

# TCM THE PLOT THICKENS

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## EPISODE 4: THE QUEEN OF BLAXPLOITATION

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** Hey it's Ben, just a note before we start, this episode discusses themes of racial and sexual violence.

In July 1972, Jack Hill's second movie with Pam Grier hit theaters. The Big Bird Cage.

**THE BIG BIRD CAGE TRAILER:** Meet the girls of the Big Bird Cage, enslaved to every cruel whim and desire of a ruthless madman.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** After finishing the movie in the Philippines, Jack returned to Los Angeles. He was looking for his next project when he got a call from AIP, the same studio where Pam once answered phones. AIP specialized in cheap, low-budget movies.

**JACK HILL:** And I went in for a meeting and I was hoping to get something that I could really get into. And the first thing he said was, he says, we want a picture about a Black woman's revenge movie where she kills the shit out of two guys in the opening scene. My first feeling was, Oh, you know, Black picture? It's not something I really know about, not something that I wrote. But then I said, Wait a minute, I can get Pam Grier for this.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** Jack called Pam and told her his dilemma. AIP wanted a Black woman's revenge movie. Jack is white. He didn't know much about the Black experience. Pam said - sure, she'd help out with the writing. But she had one condition. She didn't want to make a movie about a damsel in distress.

**PAM GRIER:** I think we should show her not always a man helping her out of this situation, that she can get out of the situation herself. So that's all I want. And I said, and if you can't do it, then I walk. And if I go home, I'm not coming back.

**THEME MUSIC**

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** I'm your host Ben Mankiewicz. You're listening to season four of *The Plot Thickens*, a podcast from Turner Classic Movies.

This season – Pam Grier. And how she rose to become Hollywood's first female action hero.

This is Episode Four: The Queen of Blaxploitation

### THEME MUSIC

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** Pam and Jack Hill started brainstorming. They created a character named Flower Child Coffin. Everyone called her Coffy. Coffy was a nurse, working the night shift. But after she clocked out of the hospital, she became a vigilante. She went around killing bad guys – for one simple reason.

**PAM GRIER:** Revenge. A Revenge Nurse. It's about a woman who takes on the crime bosses of her community, because her little sister was brought into the drug and sex trade.

**COFFY CLIP:** Wouldn't you want to kill someone that did that to your sister? What would you do, kill all of them? Well why not?

**PAM GRIER:** Coffy was my mom. Many times, I would come home from school or from work, and she would be patching up someone in the kitchen. Gunshots, knife wounds, you name it. If she found out who you were, who did the harm -- Don't let her. She's going, she's going to let you know. I know your mama. I know your grandmama. Who do you think you are? You're selling dope that you've had to bring it to everybody. That's who Coffy was.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** Pam and Jack had several script meetings. They talked about characters, settings, music. They figured out action scenes. Pam was especially good at coming up with little character moments.

**JACK HILL:** She gave me some really good ideas, things that I could never have come up with on my own. I'll give you an example. Putting a razor blade in the afro so that if you grabbed her hair, you'd gasp. I could never have come up with that. Never.

**PAM GRIER:** I just wanted to see some authenticity in the clothing and stuff. And it wasn't 100 percent. But he did try.

**JACK HILL:** And it was great of Pam because she spent some time working with me without any guarantee that she would get the job.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** Casting in Hollywood is tricky. Pam knew that even though she helped create Coffy, she might not get to play Coffy. But Jack was the director. And when AIP started casting the movie, he insisted it must be Pam.

**JACK HILL:** I told them, Absolutely, there's nobody else can do this role.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** So Pam got the part. She was the lead, the title character. Pam knew she couldn't star as Coffy and go to school. She made a choice. Her dream of going to UCLA was replaced with a new dream of making it as an actor.

In January 1973, a few days after the new year, Coffy started shooting. In more ways than one.

**COFFY CLIP:** My name's Coffy. [gunfire]

**PAM GRIER:** I was treated like royalty. Cars, limousines, assistants, hair. There was so much thrown at me.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** Coffy was not shot in the Philippines?

**PAM GRIER:** No, it's shot in Los Angeles. Coffy, I had my own trailer. It was big! My trailer, you could live in it. I was I was supremely treated like a big star. Because Black Mama, White mama was such a big success.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** Coffy was a low-budget production. But compared to her experience in the Philippines, filming in LA was luxurious.

**PAM GRIER:** I felt like a Barbie doll. I felt like someone was dressing me every day, you know.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** Pam had escaped the "women in prison" movies. She ditched the skimpy prison t-shirts and was now wearing real outfits. But the outfits in Coffy were still plenty revealing.

**PAM GRIER:** And I said, well, do I wear a bra on this when they go? No, we didn't make one. I said, Well, how am I going to do stunts without a bra? But they built support because they wanted to show cleavage. They wanted to show sexiness.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** There's a lot of sex and nudity in Coffy - it was all part of the exploitation genre. Pam had been nude in the women in prison movies. She liked showing Black women's bodies in a powerful and sexy way.

**PAM GRIER:** If you show skin, if you just be the character, that's all I wanted to do. Just be the character.

**COFFY CLIP:** So you want to play with knives, huh? Well you picked the wrong player!

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** There was plenty of violence in Coffy too. But in most of the scenes, Pam is in control. As Coffy, Pam is constantly punching people, stabbing them, and blowing them away.

**COFFY CLIP:** I'm going to piss on your grave tomorrow!

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** Many of these scenes had complicated stunts. Pam was athletic, but she was never trained to do stunts.

**JACK HILL:** There was hardly any Black stuntmen and no, zero Black stunt women, and we had stunts that we needed to do with Pam. We needed a stunt double.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** Jack Hill turned to his stunt coordinator for help.

**BOB MINOR:** My name is Robert Minor. In the business, they call me Bob.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** Bob Minor was only 29 years old. As a stuntman, though, he was already famous.

**BOB MINOR:** I was the first Afro-American in the all white Stuntmen's Association. Two years later, I was second vice president. And on the board of directors. Yeah.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** Bob remembered a woman who might be able to double for Pam. He'd seen her at a horseback riding club.

**BOB MINOR:** She would ride her horse in Burbank, and I would see her out there riding. And she kind of looked like Pam Grier. And I said, wow. This girl will make A good double for Pam Grier. And I said, You know I have this movie coming up. And I said, man, I sure would like for you to be a stuntgirl for somebody. She's, 'Oh, you got a movie? You ain't got no movie.' I said, yes, I do have a movie. She thought I was a guy that was just trying to put the make on her. [laughs]

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** The woman's name was Jadie David. She was 22 years old and studying to be a nurse.

**JADIE DAVID:** You could almost shoot me pretty close, dead on from a distance. And I would look just like Pam. Our bodies, our structure is the same, also our facial structures for some reason on camera we look a lot alike.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** Jadie left nursing school and started learning stuntwork.

**JADIE DAVID:** There were not a lot of African-American actresses that needed to be doubled. If something had to be done, they either hired an African-American male or a white woman to do the doubling.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** Stunts need a lot of careful choreography - and a lot of clever editing.

**BOB MINOR:** If Pam is getting thrown over a table by one of the stunt girls. You'll see the stunt girl grab Pam like she's getting ready throw her, And she'll make the move like she's going to throw her. Then we cut.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** Jadie would then step in for Pam, and Jadie is the one who actually gets thrown over the table.

**BOB MINOR:** I know that's Jadie and not Pam, but the audience don't know that either. The audience thinks it's Pam, but it's Jadie. So that's how we fool you.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** Coffy took just 18 days to shoot. In movie time, that's incredibly fast. Lightspeed. Shooting quickly is one of the ways AIP saved money. Even during that short time span, Jadie got to know Pam.

**JADIE DAVID:** She wanted to come out and ride my horses. And I really didn't know what her ability was on a horse. She said she could ride a horse, but a lot of people say they can ride a horse. So she

came out to my house, she saddled up and went for a ride. And, actually, she was quite the equestrian. I mean, she might have been better than me. I'm not sure. But I was really impressed with her. So in other words, what she said she can do, she actually can do. She wasn't like some other actresses that pretend like they can do stuff and can't do it.

**BOB MINOR:** Pam had it all. She had the looks. The agility, the skills, the coordination. She had the talent.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** Bob Minor was so impressed with Pam that he allowed her to do some of her own stunts.

**BOB MINOR:** I have her do a fight scene. I have her grab somebody, I might have her slap somebody. If she has to do a little roll or something. Nothing that would hurt her.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** Even so – mistakes happen. A few days into the shoot, Pam got injured.

**PAM GRIER:** There was a time where I was running and I sprained my ankle severely and fractured my foot. So they painted a cast to look like my boot. And I limped along the freeway trying to pretend I wasn't hurt.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** You're telling me here you were basically with a broken foot and a cast painted to be the color of your boot. Because you're limping. You're not faking.

**PAM GRIER:** I'm not faking. I'm trying not to limp. I'm kind of running on my toes so that I don't hit the ankle, the bone, and move it in and go down in pain. We got to finish that scene.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** With Pam's foot still in a cast, Coffy finished shooting. It hit theaters three months later.

**COFFY TRAILER:** Coffy! Where the action is, there Coffy is.

**JACK HILL:** The picture opened, I think, number six at the box office and the next week it was up to number one, which means advertising is not doing it. It's word of mouth that's doing it.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** Moviegoers went to see it two, three, four times. Theaters held it over for weeks. In August, three months after Coffy opened, it hit #1 at the box office. Coffy knocked James Bond out of the top spot.

Live and Let Die, that year's Bond movie, dropped down to number 2. By the way, Live and Let Die was written by my cousin, Tom Mankiewicz. It's a good thing we Mankiewiczes don't hold grudges.

**JACK HILL:** Just to get back to Coffy, which is actually, I think, pretty good. The grosses at the box office were not just grosses from Black audiences. It was what they called a crossover audience.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** Women, men, Black or white, Coffy made an impression on everyone who saw it.

**JACQUELINE STEWART:** This is a film I've watched dozens and dozens of times.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** Jacqueline Stewart is the director of the Academy Museum, and one of the hosts of Turner Classic Movies.

**JACQUELINE STEWART:** The opening sequence to Coffy, I think it's a perfect encapsulation how all blaxploitation films set up their narratives and kind of work stylistically. We're in a nightclub, of course, and this funky music is blaring. And this two-bit hustler comes in looking for the big man. There he is, sitting with this kind of multicultural bevy of tail. I believe that's what he calls these women, even white tail, as he points out. Sure. And the two bit hustler tells him, I've got something special for you in your car. This woman who was amazing, who was who will do anything for a fix.

**COFFY CLIP:** If I say she's something special, she's something special man!

**JACQUELINE STEWART:** And he's obviously alarmed by this and goes to see what's in this car, opens the door and here's Pam.

**COFFY CLIP:** Aint she something? Too much for me.

**JACQUELINE STEWART:** So she's in this really kind of like strappy short, low cut, mini dress, looking amazing, cheekbones, you know, that gorgeous nose, she has just everything about her looking amazing. But she's abject, sexually abject, like, willing to do anything.

**COFFY CLIP:** And I know what you want too. And you're gonna get it.

**JACQUELINE STEWART:** She lures the guy into the car. And then we get this long sequence of just driving. So we get the opening credits over the theme song for the film Coffy by the amazing Roy Ayers. So you get everything. The nightlife, it's the dark streets of L.A., it's the car driving through.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** The scene ends with Coffy revealing that she's not strung out at all – she's pretending to be wasted to get close to the Big Man. Close enough to kill him.

**JACQUELINE STEWART:** I don't understand, with the outfit she had on, where she could have possibly been concealing a sawed-off shotgun. But she has one, and she does what she feels she needs to do to avenge her sister who is strung out on drugs.

**COFFY CLIP:** This is the end of your rotten life you motherfucking dope pusher!

**JACQUELINE STEWART:** Then she goes to her job at the hospital where she's a nurse.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** For most moviegoers, Coffy was the first time they'd ever seen Pam Grier.

**QUENTIN TARANTINO:** I wasn't seeing the movies, I was just seeing this image of Pam Grier.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** Quentin Tarantino was a ten year old boy when Coffy opened. His mom didn't allow him to go see it. But everywhere he looked – there was Pam.

**QUENTIN TARANTINO:** The TV spots and the movie posters and the one sheets and the soundtrack albums and the and the and the newspaper advertisements. It was this image of Pam in this, you know, in what always looked like a bikini to some degree or another with that big afro and a sawed-off shotgun. There wasn't a white equivalent to that. Raquel Welch would do an action movie from time to time, but she wasn't like Coffy, alright? She's not blowing, guys heads off with a sawed-off shotgun.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** Six years later, when Quentin finally saw Coffy for the first time – it did not disappoint.

**QUENTIN TARANTINO:** It's the best revengeomatic movie ever made. I don't want to go too crazy on the idea that Coffy is a great movie. There's a lot of you know, it's very amateurish. But I do think that Coffy is one of the most entertaining movies ever made. It's one of the funnest revenge movies ever made. It's just entertaining. It's, it's a blast. It's funny. It's just a hoot!

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** Much of the humor in Coffy comes from Pam's performance. Like when she's going undercover as a Jamaican prostitute named Mystique.



**COFFY CLIP:** Now I don't do no leather work, mon. No whips, ropes, chains or any of those fetish freaks. Just plain sex.

**QUENTIN TARANTINO:** You're having a bit of an internal struggle while you're watching it in the first 20, 30 minutes, with the laughs, it's like, am I laughing at the movie or am I laughing with the movie? And I suspect most audiences might think they were laughing at the movie. But then the story starts working. You start caring about the Pam Grier character and about midway through, you're like, No, no, no, no. I think I'm laughing with the movie, no, no, no. Oh, and actually that was supposed to be funny. No, no. This is supposed to be. No, this is actually genuinely witty.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** Coffy, disguised as Mystique, goes to work for a pimp named King George. He appears halfway through the movie, wearing a yellow jumpsuit, sporting a big feathered hat, and carrying a diamond cane. He even has his own theme song.

**QUENTIN TARANTINO:** It's got the great music and the great clothes and King George looks fantastic in his pimp leisurewear and the afros and the Cadillacs and they hang out at The Total Experience at the very beginning, which was the big black nightclub in Los Angeles at the time. What's not to love?

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** But not everything in Coffy is played for laughs.

**DONALD BOGLE:** There is a sadistic thread that runs throughout Coffy and which Pam has to deal with.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** That's film historian and author Donald Bogle. One particular scene in Coffy is hard to forget. It's also hard to watch. It depicts racist violence, and for viewers, including me, it is shocking to see. At one point in Coffy, King George crosses the wrong people. They abduct him, point a gun at him – and then take out a noose.

**DONALD BOGLE:** King George, he has a rope tied around his neck and he's outside of a car. And the other end of the rope is tied to the car.

**COFFY CLIP:** Stop the car! Guys I'll do whatever you want! What did I do, huh?

**DONALD BOGLE:** And these two men are driving off and he's running because he knows he's going to die.

**COFFY CLIP:** Somebody help! Jesus Christ somebody stop the car! What did I do?

**DONALD BOGLE:** From my perspective, at that time, it was sort of prolonged and it was kind of agonizing to to see it.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** I asked Jack Hill about the lynching scene – after all, he wrote it.

**JACK HILL:** I got that idea because that had actually happened in Los Angeles when I was younger. Yeah, I don't know if that was a good idea or not, but I wanted to make something really brutal so that you're really rooting for Coffy to get these guys. If you're going to do a revenge story, you want to build it so that the person doing a revenge has really powerful reasons.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** Pam says Black audiences recognized this level of violence. It wasn't unrealistic to them. She was worried that the scene didn't go far enough.

**PAM GRIER:** I would see files from friends who are police officers, and I was saying, I hope we're close. I hope it's as gross and grotesque and horrible as these files. Because the audience has seen a lot more than we're showing.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** The lynching scene is one of the most exploitive parts of the whole movie. It's exploiting the audience's emotions, their visceral reaction to real lynchings. The scene was even part of the movie's marketing. The poster for Coffy includes artwork of King George, with the noose around his neck, being dragged by the car. The scene put race front and center. It leaned into it in the most provocative and uncomfortable way.

**DONALD BOGLE:** Race was being dealt with in some way. And race problems, social issues, and the drug issue and what was happening to the community. And in this sense, one kind of lynching with King George. But there were other ways in which the community had been lynched or been destroyed.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** Watching the lynching scene fifty years later – it's still powerful, still awful, and so hard to watch. Coffy may be a low-budget exploitation movie, but it has the weight of history behind it.

**JACQUELINE STEWART:** I really think that they are addressing the unfinished business of slavery, to be honest, where they are just opening up these wounds and pointing to them. They work as plot

points, clearly, justifying vengeance. But I think they're also just really openly addressing things that are that are unresolved, these questions that are totally and still unresolved.

## THEME MUSIC

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** Coming up, Pam makes a horror film, a gladiator movie, and reteams with Jack Hill for the most iconic role of her career.

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**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** After Coffy, Pam Grier was in demand. She quickly shot two more films back-to-back. The first was for AIP. It was a sequel to a horror movie. A blaxploitation horror movie.

**SCREAM BLACULA SCREAM TRAILER:** The name is Blacula! Scream Blacula Scream – the bloodiest legend of our time.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** This time, Pam had a supporting role. But she did get to scream.

**SCREAM BLACULA SCREAM CLIP:** [Pam screams]

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** Scream, Blacula Scream was filmed in February and released in June. By then, AIP realized that Pam was their biggest star.

**SCREAM BLACULA SCREAM TRAILER:** Pam Grier, the exciting star of Coffy.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** Pam's next movie was for Roger Corman in 1974. Roger had major success with his "women in prison movies." Now Roger had two big ideas: he wanted to make a female gladiator movie, set in ancient Rome. And he wanted to reteam Pam with her co-star from Black Mama, White Mama.

**THE ARENA TRAILER:** Pam Grier is the fiery Nubian slave. I am Amawe. Margaret Markov is the beautiful high priestess.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** They called the movie "The Arena" – and it was shot on location, in Italy. When Pam returned to the States, she found that her breakout movie was still going strong.

**COFFY CLIP:** Coffy baby, I'm glad to see you. No! I think you ought to know all your friends are dead. I killed them all.

**PAM GRIER:** It was intense for people to see a woman close up who is angry and seeking revenge and being strong after being abused, standing up, finding the strength to get back in the ring.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** One day, Coffy's director, Jack Hill, snuck out to see the movie. He wanted to see how it was playing in theaters.

**JACK HILL:** First, I went to see it in a theater in Pasadena, which is basically a Black neighborhood, and the audience was mostly almost entirely Black people. The audiences reacted to everything. People stood up and yelled back at the screen and shouted, and. And I thought, this is a catharsis. You know, what a theater is supposed to do!

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** Coffy got similar reactions all across the country. AIP called Jack and said – whatever you did, we want you to do it again. Give us another Coffy. So Jack got to work on a sequel.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** Were there any black people involved in the development process?

**JACK HILL:** No, no, no, the development process was just me sitting down with a little bit of coke and coming up with whatever came into my head.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** Just to be clear, we're not talking about a beverage.

**JACK HILL:** No, Coca-Cola is very bad for you.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** Jack Hill wrote a script. Then he got the gang back together. Pam signed on to star. Bob Minor came back to be the Stunt Coordinator. Jodie David returned as Pam's stunt double.

**JACK HILL:** It was originally a real sequel. It was called Burn Coffee Burn, but at the last minute, just before we started shooting, the sales department said, We don't want any more sequel. Sequels are not doing well. So some genius in the sales department came up with the title Foxy Brown. I was appalled. I thought it was demeaning, you know? Turns out I was wrong. How wrong can you be?

**FOXY BROWN TRAILER:** Pam Grier, that one chick hit squad who creamed you as Coffy is back to do a job on the mob as Foxy Brown.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** Foxy Brown needed to be different from Coffy. Jack rewrote the script and made it more extreme. The violence, the sex, the language, the humor – everything was amped up.

**JACK HILL:** I just figured I'm just going to give it to them as outrageous as I can make it.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** And he did, creating a truly original character.

**FOXY BROWN CLIP:** Now I only got so much control, and I'm liable to put one of these right between your eyes, no matter what Mama'd say.

**PAM GRIER:** Foxy is a more aggressive version of Coffy. Sexier, more sophisticated. She's a little bit more deadly. She's going to do what she needs to do.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** So, if the inspiration, the core of Coffy, this nurse, is your mom, I'm curious whether the core of Foxy, is maybe it's your aunt.

**PAM GRIER:** It's my aunt, my aunt. She was so beautiful and honest and sincere about her confidence in her sexuality. Not a lot of women would love motorcycles and would buy their own Thunderbird, you know, just daring. And it just she walked in the room and just like, blow people away.

**FOXY BROWN CLIP:** You think you're back in with those people but they're gonna stick dynamite up your ass and the fuse is burning!

**RACQUEL GATES:** The stuff that can happen in a blaxploitation film, the stuff that happens in Foxy Brown, it's insane.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** Racquel Gates is a film professor at Columbia University.

**RACQUEL GATES:** It's like thing after thing after thing. It's her reaching into her afro and pulling out a gun and then it just keeps going!

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** The movie begins with Foxy Brown's boyfriend getting gunned down by a drug cartel. Foxy then sets out to avenge his death.

**RACQUEL GATES:** But along the way, she goes undercover as a prostitute. She's kidnaped and held hostage and assaulted by these, like, racist rednecks who are also dealing drugs.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** It's true – one of the ways Foxy Brown ups the violence is that Foxy herself is drugged, then sexually assaulted. Remember, Pam was sexually assaulted in real life.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** There's a rape scene in Foxy Brown, I don't know that there's any rape scene that's not difficult to watch, that one is particularly difficult to watch. And even more so because of your own past. How was that to shoot?

**PAM GRIER:** It was OK, I survived it. It wasn't as brutal as the ones that I had taken and had been experienced. And I had to make sure I didn't snap. Because that could happen and I let them know, you know, that that could happen. That's a possibility that I may not get through this.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** Not only did Pam get through the scene, she was the one who figured out how Foxy escapes. Her hands and feet were tied to the bed, but she grabs a nearby razor blade with her mouth.

**JACK HILL:** Yeah, she told me, she told me that she had to figure that out, and she came, and that was her idea. She had tried, practiced it and said, Look, why don't we do this, you know? I said, OK, good.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** Foxy cuts herself free from the ropes – and goes on the attack. She's outnumbered, but she catches the bad guys off guard, and burns them alive.

Foxy Brown gets her revenge. But rape is used as a plot device, and during her escape, Pam's breasts are exposed to the camera. Watching this scene – it's not just uncomfortable – it's confusing. Yes, Pam is the hero. But the film is also exploiting her, not just her character, but her as a person. Her sexuality and her race.

That discomfort, that conflict, lay at the heart of blaxploitation. And as the genre came under fire, so did Pam.

## THEME MUSIC

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** After the break, Foxy Brown explodes onto screens.

-----AD BREAK-----

**FOXY BROWN TRAILER:** Have no fear, Pam Grier is here as Foxy!

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** If Coffy is the movie that made Pam a star, Foxy Brown is the movie that made her an icon. Again, film professor Racquel Gates.

**RACQUEL GATES:** Even the opening credits for Foxy Brown, which are really cool in terms of their aesthetics, but it's all about the silhouette of her body. Pam Grier is so body forward. The tops are low and everything is tight. You know the shape of her body even when she's clothed.

**DONALD BOGLE:** She used her body as a weapon. These corrupt men all wanted her and wanted her for one thing. And she's able to use her body to turn against them.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** Donald Bogle says what elevates Foxy Brown is the rawness of Pam's performance.

**DONALD BOGLE:** You know Pam Grier was not a trained actress. When you hear her in films, this applies to Coffy and to Foxy Brown, the voice, it seems authentic, because again, it's not a trained voice. She has these lines where, you know, what is it you want or what is it we can do? And she says, I want justice.

**FOXY BROWN CLIP:** What is it you really want? Justice. I want justice for all of them! And I want justice for all the other people whose lives are bought and sold so that a few big shots can climb up on their backs.

**DONALD BOGLE:** All of this is said with conviction.

**FOXY BROWN CLIP:** Sister, I think what you're after is revenge. You just take care of the justice, and I'll handle the revenge myself.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** Pam is so good in Foxy Brown, and the film has so much style, it's easy to forget that it was made by AIP, so it was made quickly and it was made cheaply.

It was extremely violent too. People are shot, maimed, run over, set on fire. One unlucky guy is decapitated by the propeller of an airplane. The movie also has a shocking finale.

**RACQUEL GATES:** Foxy Brown ends with like Pam Grier's character castrating a man, putting his genitalia in a pickle jar and giving it to his girlfriend. Like, you can't do that anymore.

**FOXY BROWN CLIP:** Why don't you kill me too? Death is too easy for you bitch. I want you to suffer.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** Jack Hill says that AIP wanted the movie to push the limits of good taste. And he understood the assignment.

**JACK HILL:** Basically, what I thought I was doing was just throwing this thing away. They want this. I'll give it to 'em big time. I had no idea then that this movie would become this iconic thing, you know, and I, oh god, what did I do?

**PAM GRIER:** So when Coffy is finished, Foxy Brown is going to open up a few months later.

**FOXY BROWN TRAILER:** A chick with drive who don't take no jive.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** Foxy Brown hit theaters in April, 1974. AIP sent Pam all over the country to promote it.

**PAM GRIER:** We didn't have like a satellite type of opening or premiere at a hundred theaters in from a hotel. We had to fly to each and every one, every opening of my film in a theater.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** Pam met scores of fans in city after city.

**PAM GRIER:** I couldn't walk on the street, I couldn't go – it'd be 5000 people. Everybody had a Coffy and Foxy Brown in their family. The shiksa Foxy Brown or the country girl or the preacher's daughter. They always came to the movie theaters.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** Pam was a sensation. Hot on the heels of Coffy, Foxy Brown was another hit.

**PAM GRIER:** Jack Silverman of the Silverman Corporation, who owned theaters, said Pam, what you're doing is fantastic for the Black community, for Black women. They are coming to our theaters ten, fifteen times, bringing their daughters. Dads are bringing their sons. They're all coming to see you fight for your respect and dignity.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** Foxy Brown was making plenty of money – in some theaters. Other theaters refused to show it. They thought it was beneath them. So did a lot of people at AIP.



**JACK HILL:** There was so much racism that was just like below the surface, you know, in those days. The people making the movie – a lot of them, not all, I can't say all – had nothing but contempt for the movies they were making. 'Ah, some Black picture,' you know, 'Ah, it's just the Black pictures.' They couldn't put them in theaters because theater owners were afraid they'd tear up the seats. Racism, just racism.

**BOB MINOR:** AIP was one of the studios they did a lot of those black exploitation type movies, if that's what you want to call it.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** That's Bob Minor again - the stunt coordinator.

**BOB MINOR:** The budgets that they had were very cheap budgets. Even when they put out stuff that we thought was junk, The movies made money because the Afro-American wasn't used to seeing, looking at the screen, seeing a Black hero on screen.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** Coffy and Foxy Brown were riding a wave of Blaxploitation films that began in 1971 with Shaft and Sweet Sweetback's Badasssss Song. Almost immediately, Blaxploitation became a lightning rod.

**NEWS REPORT:** But not all Blacks are happy about their new heroes. Many complain that all that super strong, super violent, super stud stuff doesn't tell the full and complete story of black life.

**JACQUELINE STEWART:** Many activists were concerned about them because they had this veneer of a kind of authenticity, but actually were, you know, just intended to get money out of Black audiences.

**NEWS REPORT:** Many say that Blacks and whites are left with just another stereotype. One who says that is Junius Griffin of the National Association for the Advancement for Colored People.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** Junius Griffin was blaxploitation's staunchest critic. In fact, he coined the term 'Blaxploitation' – it was meant as a knock on the movies.

**JUNIUS GRIFFIN:** We cannot take merely an economic view of Blaxploitation. It is a moralistic view.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** This is Junius Griffin from a TV interview in 1972.

**JUNIUS GRIFFIN:** Some of us are so anxious to see Blacks in meaningful roles, we are so anxious to see ourselves on the screen that we would do anything to get a vicarious victory over the system, not recognizing that once you get through that vicarious thrill of seeing a Black man beat up a white man on the screen, you go back and you face the same evil system that you faced before you went there.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** Another prominent critic of blaxploitation was a high-profile Black actress, Cicely Tyson. Tyson worked in more mainstream Hollywood movies.

**CICELY TYSON:** Like most Blacks, I rushed to the movie houses too when they first started. Initially they served a purpose. They made the movie industry aware of the fact that there is a Black market and that Blacks will support films made for us and about us.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** This is Cicely Tyson in a 1972 interview. She saw that blaxploitation was dominating the market for Black movies.

**CICELY TYSON:** There has to be a change because all of the films are too negative. They're too negative. They're perpetuating images that, for the most part, are unrealistic. When I make this statement, people say, Well, listen, whites have the same things they have. You know, the James Bond. Of course they do. They have James Bond. They have their Godfather. But they also have the Sound of Music. They have their Love Story. They have their Fiddler on the Roof. They have a variety of films from which to choose. We have to get a balance. We have to get a balance that's real.

**ODIE HENDERSON:** There was a whole coalition against Blaxploitation that was around for a couple of years that was combating these types of films and wondering why Black people went to see them when they felt that we were being so disrespected.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** Film critic Odie Henderson grew up during the era of Blaxploitation. As a young movie lover, he had a different perspective.

**ODIE HENDERSON:** There's always the comment that it shows negative aspects of stereotypes of Black people. But to be honest with you, in my neighborhood, there were drug pushers. There were pimps. There were hustlers. Everyone had a side hustle. I grew up broke, it wasn't The Cosby Show. It wasn't that kind of thing in my neighborhood. So seeing that to me was, you know, proving I existed in a way.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** In Hollywood, blaxploitation was even more complicated.

**JADIE DAVID:** There was racism and all over the industry back then. It was everywhere, everywhere.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** Blaxploitation opened doors for Black actors, writers, directors and crew members. A lot of people launched their careers through these films, like stunt woman Jadie David.

**JADIE DAVID:** The first movie that I did, the name of the film, I'm not going to repeat it in total because my family's old school and they told me never to say this word, but it was called The Legend of the N-word Charlie. That disturbed me when Bob first told me about the name of the movie. But these are the things that you had to deal with back in the seventies. That movie gave me my start. So like I said, a lot of people got their start and got established in the 1970s, no matter what the subject matter was.

**PAM GRIER:** I didn't try to hide what the community was trying to hide, because we can't solve the problems from hiding.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** Did you ever bristle at the criticism, sometimes from inside the Black community of Blaxploitation films?

**PAM GRIER:** Mmm-mmm. The women loved it.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** One thing I learned from spending time with Pam - she is a remarkably open person. But she doesn't like talking about Blaxploitation. It came up a couple of times in our conversations.

**PAM GRIER:** The Blaxploitation movies were basically cultural films that, you know, play a little harder, more funk to it, more slap at, you know, just more different.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** Pam thinks all the arguing and hand-wringing over Blaxploitation was overblown. And that a lot of the criticism was driven by sexism.

**PAM GRIER:** And they were called Blaxploitation when in fact, a lot of the men had done all these movies before I had stepped in a man's shoes and then it became exploitative, because the Black women have to fight for their identity. They have to fight. Men don't fight for them. So that's not true. I can't even engage in this conversation with people, and I don't. I'm like, whatever.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** Pam puts up a strong front. She is strong. But she isn't Coffy. She isn't Foxy Brown. Pam is more complex than any character she's played.

The more we talked, the more I saw her anxieties, and her fears. She has them. Like all of us. And the truth is that she was hurt by Blaxploitation. She was the face of a genre that divided the Black community and was dismissed by white Hollywood. Her celebrity was almost inseparable from controversy. As much as Blaxploitation helped build her career – it would also hold her back.

## THEME MUSIC

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** On our next episode, Pam struggles to find roles as the Blaxploitation craze comes to an end.

**PAM GRIER:** And then that's when I started taking ~~writing script~~ screenwriting lessons, going to school and finding out how to write a screenplay

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** And she falls in love with Hollywood's hottest young comedian.

**FREDDIE PRINZE:** Other things that give people the wrong impression of Puerto Ricans is movies. Like, West Side Story set up back a hundred years. 'Cause if you saw the movie all it did was make people think that we stand in the streets going [whistles]. [crowd laughs]

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** Angela Carone is our Director of Podcasts. Story Editors are Joanne Faryon and Shari Okeke. Audio Editing and Sound Design by Mike Voulgaris. Scriptwriting by Yacov Freedman, Rachel Pilgrim, Angela Carone and me. Yacov Freedman is our Senior Producer. James Sheridan is our Researcher and Fact Checker. Mixing by Glenn Matullo and Tim Pelletier. Production support from Julie Bitton, Mario Rials, Susana Zepeda, Liz Winter, Allison Firor, Phil Richards and Reid Hall. Web support by Betsy Gooch.

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Check out our website at [tcm.com/theplotthickens](http://tcm.com/theplotthickens). It has info about each episode and photos from throughout Pam's life. Again, that's [tcm.com/theplotthickens](http://tcm.com/theplotthickens).

I'm your host Ben Mankiewicz, thanks for listening. See you next time.