

Keith Beaudin

Title: "Bringing Civil Rights to the Movies, 1942-1967"

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My name is Keith Beaudin. I am 22. I have lived outside of Fort Wayne since 1998, and am currently finishing my first of two Senior years here at IPFW. My favorite fields of history revolve around the culture of the twentieth century, specifically movies, music, and literature. However, I also have a passion for the history of American foreign policy and the Middle Ages. After I graduate, I hope to find some success as a screenwriter, even though I know this will be a difficult task. I've finished three screenplays in the last two years, the first of which I recently submitted for judging to the 2011 Nicholl Fellowships in Screenwriting, hosted by the Academy Awards. This, entitled *Pouring Into Verse*, is the same screenplay that I won first place for at the 2010 Purdue Literary Awards. I will not learn if I succeeded in making the Academy's finalists until October so wish me luck! Also if you ever wish to read any of my work and give me some criticism, feel free to ask. If I find that my ultimate career choice falls through, I will probably attempt to stick with history and go to graduate school. In my free time I enjoy writing poetry, song lyrics, short stories, as well as watching new or classic movies, and listening to a wide variety of music that covers alternative rock, folk rock, classic rock, punk, pop, soul, blues, motown, funk, and jazz. I recently had two of my poems published in the 2010 edition of IPFW's *Confluence Literary Magazine*.

Abstract

Bringing civil rights to American cinema proved to be just as slow as bringing it to most other facets of American life was. Between 1942 and 1967, American movies went through a cultural shift with regards to the image of the African American. Before 1942, black roles usually ranged from wise-cracking buffoons to slaves. Essentially, they were menial stereotypes. This would not be changed until World War II, when the American government began to sponsor patriotic war pictures that required a strong black image to show that American troops were united and not prejudiced. When the war was over, Hollywood had a choice to make. They could either return to old form and go back to making films that featured black stereotypes, or they could listen to their black audiences and continue to make films that featured themes of integration. After much debate, Hollywood caved in, and a period of reconciliation between moviemakers and their black audiences was born.

Essentially, it was the black audience that drove the cultural change for the rest of the forties, on through the sixties. Hollywood wanted to allow for their films to feature new strong black images and integrationist themes, while at the same time not upset their white audiences or censors. In the late 1940s, pictures such as *Pinky*, *Home of the Brave*, and *Lost Boundaries* were screened and reactions from black audiences tended to be the same. They felt that these pictures were only halfhearted attempts at introducing themes that were beneficial to the Negro. Hollywood would need to try harder.

In 1950, the movies got a shot in the arm with a picture called *No Way Out*, which featured a

young Sidney Poitier in his first movie role. The film was praised by the black audiences but scared censors just as had been predicted. Scenes involving a black uprising, as well as the fact that the main white character was a horribly unlikeable racist, made Hollywood feel like integrationist movies were perhaps becoming too militant. Another film starring Sidney Poitier, *Blackboard Jungle*, reaffirmed these concerns. For the rest of the 1950s, Hollywood tried to appease the black audience by allowing for Sidney Poitier to keep his lead role status, but in turn tried to reassure censors and Southern white audiences by making sure that movies focusing on racial issues would not be too terrifying. When movies like *The Defiant Ones* and *Edge of the City* came out, black audiences were getting tired of Poitier submitting to the will of scared white filmmakers. Again, Hollywood had to try harder.

The 1960s proved to be the decade with the biggest cultural upheaval. The movie *A Raisin in the Sun* proved that a movie told directly from the Negro perspective could do well at the box office, but still Hollywood was making excuses for not giving black filmmakers more work. Black audiences had had enough of being told by white filmmakers what the important Negro issues in movies were. They were also tired of Poitier being their biggest star and were eager for fresh faces. With the help of the N.A.A.C.P., black audiences, accompanied by black and white actors, decided it was best to put Hollywood on an economic boycott unless more black actors and filmmakers got the jobs that they desired. The reticence of Hollywood executives meant that the push for more black jobs and stronger black images on the silver screen was a slow process, but, due to the continuous outcries of the black audiences, it eventually would succeed and black actors would no longer have to settle for what they could get.