

R.I.P. Melvin Van Peebles

Melvin Van Peebles, the trailblazing director who is considered to be the father of modern Black cinema died Tuesday night at age 89. Peebles' *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* was an independent triumph in Black images when it was released in 1971. He wrote, produced, directed and acted in the feature that showed Black people going up against the system for the first time and winning. Peebles self-financed the film and finished with a loan from Bill Cosby. Earth, Wind & Fire composed the soundtrack for the movie that opened in the only two theaters that would screen it; one in Detroit and another in Atlanta. The X-rated film quickly blew-up and earned more than \$15 million at the box office making it one of the most successful independent films of all time. His vision was to show the United States from a Black perspective. Film historian Donald Bogle explained the hypersexual nature of the film as being a remedy to years of asexual Sidney Poitier characters. Peebles' film and *Shaft* also released in 1971 are credited with starting the blaxploitation film genre. But Peebles' later pointed out that Hollywood movies using the label were divorced from the politics of his film and turned the characters into street criminal cartoon figures.

The distinction was important to make because there was no Black filmmaker with complete autonomy since Oscar Micheaux. Peebles' set the blueprint for modern self-actualized Black moviemaking and became financially successful in the process. Huey P. Newton called *Sweet Sweetback* "the first Black revolutionary film" and made it required watching for members of the Black Panther Party. In 2003, his son Mario, would create *BAADASSSSS!* a movie about the making of his father's film.

There were plans to turn *Sweet Sweetback* into a musical in 2009 and a preliminary version was staged at The Apollo Theater. Peebles directed a total of 15 films and recorded

seven albums. There were plans for him to make a double album with Madlib and in 2011 he began to perform with members of Burnt Sugar. In 2013, he made his public debut as a visual artist. Pebbles is the subject of two documentaries and there are plans to celebrate the 50th anniversary of *Sweet Sweetback* at the New York Film Festival that starts Friday September 24th. A new box set of his films will be released next week and a revival of his play *Ain't Supposed To Die A Natural Death* will hit Broadway next year.Â

In a statement Mario Van Pebbles made about his father's passing he said: "Dad knew that Black images matter. If a picture is worth a thousand words, what was a movie worth? We want to be the success we see, thus we need to see ourselves being free. True liberation did not mean imitating the colonizer's mentality. It meant appreciating the power, beauty and interconnectivity of all people."â€

Â

Â