

The Museum of Modern Art

For Immediate Release
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MELVIN VAN PEEBLES

June 22 - 30, 1990

Melvin Van Peebles's spirited and humane portraits of African-American life are featured in a retrospective of his films opening at The Museum of Modern Art on June 22, 1990. Although he has consistently worked outside of the mainstream of cinema, Van Peebles has established himself as a critically important filmmaker in the history of progressive American film. His works have profoundly influenced a new generation of African-American filmmakers, including such directors as Spike Lee, Robert Townsend, and the Hudlin brothers. MELVIN VAN PEEBLES continues through June 30.

The program opens with Van Peebles's introduction of Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song (1971), the story of a streetwise black man who escapes from the police and battles his way through the urban jungle. With the release of this film, black cinema explosively surfaced from the marginal position to which it had been confined in American film culture. One of the all-time top-grossing, independently produced features, Sweetback is credited with having singlehandedly created the black exploitation genre of the seventies.

The program features Van Peebles's most recent film, Identity Crisis (1990), written by and starring his son Mario Van Peebles, which is a comic story of a French fashion designer reincarnated in the body of a young rap performer. Other works included in this series are his first feature, The Story of a Three Day Pass (1967), a daring treatment of an interracial love story between an African-American soldier and a French woman; the director's only Hollywood release, Watermelon Man (1969), featuring Godfrey Cambridge as a bigoted white man who wakes up one morning to discover that he has become

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black; and the two shorts Sunlight and Three Pickup Men for Herrik (1958). Van Peebles also adapted and directed a film version of his Broadway musical Don't Play Us Cheap (1972) and wrote the screenplay for and starred in the television miniseries Sophisticated Gents (1981).

Melvin Van Peebles was born in Chicago in 1932. After attending Ohio Wesleyan and completing his military service, he moved to San Francisco where he made several short films and published a photo essay on the city's cable cars. After finding the Hollywood film industry closed to black directors, Van Peebles left California for Europe where he studied astronomy, toured with a Dutch repertory theater, and finally settled in Paris. He taught himself French, wrote five French novels, and in 1967 raised the capital to direct The Story of a Three-Day Pass. The film's critical success led Van Peebles back to Hollywood where he made Watermelon Man for Columbia Pictures.

In addition to making films, Van Peebles's accomplishments include eleven books, four television specials, and three Broadway and two off-Broadway plays, as well as numerous recordings and music videos. His Broadway productions Ain't Supposed to Die a Natural Death and Don't Play Us Cheap earned mixed reviews, yet garnered a total of eleven Tony nominations. His most recent book, No Identity Crisis (Simon and Schuster) will be published in July 1990.

MELVIN VAN PEEBLES has been organized by Laurence Kardish, curator, Department of Film, The Museum of Modern Art.

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For further information or film stills, contact Sarah Eaton, Film Press Representative, Department of Public Information, 212/708-9750.