Black Hollywood: Blaxploitation and Advancing an Independent Black Cinema

Score: **88%**
Rating: **Not Rated**
Publisher: **MVD Entertainment Group**
Region: **1**
Media: **DVD/1**
Running Time: **75 Mins.**
Genre: **Documentary/Historical/Independent**
Audio: **Dolby Digital 2.0 Stereo**

The credits open on **Black Hollywood: Blaxploitation and Advancing an Independent Black Cinema** to the sound of Grandmaster Flash singing *"Don't push me 'cause I am close to the edge / I'm trying not to lose my head"*. It's like taking a time machine back to the glorious days of my youth, although hip hop wasn't getting much radio play in Vermont back then... "The Message" was rocking urban audiences in the '80s, but it would be almost another decade before hip-hop and rap exploded into suburban white culture, and two decades before a black man would be elected President of the United States. If black images have become pervasive in entertainment and influential society today, it has everything to do with the sacrifice of the artists featured in this great documentary.
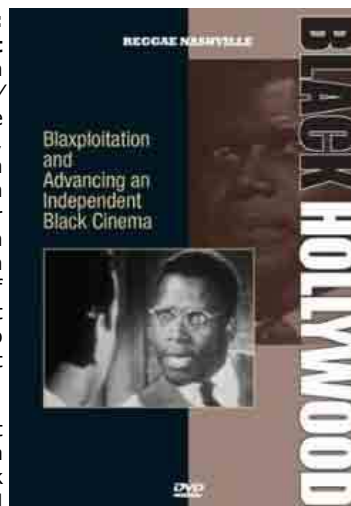
The best feature of **Black Hollywood** is that it entertains while educating. Exploitation is probably a nice word for how the film industry prolonged black stereotypes long after slavery was history and segregation was on its last legs, so it's hard to envision this being an incredibly uplifting period to study. Slave or servant characters in historical films would have been one thing, but **Black Hollywood** shows how the black roles outside of period pieces were not much better. Actors relegated to playing hookers, pimps, and criminals felt incredibly divided. On one hand, they were happy to be working; on the other hand, they realized their performances were hardly elevating the public image of black folks. Interviews with actors like Rosalind Cash flush out the history of local black theaters and "fubu" (before the clothing line...) films as a positive influence, while others like Jim Brown and Oscar Williams talk about the "Blaxploitation" phenomenon. The creation of a black consumer (if not middle) class meant more potential ticket sales, so the industry's doors began to slowly open to accommodate black actors, directors, and producers, making films for black audiences. The persistence of actors and directors striving to make films that moved away from negative stereotypes was at war with opposing forces for years after the formal Blaxploitation period ended.

There isn't a lot of in-depth critique of specific films, but clips are shown that connect to points being made in the interviews. There is a lot of talk-time here, but it is fascinating discussion around the issues that surrounded black films of the '70s and earlier. There was already a sense, when this film was made in the early '80s, that blacks in entertainment had turned the corner. Much of the suggestions made in interviews for this documentary are incredibly prescient considering the subsequent rise of black music. There's even a joke made about the fact that a black man would never be elected President, but might just work out as a Vice President. The punch line to the joke is that having a black Vice President would ensure that the President would never be assassinated... This made for good comedy in the '80s, and how ironic to now be living in the post-Obama reality! Figures like Michael Jackson, Richard Pryor, and Eddie Murphy are held up in **Black Hollywood** as examples of the new star-power of blacks in entertainment. The dedication of others like Sidney Poitier that made this possible is shown in a relatively lengthy segment on his rise to fame.

The production on this DVD is seriously unadorned, leaving many questions about the context in which it was made and the reason it was not released before now. It would be fascinating to hear some commentary as a special feature, explaining more about how **Black Hollywood** came into being. Most of the actors interviewed here did not go on to be highly visible, which is a shame. The truth is that modern actors and directors built their careers on the backs of these folks. Audiences that now accept black characters in serious dramas, as action heroes, or as romantic leads would be viewed as aliens by the audiences of twenty years ago. **Black Hollywood** comes across as powerful and righteous, rather than bitter or craving sympathy. The winds of change were already blowin' in the '80s, and **Black Hollywood** does a tremendous job chronicling, in a very stylish and succinct fashion, how long and hard the road before had been.

-Fridtjof, GameVortex Communications AKA Matt Paddock

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