

SOLID!

THE D20 BLAXPLOITATION EXPERIENCE

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WRITTEN BY:

Dave "Blue Eyed Soul Brotha" Webb and R. Hyrum "Big Daddy" Savage

ADDITIONAL MATERIAL BY:

Tony "Tyrone 'Vramite" DiGerolamo
Caias "Jersey Devil" Ward

DIRECTED BY:

Dos Hermanos Publishing

PUBLISHED BY:

Wingnut Games
704 Thompsons Drive
Brentwood, CA 94513
www.wingnutgames.com

CINEMATOGRAPHY:

Ashe Marler
Joe Walton
Dos Hermanos Publishing

EDITED BY:

Croaker

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INTRODUCTON

When this book was first conceived it started out as being a novelty, one that quickly went through several metamorphosis into the product that you now hold in your hands. We wanted our foray into supporting d20 Modern to be unique as well as entertaining, and I believe we've achieved just that. *Solid!*, The d20 Blaxploitation Experience, provides an interesting view towards the world at large as it captures the vision that only Hollywood can produce. As a film student many years ago I became intrigued with the Blaxploitation genre and since that time I have found that my interests have not waned. I wanted to put together a homage to the heroes and heroines, like Shaft and Cleopatra Jones, who stood up for what they believed in and provided a model for later heroes to work from.

Before I get too far along with this book I want to take a moment to insert my standard disclaimer of 'if you don't like it, then don't read it'. Each one of us has different tastes in what we like, and I should hope that if you're reading this book then you're a fan of Blaxploitation-just like I am. I also need to iterate that *Solid!* is a role-playing supplement, not a political or racial statement, intended for pure entertainment value and perhaps a brief history lesson, nothing more.

WHY BLAXPLOITATION?

To put it simply: Why not? Looking around we found that there were very few role-playing games that were centered on providing strong role models for the African-American role-playing community. We wanted to provide a product that would not only recognize this, but also spotlights

it in such a manner that all could enjoy it. The Blaxploitation film genre is a gold mine for role-playing opportunities, allowing people to delve into situations that would otherwise be foreign to them. C'mon, we're gamers. Most of us want to be as cool as John Shaft, but only in a role playing game can a pasty 16-year-old white kid from Suburbia pretend he's the Mack. Somehow "Chip! He's a mean mutha..." doesn't have the same ring to it, dig?

Case in point, why is a cracker like me writing this book? Again the answer is simple: I wanted to. I grew up in New Orleans and was surrounded by cultural diversity, from Haitian to Irish, Italian to Vietnamese. It didn't matter if you were black, white, yellow or brown; you lived in the same block, played with the same toys and went to the same movies. Movies such as *Black Caesar* and *Hell Up In Harlem* (both of which Larry Cohen, a white man, directed) began filling the houses of the neighborhood theaters, and having an uncle that was into movies as much as I was didn't hurt either. Does this make me an expert on African-American culture?

Not by any stretch of the imagination, but I do know one or two things about the Blaxploitation film genre and that's what this book is about. One of the reasons for this book is because I love the imagery that the Blaxploitation films provide. It's a love of the strong hero that will not give up or give in when faced with overwhelming odds. What I hope is that the next generation will bring these images into a new time so all can enjoy their appeal. So with this in mind I ask that you slip on your brim and grab your gat as we roll back the clock to a time when it was hard to keep a badass brutha in check.

CHAPTER 1: DON'T SAY THE "B" WORD MUTHAF@#\$ER!



Blaxploitation /blax sploi tation/ adj.

1. A commercially-minded film made during the 70's for black audiences.

"I had a grudge that kept going, going, and going of what I kept seeing on the screen, and said, 'Well, shit, I can do better than that!'"

--Melvin Van Peebles

THE MEN, THE MYTH, THE MOVIES

In 1971 a Negro filmmaker chose to express his displeasure with society and speak freely without fear of reprisal. That expression? The controversial hit *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*. The filmmaker was Melvin Van Peebles: the "Godfather of Blaxploitation". Not only did he write the script, but he also starred in it, produced it and composed the film's soundtrack. Van Peebles introduced this stylized "do-it-yourself" methodology, allowing him to retain total control over the project. An entirely black production, it forever

altered the way the black community was portrayed in film. *Sweet Sweetback's* explicit depiction of sex and violence, heralded in a new era for Hollywood and a new genre, Blaxploitation, was in full swing.

Van Peebles defined the formula for success in creating films for and by black people. He sold *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* as a revolutionary movie supported by the Black Panthers, but was it? Or was it merely an exploitation of a race?

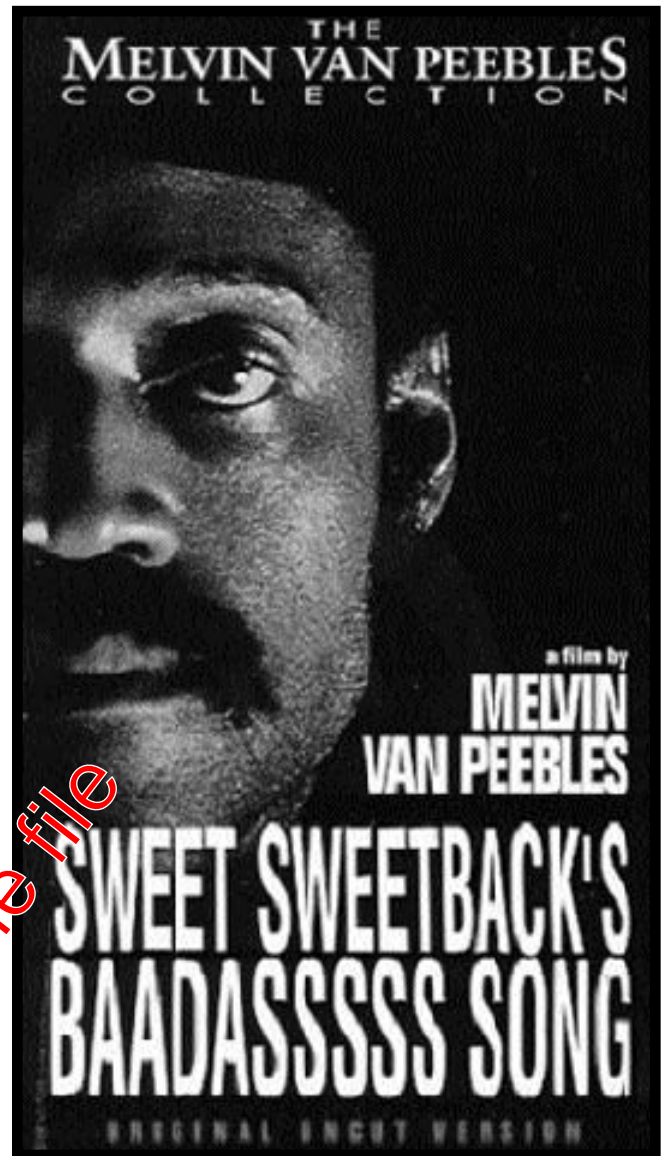
The NAACP, combining 'Black' and 'Exploitation,' coined the term 'Blaxploitation' to describe the new genre. All those that worked in the industry during that period despised the "B" word, feeling they were happily paid for their work and the black audiences certainly enjoyed the films. So who was being exploited? Blaxploitation cinema gave black audiences a positive sense of identity when it was desperately needed. In the 70's the majority of white cinema was about defeatism. Nixon and Watergate left people feeling powerless and

betrayed. Blaxploitation movies featured heroes that triumphed and characters who could effect change, ignoring the despondent attitudes that swept the country. They exemplified success, no matter the cost as the heroes often fell into conflict with ineffectual government leaders and the rampant, poverty-fueled nihilism that threatened to engulf the black community.

What made *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* incredible to its black audience was the fact that the main character, Sweetback, escapes his pursuers and isn't killed in the film, something never before seen in cinema. In the film, a smooth talking stud (Sweetback) witnesses a group of police officers brutally assaulting an innocent black youth. He beats down the officers shortly afterward and finds himself on the run. Van Peebles film noir influences are obvious as Sweetback journeys through the dimly lit back streets of the ghettos where pushers, pimps and hustlers rule and violence threatens to erupt at any moment. He seeks, and ultimately finds, refuge in the sordid underworld community of seedy sexual encounters and wanton violence. He takes on a corrupt white system and triumphs over it, again something never before seen.

Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song was the largest grossing independent film of that year marking the first time a black man had bypassed the 'old boy's network' in Hollywood and made a feature without compromise. With Van Peebles success, other films emerged in rapid succession, films like Gordon Park's *Shaft* (1971) and Gordon Parks Jr.'s *Superfly* (1972). Both films were well received by the black audience, although white moviegoers seemed to tolerate *Shaft* more. *Shaft* gave us the hero we all wanted to be: cool, sexy, tough and self-possessed as he walked a tight-rope between 'whitey's world' and the ghetto. Hey, he's the black private dick that's a sex machine with all the chicks. Who wouldn't want to be this guy? The secret behind *Shaft's* popularity with not only black, but white audiences, was his ability to be cool in any situation, he refused to give into society's view on how he should live his life. He was the Everyman hero, the guy on your block that you knew growing up. You knew a John Shaft in high school and wished you could be more like him.

Superfly, on the other hand, was everything that *Shaft* was not; a super hip coke pusher doing what he had to do in order to 'get out of the game', the only game, as quoted in the movie, that the Man had left for them to play.



Superfly capitalized on the insights of *Shaft* and *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*. It had a soulful soundtrack by Curtis Mayfield that set the tone of the movie, providing an example of how essential the right music is in order to convey atmosphere in cinema. Mayfield's work embodied everything that *Superfly* portrayed: a sordid lifestyle of drugs and sex. Added to the mix was the badass urban hero played by strikingly handsome Broadway actor Ron O'Neal who moved across the screen with tiger-like grace. If John Shaft was the black Superman, then Youngblood Priest (the main character in *Superfly*) was the ghetto equivalent to the anti-hero, steeped in individualism, self-assertion, and aggression. Priest also had some of the same problems that *Shaft* did. He's ridiculed for being an 'Uncle Tom' by the local black community, but he's not caught up in the same sense of morality that John Shaft is.

THE GOOD, THE BAD, AND THE BLACK

Most Blaxploitation heroes were anti-heroes showing lifestyles that reinforced the negative stereotypes imagined by the white majority. Pimps, hustlers, gangsters, veterans home from Vietnam and private detectives were all showcased. Though they were varied and different, they all shared one thing in common; they all fought The Man™.

The Blaxploitation genre became a victim of its own success. It was too real. The subject matter prompted a long controversial debate about what should be shown to "White America". The main plots for Blaxploitation films were largely based on crime fiction that featured gangland hoods trying to go straight, or victims seeking revenge. A generalization quickly began to formulate; black culture was filled with nothing but pimps and hookers, drug dealers and gangsters. Audiences liked the music, the action, the fashions and the culture *onscreen*, but when placed in a social context the public began to confuse black cinema with the black community. People were tired of seeing the righteous black man and wanted to see more heroes like John Shaft. Some of the first action heroes were men like Richard "Shaft" Roundtree, Jim "Black Belt Jones" Kelly, Fred "The Hammer" Williamson, Jim Brown, and Isaac Hayes, as well as *Dolomite's* Rudy Ray Moore. They were a squad of bad-asses who fought against the Mob, pushers, kingpins, and anyone else who got in their way. Of course the black community would revere these people. Following the struggle for civil rights during the 60's it was an opportunity to show African Americans as urban heroes and though they would never reach the status of blockbuster action stars of today (Stallone, Willis, Schwarzenegger) the heroes of Blaxploitation films helped pave the way for today's action stars. The budgets for these movies were minimal, at best, but the hip talk, massive sex appeal of the characters, and the message of empowerment made Blaxploitation cinema, and their heroes, a hit with their target audience.

OF BELL-BOTTOMS AND BUTT KICKIN'

For all the controversy surrounding Blaxploitation films they remain fondly remembered for their outrageous fashions, cool characters, raunchy sex and gritty violence. For the first time they showed poor and working class black people trying to outdo one another in matters of style. Pimps and hustlers were only the most outrageous examples. Leather jackets and berets gave way to crushed velvet long coats and gold coke-spoon medallions. It was a time of self-expression in the capitalistic "Me" generation after a decade of the self-sacrificing "We" generation. It was also a period of sexual revolution, introducing women of superhero-like proportions, most notably Pam Grier, Tamara Dobson, and former Playboy Bunny, Gloria Hendry. They portrayed sexually charged characters who could bring a man to his knees with a look.

It was no surprise that movies such as *Coffy*, *Cleopatra Jones* and *Black Caesar* were hits with black audiences. Although considered sexist during their opening releases, Blaxploitation films quickly created a whole sub-genre of women-dominant films. *Cleopatra Jones* introduced Tamara Dobson, wading through bad guys with rapid-fire Kung Fu action and skintight outfits. She's pitted against Shelly Winters' lesbian gangster; "Mommy", bitch slapping her all over the screen as the two struggle for dominance over the fate of a halfway house in the ghetto. Pam Grier, on the other hand, just shot people. She didn't need those fancy moves that Cleo Jones tossed around! She just pulled out a shotgun and decimated multitudes of abusive pimps, pissed off johns, corrupt politicians, pushy whores, and anyone else that got in her way. She has the deserved reputation as the "Queen of Blaxploitation" and was one of the great female stars of the genre. In *Coffy* she plays a nurse seeking revenge after her 12-year-old sister gets 'hooked on smack'. She followed *Coffy* up the following year in 1974 with *Foxy Brown*, who goes on a vendetta to avenge her fallen cop boyfriend. Female Blaxploitation characters were motivated by a sense of morality and ethics demonstrating that women of the time could be as powerful a draw to the box office as their male counterparts. Where once black women in film were seen as appendages to white women, they were now independent, curvaceous ass-kickers who didn't take any crap from anyone.

WHEN YOU KILL A BRUTHA, BETTER MAKE SURE HE'S DEAD!

A new wave of Blaxploitation movies emerged in the latter half of the 80's when director Spike Lee hit the scene with his release; *She's Gotta Have It* in 1987. Following on the heels of his success were Robert Townsend's *Hollywood Shuffle* in 1987 and Keenan Ivory Wayans' parody *I'm Gonna Get You Sucka* in 1988. It seemed as if, once again, the field was wide open for black cinema. Unfortunately the films that followed often criticized their predecessors, trying desperately to distance themselves from the very genre in whose footsteps they were following.

In the early 90's a series of movies changed the way the public viewed black cinema. It moved further away from what Melvin Van Peebles tried to achieve twenty years earlier: to have a white audience view black films as they would Italian or Japanese cinema, with the same regard and respect. John Singleton's *Boyz 'N' The Hood* (1991), provided a volatile formula, igniting a resurgence of Blaxploitation, only now it was called "gangsploitation". Black men were portrayed as gang bangers, while black women were relegated to the role of either 'bitch' or 'welfare ho'. In either case it wasn't a marked improvement on its 70's forefathers. Others followed suit: *New Jack City* (1991), made by Melvin's son Mario Van Peebles, *Juice* (1992) by Spike Lee's long-time cinematographer Ernest Dickerson, and the most successful post-Boyz film; Albert and Allen Hughes' *Menace II Society* in 1993.

White, studio executives once again took an unhealthy interest in black cinema. *Menace II Society* is typical of black cinema in the 90's. Concentrating on surface elements like music and violence, it attempted to send the same message about the 'black experience' as the films of the 70's. Cementing the revival of Blaxploitation, the Hughes Brothers released *Dead Presidents* in 1996, trying for a 'retro' feel, but falling slightly

short.

Spike Lee jumped back in the game with *Crooklyn*, and the pinnacle of all 'hood movies *Clockers*. Joining their contemporaries were Bill Duke (*A Rage In Harlem* and *Deep Cover*) and Carl Franklin (*One False Move* and *Devil In a Blue Dress*) both directors revisiting the crime noir of earlier 70's films like *Cotton Comes to Harlem*.

This return to the roots of black cinema proved that Blaxploitation would always be around, in one form or another. Never willing to fade into the background, Fred "The Hammer" Williamson revived his career (along with a few of his long time Blaxploitation cohorts) by producing, directing and starring in *Original Gangsters*, a tale of old school versus new school. It seemed there was

life left in the old stars after all. It wasn't until the release of *Pulp Fiction* that white audiences noticed how cool Blaxploitation was. Thanks to its success, audiences turned on to the funky music, hip fashions, and nonstop action prevalent in the earlier 70's flicks. Quentin Tarantino's obsession with the genre didn't end there. His follow up, *Jackie Brown*, reintroduced lovely Pam Grier to modern audiences.

The latest installment

is John Singleton's reinvention of the 70's classic action movie *Shaft*, starring everybody's favorite bad muthaf@#\$er Samuel L. Jackson. The film's stylistic formula gave us a righteous brutha standing up to a seemingly impossible, if not untouchable, adversary, who yet perseveres in the end. It was his *duty* to please everyone's booty! Many other filmmakers are planning remakes of the 70's classics. Producers are planning to revive *The Mack*, citing that 'the conditions that created the character exist today'. *The Mack* was originally released in 1973 and revolved around a convict, just released from prison, who enters into the rewarding career of pimping as a way to make a living. His brother, a black nationalist, tries to change his ways. It's not until corrupt white cops kill their mother that the two brothers band together to clean up the streets of Oakland. Today's

