

# Credit to the Parties in Brixton:

## Malcolm X Day at Attica

It's May 16, 1981, and we're at the N.Y. State Correctional Facility at Attica celebrating the birthday of Malcolm X. For foul deeds done behind these thirty-foot walls the millionaire Rockefeller earned his sobriquet, "the Butcher", as history will always and forever remember.

This afternoon the Attica Institution Band provides the opening entertainment. Their's is a powerful, contradictory sound. Some had wanted disco, others jazz. These wizards offer "fusion" which blasts across the gymnasium ricochet off the cement-block walls. They practice five nights a week, play Saturday and Sunday before the movies and do special concerts like today's. A red, green, and black cloth of sound is unrolled across the people who quietly and expectantly sit at the picnic tables that have been spread about.

"It's a rat race in here," a prisoner explains to me, "only the strong survive. The evils of the outside society are intensified in here: it is individualistic, predatory, profiteering, parasitic. Inmates are divided against each other."

The Afro-American Cultural Studies Group has organized today's celebration and it seems that they have brought every art, ancient and modern, to help break down the isolation of the inmates. "The policy of the A.A.C.S.G.," its spokesman announces, "is to educate, to agitate, and to organize." In the few years of its existence it has had to struggle against great odds. Its leaders have been shipped out or put in the hole. Its members have been harrassed. Bureaucratic pricks and thorns have been strewn across its path.

Malcolm would say that you "have to wake people up first, then you'll get action. But how do you wake them up?" he'd ask. "Not by telling them of their exploitation. No, you wake them up to their humanity, to their own worth, and to their heritage." It's this that the A.A.C.S.G. does in Attica. It teaches African and Afro-American history. It teaches the history of Attica too. "our being here. This is a product of struggle. Thirty-one people died in D-yard so we could be here today."

1971: ten years have passed.

Apparently, the guards have changed too. Besides the crewcutted, beer-bellied lifers, there's a number of long-hairs, some Blacks, even a woman, and quite a few Kluxers. There's a strong union, a state job, good pay, not bad hours and security. "I don't care who you are. Put on a uniform and sooner or later you'll start oinking". I scribble away on a notepad. Two guards approach me. They escort me to the sergeant's office. "No notes", they say. After a brief exchange of views during the course of which a great many members of the A.A.C.S.G. have assembled at the office door it is agreed that I may continue to take notes as long as I refrain from taking down a man's name or number. "Don't use

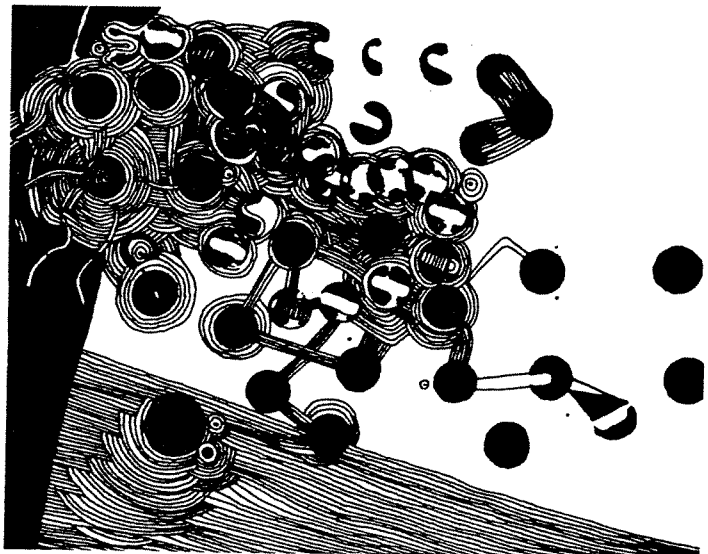
your right name, no, no, no, no", as Fats Waller used to say. As to numbers, who wants them anyway?

John Fairbrother, the oldest and chiefest of the brothers takes the microphone and asks for silence. He tells us, "Listen, please", and the courtesy and command within his pronunciation of that word, "please", instantly makes you understand why he's the first speaker. We listen. He paces backwards and forwards. He carries the mike as if he were singing jazz. He wails his wild notes. His words are in the Malcolm plain style.

"Let's learn his language", Malcolm would say of the white oppressors. "If his language is with a shotgun, get a shotgun. Yes, I say if he only understands the language of a rifle, get a rifle". John Fairbrother's is a helicopter language, whirling and chattering from above, bringing succor to the hurt and menace to his enemies. "Music of the devil", somebody at our table says and everybody chuckles. When he finishes his speech, someone else notes, "Within a month he'll be shipped out: just watch".

Besides music, dancing. Three sisters have travelled down from Buffalo for the occasion. "Sure, everyone tells us not to come down here 'cause we're sure to get raped or murdered or at least robbed". She laughs and laughs. Here is the drum. Here is the dance. These are Afro-American dances: the Nile, the Euphrates, the Congo, the Mississippi flow in the four limbs of each of the dancers. In the drums we hear the voodoo of Toussaint, of Harriet Tubman, of the Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement.

John Fairbrother, after their performance, asks a sister to dance. What formalities, what kindnesses, what gentle courtesies, these beautiful dancers cause! Three sisters, a hundred brothers: in that hideous architecture of evil, a hundred and three mirthful countenances.



"Ballots or bullets", the most famous three words of the decade. Malcolm would start out slow. "It'll be ballots or bullets," he'd drawl. He knows you've heard it before, that you're waiting for it. "It'll be liberty or it will be death". Yes, yes we're with you, this continuity with a rhetorical tradition, "The only difference", now everyone's really listening. "The only difference about this kind of death - it'll be reciprocal". And the audience would explode.

"Reciprocal". I have heard this curse: May the last and ugliest dog save his polluted urine to water the filth of Rockefeller's grave.

Ballots or bullets. "If you're afraid to use an expression like that, you should get out of the country, you should get back to the cotton patch, you should get back in the alley". Attica is a slave plantation, the guards watch the quarters. Outsiders have a license.

Right here in Harlem, in New York City, we need a Mau Mau".

The talk at the tables is careful, subdued, dignified, as inmates choose to share their experience with a visitor. A man in dreadlocks, a Rasta man, says that he feels about Bob Marley's death the way many felt about John Lennon's. "We have a class analysis", he says, "not a race analysis".

"When I saw that they put a skull and crossbones on Marxism-Leninism, I decided then and there that's what I wanted to study", explains a militant.

A scholar wants to know what I think of Henry Braverman's book on the labor process or of Brenner's contribution to the debate on the transition from feudalism to capitalism.

"You can't stop those youth over there. That's a working class that puts its theory into practice. They're taking care of business. It's not



So: a college professor explains why he calls Malcolm a "Black revolutionary warrior". What does it mean to say that he was "Black"? It means that he's the heir of the best oppressed of three centuries, that he's part of the cutting edge of the liberation of the Third World, that today his name is on the lips of Soweto. What does it mean to say that he was "revolutionary"? It means that he could make the oppressors appear puny and ridiculous. It means that he could make us seem like a rising giant, and a cunning one. "We pray that our African brothers have not freed themselves of European colonialism only to be overcome and held in check by American dollarism", he'd warn. What does it mean to say that Malcolm was a "warrior"? It means that he was clear in his objective, responsive to his followers, creative in his thinking, and always audacious. "In Mississippi we need a Mau Mau. In Alabama we need a Mau Mau. In Georgia we need a Mau Mau.

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a racial problem. It's a class problem. I give credit to the parties in Brixton", says another.

"Like man, I'm a Christian. I don't have the time for the Afro-American Cultural Studies Group", says a dissident.

A poet rises and takes to the stool in stage center. He is accompanied by two bongos and a guitar. He sings of Stokely and the Rehabilitation Brother". The prison rebel tradition of the toast, is BAAAAD as poetry can be, is transformed by the poet into rattling chains of scorn and ridicule for the neo-artists of rehabilitation. The poet sings his song of praise for Malcolm. Trumpet notes to the slain. There is a beautiful hymn to "Lodja" - unity. He recites with fervent passion, and concludes: "Prison serves no purpose WHAT SO-EVER.

We eat prison grub: all starch and sugar. However, there's some wonderful rice, truly fine, a well and hotly seasoned pilaf. A couple of pola-

roids have been produced and everyone's getting in line to have their picture taken with one of the dancers from Buffalo. "I wish they had performed a war dance", a brother mutters.

Reverend John S. Walker, known as Talik to the brothers, is a tireless, learned, dedicated advocate of prison reform and freedom for the Afro-American people. He gives a final speech. Of the music, the rice, the dancers, he tells praises. Then he gets down to business. He has a warning. Black communities across the nation are weak, powerless, and incorrectly politicized. "We must begin to think of ourselves as vanguards", he suggests, "practicing the collective leadership that the A.A.C.S.G. exemplifies and accepting the responsibilities that leadership entails". Since 1965 the strategy has been to eradicate black and poor people from the streets. "The brothers from the joint cannot return to the communities with negative criminal activity. Black ex-offenders have not organized to eliminate the situation in Atlanta. Our communities need you and we need to know that when you return to us that what you say is shuff'nuff". He concluded with the story of Gideon who preferred 300 fighters to 10,000 lame ducks. It was a powerful speech and a hundred pairs of hands applauded it hard.

Malcolm. Always outrageous, always pushing, daring, goading, taking your breath away with undreamed of possibilities. "Stop singing and start swinging". he's challenge the Civil Rights marchers. Just when you thought you were getting somewhere.

All of us sang the rolling hymn of James Weldon Johnson's "Lift Every Voice and Sing". We sang the first verse and the third verse. The middle verse was printed on the program, only we were quite distinctly told not to sing it. So, here's what it says:

*Stormy the road we trod,  
Bitter the chastening rod,  
Felt in the days when hope unborn  
had died;  
Yet with a steady beat,  
Have not our weary feet come to the  
place for which our fathers sighed?  
We have come over a way that with tears  
has been watered.  
We have come treading our path through the  
blood of the slaughtered;  
Out from the gloomy past,  
Till now we stand at last where the white  
Gleam of our bright star is cast.*

A spokesman for the A.A.C.S.G. delivers, finally, the wisdom of the joint. "Crime is illegitimate capitalism. The capitalists are the most violent group of people in the whole world. Capitalism is the real terrorism. That is what we have to prevent". It's true: besides the H-bomb makers, about the only business that's thriving now is the prison-construction business. "We need your help, the help of the community", he says. "It's like the sardine reforming the can: it can't be done on the inside".

