

1960s CIVIL RIGHTS STRIFE: DIGITAL DIVISION

BLACK LIKE ME (1964) B&W 8881/2
D: Carl Lerner. James Whitmore, Roscoe Lee Browne, Lenka Peterson, Sorrell Brooke, Will Geer, Al Freeman, Jr., Raymond St. Jacques. 107 mins. (VSC, \$24.98) 12/12

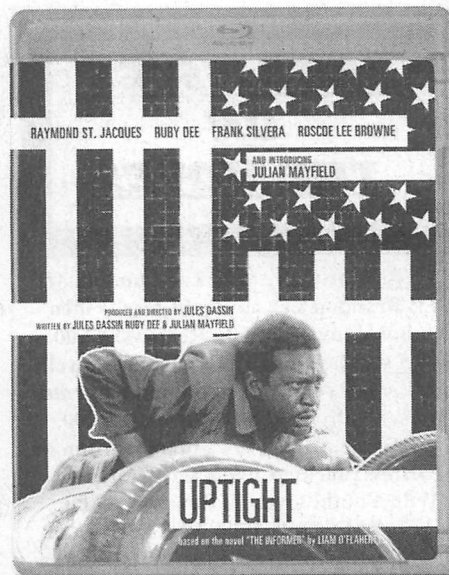
Whitmore makes for an unlikely-looking African-American, but so did his model John Howard Griffin, the real-life white Texas reporter who, in 1959, had his skin chemically darkened so he could travel the bigoted byways of the American South and experience, at least temporarily and superficially, life as an oppressed black man. The film opens in media res, with our artificially tanned seeker, redubbed John Finley Horton, getting grief from a racist bus driver (Dan Priest) before striking out on his own and finding shoeshine stand operator Burt Wilson (Richard Ward), the first of many guides willing to lend a helping hand to a fellow black man in a hostile land. Filmmaker Lerner's episodic structure serves the story well, as the wandering Horton's experiences take on disturbingly predictable patterns, most notably rides from outwardly friendly white men covertly looking to satisfy their sexual curiosity re: their "exotic" brethren. Strong character turns by near-future **Seconds** villain Geer, seen here in similarly seemingly folksy but sincerely sinister form, and Browne, as a half-crazed, self-loathing educated black, add further texture, while cinematographers Victor Lukens and Henry Mueller's cameras capture the Deep South's rolling rural and ramshackle small-town locations with almost Walker Evans-like vividness. While **Black Like Me** can't help but take the shape of a paranoid thriller, lighter moments also surface, including a then-requisite twist sequence at a local black nightclub, where Horton partakes of an im-

promptu interracial date. Griffin couldn't truly get inside the skin of his alter ego, but he returned from his terrifying travels with a fistful of truths, and Lerner and crew were able to translate them to the screen with both subtlety and force. **Black Like Me** fully earns its place in the small but enduring pantheon of '60s civil-rights films headed by Roger Corman's **The Intruder** (VS #65), Michael Roemer's **Nothing But a Man** (VS #53), Larry Buchanan's grittily effective **Free, White and 21** (VS #1), Ted V. Mikels' raw but gut-punchy **The Black Klansman** (Code Red), and Larry Peerce's searing **One Potato, Two Potato** (still criminally unavailable on home-video). VSC's double-disc set includes the worthy bonus documentary **Uncommon Vision: The Life and Times of John Howard Griffin**, tracing that unique adventurer's life as a soldier, blind man (for some six postwar years, a key prompt to his later mission), journalist and spiritual seeker, plus a printed excerpt from Robert Bonazzi's **Reluctant Activist: The Authorized Biography of John Howard Griffin**. Hopefully, the DVD set will inspire viewers to scope out Griffin's original book to boot.

UPTIGHT (1968) 888

D: Jules Dassin. Raymond St. Jacques, Ruby Dee, Julian Mayfield, Frank Silvera, Roscoe Lee Browne, Max Julien. 104 mins. (Olive Films, \$24.95 DVD) 10/12

This Black Power update of John Ford's IRA drama **The Informer**, drawn from Liam O'Flaherty's 1925 novel, reps a strange mélange of the harsh and the lyrical, the dated and the fresh. Following an oddly whimsical illustrated opening credits sequence created by frequent kid-film animators John and Faith Hubley, our basic story hews pretty closely to the original despite some contemporaneous tweaks. In the wake of Martin Luther King's murder, black militants led by a bitter young Johnny (Julien) decide to take drastic action. When burned-out, turned-out Tank Williams (Mayfield, sort of a '60s spin on Forest Whitaker) is deemed too old-school to run with his longtime civil-rights cronies, he succumbs to temptation and accepts \$1,000 in blood money to rat out Johnny, who's promptly gunned down by trigger-happy white police. Like Andrew McLaglen's dim, doomed Gypo Nolan in Ford's 1935 original, Tank spends a tormented, guilt-plagued night blowing the money in local bars and making himself an obvious target for lethal retribution. At first he tries to shift suspicion to openly gay professional snitch Clarence (Browne in a flamboyant turn), but his self-destructive behavior becomes too overt to escape attention. At times director/co-scripiter (with actors Mayfield and Dee) Dassin remains both too stubbornly faithful to the original and too desperate to seem "with-it." After establishing himself as a top noir and caper auteur (the mega-influential 1948 NYC-set sensation **The Naked City**, the justly heralded 1955 Parisian heist classic **Rififi**), Dassin tackled somewhat lighter topics during his later blacklist-driven years abroad, most notably with his popular Greece-set comedy-drama



Never on Sunday (1960). Not that he'd lost his sense of grit—his decrepit, desolate Cleveland hellscape, evocatively captured by cinematographer Boris (The Pawnbroker, 12 Angry Men) Kaufman, is as poetically bleak as they come—but several scenes play far too theatrically, with loud performances (particularly from Dee and Mayfield) better suited for the stage than the screen. That said, **Uptight** still rates as essential artistic and time-capsule viewing. A surreal sequence that sees a drunken Tank engage a group of slumming Caucs in an arcade is a classic in its own right, a psychedelic psycho-drama nightmare filled with distorted sound and wild Coney Island mirror imagery, visuals equaled only by Ray Moyer's set design for Clarence's garish crimson-drenched pad. Keyboard wizard Booker T. Jones' score opens with a poignant vocal, then butts out for most of the picture, adding only intermittent musical commentary until the final sequence when the composer, with his legendary band the MGs, kicks into the contrapuntal "Time Is Tight" (later a huge instrumental hit). Veteran West Indian multi-culti thesp Silvera, cast as everything from Mexican (in the same year's **Hombre**) to Italian (Stanley Kubrick's **Killer's Kiss**), gets to portray an African-American here, a minister intent on mediating among the fractious factions. In terms of art and message, **Uptight** is the epitome of a mixed bag, but remains one that demands to be experienced. 8

—The Phantom

KINO KING

On the verite front, Kino Classics issues the 1970 Academy Award Nominee for Best Documentary Feature, **King: A Filmed Record... Montgomery to Memphis** (\$34.95). The double-disc set contains a restored 181-minute edition mixing newsreel-style footage of Dr. Martin Luther King's journey with guest testimonials by Harry Belafonte, Ruby Dee, Burt Lancaster, Paul Newman and many other celebs filmed by Sidney Lumet and Joseph L. Mankiewicz.

