

## 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 inter-

'I only paid myself ten dollars to write it and one dollar to direct it'

ested 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... 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



Melvin and Mario Van Peebles

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.



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