

## What Is The American Film Market All About?:

I went to this year's American Film Market or AFM which ran from February 25th to March 3<sup>rd</sup> at the Loews Santa Monica Beach Hotel. The AFM is a major event in Hollywood where a lot of US and international film producers come together to sell the worldwide distribution rights to their completed films as well as films that are in development. What you do when you enter the Loews is either hang out in the lobby or by the bar and act like you're a big shot producer or filmmaker that is there to meet someone important. Or you actually are a real producer or big time filmmaker that has a legitimate AFM badge that allows you to go in and out of the multiple hotel suites occupied by studios, production companies, distributors, sales agents and foreign film commissions. You won't see a lot of brothas and sistas at the AFM, but the presence of minorities gradually growing every year.

The AFM is one of those old skool "under the public radar" Hollywood events where someone can walk around with a poster of film called "The Beast Of Bangkok" and get enough advance money from "pre-sales" of the film's foreign distribution rights to actually go make the film. This sounds too good to be true, but there are hundreds if not thousands of films that try to get financed this way every year at the AFM. And who would blame a producer or production company for getting paid before doing a damn thing.

To find out exactly how this process goes I spoke with a development executive at York Entertainment. The executive will go unnamed because like typical York development people he will have left within six months. But anyway this York executive was quite candid on how York Entertainment makes its original movies. First, I have to say the York exec said to me that York Entertainment was not making anymore urban or hip-hop films anymore. I was shocked to hear this because I had helped get our *Hip-Hop 4 Life* picked up by York less than two years ago. The exec said the urban market was over-saturated with low quality films that were not getting picked up by foreign distributors. In plain English it meant Blockbuster, Hollywood Video and Wal-Mart no longer needed York Entertainment to supply its yearly fix of urban flicks.

Tanya York now wanted her company focused on making low-budget horror or action films that would be easily picked up by foreign film buyers. So, the York executive showed me a poster of four different titles of horror films. *The Monster Ate My Momma*, *The Monster Ate My Daddy*, etc., The exec said that they would tell the prospective foreign buyers that these four horror films would be shot within the next six months. The buyer then makes York an offer of \$20,000 for the rights to distribute *The Monster Ate My Momma* in Brazil. Another buyer offers York \$50,000 for all of Europe for *The Monster Ate My Momma*. And then finally another buyer from Japan offers \$30,000 for the rights in Japan for *The Monster Ate My Momma*. What would happen then the York exec told me is that he and Tanya and a few writers would go back to the office and actually write the script for *The Monster Ate My Momma*. The intended budget for *The Monster Ate*

*My Momma* would be no more than \$100,000 because that is the amount of advance “pre-sales” they got for the picture from foreign buyers. What York is doing is not unique because these same types of deals are happening before, during and after the AFM. But what is not happening at the AFM are urban or black films getting funded with foreign “pre-sales”. And that leads to an important question that I had to pose at the AFM.

### **Why Do Urban or Black Films Fail Overseas?:**

I could not get a straight answer from dozens of foreign buyers and sellers I met at the AFM why urban or black films fail overseas. I spoke to Marcy Rubin, who is the Senior Vice President of International Distribution for Cinetel Films. Marcy did not have a clue why the pervasive Industry perception was that black films were always expected to fail internationally. Marcy had actually worked on distributing *The Five Heartbeats* for Twentieth Century Fox back in the day. Marcy vividly remember that Fox had a difficult time getting foreign film buyers to come to the film’s screenings at the 1991 AFM. None of the buyers had any confidence that *The Five Heartbeats* could appeal to audiences outside the states. The few buyers did go did to screenings were impressed with the film and its great music. But by the AFM was over Fox did not have enough foreign buyers to warrant releasing the film overseas. Even though the classic R&B music could have been a big draw to lure many Europeans who regularly buy American R&B and pop music.

I spoke at length to Chandra Pandula, who is the Executive of International Operations for India’s largest film studio called Ramoji Film City. Chandra said he could name only two African-Americans stars Will Smith and Halle Berry that Indian filmgoers would regularly go see in Indian theaters. I threw out a list of other top black stars and he shot them all down as being able to have a successful film in India. I finally said what about Chris Tucker and Chandra even said that both *Rush Hour* films were a flop in India. And as Chandra started reminiscing more about the subject of black films in India. He told me that even re-releasing any old Sidney Poitier films from the 60’s would do better in Indian theaters than any new independent black films or studio black films.

Nobody whom I spoke with at the 2004 AFM could say definitively why a *Cool Runnings* in '94 made \$86 million overseas and another predominately black sports film like *Remember The Titans* made \$20 million overseas. Or a *Big Momma’s House* makes \$56 million overseas and then a *Black Knight* with the same Martin Lawrence makes \$6 million overseas. Or two years later *Bad Boys II* makes \$75 million overseas. Where does the foreign audience go from black picture to black picture? Right now there is no sure fire way to predict which or what type of black films succeed overseas other than have major black stars featured with other major white stars.

And when you discuss this touchy subject of international black box office you immediately have to remove the Will Smith, Denzil, Halle summer or big budget blockbusters out of the equation. It is not a guarantee that spending \$70 to \$100 million dollars on an *I Robot*, *Man On Fire* or *Catwoman* will be a hit overseas, but these flicks will make their money back from DVD, cable and pay-per-view. No my question dealt with the regular and popular black films like *Barbershop*, *Drumline*, *Deliver Us From Eva*, *Soul Food*, that do not seem to make even a dent in foreign box office. There is a serious problem for urban or black filmmakers because the decades old perception that black films are not commercially viable overseas creates ripple effects of untold magnitude that effects the quality of black films and number of black films being greenlit or put into development.

### **Studio vs Independent Black Cinema:**

With the absence of any guaranteed foreign box office sales, independent black cinema cannot effectively compete against studio or market-driven genre orientated black films. Too many in the black community start out with the flawed premise that indie black films can be viable box office alternative to mainstream studio black films. But the truth is that many mainstream black films are really low budget black films or they are indie black films that have been bought by studios. There is no such thing as mainstream black Hollywood films being regularly made on the same scale and budget as mainstream white Hollywood films. That is because studios heavily rely on foreign film funds, foreign investors and foreign box office profits. I know this because I have to deal 24/7 with studio execs, investors, banks, theatrical distributors, DVD distributors and producers.

Any studio executive would tell you honestly the exact amount of money they will spend on a film that has mainly a black or minority cast. They can tell you exactly how many theaters the film will get. They can tell you what exactly how much P&A (prints and advertising) will be spent no matter who is in the cast--or if you have every top black star in the universe. And you still will have to beg studios to spend money with black media outlets. And some studios will tell you honestly they only make comedies or action films because they have no faith that blacks will see dramas.

There are many urban or black films that are intentionally made for video or DVD. The ones that detour and go on the film festival circuit are called independent, but that is their choice and maybe their downfall. A lot times the filmmaker or producers of these indie films desperately want their films picked up by the studios, but many times the theatrical rights are mired in controversy over basic issue like who actually owns the film and how much money is owed the post-house, actors, writers and producers. Sadly, most of of your so called indie black

films will get distributed by the same shady and broke urban distributors that will put out any black film no matter what the quality. And there are some indie black films that are just bad and should go directly to DVD and not pretend that they did not get picked up by a studio because of some conspiracy to keep their afro-centric vision suppressed.

There are people and production companies that regularly make black films who have no intention of releasing them in a theater. These investors or companies want their money back right away on DVD. The filmmakers resist going straight to DVD and this creates a rift. Soon the black "indie" filmmaker is walking around with a lot of film festival awards saying he/she does not know when or if his/her film will ever be released. I have seen this happen more time than you will ever know.

There are even new urban films like Screen Gems B2K film *You Got Served* that many in the black community would wrongly think is a studio film because of the way it looks or is marketed. But I know that *You Got Served* is an indie film that was made for low budget and then Screen Gems paid several millions to release it. *You Got Served* was not a film that was developed by Screen Gems. And you do not know how many other studios passed on *You Got Served* before it ended up at Screen Gems. And Screen Gems can quickly dump the film into the market because it has the nation's top R&B group B2K in it. They know the DVD will make a lot of money. But what you don't know is that a Screen Gems executive told me point blank that they would not develop or greenlight another B2K studio film until they see the domestic box office numbers on *You Got Served*.

Furthermore, every independent, militant, "don't need the studios" black filmmaker goes to an Toronto, Sundance or black film festival and hope that their producer's rep will get a Screen Gems, Lions Gate or whoever will listen to buy the rights to their "so called" indie black film. And then they will act surprised that will then be turned by the studios' marketing departments into a typical looking studio market-driven black film. The rationale in Hollywood over the past thirty years has been that if urban films or films with predominately black casts are box office losers overseas then why should we invest in big budgets or demand the highest quality stories.

### **Why The AFM Is Important To The Future Of Black Cinema:**

If you really want to know about the real war that happens between indie black film dreams and studio black film realities, then you have to go to the American Film Market. If the world's top film buyers and sellers are not concerned about black films doing well overseas, then you surely cannot expect Hollywood studios to care. It would not even take a lot of AFM buyers to actively want just a few urban or black films to make the major studios and production companies make better black films and not try to distribute ever half ass direct-to DVD black film.

But many new black filmmakers will never know how real global economic forces are dictating the fate of black cinema until they start aggressively trying to get their films picked up at the AFM. Even if the effort at first may seem hopeless and pointless the fallout from having no or practically no significance presence at the AFM will do more harm in the long run to black cinema than good.

The American Film Market is more important to black cinema than many urban or black filmmakers realize because they need to be actively involved in seeking money for their projects from German film funds, learning about new tax breaks for films shot in New Zealand, Canada and Romania, finding out new distributors in China, discussing what European films are popular or how you can make films in South Africa and still use tax breaks from other countries that have treaties with South Africa. At the next AFM in November 3<sup>rd</sup> to 10<sup>th</sup>, 2004 I will explore how hip-hop is the force that drives many of the decision makers regarding studio market-driven black films. I will also investigate whether hip-hop might be the most practical solution to allow independent black films to flourish worldwide where they are surely failing now. There has to be more to life for a black filmmaker than--I made a black film—I'll make some box office noise in the states—and make the rest of my money on DVD. That simplistic notion to black filmmaking is fine for some, but would be immediately obliterated once one got a taste of the American Film Market. Once you've been exposed to the world—it is extremely hard to forget it—or not want to participate in every way possible.

By

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