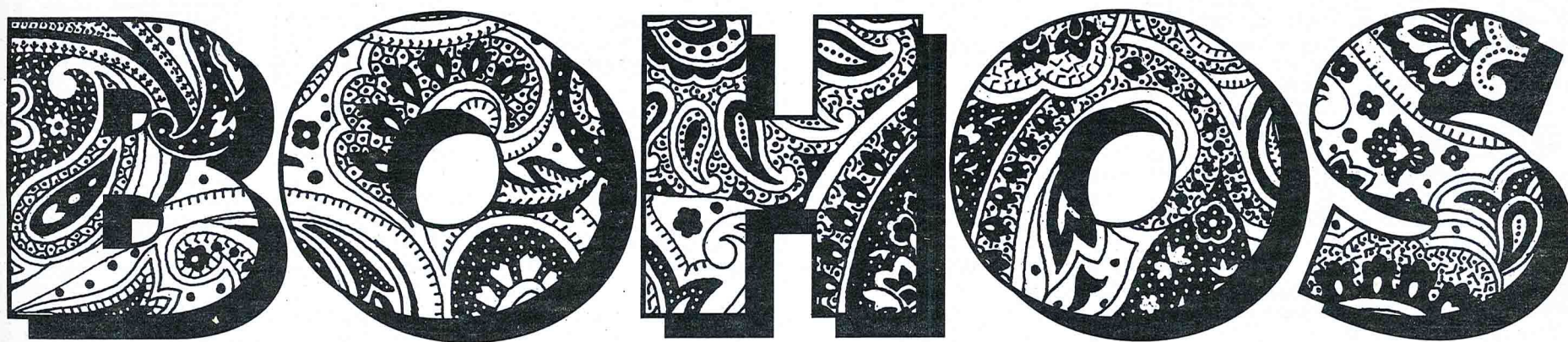


BUDDIES,



Baps & C



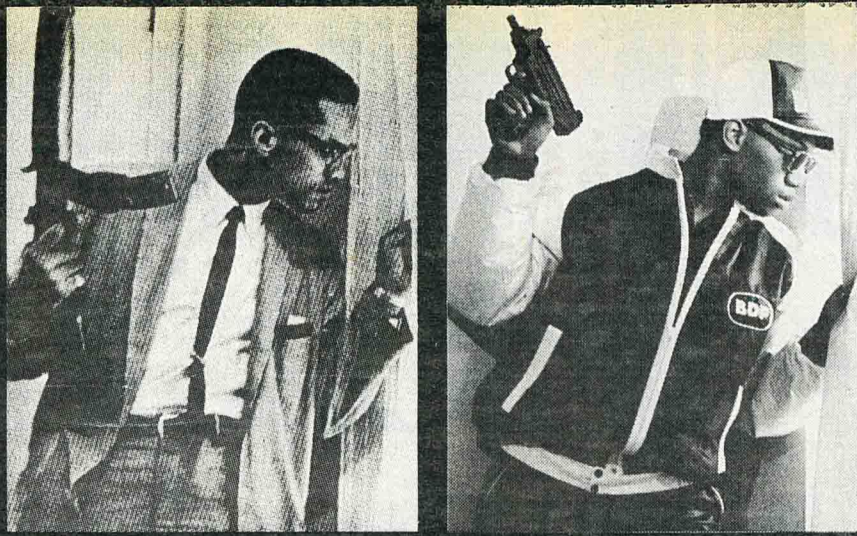
IT MIGHT HAVE BEEN WHEN mobile DJs began rocking Kraftwerk's "Trans-Europe Express" in 1977 or when WBL's slogan shifted from "the total black experience in sound" to "the total experience in sound" to "the world's best-looking sound." Or when dressing down to dress up became the new Saturday-night aesthetic of high school teens. Another clue was when Richard Pryor's blues-based life experience humor gave way to Eddie Murphy's telegenic, pop-culture-oriented joking. Neither you nor I knows exactly when it happened. But we know what happened. Over the last 20 or so years, the tenor of African American culture has changed. I came up on the we-shall-

overcome tradition of noble struggle, soul and gospel music, positive images, and the conventional wisdom that civil rights would translate into racial salvation. Today I live in a time of goin'-for-mine materialism, secular beat consciousness, and a more diverse, fragmented, even postmodern black community. The change was subtle, yet inexorable.

At *Billboard* magazine in 1982, I pushed to update the title of the "Soul" chart. Prince wasn't soul, nor was Kurtis Blow or Run-D.M.C. The direction of black music, one of the truest reflectors of our culture, had changed profoundly, as it always does. After much discussion the chart was

renamed "Black," which outraged many white retailers and black musicmakers. Too ethnic. Too limiting. Too damn black. Where "soul" was once universally accepted, the new era had yielded no new all-purpose catchphrase for the black mood—we couldn't very well call it the funk-disco-hip hop-soul-crossover chart. This diversity said a lot about the new African American mentality desegregation has spawned. In October 1990 *Billboard's* chart was recast as "Rhythm & Blues," a supposedly nonracial compromise that was actually an anachronistic evasion, the kind of back-to-the-futurism that signals a whole population overwhelmed by the complexity of the present.

B Y N E L S O N G E O R G E



MALCOLM X AND KRS-ONE

As a musical genre, a definition of African American culture, and the code word for our national identity, soul has pretty much been dead since Nixon's reelection in 1972. But what's replaced it? Arguing in these pages in 1986, Greg Tate tried to establish a "new black aesthetic" as a defining concept. He had a point, though I'd argue there was more than one aesthetic at work. For better and worse, the spawn of the postsoul era display multiple personalities.

Group self-definition is always tricky. It's too easy to turn people into caricatures or distort the complexity of individual experiences. Still, it's clear to me that four new African American character types have been crucial in shaping this country over the last 20 years—types that began germinating in the '70s and blossomed in the '80s. There is the Buppie, ambitious and acquisitive, determined to savor the fruits of integration by any means necessary; the B-boy, molded by hip hop aesthetics and the tragedies of underclass life; the Black American Princess or Prince a/k/a/ Bap, who, whether by family heritage or personal will, enjoys an expectation of mainstream success and acceptance that borders on arrogance; and the Boho, a thoughtful, self-conscious figure like *A Different World's* Cree Summer or *Living Colour's* Vernon Reid, whose range of interest and taste challenges both black and white stereotypes of African American behavior.

The B-boy has rightfully been the most celebrated and condemned of these figures, since he combines the explosive elements of poverty, street knowledge, and unfocused political anger. B-boy style has flowed far from its ghetto base and affected language, clothes, music, and damn near everything else. In fact, these other postsoulers often respond consciously to his challenge. But they ain't no joke either. The four types first came together in *She's Gotta Have It*, a film that managed to accommodate B-boy Mars Blackmon, Boho Nola Darling, Bap Greer Childs, and embryonic Buppie Jamie Overstreet.

The postsoul era hasn't just been about

style or aesthetics, but cash money too. Economics is very much a part of my framework. There is a bigger spread between black rich and poor than at any point in this nation's history. The debate over the role of capital in our race's advancement has taken a new twist, with neocons in media if not grassroots ascendancy. Economic clout has granted many black cultural figures an unprecedented level of financial control over their art. Once Berry Gordy was the patron saint of black capitalism, but Godfather Bill Cosby, singer/conglomerate Michael Jackson, TV host/producer Oprah Winfrey, and a legion of others enjoy total product control—though, significantly, not distribution control—over their hunk of culture. That's an undeniable result of genuine integration. There is wide disagreement, however, whether this black media elite has really uplifted the race or is just another example of American capitalism's savvy taste in window dressing.

Which brings us back to our search for the source of this transition—for the single event that first engaged all these aesthetic, class, and economic issues. After considerable equivocation, I've decided that my starting point is a renegade work that, like many pivotal expressions throughout history, has only been encountered by a small percentage of the folks it affected. It was the creation of a man who'd lived as a Boho, a Buppie, and a B-boy, with a little Bap arrogance on the side. Twenty years after its release, this work's children stroll our streets alienated from if not ignorant of the old soul verities.

SWEET STUFF

When Melvin Van Peebles's *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* came out in 1971, nothing like it had appeared on an American movie screen before. The depiction of a Watts-based male hustler's act of rebellion against brutal police and subsequent flight to freedom "was an important moment in the evolution of black cinema which involved redefinition and initial statement of

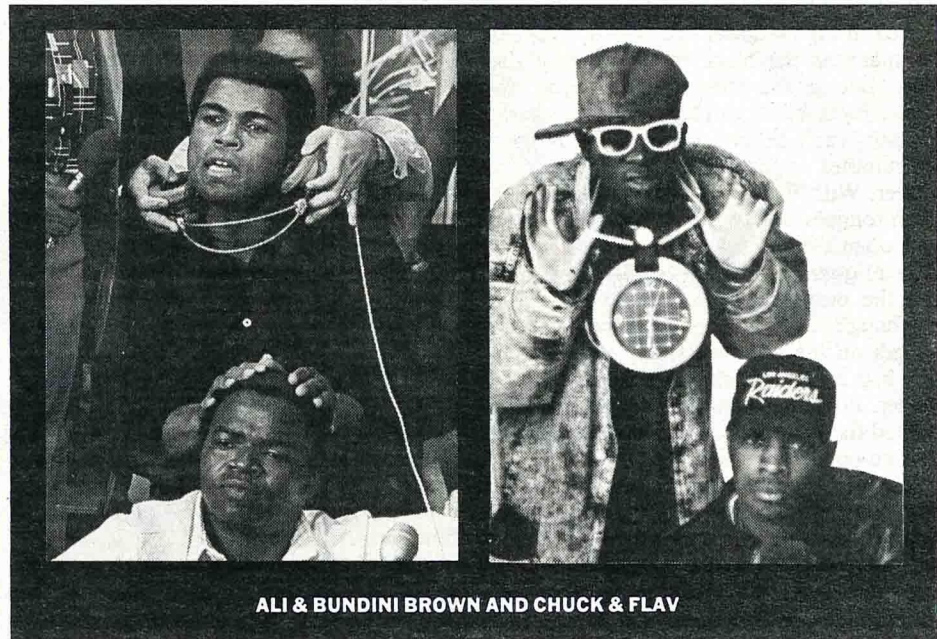
a willingness to act against one's fate in America," according to veteran black filmmaker St. Clair Bourne. Film historian Gladstone Yearwood has written that *Sweetback* "stands as a milestone in contemporary black cinema because of its popular impact, its example of economic independence, its fine use of cinematic language and its creative incorporation of the Afro-American expressive tradition." Risking his directing fee from the politically correct civil rights-era comedy *Watermelon Man* and \$50,000 borrowed from that remarkably open-minded capitalist Bill Cosby, Van Peebles made a film that both challenged the industry and foreshadowed the ongoing conflicts between street culture and mainstream taste. After a Boston theater cut out nine minutes of the film and the Motion Picture Association of America gave it an X rating, Van Peebles made like a lawyer for 2 Live Crew: "Should the rest of the community submit to your censorship that is its business, but White standards shall no longer be imposed on the Black community."

Sweetback initially opened in only two theaters—one in Atlanta, one a Detroit venue that specialized in zombie triple features—and never received national distribution worthy of its controversy. Yet *Sweetback's* ghetto-centric style, outsider perspective, and financially independent spirit still reverberate in two crucial African American artistic movements—hip hop and black film. *Sweetback* defied the positive-image canon of Sidney Poitier, dealing openly with black sexuality, government-

ly exceeds, reaching levels of profanity, sexism, and violence that these '70s flicks only suggested.

What's more, their funk-soul-disco soundtracks were composed by some of the most visionary minds of postsoul black pop. From veteran soul performers like Curtis Mayfield, James Brown, and Marvin Gaye to more broad-based producer-instrumentalists like Willie Hutch, Norman Whitfield, and Maurice White to Miles Davis and his student Herbie Hancock, these composers created a motherlode of riffs, sounds, and vocal harmonies that today underpin thousands of sample-heavy hip hop recordings. The new level of ambition that seized black pop between 1971 and 1974 was in large part inspired by the access of so many producers and artists to film. While as a genre blaxploitation may strike us now as narrow and negative, the music created to support these films wasn't. Black pop's longer tracks, more complex horns, strings, and percussion, refinements in synthesizer technology, and jazz-inflected vocal harmonies all got their start in Hollywood. So *Sweetback* trickled down to the current generation.

For black filmmakers, *Sweetback* is a vital memory of what could be, and its bastard child blaxploitation is a bitter reminder of what to avoid. No one had plotted a feature film with an uncompromised black viewpoint and put it into theaters without mainstream Hollywood involvement since the days of Oscar Micheaux, and Van Peebles's achievement wouldn't be duplicated with similar impact for 15 years. But for



ALI & BUNDINI BROWN AND CHUCK & FLAV

sanctioned brutality, and the arbitrary violence of inner city life. Its refusal to compromise still sparks black artists from Ice Cube to Matty Rich.

At a 1980 colloquy on the film, Van Peebles explained his narrative strategy. "The reality is that our people have been brainwashed with the 'hip' music, the beautiful color, and the dancing images flickering across the screen. This is what they know as cinema. And that's where we must begin. We obviously cannot dwell there; but it's a point of departure... That's what revolution is! It isn't everybody standing up here on an intellectual high. And it is not meeting people and starting from where they are not. It is starting from where they can see."

With a change here and there, Van Peebles's rap could be the spiel of a hardcore hip hopper in *The Source* talking about his rhymes and videos, though what the rap generation owes *Sweetback* has been absorbed secondhand through the blaxploitation films that *Sweetback* spawned. Those films, which took Van Peebles's aggressive hero and made him/her either a cop or a traditional gangster, live more on home video than in dim memory for the hip hop generation. *Superfly* and *The Mack*, criminal-minded chronicles of a cocaine dealer and a pimp respectively, inform the imagery and music of Big Daddy Kane, N.W.A., the Geto Boys, Ice Cube, Public Enemy, and hundreds of lesser rappers. Blaxploitation set standards for ghetto-centricity the rap generation matches and single-minded-

independent filmmakers as diverse as Halie Gerima, Charles Lane, Julie Dash, and Warrington Hudlin, blaxploitation was what kept African Americans from focusing on the variety of black perspectives they were exposing at film festivals, art houses, and, following the formation of the Black Filmmakers Foundation in 1978, discos, art galleries, and parks. This community of politically committed and historically aware filmmakers was eclipsed in the black community by blaxploitation even after the blaxploitation era ended.

Unlike the black theater, dance, and literary worlds, all sustained by a committed interracial following and regularly covered in the black and white press, black independent filmmaking received little recognition until 1986. Hollywood's dominance over African American viewers seemed unshakable. After blaxploitation dried up, Richard Pryor and then Eddie Murphy were the only African Americans with star status, while no directors, writers, or producers entered Hollywood's closed circle. During the current explosion, black filmmakers have embraced Van Peebles's legacy and disavowed blaxploitation. Van Peebles, who's finally gotten his props as a pioneer, represents what a lot of these filmmakers say their work is—rebellious, sociologically important, entrenched in the black psyche. Yet the content and/or marketing of many of these films shared more with the low-brow, commercially calculated productions of blaxploitation than with the renegade artiness of *Sweetback*. By denying this, the



NICKY BARNES AND NINO BROWN



LISA BONET: AS DENISE IN *COSBY*, IN *ANGEL HEART*, WITH HUSBAND LENNY KRAVITZ

new directors imply that to acknowledge any connection with blaxploitation is to celebrate everything about it—to ghettoize your work, and to recall with fear and loathing how quickly and easily the earlier black film boom was deflated.

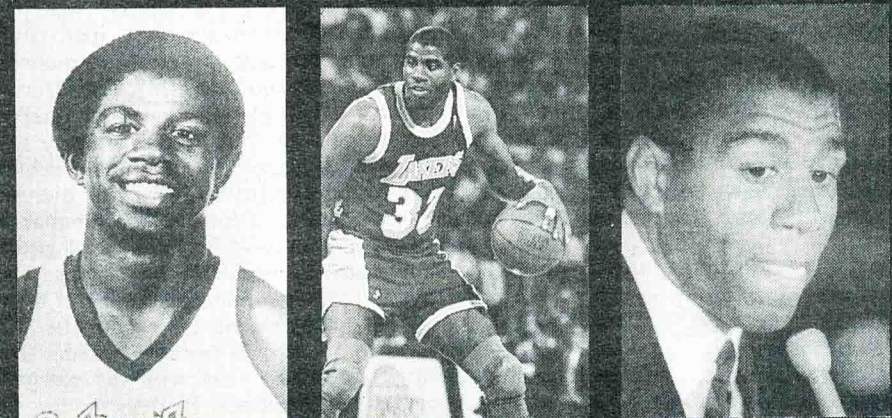
The great thing about rap for its early audience was that it created homegrown heroes with larger-than-life personas. Shaft, Truck Turner, and Nigger Charlie were disposable Hollywood fictions. Grandmaster Flash, Afrika Bambaataa, and Kurtis Blow were stars for the ghetto and of the ghetto. Similarly, the circumscribed world of independent film has its own heroes, such as MacArthur fellow Charles Burnett, whose *Killer of Sheep*, one of the select films stored in the National Archive, is regarded by many as the black masterpiece of the '70s. But in the current commercial climate, most black directors, like the early rappers, can't be sure whether this is their 15 minutes of fame or the beginning of a career. With the taste of hype lingering on their tongues, it'll be hard for them to swallow when the film colony decides, maybe in a fiscal quarter or two, that Hispanic films are the next big thing.

Though the saga of postsoul culture hinges on the way two fringe movements, hip hop and black film, came up from the under, other equally important strains reflected the unending debate over authenticity, co-optation, and redefinition that desegregation's new opportunities and contradictions intensified. Are blacks selling out our culture to corporate America? Is our media elite using its new clout to promote the best aspects of the race or just pandering to black folks' worst instincts? What do they owe their core audience? Aside from dollars, what is gained by reaching a white audience? Looking over the last 20 years, it's apparent that when confronted by crossover, assimilation, and white standards of success, most African Americans have said, "Well, I guess they're all right by me." Even our most nationalist pop culturalists, people like Chuck D and Spike Lee, work within the established systems of capitalization and distribution. Both, for example, maintain total creative control over their work, but the only revenue stream that flows directly into their accounts is merchandising money.

So despite the rise of Afrocentric consciousness, I find that many young-gifted-and-black postsouls practice integration without anxiety. Buppies, Baps, and Bohos have come of age since the end of the struggle against blatant segregation.

Through busing or family migration, many attended predominantly white schools and took their access to mainstream opportunities for granted. That's not to say they're Uncle Toms or even that they're out of touch with the masses of unassimilated African Americans, but both dangers lurk. Their experience, especially if it was not formed by ghetto life or some romantic ghetto-centric identification, makes race consciousness less central to their being. *The Cosby Show*, along with figures such as Bryant Gumbel, Oprah Winfrey, Michael Jackson, and Governor Doug Wilder epitomize this view. Bill Cosby's landmark sitcom embraced the middle-class achiever culture closest to the traditional civil rights agenda. Cosby's Dr. Cliff Huxtable and his lovely lawyer wife, Clair, represented the upside of crossover, with Lisa Bonet's Denise giving voice to the relatively color-blind children of this race-neutral environment. The boho vibe Bonet suggested was made explicit in the music, speech, and dress of her husband Lenny Kravitz, Tracy Chapman, Cree Summer, and the Black Rock Coalition. Looking back to the dawn of the '80s, Prince can now be seen as the "new breed leader" he always postured as, a figure emerging from the frozen North to announce that multiculturalism was coming, that explicit sexuality was no big thing, and that black-is-beautiful was just nostalgia. Along with his doppelgänger Michael Jackson, Prince successfully blurred ethnicity, escaping from standard definitions of blackness (and black male sexuality too) as he reaped both healthy artistic tension and megabucks.

Most of us aren't simply B-Boys, Buppies, Baps, or Bohos. We are some combustible compound—I used to describe myself as a B-boy intellectual. But in the two decades since Van Peebles's film, all of us have seen African American culture evolve (or, as some old jacks argue, devolve) from gospel-and-blues rooted with a distinctly country-accented optimism to assimilated-yet-segregated citified consciousness flavored with nihilism, Afrocentricism, and consumerism. The soul world lingers on, but for the current generation it seems as anachronistic as the idea of a National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and as technologically primitive as a crackly old Motown 45. Our aesthetic metamorphosis is not always a bad thing—Dr. J begets Air Jordan, Zora Neale Hurston begets Alice Walker. But it's not always good either—PCP begets freebase begets crack. Mostly, it just is, and there ain't no stoppin' it now.



MAGIC JOHNSON: WITH MICHIGAN, WITH THE LAKERS, ANNOUNCING HE'S HIV POSITIVE

GRAND OPENING



CADA

Broadway Square

Thursday, March 12 at Broadway and Fourth



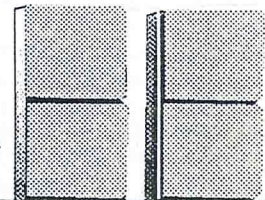
HI-FI CITY

150 FIFTH AVE. (19th & 20th St.) NYC • (212) 691-5823

MARCH MADNESS!

Super Satellite Speaker Systems

DANTAX
 Complete Satellite System from Denmark
 Only \$199



A/D/S
 Sub Set-2
 Only \$559

BOSE
 AM-5II
 Only \$559



JAMO
 SW300 System
 Only \$599

TRIAD
 Satellite System Six
 \$...Too Low To Show

AUTHORIZED DEALERS FOR: DENON, TANNOY, TARALAB, AIRTIGHT, CHARIO, A/D/S, CAMBRIDGE AUDIO, KLIPSCH, AUDIOLAB, TRIAD, JVC SUPERDIGIFINE, HARMAN KARDON, AUDIO ALCHEMY, ACROTEC, AUDIO STATIC, ETI, MIT, DAHLQUIST, CARY, MUSEATEX and many others!

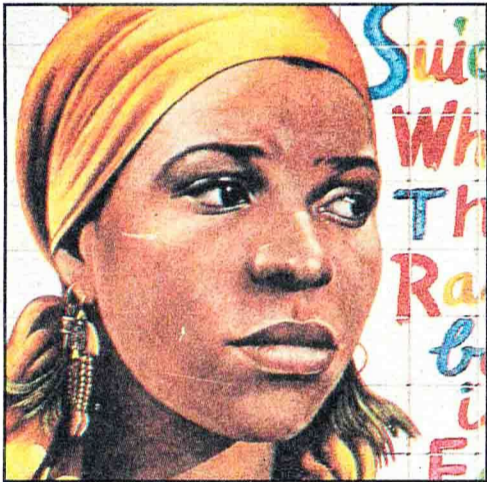
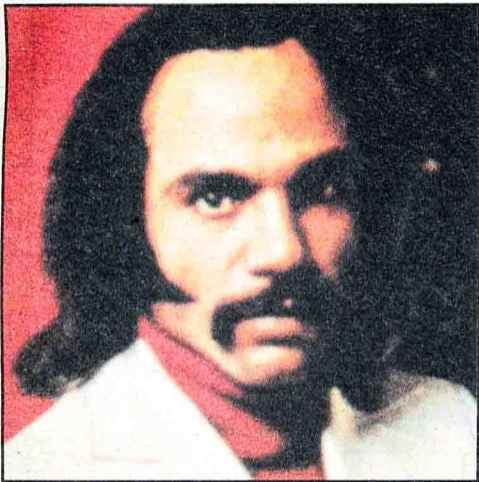
WPS 35860 NO. 11 © VV PUBLISHING CORPORATION

the village

VOICE

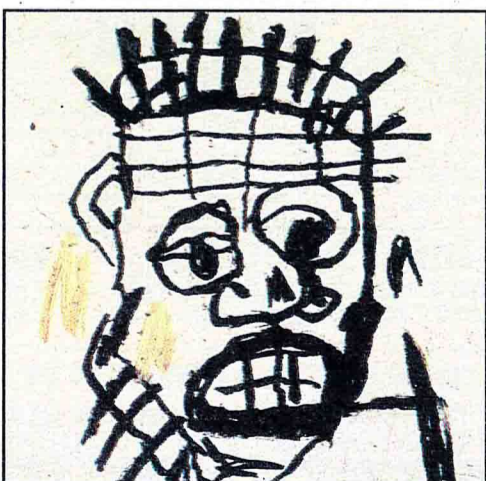
WORTH A SHOT

The State of AIDS Vaccines (P.16)



THE COMPLETE HISTORY OF POST-SOUL CULTURE

BY NELSON GEORGE



SID DAVIDOFF'S FEET OF CEMENT (BARRETT, P.11)