JANUS FILMS

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THE STORY OF A THREE DAY PASS

Melvin Van Peebles's edgy, angsty, romantic first feature could never have been made in America. Unable to break into a segregated Hollywood, Van Peebles decamped to France, taught himself the language, and wrote a number of books in French, one of which, *La permission,* would become his stylistically innovative feature debut. Turner (Harry Baird), an African American soldier stationed in France, is granted a promotion and a three-day leave from base by his casually racist commanding officer and heads to Paris, where he finds whirlwind romance with a white woman (Nicole Berger)—but what happens to their love when his furlough is over? Channeling the brash exuberance of the French New Wave, Van Peebles creates an exploration of the psychology of an interracial relationship as well as a commentary on France's contradictory attitudes about race that is playful, sarcastic, and stingingly subversive by turns, and that laid the foundation for the scorched-earth cinematic revolution he would unleash just a few years later with *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song.*

New 4K restoration by IndieCollect in consultation with Mario Van Peebles, with support from the Hollywood Foreign Press Association

France | 1967 | 87 minutes | Black & White | In French and English with English subtitles | 1.66:1 aspect ratio

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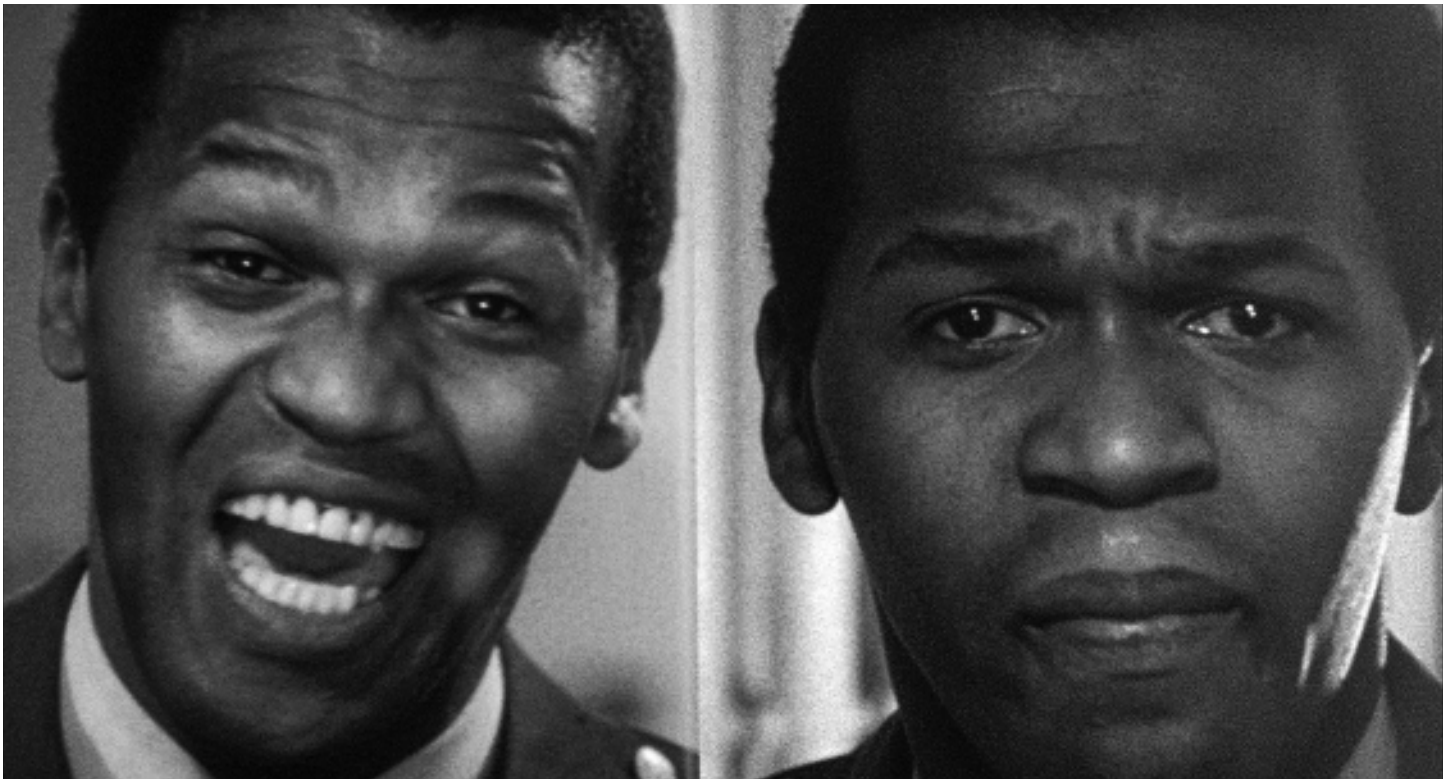


PRODUCTION HISTORY

The story of *The Story of a Three Day Pass*—the first full-length film by Melvin Van Peebles, one of cinema's most important African American directors—begins where so many other independent debuts begin: with Hollywood rejection. In 1957, a twenty-five-year-old San Franciscan cable-car gripman named Melvin Peebles was inspired to make films when a passenger congratulated him on *The Big Heart,* his memoir of the cable-car trade. The passenger told him that the book evoked movielike visuals, and Peebles soon ran with the comparison, writing and directing a couple of shorts (*Three Pickup Men for Herrick* and *Sunlight,* both 1957) despite knowing little about filmmaking.

The next step was Hollywood, but after looking to its studios for directorial work, Peebles found himself shut out from an industry that still couldn't conceive of African Americans behind the camera. The only jobs offered were elevator operator or dancer, insults that led Peebles to move to the Netherlands to study mathematics and astronomy. In Holland, Peebles became Van Peebles and started to attract interest in his filmmaking from Europeans, including Henri Langlois, the influential founder and programmer of the Cinémathèque française. Langlois invited Van Peebles to Paris, where the fledgling artist blossomed: after relocating to France, Van Peebles not only directed another short film (*Cinq cent balles,* 1963) but also continued to write and explore auxiliary creative paths as an editor, playwright, and musician.

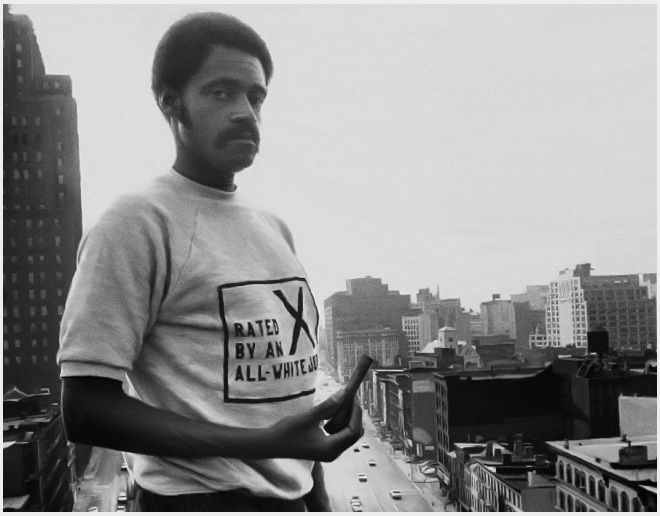
By 1967, Van Peebles had written several works in French, his adopted language. One of them was *La permission,* a novel about a Black American GI who falls in love with a white Frenchwoman during a weekend furlough despite his racist captain's warnings about staying on the straight and narrow. Van Peebles discovered that French law allowed writers temporary membership in the national directors' guild and that a $60,000 grant from the French Cinema Center would allow him to adapt his novel into a feature as long as he filmed it in France and depicted French culture and society in a suitably flattering light—easy criteria to fulfill considering his belief that Europe did not possess the "iron wall against Negro talent" that he had encountered in his native land. The Office de Production d'Edition et de Réalisation (OPERA) agreed to produce the film (called *The Story of a Three Day Pass* in English and *La permission* in French), which Van Peebles shot in roughly five weeks for $200,000.

Fittingly for an expatriate's first feature, *Three Day Pass* employed an internationally diverse cast and crew. For director of photography, Van Peebles enlisted Michel Kelber, a Russian-born cinematographer with more than thirty years of experience, including collaborations with Jean Cocteau and Jean Renoir. The role of Turner, the confident yet also self-recriminating African American soldier, was given to Harry Baird, a Guyanese-born English actor who had played mostly minor parts in everything from British crime dramas to Italian peplum (sword-and-sandal) epics. Nicole Berger was cast in the role of Miriam, the white Frenchwoman who both transcends and conforms to her culture's racial biases. Van Peebles chose Berger because of her appearances in several French New Wave productions—most notably as a

major character in François Truffaut's *Shoot the Piano Player*—that proved her amenable to the kind of improvisational and documentary-style shooting that Van Peebles favored for his own work. Tragically, *Three Day Pass* would be Berger's final screen role: not long after completing the film, she was killed in a car accident at the age of thirty-two.

In one of the great ironies of his career, Van Peebles submitted *Three Day Pass* to the 1967 San Francisco International Film Festival, which selected it on the assumption that its director was white and French. As Van Peebles once explained: "When that happened, that embarrassed the Americans because they could not have the only Black American director [be] a French director. So they offered me jobs, which I did not accept, and that forced them to look for others . . . Certainly they discovered other Black directors, discovered they were there the whole time."

Eventually, however, Van Peebles did accept a job from Hollywood, directing Columbia Pictures' *Watermelon Man* (1970), an incisive racial satire produced by John B. Bennett and written by Herman Raucher. But the liberty he had experienced commanding every creative stage and aspect of *The Story of a Three Day Pass* encouraged Van Peebles to go independent once again, for *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*, which he not only wrote and directed but also produced, edited, scored, and starred in. That 1971 landmark in independent and African American cinema remains Van Peebles's crowning achievement, and its roots can be seen in the equally daring *Three Day Pass*, an opening salvo of free experimentation and expression. •



MELVIN VAN PEEBLES ON *THE STORY OF A THREE DAY PASS*

The quotations below have been excerpted from Melvin Van Peebles's DGA career-highlights interview, conducted by his son Mario Van Peebles.

"I went down to Hollywood with those three little films that I made in San Francisco to show my stuff and to look for a job. And they offered me a job, but it was as an elevator operator. 'No, you guys don't understand, I want to be around'—I didn't know the creative process, but I explained myself. They offered me a job as a dancer."

"I guess my break would be that I got a postcard from the Cinémathèque française in France. And the Cinémathèque invited me to come to France because they had seen my films through a whole series of circumstances. They had seen my first—those three short films—and they thought they were very good and invited me to France. So that's how I ended up in France."

"I discovered along the way that there's a French law that says a French writer can have a temporary director's card to bring his own work to the screen. So, I became a journalist, and I wrote these novels, I got them published, and then I asked for a director's card to bring to the screen a novel that I had written called La permission [The Story of a Three Day Pass]. *And that's how I managed to get a director's card."*

"The French have the [French Cinema Center, which] gives subsidies—grants to help people get along to get their films done. I wrote a story that was flattering to the French psyche about an American GI who comes to France, but he's still—you know, the GI is in a much freer country—tainted mentally, even though he's been victimized; he still has the mentality of a victim because the GI is Black [and from] the States. And so, he and the girl, they meet, have trouble in the relationship: in and out, girl-boy, boy-girl–type thing. And that's the sort of bittersweet love story between the two of them. It was very appealing, very warm, and also quite flattering to the French, and so I got the subsidy."

"Anyway, my film was one of the films selected to represent France at the 1967 [San Francisco International] Film Festival. I went to San Francisco, which I had been more or less tossed out of ten years earlier, as the French delegate to the San Francisco Film Festival. I remember, I get off the plane, and there's a little old lady, blue hair on wedges, said, 'Melvin Van Peebles, le délégation française*?' I said, 'Lady . . .' She said, 'Don't bother me. Melvin Van Peebles,* délégation française.*' I said, 'I am Melvin Van Peebles,' so I sort of spun her head. That was all very funny. But I was treated very well."*

"Hollywood was very embarrassed at that juncture because here I was, a Black American, having to work as a Frenchman, and my work was of such quality. So then everybody was saying, 'Hey, what are you doing over here? What are you doing over there? Why aren't you over here? What are you doing?' I said, 'What do you mean? Last time I asked you guys for a job, you told me to be an elevator operator.'" •

TRIVIA

The narrative of *The Story of a Three Day Pass* was based on Melvin Van Peebles's personal experiences in the United States Air Force.

The depiction of a United States military base in France was anachronistic by the time of the film's release in 1968. Two years prior, President Charles de Gaulle had ordered all American troops (and other North Atlantic Treaty Organization military personnel) off French soil.

Van Peebles wrote the soundtrack music for *The Story of a Three Day Pass* with another American expat, jazz guitarist Mickey Baker, best known for composing and performing the 1956 hit "Love Is Strange" in collaboration with Sylvia Robinson.

Van Peebles sings "When My Number Gonna Hit," one of two songs written for the film. The other song, "Hard Times," is a duet between Baker and American expat singer Eileen Goldsen, professionally known by just her first name.

LINKS

Garrett Chaffin-Quiray, "Melvin Van Peebles [Great Directors Series]," Senses of Cinema 25 (March 2003)

Kimberly Lindbergs, "Melvin Van Peebles: The Story of a Three Day Pass," *Cinebeats (June 19, 2020)*

Michel Martin, "Van Peebles Speaks Candidly on Honors, Criticism," Tell Me More, *National Public Radio (November 21, 2008)*

Natalie Mokry, "6 Filmmaking Tips from Melvin Van Peebles," Film School Rejects (February 7, 2018)