

POSTER



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Exhibition**

HOUSE

You Won't Bleed Me

How Blaxploitation Posters Defined Cool & Delivered Profits

Sep 2–Feb 5, 2021

**Blaxploitation films have always
been the raised, gloved fist
(and middle finger) of movie genres.**

—Kareem Abdul-Jabbar
writer and NBA Hall of Famer

Blaxploitation cinema—a genre that encompassed hundreds of films in the 1970s featuring predominantly Black casts marketed to a predominantly Black audience—typically gets a bad rap. The term itself, coined by the former head of the Los Angeles chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), combines the words “Black” and “exploitation,” pointing to what he saw as its negative implications for the representation of Black actors and Black culture. Blaxploitation heroes are loud and brash, its villains ridiculous caricatures, and its leading ladies hyper sexualized, reinforcing stereotypes that continue to play a role in the outside perception of the Black experience. But for all this, Blaxploitation cinema also helped save Hollywood from financial ruin and began to break through some of the barriers to Black representation in the mainstream media. Blaxploitation was one of many new cinematic trends of the '70s emerging from the exploitation genre—that brought excitement back to theaters after years of audience erosion due to the rising popularity of television and Hollywood's apparent inability to appeal to the growing youth market. While the films might be seen today as trashy or unworthy of serious critique, many of the artists who made them and the fans who appreciate them are still inspired by the genre's outrageous, powerful narratives.

And the audacious posters for these films provide the best introduction to them. Blaxploitation was a revolutionary cinematic genre; for the first time in film history Black actors were consistently at the center of the story, appearing unapologetically strong, stylish, and sexy. In the absence of large advertising

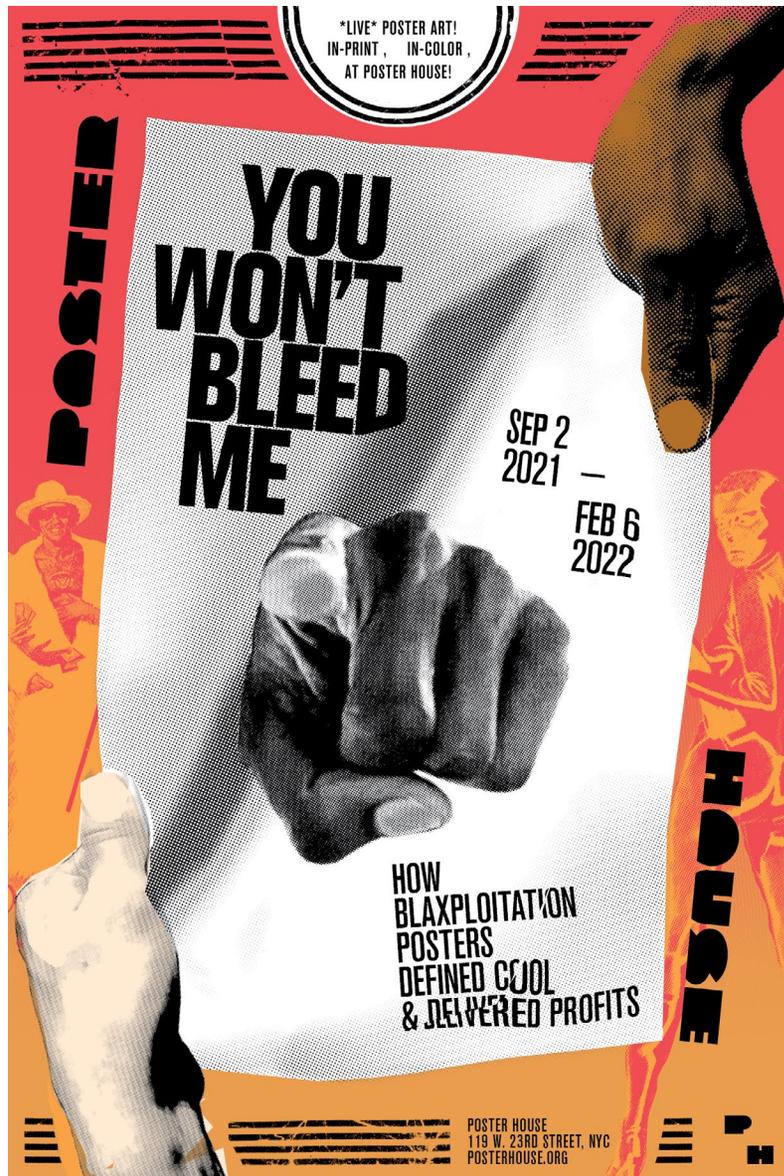
budgets, posters were the main way for studios to create excitement around a film. Typically, such posters were distributed to mostly urban theaters in press kits and through the National Screen Service, where they sometimes took on a life of their own in the imaginations of fans. Occasionally, a poster might be produced in advance of filming to secure financing. These studio-commissioned images, frequently created by talented designers, tapped into an emerging cultural awareness and a sense of the commercial appeal of existing political and social concepts of “Black Power” and “Black Is Beautiful” by celebrating stunning Black bodies, big weapons, and unbridled action. Even when the imagery on the poster was not ultimately reflected in the actual film, such dazzling artwork made legends of performers like Pam Grier, Jim Brown, and Fred Williamson. It also helped to redefine what Black masculinity and femininity could look like on the big screen.

The Blaxploitation boom was short lived, however. The controversial stereotypes in these films turned off some members of the Black community, and their heavy saturation of the marketplace eventually led to diminishing returns. Meanwhile, the appearance of such largely white blockbusters as *Jaws* (1975) and *Star Wars* (1977) reduced studio interest in a genre that was rapidly falling out of fashion. The spirit of Blaxploitation nonetheless persisted. The artwork used to sell the films remains so iconic that audiences often know about a movie from its poster without actually having seen it. The fight for more and better Black representation in film continues, but these posters serve as a reminder of an imperfect chapter in that struggle, and one that deserves reevaluation.

This exhibition was made possible through a generous loan by Mathieu Bitton.



Actor Fred Williamson
Image courtesy of Heritage Auctions, HA.co



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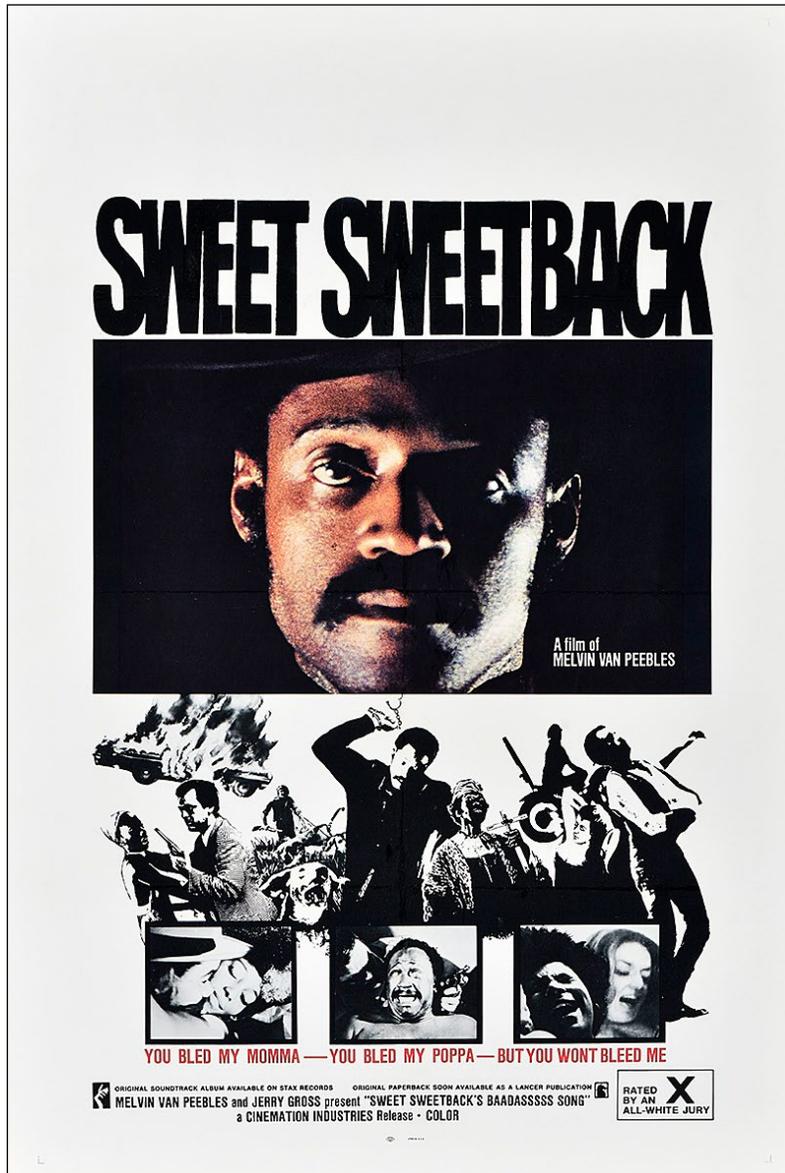


Cotton Comes to Harlem, 1970

Designer: Robert McGinnis (b. 1926)

Director: Ossie Davis (1917–2005)

- This poster exemplifies the prototypical Blaxploitation style in which more is *more*. As in standard action-movie posters, these prominently feature guns (the longer the better), buxom women, bold colors, and flamboyant clothing.
- The designer Robert McGinnis was asked by the art director at United Artists, which distributed the film, to come up with a look for the poster because the genre was new and the studio was unsure how best to market it. They specifically encouraged him to “include some of his [trademark] women,” types that had become iconic as a result of his posters for the James Bond films *Thunderball* (1965) and *You Only Live Twice* (1967).
- The film’s heroes—Coffin Ed Johnson and Gravedigger Jones—were ripped from the pages of *The Harlem Detective* series, a popular collection of detective novels by expatriate author Chester Himes published between 1957 and 1969. While McGinnis became famous for his thousands of pulp illustrations, he never created any for Himes’s books.
- The movie’s director, Ossie Davis, would later move on from Blaxploitation, collaborating regularly on “Spike Lee Joints” in a new wave of African-American films during the late ‘80s and early ‘90s.



Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song, 1971

Designer Unknown

Director: Melvin Van Peebles (1932-2021)

- *Sweetback* is reputed to be the original Blaxploitation film, partly because of the related marketing strategy with its salacious claim that it was “rated X by an all-white jury,” an unambiguous appeal to anti-establishment Black audiences. This was an independent production released by Jerry Gross’s Cinemation Industries, a company that specialized in the more general softcore exploitation genre.
- The movie is more of a political statement disguised as an art film than a traditional narrative. It tells the story of a Black male sex worker (the term “sweetback” is slang for a well-endowed ladies’ man) who becomes a fugitive following a violent altercation with the police.
- This poster depicts the film’s uncompromising writer-director-star, Melvin Van Peebles, who wears the same inscrutable, stoic expression throughout much of the film. This presentation of defiant Black masculinity allows audiences to project their own existential angst onto the film’s hero.
- *Sweetback*’s surprising commercial success (adjusted for inflation, it earned close to \$100 million) anticipated a deluge of predominantly Black films, including *Shaft* (1971) and *Super Fly* (1972), which might not have been as widely distributed had *Sweetback* not proved profitable.
- The movie earned a mixed critical reception but was considered required viewing by the Black Panther Party. The theme, spelled out in the poster and repeated like a mantra in the film—“You bled my momma, you bled my poppa, but you won’t bleed me!”—provided an outlet for Black audiences used to seeing themselves play either sacrificial or subservient roles on screen.

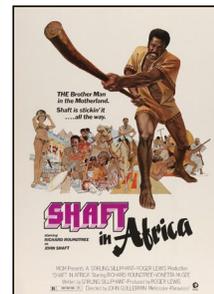


Shaft, 1971

Designer: Tony Seiniger (b. 1941)

Director: Gordon Parks, Sr. (1912–2006)

- Almost an anti-Sweetback, the titular John Shaft (played by Richard Roundtree) is a private eye who enjoys a semi-cordial relationship with white authorities. By making him an unabashed “good guy,” the story structure of this film parallels more mainstream Hollywood narratives, making it accessible to a broader, whiter audience.
- This more traditional “good guys vs. bad guys” plotline probably explains why *Shaft* is the rare Blaxploitation film to have been remade as a big-budget movie (starring Samuel L. Jackson as “the sex machine to all the chicks”). This underscores how seldom Hollywood entrusts a franchise to Black performers. belief “That All Men Are Created Equal.”
- This freeze frame of Shaft in action also appeared on the cover of Isaac Hayes’s soundtrack to the film and was accompanied in some versions of the poster with the text “Hotter Than Bond, Cooler Than Bullitt.” This tagline is a clear attempt to place the Roundtree character in the pantheon of contemporary tough white guys played by actors like Sean Connery and Steve McQueen.
- The posters for the sequels *Shaft’s Big Score!* (1972) and *Shaft in Africa* (1973) both feature Shaft brandishing increasingly large (and undeniably phallic) weapons, promising to outdo the action in the original.



Revenge

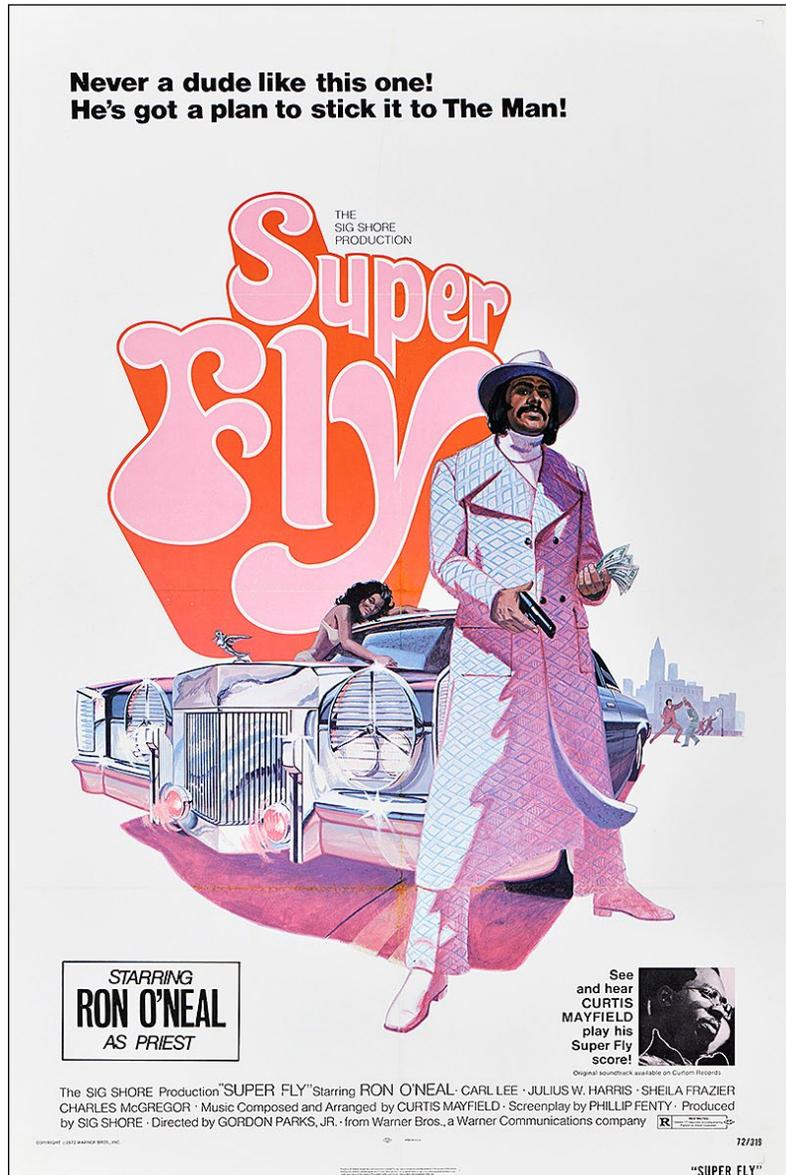
Part of the pleasure of Blaxploitation films—particularly for Black audiences of the 1970s dealing with the unfulfilled promises of the civil rights movement—was seeing Black characters outwit and outlast their white adversaries. White characters, representing the intransigence of systemic inequality, were often typecast as racist authority figures or other symbols of oppression and cruelty—obstacles that the leading Black men and women would overcome. When the Black heroes defeated their white oppressors, they were also symbolically defeating “the man” and, by extension, the larger white power structure that continued to hold them back.

Films like *Shaft* and *Cotton Comes to Harlem* showcase Black detectives far savvier and more streetwise than their white counterparts in law enforcement. *Black Caesar* may end with Fred Williamson’s gangster character meeting his own tragic fate, but not before he has humiliated and taken revenge on his white enemy. *Foxy Brown* and *Cleopatra Jones* both emphasize white women as the evil power behind the throne, while *Three the Hard Way* (1974)—one of the more fantastical films in the genre—positions white villains as collaborators in the genocide of all Black people. In the rare instances where white characters emerge as allies—as in *Detroit 9000*—they never outshine their Black counterparts. In these cinematic worlds, Black is powerful.

This type of representation was very different from that in earlier eras of American cinema, in which characters of color were generally used to supply decidedly racist forms of comic relief or represented as anonymous, two-dimensional villains, void of humanity. Blaxploitation films, on the other hand, often served as catharsis for Black audiences, giving them moments of victory and glory of which they had been historically deprived. This expression of pride and power is evident from the posters that present Black characters in heroic, dramatic, and assertive poses, suggesting that white people would not be calling the shots.

[T]hese films gave a cinematic voice to the black underclass fighting against race and class with a style and a coolness that can only be called, “Bad ass.”

—André Seewood, writer-director



Super Fly, 1972

Designer: Tom Jung (b. 1929)

Director: Gordon Parks, Jr. (1934–79)

- In its apparent glorification of a drug dealer, *Super Fly* is one of the more controversial films within the genre. The supposedly glamorous elements within the gangster tale are undermined, however, by a superb, solemn score by Curtis Mayfield that serves as a skeptical Greek chorus. The movie's uncomfortable romanticization of criminality is also undercut by Ron O'Neal's somber lead turn as Priest, a cocaine king longing to go straight.
- This poster puts a Black drug dealer—a character who would normally be represented as a marginalized villain—center stage in a flashy outfit, accompanied by a luxury car and a sexy woman. Flamboyant clothing like this both reflected street trends and influenced what would become a cohesive urban-fashion aesthetic. Such imagery is also overtly aspirational, a theme we see repeated in many Blaxploitation posters.
- The Chinese-American designer Tom Jung illustrated some of the most celebrated movie posters of all time, including those for *Doctor Zhivago* (1965), *Apocalypse Now* (with Bob Peak, 1979), and versions of the original *Star Wars* trilogy (1977, '80, '83).
- *Super Fly* was also the first major distributed film to be financed chiefly by Black limited partnerships and the first to employ a largely non-white technical crew.

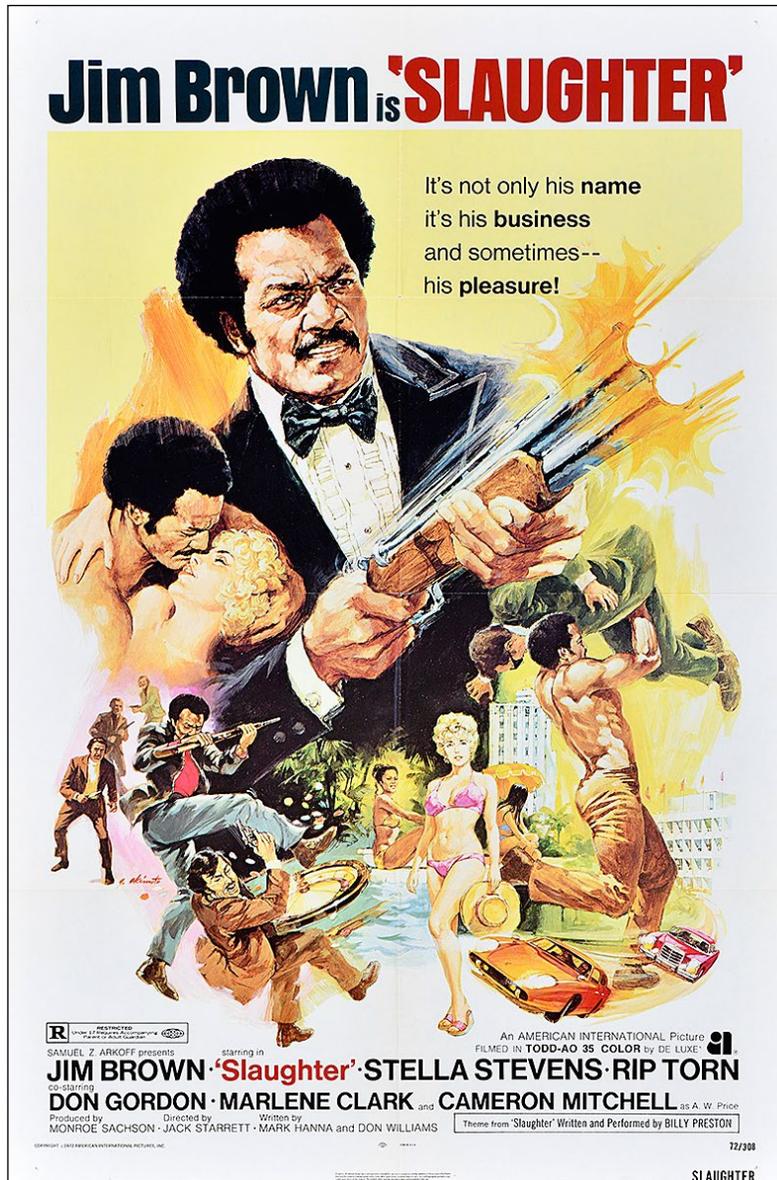


Blacula, 1972

Designer Unknown

Director: William Crain (b. 1949)

- The financial success of early Blaxploitation films, which mostly centered on crime stories, encouraged producers to experiment with other genres, especially horror. While *Blacula* was a bigger hit, the following year's more experimental vampire film *Ganja & Hess* has been hailed as a major cinematic work, even inspiring a 2014 remake by Spike Lee titled *Da Sweet Blood Of Jesus*.
- The plot of *Blacula* revolves around Mamuwalde, a prince from a fictional African country who is turned into a vampire in the 18th century by a virulently racist Count Dracula, and now stalks the streets of 1970s Los Angeles.
- The film's white producers played up the slavery subplot on some posters with the wordy tagline "Rising From the Echoing Corridors of Hell an Awesome Being of the Supernatural—with Satantic Power of Sheer Dread. Chained Forever to a Slavery More Vile Than Any Before Endured." Press books from the studios also encouraged cinema owners to display the posters in churches and stores frequented by Black audiences to "stimulate response from Negro patrons."
- The poster also alludes to interracial sexuality—a popular taboo theme in Blaxploitation film—as *Blacula* has just bitten the neck of a white woman. No such scene actually occurs in the movie.
- William Crain, the film's director, repeatedly clashed with his largely white crew and balked at the producers' original title for the film—*Count Brown Is In Town*.
- The summer release of *Blacula* was followed in the fall by the more traditional (that is, white) *Dracula A.D. 1972*, starring Christopher Lee and Peter Cushing, that attempted to transplant the storied vampire to swinging London. This representation of contemporary streetlife suggests the influence of Blaxploitation on the marketplace; the 1973 James Bond film *Live and Let Die* was similarly set in Harlem and featured Blaxploitation veteran Gloria Hendry as the primary love interest.



Slaughter, 1972

Designer: George Akimoto (1922–2010)

Director: Jack Starrett (1939–89)

- Starring NFL Hall of Famer Jim Brown as the title character, *Slaughter* was one of a handful of films that introduced audiences to a new kind of Black hero—a hyper-masculine bruiser who would not hesitate to romance any woman (white or Black) on screen. Brown further burnished his sex-symbol status by appearing fully nude in a *Playgirl* magazine spread in 1974.
- Film historian Donald Bogle called Jim Brown’s persona in the film a “reaction to the Sidney Poitier hero.” Unlike Poitier’s polite, chaste characters, when Brown went to bed with a woman on screen, audiences “knew that not only did he have a penis, but it’s gonna be erect and ... he’s going to know how to use it.”
- When questioned about his role in Blaxploitation cinema, Brown said, “I wanted to do all things we’d never done before in films.” In Brown’s case, that meant appearing in one of the first interracial sex scenes in a Hollywood film (*100 Rifles*, 1969) and routinely beating up his white antagonists without cinematic comeuppance.
- The poster, dominated by Brown dressed in a tuxedo and blasting a shotgun, effectively conveys the combination of violence and fashion that Blaxploitation films typically embraced. The design also includes alternating images of his sultry leading lady, Stella Stevens, and Brown himself confronting his adversaries in armed combat.



The Thing With Two Heads, 1972

Designer Unknown

Director: Lee Frost (1935–2007)

- One of the most enduring conventions within the Blaxploitation genre was the casting of older, established white stars whose careers were in decline (such as Shelley Winters, Martin Landau, and Frankie Avalon) as heels or foils for the Black hero. The most ludicrous example of this occurs here when Oscar-winning actor Ray Milland (*The Lost Weekend*, 1945) shares a body with NFL defensive-tackle champion Rosey Grier.
- The film's poster, promoting a "white bigot's head" on "a soul brother's body," clearly conveys the unsophisticated nature of the movie's racial politics. Both Milland and Grier play heightened stereotypes—a wealthy racist and an escaped convict, respectively—in a surreal story about a terminally ill physician who attempts to prolong his life through an experimental surgery that places his still-living head on the body of a reanimated corpse. But he fails to anticipate that his head might be grafted on to the torso of a Black man.
- The movie features special effects by the legendary Rick Baker, who later developed the famous prosthetic makeup for both Michael Jackson's "Thriller" music video in 1995 and the film *An American Werewolf in London* (1981).



Black Mama, White Mama, 1973

Designer Unknown

Director: Eddie Romero (1924–2013)

- Sexuality—the more taboo the better—was a key component of the Blaxploitation genre. Films shot in women’s prisons were a popular choice for cheap, salacious thrills combined with exploitative violence
- This film was inspired by the 1958 racial-mismatch melodrama *The Defiant Ones*, in which two prisoners shackled to each other must cooperate in order to survive.
- This poster plays up the fantasy of beautiful, scantily clad women fighting each other. Films have always used women’s bodies to sell tickets, but Blaxploitation films were among the first to consistently equate the attractiveness of women of color with that of their white peers.
- This subgenre of “women in prison” flicks introduced audiences to Pam Grier, one of the most enduring Black film stars of the era. She also appeared in similarly themed *The Big Doll House* (1971), *Women in Cages* (1971), and *The Big Bird Cage* (1972), films in which her intersectional appeal was used to further objectify her.

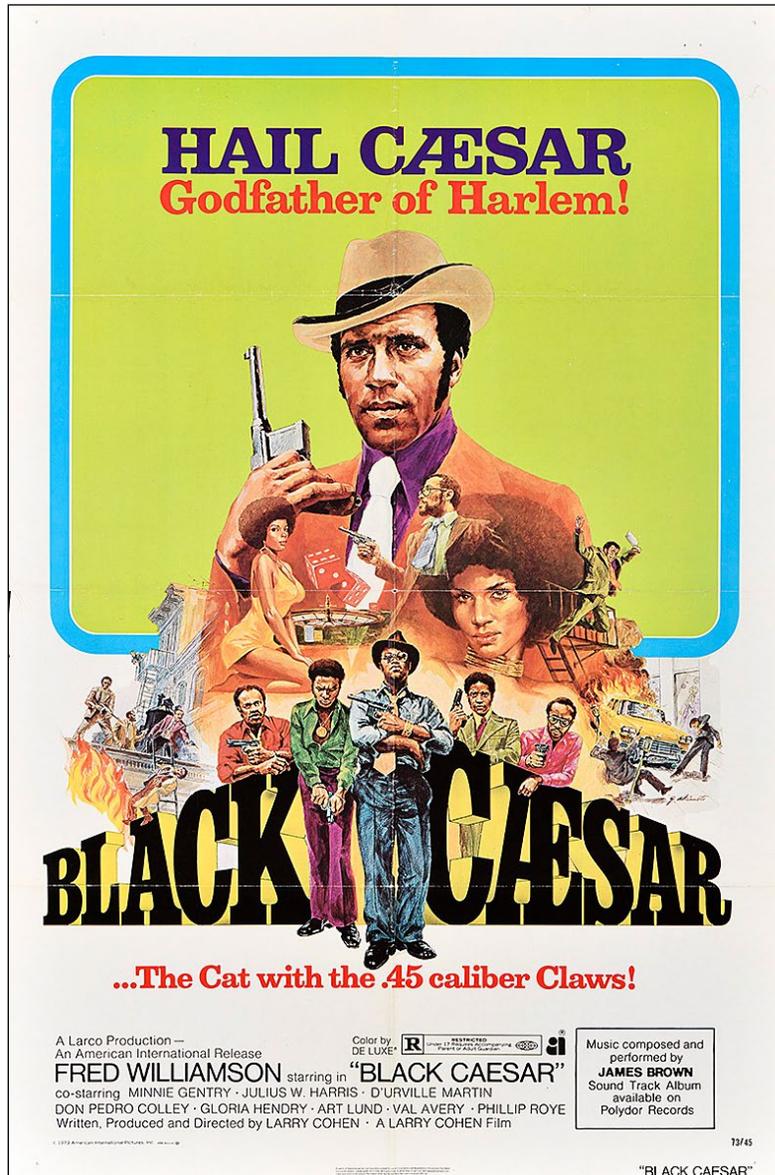


Coffy, 1973

Designer: George Akimoto (1922–2010)

Director: Jack Hill (b. 1933)

- Pam Grier's talent was so formidable that she emerged as an unlikely action hero in Blaxploitation films. In *Coffy*, she delivers one of her strongest performances, establishing the prototype for her enduring big-screen persona.
- Director Quentin Tarantino has described *Coffy* as one of his favorite films, and it partly inspired him to cast Grier as the lead in his 1997 movie *Jackie Brown*—a role originally written as a white woman in the novel *Rum Punch* by Elmore Leonard.
- The poster perfectly encapsulates Grier's appeal to audiences as the gun-toting sex symbol who is also a heroine with a heart of gold. Her grounded humanity on screen—in *Coffy* she plays a nurse seeking retribution from the people who got her sister hooked on narcotics—prevented her roles from becoming pure caricatures.
- Poster designer George Akimoto started his career as a cartoonist while he and his family were among the thousands of Japanese-Americans forced to live in internment camps during World War II.
- Once he returned to civilian life, Akimoto made a name for himself as a commercial artist before focusing chiefly on the design of posters for B-movies. He made this poster at the height of his career.



Black Caesar, 1973

Designer: George Akimoto (1922–2010)

Director: Larry Cohen (1936–2019)

- The handsome and stylish Fred Williamson was, for a time, the greatest alpha male in Black cinema. His ability to embody a specific type of character encouraged poster designers to strategically place him at the center of their images for every film in which he appeared.
- *Black Caesar* (inspired by Edward G. Robinson’s gangster classic *Little Caesar*, 1931) was ambitious for its time; it is more complex and politically charged than is often recognized thanks to legendary writer-director Larry Cohen’s provocative script and characteristic determination to shoot the film on location. The white villain is ultimately forced to wear blackface or die at the hands of the Black hero.
- Long after the Blaxploitation era peaked, Williamson continued to star in and direct similar B-movies, including *The Big Score* (1983) and *Foxtrap* (1986).
- Williamson has always bristled at the term “Blaxploitation,” saying that “the fans were seeing something that they hadn’t seen before and were enjoying it. The actors were working, making more money than they ever made before. So I don’t know who the hell was being exploited.”

Reservations

While Blaxploitation films are still fondly remembered by some for their colorful costumes and funky music, they also promote arguably problematic and hurtful stereotypes of Black men and women (even if their unfiltered stories were drawn from the actual inner-city Black experience). Despite the diverse representation on the screen, the films were written and directed almost exclusively by white men—with a few notable exceptions—and they inevitably reflect some of their implicit prejudices. Even when Black characters are the nominal heroes in these movies, they are presented as fringe members of society, typically violent pimps or drug pushers, men lacking any kind of subtlety or sophistication. Black women are often reduced to mere sex objects to be used and abused, deprived of their own desires and dimensions.

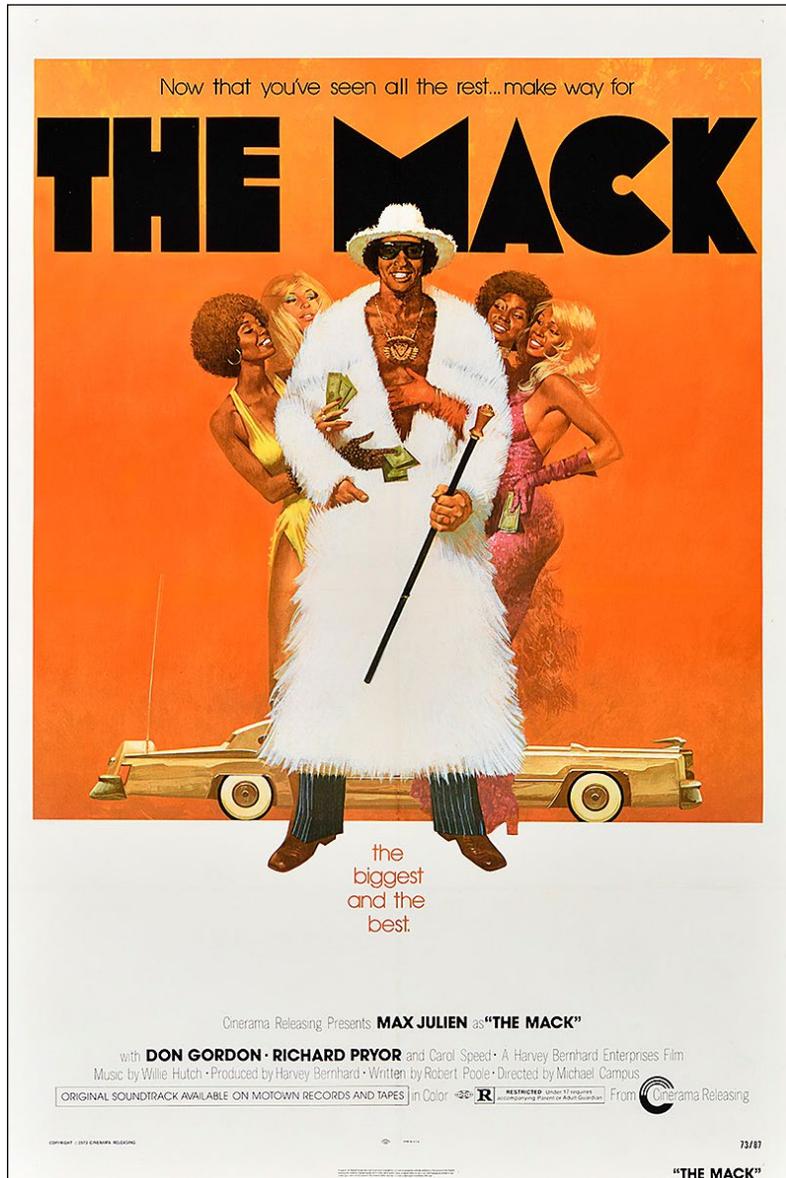
I've got three rules in Hollywood:

- (1) You can't kill me in the movie,**
- (2) I want to win all my fights in a movie, and**
- (3) I get the girl at the end of the movie if I want her.**

—Fred Williamson, actor

Some of the most vociferous criticisms of Blaxploitation films and their stereotypes during the 1970s came from prominent members of the Black community. Junius Griffin, the head of the Los Angeles branch of the NAACP, coined the term “Blaxploitation” as a negative moniker and was quoted as saying “we will not tolerate the continued warping of our children’s minds with the filth, violence, and cultural lies that are all-pervasive in current productions of so-called black movies.” In 1972, the NAACP was among the organizations that founded the Coalition Against Blaxploitation (CAB) in order to effect positive change in the representation of Black figures in Hollywood films. Griffin argued that “the transformation from the stereotyped Stepin Fetchit to Super Nigger on the screen is just another form of cultural genocide.”

Yet many of the performers in the films and the popular audience at the time did not agree. Despite its often dated dialogue and cringeworthy gender politics, Blaxploitation was a cultural phenomenon that instilled a new kind of pride among many Black viewers. *Shaft* director Gordon Parks once marveled at seeing young Black people shouting “right on” at a 1971 screening of the film, experiencing a cinematic moment he had coveted since his youth: “a Black man was winning.”



The Mack, 1973

Designer: Fred Pfeiffer (1940–96)

Director: Michael Campus (1935–2015)

- This movie, one of the most quoted and sampled films of the genre, features a breakout performance from a then up-and-coming Richard Pryor and is far less cheerful than its brightly colored poster might suggest.
- Pfeiffer also illustrated several paperback book covers for the long-running Doc Savage pulp adventure series. The musclebound adventurer is a precursor to Indiana Jones and was cited as an influence by Marvel comics publisher Stan Lee.
- *The Mack* is a more sophisticated and believable telling of the *Super Fly* story, focusing on a young man's rise through the potentially deadly ranks of becoming a pimp. Real underworld figures appeared in the film and agreed that it could be shot on their Oakland turf—an arrangement that caused separate tensions with the Black Panthers, who attempted to sabotage the filming. The 1999 documentary *American Pimp* by Albert and Allen Hughes suggests that the film remains a reference point for contemporary hustlers.
- Unlike the soundtrack, the film was not widely distributed, only playing in about 20 theaters in mainly Black neighborhoods. According to director Michael Campus, however, the film managed to bring in more profits than blockbusters like *The Godfather* (1972) and *The Poseidon Adventure* (1972) in those locations.



Detroit 9000, 1973

Designer: Robert Tanenbaum (b. 1936)

Director: Arthur Marks (1927–2019)

- One of most overlooked gems of the genre, *Detroit 9000* conveys the burgeoning cynicism of the Watergate era in a taut, well-plotted police film about mismatched white and Black cops; in it, Alex Rocco and Hari Rhodes crusade against corrupt city authorities.
- While the poster for the U.S. release of the film places Rhodes in a more prominent position than his white co-star, in foreign posters Rocco is the dominant figure and Rhodes is sometimes almost entirely eliminated from the image. Until recently, with a few notable exceptions, films with Black stars have struggled on the international market, pointing to the widespread, international prevalence of prejudice against actors of color. This made headlines in 2013 when Italian posters for the Oscar-winning *12 Years a Slave* prominently featured its white supporting actors (Brad Pitt and Michael Fassbender) rather than its Black star, Chiwetel Ejiofor.
- *Detroit 9000* ends on a low note with one of the heroes getting gunned down and a shady politician spinning his way out of trouble. This kind of cynical, downbeat finale represented a departure from most of the more typical, crowd-pleasing Blaxploitation films.



Poster for the Italian release of *Detroit 9000*.



Foxy Brown, 1974

Designer Unknown

Director: Jack Hill (b. 1933)

- This raunchy and rowdy revenge film is a victory lap of sorts for celebrated Blaxploitation actor Pam Grier, who gets her own James Bond-style number during the opening credits. The poster also highlights the numerous incidents of girl-on-girl fisticuffs featured in the film.
- *Foxy Brown* is both an earnest takedown of drug pushers and a showcase for Grier's physical assets. She was, as they say in the film, a "whole lotta woman." And, although she frequently is filmed in a state of undress, like 007 she emerges victorious in the end.
- While Coffy's poster dubbed Grier the "baddest" chick in town, the poster for *Foxy Brown* calls her the "meanest" and adds ominously that she will "put you on ice." Indeed, at the end of the film, she presents her nemesis with her lover's severed testicles in a jar.
- "All across the country, a lot of women were Foxy Brown or Coffy," Grier once said. "They were independent, fighting to save their families, not accepting rape or being victimized. I just happened to be the first one that these filmmakers ... found to portray that image."

Reverberations

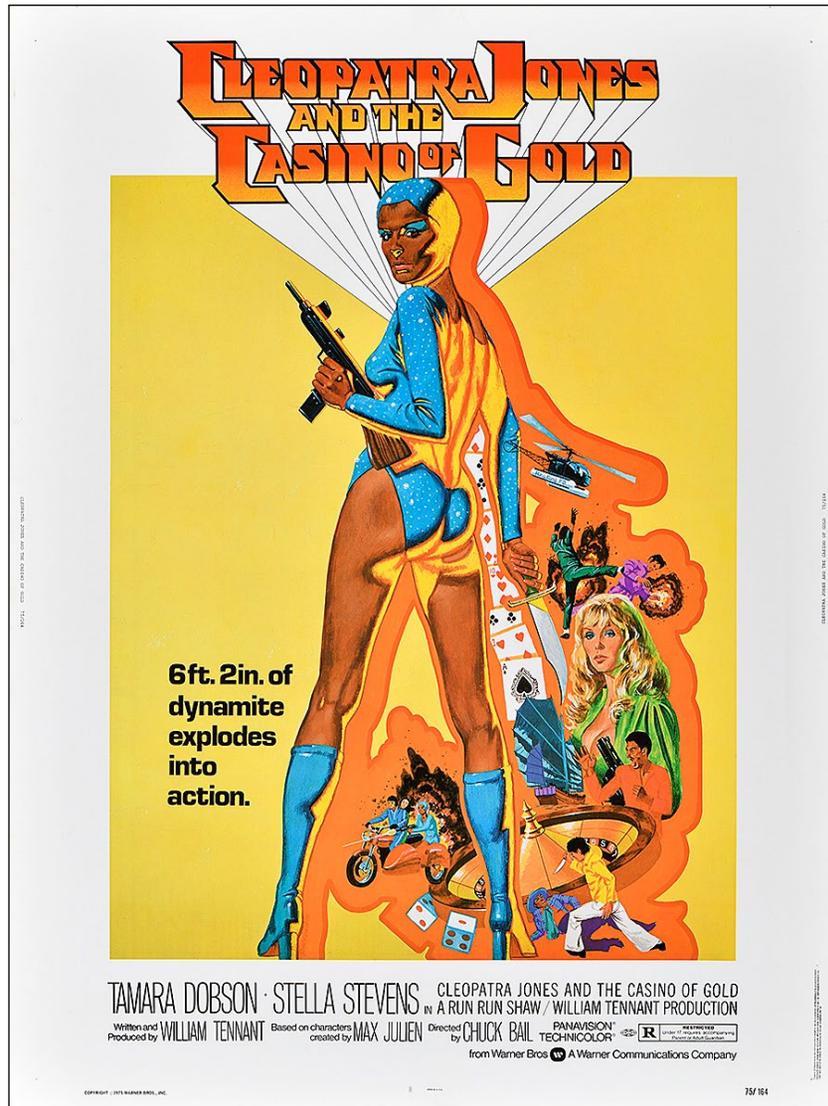
Today, a generation of modern filmmakers who grew up with Blaxploitation cinema—including Keenan Ivory Wayans, Quentin Tarantino, and Melvin Van Peebles’s son, Mario Van Peebles—continue to pay homage to the genre. This can be seen in comedy spoofs like *I’m Gonna Git You Sucka* (featuring Jim Brown, Isaac Hayes, and other Blaxploitation veterans gently lampooning their own work, 1988) and *Black Dynamite* (self-consciously shot in the style of a low-budget film of the ’70s, 2009), thrillers like *Jackie Brown* (1997), and even in such horror films as *Bones* (both of which introduced Pam Grier to a new generation, 2001).

While illustrated posters of this kind went out of fashion in the early 1980s, they remain a wonderful introduction to these films and what they came to represent. Collectors covet Blaxploitation posters because they reflect a very specific moment in cultural history, while fans of the films remember the posters as crucial to establishing the genre’s mystique. As artist and Blaxploitation enthusiast, Gerald Martinez once said, “these films have become a community’s mythology.”

Like all myths, the posters present a heightened version of reality. They often promote scenes or characters that did not actually appear in the movies themselves, but that were intended to entice the viewer. In the context of the continuing debate over the representation of Black identities and stories on the screen, it is also instructive to look at these posters as documents of a significant point in Black history. They serve as reminders of a moment when the traditional roles allocated to Black people in Hollywood films began to shift.

[A] lot of Black people, after that (period of Blaxploitation films) ended, were ashamed of us and the work we had done. It was as if they wanted to put us and those memories in the same place where they put the blues—disowned and forgotten.

—Carol Speed, Actress

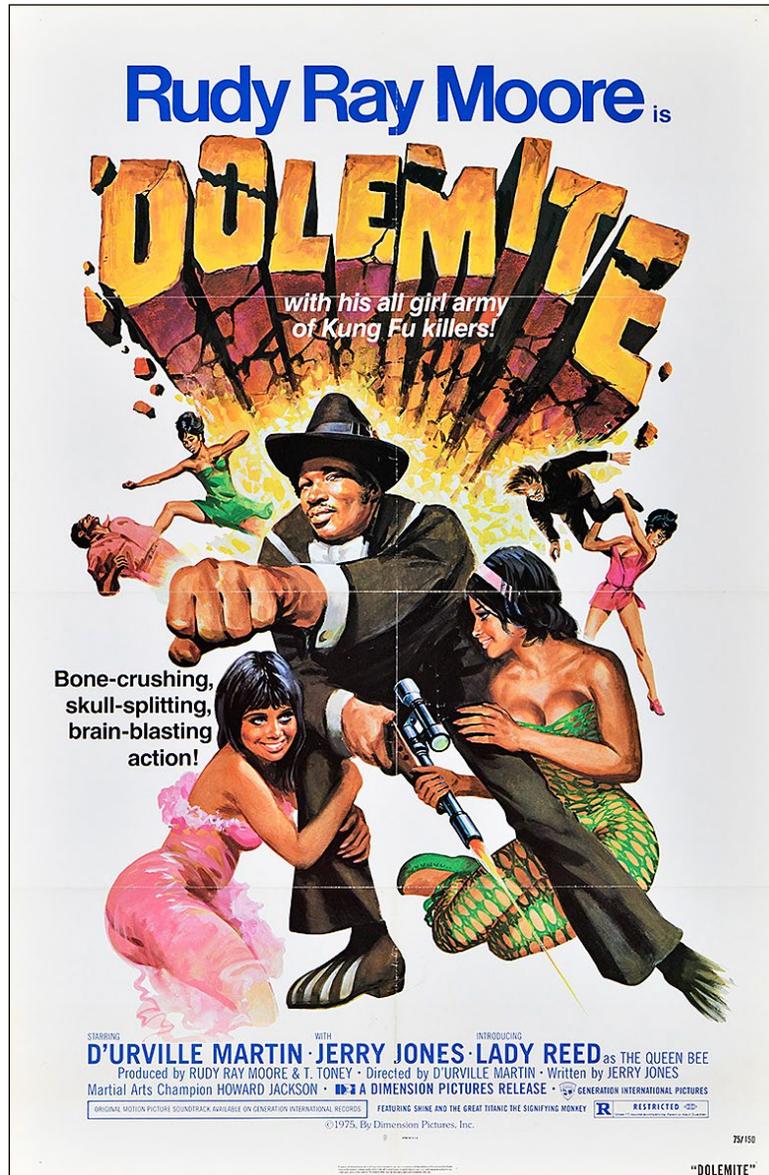


Cleopatra Jones and the Casino of Gold, 1975

Designer: Robert Tanenbaum (b. 1936)

Director: Charles Bail (1935–2020)

- Besides Pam Grier, Tamara Dobson was one of the few female Blaxploitation stars to emerge with a franchise of her own as a result of her successful portrayal of undercover special agent Cleopatra Jones.
- This sequel to the 1973 original sends Jones to Hong Kong. The exotic location and elaborate wardrobe indicated by the poster point to the growing ambitions of the genre.
- One of the most prolific poster artists of the '70s and '80s, Tanenbaum also illustrated the memorable Norman Rockwell-inspired poster for the holiday favorite *A Christmas Story* (1983).

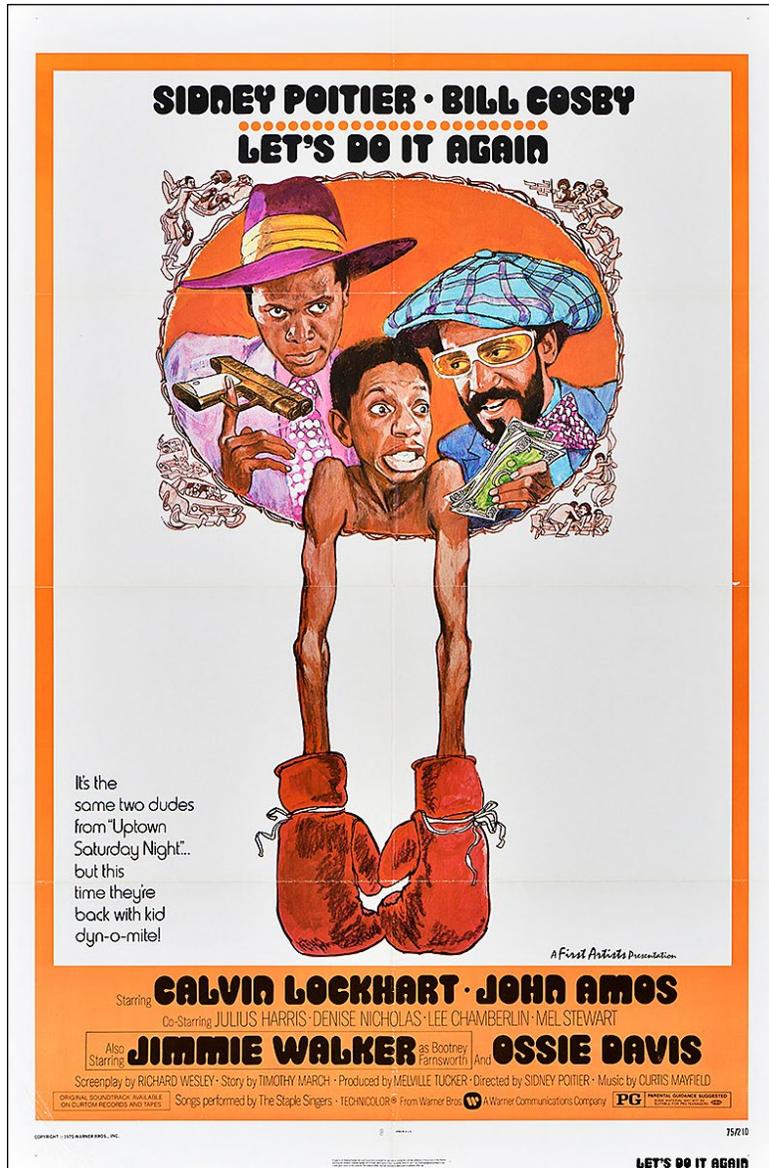


Dolemite, 1975

Designer Unknown

Director: D'Urville Martin (1939–84)

- Stand-up comedian Rudy Ray Moore, who made a name for himself as a raunchy nightclub performer, was an unlikely leading man. His potbelly and questionable acting skills did not, however, diminish his ability to captivate audiences with the sheer audacity of his on-screen persona. Confused and out of order.
- Dolemite is shown here with adoring women clinging to his legs. The pose was imitated by Boris Vallejo in his poster for *National Lampoon's Vacation* in 1983.
- In what might have been an attempt to capitalize on the popularity of kung fu movies—especially popular among audiences of color—the poster promises an “all-girl army of kung fu killers.” The film, however, features no actual display of martial-arts skills.
- This slapdash, somewhat incomprehensible action-comedy was lovingly recreated in Craig Brewer's 2019 biopic *Dolemite Is My Name* starring Eddie Murphy. Many of the deficiencies of Blaxploitation films are made explicit in *Dolemite*: amateurish performances, poor production values, and incoherent screenwriting. As suggested in the narrative of the Murphy film, however, it is a triumph of the will of its creator, Moore, who single-handedly mounts the production and negotiates its expansion into larger markets once it has made a huge splash in a few niche theaters.



Let's Do It Again, 1975

Designer: Jack Rickard (1922–83)

Director: Sidney Poitier (1927-2022)

- Enticed by the overwhelming popularity of Blaxploitation films, Sidney Poitier—the only A-list Black star of the 1960s—chose to direct and star in a trio of action comedies opposite Bill Cosby, starting with *Uptown Saturday Night* (1974).
- *Let's Do It Again* is the second and most successful of the series, and gently plays on Poitier's established, unflappable screen persona as he and Cosby portray average Joes who stumble into a scheme to rig a middleweight boxing fight (with gangly *Good Times* star Jimmie Walker improbably playing the pugilist).
- Cosby's films with Poitier were arguably the high point of his movie career; his greatest success was on television. But this was not his first foray into the Blaxploitation genre, as he had also helped fund *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*. His myriad cultural contributions would be dramatically reevaluated decades later in 2018 when he was convicted for sexual assault (this verdict was overturned in June 2021).
- The cartoonish style of this poster conveys Poitier and Cosby's harmless characters' attempts to put on "tough-guy" airs. In *Let's Do It Again*, they pose guilelessly as the kind of flashy, fearsome gangsters that populate many Blaxploitation films.



Mandingo, 1975

Designer Unknown

Director: Richard Fleischer (1916–2006)

- Storylines involving slavery were a particularly lurid subgenre of the period in which grisly plantation content was typically mixed with the promise of explicit interracial sex scenes. The term “Mandingo” has come to mean a well-endowed Black man.
- *Mandingo* stars heavyweight boxer Ken Norton as a slave named Ganymede whose master decides to train him to be a prizefighter. Quentin Tarantino’s 2012 hit *Django Unchained* (featuring “Mandingo fighters”) probably drew inspiration from this film.
- The poster references the bodice-ripper style of illustration featured on paperback romance novels as well as classic promotional imagery for such old-Hollywood melodramas as *Gone with the Wind* (1939), albeit with a more overtly suggestive tableau.
- The film was popular enough to spawn a sequel, *Drum* (1976), also set on a plantation.



The Black Gestapo, 1975

Designer: Ken Barr (1933–2016)

Director: Lee Frost (1935–2007)

- This particularly striking poster plays up crossover themes between the Blaxploitation genre and the Nazisploitation fad of the same period, as seen in films like *Ilsa, She Wolf of the SS* (1975) and *Salon Kitty* (1976). Nazisploitation movies typically combined softcore sex with the fetishization of facism.
- The Black Gestapo is set in a predominantly Black California community in which a homegrown "People's Army" moves from a security role to perpetrating crime.
- The movie was released ten years after the Watts Riots— a week of civil unrest in the Watts neighborhood of Los Angeles following an act of police brutality against an unarmed Black man.
- The Scottish-born Barr is best known for his sci-fi and fantasy inspired artwork, as well as for his Marvel Comics covers for legacy heroes like Thor and The Hulk.



J.D.'s Revenge, 1976

Designer Unknown

Director: Arthur Marks (1927–2019)

- The great character actor Glynn Turman takes center stage in *J.D.'s Revenge*, an absurd-yet-creepy film about a mild-mannered legal student possessed by the spirit of a ruthless 1940s gangster named J.D. Walker.
- While the poster suggests the hero's internal transformation, it also features a comely woman in a graveyard who might also be possessed. This character does not appear in the actual film, in which the only person to be thus afflicted is the law student.
- Turman's committed performance elevates what could have been merely a campy, supernatural farce. The film features some of the same gangster antics that came to define the genre; however, Turman's criminal alter ego is clearly an unstable villain and audiences are meant to root for the return of his more humane self.
- The film was released by the now-defunct American International Pictures, one of the most prolific studios of Blaxploitation projects. It produced other supernatural Black horror movies like *Abby* (1974), *Sugar Hill* (1974), *Blacula* (1972), and its sequel, *Scream, Blacula, Scream* (1973).



Disco Godfather, 1979

Designer: Dante (Dates Unknown)

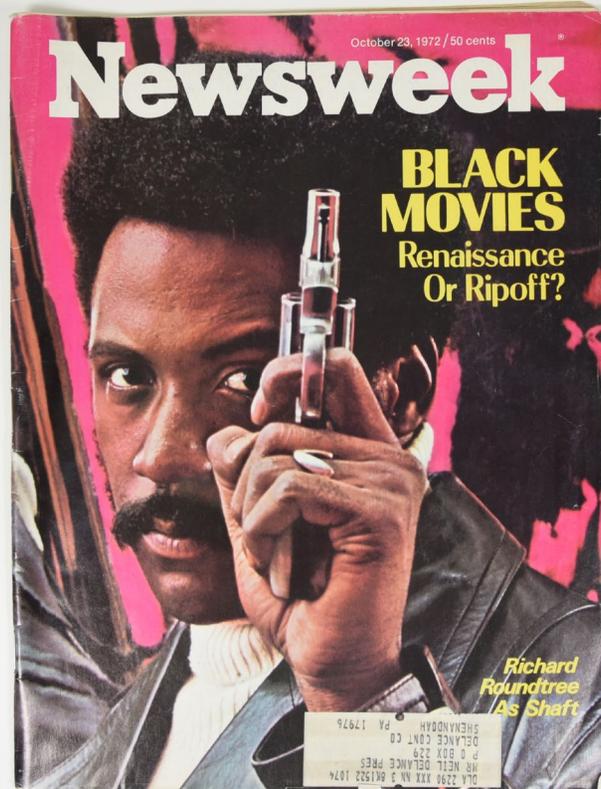
Director: J. Robert Wagoner (Dates Unknown)

- By the time *Disco Godfather* was released, Hollywood had already begun cooling its relationship with Blaxploitation. This was largely related to the financial failure of the big-budget all-Black musical *The Wiz* (1978) that followed soon after the white blockbuster *Star Wars* (1977). The film, a critical and commercial disaster, arguably represents the low point of the genre. It also arrived during a mini-fad of post-*Saturday Night Fever* disco-themed movies like *Thank God It's Friday* (1978) and *Roller Boogie* (1979).
- The poster's blend of brutal violence (a corpse in a bloody bathtub) alongside a resplendent Rudy Ray Moore effectively represents the movie's unorthodox mash-up of musical montages and criminal mayhem.
- In the film, an ex-cop-turned-disco-entrepreneur, played by Blaxploitation staple Rudy Ray Moore, implores Black and Brown dancers to “put your weight on it”—in other words, to dominate and make their presence felt. This catchphrase would become distinctly ironic within the film industry as the subsequent decades saw Black films frequently pushed to the margins to make room for more “mainstream” (white) movies.



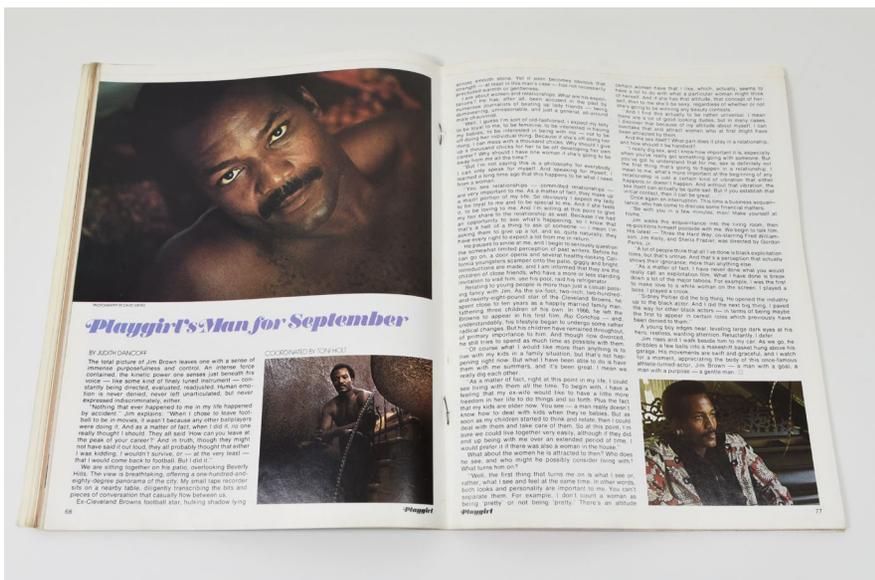
Ms., August, 1975

- An article in this issue of Ms. magazine declares that Grier (dubbed “The Mocha Mogul of Hollywood” in her profile) is one of the only three consistently “bankable” women in the film industry (the others are Barbara Streisand and Liza Minnelli). But it also laments that her success is seen as “marginal” because she appears in “Black Movies.”
- The profile, incorporating a number of cringeworthy lines (“her skin is the exact same color of the pancakes in the *Little Black Sambo* book”), nonetheless expresses the widely held view that Grier is often the best thing about any of her films.



Newsweek, October, 1972

- The cover story “Black Movies: Renaissance Or Ripoff?,” featuring *Shaft* star Richard Roundtree, captures both the peak of Blaxploitation and the rising backlash against it. According to the seven-page article, about a quarter of Hollywood films in pre-production at the time were “Black,” but opposition was so strong that some cars at the offices of American International Pictures were even firebombed.
- Tony Brown, Dean of Howard University’s School of Communication, argues that Blaxploitation films are a “phenomenon of self-hate,” while John Dotson, a Black bureau chief for *Newsweek*, makes a case for a more nuanced perspective in a separate column titled “I Want the Freedom to See Good and Bad.”
- Dotson suggests that the new Black films are not unlike classic good vs. evil stories—the main difference being that “only the color of the heroes has changed.” He goes on to say that “that difference, however, makes all the difference in the world.”



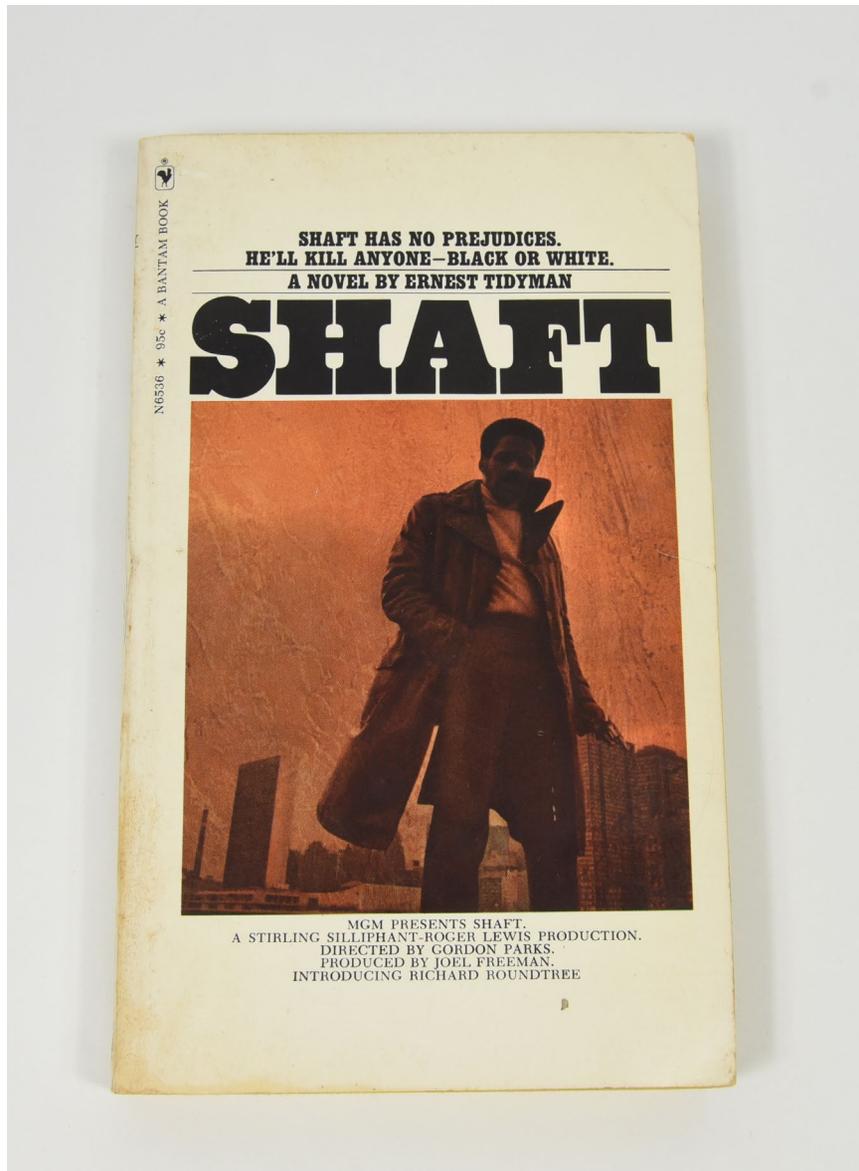
Playgirl, September, 1974

- While not as famous as Burt Reynolds's 1972 nude spread in *Cosmopolitan*, Brown's full-frontal nude photograph in *Playgirl* was created to promote his film *Three the Hard Way* (1974) with fellow Blaxploitation action stars Fred Williamson and Jim Kelly.
- Besides detailing his perspectives on romantic relationships ("I really dig sex"), Brown's interview respectfully acknowledges Sidney Poitier, whose screen persona was the polar opposite of his own. "Sidney Poitier did the big thing," Brown says. "He opened up the industry to the black actor. And I did the next big thing. I paved the way for other black actors—in terms of being maybe the first to appear in certain roles which previously have been denied them."



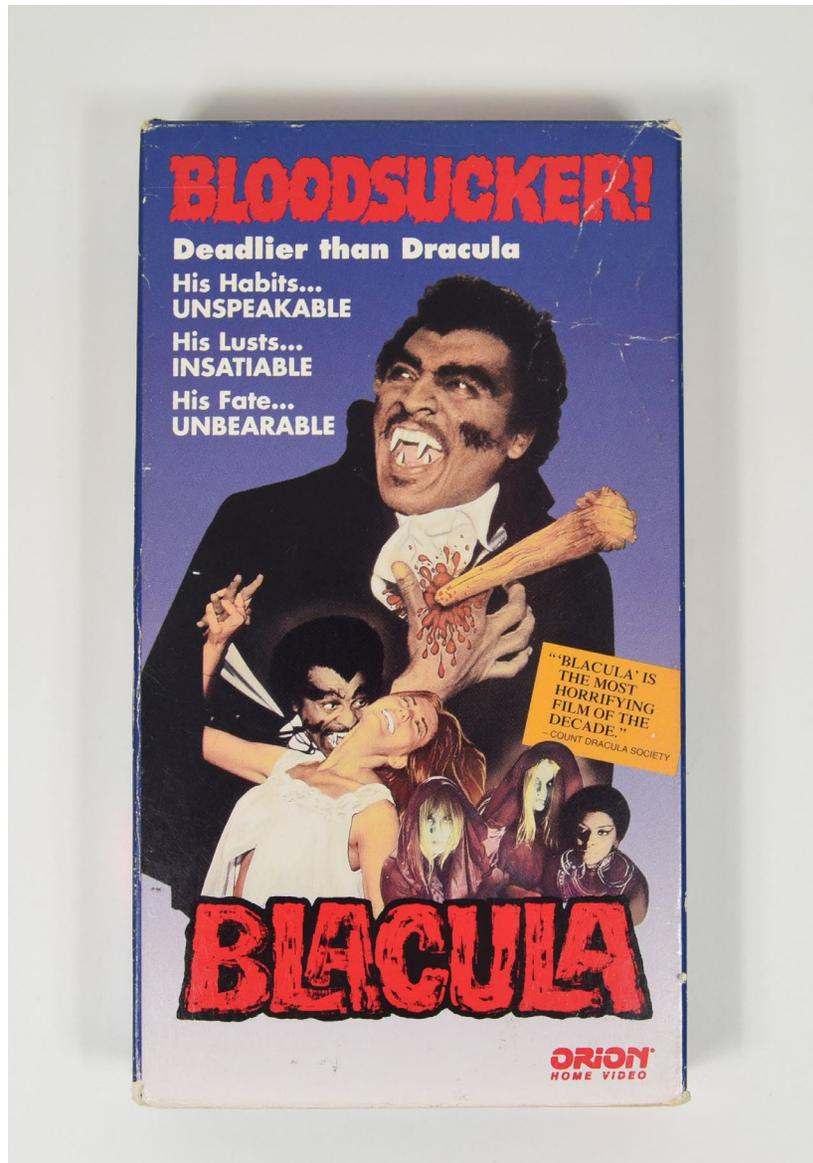
Super Fly Press Book, October, 1972

- The press book for *Super Fly* not only promotes the solid reviews the film received and its Curtis Mayfield soundtrack, but also features an attractive model hawk (and wearing only) a trademarked *Super Fly* T-shirt.
- The press book also stresses the unorthodox, grassroots means by which the film was initially funded: "The money for *Super Fly* came from 18 black people who had never invested in a film...Among them were dentists, financiers, businessmen in the black community, but also pimps, madams and drug dealers."



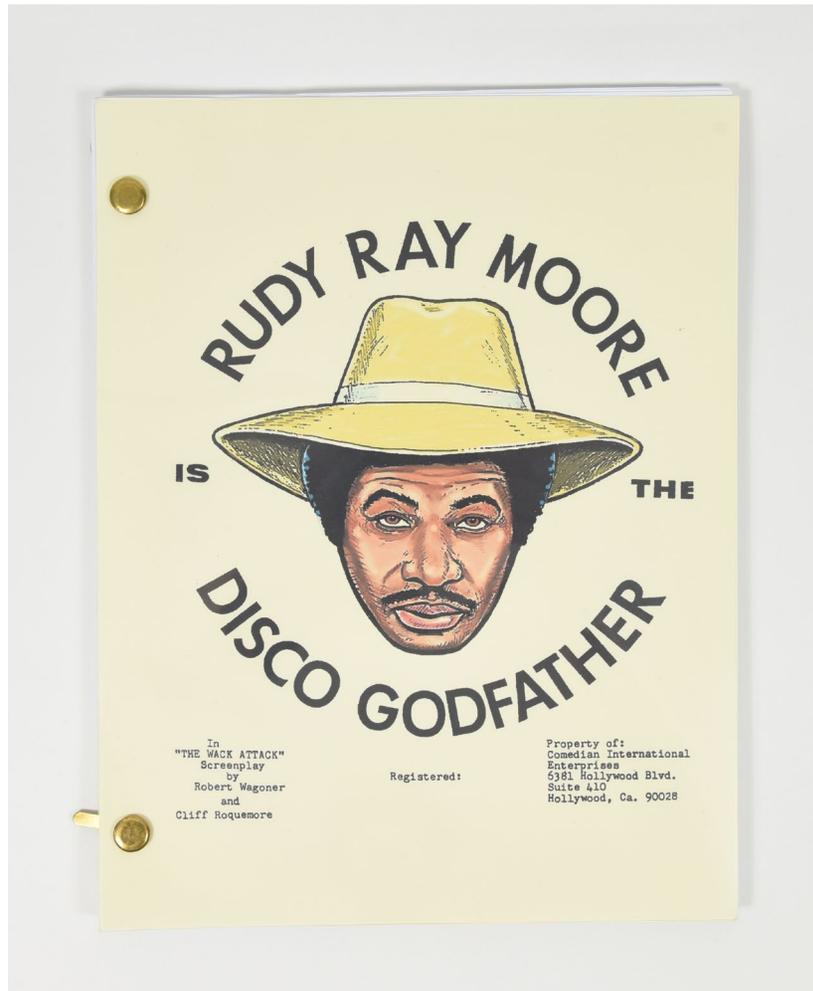
Shaft, 1970

- This is an original edition of the 1970 novel that inspired the Richard Roundtree film of the same name. There were seven original *Shaft* novels in total, concluding with the appropriately titled *The Last Shaft* in 1975.
- The author, Ernest Tidyman, became famous for stories about hardboiled detectives as well as the screenplay for the 1971 Academy Award-winning film *The French Connection*.
- “The idea came out of my awareness of both social and literary situations in a changing city,” Tidyman said in 1973. “There are winners, survivors and losers in the New York scheme of things. It was time for a black winner, whether he was a private detective or an obstetrician.”



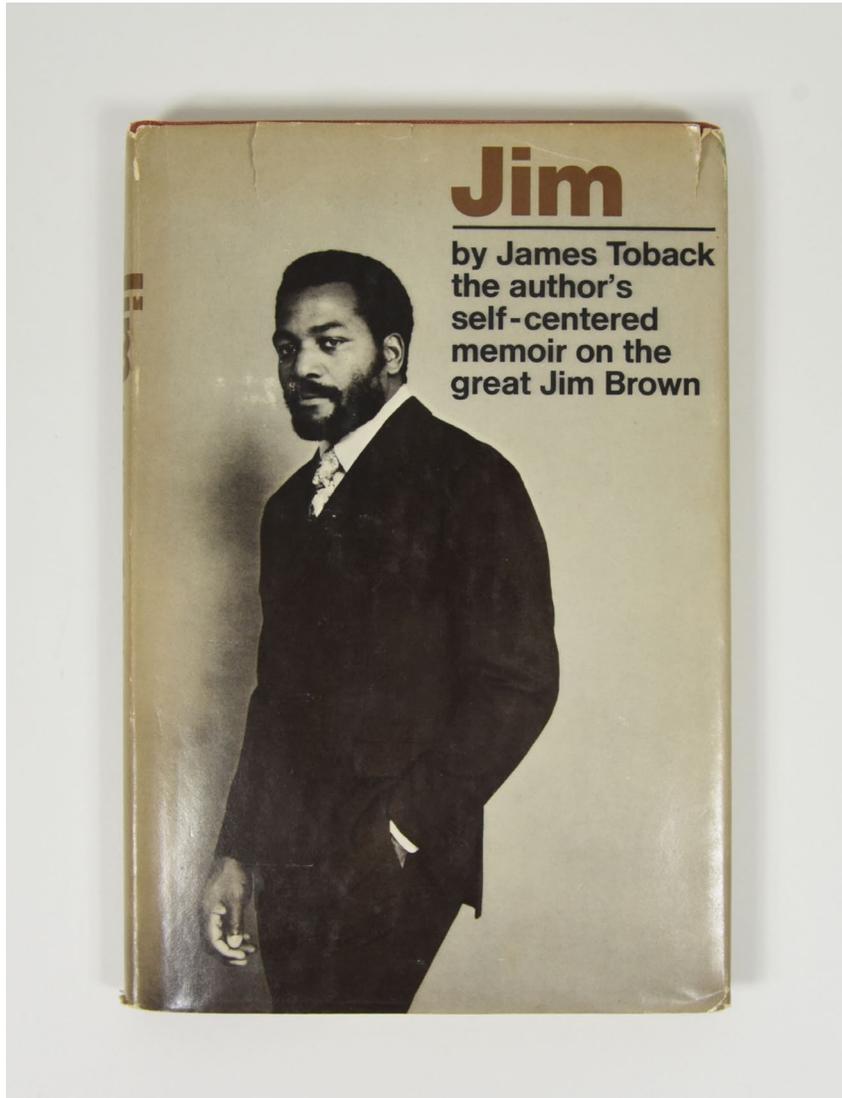
Blacula, 1987

- While several Blaxploitation films were hits upon their initial release, others found new life when audiences discovered them on home video. Movies like *Dolemite* (1975) became beloved titles when they were embraced as “classic” bad movies after repeated rentals on VHS.
- Hip-hop icons Public Enemy refer to a *Black Caesar* video cassette “back in the crib” in the song “Burn Hollywood Burn,” while Quentin Tarantino’s Rolling Thunder Pictures resurrected *Detroit 9000* for a new audience in the late 1990s with a rebranded home-video release.



Disco Godfather Screenplay, 1979
Robert Wagoner (Dates Unknown)
and Cliff Roquemore (1948-2002)

- Rudy Ray Moore’s cinematic output is not known for the quality of its writing. This script—originally entitled *The Wack Attack*—is no exception, with stage directions like “laughing, living it up, boogying” and characters named Doomsday, Stinger, and Cowboy. Meanwhile, the plot is an awkward blend of disco dance-offs and angel-dust dealing.



**Jim: The Author's Self-Centered
Memoir of the Great Jim Brown, 1972**

James Toback (b. 1944)

- NFL Hall of Famer, Jim Brown, has had a prolific and varied career as an athlete, an activist, and an actor. This infamous biography by writer-director James Toback was as much about its author's preoccupation with Brown's machismo and reputation as a ladies' man as it was about Brown's prodigious talents as an athlete and activist.
- Toback briefly lived with Brown and later became his wingman on some debauched sexual escapades (Toback has alleged the two men participated in orgies with dozens of women). Their unusual friendship inspired Toback to cast Brown alongside Harvey Keitel in his acclaimed 1978 directorial debut, *Fingers*.



Press Reviews

**The
Guardian**

Forbes

The Daily Seller.

The Washington Post

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NEWS NY**

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