker.



Vernon Reid, Living Colour.

were the conflicting philosophies of Martin Luther King and the Black Panthers. Now, people are more into not identifying with the mainstream. In the 70s, it was just about the Hustle in disco -- South Africa hadn't emerged as an issue. But now -- Jesse Jackson's campaign was important, Louis Farrakhan is important, getting paid is important.

"Folks are now more aware of economic realities. Now there must be a way to live and also to embody black consciousness. Take what Vernon and Spike are doing. Now,

Talking Loud & Saying Something The Electricity of Afrocentricity

we must be more willing to be critical of the white mainstream establishment and the black mainstream establishment."

George explains "Afrocentricity": "In the 15th century people couldn't cease believing the earth was the centre of the universe. Now people find it hard to get used to the idea that European culture isn't the centre of the universe. Our world is just as valid as anything put forward by *Time* or *Newsweek*."

"I believe in institution building. Let's say Spike Lee and [Def Jam founder] Russell Simmons came together with a company for joint ventures, a coalition to take two enterprises' strengths. But anyone wanting to build a Motown now should want to be a Motown in 1971, not 1961 -- a multi-media organisation."

Style War

Bill Lester, the "Afro styling entrepreneur," exemplifies this diversified approach. He may have started out as a hairdresser, but he takes his role in black consciousness seriously. His hair salon -- K'napps -- in Flatbush Avenue, Brooklyn, pioneered the razorcut, angular hairstyles popularised by rappers. The cuts treated black hair as unique, avoiding the inappropriate Caucasian styling (straightening, tinting) of previous generations. K'napps is now a chain of "Afro-American conscious" clothing and hairdressing shops, and the bold styles have been copied worldwide.

"Five years ago we started as a barber shop," he says. "I'm a progressive person, and I found there was no-one who could deal progressively with my hair. So I saw there was a need there, did some research, and started K'napps, kinky and nappy. To enact my vision I worked 24 hours a day, seven days a week, for five years. Now, we're the most visible natural hair cutters in the world -- and we're just from Brooklyn."

Lester is now a black style guru; cutting kinky hair in a funky way is only the start of his vision. "The important thing is education," he says. "Or it will be just like the 60s -- black consciousness won't last."

Colour Fast

Vernon Reid of Living Colour describes himself as a "by-product" of Bill Lester. His hair is shaved at the sides, with a high flat-top, and dreadlocks at the back plaited with coloured ribbons. "I could write a book about the reactions to this haircut."

Living Colour's success, as that rarity since Hendrix, a black rock group -- and having a million-selling LP with "no chemical peel, no gel" -- started from college radio support that grew to AOR (mainstream) airplay. The videos were the key, he says, "Cult Of Personality" breaking on MTV and *Yo! MTV*, the black music show.

Buggin' Out

When MTV first started, black music didn't get a look in, and now,

says Lisa Williamson, acts can still be "too black". When she hears that phrase she thinks of Malcolm X and Chuck D. "It comes from self-confidence, where your assuredness is offensive to some people."

"Being 'too black' in this industry is critical, because it becomes an economic issue. Bringing black people into jobs is 'too black' -- it puts a white person out of a job. Remember our slavery background -- using our own labour force is part of fighting the power."

"Too black" attributes a psychotic attitude, for example [the character] Buggin' Out in the Spike Lee film. If you're too black, you're buggin' out in some eyes."

In that case Public Enemy, with Professor Griff's anti-semitic, homophobic pronouncements, is the definition of buggin' out to many. Chuck D's up against the wall articulation is that of a soapbox orator. He talks of controlling the media, and opening up the channels to our people, now. The schools are full of bullshit: "How can Columbus discover land when there was a brother waiting for him? ... America is about business. Wouldn't it make sense to learn about business from the second grade?" Aids and crack are an anti-black plot: "They thought, 'this will take the motherfucker out.'"

Rap

Rap is the counter-attack, says Chuck D. "How? Through media control, so everyone hears the same thing at the same time. Radio stations come up with 'more music, less talk'. Why? Because rap gets directly to the point, and gets to the people who should hear it. To 70 percent of the young, it's their thing. Not like Motown or this singing shit."

"Now, a kid from LA knows how kids from New York or Philly are thinking. Whites have to know how we're thinking. When I went to high school, they thought I should act like JJ or Sammy Davis Jr."

"My revolution is about intellectual stick-ups, to counter-attack the white world supremacy over our people. White people are pissed -- at Spike Lee, at Public Enemy. 'Let's talk about it,' they say, 'the pen is mightier than the sword.' I'm intellectually smart, and I still want to butt the motherfuckers. Everybody should get involved till this thing runs right. Then that's it -- peace."

Duma N'dlavu, who fought red tape to bring the successful black musical *Sarafina* to the States, says he feels like he's back on a panel in South Africa. "The Spike Lee film is the strongest thing I have seen come out of the US," he says. "We've got to keep saying the same things to whites, to keep the momentum up. There should be 10 movies like *Do The Right Thing*; we should be able to play Public Enemy to whites. But how far can you tell a white person how you feel when they pay your wages?"

"But if they fire us, Spike Lee can hire us, or Def Jam ... We've got to get to the point where Eddie Murphy or Richard Pryor can hire us."

Vernon Reid: "Black people doing

well can help those that are starting out. *That's Afrocentricity.*"

Slavery

Spike Lee then is the embodiment of that concept. His film company is called 40 Acres And A Mule -- that's what blacks were to receive to get started after the Civil War, when slavery was outlawed. "I started the business because black people are the biggest consumers, but they don't produce anything. And I wanted to own my own stuff. My aim is to own my negatives."

"We want to be here for the long run. This won't be a fad, like the black exploitation of the 70s. There has to be more than Eddie Murphy out there. I was disappointed after *She's Gotta Have It* that more black movies didn't emerge. Those that did, sucked. In the 70s, when a film had blacks in it, we'd go, no matter if it was crap."

"Even though we get great press, everything's a battle. We're fighting Universal right now over budgets." And the apathy of some prominent blacks is no help. Lee doesn't mince words. Janet Jackson, Michael Jackson, Diana Ross -- what have they done for blacks? "Eddie Murphy has made a million dollars for Paramount. But virtually no blacks are working there. And then you have these Uncle Tom negroes like Arsenio Hall ..."

Uncle Tom Hall

The room erupts with approval. Arsenio Hall, a mate of Murphy's, is the hot new chat show host -- a smarmy young black Johnny Carson who virtually drools at his white bimbo guests, but attacks Luther Vandross, Holmes-style, for his weight problems. Lee was only invited on the show when a *Rolling Stone* reporter rang Hall to ask why Lee was being cold-shouldered. Then, on air, Hall told Lee off for criticising Murphy to "Caucasian journalists." Lee didn't respond. "On TV isn't the place for two black people to have a fight," he said at the NMS.

(But Hall certainly took the "Uncle Tom" bait. "Maybe a ghetto ass whipping will teach [Lee] not to talk that stuff." But later Hall said he regretted his "immaturity". "I responded like a kid from a ghetto in Cleveland, instead of the executive producer of the *Arsenio Hall Show*.")

Blacks don't exercise the clout they need to, says Lee. "We've got to get out of the whole slave mentality. Use black doctors, dentists, accountants. I use my father Bill to write my soundtracks, Jesse Jackson asked me to do his commercials. We've got to break down these imaginary barriers."

Hidden Racism

Some of the barriers aren't so imaginary, though. Lee argues that the fundamentalist group PRMC has an underlying racist attitude, connecting black people and the devil's music. To Chuck D, more dangerous is the "hidden racism" of the conservative *New York Times*, the leftist *Village Voice*, even the black family glossy, *Ebony*.

Lisa Williamson takes the point further: "It's important for white liberals to realise they can't organise black people to help themselves."

Even Arsenio Hall agrees with that, going by a later comment (that could have been scripted by Winston Peters): "There's a sub-conscious racism that's been driven on blacks so hard that it has become part of their attitude about everything. But you cannot become part of the oppression. I want to hear black people say, 'I can do anything!'"

Coming out of the Afrocentricity session, a black music journalist described what went down as "rhetoric". But outside the luxury hotel, a block away from Times Square, the frenzied dealing and consumption of crack confirms that Spike Lee and Chuck D are closer to reality than Arsenio Hall, Bill Cosby, Diana Ross or Eddie Murphy -- and are doing something about it.

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