

## Power to the Peebles

It was shot in 20 days on a wheezing budget with a crew recruited largely from skin flicks and the streets. Critics hated it, distributors shunned it. But black audiences loved *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*, a foxy film centering around an outlaw from the ghetto who throws down girls—white and black—the way Billy the Kid tossed back sarsaparilla. In the end he gets away with everything. Huey Newton, Black Panther defense minister, called it “the first truly revolutionary black film.”

The movie was produced, written and directed by Melvin Van Peebles, who also stars as Sweetback, the outraged and outrageous hero. The scion of a Los Angeles whorehouse, Sweetback graduates to an obvious profession: pimping. He “goes bad” while watching two white policemen cudgel a black youth wrongly accused of inciting riot. Sweetback reacts by mashing the cops’ skulls with their own handcuffs. He then sets off on a ghetto version of the traditional Wild West chase. He fights and fornicates, leaving behind a trail of bodies in various stages of disrepair. When cornered by two cops, Sweetback responds with his own brand of sky-high black consciousness: he kills them. After he escapes to Mexico, the screen fills with a printed warning: WATCH OUT. A BAADASSSSS NIGGER IS COMING BACK TO COLLECT SOME DUES.

**Chartreuse Suits.** An aggressive and often affronting movie, *Sweetback* is also irreverent, scatological and crude. “It’s for those dudes in the chartreuse suits,” explains Van Peebles. “Those cats who want to be card-carrying whites—man, they don’t dig it at all.”

For good reason. The actors do little acting. The film does not track along a story line. Rather, it eases by in jazz format, an initial statement of theme followed by elaborations and improvisations. Sound-track impressions boom the eardrums with rock, shrieks, sirens, hopped-up choppers and gunfire. The dialogue between black characters stays so close to ghetto speech that white sound men advised Van Peebles to redo it; they thought his recorder must have been out of whack. One speech is delivered partly from the toilet, with appropriate break-wind accompaniment.

Trouble came fast when Van Peebles set out to make *Sweetback* from his own screenplay. Industry credit dried up with a reading of the script’s first three paragraphs. Union wages priced camera crews beyond his budget. Van Peebles, however, was ready for a hassle. He used nonunion crews, throwing the unions off the scent by letting it be thought that he intended to do a quickie porno romp, not worth their while. The first takes reduced his net worth to \$13, but Soul Brother Bill Cosby answered an S O S with a \$50,000 loan.

Once the filming was finished, Van Peebles and *Sweetback* had another round of problems: no distributor would take a chance on the film. Only two theaters in the country would book it. When the talk shows blacked him out, and newspapers ignored *Sweetback*, Van Peebles took to the street corners “with friends, and chicks I was sleeping with,” and passed out handbills touting the film. Van Peebles’ fast talk, plus audience word of mouth, made it a limited success. But that was enough. *Sweetback* will reopen next month in 60 theaters in the greater New York area alone; another 140 theaters around the country will also soon show the film.

**Two Jobs.** Van Peebles was born 38 years ago on Chicago’s South Side. He is no ghetto dropout, but a graduate of Ohio Wesleyan University. A photographer friend turned him on to film making, and Van Peebles made several shorts, which he tried to parlay into a



MELVIN VAN PEEBLES

Cool dude with silver shades.

film job in Hollywood. He was offered two: elevator operator and parking-lot attendant. Meanwhile, Henri Langlois of the prestigious French Cinematèque, the largest depository of film and film history in the world, saw some of his pictures and invited him to Paris. Langlois showed the films, and for a short time Van Peebles was a cinecut celebrity. He stayed on in Paris, panhandling, singing, dancing and playing the kazoo in cafés for centimes.

During that time, Van Peebles knocked out five novels. He wrote them in self-taught French because the French directors’ union is required to give a union card to any author writing in French who wants to direct a film made from his own works. Armed with his

union card, an advance from the French Ministry of Cultural Affairs and a substantial stipend from a wealthy Frenchwoman, Van Peebles did indeed make a film. *Story of a Three-Day Pass*, about a black G.I.’s weekend with a white French girl, became a hit in France and a modest success in the U.S. Hollywood began hustling him. Columbia came up with a black-white satire called *Watermelon Man*, a dark-toned comedy about an obnoxious white man who turns black. “I thought I had to make *Watermelon Man* in order to do the films I really wanted to do,” Van Peebles said. *Sweetback* was just a camera cue away.

**Street Talk.** Van Peebles is a cool dude, casting a cynical eye on the world from behind his silver shades. He has not had a permanent address in ten years, hauling his belongings around in a battered knapsack. He is handsome in a wiry, wary way. He gestures with a skinny cigar, spilling out a blend of street talk and businessmen’s lingo. But for all his jive and his expatriate status, he insists that he is deadly serious about his black identity. His phrases are familiar: “Of all the ways we’ve been exploited by the Man, the most damaging is the way he destroyed our self-image. The message of *Sweetback* is that if you can get it together and stand up to the Man, you can win.”

Van Peebles is no easy man to get it together with. He may be content to work inside the system, but the system had better bend a bit to accommodate him. “I am what I am, man. You don’t like? That’s your problem,” he says. When his assistant director threatened to quit, Van Peebles reasoned with him in typically *Sweetback* fashion: he began banging his head on the floor. Even the challenge stamped on his body flaunts his cool: above a broken blue stripe tattooed around his neck is the inscription “Cut along the dotted line.”

**Yeah Inc.** By anybody’s adding machine, Van Peebles is a successful man. *Sweetback* has grossed nearly \$10 million. Yeah Inc., the one-man corporation he formed to finance *Sweetback*, is a busy business: there is the film and the sound-track album. A paperback of the movie is already “making some good bread.” T shirts, sweatshirts and nighties announce I AM A SWEETBACK. This fall his play *Ain’t Supposed to Die a Natural Death* opens on Broadway. Coming up: *Sweetback* douche powder. Boasts Van Peebles: “You are looking at a black conglomerate.” But he still considers himself first and foremost a film maker—and not necessarily for blacks only. “If films are good,” he says, “the universality of the human experience will transcend the race and creed and crap frontiers.”