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At least one lesson we can extract from the educational and economic struggles that blacks have engaged in throughout American history is that serious economic change, beneficial to blacks, will not occur without blacks having the power to demand it and to politically and economically punish those who stand in the way of justice and equality for blacks. Political power is the key to survival for blacks in America.

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Reel Blacks

by

Patricia A. Turner

The Good Old Days



Like most of my colleagues engaged in film studies rather than film practice, I occasionally allow myself to fantasize about the kind of films I would produce if I were a film maker. Several commercial films popular in the last fifteen years have inspired in me a bare bones scenario. My movie would have an all black “ensemble” cast. The plot would contain flashbacks tracing the events in the characters’ adolescence that solidified their friendship. These flashbacks would be punctuated by rhythmless music performed by white artists. Although no hint of “soul” would be tolerated on my movie’s soundtrack, my black characters would enthusiastically embrace it as if it were their own.

I doubt that my film would achieve any real commercial success, in spite of the fact that so many recent movies have portrayed the reverse situation. Ever since George Lucas’ classic *American Graffiti* broke box office records in 1973, white film makers have endeavored to find innovative ways of turning nostalgia for the late 1950s and early 1960s into movie making success in the 1970s and 1980s. The more notable efforts have included George Landis’ raucous view of early 1960s fraternity life in *Animal House*, Steven Spielberg’s time travel adventure in *Back to the Future*, Francis Ford Coppola’s foray into fantasy in *Peggy Sue Got Married*, Lawrence Kasdan’s depic-

tion of a reunion weekend in *The Big Chill*, and Rob Reiner’s glimpse of 1950s coming of age in *Stand By Me*.

With period costumes, period cars and period sets, the producers meticulously recreate the environments of their youth. But without a doubt, the period music is the most important component of all. Each film boasts a soundtrack true to the era it reflects. Most of the musical selections are in fact classic rhythm and blues selections or early rock and roll songs. The fraternity brothers in *Animal House* dance to Otis Day and the Nights’ “Shout.” The white hero in *Back to the Future* inadvertently “inspires” Chuck Berry to develop a new sound. The married couple in *Diner* fight over the placement of rhythm and blues discs in a record cabinet. Peggy Sue is shocked to discover that her musician husband played with an R and B group in the sixties. The opening credits in *The Big Chill* are set against Marvin Gaye’s rendition of “I Heard It Through The Grapevine” and *Stand By Me* takes its name from Ben E. King’s 1957 hit record.

Although the characters in these films identify black music as a significant reminder of their coming of age, their social groups do not reflect any impulses to integrate. Neither of the competing fraternities in *Animal House* includes any black members. Nonetheless the members assume that they will be welcome in the all black

nightclub they descend upon in one of their road trips. While the *Back to the Future* hero momentarily pauses to assure a black floor sweeper and his boss that the post-fifties era will bring about political opportunities for blacks, his own life in the eighties doesn't reflect any interracial friendships. The cliques that unite the characters in *Diner*, *Peggy Sue Got Married*, *The Big Chill* and *Stand By Me* are all white groups.

I strongly suspect that the talented film makers represented by these films would protest any accusations of racism. After all, if their young lives were influenced by black music but not by black people, then they are correct to portray that phenomenon in their films. However, the film makers may not be aware that their films can be used to study much more than adolescent rites of passage. Whether they realize it or not, their films have little applicability to the black experience. Although many blacks wish the Civil Rights issues could be as popular with eighties whites as they were with some sixties whites, most blacks do not share in any of this reverence for the past. Black coming of age was rarely as idyllic as white. References to hypocrisy and broken promises are likely to emerge in present day black discussions about the sixties and seventies. By focusing on the good old days when blacks could be relied upon to supply good dance music without intruding into the social milieu, the film makers are inadvertently chronicling a very fundamental difference in black and white perceptions of the past and the myth of integration.

Perhaps the most blatant statement of this theme is discernible in Kasdan's 1983 hit *The Big Chill*. Set in a rambling vacation home following the suicide of a sixties radical, the movie focuses on the group of old college friends who gather for the funeral and end up spending the weekend together. Reminiscing about the sixties social crises that originally brought them together, the friends recall protesting the war in Viet Nam and working for the Civil Rights movement during their student days at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor. One long defunct couple remembers making love on the night before the March on Washington. Sipping white wine and smoking pot on overstuffed couches, they fondly recall the days when Huey and Bobby (referring to black activists Huey Newton and Bobby Seales) were their heroes. Their recollections are often triggered by a never-ending supply of oldies their host puts on the turntable. Indeed the film was largely responsible for renewed interest in Motown music. As this white assemblage listens to lively black music, a subtle tension emerges as they ponder the paths their lives have taken.

At least two of the characters had intended to work for social change following their graduation. Michael, now a

writer for *People* magazine, began his career by teaching in Harlem. Meg, now a real estate lawyer in Atlanta, began her law career as a public advocate in Philadelphia. She categorizes her former clients as "scum," while he reduces his students to "those kids in Harlem." They acknowledge that they had been ill-equipped to cope with the demands of their original, more idealistic vocations. With a moderate amount of guilt, they review their decisions to pursue more lucrative ventures. In the end, the justifications for career choices that limit their contact with non-whites prevail. Their post-graduation ventures into public service work emerge as the "trials by fire" they survived prior to finding their true callings.

Meg and Michael agree that their original motivation for altruistic efforts was inspired by the self-sacrificing spirit of the college group of friends currently reassembled. The casting of this group is particularly intriguing. This is an all-white clique. In spite of their alleged concern with the Civil Rights movement and social change, they never seem to have incorporated any black friends into their inner circle. Given this casting, the audience can only assume that their college days contact with blacks was completely superficial. These white characters danced to the beat of Temptations' hits, made love to Aretha Franklin ballads, and stylishly affiliated themselves with all of the right causes, but they limited their contact with black people. It is no wonder that Meg and Michael were so nonplussed by the communities they tried to serve; apparently their previous relationships were limited to individuals like themselves.

Like the other nostalgia films, *The Big Chill* enjoins the audience to share in a celebration of the "good old days." But what exactly made these times so special? The tenacity of the interpersonal relationships is foregrounded in most of these films. The implied complexity of contemporary life is contrasted to the simplicity of the earlier times. Race relations were less complicated in these times. Blacks had been encouraged to have their music crossover into the white music world, but other parts of that white world were still restricted. The proliferation and popularity of these films suggests that they offer a genuine view of contemporary white attitudes towards the present and the past. If this is the case, then it seems reasonable to assume that whites are voicing a preference for an era in which they could guiltlessly exclude blacks from their social and occupational circles while enjoying the music made by black artists.

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