

## **Black Like Me**

Now relegated mostly to the backwaters and footnotes of 20<sup>th</sup> Century history is “Black Like Me,” a book written by a white Texan, John Howard Griffin, for the purpose of enlightening fellow Caucasians about life in the Jim Crow South. It’s greatest success came in confirming the horror stories related by negroes – this was before “black” and “African-American” entered the vernacular – about such terrible realities as lynching; designated whites-only sections in restaurants and theaters; forbidden rest rooms and drinking fountains; “coon hunts”; and men being forbidden from looking into the eyes of a white woman. Agitators were routinely beaten for demanding their constitutional rights and voting was privilege limited to citizens who could pay a fee and/or pass a test. Northerners knew more about Apartheid in South Africa and Rhodesia than the effects of segregation in Dixie. Griffin had witnessed things that shocked him and knew nothing would change if the truth continued to be swept under the rug by the media. To this end, he worked with doctors to tint his skin to a shade that would allow him to “pass” and spent hours under a sunlamp. It worked so well that he was able to experience things he previously believed were passed along for shock value.

Griffin and his editor both understood he would be putting his career and possibly his life in jeopardy, simply for reporting the truth. Moreover, Griffin put himself in a position where he could be accused by black activists of exploiting the situation strictly for personal gain and self-aggrandizement. This was especially true when the serialization of “Black Like Me” ended in *Sepia* magazine and the subsequent book became a must-read in many parts of the country. In fact, it became required reading in some high schools. Three years later, “**Black Like Me**” was adapted for the screen by Carl Lerner — editor of “*The Fugitive Kind*” and “*Requiem for a Heavyweight*,” among other ’50s classics — as his first and only feature.

Without researching the film’s history, it’s difficult for me to say why the movie was entrusted to as many first-time filmmakers as it was. It’s entirely possible that distribution would have been limited to only a very few Northern cities and college towns and it wasn’t worth the effort or financial risk for the studios. At the time, movies were edited so as not to offend racist audiences in the South with visions of blacks and whites consorting and carrying on. Lerner’s adaptation isn’t the most elegant or technically proficient movie ever made, but it’s true to the book and has a decidedly *noir* texture that still is effective. The scenes shot on the nighttime streets of New Orleans and in the nightclubs where black patrons danced wildly to post-war swing and R&B are especially effective. The movie’s biggest problem comes in the inconsistent skin tones on the face James Whitmore, which went from light brown to minstrel-show black. The script also demanded of Whitmore that he chew far too much scenery when he wasn’t gracefully interpreting Griffin’s message. Among the cast members are such now-familiar faces as Roscoe Lee Brown, Al Freeman Jr., Will Geer, Heywood Hale Broun, David Huddleston, Raymond St. Jacques, Denver Pyle, Matt Clark and Sorrell Brooke (a.k.a., “Boss Hogg”). “Black Like Me” isn’t easy to watch, even now, but its value as a historical document can’t be dismissed. It is being released for the first time in DVD, fully restored from the original negative, the package includes the bonus disc, “Uncommon Vision: The Life and Times of John Howard Griffin,” an excerpt from “Reluctant Activist: The Authorized Biography of John Howard Griffin.”

– Gary Dretzka

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