



P E R F O R M E R S

CURTIS MAYFIELD

A

sked once by an interviewer if he was a spiritual person, Curtis Mayfield smiled and said, "I think all human beings are spiritual." That good opinion of others has stood him – and all of us – in good stead over four decades of music making. Influenced deeply by the church of his grandmother, the Reverend A.B. Mayfield, and surrounded by gospel music since childhood, Curtis Mayfield would find creativity, selfhood and community forever intertwined in his career. He began harmonizing in church at age seven and taught himself guitar using a unique tuning improvised from his rudimentary piano playing. In 1957 boyhood friend and fellow choir member Jerry Butler invited Curtis to join his group the Roosters, whose members Sam Gooden, Arthur Brooks and Richard Brooks had moved to Chicago from Chattanooga. Renamed the Impressions, the group's first success, "For Your Precious Love," ironically split Butler from the group in 1958, when he was singled out on the record's label credit. But Mayfield put Butler's solo career on track in 1960, when the two cowrote "He Will Break Your Heart," then launched the Impressions' chart career in earnest with the 1961 hit "Gypsy Woman." As a trio made up of Gooden, Mayfield and Butler's replacement, Fred Cash, the Impressions brought a run of graceful, inspirational Mayfield songs to the R&B and pop charts. "It's All Right," "I'm So Proud," "Keep On Pushing," "Amen" and "People Get Ready" were by turns stately and jubilant, and all expressed the grounding influence of a church upbringing along with the awakening social consciousness of a groundbreaking generation. While those tunes blazed up the charts in America, the Impressions'

Curtis Mayfield,
singer, songwriter,
producer, record-
company presi-
dent, ca. 1973

B Y B R I A N C H I N





harmonies also became a primary influence for dozens of West Indian vocal trios, from the Heptones to Bob Marley's Wailers.

Mayfield's diligence and foresight rewarded him not only as a writer/producer but in his endeavors as an entrepreneur, too. As an independent producer, he

turned out Sixties hits that included Jan Bradley's "Mama Didn't Lie" and Gene Chandler's "Rainbow," and as Okeh's main production force, Mayfield's touch with Top Forty-oriented material was skillful and irresistible: Major Lance's "The Monkey Time" and "Um, Um, Um, Um, Um, Um" make a self-evident case for Mayfield's sense of fun. Still, business was serious: He ran a studio as well as a series of record labels, and he wisely published his own songs, avoiding the contract swindles common to the time. To this day, Mayfield retains control of his songs and master recordings.

Ultimately, Mayfield achieved a perfect fusion of the musical and the philosophical. The Impressions' 1967 hit "We're a Winner" suggests a small gathering of the like-minded: a study group and a party, too, reasoning and dancing at the same time. His later Impressions hits, "Choice of Colors" and "This Is My Country," sound more politically charged than anything on today's Top Forty. Mayfield would *really* lay it on the line, though, when in 1968 he established his third record label, Curtom, and in 1970, when he left the Impressions to go solo.

On his own, Mayfield rocketed out of the starting block, releasing three hit albums in just over a year during 1970 and 1971. His first, the gold-certified *Curtis*, set the blistering "(Don't Worry) If There's a Hell Below, We're All Going to Go" next to "The Makings of You" and "Move On Up," which recalled his earlier songs of encourage-

ment. While explicit, Mayfield's protest songs also featured unsparring self-examination. Personally unassuming but carrying the moral authority of his experience, he said his piece without judgment or detachment, without presumption or false identification – from his first solo LP to 1996's *New World Order*. "I ain't gonna point no fingers, so I don't want

Top: Mayfield with some Impressions, 1964; Right: onstage with the band, 1964; Below: on a British TV show, 1972; Opposite: Mayfield in 1993



nobody to point no fingers," he told the audience, introducing "Stone Junkie" on *Curtis/Live!*

In his view, no group or individual had a monopoly on right or wrong: "Mighty, Mighty (Spade and Whitey)" and "Beautiful Brother of Mine" pointed out the interconnectedness of communities as well as the importance of self-determination. In "We the People Who Are Darker Than Blue," Curtis constructed one of his most complex statements, evoking this multifaceted vision with a near-cinematic use of narrative, jump cuts, fades and dissolves throughout the six-minute track. These techniques made the subtext stronger, they weren't just exercises in production. And they foreshadowed his greatest commercial success: the 1972 soundtrack to *Superfly*.

Packed with smash songs like "Freddie's Dead," "Superfly," "Give Me Your Love" and "Pusherman," Mayfield's *Superfly* was much more than a film score: His lyrics commented on the action and themes as if they were an additional character. With a four-week run as the best-selling album in the country, *Superfly* marked Mayfield's commercial peak; it has retained its iconic impact twenty-

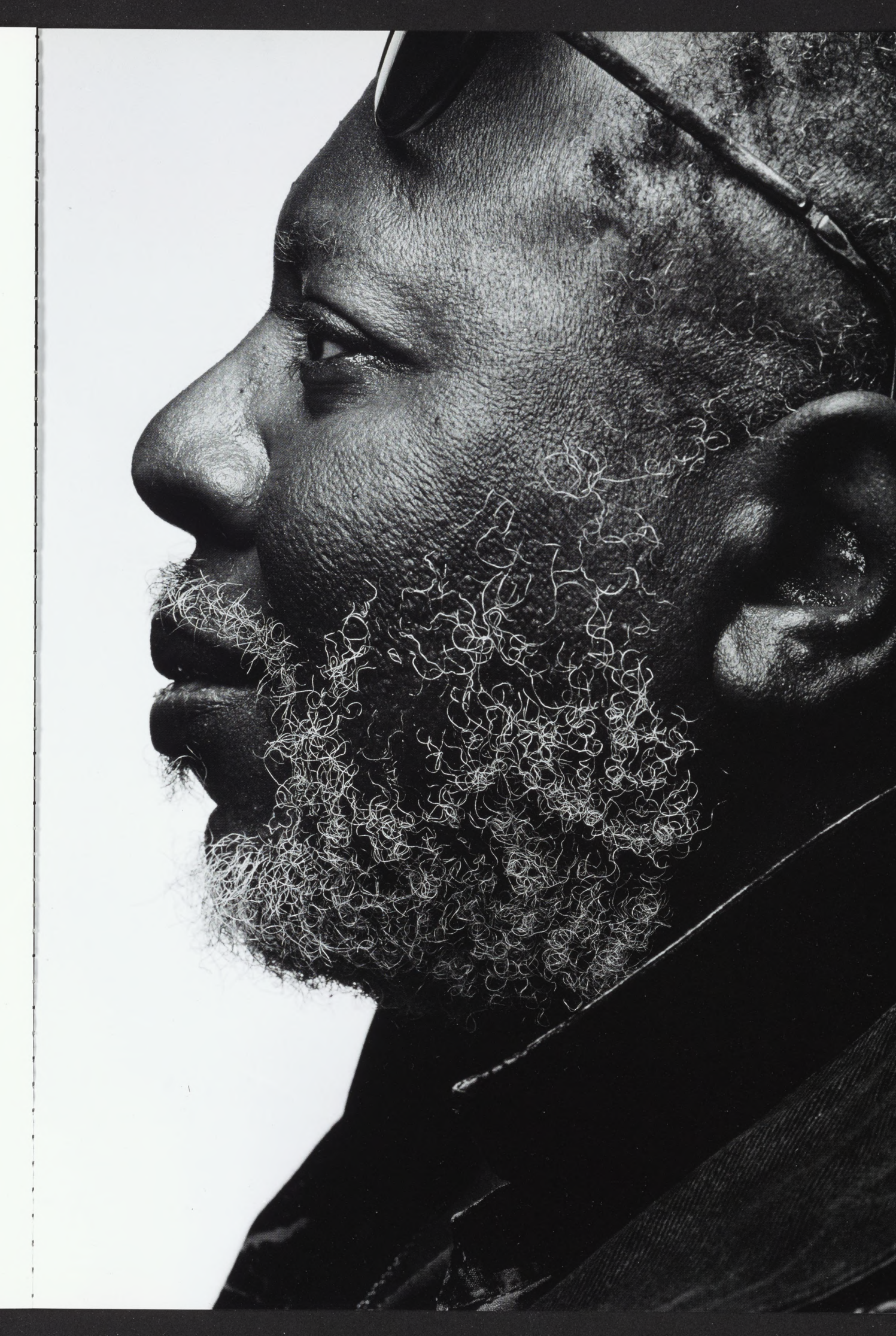


five years after its initial release. Subsequently, Mayfield produced several other film scores on which he worked with some of the greatest voices of our time: Aretha Franklin (*Sparkle*); Gladys Knight and the Pips (*Claudine*); and the Staple Singers (*Let's Do It Again*).

Through decades of success and influence, Mayfield never forgot that some of his listeners were out on the street themselves. His music assumed that you could stand to hear the truth and that, one way or another, faith could take care of the rest. The dignity with which he always espoused self-determination as a musician also embues his demonstration of grace in adversity since the 1990 stage accident that left him paralyzed.

Covers of Mayfield's songs – all the samplings aside – continue to elicit the best, deepest performances from young artists like En Vogue ("Giving Him Something He Can Feel"), Tevin Campbell and Lenny Kravitz ("Keep On Pushing" and "Billy Jack," respectively, from 1994's all-star *A Tribute to Curtis Mayfield*). His brand of progressive soul can be heard clearly in the style and content of today's young R&B lions, from D'Angelo and Maxwell to Jamiroquai and Erykah Badu. As samplers search for the real deal, portions of his songs have been regular chart makers in recent years for Mary J. Blige, Ice-T, Master P. and a long list of others.

Calling the music of Curtis Mayfield beatific is not a metaphor but a simple descriptive. "Now is the right time," he says on 1996's *New World Order*; once again rallying us to keep the faith. It has never been necessary for this artist to "reinvent" himself: His courage of conviction, determination to persevere and the ring of truth that exemplifies his songs are as relevant, surely, in the cynical present as they have ever been. Four decades later, when the morning comes, it's still a new day, in the gospel according to Curtis Mayfield. ✦



The Sound *of* Baadasssss Brothers

*The music, dialogue and imagery of classic
blaxploitation flicks reverberate to this day.* }



On a warm summer Saturday in 1972, my friends and I – resembling Fat Albert and the Cosby Kids – gather in front of 315 Livonia Avenue, a sixteen-story building in the Tilden housing projects. We're smack in the middle of Brownsville, Brooklyn, a ghetto with all the credentials: junkies, gangs and lazy cops. It's the age of suede Pumas and red canvas Converse; red-black-and-green sweatbands and street-scraping bell-bottoms; elaborate cornrows and bushy, uneven Afros. ☞ It was an age without giants – King and Malcolm were dead, Ali was great but no longer the greatest, and the let's-march-and-change-the-world optimism I remembered from my childhood was already a memory. Nowadays, from my sixth-floor window, I would watch

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Superfly had a groundbreaking soundtrack by Curtis Mayfield that was nominated for a Grammy.

police cruisers receive brown paper bags from passersby; I'd peer into crowded, ugly tenement apartments and see junkies clustered by candy stores. It didn't seem that bad, really, but by '72, no one in Brownsville was singing "We Shall Overcome."

We hop the IRT to the Deuce (Times Square, that is), and on the hour-and-fifteen-minute subway ride we compare notes on fly-ass *Soul Train* dancers and relate the latest tale of somebody's mom being mugged in a

project stairwell. The deeper into Manhattan the iron horse rides, the fewer black passengers come on board. Four loud, boisterous, black adolescent males, my friends and I draw anxious glances and steely glares from riders in the grip of urban paranoia.

We emerge from the damp subterranean station into Forty-second Street's urban-blight scape: the tawdry glow of crumbling old theaters, noisy-clanging-beeping pinball arcades, greasy luncheonettes and cheap-looking hookers. Invisible from the street, the Kings of Forty-second Street loom larger than life inside their movie-



house palaces – the Harris, the Selwyn, the Amsterdam – where we pay weekly homage to a new generation of heroes for a new black age: Richard “Shaft” Roundtree, Fred “the Hammer” Williamson, Jim “Slaughter” Brown, Jim “Black Belt Jones”

Kelly and, of course, that royal Queen, Pam “Coffy” Grier.

From our \$3.50 balcony seats – a better vantage point for scouting girls – we spend the afternoon cheering car chases, ogling busty women in distress and savoring dialogue laced with “fools,” “suckas” and “muthafucks.” Unlike Sidney Poitier – the Sixties’ embodiment of noble striving in his white shirt, dark suit and tie – the blaxploitation guys and gals are as funky as their multicolored bell-bottoms and two-toned platform shoes. Their state-of-the-art threads seem to free them to live as large and insolent as we all dream

we might. In their depictions of aggressive black heroism, the stars of *Shaft*, *Hammer*, *Trouble Man* and *Slaughter* show us attributes comprising another facet of black power: tough, non-nonsense and cool as the over side of a pillow. Like Western sheriffs and Mafia dons, our cinematic heroes make, and live by, their own rules; their worldview

and attitude are the same as those of film-noir private detectives – the irony being these really are “black” films. Even the coke dealer, Priest, in *Superfly* and the pimp, Goldie, in *The Mack* are elevated to heroic stature, filling their films with a sly cinematic presence objectionable only to church ladies and NAACP spokespeople.

Underscoring the cursing and the revenge-fixated plots are the chicken scratch of guitars, the percolating polyrhythms of congas

Richard Roundtree and Sherri Brewer in *Shaft*; James Brown recorded the 1973 *Black Caesar* soundtrack.



and bongos and the wailing of soul singers about “a bad brother” ready to “take down the man.” Sometimes, when the movie is really bad (as in “not good”) and the scent of cheeba has induced a contact high, I close my eyes and let the soundtracks fill me up. After the credits roll, it’s hot dogs at Nedick’s (cool ’cause Shaft ate there, too) before we board the train again. On the way home, we reenact our favorite scenes, quote choice dialogue and hope that next Saturday we’ll have the bank for another day on the Deuce.

Admittedly predictable, cheap and disposable, the sensationalistic black-oriented genre the Hollywood trades had dubbed blaxploitation wasn’t built to last. And now, almost two generations removed from their first-run double-feature glory, blaxploitation films fill the collections of teenagers and flow into the iconography of hip-hop and R&B. Why? Where, back then, my friends and I were experiencing for the first time the heady exhilaration of commercially viable aggression, today’s hip-hop generation has embraced “in-your-face” as a guiding principle. Viewed today, blaxploitation movies seem crudely made and haphazardly conceived, yet the brashness of their characterizations remains vividly compelling. *Shaft* and *Coffy* don’t look back on a past filled with public humiliations but to a present where a cocky attitude, a sullen face and gaudy materialism is not only celebrated but essential to street survival.

From where we sat in the balcony, the appeal was visceral and direct. Never had there been so many aggressive, I-don’t-give-a-damn black folks onscreen, and that aspect is so crucial. Blaxploitation movies reserved little space for turning the other cheek, singing Negro spirituals or chaste kissing. In fact, characters who engaged in those activities

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Music composed and performed by **JAMES BROWN**
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BLACK CAESAR

bore the brunt of the hero's much-applauded derision. In blaxploitation, black people shot back with big guns, strutted to bold jams and had sweaty, bed-rocking sex. Whatever stories the often loopy plots told, they were usually secondary to the rejection of passivity they dramatized and glorified.

Take *Shaft*, for instance. Seems the daughter of a Harlem gang lord has been kidnapped, and Shaft – a “spade dick” (as he sarcastically calls himself) with an office in Times Square and a pad in the Village – is the man to find her. But the plot is frequently backseated as Shaft's exploits and explosions take the wheel. Along the film's circuitous, ninety-eight-minute, uptown-downtown path, he throws a brother out of his office window, saves a black revolutionary from a hail of bullets, cracks a bottle over the head of a mob henchman and continually sasses a long-suffering white police detective. His attitude is less about being cool than it is about just plain simmering; the movie opens with him walking past the marquee of Forty-second Street and then directly into swollen traffic. As a taxi screeches to a halt and honks, it's Shaft who flips the bird: “Up yours!” is his first line of the film.

Shaft also proves to be an adroit lover who drives his women to nails-digging-into-the-small-of-his-back ecstasy; the white girl he picks up in a bar is just another conquest he can't be bothered with the next morning. Shaft not only gave it to the man but to his woman too; with his black-leather battle gear and ever-ready sneer, Shaft was our black id unleashed, realizing the worst nightmares of the NAACP and the KKK.

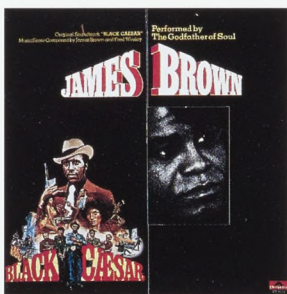
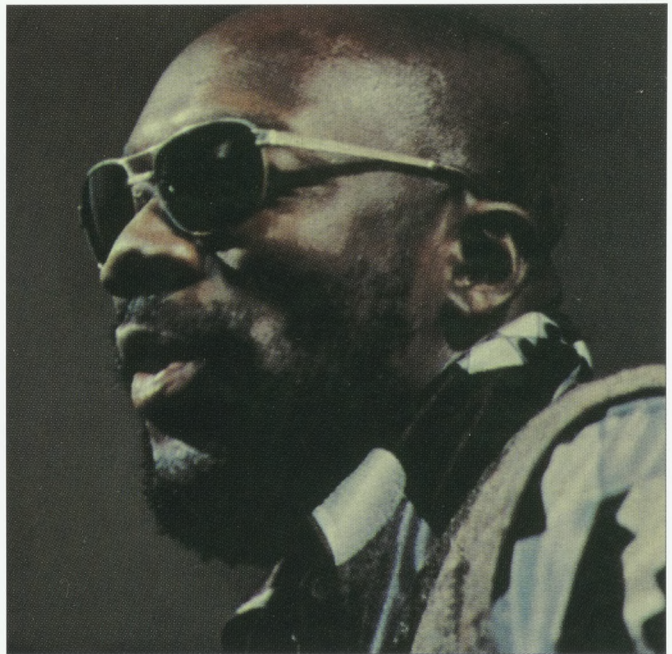
Shaft's prowess – on the streets and between the sheets – caused

much trepidation on both sides of the race line not because it broke any new ground, but because it seemed to embody and even amplify black stereotypes. Because blaxploitation glorified blacks in the very terms racists had so long used to malign the race, mainstream civil rights leaders such as CORE and the NAACP railed against it, warning of its long-term negative effects on black youth. The words of Junius Griffin, head of the NAACP's Beverly Hills/Hollywood branch in 1972, were typical of the black establishment view: “We must insist that our children are not constantly exposed to a steady diet of so-called black movies that glorify black males as pimps, dope pushers, gangsters and super males with vast physical prowess but no cognitive skills.”

But there was always more to it than that. The film that inspired blaxploitation, Melvin Van Peebles's *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* (1971), was a gritty X-rated venture made outside the studio system. Essentially the tale of a stud on the run, it had a distinctly revolutionary flavor. Like the films that followed, it took a very cynical

view of all types of politics – black and white, civil rights and radical – and in doing so reflected a nation that was generally exhausted, weary from the battles of the Sixties. In the ensuing years, this jaundiced view of politics and political leaders threatened to undermine the nonviolent, work-within-the-system principles of the civil rights

Isaac Hayes composed and performed “Theme From *Shaft*,” as well as the soundtrack album, which rocketed to Number One.



movement, which explains why many blacks found the subtext of blaxploitation so alarming.

After decades of striving to depict a positive image of blacks, the African-American artistic community was surprisingly ambivalent toward blaxploitation. Despite a few late-Sixties breakthroughs in television and the success of the aforementioned Mr. Poitier, black actors remained grievously underrepresented in all visual media, especially film. Individual actors and, on occasion, groups of actors would protest blaxploitation's negative stereotypes, but many of these same performers continued to audition for roles in them. It was the only game in town.

The parallels between blaxploitation and hip-hop run close and deep. The attacks on blaxploitation foreshadow the later criticism of

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gangsta rap, and both incurred the black establishment's wrath for their failure to present blacks in "positive" terms. Because hip-hop has remained stubbornly grass-roots and its creative energy still flows directly from the black community, it has grown, despite this. Blaxploitation, on the other hand, was produced – and abandoned – by Hollywood. Lacking hip-hop's intimate link to its audience and the resulting ability to continually reinvent itself from within, blaxploitation was thematically and commercially doomed.

And yet blaxploitation lives on. Samples of its in-your-face dialogue have been popping up on hip-hop records for years (e.g., a sound bite from *The Mack* intros "Rat-Tat-Tat-Tat" on Dr. Dre's *The Chronic*). The Players' Ball scene in *The Mack*, where the story's pimp protagonist is crowned Mack of the Year, has been referenced in several music videos. And female rapper Foxy Brown owes her handle to a Pam Grier vehicle. Jim Brown, Fred Williamson and black cult comedian Rudy Ray Moore (the star and writer of the raucous "Dolemite" series of comedies) make frequent music-video cameos. The unique influence of Antonio Fargas, a ubiquitous presence in blaxploitation, as loudmouthed hustler (*Across 110th Street*, *Shaft*) – before he became a regular as Huggy Bear in the *Starsky and Hutch* TV series – hovers over many videos, his preening vanity and over-the-top delivery having been referenced in hip-hop by Eazy-E and Flavor Flav.

Certainly the most crucial link between my Forty-second Street Saturdays and current turn-of-the-century youth culture is the persistent influence of blaxploitation soundtracks. The best

blaxploitation music – the albums *Shaft* and *Superfly*, Marvin Gaye's *Trouble Man*, Willie Hutch's "Brother's Gonna Work It Out" from *The Mack*, James Brown's "Down and Out in New York City" from *Black Caesar* – retains a theatricality and sense of place that no succeeding genre of African-American pop, including hip-hop, has consistently matched.

No one can dispute the enduring quality of Isaac Hayes's *Shaft* and Curtis Mayfield's *Superfly*, both Number One pop albums in their time. Hayes and Mayfield used these scores to expand the sonic scope of their work beyond the limits of crafting three-and-a-half-minute hit singles. Jammed with wah-wah guitars, sensuous Latin percussion, blaring horns, supple flutes and vocal choruses, these albums continue to inspire current music makers. In a nod to those classic tracks, Dr. Dre has extensively used freshly created flute, keyboard and bass lines to add cinematic sweep to his famous tales of drive-bys and machismo. It's quite appropriate that Dr. Dre, as the definitive gangsta-rap producer, has consistently paid homage to blaxploitation in his provocative immortality plays.

Likewise, Lenny Kravitz, fan of vintage speakers and all sounds retro, often uses blaxploitation soundtrack clichés – especially the wah-wah pedal and righteous string arrangements – to spice up his more soulful material. In fact, his cover of "Billy Jack," on a 1994 Curtis Mayfield tribute album, sounded more of the period than the 1975 original. D'Angelo, a son of soul with a hip-hop pedigree, opens his live show with the "Theme From *Shaft*." In so

Wattstax documented the Woodstock of blaxploitation: an early-Seventies music festival that took place in Watts.



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Blaxploitation had international appeal, as Italian, Belgian and Japanese posters testify; Ron O'Neal in *Superfly*.

doing, the singer isn't in search of post-modern irony or nostalgia but an affirmation of his own badness, which his fans happily cosign.

From its inception, hip-hop embraced the rhythmic underpinning of the blaxploitation scores. Beats and bits of rhythm from those records were utilized by early hip-hop DJs. I remember that in the late Seventies the soundtrack from *Shaft in Africa* was prized by party givers not for the Four Tops' hit "Are You Man Enough" but for a percussion break on an obscure instrumental.

Today's Deuce is a very different place from the one where my homies and I chilled. Disney's theatrical version of *The Lion King* rules the (New) Amsterdam, and a Disney store sits at Seventh Avenue and Forty-second, where Shaft (and I) ate hot dogs at Nedick's. Nearly all the familiar aspects of the Deuce we knew back in the day are in the process of being multiplexed, reconstructed and cleaned up. Except the memories.

As a young, impressionable connoisseur of blaxploitation, I admit its effects have lingered on both me and our culture. For example, my wardrobe has always had more than its share of turtlenecks and leather jackets because of Roundtree's gear in *Shaft*. The roots of my (sometime) swagger and street strut can be pinned on *Slaughter*. And I still cherish and file those blaxploitation soundtracks in my music collection – *Superfly* and *Trouble Man* especially – under "A" for attitude, right next to N.W.A and Wu-Tang Clan.

Culturally, the period from 1970 to 1974 was amazingly fertile in terms of African-American music and imagery. The creation of larger-than-life black heroes in films coincided with the electrified jazz of Miles Davis, Sly Stone's cross-racial appeal, the comedic maturation of Richard Pryor, the surreal satire of Ishmael Reed and other funky expressions too numerous to list.

All this stuff washed over me and fueled my ambition to somehow contribute, in whatever way I could, to this dark, rich continuum. However, with the possible exception of the late Eighties, when Spike Lee and Public Enemy gave an Afrocentric charge to the general pop imagination, no time since the Seventies has felt quite as

flavorful or fun. Maybe it was some kind of trashy, flashy cultural high point. Or maybe I was just a kid with very sweet dreams of being a King of Forty-second Street.

So if you ever see me striding purposefully across Forty-second Street in a leather jacket with the collar up, wearing a neatly rolled turtleneck and an intense scowl on my face, don't doubt that somewhere, deep in the folds of my soul, amid guitars, French horns and the low-pitched punch of a Fender bass, sassy women are singing, "They say this cat Nelson is a baad. . . ." *

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