

# INDIECOLLECT

IN MEMORIAM  
Melvin Van Peebles  
1932 – 2021

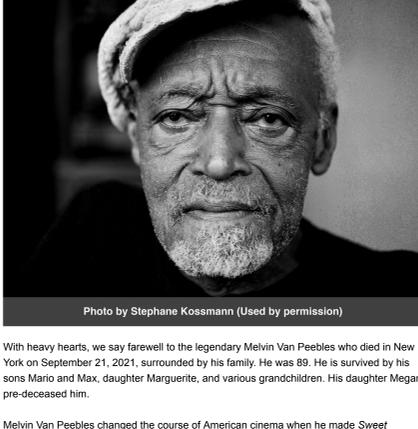


Photo by Stephane Kossmann (Used by permission)

With heavy hearts, we say farewell to the legendary Melvin Van Peebles who died in New York on September 21, 2021, surrounded by his family. He was 89. He is survived by his sons Mario and Max, daughter Marguerite, and various grandchildren. His daughter Megan pre-deceased him.

Melvin Van Peebles changed the course of American cinema when he made *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*, which he wrote, produced, directed, edited and scored. He also played the leading role. It was not only a revolutionary film, it also broke box office records. In a timely tribute, the New York Film Festival will showcase the [new 4K restoration on September 26 & 27](#).

Mario Van Peebles, who collaborated with his father on many projects, reflects on his father's revolutionary impact on the film industry:

*"Dad knew that black images matter. If a picture is worth 1000 words, what was a movie worth? We want to be the success we see, thus we need to see ourselves being free. True liberation did not mean imitating the colonizers' mentality, it meant appreciating the power, beauty and interconnectivity of all people."*

Warrington Hudlin, founder of the Black Filmmaker Foundation, considered Van Peebles a role model and was profoundly influenced by him.

He writes: *"Melvin Van Peebles is the 'best that ever did it and got away with it.'" As the Godfather of Black Cinema, he left us with both the inspiration and challenge to continue his artistic and racial disruption of the society we were born into. And he likely continues that provocation in the next life."*

## Early Career



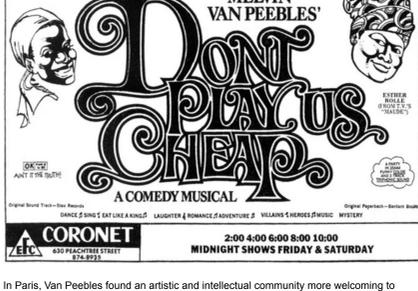
Melvin Van Peebles (Courtesy Van Peebles Family Archive)

Melvin Van Peebles was born in Chicago on August 21, 1932. After graduating with a degree in literature from Ohio Wesleyan University, he joined the Air Force.

After the service, he worked the cable cars of San Francisco and chronicled those experiences in *The Big Heat* (1957), a book with photos by Ruth Bernhard.

That same year, he made his filmmaking debut with a short, *Three Pickup Men* for *Herrick*, followed by *Sunlight*, both in 1957. But his efforts to find financing in Hollywood failed.

As did so many other African Americans, Van Peebles headed to Europe. On the way, he met film curator Amos Vogel, whose Cinema 16 series inculcated generations of New Yorkers with a love of cinema. Vogel showed the Van Peebles shorts and later shared them with his colleagues at the Cinémathèque Française, who invited Van Peebles to Paris.



In Paris, Van Peebles found an artistic and intellectual community more welcoming to Black artists and writers. Teaching himself French, he published short stories and novels in the language, including *La Fête à Harlem* and *La Permission*, both in 1967. The former became the basis for his 1972 Broadway musical, *Don't Play Us Cheap*. The latter he turned into the script for his first movie, *The Story of a Three Day Pass*.

## The Story of a Three Day Pass



Harry Baird and Nicole Berger in *The Story of a Three Day Pass* (Still from 4K restoration by IndieCollect)

*The Story of a Three Day Pass* – recently restored by IndieCollect with funding from the HFPA – launched Van Peebles's movie career. The film combines a French New Wave insouciance with a subtle but searing exposé of racism. Shown as *La Permission* at the 1968 San Francisco Film Festival, it led to long-awaited offers from Hollywood.

## Acclaim for *The Story of a Three-Day Pass*

The IndieCollect restoration, released by Janus Films / Criterion in May 2021, generated a rave review in *The New York Times*, titled ["The Film That Made 'Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song' Possible"](#).

## Breaking into Hollywood

*The Story of a Three Day Pass* secured for Van Peebles a contract to direct the 1970 comedy *Watermelon Man* at Columbia Pictures. The Criterion Channel, which recently acquired the rights, describes it as follows:

*"Melvin Van Peebles's only foray into Hollywood filmmaking, Watermelon Man is one of the most audacious, radically conceived works to be financed by a major American studio... Comedian, radical, and virtuosic performer (initially in whiteface) as Jeff Gerber, a loudmouthed, bigoted white insurance salesman whose sitcomlike suburban existence is jarringly upended when he wakes up to discover, in a wild spin on Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*, that he has become a Black man. What ensues is a ferocious satire of society's racist double standards that gradually transforms into an empowering portrait of awakening Black consciousness, executed with a mix of acerbic irreverence and deadly serious political commentary by a relentlessly subversive Van Peebles."*

Watch the trailer below.



## Breaking with Hollywood

But, after *Watermelon Man*, Van Peebles became determined to regain total control over his work, going so far as to finance his next movie himself. The result was *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*, (1971), which gave birth to the genre dubbed "Blaxploitation." It is impossible to exaggerate the importance of this movie. It not only changed Black cinema, it also changed the American entertainment industry, grossing \$10 million and giving rise to many movies that spoke directly to Black audiences without concern for how white audiences would react. In 2020, the film was named to the National Film Registry by the Library of Congress for its cultural, artistic and historical significance.



Melvin Van Peebles' body of work includes movies, art, plays, musicals, and musical compositions. He also had a huge career on-screen as an actor, appearing in more than 40 films and television shows. He is one of the few world-class artists whose work becomes more powerful and pertinent with time. He was heralded the world over, receiving the French Legion of Honor in 2000, only one of dozens of awards. It is impossible to overstate his importance. We hope a new generation will now discover and be ignited by his vision.

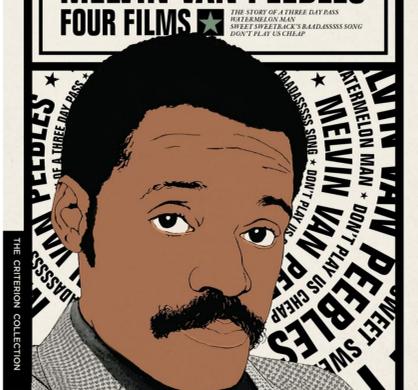
His fans can look forward to a Broadway revival next year of one of his most important plays, *Ain't Supposed to Die a Natural Death*, to be directed by Kenny Leon and produced by Lia Vollack.

[Study the Melvin Van Peebles Filmography Here](#)

## Criterion Collection MVP Boxed Set

The Criterion Collection has just released a Blu-ray boxed set showcasing four dazzling restorations of films by Melvin Van Peebles.

- *The Story of a Three Day Pass*, 1967 (restored by IndieCollect)
- *Watermelon Man*, 1970
- *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*, 1971
- *Don't Play Us Cheap*, 1972



[Collect Melvin Van Peebles: Four Films Here](#)

## An Enduring Legacy



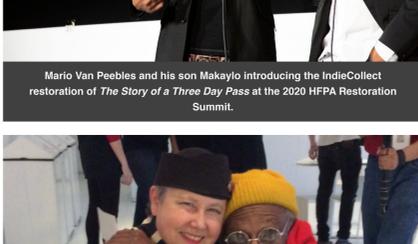
Melvin Van Peebles & son Mario, 2021 (Courtesy Mario Van Peebles)

**BAADASSSSS!** — Mario's Tribute to His Father  
Mario Van Peebles followed in his father's footsteps as both an actor and director. His 2003 docudrama, *BAADASSSSS!*, tells the story behind the making of *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*, with Mario playing his father in the reenactment.

They also collaborated on the making of *Panther*, which Van Peebles wrote and Mario directed, and on *Posse*.



Mario Van Peebles and his son Makaylo introducing the IndieCollect restoration of *The Story of a Three Day Pass* at the 2020 HFPA Restoration Summit.



Sandra Schulberg & Melvin Van Peebles in 2016 at the Museum of the Moving Image where he was presented by Warrington Hudlin with the Queens World Film Festival's "Spirit of Queens" Award.

Sandra Schulberg, President of IndieCollect, recalls: *"I consider myself supremely lucky to have first met Melvin in 1979, when we selected Sweet Sweetback as part of the 'American Independents' retrospective at the New York Film Festival. He injected his verve and revolutionary magnetism into that movie. The man and the movie were one. Both made an indelible impact on me."*

The world won't be the same without the incomparable Melvin Van Peebles, but his films live on!



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