

Distinguished Achievement Citation

Melvin Van Peebles

Class of 1953

Today, we recognize Melvin Van Peebles for his groundbreaking and prolific work in film, theatre, music and literature.

After graduating from Ohio Wesleyan in 1953 with a degree in English, Mel served as a navigator and bombardier in the U.S. Air Force Strategic Air Command. He soon found his calling to be an artist, and began an accomplished career that spanned the arts—and often redefined them.

After making the short films “Sunlight” and “Three Pick-Up Men for Herrick” while living in San Francisco, Mel moved to Holland and then France, where he was a crime reporter and began writing novels. He made his debut as a stage writer, lyricist and composer with “Harlem Party.”

Mel is best known for his work in feature films. He first adapted his French novel “The Story of a Three-Day Pass” into a film, which he also directed. Upon returning to the United States, he directed and scored “Watermelon Man,” a sharp-edged comedy about a white bigot who wakes up black one day. In 1971, Mel independently produced, directed, wrote, scored and starred in the controversial film “Sweet Sweetback’s Bassdasssss Song.” Opening to mixed reviews, the film has grossed over \$15 million, and established Melvin Van Peebles as a pioneer among black filmmakers. In addition to directing or starring in a number of movies in the 1980s and 1990s, most recently he directed “Identity Crisis,” acted in “Posse,” produced, scripted and appeared in “Panther,” wrote and starred in the documentary “Classified X,” and wrote and directed the French film “A Bellyful.”

His Broadway musicals include Tony-award-nominated “Ain’t Supposed to Die a Natural Death,” “Don’t Play Us Cheap,” and “Waltz of the Stork.” His ventures into the music industry include the albums “Br’er Soul” and “Ghetto Gothic.” A CD titled “The Melvin Van Peebles Collection” was released in 1999. Mel has worked on films and television with his son, Mario Van Peebles, who is also an accomplished actor, director and producer.

Mel has received many honors and awards for his achievements in the film industry, and was named Chevalier in the Legion d’Honneur by the Republic of France in New York.

Melvin Van Peebles is truly a self-made man, who learned by doing and who consistently, followed his beliefs and principles. With the presentation of this Distinguished Achievement Citation, we recognize and applaud his outstanding career.

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