Spectacle, masculinity, and music in blaxploitation cinema

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“Blaxploitation” was a brief cycle of action films made specifically for black audiences in both the mainstream and independent sectors of the U.S. film industry during the early 1970s. Offering overblown fantasies of black power and heroism filmed on the sites of race rebellions of the late 1960s, blaxploitation films were objects of fierce debate among social leaders and commentators for the image of blackness they projected, in both its aesthetic character and its social and political utility. After some time spent as the “bad object” of African-American cinema history, critical and theoretical interest in blaxploitation resurfaced in the 1990s, in part due to the way that its images—and sounds—recirculated in contemporary film and music cultures. Since the early 1990s, a new generation of African-American filmmakers has focused on ghetto life; contemporary African-American hip hop artists have taken blaxploitation images of urban culture and music as a point of origin for their own creative works; and, action auteurs like Quentin Tarantino and Guy Ritchie have quoted blaxploitation’s soundtracks (as well as its narratives and characters) in films such as Jackie Brown (USA 1997) and Lock, stock, and two smoking barrels (UK 1998). Interest in blaxploitation has intensified over the past few years with the release of a high budget remake of Shaft (USA/GRM 2000); Isaac Julien’s documentary BaadAssss cinema: a bold look at 70’s blaxploitation films (USA/UK 2002); Mario Van Peebles’ homage to his father Melvin, BaadAssss (USA 2003); and, the recently announced remake of Foxy Brown, to star Halle Berry in the title role. In histories of cinema, blaxploitation films like Melvin Van Peebles' Sweet Sweetback's baadassss song (USA 1971) are recognised as a--not-unproblematic--site of origin for contemporary African-American independent filmmaking. In this role, blaxploitation films of the 1970s--along with those contemporary films that have inherited their generic concerns--are still debated, as touchstones for broader questions regarding cinema as an aesthetic, social, and political force in contemporary African-American culture.

Even though blaxploitation's scores have been a key element in the recirculation of these films and are evidently a significant site of audience engagement with them, music has been largely ignored in the numerous discussions over blaxploitation's aesthetic and generic character, and its cultural role. It is not unusual for critics to observe that the soundtracks were better than the films themselves,
this observation serving as justification for lack of further comment on music’s role. Yet, the impact of blaxploitation clearly relies on the way music and film work in concert; consistently, those blaxploitation films whose cultural impact persists are those that feature the work of prominent black composers and performers of the 1970s, such as Earth Wind and Fire, Isaac Hayes, Curtis Mayfield, James Brown, Willie Hutch, and others. Soundtrack albums and singles extended the popularity of blaxploitation film, (see Appendix) and their techniques of scoring action sequences would be influential on both television and film for decades to follow. Funk-inflected themes for mid-1970s television series such as *Starsky and Hutch*, *Streets of San Francisco*, *S.W.A.T.*, *Baretta*, and even *CHiPs* suggest that blaxploitation had consolidated the association of funk with urban crime and action-oriented images of masculinity in the popular imagination. In its lavish use of music in what rapidly became action set pieces of the genre, blaxploitation undoubtedly has a place in the genealogy of contemporary action film and television, and their reliance on pop music scores to heighten the excitement of spectacular visual display. While the role of blaxploitation and its soundtracks in the historical development of action aesthetics is worth further exploration, my purpose here is to look more closely at the work of music in the blaxploitation film text and to consider in particular how it has contributed to those aesthetic, cultural and political qualities that have been the topic of so much debate. My analysis will focus in particular on Melvin Van Peebles’ *Sweet Sweetback’s baadasssss song*—a film that is atypical in some ways and yet influential in its modes of representation, both visual and musical.

**Highlighting the "cartoonish": blaxploitation and its contexts**

*Sweetback was politically unacceptable on the one hand, but it made a lot of money on the other. And I thought it was a stroke of genius to suppress the political aspects and highlight the cartoonish aspects, and there you’ve got your blaxploitation. In essence, blaxploitation ushered in a bunch of counterrevolutionary films....The upside was that because the films were so markedly "urban"--and I’m using the code word--they had to use minorities in central roles. So a lot of people got to learn a craft that had always been denied them.*

---Melvin Van Peebles, 1999

To understand the significance of blaxploitation’s representations, it is necessary to consider its historical and industrial contexts: its relation to a white-dominated film industry and likewise to the black audience. From 1968 to 1972 Hollywood studios were in a state of economic crisis, a crisis that opened a window of opportunity for black filmmakers and audiences. For several decades after World
War II, Hollywood studios had made "integrationist problem pictures":[10] featuring what Daniel Leab has called the "ebony saint"[11], a non-threatening, high-achieving, long-suffering, but non-violent Negro protagonist, the primary purpose of these films was to reassure white audiences.[12] At the same time that Sidney Poitier became top box office playing such roles in front of the camera, studios staunchly resisted moves to integrate behind the camera. Pressure from groups like the Hollywood branches of the ACLU (American Civil Liberties Union) and NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) increased through the latter half of the 1960s, but it was only with Hollywood's "discovery" of its black audience--an audience it needed to alleviate its economic woes[13]--that studios began taking chances on black scripts and directors, starting with Warner Brothers' The learning tree (USA 1969), directed by Life magazine photographer Gordon Parks and based on his autobiographical script.[14] While the production of black-oriented film progressed slowly at first, this changed when the industry found a formula that seemed to guarantee box office with minimal investment:[15] the solidly profitable MGM crime-comedy Cotton comes to Harlem (USA 1970),[16] along with the hugely successful indie production, Sweet Sweetback's baadasssss song, together inspired the generic elements of blaxploitation and inaugurated the black movie boom.

The sixty or so films that followed were black-themed and black-cast--in some cases also black-produced--crime dramas set in urban locales. Like rocksploitation's generic representations of teens and rock'n'roll culture, blaxploitation's generic representations of blacks and black culture were simplified in the extreme, cheap and easy to produce. At the same time, however, the topicality of the exploitation format meant that these were of necessity framed by contemporary political discourses of--and disputes over--black nationalism and black power. Rampantly individualistic and consumerist in their narrative concerns, these action-oriented films were on the whole anathematic to intellectual discourses of post-civil rights black culture;[17] but they had an affective, if not intellectual, link to contemporary political contexts in the way that their heroes--diametrically opposed to the integrationist impulses of the "ebony saint"--performed black anger against "the man" or "whitey." Offering fantasies of individual empowerment through violence, crime, and the performance of individual style, blaxploitation film divided the black community in their responses. In the case of Superfly (USA 1972), an independently-produced film directed by Gordon Parks, Jr. that is still considered a "black audience classic,"[18] blaxploitation excess inspired a collective response against the film's "vulgarity, violence, and vanity" from civil rights group, PUSH (People United to Save Humanity), organised by Reverend Jesse Jackson.[19]

As the trio of offences "vulgarity, violence, and vanity" indicates, blaxploitation, like other exploitation cinemas (teensploitation, rocksploitation, sexploitation, biker films, vice films, etc.), emphasised
spectacle and sensation over narrative complexity; in their representations of sexuality and violence, they took full advantage of the end of the Production Code. In their depiction of urban life, they highlighted a performative image of blackness, worlds away from the sartorially and verbally restrained, clean-cut Negro of civil rights protests and integrationist cinema. Deliberately setting its protagonists in contrast to this and other images of blackness--such as the political commitment and intellectualism of cultural nationalists--blaxploitation popularised the street glamour of pimps and hustlers, with a focus on visual excess in construction of its male--and female--heroes. Yet, spectacular as blaxploitation films were and lacking as they did the realism of psychologically-complex characterisations, they nevertheless gained a sense of verisimilitude from the fact that most were filmed on location in America's largest--and most troubled--black neighbourhoods, like Harlem (New York) and Watts (Los Angeles). These were the same neighbourhoods that had burst into flames when in the wake of the assassinations of Martin Luther King and Malcolm X, 384 rebellions and uprisings raged in 298 American cities from 1967 to 1968. With city backdrops that looked like, and in fact had been, war zones, their larger-than-life and politically-suspect fantasies of power shared the screen with stark reminders of the limits of that power and images of the everyday privations of poor blacks in the US.

In addition to their use of location shooting and their emphasis on street styles and street language, blaxploitation films gained authenticity through their use of music by contemporary black composers and performers. Picking up on the narrative and marketing strategies of independently-produced and studio-distributed youth hits like The graduate (USA 1967) and Easy rider (USA 1969), blaxploitation films relied upon soundtracks as part of their profit-making package, alongside other types of ancillary marketing. The pursuit of popular black composers and performers on the part of companies like American International Pictures to feature in their black themed films can be seen as an extension of strategies that had served AIP well in its various teen genres. But in these terms, Melvin Van Peebles was a blaxploitation innovator, as he released one of the songs for Sweetback prior to the film's release, a synergistic innovation generally attributed to the MTV generation of disco and rock-themed films. And at the same time that the combination of black film and music was a sound business move, there were also thematic alliances between contemporary black music and this new genre of black film that resonated through the film texts, heightening blaxploitation's appeal--and its cultural relevance, in spite of its generic limitations.

In blaxploitation films' focus on urban neighbourhoods transformed into ghettoes by the widening economic gap between poor and middle class blacks and between blacks and whites, they echo a
similar concern found in music of the period. While earlier soul and r&b had largely avoided direct commentary upon social and political conditions even during the civil rights movement, this was changed at the end of the 1960s by songs whose lyrics deliberately reflected upon ghetto life. This lyrical focus on the ghetto and problems of urban life was accompanied by a musical shift away from the crossover pop sounds of Detroit's Motown to a less highly produced music, the sound associated with southern studios like Memphis's Stax. Along with the increased emphasis in soul on an "earthier" sound, would come the rhythmic emphases of the "new black funk," a key element in blaxploitation's appeal. James Brown—who had long been at the top of r&b lists but largely unknown to white listeners until the mid-1960s—and his band the JBs are generally cited as funk's point of origin, although it is a musical form with links to New Orleans "second line" off-beat improvisation, as well as "hard bop" of the 1950s. As Matthew Brown summarises:

> It drew on African rhythm patterns and contemporary music technology to create a sound that was entirely new to many American ears, black or white. Basically, each instrument acts as a drum. The sound of a bass, sax, or guitar is atomized into a unit of rhythm. Each plays a brief, repeated pattern, and the parts are reconstructed into a timbric and tonal conversation. This is the groove of the funk piece. Melody is downplayed; it may emerge out of the weave of rhythms, but no single instrument dominates to follow or develop such a line. The piece proceeds in this groove until it unexpectedly shifts into another one, another key or tempo with another arrangement of rhythmic parts.

Brown's description suggests a number of qualities that were particularly important in the role funk played in blaxploitation soundtracks, from the driving jazz-funk blend of Sweetback to the funk-inflected "hot buttered soul" of Shaft, to the lightly-textured funk that enlivens the harsh realities of Superfly. Of particular importance in such soundtracks was funk's focus on rhythm and consequent emphasis on movement and energy; its downplay of both melody and linearity; the equivalence between—or "democracy" among—different instruments; and, the way that this polyrhythmic, non-linear music takes on what Brown calls an "architectural" design, to evoke a "three-dimensional space." These aesthetic features differentiated blaxploitation's music both from classical Hollywood scores and from the rock and folk oriented music that typified youth cinema's compilation scores. More importantly, funk's musical character underpinned what would become the set pieces of blaxploitation—the high angle establishing shot that claims that space for the hero; the chase scene; the violent confrontation—and made them into audio-visual representations expressive of the mobility and freedom of its protagonists to act decisively in their urban environments.
Aligned with these specific aesthetic qualities of blaxploitation's funk-based sound was the fact that it was consistently associated with black urban communities, that funk was never encouraged to cross over in the same way--or at least to the same degree--as soul or disco. Frank Kofsky comments on the cultural relevance of funk to black listeners as he traces the significance of the term to its origins in the work of "hard bop" jazz musicians like Miles Davis in the 1950s:

To describe a musician as funky--ie, unwashed and repellant--meant that he was worse (that is, better)... than just bad--he was... funky. Hence to call a composition, a passage or a player funky was not only to offer praise in general, but a means of lauding the object of praise for its specifically black qualities.

Funk was maintained by and promoted through black radio stations that provided the soundtracks of urban blacks' everyday lives—a function dramatised by Car Wash (USA 1976) through its musical-comic exploration of a day-in-the-life of a "dead-end job for chump change.

Genre of choice for both politicised songwriting as well as dance music of the period, the "new black funk" or "heavy, heavy funk" would be closely identified with various representations of black culture and community, all of which inflect its work in blaxploitation. A multi-media phenomenon, funk became in the 1970s a multi-valent signifier for mobile, urban blackness.

For many critics of the generic qualities of blaxploitation cinema as it emerged in the 1970s, blaxploitation's appeal to an "authentic" blackness in its music and mise en scene only served to highlight the problematic nature of its retrograde fantasy narratives, particularly the problematic character of its heroic--or anti-heroic--protagonists. Of particular concern for blaxploitation's critics is the way that it appeared to revive a familiar but problematic image of black masculinity from white culture. The figure that Donald Bogle has called "the brutal black buck," that Daniel Leab dubbed "superspade" and Jesse Algernon Rhines bluntly termed the "bad nigger" was transformed, in films like Sweetback and Superfly, into a hero. Bogle traces the "brutal black buck" stereotype back to Gus, the black-face villain and would-be despoiler of virtuous white womanhood in D.W. Griffiths' Birth of a nation, a spectacular representation of the threat presented by blackness, created specifically to engage and titillate a white audience.

bell hooks' comment on the iconography of the black body in popular culture makes clear what is at stake in representations that recall such earlier, voyeuristic and sensational relations to blackness, and in doing so, objectify black masculinity:

The black body has always received attention within the framework of white supremacy, as
racist/sexist iconography has been deployed to perpetrate notions of innate biological
inferiority. Against this cultural backdrop, every movement for black liberation in this
society, whether reformist or radical has had to formulate a counter-hegemonic discourse of
the body to effectively resist white supremacy. [35]

hooks makes clear the high political stakes of debates over blaxploitation's emphasis on spectacle
and its stereotyped heroes--and the high political stakes of protests against blaxploitation's role in
the community. Yet her concern with the discursive function of representations of the black body is
likewise taken up by critics who have considered the possibility that blaxploitation's anti-heroes might
themselves function as "counter-hegemonic," particularly in their turn away from the "ebony saint" of
1960s cinema.

While most criticism of blaxploitation representation focuses on white cultural production of its black
images, some commentators have altered the terms of the debate somewhat, to note that
blaxploitation's characterisations were not solely the product of a white-supremacist film iconography.
They trace the appeal of blaxploitation's heroes to pre-cinematic origins,[36] comparing them to
folklore figures such as Br'er Rabbit, and Slave John.[37] In such interpretations of blaxploitation's
characterisations, whereby a counter-hegemonic discourse is drawn from black aural culture, another
thematic link between black music culture and blaxploitation film becomes evident, as the sexually-
charged, aggressive, footloose characters of *Sweetback* and *Superfly* become recognisable as a part
of black music memory, as descendents of Staggerlee, central character in blues fantasies of
violence, sex, criminality and style that likewise pushed at the limits of law and behaviour imposed on
a black underclass. As Greil Marcus observes in his analysis of 1970s funk innovator, Sly Stone, this
figure was a persistent musical image of masculinity, even before it appeared on the blaxploitation
screen:

> In the blues, Stack changed names, but little else. He was the Crawling Kingsnake... Muddy
> Waters' cool and elemental Rollin' Stone, Chuck Berry's Brown-Eyed Handsome Man...
> Wilson Pickett's Midnight Mover; [even] Mick Jagger's Midnight Rambler....And Staggerlee
> would come roaring back on the screen in the seventies, as Slaughter, Sweet Sweetback,
> *Superfly.* [38]

Placed in its multiple cultural and representational contexts, the heroes or anti-heroes of
blaxploitation become more complex than their generic, schematised, non-psychologised
characterizations suggest, as constructs of both cinematic and musical influences; in their discursive
responses to contemporary political and cultural contexts they demonstrate representational ties to both white cinematic and black aural narrative and music cultures. In the analysis that follows, my contention is that the hero of blaxploitation is primarily an audio-visual creation, even though critical responses have focussed almost exclusively on its visual aspects. Bearing this in mind, my analysis will balance consideration of blaxploitation's ubiquitous concern with spectacular representations of blackness, with black visibility and the body, against my concern with what music contributes to the production of blaxploitation heroes in their role as both subjects of the film narrative, as well as spectacular objects of the camera's look.

"It was either that, or music": Sweet Sweetback's baadasssss song

Well, I was too short for basketball and too nervous to steal. I started as a painter... and then realised that the people I wanted to talk to--and about--didn't know de Kooning or Van Gogh or anyone else. I started writing, but then I realised they weren't reading....where was my audience? They were at the movies. So I started making movies. Big fucking deal. It was either that or music.

- Melvin Van Peebles, 1999

To attract the mass we have to produce work that not only instructs but entertains.

- Melvin Van Peebles, in his book, Sweet Sweetback's baadasssss song

With a tendency to downplay its aesthetic qualities, Melvin Van Peebles is quick to emphasise that his accomplishment in making Sweetback was in the first instance economic: having turned his back on a profitable three-picture deal with Columbia Pictures in response to studio resistance to his ideas, he raised funds entirely in the independent sector, worked with non-union racially-mixed crews, and made an end-run around the mainstream distribution system by going directly to theatre owners and persuading them to put his film on screen. Having produced a film for $150,000 that grossed more than 15 million, Van Peebles became an industry phenomenon. He is regarded as an innovator who "marketed Sweetback by standing on street corners hawking the film to passersby," he used sensational slogans ("Rated X by an all-white jury") and emphasised word-of-mouth advertising; in doing so, he showed the way for a mostly white industry to access the black audience, considered by contemporary industry analysts, an "untapped, rich market."

Even though Sweetback tends to be lauded primarily for its audacious infiltration of a film industry closed to black producers, it also has other qualities worth noting, qualities taken up in varying
degrees by the generic cycle inspired by its success. Although its soundtrack is perhaps not as frequently quoted or sampled as some others, its aesthetic—whereby the narrative space of the film is pervaded by a funk/jazz wall of sound—is arguably one of blaxploitation’s most influential.

Certainly, no other blaxploitation film would use music more extensively than *Sweet Sweetback’s baadasssss song*. Moreover, in no other blaxploitation film is music as important for narration, as *Sweetback*, taking its cues more from international art cinema than from Hollywood, develops a style far removed from mainstream storytelling. The film is also significant for the way that it engages with those same issues of specularity and race around which much of the debate over blaxploitation circulates. While it may not be the clear-cut political statement that some of its audience perceived it to be (Huey Newton proclaimed *Sweetback* to be the “first truly revolutionary Black film” and made it required viewing for Black Panthers),[45] it does comment in a complex way upon the place of black masculinity in white culture—and white film culture—with a particular focus on what Michelle Wallace has called the “regimes of visuality.”[46] In its use of musical narration and representation, it offers a counterpoint to the limitations of a white-centred visual culture,[47] as well as another site of engagement and identification with its protagonist.

*Sweet Sweetback’s baadasssss song* featured Van Peebles himself in the starring role as Sweetback, a black man who earns his keep performing in sex shows until he is arrested for a murder he did not commit. The remainder of the film is his escape from and pursuit by the police, during which he takes every opportunity to beat his white pursuers and demonstrate his sexual prowess. The final frame of the film shows Sweetback, still in flight, and the printed message: “A Baadasssss nigger is coming back to collect some dues.” Anticipating by a few years the importance of “chase” narratives to Hollywood’s blockbuster filmmaking,[48] in which spectacular visuals and sound take the place of narrative complexity or character development—*Sweet Sweetback’s Baadasssss Song* consolidates in a crude, but also very concise way, many of the elements that would make blaxploitation so appealing to its audience: the novelty of a black lead who is not an "ebony saint" but a sexualised character; the daring portrayal of black on white screen violence; and, the use of music to define black male subjectivity. This music, I argue, makes the character of Sweetback available as a point of identification for audiences despite the techniques of modernist distanciation that dominate its visual representation.

Even though most studies see *Sweetback* as a sharp departure from Van Peebles’ previous picture for Columbia, *Watermelon man* (USA 1970), the two films are quite similar in their concerns if not their style and method of storytelling. Because the earlier film is more accessible narratively, it’s worth
taking a moment to summarise it. *Watermelon man* is a fantasy parable of a white bigot Jeff Gerber (played by *Cotton comes to Harlem* star Godfrey Chambers), who awakens to find himself black. As James Surowiecki observes,

> Although the film is often described as a joke--a white man turns black--repeated ad nauseum, a closer look reveals that Van Peebles pries unexpected insight out of his rather simple conceit. Jeff Gerber begins the film as a bigoted white man, but when his skin suddenly and inexplicably turns black, he's renounced by his family, his neighbors, and his employers. Slowly, inexorably, Jeff Gerber becomes a black man, from the outside in.[49]

The situation affords Van Peebles the opportunity to illustrate comically and satirically a range of racist preconceptions at work even in the liberal sectors of white America. But its resemblance to his next picture *Sweetback* lies primarily in the attention *Watermelon man* draws to the issue of what Michelle Wallace has termed "regimes of visuality."[50] In portraying the experience of "to-be-looked-at-ness" (to borrow Laura Mulvey's useful but awkward term) that the white-man-turned-black experiences for the first time in his life, *Watermelon man* comically dramatises the experience of blacks in a white-centred visual culture. After his change, Gerber is made aware of his own body--his own "visibility"--and what it represents for others in a way that is not the ordinary experience of the middle class white male.

*Sweetback* is different stylistically from *Watermelon man*, but it is similar in its representation of its black protagonist as spectacle and in the way that it registers the problem of black representation and visibility. Played with imperturbable gravity, affectlessness, and almost complete silence by Van Peebles, the character of Sweetback has a lot in common with other deadpan, modernist anti-heroes of the period. Thanks to Van Peebles zero-degree acting style, which had precursors in both French New Wave and New Hollywood productions, he appears quite passive--despite his non-stop movement through much of the film and his moments of violence and sexual activity. The sense of his passivity is highlighted by a series of scenarios in which Sweetback is objectified and desired in various ways: from his adoption by a house of prostitution and his initiation into sex as a young boy, to his role as a live sex show performer and as police scapegoat as a young man, to his reprise of his role as sex show performer for a group of bikers. (The bikers seem to be included for no other reason than that Van Peebles as director appears reluctant to exclude any potentially sensational element of contemporary exploitation film; their inclusion--which entails Sweetback's unexplained removal from Watts and appearance in the L.A. hills--compounds the unreality of the film.[51] As a result, Sweetback's episodic journey appears likewise a journey through various exploitation genres:
sexploitation, vice, "weirdie", biker film-- in each of these he is the object of desire or violence, or both.)

Visually, Sweetback is constructed as a character mostly by the looks of others--and by their desire for the stereotypical black stud/criminal/scapegoat. In these terms, the prologue of the film is unsettling insofar as it determines the strictly male-centred representation of black politics that will follow, whereby Sweetback is subject to both a white--and a black female--gaze that shapes his identity. The opening sequence shows the young Sweetback, dirty and street-worn, wolfing down food under the avid smiles of a circle of black prostitutes; their delight in the boy is sexual even though their actions are maternal, as the scene of his sexual "initiation" that follows makes clear. During this scene, which featured Van Peebles' young son Mario, the prostitute's words of encouragement to the boy as he lies on top of her naked, stunned and still emphasise the boy's passivity, his role as the object of her sexual desire. They also anticipate his future role as spectacle: "You ain't at a photographers, nobody taking your picture, move!" Appropriately, at the end of this scene the sound of applause greets the (now adult) Sweetback's sexual climax, a soundbridge to the scene that follows, in which Sweetback is chosen by police attending a live sex show to act as their "suspect" for an unsolved murder. Sweetback's future and identity have been decided from the moment the prostitutes laid eyes on him: because Sweetback is already performing the role of "black buck" in the house's sex show, it is easy enough for police to likewise cast him in the role of scapegoat/"bad nigger" as well. He runs through the film, not because of what he's done (although he does end up beating two cops and killing two others), but because of what the white cops saw when they looked at him.

Tellingly, in these opening scenes of the film we are never given Sweetback's point of view (in a film that admittedly has little use for conventional point of view structures) except that from the cop car after he is "arrested," when he sees curious white faces looking back at the spectacle he makes: a black man in a cop car. Shots of white pedestrians staring as Sweetback passes are, appropriately, intercut with shots of neon lights, the marquees of theatres and clubs that advertise "Sex," "Dancing", "3 Big Features" (and, in the far distance, "Jesus Saves": religion, as a later scene confirms, is also a spectacle). After Sweetback beats the two cops (who have arrested and are in the process of beating a black nationalist named Mu Mu), he becomes the object of a police chase. During this chase--which constitutes the remainder of the film--the viewer is, at key points, given definitively white/cop points of view on Sweetback and the black community: the "travelling" perspective of a cop car that can only glimpse Sweetback as he dodges among city streets and
buildings; a series of interviews with members of the black community in which they address the camera as if it were a cop; and, the aerial perspective of the police helicopter that joins the chase towards its end. Through these images the film references a voyeuristic investment in black masculinity-as-stereotype that once provided Sweetback's livelihood and now has made him a criminal, a man on the run.

The double bind of black "visibility" as it is experienced by Sweetback-the-performer and Sweetback-the-criminal is echoed by Van Peebles himself in his double role as auteur and star (a role he still plays with gusto). "Brer Soul"--as Sweetback/Van Peebles is named in the credits--is, like his folklore predecessor, a trickster; he delights in playing up the role of stud both on and off camera, self-representations that have for some critics framed the film as (little more than) a self-aggrandising portrait of its director. Yet, the film, as I've outlined here, does not unproblematically celebrate the objectification of the black male: instead, it demonstrates the problems of Sweetback's role as object--initially of a desiring black female look which prefigures and is overtaken by the anxious/desiring/dangerous white gaze. It shows how Sweetback's objectification underpins his social positioning as a figure both desired and feared, and always to be kept running. It's a sleight of hand that allows a film that could be produced as porn (Van Peebles' strategy to secure a racially mixed, non-union crew); marketed as action (BAADASSSSS!); and, read as social critique ("dedicated to all of those who have had enough of the man"): in short, to have its cake and eat it. It is a film that promises in various ways the spectacle of black male sexuality--and in fact has been dismissed as no more than pornography by some critics--but delivers it only in the most non-titillating manner possible, thanks to both the deadpan acting style of its lead and to the strikingly unflattering portraits of those, both black and white, who desire Sweetback. Ultimately it replays--in the generic realm of exploitation's fascination with vice, sexuality, and violence--*Watermelon man*'s comic fantasy exploration of the way black masculinity is viewed by white culture, and the problem of white-centred culture's "regime of visuality." Yet, at the same time that the film uses multiple means of distanciation in its visual representation--from its use of various avant-garde manipulations of the visual (vibrant tinting, negative images, overlapping editing, superimpositions, jump cuts, etc.) to Van Peebles' minimalist acting style--its musical representations tell, literally, a different story. Through the musical score, the enigmatic Sweetback is given both an interiority and subjectivity. While Van Peebles scripted Sweetback as a man of few words (only six lines in the entire film), and as a director drew upon art cinema tropes to disrupt and deny the white gaze by its fragmentation, he made Sweetback's "song" a site of expression and engagement. In the film's score we hear Sweetback's voice as well as the voices of "the black community"; we discover that Sweetback has a history, a purpose, and a desire--even a future.
"He turns the angels around": Sweetback's song

...when Sweetback is in the desert, and the angels are telling him he can't make it, but he's so determined that he turns the angels around. They go from saying "You can't make it" to "Run, motherfucker." At least, that's how I thought of it.

- Melvin Van Peebles, 1999

The importance of music to Sweet Sweetback's baadasssss song is registered by its title. Its songs were written and composed by Van Peebles and played by Earth Wind and Fire, whose jazz-funk instrumentation dominates the score. Incorporated into the driving repetition of Earth, Wind and Fire's fast-paced rhythms, are African-identified percussive instruments and rough snippets of familiar gospel tunes such as "Wade in the water" and "This little light of mine." These songs are both irreverently used early in the film, during the scene of Sweetback's sexual baptism ("Wade in the water") and his christening as stud ("This little light of mine" marking the moment of sexual climax), both sung by a chorus whose presence on the soundtrack coincides with the appearance of "the Black community" in the opening credits. Later, near the end of the film, such gospel songs will be revisited as inspiration when Sweetback, having run beyond the city, struggles to survive in the desert. In addition to the half sung, half spoken "Come on feet" that propels Sweetback's flight, "Won't bleed me" is sung in call-and-response fashion by Van Peebles/Sweetback and the chorus when he reaches his crisis point in the film: "They bled my mother, they bled my father." "But they won't bleed me!" Its simple tune recurs through much of the film, with diverse instrumentation and melodic variations, punctuating Sweetback's flight.

In an inversion of relation between music and image in classical Hollywood film, the music of Sweetback largely dominates the visual aspects of the narrative, rather than supporting them, and is a key element in creating the film's diegesis. It resembles in this way international art cinemas' and New Hollywood's experiments with pop soundtracks. Jeff Smith, in his account of the evolution of the "interpolated song" notes strategies in films such as Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid (USA 1969) that "halt the film's narrative flow and allow the song an opportunity to sell itself." Films like The graduate and Easy rider "sell" their scores through sequences of minimal narrative but significant emotional import. Combined with lead characterisations of a certain opacity—the sullen reserve of Benjamin in The graduate; the stoned inarticulateness of Captain America and Billy in Easy rider—music's significatory role is further heightened. In its relation of music to image, Sweetback is aesthetically aligned with such contemporary experiments in narrative, characterisation, and scoring.
*Sweetback*’s music functions as another character; or, as a Greek chorus of characters, who serve as intermediary for the audience, as through a combination of song and spoken word, they speak for as well as to our largely silent hero.

In these terms, the soundtrack clearly functions quite differently from the classical Hollywood score. Yet, what it has in common with the classical score is the emotional and ideological element that Caryl Flinn—drawing upon Richard Dyer’s work on musical entertainment—has called "utopian."[61] In their utopian function, Flinn observes how Hollywood scores "offer glimpses of a better more unified world" or "capture a sense of lost integrity and grandeur," while noting that utopian glimpses are specifically generated out of the "perceived lacks and deficiencies of any historical period."[62] Flinn focuses on the nostalgic utopias constructed by Hollywood scores that gesture to an idealised past by their use of romantic motifs, traditional folk songs, etc. *Sweetback*’s score, by contrast, through its use of gospel and jazz/funk fusion, suggests utopias that are both past and future for the film’s protagonist, audience, and "the black community." In doing so, they highlight the political orientation of the film at the same time that they offer a means of engagement with Sweetback as a character.

The soundtrack of *Sweetback* is anchored in the past primarily through its use of call-and-response structures. Call-and-response, the basic structure of gospel music whereby performers and participants are joined in a community, has been called by musicologists one of the most enduring traits of black music.[63] In the 1950s-1970s it emerged in various secular forms—including the work of Sam Cooke, Ray Charles, Isaac Hayes—and clearly signified for its audiences black cultural identity and community. Likewise, the African rhythm instruments used by Earth Wind and Fire can be read as a musical gesture toward a diasporic cultural inheritance. It is a musical signifier that pushes its funk a bit further "toward the black end of the black/white musical spectrum" in a way that reflects the appeal in the 1970s of a black nationalistic consciousness and the desire to identify with cultural identity located in a shared past.[64]

Yet the film’s music is not merely backward looking in its appeal to black cultural identity, as it also provides what might be termed an anticipatory utopian strain in its narrative use of Earth Wind and Fire’s jazz-funk fusion. Combining contemporary technologised and traditional African instrumentation, the energy of the group’s polyrhythmic music propels Sweetback’s journey and gives him an interiority only hinted at in the visual storytelling and script of the film; as suited to his image of urban cool as the gold crushed velvet he wears, it is clearly "his" music. While police business is conducted in silence, Sweetback’s non-stop instrumentation accompanies his violent and
sexual escapades, as well as his endless footrace through city and countryside. As well as supporting our sense of Sweetback’s energy and mobility, the formal qualities of Earth Wind and Fire’s music also support a sense of his persistence, as the music itself persists, endlessly flexible in its reinvention of itself. Although Earth Wind and Fire’s music incorporates elements of melody, it does not "progress" in the sense a melodic line would, but it continues: there is no end in sight for its headlong instrumentation, its shifts in key and tempo followed by reiteration, then repetition. As persistent as Sweetback himself, the music effectively forestalls any possibility of his stopping or failing or being captured—-even when Sweetback is sent literally in circles by the mazelike warren of Los Angeles’ inner city streets or dwarfed by the enormity of its industrial wastelands.

In the latter example, the expansive character of the music played for the song "Come on feet" combined with the framing of the scene gives the distinct impression of the music being both greater than Sweetback, yet still indicative of his interiority—a powerful metaphor, in other words, for desire and determination. It is the audio-visual equivalent of the lyrical exhortation to "come on feet, do your thing." Likewise, in the scenes of Sweetback’s urban flight, the music's polyrhythmic texture rhymes the frenetic montage of the visuals, visuals which put Sweetback seemingly everywhere at once, always on the move, disappearing and re-emerging in the city: both Sweetback and his music can fit into and negotiate any narrative space. Musical and editorial treatment of the mise en scene thus together give audio-visual expression to "Brer Soul’s" ability to negotiate Watts' urban tangle, its burned out buildings and streets and to be somehow in control of this environment, even as he keeps running. In short, this music of motion effectively disregards the possibility of Sweetback’s capture or failure, as he proceeds to some unknown destination--from which we are assured he will return. To persist, to not be captured, was itself a glimpse of utopia: contemporary black audiences were astounded when Sweetback survived the film. As Richard Dyer observes, in his essay on entertainment and utopia, it’s "what utopia would feel like, rather than how it would be organised."[65]

In its use of music, Sweetback creates an alternate world for its hero and for its audience; in this way there is a resemblance to the dual diegesis familiar from Hollywood’s musical genre. In the Hollywood musical the dual diegesis posits double realities of performance or fantasy in contrast to everyday life. The dual diegesis formed in Sweetback’s musical and visual registers works differently in that it opposes instead Sweetback’s white-centred and black-centred realities; it identifies the limitations for Sweetback in the one, and the possibilities—possibilities of desire, energy, affect—for him in the other. Thus, the film seems a fitting response to the frustrations that Van Peebles had experienced in his work within the US film industry, as it poses music—which Michelle Wallace has called (and
Spectacle, masculinity, and music in blaxploitation cinema

bemoaned) as "the founding discourse of the African American experience" as an alternative space wherein a black-centred subjectivity can be created and explored for its protagonist.

**Conclusion**

Although subsequent blaxploitation films are stylistically very different from Van Peebles', their music, like *Sweetback's*, likewise undermines the hierarchical relation between music and image characteristic of classic Hollywood scores. In doing so, their music transcends generic limitations even as it heightens the effectiveness of the genre's visual storytelling: it implies interiority and in doing so facilitates engagement with simply drawn characters; it provides cultural context, as it proffers an aural representation that is marked as specifically and authentically black. In particular, blaxploitation films, like *Sweetback*, use the specific aesthetic qualities of funk to facilitate a privileged relationship between lead characters and their urban environment. Likewise, in a manner similar to *Sweetback*, some soundtracks offer--if not an alternate diegesis--an alternate narrative perspective. For example, Curtis Mayfield's vocals in *Superfly* offer a distinctly critical perspective on the lifestyle celebrated by the spectacular visual representation of Youngblood Priest, their authority heightened by his highly controlled and otherworldly falsetto. Likewise, the raw-grained expressivity of James Brown's vocals in *Black Caesar* belie the cool image projected by the film's gangster protagonist, even as they lyrically locate that highly individualistic figure in a broader context of black experience and history. In each example, music is both an important element in blaxploitation's generic representation and also a site where the limitations of the genre--and the limitations of black life in a white-dominated society--are registered.

Thus blaxploitation soundtracks contributed not only to the marketability of these films, but also offered another site of representation that worked in often complex ways to inflect visual storytelling. Because blaxploitation is a genre built upon the idea of an embattled blackness, within the specific contexts of 1970s culture and society, however fantastic its representations of heroism, however simple its characterisations, it must necessarily register some of those challenges to address and engage its audiences, as a component of the pleasures it offers them. The films' soundtracks are an important feature of this address to the problems and pleasures of contemporary black life as the films imagined them, as well as a site where black artists could offer their own musical perspective on the films' generic representations.

**Appendix 1:**

Selected musical scores and soundtrack releases for blaxploitation film. Soundtrack titles and dates
are the same as film, unless otherwise noted. All films USA, unless otherwise noted.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>film title</th>
<th>film production company</th>
<th>artist(s)</th>
<th>soundtrack label</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sweet Sweetback's baadasssss song (1971)</td>
<td>Yeah</td>
<td>Songs written, composed, by Melvin Van Peebles; instrumentation by Earth, Wind, and Fire</td>
<td>Stax</td>
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<tr>
<td>Shaft (1971)</td>
<td>MGM</td>
<td>Isaac Hayes</td>
<td>Stax/Enterprise</td>
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<tr>
<td>d. Gordon Parks</td>
<td></td>
<td>Stax studio band, Bar-Kays</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Superfly (1972)</td>
<td>Superfly Ltd.</td>
<td>Curtis Mayfield</td>
<td>Curtom</td>
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<tr>
<td>d. Gordon Parks, Jr.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Trouble man (1972)</td>
<td>20th Century Fox</td>
<td>Marvin Gaye</td>
<td>Tamla-Motown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d. Ivan Dixon</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>The final comedown (1972)</td>
<td>Billie Dee Williams Ent.</td>
<td>Grant Green</td>
<td>Blue Note</td>
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<tr>
<td>d. Oscar Williams</td>
<td>Oscar Williams Assoc.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Cool breeze (1972)</td>
<td>MGM</td>
<td>Solomon Burke</td>
<td>MGM</td>
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<tr>
<td>d. Barry Pollack</td>
<td></td>
<td>with Gene Page</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hammer (1972)</td>
<td>Essaness Productions</td>
<td>Solomon Burke</td>
<td>unreleased</td>
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<tr>
<td>d. Bruce D. Clark</td>
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<tr>
<td>Title</td>
<td>Director</td>
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<tr>
<td>Black Caesar (1973)</td>
<td>d. Larry Cohen</td>
<td>American International Pictures</td>
<td>James Brown with Fred Wesley and vocalist Lyn Collins</td>
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<tr>
<td>Slaughter's big rip-off (1973)</td>
<td>d. Gordon Douglas</td>
<td>American International Pictures</td>
<td>James Brown with Fred Wesley and vocalist Lyn Collins</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Mack (1973)</td>
<td>d. Michael Campus</td>
<td>Harvey Bernhard Ent.</td>
<td>Willie Hutch</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shaft in Africa (1973)</td>
<td>d. John Guillermin</td>
<td>MGM</td>
<td>Johnny Pate with vocals by The Four Tops</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brother on the run</td>
<td>d. Edward Lakso</td>
<td>unknown</td>
<td>Johnny Pate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coffy (1973)</td>
<td>d. Jack Hill</td>
<td>American International Pictures</td>
<td>Roy Ayers</td>
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<tr>
<td>Film</td>
<td>Studio</td>
<td>Soundtrack</td>
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<tr>
<td><em>Blacula</em> (1973)</td>
<td>American International Pictures</td>
<td>Gene Page with the Hues Corporation</td>
<td>RCA</td>
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<tr>
<td><em>Gordon's War</em> (1973)</td>
<td>20th Century Fox</td>
<td>&quot;Badder than Evil&quot; with vocals by Barbana Mason</td>
<td>Buddha</td>
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<tr>
<td><em>Hell Up in Harlem</em> (1973)</td>
<td>American International Pictures</td>
<td>Fonce Mizell and Freddie Perren with vocals by Edwin Starr</td>
<td>Motown</td>
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<tr>
<td><em>Dynamite Brothers</em> (1974)</td>
<td>Asam Film Col</td>
<td>Charles Earland</td>
<td>Prestige</td>
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<tr>
<td><em>Willie Dynamite</em> (1974)</td>
<td>Universal</td>
<td>J.J. Johnson with vocals by Martha Reeves</td>
<td>MCA</td>
</tr>
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<td>Film Title</td>
<td>Production Company(s)</td>
<td>Music Group(s)</td>
<td>Studio/Soundtrack Label</td>
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<tr>
<td><em>Truck Turner</em></td>
<td>American International Pictures</td>
<td>Isaac Hayes</td>
<td>Stax/Enterprise</td>
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<tr>
<td>(1974)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>d. Jonathan Kaplan</td>
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<tr>
<td><em>Black Belt Jones</em></td>
<td>Sequin Films</td>
<td>Dennis Coffey</td>
<td>Warner Bros.</td>
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<td>(1974)</td>
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<tr>
<td>d. Robert Clouse</td>
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<tr>
<td><em>Three tough guys</em></td>
<td>Columbia Films, S. A.</td>
<td>Isaac Hayes and The Movement</td>
<td>Stax/Enterprise</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(ITA/FRN/USA 1974)</td>
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<tr>
<td>AKA <em>Uomini duri</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>d. Duccio Tessori</td>
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<tr>
<td><em>Sheba, Baby</em></td>
<td>American International Pictures</td>
<td>Monk Higgins, Alex Brown, Barbara Mason</td>
<td>Buddha</td>
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<tr>
<td>(1975)</td>
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<tr>
<td>d. William Girdler</td>
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<tr>
<td><em>Bucktown</em></td>
<td>American International Pictures</td>
<td>Johnny Pate</td>
<td>AIR</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(1975)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>release date: 2004</td>
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<tr>
<td>d. Arthur Marks</td>
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<tr>
<td><em>Dolemite</em></td>
<td>Comedian Intl. Enterprise Productions</td>
<td>Soul Rebellion Orchestra (w/Arthur Wright; Ben Taylor and Mary Love, vocals)</td>
<td>Generation International</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(1975)</td>
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<tr>
<td>d. D'Urville Martin</td>
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<tr>
<td><em>Dr. Black, Mr. Hyde</em></td>
<td>American International Pictures</td>
<td>Johnny Pate</td>
<td>unreleased</td>
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<tr>
<td>(1976)</td>
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<tr>
<td>d. William Crain</td>
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Spectacle, masculinity, and music in blaxploitation cinema

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<th>Title</th>
<th>Studio</th>
<th>Artist</th>
<th>Label</th>
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<tr>
<td>Aaron Loves Angela (1976)</td>
<td>Columbia Pictures</td>
<td>Jose Feliciano</td>
<td>Private Stock</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>d. Gordon Parks, Jr.</td>
<td></td>
<td>title: &quot;Angela&quot;</td>
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<tr>
<td>Big time (1977)</td>
<td>unknown</td>
<td>Smokey Robinson</td>
<td>Motown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d. Andrew Georgias</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Brothers (1977)</td>
<td>Soho Prod.</td>
<td>Taj Mahal</td>
<td>Warner Brothers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d. Arthur Barron</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

(Sources: IMDB, blaxploitation.com)

Endnotes

(To return to your place in the text, simply click on the endnote number)

[1] As recollected by black cinema scholar Manthia Diawara in his interview with Sylvia Kolbowski, "By the time I became an academic in this country, blaxploitation movies were bad objects; no one wanted to talk about them, and therefore Pulp fiction almost stole the show." "Homeboy cosmopolitan: Manthia Diawara interviewed" October 83 (1998): 52.


The soundtrack of Quentin Tarantino's *Jackie Brown* includes Bobby Womack's and J.J. Johnson's theme from MGM's *110th Street* (USA 1972)--a film that shares a number of blaxploitation's concerns and uses music in some similar ways. *Jackie Brown* also includes several songs by Roy Ayers, which function as an homage to its star Pam Grier, as they are borrowed from Ayer's soundtrack for American International Pictures' *Coffy* (USA 1973), in which Grier made her debut as blaxploitation star. The soundtrack of Guy Ritchie's *Lock, stock, and two smoking barrels* includes James Brown's song "The boss" from American International Picture's *Black Caesar* (USA 1973) as well as Brown's "The payback." According to Larry Cohen, director of *Black Caesar*, Brown had also composed a score for its sequel, *Hell up in Harlem* (Cohen, USA 1973), which was rejected by American International Pictures in favour of one featuring Edwin Starr; this material was later released by Brown as the album *The payback* (source: Director's audio commentary for *Hell up in Harlem*, MGM Home Entertainment, 2001).

AKA *How to get the man's foot outta your ass* and *How to get the man's foot outta your baadasssss*. Script is based on Melvin Van Peebles' book, *Sweet Sweetback's baadasssss song* (New York: Lancer, 1971)


There are exceptions: although the scope and focus of his study does not allow for extended analyses, in *Framing blackness*, Guerrero consistently references the role of music in film representations of African-Americans, including the music of blaxploitation. Other studies that include references to blaxploitation's music are Paula J. Massood's *Black city cinema: African American urban experiences in film* (Temple University Press, 2003), which notes the work of music in constructing black urban identity; likewise, Mark Anthony Neal's *What the music said: Black popular music and Black public culture* (New York: Routledge, 1999) places blaxploitation soundtracks by Curtis Mayfield, Isaac Hayes and Marvin Gaye in their music cultural contexts, and Demers discusses the role of music in blaxploitation to contextualise her analysis of hip hop sampling, 46-48. Julien's
documentary, *BaadAsssss cinema*, concerns itself with the popularity of and pleasure offered by blaxploitation and so makes specific references to the role of music. While accounts of film and music industry interaction are few, it is worth noting that those studies of film and music "synergy" that have been published--such as R. Serge Denisoff & William D. Romanowski, *Risky business: rock on film* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Transaction Publishers, 1991)--have almost nothing to say about blaxploitation film and its soundtracks, even though they are clearly a part of the trend toward increased use of compilation scores and cross-marketing between film and music.


[10] This phrase is from Guerrero, *Framing Blackness*, 80.


[13] Since the early 1960s, the black audience had represented as much as 30% of the box office for Hollywood film, even though it represented only 10-15% of the total population. See Lee Beaupree, "One-third film public Negro: Columbia and UA pitch for biz," *Variety*, November 29, 1967, 3.

[14] While Parks attributes the opportunity afforded by this breakthrough film to the courage of Kenny Hyman at Warner Brothers, Jesse Algeron Rhines' discussion of this period emphasises economic and structural changes which "had reduced the risk that a Black director of a Black-cast film would flop at the box office." *Black film/White money* (Rutgers UP, 2000), 41-42.

[15] For a useful summary of the economic and social contexts of blaxploitation see Guerrero, *Framing blackness*, 80-86. See also Rhines, 36-50, and Leab, "Black is boxoffice," in *From Sambo to superspade*, 233-263.

[16] *Cotton comes to Harlem*, based on the novel by Chester Himes, was directed by Ossie Davis. Grossing 15.4 million on a 2.2 million investment, it encouraged MGM to continue its use of black talent to secure the black box office. See Guerrero's discussion of the film and its role in relation to blaxploitation, *Framing Blackness*, 81-82.
In their focus on individual black on white violence, blaxploitation provided a reductive--and largely de-politicised--version of black nationalist beliefs concerning white supremacy and hegemonic control of culture, quite different from that proposed by Malcolm X: "'Unless we call one white man, by name, a 'devil' we are not speaking of any individual white man. We are speaking of the collective white man's historical record... the collective white man's cruelties, and evils, and greeds, that have seen him act like a devil toward the non-white man.'" Quoted by Frank Kofsky in *Black nationalism and the revolution in music* (New York: Pathfinder, 1970), 251.

Lott, 229.

Qtd. Guerrero, *Framing blackness*, 100.

For a typology of spectacle and its relation to narrative in exploitation cinemas, see Eric Schaefer's *Bold! Daring! Shocking! True! A history of exploitation films, 1919-1959* (Durham: Duke UP, 1999), 77-95. Although his focus is on what he calls "classical exploitation" his formal analyses are likewise useful for understanding those exploitation forms that post-date his study. His study also provides a historical framework for understanding a film like *Sweetback* which blurs the line between sexploitation and art film, 325-42.

Guerrero, *Framing blackness*, 71.

Setting the tone for the rest of blaxploitation filmmakers, Melvin Van Peebles saturated the market with not only a book and soundtrack for *Sweetback* but also "t-shirts, posters, even nightgowns" the rights to all of which he retained. See Greg Merritt, *Celluloid mavericks: a history of American independent film* (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 2000), 218-219.

Van Peebles makes prior claim to this marketing innovation in his 1999 interview with Surowiecki, 183. In the DVD release of *Sweetback* Van Peebles explains: "I had no money by the time the film was finished and no way of advertising, so I thought I'll write a hit tune." (*The real deal* DVD bonus featurette, Yeah, 2002)

This said, despite the fact that r&b music did not comment directly on civil rights, it nevertheless engaged with social feeling and racial identity directly relevant to contemporary political contexts, see LeRoi Jones/Imamu Amiri Baraka, *Black music* (New York: William Morrow, 1967), 180-211.

For a discussion of the development of a politicised "ghetto sound" and its relation to


[31] Kofsky, 43-44.

[32] Nelson George discusses the importance of radio stations to black communities in *The Death of Rhythm and Blues* (New York: Pantheon, 1988).

[33] In *Superfly* this is Youngblood Priest's summary of the alternative to a life of crime that white-dominated society offers him.


[37] Rhines, 43.

In the sense that Michel Chion has theorised it in *Audio-Vision: sound on screen*, ed. and translated, Claudia Gorbman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994).

Quoted in Surowiecki, 180.

The three-picture deal was offered to Van Peebles after his first feature *La permission/Story of a three-day pass* (FRN 1967) won as the French delegate to the San Francisco Film Festival.

Source: IMDB.com


Ted Angelus in *Advertising Age* article of 1971, quoted by Bobo, 421.

See Guerrero's discussion of Newton's essay "He won't bleed me: a revolutionary analysis of *Sweet Sweetback's baadasssss song*," *Framing blackness*, 88-89.

In her essay, "Why are there no great Black artists? The problem of visuality in African-American culture," Michelle Wallace writes, "I think we need to begin to understand how regimes of visuality enforce racism, how they literally hold it in place.... The relationship of the problem of visuality (who produces and reproduces vision) to popular culture and material culture and, ultimately, history is vital. We are in danger of getting wasted by ghosts... by visual traces that haunt us because we refuse to study them, to look them in the eye." *Dark designs and visual culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 191.

Wallace summarises these limitations: "In the context of mass culture, the image of the black is larger than life. Historically, the body and face of the black have posed no obstacle whatsoever to an unrelenting and generally contemptuous objectification. And yet, until recently, there has been no position within or outside American visual culture from which one could conceptualise the African American as a subject. The prominence of black directors in film finally threatens to change that picture. But the difficulty of the project for black film has to do precisely with the history of a mostly invisible black visuality," 186.

In its "chase" narrative, it also recalls the motif of the running black man in *Invisible man*. For more on thematic links between *Sweetback* and African American literature, see Diawara, 9.
Van Peebles' film aligns representations of "black macho" and black power in a way that anticipates representations common to both blaxploitation cinema and much of black music of the period. Michelle Wallace responds to this aspect of the Black Power movement in her controversial book, *Black macho and the myth of superwoman* (London: Platform, 1979), for which bell hooks offers a critical reassessment in *Ain't I a woman?: black women and feminism* (Boston: South End Press, 1981). Ward discusses representations of masculinity in black popular music during the 1970s, comparing them to those of the 1960s, 369-387.

As Thomas Cripps notes, "Van Peebles... made the title role an extension of himself....[and] modelled his heroic role on the social rebellion expressed in his own lifestyle." 134

The name echoes that of the r&b album, *B'yer Soul* that Van Peebles released in 1969 on A&M, whose spoken word songs anticipate those he composed for *Sweetback*. (source: allmusic.com)

Cripps, for example, concludes that Van Peebles' "simple nationalist politics" ultimately "bloat into a self-indulgent fantasy", 138.

In the essay "Black spectatorship: problems of identification and resistance," Diawara adapts Laura Mulvey's theorisation of "the gaze" in order to analyse the means by which "dominant cinema situates Black characters primarily for the pleasure of White spectators (male and female)," a critical move relevant to Van Peebles' characterisation of Sweetback as policed and surveilled, 211-220.

For instance, Mikel J. Koven asserts that *Sweetback* is "more pornography than Blaxploitation....[and] the $15 million it made domestically was due more to curiosity about sex in the film, than an engagement with the socio-politics of it" in *The pocket essential blaxploitation films* (Harpenden, UK: Pocket Essentials, 2001), 15.

This is not the first time that music has featured centrally in Van Peebles' filmmaking, as his
award-winning French film, *La permission* also had a funk/jazz soundtrack, released in the form of a four-track EP in France in 1968. (Source, blaxploitation.com.)


[66] Wallace concludes her essay on the problem of the visuality in African-American culture, saying "There is by now too vast an array of compelling narratives in which African American music is the founding discourse of the African American experience.... for my part, I am at war with music, to the extent that it completely defines the parameters of intellectual discourse in the African American community," 192.

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