



HR0242

LRB096 12188 KXB 24672 r

1

HOUSE RESOLUTION

2           WHEREAS, The cinema is just one medium in which the  
3 multi-talented Melvin Van Peebles has distinguished himself;  
4 after serving a stint in the United States Air Force, he lived  
5 in Mexico where he worked as a portrait painter in the  
6 mid-1950s; he made his first short films ("Sunlight" and "Three  
7 Pickup Men for Herrick", 1958) while working in a San Francisco  
8 post office; and he went on to live in Holland and France, and  
9 earned his living as a crime reporter in Paris, where he also  
10 began writing French language novels; and

11           WHEREAS, He made his feature debut adapting his novel, "La  
12 Permission/The Story of a Three-Day Pass" (1967), the story of  
13 a romance between an American Negro soldier and a French girl;  
14 it was selected as the French entry in the 1968 San Francisco  
15 Film Festival; some American reviewers embraced the picture as  
16 a promising directorial debut; choosing between various offers  
17 from American studios, he returned to the United States to  
18 direct and score a hilarious, sharp-edged comedy, "Watermelon  
19 Man" (1970), about a white bigot (played by comedian Godfrey  
20 Cambridge in whiteface) who one day wakes up black; though  
21 still a crowd-pleaser, some contemporary reviewers deemed it a  
22 one joke movie that was too broadly played; and

23           WHEREAS, The year before, he had recorded his first album,

1 "Br'er Soul", which has been subsequently cited as a precursor  
2 to rap music; he independently produced, directed, wrote,  
3 scored, and was the star in his best known film, the tough,  
4 controversial "Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song" (1971), a  
5 violent, frenzied, and exceedingly stylized tale of a black  
6 superstud on the run from the police; "Sweetback" cost \$500,000  
7 to make (including \$50,000 borrowed from Bill Cosby) and  
8 grossed over \$14 million; opening to mixed reviews ranging from  
9 adoration from the hipsters to cautious condemnation from both  
10 the black and non-black critical establishment, the film's  
11 reputation has only grown with time; "dedicated to all the  
12 Brothers and Sisters who have had enough of the Man", "Sweet  
13 Sweetback's Baadasssss Song" is an art film in the guise of an  
14 exploitation flick; and

15 WHEREAS, Melvin Van Peebles favored gritty zoom  
16 photography, multiple exposures, and hallucinatory colors; the  
17 movie has been hailed as one of the first films to define an  
18 African-American esthetic; in any event, it certainly helped to  
19 usher in the edgy "Blaxploitation" movies of the 70s and  
20 established Van Peebles as a folk hero; and

21 WHEREAS, After having worked in three vastly different  
22 styles of filmmaking (European art, American studio, and  
23 independent), Mr. Van Peebles moved on to other interests; he  
24 shone on the musical stage in the 70s with "Ain't Supposed to

1 Die a Natural Death" and "Don't Play Us Cheap" (a 1972 film  
2 version languished on the shelf for 18 years), which  
3 contributed to the growing black presence on Broadway; Mr. Van  
4 Peebles segued to television, scripting and composing the title  
5 song for a TV-movie pilot for MTM Enterprises entitled "Just an  
6 Old Sweet Song" (CBS, 1976); Cicely Tyson and Robert Hooks  
7 starred in this drama about a Detroit family that is strongly  
8 affected by a two-week vacation down South; he reworked the  
9 project into an hour-long special entitled "Down Home" (CBS,  
10 1978) which replaced Ms. Tyson with Madge Sinclair but again  
11 failed to get picked up; in between, he wrote the screenplay  
12 for "Greased Lightning" (1977), a low-budget biopic starring  
13 Richard Pryor as Wendell Scott, the first black racecar driver;  
14 and

15 WHEREAS, Melvin Van Peebles experience in the arts taught  
16 him that often the most challenging aspect of creation was  
17 financing a given project; with this in mind, he tried his hand  
18 at commodities trading where he enjoyed success in the 1980s;  
19 he even authored a financial self-help guide entitled "Bold  
20 Money: A New Way to Play the Options Market" (1986); and

21 WHEREAS, Melvin Van Peebles son, Mario, worked as a model  
22 and first gained celebrity as an actor in films and television;  
23 he starred as "Sonny Spoon" (NBC, 1988), a quirky short-lived  
24 detective series from producer Steven J. Cannell; the show

1 afforded the elder Van Peebles his first gig as a recurring  
2 character on a television series as he played Spoon's bartender  
3 father; and

4 WHEREAS, Melvin Van Peebles again collaborated with his son  
5 (who scripted, co-produced, and starred) on "Identity Crisis"  
6 (1989), his first feature helming effort in 17 years; a broad  
7 farce about a young straight black American rapper who gets  
8 reincarnated in the same body with a gay white French fashion  
9 designer, the film bombed commercially and critically; he  
10 played a supporting role in the mostly black Western "Posse"  
11 (1993), directed by his son; Mr. Van Peebles returned to the  
12 spotlight with "Panther" (1995), a fictionalized chronicle of  
13 the rise of the Black Panther Party for Self Defense, which he  
14 produced with Mario (who directed), scripted from his  
15 unpublished novel, and appeared in a small role; the modestly  
16 budgeted feature opened to mixed reviews, disappointing box  
17 office, and blistering attacks from both the political left and  
18 right; controversy arose from the many liberties the film took  
19 with the historical record for dramatic purposes; and

20 WHEREAS, Though none of his subsequent work has had a  
21 comparable impact to "Sweetback", he has remained visible as an  
22 actor in a variety of film and television projects; he has  
23 become an iconic presence in films by a younger generation of  
24 black filmmakers; his relatively brief film career is less

1 important for its artistic finesse than for the fact that his  
2 grittier-than-Hollywood portraits of black America somehow  
3 made it through the system; in 1990, New York's Museum of  
4 Modern Art held a retrospective of his works; and

5 WHEREAS, Melvin Van Pebbles is the loving husband of Maria  
6 Marx and is the proud father of Mario; he attended West  
7 Virginia State College and received his Bachelor of Arts degree  
8 from Ohio Wesleyan University; therefore, be it

9 RESOLVED, BY THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES OF THE  
10 NINETY-SIXTH GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF THE STATE OF ILLINOIS, that we  
11 honor Melvin Van Pebbles for his extensive body of work and  
12 wish him all the best in his future endeavors; and be it  
13 further

14 RESOLVED, That a suitable copy of this resolution be  
15 presented to Melvin Van Pebbles as a symbol of our respect and  
16 esteem.