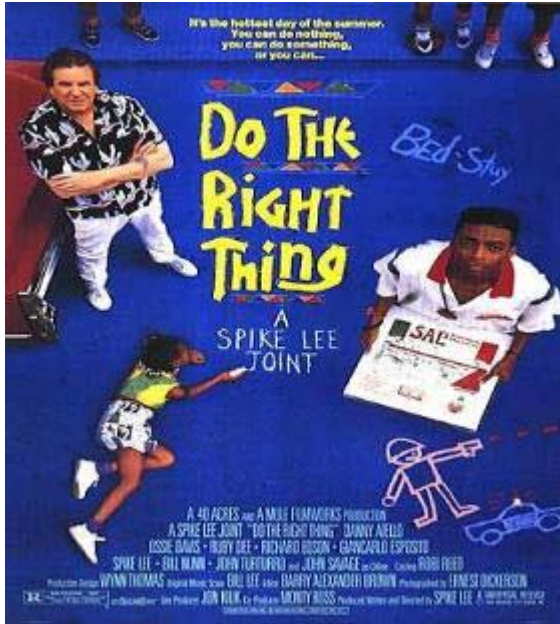


Do the Right Thing 20 years later

By Khalif 'Ras' Williams



This summer marks the twentieth anniversary of the Spike Lee movie classic *Do the Right Thing*. The movie is a landmark not only in cinema but for Hip Hop culture. I was discussing this with a friend while getting this editorial together and the question that came up was what made *Do the Right Thing* such an important film to not only black cinema but specifically Hip Hop culture? The conclusion we came to was the fact that it was the first movie that incorporated Hip Hop symbolism and cultural expression through out the movie but the subject matter was not Hip Hop related. Movies like *Wild Style*, *Beat Street*, *Breakin'*, *Krush Groove*, etc all incorporated Hip Hop and were essentially Hip Hop movies at their core but all of them were strictly about Hip Hop culture in some form or another but *Do The Right Thing* was a Hip Hop movie about race relations in NYC and ultimately gave insight into race relations across America.

Hip Hop was the main character in the film embodied in the characters Radio Raheem, Buggin' Out and Mookie, I would even venture to say even the song *Fight The Power* was a character in and of itself.. Radio Raheem was the quintessential Brooklyn Hip Hopper, flat top hair style with parts and designs cut in his hair, four finger rings with love and hate engraved on them, giant boom box blasting Public Enemy's *Fight the Power*. The visual impact of Rosie Perez incorporating Hip Hop dance moves as a solo boxer shadow boxing "The powers that be" in the opening scene has become legendary. Her dance routines and choreography became a staple on shows like *In Living Color* as she made her name synonymous in the 90's with Hip Hop dance as a choreographer for some of music's most important artists. The angst, rebellious spirit and racially charged climate of the summer 1989 was embodied in the youthful characters who expressed themselves the Hip Hop way from their clothing, choice and style of jewelry, hairstyles, and Nike Air Jordans another Hip Hop staple of the day worn throughout the movie by Spike Lee's own character Mookie. The

character Mookie in a way was really an ode to Mars Blackmon from Spike's first major release *She's Gotta Have It*. Mookie was also an ode to the famed baseball great Mookie Wilson and a childhood friend of his by the same name. Mars eventually became a spokes person for Nike Air sneakers with Spike Lee appearing as his legendary character in many Nike commercials both before and after *Do the Right Thing*.

The impact of the Movie was immense upon its release simply because of the subject matter, race. Hip Hop was always a revolutionary tool from the very beginning of the cultures' birth, but Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing* which debuted a year after the critically acclaimed movie *Colors* which also addressed the L.A. gang life, race relations and police brutality, *Do the Right Thing* ushered in a new era of visual expression for African American cinema of the socio-political, cultural and racial experience in the inner city. It unapologetically expressed the feelings of distrust for law enforcement and interracial distrust between blacks and whites as well as some of it's causes. Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing* paved the way for some of cinemas most powerful movies that addressed inner city life and race from a black perspective like John Singleton's *Boyz n Da Hood* and The Hughes Brother's *Menace 2 Society* which also showcased the cauldron bubble of racial tension inner cities had become across the country at that time albeit from a West coast perspective. *Do the Right Thing* made a tangible connection between the experience of people of color and the overt and covert racism in the daily lives of the denizens of the hood. Race has always been the disease that has been diagnosed but remains the unacknowledged pink elephant of American society. For a long time no one thought that in the so called melting pot Mecca of the world called New York City that there were places a black man shouldn't be caught after sundown for fear of being killed because of their skin color because the assumption always was that that was a "southern" phenomena.

New York City has long had a hefty stake in the race based politics of the fabric of America from this country's very beginning. White neighborhoods like Bensonhurst, Brooklyn and Howard Beach, Queens for example were places that were dangerous for black youth to be found after sundown or in the day in some cases in the 80's and 90's. Like Malcolm X once said "Anywhere south of the Canadian border is Down South." But, no one believed us when we lamented the hell of urban inner city life. In the wake of numerous high profile, racially motivated killings by both white citizenry and NY police officers most of which the perpetrators were acquitted or given lesser charges like the 1982 fatal beating by a white mob of African American Willie Turks in Gravesend Brooklyn, the 1983 killing of black Graffiti artist Michael Stewart who was basically and strangled while in police custody in Brooklyn, NY (which was eerily similar to Radio Raheems' death in the movie) all 11 police involved were white. The 1984 police shooting of elderly African American Eleanor Bumpurs, the 1984 vigilante shooting of black youths by Bernard Goetz, the 1986 killing of black Trinidadian immigrant Michael Griffith who was hit by a car in Queens after being chased into the street by a young white mob. We will talk more about this case a little later.

Another lit fuse in race relations came just months before the films release was the April 1989 the Central Park Jogger case where 5 black and Latino youth (bka The Central Park 5) were falsely accused of raping and brutally assaulting a white woman, Trish Meilli after being forcefully coerced by police into confessing to a crime they didn't commit. Keeping in line with the racist American propaganda and media machine they were called animals and a wolf pack by the media unlike any of the white mobs who were called 'misguided' youth after having killed the aforementioned black youth and again Hip Hop was blamed in the 'Jogger' case because police erroneously claimed that

these young kids quoted the hook from rapper Tone Loc's *Wild Thing* as they raped the victim. Many years after being imprisoned they were all acquitted except Khary Wise when the lone Latino male perpetrator and convicted killer Mattias Reyes who was not with the Central Park five that night came forward years later and by DNA testing and retelling of the events of that night by him he was confirmed as the rapist (though never convicted). Lastly less than a month after the release of the movie the killing in Bensonhurst, Brooklyn by another 30 man white mob of Yusef Hawkins. These were just some of the high profile killings and murders of African American youth which made New York City a powder keg of racial tension by 1989 thus setting a powerful aura around the anticipation of the release of Lee's *Do the Right Thing*.

Another thing to keep in mind is the murder rate in NYC was a record 1,896 for 1989 nearly identical to 1988 which was the summer in which the film was made. The Crack Era was still in full swing, 80's street gangs like the Lo Lifes, Decepticons, Autobots, F.A.P., A-Team and many more were running rampant terrorizing the streets and schools of New York at the time making news headlines daily. As far as Hip Hop was concerned the Golden Age was in its early stages critically acclaimed albums like De La Soul's *3 Feet High and Rising*, Kool G Rap's *Road to the Riches*, EPMD's *Unfinished Business*, and Queen Latifah's debut *All Hail the Queen* were released. There was music to satisfy any Hip Hoppers taste, in other words there were more flavors than Baskin Robbins. Another norm in urban environments is the hotter the summer, the higher the murder rate. These were all factors that affected the atmosphere and the setting of the film. Spike Lee utilized all of these truths in the telling of the story of that one Bed Stuy block, Stuyvesant Avenue between Lexington Avenue and Quincy Street on the hottest day of the year.

Spike Lee addressed all kinds of issues in the film from gentrification outlined in the scene with Buggin' out and Clifton played by John Savage who steps on Buggin' Out's brand new Jordans to black ownership of it's own neighborhood businesses outlined in the relationship with Sal and Buggin' Out who demands blacks faces be included on Sal's wall of fame. The conversation between the corner men which included Sweet Dick Willy and company also speaks to this problem of gentrification. He also addressed black and Asian relations in the movie as well throughout the film and especially at the end of the movie when the riot almost turned its attention to the Korean Fruit Stand after burning down Sal's Pizzeria. Tawana Brawley incident was referred to in the graffiti on the side of the wall in one scene and she appeared in the *Fight The Power* video as well. The crowd shouted "Eleanor Bumpurs!!" during the riot scene then later they yell "Howard Beach!!", in reference to the Howard Beach incident. He also addressed the lack of worth of the life of a black person (Radio Raheem) over the property of a white man (Sal). This echoes something we have yet to grapple with as a society and dates all the way back to slavery. In the documentary on the making of the film Spike talked about how many journalists (he went as far as to read reviews by these journalists) made a bigger deal over the burning of Sal's Pizzeria than they did over Radio Raheem's murder.

The documentary on the making of the movie discussed the news headlines that drove the plot of the film. This event was the Howard Beach Incident in which a white mob beat three black men after they walked 3 miles to find a pay phone to get assistance with their car which broke down while they were riding home together from work. The white mob severely beat all three men and the mob eventually chased Michael Griffith, an African Trinidadian immigrant who lived in Bed Stuy into the street where a car driven by the son of a police officer struck and killed him. Griffith was killed in front of a pizza shop where he and his friends ate just before being attacked. These true

events provided the inspiration for Lee to set the stage for the pivotal events in the film to unfold in a pizza shop in Bed Stuy run by a racist white Italian-American from Bensonhurst.

The film got all kinds of critical acclaim being nominated for awards from Golden Globes to Academy Awards, from Cannes to the NAACP Image Awards to winning an MTV Movie Award. In the AFI's 100 years 100 movies it was even voted 96th greatest film of all time by the American Film Institute in its tenth anniversary edition 2007. The cultural impact of the film is really something to behold because even today Ludacris on his most recent album *Theater of the Mind* paid homage to the film by making his song *Wake Up!!* featuring Common and Spike Lee. Lee made that phrase "Wake Up!!" famous in *School Daze*. The song was an homage to both *School Daze* and *Do the Right Thing*. The phrase was a call to not only the characters in the film but the audience themselves to wake up and not fall for the okeedoke of the system. President Barack Obama and his then girlfriend Michelle went to see the film on their very first date. Mike Judge creator of *King of the Hill* got inspiration for his cartoon from the scene with Sweet Dick Willy and Friends sitting on the corner. Episodes from TV shows like the Boon Docks, Futurama, Family Guy, Martin, In Living Color, Space Ghost: Coast to Coast and the Critic have drawn inspiration from the film. Artists from Kanye West to Dem Franchize Boyz, The Cool Kids to Common and Kardinal Offishall have all drawn artistic inspiration from the film or shouted it out in one way or another. Even Nike honored the film by making specialty *Do The Right Thing* Air Jordan number 3 sneakers the toe of the sneaker appears on the cover of the DVD version of the movie.

Why has this film had the impact it has over the last 20 years? The incredible impact the movie was simply because it told the story of America, not just Brooklyn but all of America. What happened in the scenes of that film has happened in L.A., Boston, Detroit, Birmingham, Chicago, Selma and other parts of the nation. In the twenty years after the film we have had James Byrd dragged to death in Texas, Amadou Diallo shot 41 times by NYC police, Abner Louima brutally sodomized in police custody, Anthony Baez choked to death for accidentally hitting a NY police car with his football while playing with his brother and Sean Bell shot at 50 times on the eve of his wedding, The Jena Six incident, the Oscar Grant killing and a host of other killings mirroring everything addressed in the film in one way or another.

Do the Right Thing speaks to the black experience and the experience of people of color in this country. It exposes the sheer ignorance of racism and the pain it causes not only to those who are it's victims but it victimizes the perpetrator no differently. The film uses characters people are familiar with. Growing up in Brooklyn myself in Prospect Heights, Park Slope and Ft Greene, I knew people like Mother Sister, Da Mayor, Sweet Dick Willie and crew, and Radio Raheem et al. These were familiar faces even Clifton was a familiar face from my childhood. Being a child of immigrant parents what happened to Michael Griffith was a major fear of my mother's because coming to America was first time in her life she ever experienced White/Black racism. She came from a country run by black people so this was a new thing for her on a personal level though she grew up listening to the Civil Rights Struggle in America on the radio in Trinidad. I was 15 years old when this movie came out and I was living the reality this film expressed everyday.

Why is the *Do the Right Thing* important to Hip Hop? It is important because it used the most ridiculed and shunned culture born from the have-nots of society, those discarded as undesirables. It used the language of the people to speak to the people and that language was Hip Hop music

and culture. Though many may not have wanted their dirty laundry as Americans put out on 'Front Street' because the world was under the impression things had changed dramatically for the better in the USA in terms of race relations. Spike told the scary unadulterated truth. We love Spike Lee because Spike Lee *is* Hip Hop. We love *Do the Right Thing* because it told the story of our experience in our language. The movie put a mirror up to the faces of both racism's victims and perpetrators and it showed the anarchy, chaos, rage and death racism can bring if it remains unaddressed. The movie is no less relevant now than it was twenty years ago. Spike hoped to ask questions of the audience so that we as a nation can make true progress. The least we can do is like President Obama said in his race to the White House is to "Have an honest dialogue", this dialogue can change the nation no different than the vote did on January 20th, 2009 "And that's the truth Ruth!!!"

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