

MEKHI PHIFER

BY HARIETTE SUROVELL

"Strikes" It Big as the Lead in *Clockers*

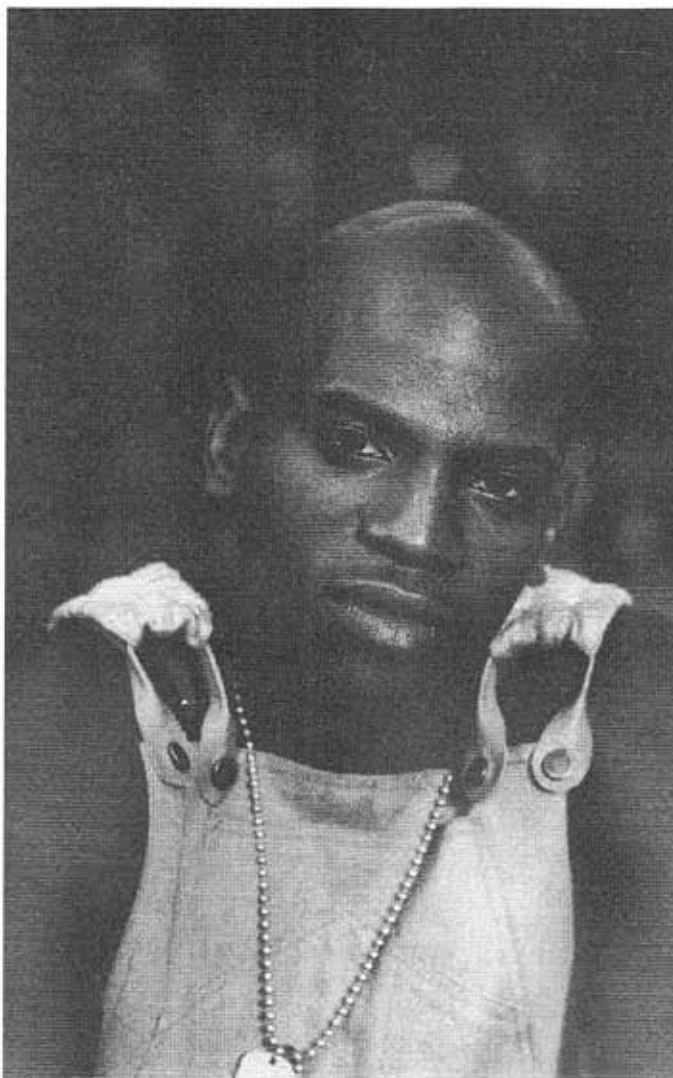
By now, the story has become almost legendary. Told about a casting call for the part of "Strike," *Clockers* complex, conflicted crack dealer, 18 year old, professionally untrained, Harlem-bred Mekhi Phifer beat out 1,000 competitors with a set of Woolworth's Polaroids. Not only has his performance garnered critical raves, but it has led to his appearing in the HBO movie *Tuskegee Airmen* which aired in August, an upcoming starring role in *New York Undercover*, and a cameo appearance in another Spike Lee movie, *Girl 6*. And all this without a smidgen of professional acting training.

Mekhi also has a rap recording deal with Warner Brothers Records, he co-owns a company that manages young Black talent, and SUNY/Newpaltz has offered him a full scholarship to study electrical engineering... which he still plans to do some day.

Meeting Mekhi at N.Y.C.'s Royalton Hotel was a profound experience. Not only has this 20 year old handled his newfound celebrity with grace and poise, but he seems to have used the lessons he has learned to become even more spiritual and evolved.

"Music was my first love," Mekhi told me as he devoured a cheeseburger with salsa. "I've been doing talent shows and community plays since I was 13. Being tied to my community and my roots is essential to me. A lot of my experience came from being on stage in Harlem. Then a producer/rapper told me to come into the studio, my manager sent my demo to Warner Brothers and I got a contract with them.

"Right about this time, a friend told me about the open call for *Clockers*."



I KNEW I'D NEVER FALL PREY TO THE TEMPTATIONS OF THE HARLEM STREETS BECAUSE OF MY MOTHER.

Spike auditioned me six different times. I had seen all of his movies and some of Scorsese's."

"I knew Harvey Kietel was Scorsese's boy but it wasn't really intimidating working with Harvey. I knew the scenes front to back and Harvey had just

gotten the script."

"Spike didn't want me to read the book *Clockers*, so I still haven't read it. But I met Richard Price, and I think it took a lot of courage for him to study an aspect of other people's lives and not be affected by the media or stereotypical exploitation. He gets deep into the characters — even the drug dealers. You feel for Strike. It took a lot of courage and I commend Richard for this.

"I see Strike as a compassionate human being. His ulcer shows his sensitivity. He wants to be away, but he just doesn't have the means. The trains make him more than just a shallow drug dealer.

"I personally don't relate to being vulnerable. I knew I'd never fall prey to the temptations of the Harlem streets because of my mother. She's a grade school teacher and my strongest influence. She's a strong, strong woman who taught me to respect women, to respect my elders, to have common courtesy, common sense, and to be a gentleman. She helped me to keep my eyes on the prize."

"I think not having professional acting training was the key to my freshness. I didn't try to follow a technique — I just let the words flow. Spike showed me a lot of the intricate parts of the camera. I like all his other movies, but I felt *Clockers* really got into the street life of the

projects."

"I really do feel fortunate. My friends have been my friends for years. They keep me grounded and they keep me honest."