

BECK & YOKO

THE NEW YORKER FOR SALE?

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# NEW YORK

## What's so funny?

Conan O'Brien turns five.

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# The Kids Are All Right

*Far and away the most reasonable voices to be heard at the Million Youth March were right on the street: The very youth the rally purported to want to reach.*

**T**HE POLICE WATCHED FROM rooftops, their heads in dark helmets bobbing along the brownstones on Malcolm X Boulevard. One relaxed, in silhouette, his hand resting on the butt of a rifle positioned on a tripod.

They were in the streets too, in their shiny thick black shirts, light cotton blue shirts. There were even white shirts—what cops call “the bosses,” the older, white, white-haired men. It was a hot, cloudless day, and there were badges glinting. Detectives with greased hair and long ties murmured into cell phones.

Shamiela Gray wore a pink track suit and green barrettes and smiled irrepressibly, showing a missing front tooth. She was 6 years old. She threw her arms up in the air. “I came to march for youth—to make peace, to make history!” she said. We were standing in what amounted to a pen, high metal barricades all around us. The police had divided each of the six blocks allotted to the march with these ramparts.

Shamiela’s father, Shamie, held her and her brother Amen-Ra’s hands. Shamie was 30 and had that look people associate with rappers—hooded sweatshirt, gold chains, army fatigue pants. Sweat trickled between his cornrows. He and the children had come all the way from the Bronx, and it had taken most of the morning. The mayor had cut off the nearby trains; the police were making the marchers walk down access streets between sawhorses. “I brought them,” Shamie said, “because I wanted to let them see we got to come together to form unity between people of all races.”

A police helicopter buzzed the crowd, hovering so low you could see a policeman’s leg cocked casually against the running board. Shamie’s voice was

drowned out by the sound. Shamiela looked up. “These cops are getting on my nerves,” she said.

It quickly became clear that there were not many youths coming to the Million Youth March. But the few who did come were searching for something; it may have been as simple as hope. “We need to see some changes. We need more leadership, more jobs, better schools,” said Jacob Engles, 17. “A lot of people our age have been

ple can co-exist,” said Jason, “that’s cool.”

“You can’t stand there.” An officer barked at the boys, motioning impatiently for them to move. People filed along, following police orders, sweating under the punishing sun. Shaking their heads, Jacob and Jason rejoined the flow; they were on their way to the Mount Olivet Baptist Church, to volunteer “in case anybody gets hurt.”

“When the KKK marched in Texas—



The few young people who attended really were searching for something—maybe just hope.

dealt the wrong card. How do we solve these problems?”

Jacob and his brother Jason were twins. They looked young for their age, in New York Yankees jerseys, with identically sparse mustaches struggling to mark them as men. They, too, had come from the Bronx, although they had debated whether they should make the trip. They had their differences with Khallid Abdul Muhammad, the controversial organizer of the march. “I disagree with him about whites and the whole race thing,” said Jacob. “If peo-

without a permit,” said Jason, “they got protection.”

Jacob said, “We are stereotyped as youth.”

“Whether you call yourself a nigger, you call yourself a Crip, you call yourself a Blood, I’m here to tell you that you are the chosen people of God!” The voice of Malik Shabazz, Khallid Muhammad’s attorney, boomed from tall speakers.

There was little response, a listless, beaten feel. A few middle-aged men put their fists in the air on cue. Workers World Party members, all white, filtered

through the crowds, passing out flyers and fishing for converts. Nation of Islam members in crisp bow ties and straw hats jabbered into cell phones. Everywhere, there were reporters, their bulky cameras and tape recorders flashing, metallic, adding to the sense of being surrounded by weaponry.

"You can't talk to them!" a woman in a peach silk jumpsuit shouted at me. "We don't *prep* them to talk the way white people do!"

"Ah, Mom." The three teenagers I'd been talking to—two boys and a girl perched on a barricade—had been describing their school; they said the books were "messed up," the after-school programs had been cut, the classes were so overcrowded that sometimes people had to sit on the floor. One of them mentioned, with disgust, a report that had recently appeared in the papers saying New York business leaders were reluctant to hire graduates of the city's public schools.

"You should be listening to these people up here on the stage—not talking!" their mother hissed. She threw an arm around them protectively, her back to me.

"What you doin' on our turf, punk?" Someone was blasting the Wu-Tang Clan from a high window, the gloomy beat competing with the amplified voice of another speaker. He was yelling, gravely, something about "honkies." The teenagers began to giggle. "Honkies?!" They laughed, their legs kicking with amusement.

If there was anything hopeful in the Million Youth March, it was that for most of the young attendees, the fire-and-brimstone race politics of Khalid Muhammad was an anachronism. Muhammad never seemed to understand this group that he was supposedly trying to reach out to, a new and multicultural generation. If they wanted anything from him, it was to voice their many urgent concerns, but these did not include hatred of others.

Mike Simpson, a slim young man of 25, stood with his arms folded, listening to the speakers. He looked tired and disappointed. The night before, he had traveled all the way from Cleveland on a bus to "represent for youth" and for his 3-year-old son. "I teach him you're supposed to love everybody," he said. "I

don't discriminate on nobody. If you got a good heart, you got a good heart, regardless of what color or whatever."

He took off his baseball cap and wiped his brow. "I'm here because we need some jobs, know what I'm saying? We need to stop killing off our own people. And we need to stop putting people in jail for nothing. It ain't no good." He said that he'd read somewhere that America had more people in prison than anywhere in the world—that in the nineties, the prison population had skyrocketed to nearly 2 million.

"Look around," he said, frowning. "Why they watching us like we criminals?"

Some white "bosses" were striding up the half-empty street, three abreast, chuckling.

Now a speaker on the stage was telling everyone how Khalid Muhammad was going to get them "reparations" for slavery: "No freedom, justice, or equality unless we are paid—we must be paid!" The crowd tried to cheer.

Vendors frantically peddled Million Youth March hats, buttons, flags, key chains, T-shirts. (continued on page 99)

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**Restaurant 222**—Cozy and romantic, with the feel of a townhouse, Frank Valenza's top-rated New American West Sider is a luxurious surprise in a neighborhood nearly bereft of them. The \$42.50 dinner prix fixe, available Sunday through Thursday, is a great deal. 222 W. 79th St. (799-0400). (E) AE, DC, MC, V.

**Sarabeth's**—This New York institution is a homey place for upscale down-home food like chicken potpie and pancakes. It also offers a children's menu and a mouthwatering bakery counter, with homemade, award-winning jams and preserves. 423 Amsterdam Ave., nr. 80th St. (496-6280). (M) AE, DC, DS, MC, V.

**Tavern on the Green**—A must for your country cousin. This maze-like collection of dining rooms, each with a view of the park better than the previous one's, is worth cutting the hansom-cab ride short for. Central Park at 67th St. (873-3200). (E) AE, CB, DC, DS, MC, V.

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**Cucina**—A labor of love. Northern Italian in an elegant and very well appointed room. Sensational antipasti. 256 Fifth Ave., nr. Garfield Pl. (718-230-0711). (M) AE, MC, V.

**Lundy Bros.**—This restored landmark restaurant serves a wide-ranging menu of fish, pasta, chicken, and steak but specializes in lobster and other varieties of seafood. Don't miss the oyster bar or the reconstructed shore dinner. Sunday brunch buffet available. 1901 Emmons Ave. (718-743-0022). (M) AE, MC, TM, V.

**Peter Luger's**—Steak for one, steak for two, steak for four, and creamed spinach. Apply for your own house credit card, or bring cash. 178 Broadway, at Bedford Ave. (718-387-7400). (E) (\$).

**Two Tom's**—Firehouse-kitchen ambience and a waiter who tells you what you want to eat. The double-rib pork chops are peerless, and the escarole is great, too, but refuse the mercilessly overcooked pasta when it's offered. Eat early during the week and call ahead on weekends. Regular private parties make getting a table frustrating, but it's always worth the trouble. 255 Third Ave., nr. Union St. (718-875-8689). (I) (\$).

## Queens

**Elias Corner**—Mix with the locals in Astoria as they queue up for a table at this Greek fish tavern. Don't wait for a menu; it won't come. Instead, eyeball the counter as you enter. If the offerings look like today's catch, they are. The owner fetches the fish each morning. Opt for the deep-fried, pinky-size bait fish over the squid. 24-01 31st St., at Astoria Blvd. (718-932-1510). (M) (\$).

**Pearson's Texas Barbecue**—Deservedly heralded as New York's best barbecue, this cozy Queens joint draws fans from much farther than across the East River. The barbecued Texas beef is sublime. 5-16 51st Ave., Long Island City (718-937-3030). (I) (\$).

**Water's Edge**—Every table has a view of Manhattan. A quiet and elegant space to partake of fancy American fare like roasted-chestnut soup and red snapper poached in orange-saffron infusion with baby fennel and chervil. Jacket required. 44th Dr. at the East River (718-482-0033). (E) AE, DC, MC, V.

## Sales continued from page 21

Every other kid was wearing something.

WE LOVE OUR YOUTH, read a sign somebody was waving.

The police were now ordering everyone to leave. The helicopter was zooming overhead, back and forth, the high whip of its blades inevitably conjuring up images that were never supposed to be New York, but Vietnam or L.A.

Khalid Muhammad was speaking. "If any one of these bastards riots here today, you take their nightstick the way they did brother Abner Louima, and you ram it up their behinds and jam it down their throats!" he bellowed.

For the first time all day the crowd began to get worked up. "Black power!" yelled a boy waltzing down the street. "Black power!"

"The police are only out here like this when it's people of color," said a young woman who called herself Belqis. She shook her head, in a tall maroon turban, pursing her lips, looking around uncomfortably. "That's what makes people angry—they say, okay, you want to treat us like animals, I'll show you an animal!" Belqis and her sister Favva hurried for the exits with the rest of the people leaving. Heads shot round. At the front of the march, near the stage, there seemed to be screaming.

I leaned down to talk to a copper-colored girl named Shafari Oliver, age 8. "I'm worried that this is gonna keep going on—this war," she said. "They'll put you in handcuffs just 'cause of the way you look—" Shafari was one of those children you see now all over New York, not black, white, Latino, or Asian, but a breathtaking meeting of all.

"One day, my uncle was going home in the Bronx," she said, "and the police, they just ran up on him and killed him—shot him in the back eight times, and shot him in his head—"

"His name was André," offered her aunt, Shahara, grimly. "They said he had a weapon, but he was coming home from a construction site, so he had his hammer and his belt—"

"Some people, they don't like our color," Shafari whispered, twisting the bottom of her shirt.

I asked her who these people were.

"A couple of them are Jewish," she said anxiously, eyes glistening.

Perhaps a better leader will come along who cares about what is good in today's kids, and cares to speak to it.

Now there was a small riot going on.

Out on Broadway, some kids slammed a water bottle against a police truck—as if trying to put a fire out—and took off running.

## Kaplan continued from page 32

reads, in part. "I was impressed by your manner, never lose that natural, intelligent speech pattern. I really think you will go all the way. Save your money, marry a nice girl, get a dog, and buy only blue shirts. . . . I could have gone even farther if I had your hair. . . ."

O'Brien cats at his desk as he discusses the "Year 2000" bit. "You always feel that the desk piece—the show's first piece—'has to be more durable,' he says. "More showbiz. You want to give them their roughage. Act-fours"—the name for the last bit on the show—"can be almost subliminal. Like the Hooded Sweatshirt Guys."

He quickly shows me a tape of the Hooded Sweatshirt Guys, a running gag. The Guys—played by writers Jon Glaser and Brian Stack, wearing dark sweatshirts—rise up silently, eerily, in the lower corners of the screen, late in the show, as O'Brien and Richter sit talking about something else. Mute, goofy, staring presences, they answer all questions by nodding or shaking their heads. Their names are Ira and Jeremy. They apparently come in peace.

O'Brien barely suppresses a smile as he watches the screen. Visual and highly marginal, the Guys clearly approach the essence of comedy for him. "There is no discernible joke," he says. "It's the kind of thing that has to happen after one in the morning. Sometimes I worry about the show, and then I think, *It's 12:30 at night, for God's sake*. Our motto should be, 'If you have any complaints about the show, you shouldn't be up that late anyway.'"

FIVE-FIFTEEN P.M.: THE HALL OUTSIDE STUDIO 6A. Conan O'Brien, now in tie, dress shirt, and slick suit slacks, has been transformed from room guy into host. He does deep knee bends as the din of the Max Weinberg 7 booms through the double doors. Then he goes in for the warmup.

The audience greets him wildly; O'Brien beams. The 200 faces are primarily white and mainly very young. The average age looks to be about 17. O'Brien bounds up the steps, picks a cute blonde from the seats, and, as the band plays a pounding number, goes into a wild dance. The blonde tries to keep up, then is reduced to laughter. After the song is over, O'Brien, grinning, breathing hard, looks around the audience. They're his.

"Were you frightened by that?" he asks. "Who wet himself?"

He turns to the blonde. "Were you frightened, or was it like a sexual thing?" he asks her.

"Frightened," she says.

O'Brien looks ecstatic. "That's what I was going for," he says.