

# The BFC/A Announces the New William Greaves Collection

On his recent visit to campus to screen his latest documentary, *Ralph Bunche: An American Odyssey*, legendary filmmaker William Greaves presented BFC/A Director Audrey T. McCluskey with a first installment of materials that will become the basis for a new special collection documenting his amazing career. One of the most prolific filmmakers in cinema history, William Greaves has made over 200 films. We expect the BFC/A's William Greaves Collection to grow into a major repository of his work that is also being housed at the Schomburg Center in New York. Greaves' career encompasses over half a century in the film industry and the contents of the collection will contain films and related materials including correspondence, out takes, posters, press packets, and other items of interest to researchers, archivists, and students of film history.

Harlem native William Greaves began as an actor in the late 1940s. He knew and/or worked with some of the pioneering black actors including Stepin Fetchit and Paul Robeson, two opposite film personas. Fetchit, whose real name was Lincoln Perry, became the first black Hollywood star through his portrayal of the slow talking, head scratching filmic buffoon, though his rejection by black audiences made him a lonely and disaffected man, says Greaves. Robeson's film performances, conceived with more dignity, were still confined by Hollywood. Greaves soon became frustrated with the limitations placed upon black actors and decided that he could do better job behind the camera. He left the United States for Ottawa, Canada to hone his skills as a writer and filmmaker at the National Film Board of Canada. Drawn to the representation of the heroic in the human experience, especially the torturous path that produces the black hero, his documentary subjects have included: Muhammad Ali, Malcolm X, Ida B. Wells, Booker T. Washington and many others. His films take insightful looks within the culture, not just the surface of responsive representation to counter destructive images. Since his days as a pioneering writer-producer director of Public Television's Black Journal three decades ago, Greaves had stayed on the cutting edge. His work has influenced generations of filmmakers who principally work in the documentary genre such as St Clair Bourne, Ayoka Chenzira, Haile Gerima and others. However, Greaves' work is



William Greaves presents documents for the William Greaves Collection to BFC/A Director, Audrey T. McCluskey.

by no means confined to documentary. One of his earliest films, the experimental *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take One* (1968) is being revisited by the filmmaker who is now filming *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take Two*, to be completed later this year. He also directed Cicely Tyson and Richard Pryor in the 1981 film *Bustin' Loose*.

The Ralph Bunche film which took almost twelve years to complete, made Greaves, in his words, "a Ralph Bunche groupie." He marvels at Bunche's accomplishments as a student at UCLA and Harvard, as a professor at Howard University, as a diplomat and undersecretary of the

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## Announcing the New BFC/A Endowment

We appreciate your generous contribution to the newly established BFC/A Endowment to support collections development and special projects, such as the "Imaging Blackness" exhibit.

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## 8 Mile: Great White Hip-Hop

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musical charts singing Little Richard's "Tutti Fruity." But Eminem/Rabbit has skills; he is not some plainly ridiculous wanna-be rapper. Furthermore, as harsh as it may sound, the glaring lack of talent on the part of black rappers in *8 Mile* mirrors the real world. Most heavily promoted, well known commercial rap recordings – mostly by black acts – are creatively lacking. To be plainly asinine has been the order of a very long day in contemporary rap music, and such makes the world of *8 Mile*, where a white man reigns supreme in a black art form, all the more believable – for those who don't know better.

In reality there are plenty of talented, intelligent, creative, compelling black rappers, but major labels do not often prospect them because they lack the exotic element that major labels, in their quests for capital, gravitate toward. Will Smith, for example, is a bright, eloquent hip-hop lyricist who was offered a scholarship to MIT, turned a recording career into a multimedia career, and continues to champion and represent hip-hop as a potent art form. It must have been difficult for Smith to swim against the rap tide all these years. But how would Brian Grazer respond to the idea of making a biopic about *him*?

What Grazer does respond to with *8 Mile* is the further exploitation of the Eminem franchise. The film is not about rap as a legitimate art form with untapped potential. It is a film about a white boy who is victimized by black people, a dynamic which conjures up notions of reverse discrimination, a phenomenon that clearly reflects the tenor of the times for the culture at large. *8 Mile* is also about the steadily increasing return of the whitewash of popular music that was the regular practice of the 1950s. All of this is not to disparage Mr. Mathers—he is beside the point. The fact that many black rappers care nothing for excellence in hip-hop is not his fault. But that fact, as it operates in *8 Mile*, alludes to the notion of white supremacy – however subtly or unintentionally.

*Postscript:*

And Eminem was rewarded for his cinematic efforts with the Oscar for Best Song for "Lose Yourself," the theme song from *8 Mile* at the 2003 Academy Awards and the first hip hop song to be so recognized.

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United Nations. Yet even as the first black to win the Nobel Peace Prize in 1950 for his role in producing an Armistice agreement between Palestine and Israel, he is under appreciated today. The finished film was over six hours long, and had to be ruthlessly cut to two powerful and rapidly paced hours. Greaves and his co-producer, wife Louise Archambault, are producing several 20-40 minute modules on different aspects of Bunche's life that can be used in educational settings, and by those who want the full array of Bunche's life in chapter form.

One of the questions raised at the IU screening was: Why don't we know more about this man? A good question. At least now, with the availability of Greaves' new highly acclaimed film, we no longer can excuse our ignorance.

## African Americans in Cinema: The First Half Century

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in shorts and even feature films and African American female singers, such as Nina Mae McKinney and Lena Horne, became film stars in black-cast films.

Despite these advances, African Americans were still fighting against stereotypes in Hollywood. While films such as *Imitation of Life* (1934) and *Gone With the Wind* (1939) helped establish Louise Beavers and Hattie McDaniel, respectively, as stars in Hollywood, they typified the casually racist attitude of the day and strengthened the view of African American women as docile "mammies." Some black performers pursued their careers in Europe, which offered them an opportunity to shed the stereotypes forced upon them in Hollywood. Josephine Baker became an international star in France and began her movie career with *Siren of the Tropics* (1927), while Paul Robeson established himself in England following his screen debut in Oscar Micheaux's *Body and Soul* (1924).

World War II brought to African Americans a new immediacy to the struggle for equal rights. The United States government released several films, such as *The Negro Soldier* (1944), aimed at encouraging racial unity, yet military units remained segregated throughout the war. However, black soldiers were introduced to a different racial attitude and enjoyed a greater degree of acceptance in Europe. One demonstration of this is the acting career of John Kitzmiller. While stationed in Italy in the aftermath of the war, he was approached by an Italian filmmaker to appear in *Vivere in pace* (1946). This led to a long career for Kitzmiller in Italy, while perhaps his only well known performance to American audiences is as Quarrel, a sidekick to James Bond in *Dr. No* (1962).

While African American actors were offered more work in Hollywood and Europe, the unfortunate effect was the decline of race movies. Spencer Williams, who began his career as an actor in the 1920s, enjoyed a number of successful hits, such as *The Blood of Jesus* (1941), directing race movies in the 1940s. However, the appeal of race movies faded and Williams is mostly remembered today as Andy in the early 1950s television series of *Amos 'n' Andy*.

With the end of one era however, another began. The late 1940s saw some glimmers of hope for African Americans with Hollywood movies that explored racial attitudes such as *Pinky* (1949) and *Home of the Brave* (1949) and the beginning of an acting career that would truly cross-over into the white mainstream, that of Sidney Poitier.

An instructor's guide comes with *African Americans in Cinema*, which introduces and summarizes each section and its essays, outlines the learning objectives, and poses questions for classroom discussion. Also included on the CD-ROM is a searchable database of black films prior to 1950. *African Americans in Cinema: The First Half Century* is available through the University of Illinois Press.

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