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Gordon Parks' LEADBELLY



Gordon Parks came to filmmaking late in life after a successful career as photographer (25 years on the staff of *Life*), writer (*A Choice of Weapons*, *Born Black*), and musician. His first film, *THE LEARNING TREE* (1969), a memory of growing up Black in Kansas based on his autobiography, was the sort of visually stunning movie you'd expect from a master photographer turned filmmaker. But it was dramatically static and didn't make much money, so Parks next tried his hand at sure-fire box-office material. *SHAFT* (1970) was a commercial blockbuster which founded the new genre of Black urban action movies (it's still the best of them) and set a new visual style for downbeat city films in the 70's. Parks settled in this groove for awhile, following up with *SHAFT'S BIG SCORE* and *THE SUPER-COPS*.

Last year, he returned to a more personal, adventurous style of filmmaking and *LEADBELLY*, the result, is quite simply magnificent. The film begins in 1905. A young Black man by the name of Huddie Ledbetter quits his family's farm in the Louisiana bayous and, guitar strapped to his back, sets out for the bright lights of Shreveport, intent on becoming "The King of Fannin Street." There, in bordellos and bars, he plays his particular brand of back country blues, learns the intricacies of 12-string guitar, the instrument he will later make his own, and—being a

tough, uncompromising guy—picks up the nickname "Leadbelly."

After a series of adventures he finds himself in Texas, meets up with Blind Lemon Jefferson (another master of country blues) and, after a fight breaks out when he and Lemon play for whites at a Confederate Veterans Hall one evening, is sentenced to a spell on a chain gang. Leadbelly spends most of the next 25 years in various hellish prisons in Texas and Louisiana. Then, one day in 1933, he and his music are 'discovered' by musicologists John and Alan Lomax and the rest, as they say, is history.

Like most mythic stories, *Leadbelly's* potentially verges on cliché and it takes some of Parks' particular talents to avoid those pitfalls. He does so by confronting the mythic material head-on rather than apologizing for it. The film has a classic narrative structure: strong, simple, direct, and pointed. In short, it's very much like *Leadbelly's* own music. It's grounded in humiliation. (Texas Governor Pat Neff comments after *Leadbelly* has performed for him: "Ain't nothin' can sing like a darkie when he puts his mind to it!") It opposes that oppression with the elemental politics of survival. (Dicklikker, *Leadbelly's* prison buddy, explains: "Ya suit yerself to the situation. When they wants to kill ya, just livin' is winning.") Ultimately, it's a triumph of will. (After seven years on the chain gang, *Lead-*

belly can rightly and magnificently claim: "You ain't broke my body, you ain't broke my mind, you ain't broke my spirit!" and we know it's true.) *LEADBELLY* provides a legitimate historical high of the sort we seldom get any longer from mainstream American movies, made by people who have lost (or never had) a sense of the validity and vitality of existential politics.

Parks can bring it off because, first, he understands the strengths of *Leadbelly's* music. (Fred Karlin scored the film and H-Tide Harris recreates the vocals with surprising accuracy and spirit.) He's also pulled some extraordinary performances from his actors, especially Roger E. Mosely (Huddie), Madge Sinclair (Miss Eula), Art Evans (Blind Lemon Jefferson), and Albert P. Hall (Dicklikker). Along with his cinematographer, Bruce Surtees, he has also created a breathtaking elemental imagery for the film—full of earth, air, sun, sweat, and color—that's almost insolent in its powerful effect.

Most important perhaps, is the underlying structure of the movie. What gave *Leadbelly's* songs their special power were the people whose stories they told. The same must be said for Parks' film. That's what gives it its mythic energy. And that's what makes Gordon Parks' fifth feature such an achievement.

James Monaco

PARKS INTERVIEW (Contd.)

lims because I gave them a voice. They would have never had a voice—some seven million subscriptions per week—to say something.

Meanwhile, I went off and did the world. I did royalty, fashions, sports. I did everything that came along. Why? Because I knew that as a black photographer, if I was going to make that staff, then I'd have to do more than just black subjects. I think that's the

mistake that many black youths make today. They ghetto-ize their own talent. Black youth have got to get it into their heads that they've got to do everything in every field there is. That's the only way they're going to survive. Black directors have got to stop thinking about doing only black films. They've got to address Hollywood to that. I do it to my agents all the time. I say, 'Don't just bring me black films. Bring me RYAN'S

DAUGHTER. Let me refuse it if I want to. Let me refuse *THE EXORCIST*, or take it if I want to. Bring those things to me.'

The white directors are doing films that black directors could best do. So what's left for black directors? Develop themselves as fine directors and forget the fact that they're black so they can do any film they want to. Because after a while there's going to be a limit to what you can do out there. ■