

# The Mack

USA | 1973 | 110 minutes

## Credits

<b>Director</b>	Michael Campus
<b>Screenplay</b>	Robert J. Poole
<b>Photography</b>	Ralph Woolsey
<b>Music</b>	Willie Hutch
<b>Cast</b>	
<b>Goldie</b>	Max Julien
<b>Hank</b>	Don Gordon
<b>Slim</b>	Richard Pryor
<b>Lulu</b>	Carol Speed

## Synopsis

John "Goldie" Mickens and his partner Slim are ambushed by rival gunmen in a junkyard. Two white detectives (Dan Gordon and William Watson) arrive on the scene and debate whether to kill Goldie or arrest him. Six years later, Goldie is released from prison and returns to Oakland. He visits his mentor, the Blind Man (Paul Harris) who advises Goldie, "Pimpin's big business. And it's been goin on since the beginning of time. And it's gonna continue straight ahead until somebody up there turns out the lights on this small planet. Can you dig it?"

Goldie catches up with an ex-girlfriend Lulu, an "outlaw" turning tricks to pay the bills. She implores Goldie to manage her. Goldie's militant brother (Roger Mosley) is a political organizer dedicated to running pimps and drug dealers out of the community, but Goldie notifies him that he has some things he wants to do. He gets himself cleaned up, buys some new clothes and decides, "to be the meanest mack who ever lived. They're gonna be talkin about Goldie like they used to talk about Jesus!"

Rising to such success that he is awarded "Mack of the Year" honors at the annual Players Ball in Oakland, trouble arises when Goldie's former employer Fatman (George Murdock) gets word of his protégé's success. He demands Goldie come back to work for him. The vile detectives who busted Goldie are also intent at taking him down. To get out of the game with his life intact, Goldie turns to his brother for help.

## Production history

Robert Poole was an ex-con who – according to legend – wrote a 40-page treatment for a movie idea he had on prison toilet paper. His story concerned an ex-con who returns to the streets to become the greatest pimp of all time. Titled *Black Is Beautiful*, Poole ultimately approached producer Harvey Bernhard with his idea. Fascinated with how a man could "control a bitch's mind," Bernhard hired a young filmmaker named Michael Campus, who had shot a few television documentaries for ABC, to direct.

Max Julien was the first actor Bernhard approached. Julien had written the screenplay for *Cleopatra Jones* and was looking to direct, but Bernhard gave him carte blanche to rewrite the script. Traveling to Oakland, Julien and Campus sought the help of the Ward brothers, four men who ran the city's criminal underworld. Frank Ward agreed to take the filmmakers into his world, if they took him into theirs. In addition to being awarded a cameo in the film, Ward inspired the basis for Goldie's character.

Frank Ward not only met with Julien to make sure the actor portrayed him correctly, but provided protection for the cast and crew. Trouble came when Huey Newton and the Black Panther Party – who ran the political side of black Oakland – felt the production had infringed on their turf. The Panthers rained bottles down on the crew on the first day of filming. Julien was friends with Newton and met with him to cool tensions, but before filming could be completed, Frank Ward was shot in the back of the head and killed.

The Panthers were blamed for the hit and without Ward's protection, the filmmakers retreated to L.A. to finish the film. They dedicated *The Mack* to Frank Ward, but as if to show who really ran Oakland, Huey Newton insisted the premiere benefit the Panthers' milk fund in the city. Critics decried the film as "Blaxploitation" at the time, but it's since come to represent '70s style finer than perhaps any other movie. Scenes later showed up in *True Romance* and *Friday*, and informed Snoop Dogg's entire career.

## Opinion

Other than the clothes, the cars and the music – Willie Hutch wrote and performed nine classic tunes, including "I Choose You", "Theme of The Mack" and "Brother's Gonna Work It Out" – one reason *The Mack* has endured is the message at its core. The tension between those seeking self-sufficiency through political change and those pursuing criminal enterprise – tension in the Black community that plagued the production – is richly conveyed in the relationship between Roger Mosley and Max Julien's very memorable characters.

The movie is still a shoot 'em up straight from the pages of Iceberg Slim and tends to get somewhat repetitive, but it also has an improvisational charge to its dialogue, thanks largely to Richard Pryor. Instead of feeling artificial, *The Mack* plays like a documentary feature on Oakland of the early '70s. And despite a comically low budget, nearly every scene is infused with a love for movies. Goldie's makeover – where Julien throws



# The Mack



dollar bills into the air and is captured in slow motion – is a joy.

Bill Gibron at DVD Verdict writes, "The Mack is indeed a neo-realistic, honest story of one man's journey through the dark world of organized street crime. It is also incredibly preachy, disjointed, and esoterically insular ... People seeing this film without a thorough knowledge and understanding of the jargon and manner of 1970s black society will probably find their head reeling from the excessive use of street jive and indecipherable pimp code names."

"I see on the one hand a rather racist film filled with stereotypes and narrow attitudes, while on the other hand, Goldie maintains that a sense of empowerment and justice, however skewed, is served. A good argument for both stances could be made, but watching this film today, the blended themes are awkward and unnerving and bring back thoughts of how far we still have to go in terms of equality for everyone," writes Ryan Cracknell at Apollo Movie Guide.

Jeffrey Anderson at Combustible Celluloid writes, "One of the seminal works of blaxploitation is actually a bit softer and more thoughtful than it may appear. This is partly thanks to the low-key, sleepy-eyed performance by Max Julien as 'Goldie' ... The film is full of odd little touches, such as a man attacked by rats in the trunk of a car or battery acid injected into the veins of another. But in-between the (white) director Michael Campus employs an almost improvisatory approach, it's as if the actors weren't even aware the camera was running.

*Taken from Wikipedia*

## Blaxploitation is back - black-themed movies and mental slavery

*Progressive, The, Sept, 1997 by Fredrick L. McKissack, Jr.*

Hollywood is all set to revisit a genre that supposedly died two decades ago -- the blaxploitation film.

Producers Doug McHenry and George Jackson plan on remaking *The Mack*, a classic of the genre. The two told the Los Angeles Times that the conditions that created the main character, Goldie, exist today. "We're going after a bigger, more epic film -- not a remake," McHenry said. "We see it as a *Pulp Fiction* and *Scarface*."

Two points should jump right out at you: First, according to McHenry, conditions inside the black community that created the uber pimp Goldie have not improved since the 1970s; second, the time is right for making a "bigger" movie (50 percent more shooting? Seventy-five percent more 'ho's?).

*The Mack* was a 1973 film starring Max Julien as Goldie, a recently released convict who enters the highly lucrative pimping business on the mean streets of Oakland. The movie tried to be a morality play involving two brothers -- one a pimp, the other a black nationalist. The two are at constant odds, until white policemen, upset that Goldie won't pay them protection money, kill their mother. This act brings the brothers together in an attempt to clean up the streets.

Technically, the movie was a disaster, with a script so thin that it was barely visible. And it had the look of a not-so-well-made student project, not surprising since it was shot in five weeks. The director, Michael Campus, went to Oakland and met with the Ward brothers, a couple of real-life street toughs, to get a more realistic view of pimping, and also to get their cooperation in making the film. The head of the Ward family, Michael, was killed a week after the making of the film, and the film is dedicated to him.

So why was this poor-quality film about a pimp so successful within the black community?

"At a time when most black men realized a fundamental freedom and power over their lives was denied them at every turn, the pimp, for better or worse, was equated with self-assertion," writes Donald Bogle, author of *Blacks in American Films and Television* (Garland, 1988).

"A lot of films today are about victims, but most of the films then were about empowerment," Pam Grier, an actress in some of these films, told *Entertainment Weekly* in 1996.

Grier starred in *Coffy*, a film where beauty, brains, and gun-play were the main ingredients. It was Grier's most memorable role. She played a nurse who is out to get the people that turned her sister into a junkie.

These movies presented a strange kind of empowerment. The *New Republic's* film critic, Stanley Kauffmann, wrote off the entire genre in an April 28, 1978 piece: "All that talk about



# The Mack



Black Power and Black is Beautiful, and when they finally get their long-delayed screen time, all they do is show that Black is Ugly -- just as ugly as everybody else." The established black middle class echoed Kauffmann's sentiments. Richard Pryor, however, gave the most pragmatic reason for making blaxploitation films. "You know, we used to pick cotton," he said in 1973. "Well, now we are making movies. Same thing. I call them pickin'-cotton movies, but they pay the bills. And some people get over them. All that works, man."

Apparently, blaxploitation still resonates with the hip-hop generation. New Line Home Video released *The Mack* on video in 1991. In 1997, the movie sold 67,000 copies. McHenry and Jackson said they have been besieged by requests from actors willing to try out for the film, which could make the original look like an Ibsen play. Rapper Snoop Doggy Dog reportedly has the inside track on playing Goldie.

White producers in Hollywood are very uneasy about the trend. "The Mack is a throwback to an image blacks have been trying to fight offscreen," producer told the Los Angeles Times. "Every black actor of note talks about turning down maid and slave roles, so why make a movie about the industrial-strength pimp of all time?"

Good question. You have to take a look at why the films were made in the first place. Until the era of blaxploitation, black actors and actresses within the mainstream were generally in subservient roles. Who can forget Butterfly McQueen being smacked by Miss Scarlett in *Gone With the Wind*? A funny moment for white people, a terribly painful one for blacks. Steppin' Fetchit's slow-talking style and Mantan Moreland's bug-eyed antics are etched in the souls of black folks. And while Eddie "Rochester" Anderson out-witted Jack Benny, Rochester was still the butler. If blacks weren't "coonin'," then they were exotic and animalistic. Dorothy Dandridge, a talented actress who died after overdosing on pills in the mid-1960s, was constantly given the role of the tragic mulatto. Mainstream films did nothing to give black people a sense that they were powerful and physically beautiful, or, at least for black women, that they were desired if they were darker than a brown grocery sack.

*Cleopatra Jones*, made in 1973, was one of the first films to break the pusher/pimp mold, offering one of the first black heroines (albeit of the comic-book variety). Tamara Dobson, a former model, plays a karate-chopping CIA agent who is sent to battle a gang of drug dealers led by an incredibly campy Shelley Winters. Quentin Tarantino, an unrepentant fan of the blaxploitation genre, used elements (especially the absurd and comedic parts) of these films in *Pulp Fiction*. His next project, a film version of Elmore Leonard's *Rum Punch*, will star Pam Grier in the role of Jackie Brown, a flight attendant. In fact, Tarantino had to change the race of the character in order to use Grier.

In the past year, three of the better mainstream films dealing with African American issues -- *Rosewood*, *Get on the Bus*, and *Love Jones* -- were critical successes but commercial failures. Contrast them with *Booty Call* and *B.A.P.S. (Black American Princesses)*. Both of these did very well at the box office, as did action pictures with African Americans.

Apparently, the community wants movies about the black condition that focus on its criminal elements, and there will be more and more of them as Hollywood sees that these films are going to make money.

The era of blaxploitation films may be upon us again.

Fredrick L. McKissack Jr. is a former editor of the Progressive Media Project in Madison, Wisconsin. He lives in St. Louis.

EDINBURGH  
FILM  
GUILD