

Retrospective

Van Peebles the Elder

HIT MAN



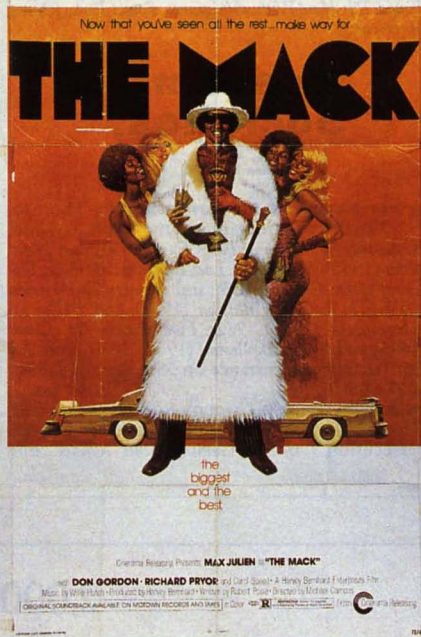
He aims to please.

MGM presents "HIT MAN"
Starring BERNIE CASEY · Co-starring PAMELA GRIER
Screenplay by GEORGE ARMITAGE
Based Upon the Novel "Jack's Return Home" by TED LEWIS
Produced by GENE CORMAN
Directed by GEORGE ARMITAGE · METROCOLOR
MGM

The blaxploitation movies of the seventies—with their swanky, gritty world of pushers and pimps and big-haired, gun-toting heros—signified the cinematic arrival of powerful (and often powerfully corrupt) African-American role models, as well as some of the most memorable tag lines in movie history (“Don’t mess aroun’ with Foxy Brown. She’s the meanest chick in town!” and “Coffy: She’ll cream you!”). But the **“Blaxploitation, Baby!”** festival (featuring *Shaft*, *Super Fly*, and more than 30 others) also celebrates a genre spurred on, like all Hollywood trends, by box-office success—specifically, the huge grosses earned by *Sweet Sweetback’s Baadasssss Song* (1971). That independent film, written, produced, directed, edited, scored, and starring Melvin Van Peebles (he also wrote the recent *Panther*, directed by his son Mario), “was not supposed to work,” says Van Peebles. “Up until that time, the belief had been that black movies never made money. Well, my contention was that they hadn’t made black movies; they had made white fantasies of what black movies were.” *Sweet Sweetback’s* anti-hero—a superstud running from the police for virtually the entire film—spawned a wave of imitators, though most of them were undercover narcotics or FBI agents. “*Sweetback* ushered into the cinema vocabulary the black hero,” Van Peebles says. “However, it was unacceptable to have this hero completely on his own. You had the Coffy Browns, the Shafts, and all the others who were allowed to have a flamboyant urban style—but they still, in the final analysis, were working under the auspices of the bwana.”

Not that Van Peebles thinks these movies should be dismissed. “I think you should see all of them,” he says, even “nice and frivolous” comedies like *Uptown Saturday Night*, a 1974 hit starring Bill Cosby and Sidney Poitier. “But you can’t immerse yourself fully. You have to be aware of the mind games that are being played.” At Film Forum from June 23 through August 10.

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MICHAEL GILTZ