

= Sweet Sweetback 's Baadasssss Song =

Sweet Sweetback 's Baadasssss Song is a 1971 American independent drama film , written , produced , scored , directed by , and starring Melvin Van Peebles , father of actor Mario Van Peebles (who is also in the movie) . It tells the picaresque story of a poor African American man on his flight from the white authority . Van Peebles began to develop the film after being offered a three @-@ picture contract for Columbia Pictures . No studio would finance the film , so Van Peebles funded the film himself , shooting it independently over a period of 19 days , performing all of his own stunts and appearing in several unsimulated sex scenes . He received a \$ 50 @,@ 000 loan from Bill Cosby to complete the project . The film 's fast @-@ paced montages and jump @-@ cuts were unique features in American cinema at the time . The picture was censored in some markets , and received mixed critical reviews . However , it has left a lasting impression on African @-@ American cinema .

The musical score of Sweet Sweetback 's Baadasssss Song was performed by Earth , Wind & Fire . Van Peebles did not have any money for traditional advertising methods , so he released the soundtrack album prior to the film 's release in order to generate publicity . Initially , the film was screened only in two theaters in the United States . It went on to gross \$ 4 @.@ 1 million at the box office . Huey P. Newton celebrated and welcomed the film 's revolutionary implications , and Sweetback became required viewing for members of the Black Panther Party . According to Variety , it demonstrated to Hollywood that films which portrayed " militant " blacks could be highly profitable , leading to the creation of the blaxploitation genre , although some do not consider this example of Van Peebles ' work to be an exploitation film .

= = Plot = =

A young African American orphan (Mario Van Peebles) is taken in by the proprietor of a Los Angeles brothel in the 1940s . While working there as a towel boy , he loses his virginity at a young age to one of the prostitutes . The women name him " Sweet Sweetback " in honor of his sexual prowess and large penis . As an adult , Sweetback (Melvin Van Peebles) works as a performer in the whorehouse , entertaining customers by performing in a sex show . One night , a pair of LAPD officers come in to speak to Sweetback 's boss , Beetle (Simon Chuckster) . A black man had been murdered , and there is pressure from the black community to bring in a suspect . The police ask permission to arrest Sweetback , blame him for the crime , and then release him a few days later for lack of evidence , in order to appease the black community . Beetle agrees , and the officers arrest Sweetback . On the way to the police station , the officers arrest a young Black Panther named Mu @-@ Mu (Hubert Scales) . They handcuff him to Sweetback , but when Mu @-@ Mu insults the officers , they take both men out of the car , undo the handcuff from Mu @-@ Mu 's wrist , and beat him . In response , Sweetback uses the handcuffs , still hanging from his wrist , to beat the officers into unconsciousness .

The remainder of the film chronicles Sweetback 's flight through South Central Los Angeles towards the United States ? Mexico border . Sweetback is captured by the police and violently interrogated about his previous assault on the arresting officers , but he escapes when a riot breaks out . Sweetback goes to a woman who cuts his handcuffs off in exchange for sex . With his handcuffs off , Sweetback continues onward , only to be captured by a chapter of the Hells Angels . The female leader of the gang is impressed by the size of Sweetback 's penis , and agrees to help him and Mu @-@ Mu escape from the police in exchange for sex . The police find Sweetback and Mu @-@ Mu at the bikers ' hangout , but Sweetback escapes on foot while Mu @-@ Mu goes away with the bikers . Mu @-@ Mu and one of the bikers (John Amos) are killed . After his escape from the bikers ' hangout , a white man sympathetic to Sweetback 's cause agrees to switch clothes with him , allowing the usually velour @-@ clad Sweetback to blend in . The police find Sweetback 's former foster mother , who reveals that Sweetback 's birth name is Leroy . The film concludes in the desert , where the L.A. police send several hunting dogs after Sweetback . He makes it into the Tijuana River , and escapes into Mexico , swearing to return to " collect dues " .

= = Production = =

After Melvin Van Peebles had completed Watermelon Man for Columbia Pictures , he was offered a three @-@ picture contract . While the deal was still up in the air , Van Peebles developed the story for Sweet Sweetback 's Baadasssss Song . The initial idea for the film did not come clearly to him at first . One day , Van Peebles drove into the Mojave desert , turned off the highway , and drove over the rise of a hill . He parked the car , got out , and squatted down facing the sun . He decided that the film was going to be " about a brother getting the Man 's foot out of his ass . " Because no studio would finance the film , Van Peebles put his own money into the production , and shot it independently . Van Peebles was given a \$ 50 @,@ 000 loan by Bill Cosby to complete the film . " Cosby didn 't want an equity part , " according to Van Peebles . " He just wanted his money back . " Van Peebles wound up with controlling ownership of the film . Several actors auditioned for the lead role of Sweetback , but told Van Peebles that they wouldn 't do the film unless they were given more dialogue . Van Peebles ended up playing the part himself .

According to Van Peebles , during the first day of shooting , director of photography and head cameraman Bob Maxwell told him he could not mix two different shades of mechanical film lights , because he believed the results would not appear well on film . Van Peebles told him to do it anyway . When he saw the rushes , Maxwell was overjoyed , and Van Peebles did not encounter that issue again during the shoot . Van Peebles shot the film over a period of 19 days in order to avoid the possibility of the cast , most of whom were amateurs , showing on some days with haircuts or clothes different from the prior day . He shot the film in what he referred to as " globs , " where he would shoot entire sequences at a time . Because Van Peebles couldn 't afford a stunt man , he performed all of the stunts himself , which also included appearing in several unsimulated sex scenes . At one point in the shoot , Van Peebles was forced to jump off a bridge . Bob Maxwell later stated , " Well , that 's great , Mel , but let 's do it again . " Van Peebles ended up performing the stunt nine times . Van Peebles contracted gonorrhea when filming one of the many sex scenes , and successfully applied to the Directors Guild in order to get workers ' compensation because he was " hurt on the job . " Van Peebles used the money to purchase more film .

Van Peebles and several key crew members were armed because it was dangerous to attempt to create a film without the support of the union . One day , Van Peebles looked for his gun , and failed to find it . Van Peebles found out that someone had put it in the prop box . When they filmed the scene in which Beetle is interrogated by police , who fire a gun next to both of his ears , it was feared that the real gun would be picked up instead of the prop . While shooting a sequence with members of the Hells Angels , one of the bikers told Van Peebles they wanted to leave ; Van Peebles responded by telling them they were paid to shoot until the scene was over . The biker took out a knife and started cleaning his fingernails with it . In response , Van Peebles snapped his fingers , and his crewmembers were standing there with rifles . The bikers stayed to shoot the scene .

Van Peebles had received a permit to set a car on fire , but had done so on a Friday ; as a result , there was no time to have it filed before shooting the scene . When the scene was shot , a fire truck showed up . This ended up in the final cut of the film .

= = = Directing = = =

Van Peebles stated that he approached directing the film " like you do the cupboard when you 're broke and hungry : throw in everything eatable and hope to come out on top with the seasoning , i.e. , by editing . " Van Peebles stated that " story @-@ wise , I came up with an idea , why not the direct approach . [...] To avoid putting myself into a corner and writing something I wouldn 't be able to shoot , I made a list of the givens in the situation and tried to take those givens and juggle them into the final scenario . "

Van Peebles wanted " a victorious film [...] where niggers could walk out standing tall instead of avoiding each other 's eyes , looking once again like they 'd had it . " Van Peebles was aware of the

fact that films produced by major studios would appear to be more polished than low @-@ budget independently made features , and was determined to make a film that " [looked] as good as anything one of the major studios could turn out . "

Van Peebles knew that in order to spread his message , the film " simply couldn 't be a didactic discourse which would end up playing [...] to an empty theater except for ten or twenty aware brothers who would pat me on the back and say it tells it like it is " and that " to attract the mass we have to produce work that not only instructs but entertains " . Van Peebles also wanted to make a film that would " be able to sustain itself as a viable commercial product [...] [The Man] ain 't about to go carrying no messages for you , especially a relevant one , for free . "

Van Peebles wanted half of his shooting crew " to be third world people . [...] So at best a staggering amount of my crew would be relatively inexperienced . [...] Any type of film requiring an enormous technical sophistication at the shooting stage should not be attempted . " Van Peebles knew that gaining financing for the film would not be easy and expected " a great deal of animosity from the film media (white in the first place and right wing in the second) at all levels of filmmaking " , thus he had to " write a flexible script where emphasis could be shifted . In short , stay loose . "

= = = Editing = = =

The film 's fast @-@ paced montages and jump @-@ cuts were novel features for an American movie at the time . Stephen Holden from The New York Times commented that the film 's editing had " a jazzy , improvisational quality , and the screen is often streaked with jarring psychedelic effects that illustrate Sweetback 's alienation . " In The 50 Most Influential Black Films : A Celebration of African @-@ American Talent , Determination , and Creativity , author S. Torriano Berry writes that the film 's " odd camera angles , superimpositions , reverse @-@ key effects , box and matting effects , rack @-@ focus shots , extreme zooms , stop @-@ motion and step @-@ printing , and an abundance of jittery handheld camera work all helped to express the paranoid nightmare that [Sweetback 's] life had become . "

= = = Music = = =

Since Van Peebles did not have the money to hire a composer , he composed the film 's music score himself . Because he did not know how to read or write music , he numbered all of the keys on a piano so he could remember the melodies . Van Peebles stated that " Most filmmakers look at a feature in terms of image and story or vice versa . Effects and music [...] are strictly secondary considerations . Very few look at film with sound considered as a creative third dimension . So I calculate the scenario in such a way that sound can be used as an integral part of the film . "

The film 's music was performed by the then @-@ unknown group Earth , Wind & Fire , who were living in a single apartment with hardly any food at the time . Van Peebles ' secretary was dating one of the bandmembers , and convinced him to contact them about performing the music for the film . Van Peebles projected scenes from the film as the band performed the music . By alternating hymn @-@ based vocalization and jazz rhythms , Van Peebles created a sound that foreshadowed the use of sampling in hip hop music .

Van Peebles recalls that " music was not used as a selling tool in movies at the time . Even musicals , it would take three months after the release of the movie before they would bring out an album . " Because Van Peebles did not have any money for traditional advertising methods , he decided that by releasing a soundtrack album in anticipation of the film 's release , he could help build awareness for the film with its music .

= = Release and alterations = =

The film was released on April 23 , 1971 . Melvin Van Peebles stated that " at first , only two theaters in the United States would show the picture : one in Detroit , and one in Atlanta . The first night in Detroit , it broke all the theater 's records , and that was only on the strength of the title alone

, since nobody had seen it yet . By the second day , people would take their lunch and sit through it three times . I knew that I was finally talking to my audience . Sweet Sweetback 's Baadasssss Song made thousands of dollars in its first day . " The film grossed \$ 15 @, @ 000 @, @ 000 + at the box office .

After Sweetback received an X rating from the Motion Picture Association of America , inspiring the advertising tagline " Rated X by an all @-@ white jury " , and a theater in Boston cut nine minutes out of the film , Van Peebles stated , " Should the rest of the community submit to your censorship that is its business , but White standards shall no longer be imposed on the Black community . " The Region 2 DVD release from BFI Video has the opening sex sequences altered . A notice at the beginning of the DVD states " In order to comply with UK law (the Protection of Children Act 1978) , a number of images in the opening sequence of this film have been obscured . "

= = Response = =

The end of the film was shocking to black viewers who had expected that Sweetback would perish at the hands of the police ? a common , even inevitable , fate of black men " on the run " in prior films . Film critic Roger Ebert cited the ending as a reason for the film not to be labeled as an exploitation film . Critical response was mixed . Kevin Thomas in the Los Angeles Times described the film as " a series of stark , earthy vignettes , Van Peebles evokes the vitality , humor , pain , despair and omnipresent fear that is life for so many African @-@ Americans " . Stephen Holden in The New York Times called it " an innovative , yet politically inflammatory film . " The film website Rotten Tomatoes , which compiles reviews from a wide range of critics , gives the film a score of 73 % " Fresh " .

Huey P. Newton , devoting an entire issue of The Black Panther to the film 's revolutionary implications , celebrated and welcomed the film as " the first truly revolutionary Black film made [...] presented to us by a Black man . " Newton wrote that Sweetback " presents the need for unity among all members and institutions within the community of victims , " contending that this is evidenced by the opening credits which state the film stars " The Black Community , " a collective protagonist engaged in various acts of community solidarity that aid Sweetback in escaping . Newton further argued that " the film demonstrates the importance of unity and love between Black men and women , " as demonstrated " in the scene where the woman makes love to the young boy but in fact baptizes him into his true manhood . " The film became required viewing for members of Black Panther Party .

A few months after the publication of Newton 's article , Lerone Bennett responded with an essay on the film in Ebony , titled " The Emancipation Orgasm : Sweetback in Wonderland , " in which he discussed the film 's " black aesthetic " . Bennett argued that the film romanticized the poverty and misery of the ghetto and that " some men foolishly identify the black aesthetic with empty bellies and big bottomed prostitutes . " Bennett concluded that the film is " neither revolutionary nor black because it presents the spectator with sterile daydreams and a superhero who is ahistorical , selfishly individualist with no revolutionary program , who acts out of panic and desperation . " Bennett described Sweetback 's sexual initiation at ten years old as the " rape of a child by a 40 @-@ year @-@ old prostitute . " Bennett described instances when Sweetback saved himself through the use of his sexual prowess as " emancipation orgasms " and stated that " it is necessary to say frankly that nobody ever fucked his way to freedom . And it is mischievous and reactionary finally for anyone to suggest to black people in 1971 that they are going to be able to screw their way across the Red Sea . Fucking will not set you free . If fucking freed , black people would have celebrated the millennium 400 years ago . "

Black nationalist poet and author Haki R. Madhubuti (Don L. Lee) agreed with Bennett 's assessment of the film , stating that it was " a limited , money @-@ making , auto @-@ biographical fantasy of the odyssey of one Melvin Van Peebles through what he considered to be the Black community . " The New York Times critic Clayton Riley viewed the film more favorably , commenting on its aesthetic innovation , but stated of the character of Sweetback that he " is the ultimate sexualist in whose seemingly vacant eyes and unrevealing mouth are written the protocols of

American domestic colonialism . " In another review , Riley explained that " Sweetback , the profane sexual athlete and fugitive , is based on a reality that is Black . We may not want him to exist but he does . " Critic Donald Bogle states in a New York Times interview that the film in some ways met the black audience 's compensatory needs after years of asexual , Sidney Poitier @-@ type characters and that they wanted a " viable , sexual , assertive , arrogant black male hero . "

= = Legacy = =

Sweet Sweetback 's Baadasssss Song is considered to be an important film in the history of African American cinema . Hollywood studios were led to attempt to replicate the film 's success by producing black @-@ oriented films such as Shaft and Super Fly . Sweet Sweetback 's Baadasssss Song was credited by Variety as leading to the creation of the blaxploitation genre , largely consisting of exploitation films made by white directors . As Spike Lee states , " Sweet Sweetback 's Baadasssss Song gave us all the answers we needed . This was an example of how to make a film (a real movie) , distribute it yourself , and most important , get paid . Without Sweetback who knows if there could have been a [...] She 's Gotta Have It , Hollywood Shuffle , or House Party ? " In 2004 , Mario Van Peebles directed and starred as his father in Baadasssss ! , a biopic about the making of Sweet Sweetback . The film was a critical but not commercial success .