

NOIR OR NOT

Steve Kronenberg

BLAXPLOITATION

"Blaxploitation." Next to noir, it's arguably the most imprecise, misused word in the language of cinema. It was coined in 1972 by NAACP leader Junius Griffin in response to the release of *Superfly*. Griffin argued that the film, and others that followed in its wake, unfairly stereotyped African American characters as pimps, hustlers, and criminals. The word has since been used by moviegoers and critics to marginalize and "profile" a group of films released in the mid-1970s featuring black casts in a variety of genres. Many of these are two-fisted action vehicles, not much different from movies starring Charles Bronson, Clint Eastwood, and Bruce Lee. Others are violent, cynical takes on the pathological effects of urban decay and corruption—films that deserve a place alongside such notable neo-noirs as *Dirty Harry* (1971), *The French Connection* (1971), and *Mean Streets* (1973).

Case in point:

1973's *Black Caesar*, written, produced, and directed by the late B-movie maestro Larry Cohen. Cohen modeled *Black Caesar's* title and plot on the gangster classic *Little Caesar* (1931), but the film's lead character, Tommy Gibbs, more closely resembles James Cagney's Tom Powers in 1931's *The Public Enemy*. Both Gibbs and Powers are vicious hoodlums who enter the criminal underworld at an early age.

We're introduced to a twelve-year-old Gibbs (Omer Jeffrey) polishing shoes outside a blighted Harlem hotel. When the scrappy kid isn't snapping a shine rag, he's working as a mob courier, delivering dirty money to an even dirtier cop named John McKinney (the perfectly reptilian Art Lund). McKinney's corruption is stained with a virulent racism. When the bigoted flat-foot suspects Gibbs of pocketing part of his payoff, he spits racial slurs and beats the youngster nearly to death, leaving the boy with a broken leg, a permanent limp, and a vow of vengeance.





“The Gang’s All Here”: *Black Caesar* writer/director Larry Cohen (left); star Fred Williamson (with cigarette and pistol), and some Harlem “protection” await a matinee crowd outside New York’s Cinerama Theatre

Twenty years later, Gibbs (now played by ex-NFL star Fred “The Hammer” Williamson) begins his ascent through Harlem’s drug-fueled netherworld. He ingratiates himself with local Mafia boss Cardoza (a scheming, skeevy Val Avery) by fulfilling a contract hit on a mob rival. Wearing a sardonic smile, Gibbs gleefully glides into an Italian bistro, drops his victim’s severed ear into Cardoza’s pasta, and confidently cracks: “Thought you’d like some meat with your sauce.” An impressed Cardoza bequeaths Gibbs a slice of Harlem’s narcotics trade, but the ambitious upstart quickly guns and garrotes his way to the top of New York’s underworld, acquiring untold riches and a slew of enemies, including an angry McKinney, who’s now a captain in the NYPD and a fixture on Cardoza’s payroll.

Gibbs’s bloodstained lifestyle eventually alienates everyone he loves: his wife, Helen (Gloria Hendry, in a smoldering performance that treads between indignation and rage); his best friend (Philip Roye); and his parents (stellar work from veteran charac-

ter players Minnie Gentry and Julius Harris). When Gibbs buys his mother the luxury condo in which she works as a housekeeper, she throws the deed in his shocked face, condemning him for purchasing her love with his ill-gotten gains. The film’s ugliest scene occurs when Gibbs pins down a disgusted Helen and rapes her after she spurns his bedside advances. Hunted by his rivals and rejected by his family, the newly crowned king of Harlem takes a hard fall before Cohen caps the picture with an ending as eerie and ironic as any in film noir.

Cohen’s script was originally commissioned by and for Sammy Davis Jr., who was seeking respite from his role as a Rat Pack foil. When tax problems forced Davis out of the project, Cohen was approached by American International Pictures chief Samuel Z. Arkoff. Long a source of low-budget horror fare, AIP was eager to release a straightforward crime film featuring an African American actor. Given free rein to both write and direct the picture, Cohen chose Williamson as his lead (the

actor had appeared in several films and costarred in Diahann Carroll’s popular TV series *Julia*). Despite its solid supporting cast, *Black Caesar* would be unimaginable without Williamson’s physicality and flair. He fully inhabits Tommy Gibbs, informing his portrayal with savagery, sensitivity, and style. “Fred was totally different than what Sammy [Davis Jr.] would have played,” Cohen recalled. “Fred was a handsome leading man. He looked great in the clothes, and he could strut through Harlem.”

Williamson works his way through a tangled emotional arc, segueing from rapacious thug to loving son to power-mad paranoid. It’s an assured performance the actor pulls off with panache, whether he’s shooting a .45, lighting a cigar, or informing a hateful McKinney of his newfound alliance with the Mafia: “Everyone’s a liberal nowadays, McKinney. *Get with it!*” When Gibbs is betrayed by his wife and his best friend, Williamson’s icy eyes belie a broken heart: “I can’t let you get away with this,” he tells them. “I’d lose respect.”



An enraged Fred Williamson “shines” in the memorable beat-down scene that climaxes *Black Caesar*

In *Black Caesar*'s most celebrated scene, McKinney holds Gibbs at gunpoint and demands a shoeshine. The vengeful gang lord quickly overpowers his nemesis, slathers his face with shoe polish, and forces him to sing “My Mammy” before furiously beating him to death with his shine box. Close-ups of Williamson's enraged face are intercut with flashbacks of the assault McKinney inflicted on the young Gibbs during the film's opening moments. It's a bold, provocative sequence, but its visceral power lies in Williamson's snarling ferocity. Cohen remained justifiably proud of it: “Personally, I don't think anybody can top the ‘shoeshine scene’ in *Black Caesar*. For me, it's one of the greatest sequences in film.” Williamson relished both his role as Gibbs and the pummeling he gets to deliver throughout the film. “You gotta understand where I came from,” he declared. “I'm an ex-pro football player, ok? My nickname was The Hammer. I didn't get the name Hammer from picking roses.”

Cohen, a native New Yorker and cinema renegade, decided to shoot *Black Caesar* on location in Harlem (though most of the movie's interiors were shot inside the director's Coldwater Canyon home, previously owned by his close friend and fellow maverick filmmaker Samuel Fuller). When filming began, local gangsters approached Cohen and demanded he pay them for “protection.” Instead, he offered them bit parts in the picture and invited them to the film's New

York premiere, ensuring their gratitude and cooperation. The Harlem hoods consistently had the director's back: when the Teamsters threatened to shut down Cohen's non-union shoot, his new friends quickly stepped in and intimidated the labor bosses.

Awed by Williamson's presence, Manhattan police allowed Cohen to film without safety permits. Despite the support of cops and gangbangers, Cohen's guerrilla-style strategy proved daunting and dangerous. When his script called for a taxicab to careen down a public sidewalk, Cohen

simply hailed a hack and paid the driver a few bucks to perform the stunt on the spot, causing panicked pedestrians to flee in terror. In another scene, Gibbs is gunned down outside Tiffany's, prompting Williamson to release several blood bags concealed beneath his shirt while pretending to stagger down West Fifty-Seventh Street. The camera captures concerned onlookers who, thinking the actor had really been shot, offer to drive him to the hospital.

Cohen's edgy, seat-of-the-pants approach infects *Black Caesar* with a raw minimalism—a tribute to such starkly urban noirs as *Cry of the City* (1948), *The Naked City* (1948), and *Blast of Silence* (1961). Fenton Hamilton's unflinching handheld camerawork and George Folsey Jr.'s speed-of-light editing deliver a bleak, bone-lean vision of inner-city rot: crumbling tenements, littered streets, greasy pool halls, sinister back alleys. Gibbs's run-and-gun rise to gangland's top tier is depicted in a startling montage of brutal, blood-soaked images reminiscent of Burnett Guffey's cinematography in *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967).

The film's aggressively paced plotline is pushed, pulled, and prodded by James Brown's vibrant, funk-ed-up musical score (Cohen initially tapped Stevie Wonder, who declined because he thought the story was too violent). *Black Caesar* represents Brown's first attempt at a movie soundtrack, and his percussive rhythms complement Cohen's relentlessly propulsive style. Gibbs does a cock o' the walk strut past the Apollo



An angry Gloria Hendry prepares to belt out a blues number in *Black Caesar*



Convinced that he's really been shot, curious onlookers gape as a wounded Fred Williamson takes a long walk down New York's West Fifty-Seventh Street

Theater to the beat of Brown's infectious "The Boss." "Paid the cost to be the Boss," the singer raps, and suddenly the Godfather of Soul and the Godfather of Harlem are in perfect sync (flash forward four years and watch John Travolta replicate Williamson's street-wise swagger during the opening minutes of *Saturday Night Fever*). Later, a tearful Gibbs mourns at his mother's graveside as Brown's solemn "Mama Died" plays in the background.

Mainstream critics thumbed their noses at Cohen's film, but audiences enthusiastically hailed *Black Caesar* and the picture exploded at the box office (\$2 million in gross receipts against a \$300,000 budget). AIP chief Arkoff sprinted to the director's side and requested an immediate sequel. Cohen reluctantly agreed, but he shouldn't have bothered. *Hell Up in Harlem*, released later in 1973, is a hasty, indifferently filmed paste-up denuded of the noirish grit that makes its predecessor so memorable and important. Distracted with filming his cult horror hit *It's Alive*, Cohen admittedly drafted *Hell Up in Harlem's* script "as I went along." Williamson, ensconced in LA completing his next film, was available only for a series of slapdash action sequences and quick close-ups; location scenes in Harlem were filmed with a double. Gloria Hen-

dry gets barely more than a cameo, leaving Julius Harris to carry the film in a reprise of his role as Gibbs's father. James Brown's participation is sorely missed; Arkoff rejected his proposed soundtrack, claiming that Brown couldn't properly synchronize his music with the movie's editing. Cohen

candidly labeled *Hell Up in Harlem* as "the poorest of all my films."

Cohen's hack job from *Hell Up in Harlem* shouldn't obscure the legacy he left with *Black Caesar*, which carries its own influential cachet. *Black Caesar's* ghost haunts the violent images in *Taxi Driver* (1976), *The Warriors* (1979), *Scarface* (1983), *Reservoir Dogs* (1992), and *Jackie Brown* (1997). Unfortunately, despite its impact on modern noir, Cohen's magnum opus continues to bear the brand "blaxploitation." The writer/director wasn't shy about condemning the label. "I think every movie is an exploitation film," Cohen declared. "You're trying to sell your tickets to your audience, so every movie has that element of exploitation. So I don't see what was different about having a picture that would be geared to black audiences." Williamson's contempt for the B-word is even more vehement: "What I want to know is, who the hell was being exploited? If what I'm doing is 'blaxploitation,' then why don't they call all those bad movies I saw Burt Reynolds make in the '70s 'whiteploitation'?"

Black Caesar is only one of many notable urban noirs that happen to boast African American casts and crews. *Across 110th Street* (1972), *Detroit 9000* (1973), and *Coffy* (1973) immediately come to mind. It's time to erase "blaxploitation" from our vocabulary. After all, a noir by any other name is . . . well, you know the rest. ■



"King B": A defiant Larry Cohen and crew stand at the ready in this candid offscreen shot