

COVER STORY

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AGE OF BEAUTY

Despite Hollywood's obsession with youth — which, let's face it, never grows old — there's a power surge happening among more seasoned female performers. And while guys have long been able to maintain leading-man status as their birthday candles hit the three-score mark, today the women come off just as commanding, sexy and in tune. No wonder some of their latest work has movie titles like "The Queen" or song titles like "Under Your Spell Again."

Here's a party of five who prove that "sexy" applies no matter the age.

A strong woman who can take charge and kick butt? Pam Grier practically defined that as Coffy and Foxy Brown in B-movies of those names in 1973 and 1974, helping to make her the first black woman to grace the cover of Ms. magazine back in 1975.

Grier proved she was more than just a campy icon in "Fort Apache the Bronx" (1981) and in a recurring part on the 1980s hit series "Miami Vice," and showed she could be sexy and in on the joke in 1997's "Jackie Brown." On Showtime's "The L Word," the 57-year-old actress is a bar owner and port in the storm for the gals, including her half sister (played by Jennifer Beals).

Survivor? You bet. When Quentin Tarantino crafted her "Jackie Brown" comeback, he didn't see a 1970s icon; he saw an actress ready for the best role of her career. And nothing is sexier than a woman who knows what she's worth, and won't settle for less.

M.G.

▲ PAM GRIER: 'L' for Lady

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SALLY FIELD: A Place in Our Heart ►

Sally Field was reportedly turned down for the role of Benjamin Braddock's girlfriend in 1967's "The Graduate," and it's easy to see why: Her sexiness has always been of the wholesome, all-American variety.

Even though she shot to fame as the bikini-wearing Gidget, you just knew Field wasn't the type who would play on the beach after dark. She even made flirting with Burt Reynolds seem innocent both in "Smokey and the Bandit" (1977) and in her private life, where Field turned down his marriage proposals. In short, we really *liked* Field, and that kept us on her side as she formed a union in "Norma Rae" (1979), fought for her farm in "Places in the Heart" (1984), juggled suitors in "Murphy's Romance" (1985) and pitched a fit in "Soapdish" (1991).

Now, at 60, as a widow on ABC's drama "Brothers & Sisters," Field makes her character Nora's desire to date after her husband's death touching, amusing and, yes, sexy. She won't be hitting on a teenage gardener or her neighbor's son; that wouldn't suit her. But when Field wants to find romance again, we'll be rooting for her, as always. Michael Giltz

REGAL, ROYALLY CUTE Helen Mirren (opposite) has wowed at the movies and on the red carpet; Sally Field is America's sweetie.