

A portrait of a man with a goatee, smiling, wearing a dark blue pinstriped suit jacket over a white shirt. The background is a solid grey color. A large, white, dotted circular graphic is positioned behind the main title text.

# Friday At The Movies

How this champion  
of black films  
keeps diversity  
on the screen

*By Pamela K. Johnson*

## JEFF FRIDAY SEES A LOT OF MOVIES. THIS YEAR ALONE HE'S

screened roughly 500 films for the American Black Film Festival. One of his all-time favorite movies is Spike Lee's *Get on the Bus*, about a group of men trekking across the country to attend the Million Man March: "I'm moved by black people collaborating with one another," he says. That same theme drives his Miami-based fest, where attendance has grown from 190 in 1997 to more than 5,000 today.

African American filmmakers are still unable to gain much power in an industry now being transformed by digital production and distribution—a feat that may become tougher as consumer appetites and movie-going habits shrink box-office returns. Global revenues were \$4.05 billion for the first quarter of 2011 versus \$4.83 billion for the same period in 2010, a decline of roughly 16%. U.S. box offices took the greatest hit of major markets with a revenue drop of more than 20%.

That's why Friday's focus on innovation, education, and collaboration has such urgency. In fact, Friday, who is also the CEO of movie distributor Film Life and one of **BLACK ENTERPRISE's** Top 50 Hollywood Power Brokers, recently teamed up with **BE** to provide a showcase for the diverse contributions of black filmmakers through "Black Movie Month," to be featured on the BMM Website ([www.blackmoviemonth.com](http://www.blackmoviemonth.com)) and BlackEnterprise.com in October. (You can also go to [www.blackenterprise.com](http://www.blackenterprise.com) for coverage of this year's festival.) **BE** recently spoke to Friday about the state of black filmmaking, the impact of technology, and transforming NBA and NFL ballers into shot callers.

### How has the festival evolved over the years?

When people showed up in [1997], we realized that African Americans had an amazing interest in film and that we could be the conduit to people who had very little access to Hollywood and create a platform for future filmmakers. Over the years, hundreds of folks have come out and met people that they're working with now, parlaying those relationships into fruitful careers in TV and film.

### So education represents a vital component?

We're clear why we're valuable: We nurture filmmakers. This year, Robert Townsend conducted a class on producing and pitching; Bill Duke did an amazing acting class; and in the past, Spike Lee, Lee Daniels, and John Singleton

have all taught. Now we're in the process of finding a sponsorship source so we can offer a master class series in cities around the country.

### What are some films that have earned their wings at ABFF?

This festival is about giving filmmakers an opportunity to tell their stories, and giving audiences a chance to share in that experience. The film on the screen may not ever get distribution, so when people ask me about my breakout movies, I say, 'Nope, I'll tell you my breakout people.' Obviously the Rainforest folks: Will Packer and Rob Hardy [producers of *Stomp the Yard*, *Obsessed*, and *Takers*]. There's Roger Bobb, who's the only person to win best film at ABFF twice. Bobb met Tyler Perry through a connection made at our fest about seven years ago, and got hired when Tyler Perry set up his studio, so he's been a producer on all his movies and TV shows. He's now leaving Tyler Perry Studios to start Bobbcat Films in Atlanta. Sylvain White [the director of *Stomp the Yard* and *The Losers*] also came out of this festival. He's now working in TV and film as is Saladin Patterson [who served as the producer of *The Bernie Mac Show*, *Frasier*, and *The Fighting Temptations*].

### Has technology made it easier for emerging filmmakers?

The introduction of the DVD market offered a new platform for distribution of niche movies that didn't get theatrical release, and you can actually earn a better living with a successful DVD release than you can with a theatrical one. Secondly, access to affordable technology has lowered barriers of entry to filmmaking. But just because you can buy a high-definition camera for \$2,000 and some editing software doesn't mean you're good. That's why I created the Film Life Foundation with the mission of raising money to send African Americans to film school. ▶

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### How has social media affected filmmakers?

Social media, Internet distribution, self-promotion [are] the ways you get the word out about your movies because nine out of 10 films are not going to get [traditional] distribution. It becomes your e-commerce store, and levels the playing field. One filmmaker told me he sold 50,000 copies of his movies from his website. One of our next steps is to develop theaters with the Film Life or ABFF brand—take a film [that did well in our fest] and offer the filmmaker a place to show it around the country.

**You have a program called the Pro-Hollywood Initiative, that encourages professional athletes to get involved in the movie industry and the production of independent films. What is your ultimate goal?**

About 10 years ago, we started to see a lot of African American pro athletes in their 20s coming to the festival. Their interest was social because 10 years ago people still wanted to be rappers and music producers. But the music industry has changed and we saw a seismic shift in interest toward film. People would show up with films financed by Charles Oakley or Baron Davis. It struck me that a lot of NBA players were financing movies.

Three years ago, I got a call from this guy who plays with the Baltimore Ravens, Terrell Suggs. We had lunch, and he knew as much about the history and industry of cinema as I do. A light bulb went off: We have the resources we need in our community to make movies. If 1,000 creative people walk into ABFF with scripts but no money and partner with 1,000 people who have money, we can make this happen. At the festival, Suggs met a writer and ended up financing her first short from her putting a script in his hand at ABFF. Suggs has made four short films to date. The most recent one played at the Cannes Film Festival in France. He also came on board at our highest sponsorship level this year. So we've reached out to the NFL as well as the NBA. And we're talking.

### What makes ABFF so successful?

When 4,000 to 5,000 people get off planes from all over the world, and they're in the same frame of mind—to support each other, network, and take something home that will help them move their careers forward. We're the vehicle to help them live their dreams. **BE**

FRIDAY WITH DIRECTORS TOWNSEND, SINGLETON, AND LEE; HALLE BERRY APPEARS AT THE FEST.