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Father and Son Discuss Coming-of-Age Comedy

By Kam Williams
Special To *The Skanner News*

Mario Van Peebles was born in Mexico City on January 15, 1957 to Maria Marx and the legendary actor/director/composer/scriptwriter Melvin Van Peebles. Heo made his acting debut as a teenager in his father's film *Sweet Sweetback's Badasssss Song* (1971), before embarking on an enduring career as a thespian marked by memorable outings in everything from *New Jack City* (1991) to playing Stokely Carmichael in *Panther* (1995) to impersonating Malcolm X in *Ali* (2001).

Mario has also stepped behind the camera to direct a number of films, most notably, *New Jack City*, *Panther*, *Badasssss!* (2003) and *Posse* (1993). His latest offering, *We the Party*, is a bit of a family affair, in that it stars his 18 year-old son, Mandela, and features his father and four other children, Makaylo, Maya, Morgana and Marley, in supporting roles.

Here, Mario and Mandela talk about the movie, a coming-of-age comedy which might be best thought of as an African-American variation on *American Pie* (1999).

Kam Williams: Hi Mario and Mandela, thanks for the interview. You know, back in '79, I had the honor of running part of the Boston Marathon alongside Melvin Van Peebles. Your father's one of my idols.

Mario: Cool, man. When you met him did you go, "Come on feet! Do your Thing!" like his character did in *Sweet Sweetback*? [LOL]

KW: I'm sure I did. What interested you in making *We the Party*?

Mario: Half of it came from just witnessing the party all around me. I had this cool constituency of five teenagers growing up, listening to all this new music and dealing with all the "isms" that are still alive. They're trying to climb through: lookism... classism... sexism... racism. Then they literally threw a huge party at the house for one of their birthdays.

Mandela: Yeah, one of my brothers and I have our birthdays around the same time, and my father wasn't giving us as big an allowance as others in our age group. So, we figured we should pool our money, hire a DJ, hire security, order some pizza and refreshments, and charge \$10 a head. It was amazing! We had at least 500 people show up.

KW: Wow!

Mario: But it never got out of control like *Project X* because "dad" was there. I patrolled the premises with my video camera, and tried to keep the hormones from raging out of control. The way these kids behave, it sort of looks like safe sex out there on the floor. The last time I danced

liked that I had a baby 9 months later. So, inspired by real events, I started piecing the story together piece by piece.

KW: How true to life is the movie?

Mandela: A lot of the movie was inspired by real life, but some of it is fiction. For instance, I would get so mad, if my brother really got a car and I didn't.

KW: How similar are you to your character, Hendrix?

Mandela: He's the same kind of kid as me. He's stylish, but he's not the coolest kid or the weirdest kid. He's kind of in his own world.

KW: Mandela, Harriet Pakula Teweles asks: Was it weird being directed by your dad?

Mandela: No, it wasn't, because I've been directed by him almost my whole life. That's 18 years. However, it was important to know the difference between my dad and Mario Van Peebles, the director. You gotta show up early...

'It's okay to let them know ... that they might not be able to buy their sense of self at the mall'

you gotta know your lines... and I had to set an example for the other actors, so they could see that even the director's son was always prepared and very professional.

KW: Mario, was it hard keeping egos in check when you have stars like Snoop Dogg, Salli Richardson, Michael Jai White and Tony Lister in support roles.

MVP: One of the cool things about the adults in the movie is we've all been doing it for a minute. Salli, Tiny and I have been working together since *Posse*. And Snoop's been *The Doggfather* for awhile. So, we're all pretty secure within ourselves. On top of that, it wasn't just my badass crew in the movie, it was Snoop's son [Corde Broadus], P. Diddy's son [Quincy Brown], a Wayan's kid [Gregg], and a lot of talented youngsters from *That's So Raven* and *Hannah Montana*, plus some professional music and dance crews. So, the adults were happy to be a part of a cool movie being made that had some nutritional value. And I think they also knew that when you make an independent movie like *We the Party*, you really have to put the money on the screen. That's why I only paid myself ten dollars to write it and one dollar to direct it. No one was there for the money in the first place. That was the wrong reason to be on the set. Understand that Hollywood tends to be a little

reductive in its portrayals of people of color. It might get behind a couple filmmakers who are doing goofy comedies, which is fine, but I also want kids of all colors to have an alternative. I want our kids to be able to go to the movies to see something that is relevant to them that

also has something to say. There's no reason to be afraid to continue a conversation that society has already started with a young audience. So, if they've already been hit with hyper-sexuality and hyper materialism, it's okay to let them know in the context of a movie that they might not be able to buy their sense of self at the mall. Like I say in the classroom scene, the people we really respect aren't the big shoppers like the Kardashians, but the people who stand for something. Martin Luther King and Malcolm X weren't big consumers. You couldn't sell Mother Teresa breast implants. You couldn't sell Gandhi a new car. That's a long answer, but once my cast saw that level of consciousness in a script aimed at young adults, they jumped at the chance to be a part of delivering a positive message. They were attracted to the project for content reasons, not for ego reasons.

KW: That reminds me of how your dad's film, "*Sweet Sweetback*," was taught in one of my black studies courses when I went to Cornell.

Mario: Kam, you're hitting on a real important point that's often lost in the conversation when we talk about Blaxploitation Era cinema. What Melvin Van Peebles really created was Black Power Cinema. He made the first definitive film where a brother transforms from a hustler into a revolutionary and goes up against the system. Hollywood saw that movie make money, and made Shaft, a private eye who was working with The Man, instead of against The Man. And *Superfly* came later, which was about a guy who was dealing drugs to his own people for The Man. So, although the films after *Sweetback* still featured empowered black leads, they were only icing on the cake, because the revolutionary core had been drained from the cake. Consequently, black people are today still trying to recover from the Blaxploitation Era's drug dealer as a hip guy mentality. The Hollywood industry prefers to support cinema that doesn't threaten the status quo as opposed to promoting material that might raise consciousness. Even reality-TV shows dupe viewers into believing they're exercising an important choice when they're given a chance to vote for this or that next *Pop Idol*. But the truth is, they're really only exercising distraction. Do you understand what I'm saying?

KW: Yep. Is there any question no one ever asks you, that you wish someone would?

Mario: Well, it's fun talking to you, Kam since you saw the movie and you're touching on some good points.

KW: When you look in the mirror, what do you see?
Mario: I see a brother who's been blessed in many ways.



Melvin and Mario Van Peebles

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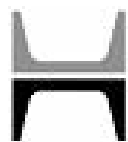
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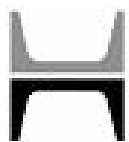
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