

Walker's his name. Shaft's his game.

BY SARAH HANSELL
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Portland comic writer and author David F. Walker wanted to make comics since he was a little kid watching movie trailers featuring blaxploitation-era heroes. With the end of the blaxploitation era, comics and film have seen a gaping hole where black representation used to be — a hole that Walker wants to help fill. And after over 20 years of working to break into the mainstream comic scene, he is bringing the iconic character of '70s black fighter, Vietnam vet and hero Shaft back to life. His reincarnation of "Shaft" has been released by Dynamite Comics, with the sixth and final installment slated for next month. He has also finished a "Shaft" novel, "Shaft's Revenge," the first in 40 years.

Walker has gained distinction for his publication "BadAzz MoFo," which focuses on black films of the 1970s, and his work as journalist, author, filmmaker and educator. He is also working on reviving Cyborg for a project with DC Comics, and pitting Howard the Duck against Blade the Vampire Slayer for Marvel — continuing to bring black characters into the realm of visibility in comics.

Sarah Hansell: *What inspired you to reincarnate John Shaft in comic book form?*

David F. Walker: It was a character that I've been fascinated with since I was a kid, which was a long, long time ago. The movies were based on books, and I started reading the books when I was probably in my mid-20s, and that was when I was like, "Oh, man, I've got to do something with this character." It only took 20 years for it to happen. I think everybody has these ideas in the back of their head, like, "Oh, if I could make my own 'Star Wars' movie." Or if they could write their own character they love ... Batman, Popeye the Sailor Man. It doesn't matter; everybody's got those things they love. For me it was John Shaft. And I just decided to be proactive about it, go after the rights, or figure out who owned the rights, and go from there.

S.H.: *You've talked in at least one of your interviews about how Shaft was a good character for you to tackle the issues that you wanted to tackle. Can you talk a little bit about what those issues are and why Shaft was a good character to share them?*

D.F.W.: Well, you know, in the books, in Ernest Tidyman's books, he's a Vietnam vet, and he had a juvenile record, and he sort of represented the constraints of what poverty and oppression can do to inner-city youth. You can tell a story like that in a contemporary setting, but it sometimes becomes difficult, not as palatable for audiences. Put it in a pair of bell-bottoms with a wide lapel, set it in the '60s or '70s, and suddenly, you know. It doesn't have



In an effort to increase black representation in comic books, Portland writer David F. Walker (top) has recreated the 1970s character Shaft in a series released by Dynamite Comics.

necessarily the same immediacy, but then it becomes more of a metaphor.

There are a lot of issues — again, one example is issues surrounding veterans now, returning Gulf War veterans. And those issues aren't that different than what Vietnam vets were facing, and Shaft was a Vietnam vet. And so that was part of what made the character appealing, was just to sort of talk about these things, reconciling police corruption and the impact of commercial development in poor communities. What happens when a poor community is targeted for urban renewal? What happens to its residents? All that sort of stuff. And I mean, I'm not trying to be ham-fisted about it. If readers don't get it, that's fine. But that's a lot of what the underlying message is.

S.H.: *You also talked about John Shaft being a character in the middle — a couple of steps away from being a police officer, a couple of steps away from being a criminal. Can you speak to that?*

D.F.W.: I think that in real life, especially in this day and age — the way the economy is, the money people make, the money they pay for houses, everybody's one step away from being in a set of circumstances that they never imagined being in. Whether it's losing their home and becoming homeless, whether it's being in a car accident and facing medical bills they can't afford. Everybody's one step away from having their worst nightmares come true, and then everybody's also one step away — one or two steps away — from everything just being great for them. You win the lottery or something like that. Or, suddenly you get a promotion at work and your income bracket changes.

But most of us live our lives in this sort of

gray area. And that's a more interesting story when that gray area is the difference between law enforcement and criminals, which at the end of the day, there's not always that big of a difference between the two. It takes a special kind of person to pick up a gun and go, "I'm going to ... do whatever with this gun." Whether they think it's taking care of themselves by robbing other people or taking care of the community by shooting someone, some unarmed civilian.

So, Shaft to me just represents that moral gray area so many of us live in, that circumstantial gray area that could shift at any moment. And a lot of people don't navigate it very well. We get really comfortable, and then the thought of change ... change scares so many people that they will fight sometimes to the death just to maintain their status quo.

S.H.: *What first attracted you to the blaxploitation era in the first place?*

D.F.W.: I grew up around it, but I was too young to fully appreciate it. And it just sort of fascinated me because it was these larger-than-life characters. I would see the commercials on TV for the movies, older cousins were going to see the movies, or I'd see the cover of Ebony magazine or Jet magazine. It fascinated me as a kid, and then as I got older, it was like, that era presented these larger-than-life heroes. And then, as I got even older, those heroes didn't exist anymore in pop culture.

By the time I was out of high school and in college in the '80s, all of these figures that I'd seen as kids were gone. And so I was like, what happened to them? And the handful of movies that I'd seen as a kid had stuck in my memory so much that that sort of caused me to research and to learn more.



Inspired by blaxploitation-era films, Portland author resurrects the 1970s icon

You know I saw "Black Belt Jones" when I was a kid, with Jim Kelly, and I was like, "Whatever happened to him?" And that's what led me down that somewhat scholarly, if you want to call it scholarly, path.

S.H.: *What do you think are some of people's biggest misconceptions about blaxploitation art?*

D.F.W.: I think the biggest misconception — there's so many of them — but right now, it's that they're something to be made fun of, that they're comedic, that the movies are all bad, or all negative. And so, you look at something like "Black Dynamite," which is a movie and an animated show, and I love the show, but it treats that whole era like it's a comedy, and it's not. Like, there's some great movies within that era. There's some terrible movies too. But 30 years from now, we'll be talking about the summer of 2015, and there'll be terrible movies that we're talking about then, just like there'll hopefully be some great movies, but maybe not. And so it's that people, as with everything, they rush to judgment on it based on the few things they know, or not knowing anything.

S.H.: *What do you see as far as black representation and diversity in comics now? It seems to me that it's fewer and further between than the blaxploitation era.*

D.F.W.: There was more quantity definitely in the '70s. We can argue about the quality all we want. But now there's neither quantity nor, for the most part, quality. Or, the stuff that's out there, you have to dig around to find it. It's not in the upper strata, upper tier of pop culture. Part of what I've been trying to do is bring some of that stuff more to the forefront and talk about it. Because my belief is that in terms of representation, lack of representation in and of itself becomes a form of oppression. It's oppression through omission. And I don't care who you are, if you're not part of the mainstream — heterosexual white men, that's mainstream — everybody else is a minority. And if you're not part of that mainstream, then you're not getting what you need, and it's not allowing you to activate your dreams.

I was talking to this young woman who wants to be a screenwriter recently, and every idea she had was for a story about a white man as the hero. And I was like, "Why are you...?" And she was like, "Well, I couldn't tell the story with a woman." And I was like, "Sure you could." It's frustrating to me because we're all brainwashed that way. I'm brainwashed that way. When I'm writing a story, I always have trouble finding a role for women in it because that's me. I'm so brainwashed into that concept that men are the heroes. We all need to sort of change our thinking.