



## Looking back at 'blaxploitation' films

by Stephen Whitty/The Star-Ledger

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Richard Roundtree starred in one of the films that sparked the blaxploitation movement -- the original 1971 film, "Shaft."

It lasted too long to be a fad, and was probably too much fun to be a movement.

It was criticized by its own community from the beginning, and deserted by its audience in the end.

But for the first half of the 1970s, genre films made by and for African-Americans -- dubbed "blaxploitation" -- were a hugely profitable and popular part of American movies.

Today, they're being nostalgically remembered. A new oral history, "Reflections on Blaxploitation" (Scarecrow Press), collects interviews with more than 20 filmmakers and actors. "Black Hollywood," a recently rediscovered documentary (Screen Edge/MVD Visual), looks at it as part of the entire history of African-American cinema.

But the genre didn't get much love at the time, from high-minded critics or socially progressive organizations.

Perhaps that was because it was too rough, too raw, too rude -- particularly in contrast to earlier African-American films. Oscar Micheaux, for example -- a pioneering black director who shot some of his movies in Fort Lee -- was a serious artist, concerned with issues of class and identity. He was a showman, too -- he promoted stars like Paul Robeson and Lorenzo Tucker ("the first Negro leading man in motion pictures") and had a flair for melodrama -- but his films were never crass or crude.

Neither were the movies that followed during the civil rights era. There were musicals like "Carmen Jones" and dramas like "Intruder in the Dust"; new personalities were discovered, from the iconic (Sidney Poitier) to the tragic (Dorothy Dandridge) to the now criminally forgotten (James Edwards.) Yet these were made by white directors, aimed primarily at white audiences. Their hope was to liberalize the majority, not entertain a minority.

It took the '60s -- and a rising tide of black power -- to create a new kind of film for and by African-Americans.

It came slowly. You can see hints of it in 1967's "In the Heat of the Night" in which a coldly furious Sidney Poitier slaps a white racist. That was an announcement -- no longer would the black hero suffer nobly, silently. (The sequel, 1970's "They Call Me MISTER Tibbs" only confirmed it.) Other films -- like that year's "Cotton Comes to Harlem," directed by veteran activist Ossie Davis -- added layers of cool humor and hip weariness to their black heroes.

It took African-American directors Gordon Parks and Melvin Van Peebles to really kick the movement off, though, the next year -- and show two possible paths.

Parks' "Shaft" took the conservative approach. A standard detective film in everything but race, it embraced genre rules rather than upending them, and sought no new artistic breakthroughs (apart from its immediately classic, funky Isaac Hayes score). It aimed to give black audiences the same kind of Hollywood movies that white ones got -- a "black James Bond," is how Parks described Richard Roundtree's hero.

Van Peebles' "Sweet Sweetback's Badasssss Song," meanwhile, was proudly, provocatively radical -- right from the title (which most newspapers refused to print) and its unabashed sex (causing it to be "Rated X -- by an all-white jury!" as the posters announced). Financed independently (Bill Cosby loaned the director \$50,000), it was a literally revolutionary film, with artsy camera work and prostitutes and Black Panthers as heroes.

Parks wanted to be part of the system; Peebles wanted to turn it upside down. But when these very opposite films both became hits, copycats jumped in, mixing elements of both.

From Parks, they took a fondness for conventional, crowd-pleasing genres -- action pictures, horror films, comedies (while ignoring his studied professionalism). From Van Peebles, they

grabbed a rebellious identification with anti-heroes -- pimps, drug dealers, thieves (while studiously avoiding the outsider politics behind it.)

And "blaxploitation" began.

At first, the word stung like a slap. Fred Williamson, who would smartly take control of his own projects, zeroed in on its intimations of powerlessness. ("Who was being exploited?" he asks in "Reflections on Blaxploitation." "Certainly not me.") Others saw the unfair racial aspect of it. (Why, director Oscar Williams would ask, wasn't "Death Wish" seen as "whitesploitation"? How come only the films for African-Americans were singled out as being sexist and violent?)

The fact was, the put-down originated with leaders in the mainstream black community, who coined the phrase to criticize the less-than-positive images being presented. Films that featured African-Americans playing brilliant doctors marrying into Katharine Hepburn's family were one thing; flashy, trashy B movies that had "Superfly" drug dealers as their heroes were something else.

It was the same question that Jewish novelists like Philip Roth had faced only a decade before: Now that we can tell some of our own stories, what stories should we tell? Yes, it's a good movie, but is it good for us? It was a question every minority has asked, at some point. And it would soon be joined by a more universal worry -- Does art reflect society's ills, or only encourage them? -- that continues to this day, in debates over gangsta rap or torture-porn horror films.

These were legitimate concerns. But if the experts were worried, the audiences weren't. They were too busy having fun.

And blaxploitation movies were fun. There were great scores (including Curtis Mayfield's for "Superfly," Marvin Gaye's for "Trouble Man" and Bobby Womack's title song for "Across 110th Street"). There were brand-new stars -- like strapping action heroes Tamara Dobson and Pam Grier, matinee idol Billy Dee Williams and scene-stealing character actors Antonio Fargas and Yaphet Kotto.

And, like many genre films, they smartly rewrote classic plots. Harkening back to "Get Carter," "Hit Man" had Bernie Casey as an assassin out to avenge his niece's death. "Black Mama, White Mama" switched genders on the classic "The Defiant Ones." "Black Caesar" starred Williamson in an updating of Warner's gangster flicks. "Blacula" created a new vampire myth around an African prince.

The entertainment they provided often crossed barriers. Kids of all races went to see "Scream, Blacula, Scream," while the Diana Ross soap opera "Mahogany" drew white women and gays. The films didn't play only in black neighborhoods (while other classier, non-exploitation black films, like "Sounder," and "Lady Sings the Blues," were soon competing for Academy Awards). Yet they gave black audiences something Hollywood hadn't before -- a chance to see themselves on screen, standing tall and fighting back.

True, the films could sink to a simplistic get-whitey level, pandering by casting campy villains like Sid Haig or Shelley Winters. But to see Richard Roundtree turn a fire hose on his pursuers in "Shaft," or Pam Grier shoot her villainous ex-lover in the crotch in "Coffy" was to turn old stories of abuse on their heads. This was revolutionary on a far more visceral level than Van Peebles' exhortations against "the Man."

And then, by 1976 or so, the genre went into decline.

There were a number of factors. The Coalition Against Blaxploitation -- a product of the NAACP, the Urban League and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference -- continued to be a harsh and active critic. And studios -- which had just scored enormous hits with "Jaws" and "The Exorcist" -- were discovering that films could be huge inner-city hits without a single black star.

"We were treated as a fad," Vonetta McGee says in "Black Hollywood," "instead of as an art form."

And then there were the flaws in the films themselves. True, some new stars had been discovered; some films (comedies like "Cooley High," dramas like "Cornbread, Earl and Me") had raised the bar. But when a Broadway-trained star like William Marshall could only get parts playing monsters, when the screenwriting had become so routine you couldn't tell "Coffy" from "Foxy Brown," it was clear the trend was winding down.

It was to get worse, something that gives "Black Hollywood" a particularly bittersweet feel, as '80s interviews feature talented performers like McGee and Paul Mooney talking about their limited opportunities. (Diahnne Abbott recalls the racist "compliment" of being told she was too attractive -- i.e., too light-skinned "" for certain roles.) Yet sadly, their opportunities were to grow even more limited as blaxploitation pictures disappeared completely.

And yet the genre's influence lingers.

At first, the movies were both gone and forgotten. The next generation of African-American directors seemed embarrassed by their older brothers, more likely to respectfully cite Jean-Luc Godard than Gordon Parks. When I asked them once about a specific shot in "Dead Presidents," the Hughes Brothers happily quoted "Mean Streets"; queried on an early, transformative film experience, John Singleton told me about seeing "The 400 Blows" at a revival house.

These were directors who wanted to make great films, and that was not something you learned from watching "Black Belt Jones," or from limiting yourself to only one kind of art.

Yet the Hughes Brothers went on to direct "American Pimp," a documentary that owes an enormous debt to "The Mack." John Singleton remade Parks' "Shaft."

And while Spike Lee would probably prefer to be compared to no one, his approach to his career -- the go-it-alone beginnings, the outspoken successes, the sometimes combative confidence -- is straight from the Van Peebles playbook.

There are still salutes to the genre in today's films. Like "Black Dynamite," a Sundance hit headed to theaters in December, that features Michael Jai White as a slick action hero attended by a hip "harem." Or Quentin Tarantino's homages, from the Pam Grier vehicle "Jackie Brown" to the upcoming "Inglourious Basterds," which tweaks the title of an old Fred Williamson movie.

And there are other signs of its lasting influence. The recent "Notorious" had a gritty-yet-glamorized salute to the streets that wouldn't have been out of place in "Superfly." And Tyler Perry connects just as unapologetically with his audience as his forebears did -- while similarly

ignoring the occasional (and familiar) complaints from a few African-American critics that he's not delivering the "right" message.

Blaxploitation was a study in contrasts at the time. It used conservative story-telling forms, but often delivered radical messages. It relied on a crude filmmaking style, yet employed sophisticated musical scores. It empowered a generation of actors and actresses, while often stereotyping them as studs and sluts, pushers and hookers.

And more than 30 years later, it's still around -- and no less complicated than it ever was.

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