

The DVD-Laser Disc Newsletter

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As African American as James Whitmore

In the maturation of a nation and a society, the unevenness and awkwardness of progress during its formative era is akin to adolescence. America's adolescence began with the Emancipation Proclamation and concluded sometime after the Civil Rights Act, when African-Americans began appearing in politics, business and culture without serious backlash. Some say it was the acceptance of Bill Cosby or Shirley Chisholm, others point to the crossover appeal of Michael Jackson or maybe the success of Famous Amos cookies. Whatever the tipping point was, by the time Barack Obama became president, the transition to early adulthood was complete. That doesn't mean that racism has disappeared by any means, but it no longer defines American society, which is much more, today, about the inherent contradictions between capitalism and democracy than about the appearance, beliefs or persuasions of individuals. But America was still in its final stages of adolescence when John Howard Griffin, a decade after World War II, chemically altered his skin tones and passed as an African American in the South to write about the experience, and it was still in its adolescence when, in 1964, a film was made about those experiences, starring James Whitmore as Griffin, **Black Like Me**, which has now been released by Norton Media and VSC (UPC#778854191891, \$25). It is a very awkward, very embarrassing movie in a lot of ways, and is to **Gentleman's Agreement** what Elvis Presley's *Long Tall Sally* is to Pat Boone's. It can't help but to be patronizing. Even as the hero focuses on how shamefully other white people are treating him, he, and even the film, are often oblivious to the black culture around him. Most of the blacks he meets are docile, which is how they might appear in public, but they are that way in private, too, as if both he and the movie were blind to the nuances of spirit that would be displayed in private, even in a society as oppressive as the South was at the time. The younger people he meets are more confrontational (and the one younger woman he spends time with has no compunction about committing adultery), but the film still seems to be playing into stereotypes rather than blasting through them. And yet, it is because of these flaws that the film is so fascinating and so important. It captures an aspect of white attitudes at the time that is intrinsic

to understanding why racism lingered as long as it did. It wasn't that a majority of white people supported the racists, it's that they were clueless about who they were defending. The racists controlled the story, and it wasn't until tales—and **Black Like Me** would be one of them—about the other side began to proliferate that their hold on the narrative could be broken.

As for Whitmore, you cringe every time he is on the screen, not because he looks black, but because he doesn't. Unlike the hero within the story, the actor is only using makeup, and it is difficult to believe anyone, black or white, mistakes him for the real thing. The film is episodic, following his interactions with an array of people and what he learns from each encounter. Running 105 minutes, the film, although undeniably true, is too persistently absurd to ever be dull, but viewers who are not appreciative of its historical context are going to find it pretty ridiculous.

The black-and-white picture is letterboxed with an aspect ratio of about 1.85:1 and an accommodation for enhanced 16:9 playback. The image is free of wear and contrasts are reasonably sharp. The monophonic sound is okay, and there is English captioning. Three trailers are included, along with a few lobby cards in still frame.

A second platter in the set features a 58-minute documentary, *Uncommon Vision: The Life and Times of John Howard Griffin*. If it was a fiction movie, you'd never believe it, and not just because he passed for black to write about race relations. He moved by himself to Paris when he was still a young teenager, ended up working with the French underground when the Nazis invaded, eventually came back to the States and enlisted, was sent to the Pacific (don't you love the logic of the military), where he was blinded in an air raid and remained blind for a number of years before finally regaining his sight—and so on. Only a couple of inserts from **Black Like Me** are utilized, as most of the program combines still photos with archival footage and vaguely staged re-enactments to give the show a little movement. The 2011 program makes a worthy counterpart to the feature film, reinforcing its biographical context and underscoring just how much stranger truth can be than fiction. The black-and-white picture is letterboxed with an aspect