

## **Future Film Festival preview: Fight The Power: How to Be Black in the British Film Industry**

Grace Barber-Plentie looks at the hidden history of the black British film industry and anticipates an in-depth session on the subject.

**by Grace Barber-Plentie**

Naming a panel “How to be Black in the British film industry” may seem a little strange as the general consensus is that well, unless you’re someone like Steve McQueen, you can’t be. According to BFI research, in 2012 a worrying 5.3% of the British film production workforce were from Black, Asian and minority (BAME) backgrounds. And just look at Benedict Cumberbatch’s recent comments. If we ignore his misjudged choice of terminology, he made some salient points about black actors who currently seem to have many more opportunities in the US than in the UK. However, does working as a black actor in the US mean giving up your “Black British-ness”? Is it really possible to have a composite Black British identity within the film industry? What is even meant by a “Black British film industry”, and how does this differ from the Black American film industry? This piece will explore the history of the term, showing exactly why such a Q+A is needed.

Though perhaps less well-known than black US indie movements that have produced the likes of Charles Burnett, Julie Dash and Spike Lee, there has long been a black British film scene lurking somewhere in the undercurrent. Films have been made about the black British experience since the 1930s. The pioneering *Borderline* (which starred silent screen legend Paul Robeson) and films like *Sapphire* (1959) and *a Taste of Honey* (1961) dealt with interracial relationships and racial tensions in the UK. Despite their progressive nature, these films all had white directors, and the first feature by a Black British director, *Pressure*, was not released until 1975. Directed by Horace Ové, the film looks at first and second generation Black Caribbean residents of London and their struggles.

In 1982 the Black Audio Film Collective was formed. Their work touched on themes and genres including Afrofuturism and black British identity. Among their membership was director John Akomfrah, who continues to work today (he released *The Stuart Hall Project* — a portrait of the late, great cultural analyst — in 2013.) History was made in 1994, when *Welcome II the Terror-dome* became the first film directed by a black British woman, Ngozi Onwurah, although it’s sadly now unavailable, clearly showing the film industry’s sad disregard for both Black and female filmmakers. Another name which rose to prominence around this time was Isaac Julien, a filmmaker who not only explored black British identity but also gay identity, and how the two may intersect, in films such as *Looking for Langston* (1989) and *Young Soul Rebels* (1991).

In the past perhaps one had to dig deep to discover the black British film scene, yet it is definitely beginning to move (very slowly) towards the mainstream. Take 2014 for example, which saw the release of Steve McQueen’s critically acclaimed, Oscar-winning *12 Years a Slave*, as well as Amma Asante’s *Belle*, two films that used black British stars as their protagonists. Rather than go down the easy “white saviour” route, both films used their protagonists to investigate slavery from two points of view - one British, one American, both with great success. And, as previously touched upon, Black British actors such as Chiwitel Ejiofor and David Oyelowo are forging careers in Hollywood, having started out on British stages and screens.

Despite the strides by the Black British film scene in recent times, there is undeniably still a long way to go, as highlighted by the aforementioned BFI statistics. In the forthcoming Q+A “Fight the Power: How to Be Black in the British Film Industry” (named with a little tongue-in-cheek humour as well as a certain pugnacity), DJ and filmmaker Iyare Igiehon will attempt to assess this tricky question. Igiehon’s own career is certainly interesting. He began as a radio DJ, working on stations including 1Xtra, 6Music and 5Live. Moving away from radio, he began working as a filmmaker as

well as a curator, organising the S.O.U.L. (Screening Our Unseen Lives) festival at the BFI to support and encourage fellow Black British as well other BAME people in the film industry into creating their own work. At the Q+A, Iyare will be joined by a host of other members of the film industry who will help give advice and offer perspective. Will they be able to answer the question? It's hard to say, but what they do have to say will surely be interesting regardless.

**Fight The Power: How to Be Black in the British Film Industry takes place at 2pm on Sat 21 Feb in NFT2.**

**Grace Barber-Plentie was a successful applicant for the IdeasTap and BFI Film Journalism Workshop and Mentoring brief.**