TRANSCRIPT

MUSEUM OF THE MOVING IMAGE

A PINEWOOD DIALOGUE WITH **MELVIN AND MARIO VAN PEEBLES**

Legendary maverick Melvin Van Peebles is a novelist, composer, and filmmaker who has also worked in television, popular music, and theater. After spending the 1960s in Paris, he returned to the United States and made the groundbreaking 1971 film *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*. The stunning box-office success of this subversive and sexy film paved the way for filmmakers such as Mario Van Peebles, who directed *New Jack City* and *Panther*. Mario paid tribute to his father with his 2003 movie *Baadasssss*; in this lively discussion, Van Peebles *père et fils* share a lifetime of experience and a playful father-son rivalry.

A Pinewood Dialogue following a screening of *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*, moderated by Chief Curator David Schwartz (May 8, 2004):

SCHWARTZ: Please welcome Melvin and Mario Van Peebles. (Applause)

Melvin, your first experience in Hollywood was doing comedies. Of course, you did *Watermelon Man*. I guess you were with Universal for a while; you were signed on. There was a front-page story in *Variety* that "Universal Hired Its First Negro Director" and that you were working on a television project. So to just sort of go from that to making this film—from the mainstream comedies to making a film that was so radical, both in how it was made and the subject matter and all that…

MELVIN VAN PEEBLES: Well, the actual truth was, it was my idea to do this all along. But I had to play my cards or do my pretend. In 1957, I started making short films in San Francisco, because I was tired of seeing what I was seeing in the theaters. It's just that simple. However...

SCHWARTZ: The images of blacks, you mean, on screen.

MELVIN VAN PEEBLES: Yeah, the images of minorities: "Yes, sir; no, sir," and always hung with the Bible. They didn't—they didn't have any resonance with any of the people that I knew growing up in the hood in Chicago and elsewhere around America. And so I wanted to change all that. And I set myself the task of changing that. Of course, when I made my first films, I went down to Hollywood and they offered me a job, but as an elevator operator. I said, "No, I don't want—I want to really be in front of the camera or doing creative things." And that was—they offered me a job as a dancer.

Anyway, long story short, I went to Holland. Through another fluke that's too long to go into here, my short films that had been turned down in Hollywood were seen in France, and France invited me. So I came to France, and I taught myself French. There's a French law that a French writer can get a director's card, so I wrote some novels in French and then asked for a director's card. And so I got a director's card. So after I got the director's card—but my objective was always the same—after I got a director's card, I won the San Francisco Film Festival as a French delegate. A lot of funny stories, but too long to go into, that were surrounding that. But Hollywood was immensely embarrassed by having the only black American director a French director, and so it was at that juncture that the first crack actually happened in Hollywood.

I was given job offers. But if I had taken those job offers, I felt that you would have the one Negro threat under wraps, and no one else would ever get a shot. So I refused. And it's at that juncture that Gordon Parks and Ossie Davis were discovered. Then I said I would do something in Hollywood. I would do a film—if I could shoot it in Hollywood instead of on location, as the other two films had to be done—and that film was *Watermelon Man*. Then after I made *Watermelon Man*, I had a three-picture

deal with Columbia for other films. And it was at that juncture that spelling *Baadasssss* [*Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*] takes over. You—I used my muscle, what little bit of it I had, and my understanding of Hollywood, to make the film. That's—but it was not a departure at all. I had to do the steps I had to do to get to where I wanted to go.

SCHWARTZ: Yeah. And I just looked here a little bit more. I love the ending of the film, the success the movie has at the theater in Detroit. It goes to the number-one film. At the time it was number one in the country, it was actually only on less than twenty screens. It was such a different time than now, where every movie goes out on thousands of screens, it seems.

MELVIN VAN PEEBLES: Yeah, it only opened—there were only two theaters in the United States that would show it at the opening. But, you know...

SCHWARTZ: But it did very well. It broke all the records, at least the Detroit theater.

MELVIN VAN PEEBLES: Oh, yeah. Exactly as Mario showed in *Baadasssss!* That is, the first showing, two people came in, and two people walked out and asked for their money back. A lady and her mama. Second screening, there was nobody. And the third screening was what you saw, with lines around the block and everything. Just how it happened. And it's just like—every now and then, God gets it right. Not that often, but every now and then. (Laughter)

SCHWARTZ: [To Mario] From your perspective at that time, as a thirteen-year-old, I guess you had a pretty bohemian upbringing, and you had some idea of the politics of the film and what was going on. But what did it look like to you, in terms of how important this film was or what the film was trying to do?

MARIO VAN PEEBLES: This was my first time really spending this kind of time with my dad. My dad had been in France climbing the cinematic mountain, as he said. And so this was my summer with Pop. (Laughter) And he was working on this movie. And we—you saw what I thought; we didn't always get along. But what happened was, as time went on, I saw what he was up against. And it's almost as if... It's almost as if you and I have our differences, but if this theater were to catch on fire, our differences would be eclipsed by a bigger event: that we've got to get out of a theater that's on fire. And if we get out and we decide to put ourselves in harm's way to come back in and help other folks get out, then you know something about my character in a very short period of time, and I know something about you.

And in that short period of time, that summer, I got to learn a lot about him, because he insisted that his crew look like America. A third of the crew hadn't seen a camera. It was like film school. So they had women and Hispanics and Asians and black folks and white folks together. As time went on, it sort of—the dynamic switched, and I think I—I thought that I—I wanted to help. And when your dad starts getting death threats for what he believes in, it eclipses all the other: "Well, you put me in a sex scene," or "You gonna cut my 'fro," or "You gave away that bike." (Laughter)

SCHWARTZ: (Laughs) So you were working some things out with your dad at this time.

MARIO VAN PEEBLES: Yeah, well, it's a trip. As I look at the film now, on some levels it's like therapy you could eat popcorn to.

SCHWARTZ: (Laughs) Actually, you should make the film from Mario's viewpoint now, somehow.

MARIO VAN PEEBLES: Yeah, and you play me. (Laughs)

SCHWARTZ: Yeah. (Laughter)

MELVIN VAN PEEBLES: Mmm…okay! (Laughter)

SCHWARTZ: Are most of the incidents in the film based on real life? One little thing that jumped out was the rope scene. I thought that was so interesting.

MARIO VAN PEEBLES: Absolutely, man. That happened, down to the pistol in the prop box, the secretary who knew Maurice White. Sometimes truth is stranger than fiction. And not only were the incidents real, but we went back to some exact locations to film where we—the part where we shot—where Melvin goes into that proverbial

looking glass and the whole world becomes black and white.

SCHWARTZ: That's great. Yeah.

MARIO VAN PEEBLES: Thank you. That's all shot on the street that he lived on. The actual very same street. We shot in the Crenshaw District. There's a little place that time forgot, right behind the Magic Johnson Theater—if you know L.A., that's L.A.'s hood. And I had gone out, on the weekend, because I now had an actor playing the lead who wouldn't give me any shit, and knew his lines, so I could abuse him…and that was me! And I was running through the hood—I had that same unfortunate pimpy gold outfit (Laughs) that my dad wore. And I told my DP [Robert Primes], "Okay, get ready." My DP's a 63-year-old cat and he was in the car. I signaled him, I start running through, and there's people walking around. This one brother looked up from drinking his Ripple, looks up and says, "Sweetback's back! Look! The brother came back, just like he said!" (Laughter)

SCHWARTZ: That's great. He had to wait thirty years, but...

MARIO VAN PEEBLES: Oh, thirty years later, man. (Laughter) And the kind of stuff that would happen daily was just—I would yell, "Cut," and my whole crew would cut. But I was yelling "cut" as Melvin, not as Mario. So it was a mirror—it was a hall of mirrors, man.

SCHWARTZ: So did you have to work out two different types of "cut," or two different words?

MARIO VAN PEEBLES: Yeah, eventually we got it right, but it took a minute. (Laughter)

SCHWARTZ: And obviously, the film you made, you know, mirrors *Sweet Sweetback*. Sometimes it looks and acts like your dad's film. And also, I guess the production circumstances were somewhat similar.

MARIO VAN PEEBLES: Yeah, I thought maybe I'd get the edge this time, thirty years later, but… The backstory is, I was on *Ali*. And Michael Mann's directing me to play Malcolm X, Brother Malcolm X. And I'm spending time with Malcolm's eldest daughter [Attallah Shabazz]. And growing up with my dad was kind of like growing up with the *Big Fish*, because you don't what stories are live and which are kind of Memorex**.** So he had told me that he'd interviewed Malcolm when my dad was a journalist in France. He *did*. Turns out he did. So I'm sitting down with him, asking about Malcolm, and it starts to hit me that Malcolm had said, "If they don't want you in their restaurant, build your own restaurant." And my dad had said, basically, "If they don't want you in their movies, build your own movies." So I'd grown up in a sort of "independent-by-any-means-necessary" filmmaking family.

And so I thought about doing this. I started thinking about doing this story, and Ali would come up to me ask and questions about my dad. Like, "Is your daddy still getting some?" (Laughter) And so we thought about [how] if Ali was the first athlete to use the ring not just to box but to stand for something, my dad used the silver screen not just to make movies, but to stand for something. And so all the ideas started going. I started going, Wow. Let's do this. But my dad had—when I went to see him, and he had the book, it was sitting there; it was getting dusty: *The Making Of* [*The Making of Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*]. And I thought, He's going to give it to me. He loves me. So I said, "What do you think? I'm going to do your story." This is a very flattering thing to say to your father. He says, "Great! I don't want to get screwed on the deal; option the book!" (Laughter) So I did. And then his only note was, "Don't make me too damn nice." So I'll tell you, the circumstances I had to make the movie under after that—after going to studios and getting turned down—were, I had to shoot it in eighteen days.

SCHWARTZ: Wow.

MARIO VAN PEEBLES: So that's what you saw.

SCHWARTZ: That's less than *Sweetback*? (Laughs)

MARIO VAN PEEBLES: That's one, but I had technology on my side.

SCHWARTZ: Now, you talked about Muhammad Ali. Bill Cosby appears a few times. And obviously you had a strong friendship with him. I think people sometimes forget how much of a breakthrough figure he was. Just the fact that he was on *I Spy*, at a time when there was—I think it was the first black

in a major dramatic role on television. But if you could talk a bit about your friendship with him and what he meant to black culture...?

MELVIN VAN PEEBLES: Well, actually, I didn't know Bill that well, because the *I Spy*—in all that time, I wasn't in the United States. I was in Europe. However, I directed one of his episodes, when he was [playing] a teacher at a high school. And that's how we got to know each other. And because there wasn't any other black director around in Hollywood, he was very nice to me. And when the crew got arrested, I was really in deep doo-doo, and I called him. And he came through.

SCHWARTZ: Hmm. This was an episode of his sixties series?

MELVIN VAN PEEBLES: '69 or '70, something like that. He was doing something where he was a high-school teacher. That was a short-lived series that he was on, and I directed one of those episodes. And he had specifically asked that I direct one of the episodes, trying to be helpful, to give me a foothold. And I remember his kindness.

SCHWARTZ: (Repeats audience question) You've made films that try to tell history as it really happened, and you're also trying to make stories that are entertaining. Is there a clash between those two things for you?

MARIO VAN PEEBLES: Mmm. You know what? We were on the Floating Film Festival with Roger Ebert, and it won the Critic's Award. And my dad and I have been now hanging out together a lot. (Laughter) And it's been a trip. It's fun, but you got to be careful what you ask for. So we're on the boat, and we have—I have my little bunk here; he's got his little bunk there. And he comes in at two in the morning, with his cigar lit. I'm like, "Where do you go on a ship until two in the morning?" (Laughter) And I looked up at my dad, and I thought, You know...

MELVIN VAN PEEBLES: Long live Viagra! (Laughter, applause)

MARIO VAN PEEBLES: I'm getting ready to go, "Man!" And then I said, You know what? I want to thank you for living a life that is so colorful and so—that I could make two or three movies on this cat, and not run out. So I think sometimes you come to places where you want to figure it out. And I think that I would go more the historical route. But you can play the drama a number of different ways. In the case of *Baadassss!*, if you read the book, it's pretty spot-on. And once I put in the testimonials, and my sort of remembering it as a kid—my P.O.V.—it wasn't a hard film to make. It really came through me, like kids come through you, not from you. You know what I mean?

Posse was more of a place where there were a lot of black towns like that that existed, and we had a different sort of form. It was sort of a bigger-than-life western. Do you know what I mean? Whereas *Panther* was more straight in there. And based on his book, again. So I haven't come to a lot of places where I thought, Well, if I go this way, there's a problem. Now again, it also depends on the time period you take. Like, in *Panther*, we took the early years. In *New Jack City*, that wasn't hard, because it was a fictional character, but it's based right on [Leroy] Nicky Barnes and Felix Mitchell and Rayful Edmond, so I was able to do things, but based on those real-life situations. The whole betrayal, the whole incarceration—and he [Barnes] was on the cover of *The New York Times* as Mr. Untouchable. So it varies in each case.

This one actually was easy. When my dad saw it at Toronto—the first time my dad saw it, we were at the festival in Toronto. There are six hundred other people in the audience. And to sit next to your dad while he watches you play him? And there's that scene where he's in bed with Bill. And I let the camera just hang a little bit. (Laughter) He gave me a look like, What the f...? (Laughter) But at the end of the movie, people were applauding, and I said, "What do you think?" He said, "Well, it's like *Seabiscuit* on two legs." (Laughter) But this really had that thing, because the core of it really was this cat with an impossible dream—opens in two theaters, the customers demand their money back, and it becomes the top-grossing independent hit up until that time. So not just for black film, for all independent film.

And it's a pretty amazing story, and it's a story that seems to get left out. It got left out of Peter Biskind's book [*Easy Riders, Raging Bulls: How the Sex-Drugs-and-Rock 'n' Roll Generation Saved Hollywood*]. It's interesting that it changed so much.

Sometimes we forget what happened. After he made *Sweetback*—Cosby has that line in the movie where he says, "They get three strikes at the plate. We only get one." Even when you win, if you don't win on their terms… He never got another job offer after *Sweetback*. Never. And *Sweetback* was never distributed foreign, to this day. So it's pretty amazing, when you look at it.

SCHWARTZ: Even during that period of the... Because, obviously, the success of the film got Hollywood interested in making black films, but they didn't want to make that kind of film?

MELVIN VAN PEEBLES: Well, what they did with *Sweetback*, when we were shooting that—at the end of *Sweetback*, when it made all that money, MGM was preparing a—doing the pre-production of a detective story. A white detective. So they stopped the pre-production, and recast it for black. And that detective was Shaft. Shaft was originally a white detective. They saw the money. But what they did do, they took the political core out of the movie, and added a more cartoonish—and that became what we now call "blaxploitation."

SCHWARTZ: So they saw that the market was there, but they didn't want the message…

MELVIN VAN PEEBLES: Well, you have to understand that up to that time, a black character who showed any dignity never lived to the end of the movie. He always ended with some white guy praying over him, saying, "Well, we hope one day America will change," and da-da-da. (Laughter) Meantime, he was dead, right? For example, there was no black male up to that time in a movie with facial hair. If he had facial hair, it was like mine is, beginning to turn gray, you know what I mean? There're all of these things.

I remember so well, the second place the movie opened was in Atlanta—at one of the two theaters—and it opened on a Friday. And I walked into the theater and I'm talking to the theater owner, and I said—and I apologized for the theater being empty, and I told him I hoped what would happen, [that] what had happened in Detroit would happen there. The guy said, "Oh, no. The theater's full." Word had already gotten down—however, Atlanta had just desegregated, and I guess the blacks were a little shy about being too vocal. They were all sitting there in the theater. I found a seat next to an old black lady. And she says, "Lord"—Sweetback's in the desert now—she says, "Let him die. Let him die out there, Lord. Let him die out there. Don't let them kill him." Because it was unthinkable that he was going to live through the end of the movie. That was just all the record. And this may be hard to visualize now, but those things didn't happen. A black movie was not shown first-run. Any of them. They always had a second feature with it. Because the word was your people didn't want to go to just one movie. My response was, "How do you know? You never showed them anything they wanted to see." (Laughter) But that *Sweetback* changed all that.

However, I think outside of simply the racial angle, the fact that the film was an independent film—which was very, very poorly viewed in Hollywood at the time—had a lot to do with my reception. Because, you see, if a film could be made independently—Hollywood had maintained you had to have seven dialogue coaches, and five this, and twenty of that—that put a lot of people out of work. Here I come with a ukulele and a unicycle, and make this movie, doing all this. A lot of people got egg on their face. So that wasn't very well appreciated.

MARIO VAN PEEBLES: It's interesting because thirty years later, when I went to do *Baadassss!* and I sent the script out, there was no head of any studio—and there's no head of any studio now—who's a woman, and no head of any studio who's a minority. So you kind of go into that same jury that's not of your peers. It doesn't mean that they're not well-read and interesting folks, but there's a certain cultural bias. So they'll tell you what you should make, and what your people want to see. And the first set of notes I got was, "Well, your dad changed the game for independent film, so make the film more for a sort of intelligentsia film audience." I said, "Well, that's part of it, but that's not all of it." And then the second studio said, "No, no, no, this is clearly going to appeal to black folks. And the last one that made money was this, so make it more hip-hop *Barbershop*. Make it more comedic, like that." So that's, again, not it. And the other studio said, "Well, it's too political, it's too sexy." And *all* of them said, "You got to make Melvin more of a likeable character. He's got to be likeable." And, you know...

MELVIN VAN PEEBLES: You found him likeable, didn't you? (Laughter)

MARIO VAN PEEBLES: So I thought: Well, here's a guy from the South Side of Chicago, who's got the French Legion of Honor Award; he's pissed off at systemic "isms"—sexism and racism—but he's not mad at people. And his crew was like everybody. So—and his life was sexy and tragic and comedic and multiracial. And it became a marketing thing, where they're saying, "Well, we got to slot it. How are we going to slot it? If it's not *Lost in Translation*, and it's not *Soul Plane*, what do we do with this?" And so I wound up saying, "Okay, I made *New Jack* in 36 days, the other films in about 40," and that's why I had to shoot this in 18.

And it was interesting, because then you see who's really about the project. Suddenly Michael Mann, whose first movie that he saw in his—first date movie he saw with his wife was *Sweetback*. And he's still married, so I guess (Laughter) it was a good date movie. And so he came on as our executive producer. And Ossie Davis called me up and said, "I'll play your father's father." I said, "I don't have a hotel for you. I can't afford a hotel." He said, "Clean up your house." So he stayed chez Van Peebles. So suddenly you're doing a film in the spirit of the original, and it's…whew. It's an amazing thing to play a director of a fierce independent while you're directing a fierce independent. I found that I had to really, literally, start to walk a mile in this guy's shoes. But I didn't have people shooting at me. And it was interesting also to note that the reason that I could now get a multiracial crew that was in the union was because he did what he did.

SCHWARTZ: And just how have you seen the climate change for yourself as a filmmaker? Because at the time of *New Jack City*—it was, I guess, a little bit after *Boyz n the Hood*, and there was a market for films, but there were filmmakers who complained that the only kind of movie you were allowed to make was an urban film, and it had to be violent because it had to appeal to a certain audience. So how have you seen things change or not change over the years for yourself?

MARIO VAN PEEBLES: Well, it's interesting, because I've seen it sort of "bi-generationally," and partly by osmosis. But I think it's no accident that when my dad did *Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*, and then the studios sort of took that genre inward and bore it out after a while, there were a bunch of kids that saw those movies that didn't know the Hollywood dream wasn't supposed to be for us. So me and the Singletons [John] and Spike [Lee] and the Hudlins [Warrington and Reginald] and Julie Dash—a lot of folks were suddenly seeing the possibility of this. So twenty years later, you have this new generation in. And actually, *New Jack* came out before *Boyz n the Hood* did.

But the biggest change at that juncture was that Wesley Snipes had been playing the funny guy and the best friend of the guy, but never *the* guy. We were never [always] the supporting guy. If they wanted a funny guy in *Major League*, they got Wesley; if they wanted a funny in *Heartbreak Ridge*, I was lucky enough that Clint [Eastwood] picked me; and if they wanted a best friend, they got Larry Fishburne. But we were never the leading guy. And it was only after we started directing and I went back to talk to my dad, and re-read his book on the making of *Sweetback*, that I decided to put my acting on hold and start directing.

Clint had introduced me to the folks at Warner Brothers, which is how I got to do *New Jack City*. When I got to do *New Jack*, I went to Wesley and said, "Hey, you can be in this film as *the* guy. You don't have to crack jokes, you don't have to be the best friend of the lead. You will be *our* guy." And Singleton did the same thing with Larry Fishburne a little later in *Boyz n the Hood*. And then of course, what Spike did with Denzel [Washington] in *Malcolm* [*X*], by not doing it from the point of view of the journalist, but from Malcolm's point of view. When those films made money—as my dad had said, "Hollywood has an Achilles pocketbook." (Laughter)

Suddenly then we were able to play leads. So they put Wesley in *Passenger 57* as the lead, even though it wasn't written black. And they put Larry in *Bad Company*. And they put Denzel in *Pelican Brief*. And when they weren't available, I was in an interesting position, because I was also an actor, so they came to me and said, "Well, this script's written for [Sylvester] Stallone, but you can shave your head and grow some muscles, and you could be Schwarzenegro." (Laughter) And so we slowly

changed the game, but I had to go back to the plan.

But there definitely came a point when we realized that although the Italian directors started out with their hood flicks—*Mean Streets*, their equivalent of *New Jack* and *Boyz n the Hood*—they were allowed to grow as filmmakers past any films that had to be pasta-intensive, while we were being told either we had to make "Hip-Hop Comedies" or "Shoot-'em-Ups." And if you didn't do one of those, you could leave, if you were chosen, and go direct films about the dominant culture, i.e, you could step out and direct *Italian Job*—which is great, and you should do that—but if you wanted to make films with black characters, you couldn't do a *Good Will Hunting*.

So that's kind of the same place—so that's when I came up with *Baadassss!* I was like, Well, if I do a film about a guy who is a director—he's not an athlete, he's not on crack, he's not in jail. What's going to happen with that? And so we're going to find out real soon. It opens May 28 in New York and L.A. You won't see big billboards. It's Sony Classics. It's two theaters—I mean, two cities this time; a little bit up from two theaters. But we're in a word-of-mouth situation. It's like the same cake, different icing.

SCHWARTZ: (Repeats audience question) Is the market of straight-to-video or selling films over the internet—is that creating an opportunity?

MARIO VAN PEEBLES: I don't know. I don't know enough about it to say. I do know this, that distribution is where the—you can now make a movie; getting it distributed is a whole different deal. And it'd be great to see a viable alternative to the lockdown we have right now. But I don't know that I know the answer on that.

SCHWARTZ: This was made on video, shot [on video]?

MARIO VAN PEEBLES: Parts of *Ali* were shot on hi-def. And I watched Michael Mann make a beautiful, lush film using this technology. And then I directed a *Robbery Homicide* [*Division*, episode "Life Is Lust" (2002)] for him. And then when he came on as our exec, we talked about it. So I did mostly digital, and I did a little bit of 35mm.

SCHWARTZ: Yeah, it's a great-looking film. But did the video—did that allow you to bring the budget down, or did that make it possible to make the film with the budget?

MARIO VAN PEEBLES: It does bring the budget down. It costs—you still got to transfer it at the end, so if someone buys it at the end, they kind of go, "Hmm." If you're not careful, you have a lot more film or tape to cut. So you want to be careful, because you start going, "Yeah, just roll it." That can get problematic, so you got to watch that in the editing room, that you don't indulge that way. It's good because you're not, you know… You're not chained—the camera doesn't rule you the same way—but sometimes when you want to run a gun, you can't; you don't have the monitor. And so there's—I don't want to go into it in length—but there're downsides to it, but it's getting better.

SCHWARTZ: It seemed like maybe in the editing, you were able to be free or experiment, in terms of the optical effects and editing.

MARIO VAN PEEBLES: You're already in the digital realm.

SCHWARTZ: So that lets you do that; digital lets you play around more.

MARIO VAN PEEBLES: Yes, it does.

SCHWARTZ (Repeats audience question): The question is how you see the next few years shaping up in terms of black film, is what you're asking…

MARIO VAN PEEBLES: Well, I'll go first then, okay. That's a tricky question for a couple of reasons. One, you have to understand: be it black, white, green, or yellow, if it goes through the Hollywood system, it had to get approved by the same board of guys. So if you're going to do *Charlie's Angels*, then, cool, they're going to debate how many kicks you should have. But if you're going to do a film about a cat and things that are important to you, some of those notes are going to turn your movie into cinematic Wonder Bread. And you might have to do it independently. The vision you saw tonight—yes, I only had eighteen days, but I couldn't have bought that kind of good will. Do you know what I mean? When I called Cosby up, he had that tone of, like, "Oh, hell, you going to ask me for a loan,

too, junior?" (Laughter) But you can't buy that kind of good will. So I was able to make a movie and do it, and really have that vision. And that's a nice, free thing to have.

It's going to depend on anything else. I think it depends on moments like these. Do we get out and e-mail and talk about it and make a difference? Or do we sit back and feel helpless and wait for *Booty Call 4*? There's some value in *Booty Call 4*. But if we get out, if it makes a difference, then Hollywood, like my dad always said, has an Achilles pocketbook; we're writing history right now. This is one of those moments. If it works, they'll say, "Oh, wow! Maybe we can do a movie about this Indian sister who meets this Asian brother," and it doesn't have to be just white and black and green.

What's been so hip is that it just won the Critic's Award with Roger Ebert, and those folks were eighty and from Florida. And yet [it also won] the Audience Award in Philadelphia and Morehouse. So it's like the audience is looking a lot like the crew. That's a tricky marketing thing for them, because they're not used to—"Well, wait a minute; we don't know where to go with this!" That's a tricky thing to do. So I think the future kind of is in our hands right now. And you saw it. It was there before. I have dreams where I'm, like, my dad in the audience and there are two people. But we'll see. It's really hard to say, beyond that. I think independent film is leading the way, as usual. Majors tend to chase an audience, whereas independents sometimes tend to lead an audience. So I think we're going to look to independent film a lot. Dad?

MELVIN VAN PEEBLES: I'm a cockeyed optimist. And recently, something's helped us a great deal. That is digital technology. I don't know how the barrier's going to be broken, but I'm quite sure that it will. Right now, producing is not the major barrier that it used to be. Right now, I think the next great frontier for the independent filmmaker is the distribution. And that has been alluded to a couple of times here. Don't know yet how that that's going to be, but I think somebody's going to figure something out. And if not, it's not how many times you get knocked down that counts, it's how many times you get up. A bumblebee is aerodynamically unsound; he doesn't know he can't fly. Since he doesn't know he can't fly, he flies anyway. And that's sort of the way I approach things.

SCHWARTZ: We've been focusing on your film, but you have a musical revue that's onstage in France, you write books, you do so many other things also.

MELVIN VAN PEEBLES: Well, we can get a little focused on the filmmaking, but it's the same paradigm, it's the same battle when you're pushing the envelope a lot of times. Unfortunately for me, my work is a little—even though in the final analysis, it's populist—it's a little avant-garde in the explanation. And so I find it very difficult to get funding. When it's finished, everybody says, "Oh, yeah, I see what you mean." (Laughter) But it's before that "Oh, yeah" part—you know what I mean—that makes it difficult. "Ahhh." If you can't stand the heat of the oven, get out of the kitchen.

SCHWARTZ (Repeats audience question): Why did you need the sex scene that Mario was in in *Sweet Sweetback*? Why did you need that scene?

MELVIN VAN PEEBLES: Well, the sex scene wasn't any less necessary as [than] anything else. You're speaking of your particular paradigm that offends you or that intrigues you. I don't know. Some people said, "Why'd you have to kill the dogs?" Everybody's got their own little thing. I make films like I cook; I put in what I like. In case no one likes it, I have to eat it for the rest of the week. (Laughter)

MARIO VAN PEEBLES: I'm still looking for him to give me another shot at that now, though. (Laughter)

SCHWARTZ (Repeats audience question): Was it just as hard for you to get money to make this film as it was for *Sweet Sweetback* to be made?

MARIO VAN PEEBLES: No. Mine, I think was easier, even though I only had, loosely, a million dollars, right. Because what I did have, I had an advantage, in that he had done it before. So flash back thirty or so years, the dominant culture's at a disadvantage, because minority cultures, minorities, have the advantage: we know our culture, and we know them. Right? But they only know them. We might go to see [Arnold] Schwarzenegger, but they don't necessarily come see our flicks. So we're forced to be bilingual, right? So when *Sweetback* came out and they reviewed it, they had the disadvantage of

thinking, "Well, if I don't get it, it means it's bad or it doesn't work." So one of the reviewers said, "Well, the sound is garbled." Well, he didn't understand ebonics. So he couldn't understand it. But the concept that "I can't understand it"—everything's geared for you if you're the dominant culture, so, well, "It doesn't work. The sound's garbled. It's bad technically." The other thing was, the reviewers, who were mostly white, said it was based on a false premise that police officers would beat up a black guy like that. (Laughs) So, you know...

MELVIN VAN PEEBLES: That was before camcorders, son. (Laughs)

MARIO VAN PEEBLES: Before camcorders. (Laughter) So it's, like, fifteen or twenty years before the [Rodney] King incident; they... But everyone in the hood had a different—they were like, "Oh, hell, yeah, that goes down." Do you know what I mean? They [white critics] were at a disadvantage. So then they couldn't understand why it works, makes 15 million—and I don't know if the price was a dollar or 2 dollars a ticket, but that's close to 120 million today. And that's a lot of bread for them not to understand. So they—after that, they said, "We got to get some niggerologists in here to understand this." (Laughter) And they started hiring black folks and being aware of it. Now you can't go to the mall without a white kid with his hat turned backwards and some baggy pants on. So at least they go, "Oh, okay, maybe I don't get it, but let me ask my son, J.J." Do you know what I mean? So I had an advantage in that now, culturally, we're a little bit more in the mix. Do you know what I mean?

The disadvantage I had was that they kept saying, "If it's going to go this way, you got to dumb it down." Right? Or "you got to do that." So that was my disadvantage. But I did have an advantage [compared] to where my dad was. And like I said, I did have the advantage that I could have a multiracial crew that had camera experience. It was an experienced, good, solid crew. Yeah. So I think it was easier, clearly, for me. Yeah.

SCHWARTZ: Okay. Mel, just as the last thing, Melvin, I'll just ask you then: What was the case, since the film didn't get great reviews in the mainstream press, and it didn't have the advantages of a big advertising budget—[but] it did become the number-one film? So what was it that made it the top film?

MELVIN VAN PEEBLES: It was obviously the early sex scene. (Laughter) There are a lot of people who were just thinking the way I was. The title could've been called *The Ballad of the Indomitable Sweetback*. But I'm with Marshall McLuhan, that the medium is part of the message. And that's why I called it *Sweet Sweetback*'s *Baadasssss Song*. And why the word "song"? Because I thought sound, the music sound—which I hadn't heard, the mixture of that music sound—was also a possibility. And no holds barred. By the way, that sex scene, the guy's name is Sweetback. Many people didn't even know where that word came from. And it's an old terminology, where a pimp is called a "sweetback man," because supposedly you make love with the action of your back. And that's why the woman calls him Sweetback, and then, bam!—the titles come on. That's all the origin of how the whole thing started. And we had never seen sound like that, the use of color like that, the use of retribution like that, and the getting away like that. So all of those things... I would see, by the second day, people would come into the theater with their lunch and sit through the show three times. It was such a cathartic experience.

And one of the other things that I did, which has become ubiquitous now: since I had no money to advertise… And I didn't get a lot of bad reviews, actually, because I didn't get a lot of reviews. (Laughter) Most of the papers refused. That's why I spelled the title *Baadassss*, so that eventually they could run it, because otherwise—they couldn't say "darn" in the newspapers at that time. And don't forget, the film was X-rated. The film received an X rating, because if you shoot a film in the United States and you do not go to the Motion Picture Association, you have to take an automatic X. And when I went to the Motion Picture Association, there were just all these old white guys, and I said, "I don't think you're a jury of my peers. And if you say you're here to protect the minds of young people, then you didn't protect my mind." Said, "What about *Tarzan* and 'Yes sir, Boss,' and so forth and so on?" So I said, "You have not been doing your job, so I won't submit to you." So I had to take an X.

But then the entrepreneur: when they gave me an X, I put on the text, "Rated X by an all-white jury."

(Laughter) And I sold T-shirts. I made a fortune. [Jack] Valenti went ballistic. He said, "Well, that has nothing to do with it." I said, "You're all white, ain't ya?" He said, "Yes." And since then, the Motion Picture Board has now had more diversity. I know it's hard to step back to just the complete folly and the arrogance and the hubris of: Well, it's this way. But it wasn't ever, and you can't win the war with clean gloves. And that was the battle. I'm not being facetious; I don't know which part of it. But my life was on the line, and I thought that we had to do something in such a bold way, because it didn't matter what the papers said, because the papers wasn't going to review it anyway. Didn't matter, any of those things.

And then, when—I said, "How am I going to do it?" But I realized that a fifteen-second spot costs a lot of money, much more than I could afford. However, if I wrote a hit tune and named it "Sweetback's Theme," and then the band played that tune and the DJs played that tune, every time they played this tune for two minutes and thirty seconds free, hmm? I'd have the film advertised! Hello, hmm? Now that seems just so natural. But before that, music was only used as an afterthought in a film. The album would come out maybe two or three weeks, sometimes a month after, even if it was a Hollywood musical that they had—a musical that Hollywood had bought from Broadway. And so now the use of music like that, I think that helped a great deal. And I think the title helped a great deal.

MARIO VAN PEEBLES: I want to add one thing. My son is in the movie [*Baadasssss*]. He plays the little angel of inspiration, with the wings. And there's a sequence where he's bouncing on the bed in the beginning. And we were shooting that scene—I had gotten the camera on loan, and we're going to shoot that scene, and we didn't have a lot of time. The lady was going to kick us off the lawn, and we had to get the camera back by six. And we hadn't broken for lunch, and everyone was getting irritable. And my son took off his wings, and he was going to go for lunch. And I heard this voice yell out. And the voice yelled out, "Get back here! We had a deal! You're supposed to be in the movie. It's about a business. Get on the bed and start bouncing!" (Laughter) And it was my dad's voice. But my dad was in New York, and the voice was coming out of my mouth. (Laughter) It's funny that thirty years later, you find yourself going, Oh, I would never do that—and suddenly, there you are! (Laughter) But what I wanted to do, in this movie, was play the truth. I didn't want to play Dad as a good guy or a bad guy, but play the truth. We're different people; we're different fathers. But I came, in that summer of 1970, to really respect what the brother stood for. And a lot of love.

SCHWARTZ: Thank you. (Applause)

MARIO VAN PEEBLES: Thank you.

MELVIN VAN PEEBLES: Thank you both.

The Pinewood Dialogues, an ongoing series of discussions with key creative figures in film, television, and digital media, are made possible with a generous grant from the Pannonia Foundation.

Museum of the Moving Image is grateful for the generous support of numerous corporations, foundations, and individuals. The Museum receives vital funding from the City of New York through the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs and the New York City Economic Development Corporation. Additional government support is provided by the New York State Council on the Arts, the Institute of Museum and Library Services, and the Natural Heritage Trust (administered by the New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation). The Museum occupies a building owned by the City of New York, and wishes to acknowledge the leadership and assistance of Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg, Queens Borough President Helen M. Marshall, and City Council Member Eric N. Gioia.