

Spike Lee Regis Dialogue with Elvis Mitchell, 1996

Elvis Mitchell:

Thank you. Thanks for being here. Spike, thanks. Spike Lee is a director. Now, I know that sounds dumb and obvious, but I think this is a point that has to be made because so much controversy comes up in a lot of his work. He's discussed as a social force so often that I think that people, and I mean critics too, lose sight of the fact that there is a phenomenal body of work that he's produced.

We're going to see in each of these clips and through his conversation tonight is how he uses humor, and drama, and sort of takes everyday life and makes us pay attention to the nuance and detail, and learns something about ourselves. And we'll also see, I think, and hear from him too how he's evolved as a filmmaker, and what you're also going to see is a real breath and ease in the work. And the work has always been funny, which is the thing we always forget about Spike Lee, and you see him being called on Nightline whenever something has happened or something like that, and being offered up as a spokesman and he's certainly articulate, but these are funny movies, and that's just one of the aspects of him that I think make this body of work so potent and will make it stand the test of time as well.

What I'd like to do before we get started, just read you a list of names. Laurence Fishburne, Samuel L. Jackson, Wesley Snipes, Delroy Lindo, John Turturro, Nick Turturro, Rosey Perez, Danny Aiello, Hallie Barry, Tisha Campbell, Martin Lawrence. Now, these are all people who either got their film debuts through Spike or came to prominence as actors because of Spike Lee.

You forget about that until you do what I did and take a look at his entire filmography over the course of a couple of days. You think, "Well, Martin Lawrence was in *Do The Right Thing*? Wait, wait. Nick Turturro was in *Do The Right Thing*? Wait, what's going on here?" And what you will see is that he's got an ear for actors dialog as well.

There aren't many directors that are on I think who give actors a chance to breathe and give them space, and let them work in a way that's interesting, and honest, and adds some intelligence to the work, and Spike is one of the rare who would do that. I mean, there are lists of director that you hear that are mentioned in the pantheon always. Oliver Stone, Martin Scorsese, Robert Altman.

I think Spike Lee is a man who certainly has turned around independent cinema, but is also the first and justly celebrated African American film director, and tonight we're going to learn why. So, why don't we start off by taking a look at a clip from his seminal work *She's Gotta Have It*.

I think you said a couple of time before that it's hard for you to watch *She's Gotta Have It*, and I guess I'd like you to explain that a little bit for me because I don't understand why. It holds up remarkably well. I know it's got to be a reminder of what a tough time it was to get the picture made.

Spike Lee:

No. I mean, the reason why I don't like to look at it is not because it was so hard to make, I just don't like the acting in that movie. And anytime that this bad acting in the film is either two reasons. One, the wrong people were cast or the director wasn't directing.

Spike Lee:

So, that is why I don't look at this film anymore. It's been five, six years since I've seen it.

Elvis Mitchell:

And was this more of it than you wanted to see tonight? Was this more that you wanted to see tonight?

Spike Lee:

No. This is a good scene that you chose.

Elvis Mitchell:

I mean, I chose it to illustrate a point because you talk about the acting being problematic for you, and I think what it is it's at the very least very expressive. I mean, it's almost like a problem play where people say what they want, and things happen, and things get discussed. And I know you think you've evolved a little bit, but you want to evolve in the way you treat women in the movie.

Elvis Mitchell:

But I think it's very interesting about this movie in that Nola leads her life like a man. She wants the same sort of sexual prerogatives as a man, she doesn't want to be dismissed or treated badly, and I don't think it's condescending at all. I know that's a complaint that's been lodged against the movie.

Spike Lee:

Well, I think women were lined up on both sides. I mean, you had women who thought it was derogatory, then you have some women who say it was a feminist film. So, I think they would say it's split down the middle, but that was the premise of the film that this woman was leading her life as a man as far as her sexuality goes, and what would happen if that was the case, and how would the men react with the tables turned. So, that was the whole premise for it.

Elvis Mitchell:

Now, were you surprised of the success of the movie because you think back to this too, and most of the film we saw with black people in those days were basically music videos with rappers in them. I mean, it was a real big deal to see a movie entirely-

Spike Lee:

Rap wasn't event ... Not yet.

Elvis Mitchell:

There were a few. The early run DMC videos. I mean, they weren't spending a lot of money on them, but they were getting a little bit of play.

Spike Lee:

No. I mean, the way you saw black people was in the Richard Pryor and the Eddie Murphy movies.

Elvis Mitchell:

Not really because in the Eddie Murphy movies, he always existed in this universe by himself, and this is the first movie that showed to my memory, an entire group of black people just getting into an ordinary day. A universe of black people, and whites got to see, "God, is that the way? That's not scary." And what it was is

nobody was a martyr, nobody was offered up as a case as a victim or somebody who suffered unduly, but just people getting through a day or through a period of their lives and evolving over a period of time as well.

Spike Lee:

Well, the thing about *She's Gotta Have It*, the reason why it was a success, excuse me, was timing because I think this is two years before people knew what AIDS was about. So, we waited two years to do this. I think that the general public, the reaction toward it would have been much different, and people looked at the character of Nola Darling and her actions of how she's leading her life sexually much different than they did before anybody knew what AIDS was about.

Elvis Mitchell:

Did you feel when you were making the picture that people were going to see it?

Spike Lee:

Oh, we felt that the film will be a hit if we could finish it, but we didn't know where we were going to get the money from.

Elvis Mitchell:

But did you think it was going to cross over in the way that it did?

Spike Lee:

Well, I don't really think of terms of crossing over and that kind of stuff. I just felt that there was going to be an audience for this film and people would go. For me, one of the most important things about this film was just having gone to film school with Jim Jarmusch, and Nolan Jim, and had his film *Stranger to Paradise* being a hit.

Spike Lee:

So, when that happened, and I pick up a paper an ad for his film, which I'm not saying is a derogatory, that's one of my favorite films. It just made it seem like it's doable now because here's somebody I know, somebody who I went to school with who has a film that's playing in the theater. So, it wasn't so farfetched.

Elvis Mitchell:

Well, I guess when I first saw *Joe's Bed-Stuy Barbershop*, maybe you had problems with the acting in that too, I don't know. But I had thought it was really sort of compact and trimmed piece of work, and the acting again is pretty expressive. It's about people trying to get points across, and the beginnings of that thing I think runs through all your pictures of people always either in pains or amused by the way they have to try to explain themselves to others.

Elvis Mitchell:

That's always going on when somebody is trying to say who he is or what he's about, and he puts his foot in his mouth or he doesn't quite explain it in the way or other people don't understand him. But *Joe's Bed-Stuy Barbershop* was the first time I saw something like that, that sort of took up a whole film instead of it being about a student directing technique or somebody trying to show off how smart his writing was. It seemed to be a real sort of character line in the piece.

Spike Lee:

What we saw in NYU was really a rental house. You got the equipment to make the films because a degree,

MFA in production really is useless. When you come out of film school and you're a director, I mean you want to come out with a film because that's what's going to get you work hopefully. And so, I thought it would, but it didn't, so that's why we had to raise the money independently for the film *She's Gotta Have It*.

Elvis Mitchell:

Were you surprised that *Joe's Bed-Stuy Barbershop* didn't get you or did it get you a bunch of phone calls, and offer you projects that you just didn't want to do?

Spike Lee:

No. It got me an agent, but no work though.

Elvis Mitchell:

I remember you saying, was that where you got off from an after school special or something like that after *Joe's Bed-Stuy Barber-*

Spike Lee:

No, we didn't get one. We didn't get anything.

Elvis Mitchell:

Well, after *She's Gotta Have It* and it got the response that it did, did you sort of feel like you were now part of the film world or were you concerned about what you do for your second picture?

Spike Lee:

I really wasn't concerned because I had written the script at *School Days* before I written the script for *She's Gotta Have It*, but I just knew it was too ambitious. So, I knew what my second film would be, and that was *School Days*. And with the success of *She's Gotta Have It*, we were able to follow up pretty quickly.

Elvis Mitchell:

Now, the film you were supposed to make or the one you wanted to make that sort of fell apart of boring was *Messenger*.

Spike Lee:

Messenger.

Elvis Mitchell:

What was that about?

Spike Lee:

It's about a bike messenger and his family, and Jon Carlos Pasilos was supposed to be in it and Larry Fishburne. But the money never came together, so we were in pre-production, but we actually never shot any film.

Elvis Mitchell:

Now, what happened exactly? The money just sort of fell out or what?

Spike Lee:

Well, the producer who said he was going to produce didn't produce. So, the money he promised that he would deliver, he didn't deliver.

Elvis Mitchell:

And so, you pull this movie together really quickly. I know this has become kind of legend now, but it's still pretty amazing to me.

Spike Lee:

No, it wasn't quick because we tried to shoot *Messenger*. I mean, we were in pre-production the summer of '84, and then I wrote *She's Gotta Have It* that winter, and we shot *She's Gotta Have It* the next summer '85. Then it came out August '86.

Elvis Mitchell:

Over how fast a period of time?

Spike Lee:

12 days we shot that.

Elvis Mitchell:

And for very little money?

Spike Lee:

175,000.

Elvis Mitchell:

But how much up front basically when you started shooting?

Spike Lee:

We had a \$10,000 grant from the Jerome Foundation to begin *She's Gotta Have It*.

Elvis Mitchell:

And you also have some AFI money that disappeared kind of quickly.

Spike Lee:

Well, I had gotten the grant from the American Film Institute for \$25,000 for *Messenger*. So, when *Messenger* fell through, I thought that they let me slide over to *She's Gotta Have It*, but they said, "No, we funded you for *Messenger*. And since you're not making that film, we have to take the money back."

Elvis Mitchell:

Now, one thing I always wanted to ask you about, you're writing this picture, you've cast it basically so you can do it with not a lot of people, and then you're in it. How did that happen that you cast yourself in the picture?

Spike Lee:

We couldn't afford to pay anybody else. We had no money.

Elvis Mitchell:

And you were convinced you could do it or it was just out of necessity?

Spike Lee:

I mean, I never saw Mars as being that big a role in *She's Gotta Have It*.

Elvis Mitchell:

You really didn't?

Spike Lee:

Not really. So, it was a surprise to me how people were smiling to Mars. It was a bigger surprise of getting that call from Wieden Kennedy who's an advertising agency for Nike, and then put in Mars and Michael Jordan together. And we did that for six years.

Elvis Mitchell:

When you start to do the commercials, did you think about how Mars was sort of translating to the world of commercials or?

Spike Lee:

I had no idea that, as I said before, that there will be an afterlife of Mars after *She's Gotta Have It*. I mean, Mars was hip, so he would wear Air Jordans, and he did, and Michael Jordan's his favorite basketball player. So, the advertising agency saw that and they got the idea to put Mars with Michael Jordan.

Elvis Mitchell:

Now, one of the things that sort of surprised me that didn't happen immediately was that the success of *She's Gotta Have It* didn't make studios say, "Well, there's got to be a wealth of this kind of material off there," or, "We should encourage more black film makers." Were you surprised that didn't inspire another wave immediately? Because you know how this stuff works in the movies.

Elvis Mitchell:

Well, one flying saucer movie succeeds, they make 100 of them the next year.

Spike Lee:

No, but I still think that *She's Gotta Have It* and *Hollywood Shuffle* had really started all those films, all the black films being made.

Elvis Mitchell:

Yeah. But even when *Hollywood Shuffle* came along, it was kind of more like a grassroots response to what you had done than something from on high. Somebody in a position of power saying, "Well, we need to do something to encourage this."

Spike Lee:

Why would they want to do that?

Elvis Mitchell:

Well, let's see now. Your movie made money, they want to make money, why not make more movies like

that? I mean, if the people in an advertising agency was smart enough to see it, it would make sense to make that a studio would somehow get it.

Spike Lee:

Well, eight and a half million dollars is not a lot of money as far as a studio is concerned. And they weren't convinced, they're still not, but they weren't convinced at how many other white movie going viewers would go see films with black people in it.

Elvis Mitchell:

Yeah, but just getting back to the profit mode. If you look at the movie that cost all in \$175,000 bringing back \$8 million dollars, that's not bad.

Spike Lee:

Well, they made them, but I mean it was no rush. I mean, they're still making them now.

Elvis Mitchell:

What do you mean?

Spike Lee:

Well, I mean there's people like New Line that specialize in making films for their African American markets that cost like \$4 million, and they end up making \$35 million dollars, stuff like that.

Elvis Mitchell:

But those aren't too far from exploitation pictures of those movies.

Spike Lee:

Well, some of them might be considered that.

Elvis Mitchell:

Yeah. I guess some of them might. I guess what I'm saying is that it made sense to me because it's a movie that was good, that people responding to. Maybe I'm belaboring the point here, obviously I am, but if you just look at it that way because they're always talking about it. I remember in those days, Exciting wrote a couple of pieces for various magazines.

Elvis Mitchell:

Once a year, you'd see one article somewhere with all of the studios has to say, "We've got to make more of these black movies. We know there's an audience out there for them, and that never happened."

Spike Lee:

Well, what was that year they made 19 one year? It was a couple of years ago. I think it was 19.

Elvis Mitchell:

That seems like it may have been the peak year though. I mean-

Spike Lee:

That was the peak.

Elvis Mitchell:

Because I don't mean to compare it to the blaxploitation era, but these movies are all looked at and you certainly talked about this as having a ceiling. They only want to spend this much money, and on this much money they only get this much return. If they don't spend a lot of money on a movie anyway, they sort of look down on us like a poor cousin if they don't spend \$50 to \$60 million dollars to make it.

Spike Lee:

True.

Elvis Mitchell:

It's good to be right. Now, since you've written *School Days* first and you got to a chance to make it, it was I think an incredibly daring movie to make because it was a movie about, well rivalries in the black community. I think some-

Spike Lee:

All we tried to do with that film was use a predominantly black college as a microcosm of African American community. So, we wanted to show the petty and sometimes superficial differences that keep us from being more unified as a race. Differences based upon hair texture.

Spike Lee:

You got that song Straight and Nappy whether you're light skinned or dark skinned, and what class you come from. And then we broke it down even further whether you're in a frat or non-frat, whether you were from the city or from the sticks. So, we put all that stuff in the film.

Elvis Mitchell:

It's a movie that I remember shocking a lot of people because one other thing I find really interesting about your movies, and something you've done is by exposing a lot of African American culture into the mainstream. You sort of helped people to understand or brought some kind of understanding about. I remember people saying to me, "Well, how can black people not like other black people?" Which is a very stupid thing for somebody to say, but the point is that it was something that people had not thought about before.

Spike Lee:

Well, we also got criticized a lot by African Americans for-

Elvis Mitchell:

Airing Dirty Laundry?

Spike Lee:

Airing Dirty Laundry because of this film.

Elvis Mitchell:

And were some of these black schools sort of upset about the depiction of black schools too?

Spike Lee:

Well, we shot this film at my alma mater Moore House. We began to shoot there after three weeks in production. They kicked us off. So, we had to finish at Clark College, and Morris Brown, and Atlanta University, but Spelman. We wanted to shoot Spelman, but they never allowed us to shoot there.

Elvis Mitchell:
They wouldn't even hear about it?

Spike Lee:
They weren't hearing it out.

Elvis Mitchell:
And what happened at Moore House? Why did they run you out?

Spike Lee:
Well, Moore House, their president at the time felt that it would be detrimental to black higher institutions of learning.

Elvis Mitchell:
Really? Why?

Spike Lee:
Well, because the film took place during a homecoming. I think a lot of people said, "Well, how come you're not showing anybody in the classroom?" But the film takes place during a homecoming weekend. I mean, that's the whole point.

Elvis Mitchell:
So, because it wasn't sort of being shown as a center for higher education, it was detrimental?

Spike Lee:
That's what they felt.

Elvis Mitchell:
Oh man. Well, that kind of makes me speechless too. So, I guess what we should do at this point is to remind you of how good *School Days* was. We should take a look at a scene that I think illustrates ... First of all, we can see how much more easier it is with the camera that you have, but it sort of illustrates-

Spike Lee:
Well, that's not really a comparison because I mean at first, I mean one of the reasons why we were able to shoot *She's Gotta Have It* in 12 days is because a large part of that film, people talking directly into the camera. So, that was the device, a technique we knew we had to use because it doesn't take any time to light somebody looking straight into the camera. So, to compare that scene with this and saying, "I'm more at ease with the ..." That's not the right thing.

Elvis Mitchell:
Okay. There's one right and one wrong, if you're keeping score out there. Now, let's take a look at *School Days*. Very simple, straightforward, I think even elegant scene that I neglected to mention. It has Bill Nunn and Branford Marsalis as two of the actors. Also, that's the debut I think of Jerry Cowhig, Sam Jackson were in *Pulp Fiction*.

Elvis Mitchell:
When I see a movie like this that really sort of opens stuff up, and is an incredibly ambitious thing to try as a

second picture, I was just wondering if you ever felt daunted by what you were taking on. It's a lot to do. As you know, it's just the physical terms of getting all the music cues and everything all lined up.

Spike Lee:

No. We didn't see it like that. This scene, I told you earlier, this is the first day that we shot. The first day of filming in *School Days*, and Kentucky Fried Chicken down the block.

Elvis Mitchell:

Was that your first tie-in in the movies?

Spike Lee:

No. We had tied in before in NYU, but that after ... When *She's Gotta Have It* came out in August, that November I knew I was going to do *School Days*, but I was going to do it for EyeWin Pictures because EyeWin did ... When I gave them *She's Gotta Have It*, I signed a three picture deal. So, *School Days* was supposed to be for EyeWin.

Spike Lee:

And so, that November was more on homecoming. I wanted the cast to really experience a homecoming on a black college campus. We went down and EyeWin paid for a whole bunch of people to go down for homecoming.

Spike Lee:

At that time, the role played by Tisha Campbell was going to be played by Vanessa Williams and, I forgot her name. Someone else was going to play the role played by Chyme. And so, we all went down there, and then once EyeWin saw that it was going to cost, they didn't want to go over \$4 million dollars.

Elvis Mitchell:

And what did you think it was going to cost? What did you budget it?

Spike Lee:

We knew it was going to cost around six because of the musical numbers and stuff like that. So, that's when they put it in turnaround, and Columbia Pictures, David Picker and David Putnam came through, and we did it with them.

Elvis Mitchell:

We were just talking earlier too and I remembered that the same weekend, this was the big black explosion in 1988 if I remember, *Action Jackson* with Carl Weathers, and *Shoot to Kill* with Sydney Poitier, I think the entirety of the black movement in 1988 and they all came out in the same day with your picture.

Spike Lee:

True. It came out the same day, and I remember Carl Weathers calling me and telling me, asking me to change the date, but there's nothing I can do at that time.

Elvis Mitchell:

He actually called you up?

Spike Lee:

Mm-hmm. I mean, it's not really good business. I have all those three films opening on the same day.

Elvis Mitchell:

Yeah. I mean, didn't you say something? I mean because that's kind of an odd thing to do.

Spike Lee:

We were locked in that position about the time we found out about the other two films. It couldn't be moved.

Elvis Mitchell:

And that picture turned out to be one of the biggest grossing pictures Columbia released that year didn't it?

Spike Lee:

Yeah. They had a terrible year. Some of those films that David Putnam did didn't work, and then he got kicked out, and Dawn Steele came in, and Columbia literally just tried to dump the film. But it ended up making more money for them that year than any other film they've released.

Elvis Mitchell:

So, you were there at Columbia with Dawn Steele. Did she want to continue a relationship with you?

Spike Lee:

No, and it was mutual. And so, the next film was *Do The Right Thing*, and it was going to be at Paramount. But a couple of executives at Paramount didn't like the ending, and they wanted Mookie and Sal to embrace at the end of the movie and sing 'We The World.' So, we didn't do that, and I knew this producer, executive Sam Kitt from New York, and he had just gotten the job at Universal Pictures.

Spike Lee:

And so, that's where we did *Do The Right Thing*.

Elvis Mitchell:

This is a question that just came while I listened to you talk about this. Does the movie industry seem incredibly stupid to you?

Spike Lee:

Sometimes. But I mean, to be honest, they don't know black people, don't know minorities. And so, we're just like aliens to them.

Elvis Mitchell:

Yeah, yeah. That's obviously true. But just from hearing you talk about these things, it just seems like what they were doing in terms of sheer business practice didn't make any sense. You make a movie for two different studios, and make more money from seeing lots of other stuff. It would just make sense if somebody swallowed hard and say, "Well, we'll take a chance on you."

Elvis Mitchell:

I mean, I don't imagine that *Do The Right Thing* was so expensive a proposition that they walked away from that.

Spike Lee:

Well, Universal did take a chance.

Elvis Mitchell:

Yeah, but no. But I'm saying Paramount did. I mean, I know this happens all the time where studios go ... A picture bounces from one to another, to another. We can look at the history of *Malcolm X* over the years.

Spike Lee:

Well, these going to have creative differences, and if you have somebody sign you that doesn't like what you're trying to do, then you leave.

Elvis Mitchell:

Yeah, but I just ... I don't know. It's obvious somebody missed the point of *Do The Right Thing* by saying something like that.

Spike Lee:

Well, I mean they weren't the only ones. I mean, you had people like Joe Klein who was saying that-

Elvis Mitchell:

Yeah. It's going to start a riot.

Spike Lee:

... this film would incite riots all across America, and he wasn't the only one.

Elvis Mitchell:

And I guess we should sort of just make a historical note too that I guess *Do The Right Thing* sort of came shortly after *Driving Miss Daisy*, which was probably I guess the big black wave of 1989.

Spike Lee:

Well, that did win Best Picture that year.

Elvis Mitchell:

So, it seems that *Do The Right Thing* was kind of signaling that this is the beginning of a whole new world, doesn't it?

Spike Lee:

Well, that's what we thought at that time, but-

Elvis Mitchell:

It seems like, and maybe you've said this before, the movie sort of made a big impact in New York and probably helped to get David Dinkins elected, didn't it?

Spike Lee:

Well, that was really one of the goals that we wanted the film to come out right before the run off between Dinkins and Mayor Ed Koch. And I still feel that Mayor Ed Koch was responsible for a lot of the racial climate in New York City, in his two terms as mayor. The original idea for *Do The Right Thing* came from the Howard

Beach incident where three black men driving home from work, the car has a flat, they go in this pizzeria to use the phone, New World Pizzeria in the Howard Beach section of Queens, and they called AAA.

Spike Lee:

They used the phone. They were chased out of there by a gang of bat wielding Italian American news, and one of the guys that tried to run away runs on the highway and gets hit by a car. So, that's where the initial idea came from for *Do The Right Thing*.

Elvis Mitchell:

Now, you also made a spot for Jesse Jackson for his presidential campaign too. Do you feel yourself to be more of a political filmmaker than anybody else making movies now in the mainstream? Because I do think of you as a mainstream filmmaker.

Spike Lee:

I think Albert Stone also does stuff with a lot of politics, and definitely I feel, tries not to make mindless entertainment. Films that take some semblance of a brain to understand.

Elvis Mitchell:

Some semblance sounds right.

Spike Lee:

Well, we disagree.

Elvis Mitchell:

We disagree. Yes we do.

Spike Lee:

I like Oliver a lot.

Elvis Mitchell:

It won't be the last time tonight. I think though when you said mindless entertainment, that seems to be a thing that has sort of cemented your reputation that you've always sort of used movies as a way to sort of provoke or start a conversation about something. Does it start there for you in a lot of cases?

Spike Lee:

No. It's just really a film I wanted to see. So, I'm not really saying I want to make a film that's going to say this and say that. It really is just a story, and out of the story, those other things come, those other things evolve.

Elvis Mitchell:

But that sort of seems implicit because the movies are for the most part, provocative in terms of subject matter.

Spike Lee:

Yeah, but I mean *Do The Right Thing* was ... It's the hottest day of summer. I remember seeing this *Twilight Zone* or *One Step Beyond*, something like that, and when I was little it was this show about the scientists who would come up with some type of theory that says the murder rate goes up after 95 degrees. In all

through the show, you're seen looking at this thermometer, and at the end of the show it goes 95 degrees, and he gets murdered.

Spike Lee:

So, I mean that also had a lot to do with that film because just growing up in New York, you don't have to be a scientist to see what happens when it really starts to get hot. People act differently. So, I just wanted to have this one block in the hottest day of the summer in a 24 hour day period.

Elvis Mitchell:

But when you say that you wanted the movie to have an effect on the New York mayoral election, then that implies some awareness to make it stir.

Spike Lee:

That came out of evolution. That was not the first thought in my mind.

Elvis Mitchell:

When did you start working on the script?

Spike Lee:

When I was doing a post-production of *School Days*.

Elvis Mitchell:

School Days? So, it would be what? '87?

Spike Lee:

'87.

Elvis Mitchell:

Well, I think now is the time to take a look at this clip from *Do The Right Thing*, which maybe this time you will agree show some evolution is a director. But I think what we really get a sense of in this scene is the emotional impact of these movies, specifically this one and that's why at the end of the picture is so overwhelming because we are invested in these characters in the movie. So, let's take a look at this clip from *Do The Right Thing*.

Elvis Mitchell:

Your first Oscar nomination, and I guess I thought the movie would make probably a bigger splash at the Oscars that it ended up making.

Spike Lee:

Why?

Elvis Mitchell:

It had a lot of heat, a lot of people talked about it. You can't deny that it's a good movie. These are all things that should make it Oscar worthy. Again, it's no *Driving Miss Daisy*, but I think it has its merits.

Spike Lee:

Well, we received two academy award nominations. Dan Aiello for best supporting actor, and myself for best supporting-

Elvis Mitchell:

Best screenplay.

Spike Lee:

Excuse me. Best original screenplay. But it was after that experience that we really, since then, not really try to put too much merit in the academy award nominations. I mean, you look at that film and see what they chose. I mean, from the academy, when they give a film the best picture award, they say, "This is the best we have to offer. This exemplifies what ..."

Elvis Mitchell:

American filmmaking is.

Spike Lee:

What American filmmaking is about. And when they chose *Driving Miss Daisy* with that role that Morgan Freeman played, that you could look at Ray and Rahim were bugging Mookie, then it's obvious which black males they're more comfortable with.

Elvis Mitchell:

Yeah. Yeah.

Spike Lee:

So, we don't really don't need validation from the academy or-

Elvis Mitchell:

But were you surprised because nominally do ... Was representing the best for American filmmaking around the world, and I suspect that we probably made a few academy voters reach for new batteries for their pacemakers or something because it's not, as you said, the kind of black men that they were used to seeing on the screen.

Spike Lee:

It didn't surprise us that this is going to happen, and I mean look what happened last year. We had 319-something nominations, only-

Elvis Mitchell:

One African American.

Spike Lee:

The woman Diane Houston for-

Elvis Mitchell:

For her short subject.

Spike Lee:

... her short subjects. And you look at the work the people did in front of them behind the camera. So, I mean it's not a surprise. And then the academy, they roll out Whoopi Goldberg who is MCing, Quincy Jones who is producing this. So, how it could be racist? We had Whoopi. I mean, Whoopi was doing MCing and Quincy was producing it.

Spike Lee:

But that has nothing to do with the filmmaking though.

Elvis Mitchell:

But do you think that there's some validity in the things that Jesse Jackson was saying, I mean in mounting his protest against the academy?

Spike Lee:

I think that he should be brought upon the academy. At the same time, I think we have to realize what the academy is about, and they're about promoting their own, and they really don't see us as a part of Hollywood. If they did, I think that would be reflected in the way they vote.

Elvis Mitchell:

Well, maybe in the kinds of movies that got made. When you mentioned that wave of 19 pictures, have you hard pressed to name like five of them, and I'm sure they want to be tough with you besides the ones that you've made, I guess, that year. I guess I would expect that you might be feeling a little tired at this point because you're still looked upon for good reason in a lot of case as being the standard bearer for African American cinema.

Spike Lee:

Why should I be tired?

Elvis Mitchell:

Wouldn't you like some company up there?

Spike Lee:

I don't really look at it like that Elvis. I don't see it as I mean me being some lofty perch and no one else there. I think that everyone has to do their own work, and explore their own vision, and I think it's good that there are other African American filmmakers making films that have nothing to do with the stuff I do even look or sound like I do because we're not one monolithic group.

Elvis Mitchell:

But filmmakers do end up hanging out or spending a lot of time together or people in that community do.

Spike Lee:

I mean, some do, but most of the African American filmmakers live in LA, and I'm not out there that much. So, I know a couple that I hang out together, but I'm rarely out there.

Elvis Mitchell:

I remember, and I don't know if you've read this, a pretty divisive piece in a New Yorker's film issue of a couple of years ago, a profile of the Hughes Brothers, and what they seem to go sort of out of their way to

sort of single out people. And I wondered what you thought about them. I mean, they were attacking you and John Singleton, and-

Spike Lee:

I just think they just showed the immaturity and how young they were. So, I didn't really sweat it.

Elvis Mitchell:

Have you spoken to them since then?

Spike Lee:

No. I didn't call them up about it or anything like that.

Elvis Mitchell:

I understand a young artist. You come up, you feel like you're full of whatever. Four year olds. you want to tear down what's come before you. But at the same time, it feels to me in a lot of ways that the African American filmmaking forum is so sort of shaky that it can't stand too many hits from the inside.

Spike Lee:

Well, but if you don't know your history and you think that there was nobody there before you, not just Spike Lee, but I'm not talking about Ozzy, or Michael Schultz, or Gordon Parks or Micheaux.

Elvis Mitchell:

Sure.

Spike Lee:

So, they don't know there was somebody there before them, then you really can expect more than the way they act.

Elvis Mitchell:

That's what it is because they sort of pride themselves on knowing film history, and in fact should be able to quote from the rest of cinema pretty easily. We've talked about Scorsese and other directors they want to try to emulate. And odd quote, they didn't want to be limited to just making black movies.

Spike Lee:

Well, I really can't comment on the Hughes Brothers. I don't know really how they operate or how they think.

Elvis Mitchell:

No, I just thought was for somebody you want to be limited to the idea of black cinema to me, being limiting is a ... You've shown that it's not limiting at all, and then the kinds of movies that you've made.

Spike Lee:

Well, a lot of us fall into that trap where we think that just the word black attached to you. Black director, black actor makes you become limited. But I never felt like that.

Elvis Mitchell:

Well, I think the movie of yours that was probably at the time the most eagerly awaited, and certainly among the most controversial was *Malcolm X*, and let's take a little okay at that now and then talk about it.

Spike Lee:

Well, when they were in the thing praying, I remember Ernest Dickinson shot that, and Ernest Dickinson shot all my films from NYU up the *Malcolm X*. And I remember we just wanted to try to hold that first scene as much as possible. So, we had like a long dolly into the both of them and doing that.

Spike Lee:

Then once we got close, we started to cut back and forth. But that shot with Al Freeman Junior who plays Elijah Muhammad, I remember that being a very difficult special effects shot. We had a motion controlled camera that went around Denzel.

Spike Lee:

The reason why this film worked was because Denzel's performance. He was great, and I say this every time if I can, and he was robbed. So, I mean, everybody was robbed at the academy awards, and that was Denzel.

Spike Lee:

No disrespect though to Al Pacino.

Elvis Mitchell:

Al Pacino.

Spike Lee:

But if he's going to win an Oscar, give it to him for *Dog Day Afternoon*.

Elvis Mitchell:

Or the *Godfather Part Two*.

Spike Lee:

Serpico, *Godfather Part Two*, but sent *Scent of a Woman*? Nuh-uh.

Elvis Mitchell:

Well, certainly is a great performance, but it also works in concert with the picture. You said to me at one point, you thought this is the movie you were born to make. What's it's like-

Spike Lee:

Now I remember saying that. I might have-

Elvis Mitchell:

Well, it's in print now. Anybody got PlayBoy magazine out there? We can pull it out. And it seems like you really came through, and there was a lot of controversy surrounding that as you recall the thing with Norman Jewison to talk about you forsaking the James Baldwin out Arnold Perl screenplay. What's it like to look at the movie now?

Spike Lee:

It's some of the best work I've done.

Elvis Mitchell:

When you see the movie now, does it seem like a lot of that controversy was just kind of silly, and just ... It

seemed like a lot of people didn't even want to give you a chance to make the movie. You were being judged before the picture ever came out.

Spike Lee:

Well, but even at the time I understood why this was happening because Malcolm mean so much to everyone. So, I gave people the benefit of the doubt. People like Ameer Baraka. That's why they were saying the stuff they were saying.

Elvis Mitchell:

But he was not a big, let's say Malcolm supporter.

Spike Lee:

Maybe not then, but now ... I mean, he was defending *Malcolm X* and his attacks against me.

Elvis Mitchell:

But he's also seems to be using it as kind of a springboard to say, "Somebody should make a movie about *Malcolm X*," that he had written if I recall.

Spike Lee:

Well, maybe not him, but I mean he said he has several scripts that should have made also.

Elvis Mitchell:

This brings up the question for me. Do you think there's a difference between a director and a storyteller, and which of those do you think are your strengths?

Spike Lee:

Well, yeah I think there's a difference. A director is someone who could just know how to make a pretty picture and that kind of stuff, but the storyteller, someone is going to draw the audience in have them forget that they're sitting in a room watching light on a screen.

Elvis Mitchell:

And which do you think is your strengths?

Spike Lee:

Storytelling.

Elvis Mitchell:

Storytelling? Because you don't get talked about very often as a storyteller. That's why I was asking that. It's one of the things again, that I think are obscured by the way people seem to react to you as a public figure rather than reacting to you as a filmmaker, and a storyteller, and a director.

Spike Lee:

Well, you know why this happens is because number one, I think that I'm in my films. So, I think most directors, I mean unless you ... Nobody knows. I mean, who are the faces that you know? Wood Allen, Spielberg.

Elvis Mitchell:

Alfred Hitchcock.

Spike Lee:
Oliver Stone. I mean living.

Elvis Mitchell:
Wow.

Spike Lee:
I mean living.

Elvis Mitchell:
Okay. I guess Hitchcock is dead. Okay.

Spike Lee:
So, when your face is known and you do other stuff besides make films, and people start to-

Elvis Mitchell:
Single you out, you think?

Spike Lee:
Not singling you out, but they get sidetracked I think, by what they feel the persona of Spike Lee is rather than just doing what they're supposed to be doing as a film critic that's paid by publications or newspapers to review the film. And so, often reviews I read about my films is as you said before, it's not really about the work, about Wynn Thomas' production design or Ernest Dickinson cinematography or Ruthie Carter's costumes or the scores by my father or Terence Blanchard. It's about whether they like or dislike Spike Lee whether it has to do with Nike commercials, whether I should be allowed to sit court side at Knicks games.

Spike Lee:
It's just stuff that has nothing to do with the films.

Elvis Mitchell:
Or whether you're a racist, which comes up all the time. People, as I was on a plane and I was talking to somebody because I had a bunch of clips that I was looking at on the plane, and somebody goes, "Oh, that Spike Lee, he's a racist." I said, "Why?" And this is somebody who had never seen a movie you had made.

Spike Lee:
I mean, those are the ones that usually say that.

Elvis Mitchell:
Well, why do think that people think that though? Why does that seem to be something they associate with you based on not having seen any of your movies even?

Spike Lee:
Well, I mean my best known films I have dealt with race relations in this country. *Do The Right Thing*, from *Malcolm X*, *Jungle Fever*. And so, therefore if you point out how racist this country is, therefore are you a racist to try and negate what you're saying?

Spike Lee:

And the media has a lot to do with that. I think that the most damaging thing has ever been done to me was just cover story Esquire.

Elvis Mitchell:

Oh yeah. What was the name of that piece? Remind people what it was called.

Spike Lee:

Yeah. It was Undercover Esquire when *Malcolm X* was out, and the title of the article was Spike Lee Hates Your Cracker Ass. And the way they positioned it was like it was a quote, like those words actually came out of my mouth where I said something close to that, which is totally false. If you don't know my films, but you know I'm a filmmaker and you see this magazine, and you see this big giant headline, why would you want to see my films?

Elvis Mitchell:

These movies...How are they reacted to in Europe where they can't be the same kind of sort of media phenomenology that there is here?

Spike Lee:

No. I mean, they're just as racist in Europe as-

Elvis Mitchell:

No. Do you have the same kind of play? Do they call you racist there too and not get that as well, or do they play differently there?

Spike Lee:

No, we get the same stuff. I mean, I'm not saying it's like that across the board here in the States or in Europe, but it does pop up.

Elvis Mitchell:

Well, there's obviously still got a ways to go in race relations. Could have ever seen that movie, I guess it was earlier this year, Hate by-

Spike Lee:

The guy that rips me off all the time.

Elvis Mitchell:

Yeah. It was *Do The Right Thing* is staged like a Benetton commercial. It just seemed like he was *Do The Right Thing*.

Spike Lee:

Yeah. But you see, his first film was a rip off of *She's Gotta Have It*.

Elvis Mitchell:

Gotta Have It. Yeah.

Spike Lee:
What's the guy's name?

Elvis Mitchell:
God, what is his last name? His first name is Mathieu and I forget it, but I figure at the very least he should be calm to thank you or send you a check or something.

Spike Lee:
No. He denies there's any similarities at all.

Elvis Mitchell:
Oh. They can call him the French Spike Lee.

Spike Lee:
He doesn't like it.

Elvis Mitchell:
Well, I think a clip I like to show now just to give people understanding of the breath of your work, and that's not all specifically about race or sexuality, but about people is I think the sort of the unjustly ignored movie *Crooklyn*, which a lot of people haven't really seen or haven't seen at all. It's a great movie, nothing some is a really-

Spike Lee:
Well, all nine are on videotape now.

Elvis Mitchell:
Well, before we get-

Spike Lee:
Well, I mean all nine of 10.

Elvis Mitchell:
Okay. Well, before we get into the price point of the videos, let's take a look at this clip from *Crooklyn*. A movie that didn't get the attention it deserved I think. Why do you think that was?

Spike Lee:
You never really know what's going to happen with the film. As I said before, everything is timing, it's what audiences want to see, what else is out in the theaters at the same time whether the studio was behind it, all that kind of stuff.

Elvis Mitchell:
Which of those factors do you think sort of weighted on that? Do you think that the timing was bad for a movie like that, that the studio wasn't behind it? I mean which of that?

Spike Lee:
Well, I mean it's not really a simplistic answer. I think that all those things I mentioned had a lot to do with it.

Elvis Mitchell:

One thing about your movies is that each is a departure from the one that's come before it. I don't know if this is conscious or not to be looking for something, a way to sort of engage yourself in the filmmaking process again, and each story is very different. And this one feels a lot more intimate than all of the movies that came before it. It's a real departure.

Spike Lee:

Well, I don't know if it was a real departure, but-

Elvis Mitchell:

You don't think so? Is it not like *Malcolm X*? I mean, it's following this girl over a portion of her life, and the relationships with her family.

Spike Lee:

Well, in a lot of ways the film was like *Jungle Fever* because really it's centering on a family. Of course, I think that family in *Jungle Fever* feels a lot more dysfunctional than-

Elvis Mitchell:

I hope so.

Spike Lee:

... than *Crooklyn*, but this original story, as I said before, of my sister and brother came to me. They had written it without even telling me, and I liked it, but there were some things I wanted to incorporate. So, we wrote it all together, and just some of the stuff is semi-autobiographical in the film.

Spike Lee:

I think my sister wrote it. She said, "Our mother died of cancer." So, after she finished writing the script that this is the catharsis that she needed because she never really enabled to get over the death of our mother, and that was like a long time ago.

Elvis Mitchell:

What was it like for you then in making the picture? You must've had some of those that are emotional sort of re-experiences you were doing.

Spike Lee:

Not really. I mean, people ask me that, "Was it hard to do that stuff?" But I mean, I didn't approach this film as I was telling the story of our family growing up in Brooklyn.

Elvis Mitchell:

It's a pretty joyful movie in a lot of ways too. I mean, there's a lot of fun in it.

Spike Lee:

Well, what was fun was trying to recreate that look, that era of the early '70s with the Afros, and the clothes, and the music, and looking at all those shows as a part of this family, trying to find the song that they sang on the show that will be good enough to use. And also, going through all those stuff with the old *Soul Train* shows too.

Elvis Mitchell:

Well, the thing that I really like about it is that it reminds me of a lot of great black fiction. It's one of the first movies I remember seeing that has a real strong sense of black community, and the sort of sense that the saying you always hear, "It takes a village to raise a child." Well, there's a village in this block, and everybody knew everybody, and there's that whole sort of sense of connectedness for good or bad, and how it shaped the way these kids led their lives.

Elvis Mitchell:

And I don't recall anything like that.

Spike Lee:

But I mean, if you look at that film though, Elvis, I mean that block is not predominantly black. The two houses on either side of the family, the crazy guy, and the Italian-American family on the other side. So, I mean, we really tried to mirror the block we grew up in, which was a whole lot of different people on it.

Elvis Mitchell:

There's two certainly. I mean, there is this sense of that block being a world unto itself. When I asked you if you had any sort of emotional sort of remembrances about it, I just wondered if you miss that world because that world doesn't really seem to exist anymore, and it's never played out in fiction really for this audience.

Spike Lee:

Well, I do miss it. I mean, all those games that we tried to recreate in the film, and tried to show these kids. They had no idea what those games were. Skellies, Spin the Top, Johnny on the Pony, Stoop Ball, Strat-O-Matic Baseball, Rock'em Sock'em robots. We had to teach them everything. Stick ball, I mean, all these games we grew up playing on the streets of New York were replaced by video games.

Spike Lee:

And so, that stuff at the beginning of the film where the ... I forgot the name of the game where the can is the ... Hot Piece of Butter with the belt, and the can in the middle of the thing, all that stuff has been lost forever because these kids don't know it.

Elvis Mitchell:

It's interesting too that because the way you use music in the movies, and that's always been a real strong part. This was the first time of the music I saw it have a real sort of emotional connection for a lot of people because these were all songs that a lot of the people in the audience I saw the movie with had heard before, and it sort of really pulled people back into the era. But it wasn't sentimental about the period then. What I mean is there's this real sort of lack of sort of cheap sentiment in your movies in general.

Spike Lee:

No. We tried to stay away from that, but I think what really drew me to the picture, to the script is that you never really had seen a film that it was about a young African American girl, 10 years old growing up, really in a household of men. Four brothers-

Elvis Mitchell:

Right.

Spike Lee:

... and a dog, and her best friend is her mother and how she tries to continue to live in this world with her when she loses her best friend and her mother.

Elvis Mitchell:

And that awful sense of separation she has just when she has to go down South and is away from her family. I mean, the way I've heard people talk about *A Little Princess* last year is a way I thought they were talked about this picture. I had more people seeing it.

Spike Lee:

Yeah. I liked that film a lot. We got criticized a whole lot for the sequence down South with anamorphic lenses, but I'm not trying to be stubborn or I made a mistake, but I don't think it was a mistake to shoot that scene like that. We wanted to convey to the audience how Troy was viewing the world because she had grown up in Brooklyn, New York and never been outside Brooklyn. I mean, the City of Manhattan.

Spike Lee:

I mean the City of New York. So, she had never seen a whole bunch of trees, and grass, and just the way that her cousin was living with the whole church thing, and this crazy art. And so, to convey the best way her sense of being displaced, that's why we chose to shoot that entire sequence with the anamorphic lenses, and I heard that people were yelling at the projectionist.

Spike Lee:

I think after the first week of release, Columbia Pictures ... I mean, excuse me, Universal started to hand out flyer to people before they're going in saying that there's not a problem, but I think that the people who probably saw the first time, saw a film with black and white and color cut together. Probably we were experiencing the same things, so we just felt it was a right choice.

Elvis Mitchell:

Now, we should get to your current release I guess. Talk about *Get On The Bus*, which in a way is kind of being your 10th picture, coming out 10 years after *She's Gotta Have It* is in a way kind of a return for you. It's sort of down and dirty filmmaking.

Elvis Mitchell:

You made it for not a lot of money or not a very long period of time. Did you feel like you want to do it? I've heard Scorsese saying from time to time that he wants to sort of go back and make movies, and make them fast, and not deliberate so much over them and just get them done. Was that part of the consideration for you?

Spike Lee:

I mean, that was part of the consideration, Elvis. But the reason why we had to shoot it so fast is because that's all the money we had. We only had \$2.4 million dollars to shoot, and when you had that little money, that dictates that you shoot the film in a very short time. So, *Get On The Bus* was shot in 18 days, three six day weeks.

Spike Lee:

We shot in and around LA, then flew to Nashville, Tennessee where we shot a week and around there, and

then we flew to DC. The final week was six days in and around the Washington, DC area, and we had a unique way of financing this film. This financed by 15 African American men.

Spike Lee:

People like Will Smith, Wesley Snipes, Danny Glover, Johnnie Cochran-

Elvis Mitchell:

Robert Guillaume was one of them?

Spike Lee:

Who?

Elvis Mitchell:

Was Robert Guillaume one of them?

Spike Lee:

Robert Guillaume, myself, the screenwriter, Reggie Bythewood, and Reuben Cannon is one of the producers and cast the film. The reason why we chose to do it that was two reasons. It was good business sense because Columbia Pictures wanted to finance the film outright, but we felt that we should be able to raise \$2.4 million dollars.

Spike Lee:

And once we did raise that, then we sold it to Columbia for 3.6 in a negative pickup deal. And because of that excess, that's how we're able to present investors a check a week before the movie opened with their initial invest plus 15% interest on the money before the movie even opened.

Elvis Mitchell:

I've heard about all this because I was at the march. I thought about that moment, and I don't know if you were there for this, where one of the speakers said, "I want every black man in this crowd to hold a dollar bill and raise up his fist." I actually remember doing that and looking on that crown, and just sort of seeing ... I just feel this enormous sense of empowerment and thinking so much is possible.

Elvis Mitchell:

So, to see this movie come out that spirit, financed that way just seemed to really echo that to me.

Spike Lee:

Well, we felt that if we wanted to be true to the spirit of the march, which we're saying we need self-reliance and self-dependence, and knowing also that African Americans are going to spend in excess of \$400 billion dollars this year alone in the United States, we are America's biggest consumer as far as race goes. So, therefore I just knew that we should be able to raise \$2.4 million dollars for this film, and it was a lot harder than I thought it would be, but we were still able to get the money.

Elvis Mitchell:

I just wonder, what did you feel like at the march?

Spike Lee:

I didn't go to the march.

Elvis Mitchell:
Did you not go?

Spike Lee:
I watched it on television. Three days before the march, I had a knee operation. So, I had to watch on CNN.

Elvis Mitchell:
Because it was the most amazing thing I've ever been to in my life. I mean, to call it the nation time version of Woodstock would just be diminished a little bit because I've never felt that way about anything in my life, and I just wonder just by watching if you felt that you had to do something. Define some way to dramatize-

Spike Lee:
No. I'm not going to lie. When I was looking at the march, I felt the same way you did, Elvis. But at no point in time did I think there was movie in it. I was hoping that somebody was there shooting footage for a documentary for the historical archival stuff. But I did not know there was a film in it, and two of the three producers Bill Borden and Barry Rosenbush were watching TV, and they were watching the news, and there was this segment about a group of African American men who returned from DC by bus to Los Angeles.

Spike Lee:
This same group had went to DC on the bus as strangers, but had come back as lifelong friends. And then they got the idea for the film. But being white and Jewish, they felt it might be a little bit difficult to do a film on the march without some help. So, then they called Reuben Cannon, and then-

Elvis Mitchell:
Who's a well known black casting director.

Spike Lee:
Yes. And then Reuben called me and said, "We want to fly to New York and meet with you." And so, I said, "Okay. Come on." And then they took the red eye and we met the next day, and I said, "I'll do the film." And then we got Reggie to write the script, and in two months we were shooting.

Spike Lee:
We started to shoot the film in April 1st, this past April.

Elvis Mitchell:
Because you were determined to get out the anniversary of the march?

Spike Lee:
Yes. We didn't know we wanted to do it exactly the same, the one year anniversary march, but some time around there.

Elvis Mitchell:
Well, I think we should do tonight is thank Spike for being here, and most importantly thank him for the body of work that will endure for many years to come. Spike, thank you.

Spike Lee:
Thank you Elvis. Thank you for coming. Thank you.