

Name _____ Date _____

Malcolm X

Learn more about this topic! Each section gives more detail on one of the lyrics from the song. Read each section, and then respond by answering the question or taking notes on key ideas.

1. Years before he changed his name to Malcolm X, Malcolm Little was an excellent student. Little had plans to become a lawyer, but an English teacher urged him to be more “realistic.” The teacher suggested it made more sense for a black person to focus on carpentry than to study law. As a result, Little became disillusioned with school and dropped out the following year, at the age of 15. After leaving school, Little moved to Boston to live with his half-sister. He became involved with drugs and crime as he moved from Boston to Flint, Michigan, to Harlem, New York, and back to Boston. In 1946, he was arrested for burglary and sentenced to 10 years in prison.

Notes

2. In prison, Malcolm Little took his education into his own hands. Starting with the dictionary, he read every book in the prison library. While working through his personal education, Little was introduced to the teachings of Elijah Muhammad, the head of the Nation of Islam. Muhammad combined principles of Islam with a focus on discipline and self-reliance within the black community. The Nation of Islam advocated for black separatism. This meant they believed a separate black state and government would be more productive than an integrated society with white people. Upon his release from prison, Little joined the Nation of Islam and changed his name to Malcolm X. Malcolm saw the legacy of slavery in his birth name, explaining that “Little” was a name slave-owners had given to his family. The X represented his lost African name and heritage, something he sought to reclaim.

Notes

3. Malcolm X was a charismatic and intelligent speaker. He quickly rose to prominence as the voice of the Nation of Islam, sharing Elijah Muhammad's teachings with a wider audience than ever before. Malcolm X spoke forcefully and directly to black Americans who were fed up with how they were being treated in the United States. Malcolm X served as a counterpoint to Martin Luther King Jr. While King preached nonviolence, tolerance and integration, Malcolm focused on self-reliance, self-defense and separatism. Though he never took part in any violence, Malcolm X did not discourage it and stressed the importance of fighting back if attacked. He gave voice to the anger and frustration many black people felt but could not express openly. Throughout the early 1960s, Malcolm became a controversial figure. White people in power perceived him as a threat and some black activists considered him too radical.

Notes

4. Amidst growing tension and disagreements with Elijah Muhammad, Malcolm X left the Nation of Islam in 1964. Following a pilgrimage to Mecca, Malcolm converted to Sunni Islam. He changed his name to el-Hajj Malik el-Shabazz and began preaching a more tolerant version of Islam. He softened his stance on separatism and self-defense as he vowed to continue the fight for civil rights.

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5. Malcolm X was assassinated on February 21, 1965 at the Audubon Ballroom in New York City. According to police, three members of the Nation of Islam opened fire as he approached the podium to speak. Malcolm X, once a poster child for the Nation of Islam, had become an enemy to its members. As Malcolm X had become more and more popular in the late 1950s and 60s, tensions between him and Elijah Muhammad increased. A combination of jealousy, political disagreements and Malcolm X's disapproval of Muhammad's extramarital affairs left the two men at odds. Malcolm X left the organization in 1964. The following year, and only a week after a separate attempt to harm him and his family, Malcolm X was murdered at the hands of the organization he once fervently advocated for and helped popularize.

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6. Read the following excerpt from Malcolm X's autobiography, where he discusses his self-education in prison:

It was because of my letters that I happened to stumble upon starting to acquire some kind of a homemade education.

I became increasingly frustrated at not being able to express what I wanted to convey in letters that I wrote, especially those to Mr. Elijah Muhammad. In the street, I had been the most articulate hustler out there – I had commanded attention when I said something. But now, trying to write simple English, I not only wasn't articulate, I wasn't even functional. How would I sound writing in slang, the way I would say it, something such as, 'Look, daddy, let me pull your coat about a cat, Elijah Muhammad-'

Many who today hear me somewhere in person, or on television, or those who read something I've said, will think I went to school far beyond the eighth grade. This impression is due entirely to my prison studies.

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