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Joe's Bed-Stuy Barbershop
(July 6)

Joe's Bed-Stuy Barbershop: We Cut Heads

PROGRAM NOTE:

New York City's place names are largely Dutch in origin. Manhattan was once New Amsterdam, while the region across the river was known as "Breuckelen." Within that area was the small hamlet of Bedford, which was firmly established by the Dutch ten years before the arrival of Peter Stuyvesant in 1636. Eventually, New Amsterdam became New York. By the nineteenth century, the area was no longer rural farming country but had become largely residential. With the opening of the Williamsburg Bridge in 1903, the community was made attractive to commuters, and there followed a boom in the construction of apartments up until shortly after the end of World War I. With the advent of the Great Depression in 1929, the community changed once more. The ethnic make-up of the neighborhoods changed rapidly as one group moved out and another group moved in. As the facades decayed and the property values shifted, a slum was born. Two communities that were concerned with the shifting life style of the area banded together to bolster one another in their attempts to cope with the situation. The residents of the old Bedford community and those of Stuyvesant Heights formed a new community with a new name: Bedford-Stuyvesant.

"In Black communities (urban or rural) there are focal points which serve as the meeting spots. First and foremost is the church but not far behind is the barbershop. It is in Joe's Barbershop where the people of Bedford-Stuyvesant (a five square mile neighborhood of 300,000 in Brooklyn) come to put their nickels and dimes in the numbers, a poor man's stock market. Many a person can be overheard: "If I just hit this number, I'll be ovah the hump. Things will be OK." But until those elusive three digits hit, you do the best you can."

--Spike Lee

Joe's Bed-Stuy Barbershop: We Cut Heads, Spike Lee's NYU thesis film, is notable for its keen sense of a very particular ethnic community. As with Wayne Wang's *Chan Is Missing*, Lee's oddball plot is rooted in specific realities--here the uneasy realities of black lower-middle-class Bedford-Stuyvesant, with its rumpled barbershop shmoozers on one hand and a new class of dapper gangsters, the numbers racket coming of age, on the other. These two worlds, or so the film argues, have become disturbingly entwined: reflective of larger troubles in Bed-Stuy and elsewhere.

With its titular barber knocked off early on, the film's center becomes Joe's partner Zack (Monty Ross), a moody, old-fashioned sort of barber, repelled by the hair-destroying "faggoty curls" and "processing" methods practiced by more successful peers. Initially, Zack also resists what one advocate describes as "the black man's Wall Street": the local numbers racket that might bring business to his empty shop. Though she's equally wary of the racket, Zack's graduate school-educated social worker wife Ruth (Donna Bailey) has a grip on modern times. And as the film evolves, she vacillates between chiding Zack for his antiquated ideas and suggesting they both flee New York for a farm she's conveniently inherited outside Atlanta. . . Like Wang with *Chan Is Missing*, Spike Lee is after something bigger than ethnic slice-of-life. He wants to probe various movie genres, explore prickly moral and ethnic dilemmas.

--J. Hoberman, *Village Voice*

BACKGROUND NOTE:

Spike Lee is a graduate of New York University Graduate Film School. He graduated from Morehouse College in Atlanta, Georgia with a BA in Mass Communications. His father, Bill Lee, a world-renowned jazz bassist and composer, scored this film and his son's earlier film *Sarah*. Spike Lee is twenty-five years old and lives in Brooklyn.

JOE'S BED-STUY BARBERSHOP: WE CUT HEADS

JOE'S BED-STUY BARBERSHOP: WE CUT HEADS dramatically enters the world of the corner barbershop, the local meeting place where people talk and put nickels and dimes on their numbers, and sometimes get a haircut. This engaging tale of murder, suspense, and the dream of making the-big "hit" is set against the graffiti-covered concrete of Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brooklyn's inner city community.

In Joe's barbershop more business is done playing numbers than cutting hair. Zachariah Homer inherits the business from his partner Joe who met an early end double-crossing the neighborhood kingpin Nicholas Lovejoy. Lovejoy controls the local numbers racket, the "poor man's stockmarket" which according to his philosophy provides jobs for the community and paves the way toward a better future. Through the film's humorous and touching scenes of Zack, Ruth his social worker wife, sidekick "Teapot" and gangster Lovejoy, we learn of Zack's unsuccessful attempt to break away from the "IT'S LIKE A JUNGLE SOMETIME" urban treadmill and start a new life. JOE'S BED-STUY BARBERSHOP skillfully combines wit and drama to provide a unique and highly entertaining perspective on inner city life.