

PARTING SHOTS

LIFE

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Sweet Melvin's very hot, very cool black movie

Melvin Van Peebles is a brilliant black man with overweight eyelids that rise and fall like little man-hole covers and a dotted line tattooed around the base of his lean and muscular neck. Just below it, in both French and English, appears a minute inscription: CUT ON THE DOTTED LINE—IF YOU CAN. "In the last year," Van Peebles murmured drily, "a lot of people have tried."

Van Peebles is the author, producer, director, editor, composer and star of a picture called *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*, and he was referring to the middlebrow reviewers, black and white, who have angrily ripped his movie as a sleazy black skin flick that "merchandises injustice" and incites to riot. Four months ago, only two major downtown exhibitors in the U.S. were willing to give the picture playing time. But by last week, smashing house records wherever it has played, *Sweetback* had become the top-grossing independent picture of all time. It has made more than \$10 million in the first-run theaters and established Van Peebles as the black hope of American movies.

"*Sweetback* is the first black movie that doesn't cop out," Van Peebles told me when I pressed him to explain its success. "It tells you about black life like it is—not

like the Man wants to hear it is. It's also the first revolutionary black movie. It shows a nigger that busts a white man's head and gets away with it! Now, bourgeois critics don't like that, but black folks do. They scream and cry and laugh and yell at the brother on the screen. For the black man, *Sweetback* is a new kind of hero. For the white man, my picture is a new kind of foreign film."

In the 36 hours we were together, Van Peebles told me almost nothing about his past. "When a black man is poor," he said, "he's just black. When he gets rich, I don't think he should fink out and acquire a biography." Van Peebles presents himself as a mystery and a style, an unswervable force. "One thing about me," he said coldly, not caring whether I liked it or not, "I mean to get my way."

Getting it hasn't been easy. Born 38 years ago in a Chicago ghetto, Van Peebles drifted from Ohio Wesleyan to the air force to a motorman's job on a San Francisco cable car to graduate school in Holland. Somewhere along the line there was a marriage, a divorce, two children. Invited to Paris to show some short films he had made, he stayed for nine years. To feed himself, he sang and danced on street corners. Lat-

er he edited a magazine modeled on *Mad* and in his spare time wrote five novels. In French. In 1966, financed by the French government, he made a movie called *Story of a Three-Day Pass*; in 1970, financed by a Hollywood studio, he made *Watermelon Man*.

Sweetback he made on his own, and he staked out his autonomy like a ghetto kid battling for his turf. He persuaded a studio to defer the rent on its film equipment and got a film lab to lend him color stock. To save money he played the hero himself.

Working day and night, Van Peebles drove his crew (half black, half white) like an overseer. *Sweetback* was shot in 19 days and edited in five and a half months. When it was done, it belonged 100 percent to Van Peebles. So did the spin-offs: a *Sweetback* album, a *Sweetback* paperback, *Sweetback* T-shirts and *Sweetback* wines (Mama's Tub Red and Mama's Tub White). "Mel could come out of this movie," says a friend, "with \$3 million under his mattress."

Money has not altered Van Peebles's "luncheonette life-style": he still slopes around in a cheap denim jacket, keeps a low-rent pad in lower Manhattan, travels by subway, eats one meal a day. But money has magnified his clout. Did the movie raters award him an X? Van Peebles sued for restraint of trade. Did a Boston exhibitor slash nine minutes out of *Sweetback*? Van Peebles sued for breach of contract. In the fall he expects to



Van Peebles in an X-rated shirt

open a play on Broadway and next year he plans to make two new movies, one of them a *Sweetback* sequel.

"The main thing," Van Peebles told me thoughtfully, "is to build a black movie industry. Black people need a mirror they can watch themselves in, a mirror the white man can't distort. I've proved that a black man can make it in this business with no help from Whiteness. In the next couple years a lot of black directors gonna do the same thing. Man!" he almost shouted, jumping up and slapping his thigh, "you're lookin' at the start of an empire!"

BRAD DARRACH