

# Film Makers Tell How They Broke Racial Barrier

"What do you do when you go to a new school? You find the biggest boy and you whip him. Hollywood was the biggest boy for me, and I've found it and I've whipped it."

For Melvin Van Peebles, Hollywood's newest black film director, such a conquest did not come easy. Nor is it easy for other blacks to break through what they feel is a barrier of discrimination in the film industry.

With his newest release, "Watermelon Man," Van Peebles has earned what he calls his "establishment Ph.D. in

filmmaking." But like many black filmmakers, Van Peebles had to go abroad to get his start in the industry. After spending 10 years in France producing films and writing books, he surprised his American compatriots by winning an award as the French delegate to the San Francisco Film Festival in 1968 with the film "The Story of the Three Day Pass."

For William Greaves, former producer of the Emmy award-winning NET series, "Black Journal," the country was Canada. "It was pretty clear to me back in 1952 when I was

trying to crack into the industry that there was just a wall of racism and discrimination that I could not possibly penetrate," says Greaves.

Ossie Davis, acclaimed as an actor, playwright and stage director, acknowledges "had I been white, I think I would have been a director 10 years earlier."

Davis says television networks and motion picture producers "are locked into contracts with labor unions which will refuse to produce with non-union members."

He dismisses the possibility that blacks can underwrite the cost of their own film productions and circumvent the unions. "If you come into the market with a non-union product, how are you going to get distribution? Somewhere along the line someone's got to pay union dues... Show me one union distribution house that has a projectionist who is union that will show the thing."

This is disputed by Van Peebles, who is evidently willing to try his luck in this type of

black enterprise. He has underwritten the cost of his up-coming film, "Sweetback's Bad Ass Song," made by a crew which is 50 per cent black and Puerto Rican.

Van Peebles says he was not

satisfied with the number of black filmmakers who were brought in on his insistence for "Watermelon Man." "These six men represented only a very small portion of the work force in the entire film. I realized we

had pushed the unions as far as they would go. However, I don't think it was far enough."

Greaves, who grew up in Harlem, had a full career as an actor in the theater and motion pictures before he started

producing for television. He was featured in Louis Derocchemont's motion picture "Lost Boundaries," and later acted a leading role in the Broadway hit, "Lost in the Stars." His production of "Black Journal"

for National Educational Television won him the Russwurm Award for excellence in television journalism. He also received the American Film Festival's Blue Ribbon Award this year for his film "In The Company of Men," produced by NET. That film also won awards in four major film festivals.

Van Peebles was born in Chicago and operated cable cars in San Francisco before going abroad. While in France, he produced several short films and wrote six books, five of them in French.

Davis, born in Cogdell, Georgia, has starred in a number of films, including "Sam Whiskey," "The Scalphunters," "A Man Called Adams," "The Hill," "The Cardinal," "Purlie Victorious" and "No Way Out." He makes his debut as a motion picture director with his most recent film, "Cotton Comes Ot Harlem." He has appeared in several television shows, including "The Defenders" and "The Nurses and the Doctors," and has written a few TV play-



MELVIN VAN PEEBLES



TONY BROWN



WILLIAM GREAVES



OSSIE DAVIS



DAVID HALL

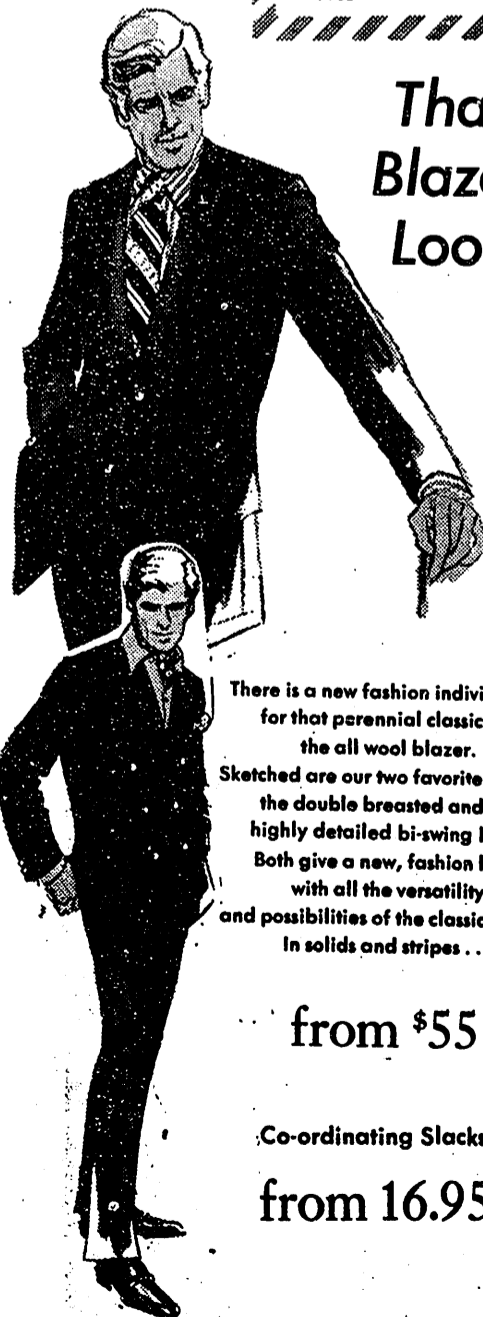
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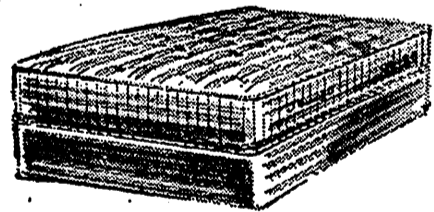


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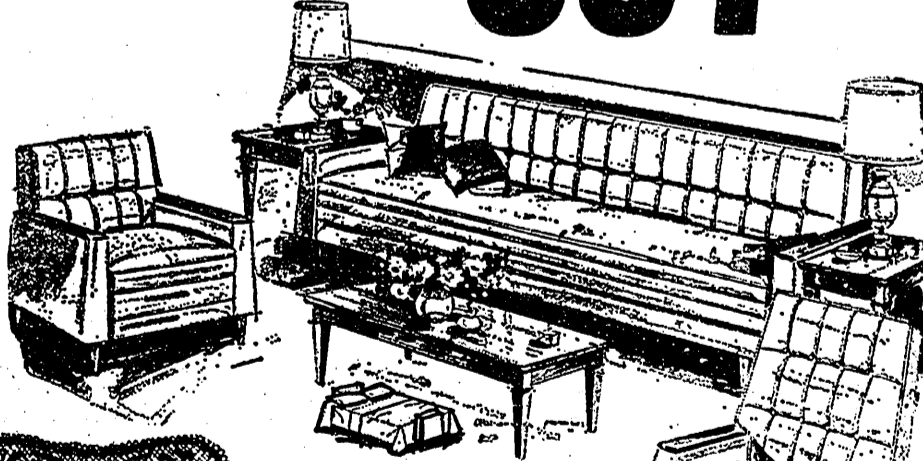
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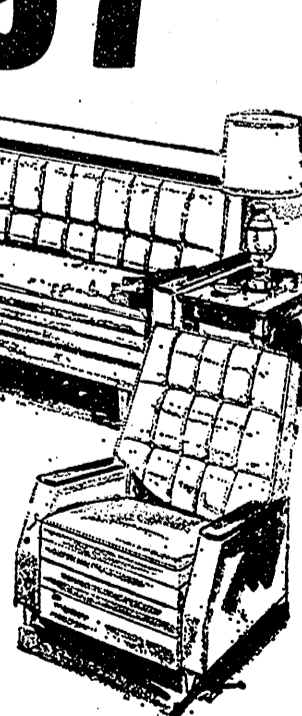
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