

 PAM GRIER as Coffy
 BOOKER BRADSHAW as Brunswick

 ROBERT DoQUI as King George
 WILLIAM ELLIOTT as Carter

 ALLAN ARBUS as Vitroni
 SID HAIG as Omar

Written and Directed by JACK HILL Produced by ROBERT A PAPAZIAN Executive Producer SALVATORE BILLITTERI Director of Photography PAUL LOHMANN Edited by CHUCK McCLELLAND Music Composed and Conducted by ROY AYERS

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As far as opening scenes go, it's hard to find one as memorable and ground breaking and not to mention as downright electrifying and shocking—as the beginning of *Coffy* (Jack Hill, 1973). Posing as a junkie in need of a fix, Pam Grier agrees to trade her body to a drug dealer for some heroin. When they go back to his bedroom, she gives him a bigger surprise than he could have ever imagined.

### "This is the end of your life you motherfucking dope pusher!"

With these eleven words—and the help of a sawed-off double-barrel shotgun that blows said dope pusher's head into oblivion—Grier irrevocably changed cinema history. Her character, Coffy, was a one-woman army. Nurse by day, vigilante by night, on a mission to single-handedly take down the dope, prostitution, and political corruption that was plaguing Los Angeles and was responsible for turning her 11-year-old sister onto drugs. Equal parts strong, street smart, sexy, and sophisticated, Coffy was a quadruple threat. Had there ever been a more powerful screen heroine?

#### Hell no.

*Coffy* premiered in 1973. Grier was a new type of star for a new era, and Coffy was a new type of character for a new type of movie. But while *Coffy* is very much a film of its time, it is also a reaction against the times. Like many exploitation films, it took advantage of certain tastes and trends of the time, playing into what was popular and in vogue, but it also challenged many of those same conventions. To see it merely as "just another Blaxploitation" film is to overlook its radical and history-altering accomplishments.

The late-1960s and early-1970s was a time of great social upheaval in America and around the world, and Hollywood was not immune to these crises. Movies like *Bonnie and Clyde* (Arthur Penn, 1967) and *The Wild Bunch* (Sam Peckinpah, 1969) reflected the rising tide of violence, while *Midnight Cowboy* (John Schlesinger, 1969) and *Carnal Knowledge* (Mike Nichols, 1971) revealed new levels of sexual frankness. Meanwhile, there was the first wave of Blaxploitation cinema, a movement of both independent and studio-produced movies that prominently featured black characters. These films not only indicated a



changing racial consciousness in America at the time, but were also an attempt for an industry in financial straits to cash-in on a large audience that had been alienated and ignored almost entirely since the beginning of cinema. Some of the earliest Blaxploitation films were: *Cotton Comes to Harlem* (Ossie Davis, 1970); *Shaft* (Gordon Parks) and *Sweet Sweetback's Baadassss Song* (Melvin Van Peebles, both 1971); and *Blacula* (William Crain), *Hammer* (Bruce Clark), *Slaughter* (Jack Starrett), *Super Fly* (Gordon Parks Jr.) and *Trouble Man* (Ivan Dixon, all 1972). What these films shared in common, aside from their African-American protagonists, is that they were all male-oriented films.

#### Coffy changed all of that.

The company behind Coffy was American International Pictures (originally called American Releasing Corporation), created in 1954 by James H. Nicholson and Samuel Z. Arkoff, AIP's initial output catered to the low-brow double-bill tastes of teenagers: It Conquered the World (Roger Corman, Runaway Daughters (Edward L. Cahn, both 1956) / Was a Teenage Werewolf (Gene Fowler Jr., 1957), and High School Hellcats (Edward Bernds, 1958), to name just a few. And while all the movies followed what came to be known as the "A.R.K.O.F.F." formula—Action. Revolution. Killing. Oratory. Fantasy. and Fornication— AIP soon distinguished themselves from other fly-by-night B-companies through not only their endurance and prolific output, but by the actual quality of their films (well, some of them). Amidst all of the drive-in sensationalism, there emerged a series of genuine masterpieces from then-emerging directors, including Corman's Poe cycle (eight films between 1960 and 1965). Curtis Harrington's Night Tide. Francis Ford Coppola's Dementia 13 (both 1963), Sidney Lumet's The Pawnbroker (1965), Corman's The Wild Angels (1966), Leonard Kastle's The Honevmoon Killers (1969), and Martin Scorsese's Boxcar Bertha (1972). These weren't just background images to ignore while making out in a car, they were avant-garde pulp: a mixture of counter-cultural edginess, artistic ambition, formal elegance, and forward-thinking cinematic innovation. This was cinema at the fringes of society, using exploitative attractions to reveal the uply truth about the contemporary world. Dirty, cheap films for a dirty, cheap audience in a dirty, cheap world.

One of the producers behind the scenes at AIP was Larry Gordon. He was hoping to develop an ass-kicking female-focused film along the lines of *Shaft* called *Cleopatra Jones*. When that project wound up going to Warner Bros. instead (where it would be made with Tamara Dobson, later Grier's roommate), Gordon wanted to strike back and beat the competition to the punch. He called on Jack Hill to create "a black woman revenge film." For the opening, Gordon wanted "this woman to just kill the shit out of two guys," Hill remembered during this release's accompanying commentary track. "That's what I had to work with and I created the story from that." In the end, Hill only had 18 days and \$500,000 to complete the picture, he related in an interview in Calum Waddell's book, Jack Hill: The Exploitation and Blaxploitaton Master, Film by Film (2009).

Hill was the perfect choice for the project that would come to be known as Coffy (a title he suggested). A classmate of Coppola's at UCLA, he got his start working as an assistant to Corman. From his first features as a director, Hill exhibited a strong sense of cultural commentary and feminist politics, as well as a compositional style whose fusion of classical elegance and in-your-face-delirium suggested Orson Welles. In Mondo Keyhole (1966, additional footage directed by John Lamb), about a rapist husband and his junkaddicted wife, Hill appropriated images ranging from "American Gothic" to cheesecake photos to furniture advertisements, a visual clash of the perverse and the mundane that critiqued the ideology of modern society, in particular the objectification of women. Such is the double-edge of exploitation cinema, revealing the artifice of entertainment while still delivering batshit-crazy mayhem. Hill's feminist critiques are also present in Blood Bath (1966, additional material directed by Stephanie Rothman), in which a male artist murders the women he paints by dipping them in hot wax, guite literally objectifying their beauty. Other films such as Pit Stop (1969), The Big Doll House (1971), The Big Bird Cage (1972), Foxy Brown (1974) (in many ways a spiritual sequel to Coffy), and Switchblade Sisters (1975) not only focused on female characters, but also broadened the scope of roles available to actresses, allowing them to be as tough, violent, wild, and adventurous as their male counterparts.

In Grier, Hill found the perfect embodiment of this modern, revolutionary heroine, Originally hired as a receptionist for AIP's offices in Los Angeles. Grier was encouraged to audition for a role in Hill's The Big Doll House. AIP's latest "women in prison" picture to be shot on the cheap in the Philippines. The story was far from sophisticated: it was about a group of prisoners in an all-female jail who band together to fight the sadistic female warden and bust out of the joint. On the surface, the film was little more than an excuse for scantily clad bombshells to catfight and roll around in the mud for 90 minutes, but therein lav the subversive brilliance of exploitation cinema: that's exactly what The Big Doll House was, but that is also what separated it from the mass stupidity of mainstream cinema that gender-locked women into plaving conservative and limiting roles. The prisoners of The Big Doll House weren't just breaking out of a jungle jail-they were breaking out of cultural confinement, too, tearing down the walls of cinema's own prison. Pam auditioned to play one of the prisoners (a lesbian who plays informant to the warden in order to satisfy her girlfriend's junk habit) and was given the role on the spot. "I had no concept of categories like A. B. or C movies. A movie was a movie, and I intended to deliver an A performance, no matter what anybody else did." Grier related in her memoir. Foxy: My Life in Three Acts. "Since I was playing a radical black woman, I could draw personally from

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my own anger and the anti-war rallies I'd observed at UCLA and in Colorado when I lived there. That kind of raw energy was real for me, and I worked hard to make sure none of it looked fake or manufactured."

Grier's performance won her instant adoration from AIP. From the moment she hit the screen, Grier wasn't an actor-in-training, she was a natural born star. She stayed in the Philippines for two more "women in prison" pictures, including Hill's *The Big Bird Cage* and Gerardo de León's *Women in Cages* (1971). While these and other exploitation pictures would boost Grier's career, it wasn't until 1973 that she would achieve screen immortality.

### "You want me to crawl, white motherfucker? You want to spit on me and make me crawl? I'm going to piss on your grave tomorrow."

In Coffy. Pam Grier redefined what it meant to be a powerful black woman on screen (as well as a powerful woman, and-hell-a powerful person in general). What she did on screen in 1973 was radical-and would have been as impossible at any other time. Just four decades earlier, things were guite different for black actresses. In the 1930s, Theresa Harris was relegated to the background (and often in uncredited roles) at Warner Bros. Louise Beavers and Fredi Washington broke new ground as the mother and daughter pair in the original Imitation of Life (John M. Stahl, 1934), and it was remarkable that Hattie McDaniel won the Oscar as Mammy in Gone with the Wind (Victor Fleming, 1939). The 1940s and 1950s saw actresses such as Lena Horne and Dorothy Dandridge making bold strides forward, too, while the 1960s brought a new generation of black actresses to the screen, including, Diahann Carroll (Hurry Sundown, Otto Preminger, 1967), Ruby Dee (A Raisin in the Sun, Daniel Petrie, 1961), Abbey Lincoln (Nothing But a Man, Michael Roemer, 1964), Cicely Tyson (The Heart is a Lonely Hunter, Robert Ellis Miller, 1968), and even Eartha Kitt as television's Catwoman (she would later appear with Grier in Friday Foster, Arthur Marks, 1975), Grier took things to a whole other level, Because Coffv was an independent, exploitation film, she was allowed to be sexier, smarter, sassier, and more individualistic than almost any woman in film history. Her performance has had such influence that it is easy to take for granted just how revolutionary Grier was at the time. and you'd still be hard pressed to find any character on screen now to rival Coffy.

Just who is Coffy? That's her nickname, short for Flower Child Coffin, a name that conjures up images of Spaghetti Western antihero Django, dragging around his coffin full of guns (in a way, she is like a western gunslinger, out for revenge and dragging around her metaphorical coffin of social and personal wrongs that need righting). "Coffin" also reminds of Coffin Ed and Gravedigger Jones, Chester Himes' African-American revisionist hardboiled private eyes that not only diversified the racial landscape of crime fiction in

the 1950s and 1960s, but also injected true grit, surreal violence, street realism, and a fantastic grandeur into noir that most certainly influenced the Blaxploitation films of the 1970s. Flower Child Coffin also represents the shattered idealism of the 1960s, the peace-loving person she wants to be but can't in the face of the politically corrupt, racist, sexist, and drug-and-poverty ridden world she inhabits. In *In the Heat of the Night* (Norman Jewison, 1967), Sidney Poitier as Mr. Tibbs had to fight oppression from inside the boundaries of the system; in *Coffy*, Grier is like a renegade Mr. Tibbs, someone outside of the system who doesn't have to be nice and play by the rules.

As a heroine (or anti-heroine, as the case may be, considering how many conventions she defies), Coffy is an amalgamation of many different archetypes. She borrows the best, the most alluring, and the most badass characteristics from an array of predecessors, building on their styles while creating something undeniably her own. Whereas women in crime stories were often restricted to supporting roles (the secretary, the girlfriend, the wife, the victim), Coffy takes the lead role as the hardboiled action protagonist. More than just muscle, she's also part femme fatale-the dangerous woman of film noir who manipulates men with her intelligence, sexuality, and ambition, like Barbara Stanwyck in Double Indemnity (Billy Wilder, 1944) or Peggy Cummins in Gun Crazy (Joseph H. Lewis, 1950). (Cummins' line, "I've been kicked around all my life, and from now on, I'm gonna start kicking back," almost sounds like it could have been written expressly for Grier). Coffy is also a working class warrior who, like Stanwyck in Baby Face (Alfred E. Green, 1933), uses her sexuality to infiltrate, dominate, and ultimately destroy, the patriarchal hegemony that is trying to keep her down. (In her 2010 autobiography, Grier herself noted the similarity between her films and 1930s Pre-Code cinema: "The plots nearly always resembled old Warner Bros. melodramas, with dashes of MGM fashion glamour-via the street-thrown in. It was common for the persecuted female character, angry and less conflicted than her male counterpart, to destroy a white-based power structure that had caused pain and harm to herself and her family.") Coffy is also like the Black Angels of Cornell Woolrich's noir nightmares (The Bride Wore Black [1940, filmed in 1968], The Black Angel [1943, filmed in 1946], Deadline at Dawn [1944, filmed in 1946]), the devoted lover who ventures into the shadows for revenge. With her espionage expertise, sexual prowess, and verbal wit, Coffy is also a bit like James Bond (though, unlike him, she doesn't need Q or his hi-tech gadgets, nor is she a walking-and-talking relic of sexism). And then there's her vigilante spirit, which pre-dates such iconic revenge flicks such as Walking Tall (Phil Karlson, 1973), Death Wish (Michael Winner, 1974), Street Law (Enzo G. Castellari, 1974), Taxi Driver (Martin Scorsese, 1976), I Spit On Your Grave (Meir Zarchi, 1978), and The Exterminator (James Glickenhaus, 1980), among many others. And with her extreme willingness to blow her opposition away-as well as her signature farewell speechesshe's a 'Dirty' Harry Callahan for the radical left. What's significant about Coffy's lineage is



that she is largely co-opting characteristics that belonged to male characters. By merging both the male detective figure with the femme fatale, *Coffy* reinvents—and revitalizes—the noir genre for the post-Civil Rights generation.

"To me, what really stood out in the [Blaxploitation] genre was women of color acting like heroes rather than depicting nannies or maids," Grier wrote in *Foxy*. "We were redefining heroes as schoolteachers, nurses, mothers, and street-smart women who were proud of who they were. They were far more aggressive and progressive than the Hollywood stereotypes. Despite the fact that many men and some women were not supportive of female equality like they are today, the roles all made sense to me. After all, these were the women with whom I grew up. I guess I was ahead of my time, because today, contemporary women are scantily dressed but are still dignified and very intelligent."

Grier's strong dramatic performance and mesmerizing star guality. Hill's subversive brilliance, and the film's vibrant and infectious spirit, made *Coffy* a hit with audiences. Critics, however, were slow to realize the film's smartness. Instead, they saw more clichés and overlooked the cleverness. "Despite a good deal of lip service against the evils of drugs and the like, there's a maximum of footage devoted to exposing Miss Grier." A.H. Weiler cheekilv reviewed in the New York Times when the film was initially released. "What happens? She kills them all off, including her two-timing lover, All of which leaves a viewer with the happy thought that she now can get back to nursing and away from films like Coffy." Meanwhile. Variety offered the backhanded, sexist compliment, "Grier, a statuesque actress with a body she doesn't hesitate to show, is strongly cast." Roger Ebert dismissed of the film's professionalism, seeing it as a detriment rather than a strength; "Coffy is slightly more serious and a little more inventive than it needs to be." On the other hand. Ebert was one of the rare critics who was able to pick up on Grier's screenshattering star persona. "She's beautiful, as I've already mentioned, but she also has a kind of physical life to her that is sometimes missing in beautiful actresses. She doesn't seem to be posing or doing the fashion-model bit: she gets into an action role and does it right." Still, he only gave the film "two stars."

Such a humble beginning for a film that, forty-one years later, is an enduring classic.

Part of why the film holds up so well is that, like any great movie, it is an ensemble effort. Supporting Grier was a cast of cult cinema's finest, including longtime Hill collaborator, virtuoso character Sid Haig (who would ultimately appear in several films with Grier, including *The Big Bird Cage, The Big Doll House, Black Mama White Mama,* Eddie Romero, 1973, and *Jackie Brown*, Quentin Tarantino, 1997), who here plays the bodyguard to mob kingpin Vitorini (played by Allan Arbus, ex-husband of famed art photographer Diane

Arbus). Appearing as Coffy's boyfriend, a straight cop in a world of corruption, is William Elliott, who later starred in Henry Hathaway's final film, *Hangup* [aka *Super Dude*] (1974).

And no Blaxploitation film would be complete without a soulful score to capture the musical zeitgeist of the times. One can't imagine the great Blaxploitation films without their iconic scores: Isaac Hayes and *Shaft*, Curtis Mayfield and *Super Fly*, James Brown and *Black Caesar* (Larry Cohen, 1974), or Marvin Gaye and *Trouble Man. Coffy's* score was composed by Roy Ayers, the great jazz vibraphonist, who blended funky grooves with complex modernist harmonies. Like with those other films, Ayers' contribution is so magnificent that it stands on its own as one of the best soundtracks of the 1970s, but it is so fully integrated into the movie that one can't imagine watching *Coffy* without the music or listen to the album without seeing the film's images in your mind.

In the end, however, it is Pam Grier and her unstoppable aura that has ensured that *Coffy* will never be forgotten. It was a role that not only defined, but also redefined, an entire era of culture, celebrity, and cinema.

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# **Pam Grier**

### by Yvonne D.Sims

On May 26<sup>th</sup>, 1949 Pamela Suzette Grier was born in Winston-Salem, North Carolina to Clarence Grier (retired Air Force) and Gwendolyn Sylvia (a nurse). In her early years, Grier's family lived in many states as well as in the UK because of her father's occupation. Eventually, the Grier family settled in Denver, Colorado. By this time, Grier had a younger brother and a sister would soon complete the family. In her autobiography Foxy: A Life in Three Acts (Pam Grier and Andrea Cagan, 2010), she fondly recalls her grandparents in particular, her cousins and growing up in the era of racial prejudice. While she did not grow up in the South when Jim Crow was in effect, the fact that her father was in the Air Force did not provide a shield from racism. When her father was transferred to Columbus, Ohio, the family could not stay on the base (African American families were not allowed to live on Air Force bases) and had to make arrangements to find housing elsewhere in the city. Her first memory of racial prejudice was in Columbus, where she, her mother and Rodney, her younger brother walked home with an arm full of groceries and no city bus would stop to pick them up. Because of the heat, it took them longer than usual to reach home that day and eventually, one bus did stop. It was empty and the white driver (Life in Three Acts: A Memoir) gave them a ride home.

Upon graduating from high school, Grier enrolled at Metropolitan State College while simultaneously working at several jobs including a radio station that became the catalyst for her future career as an actress in Hollywood. Working as a receptionist for KHOW radio, Grier was persuaded to enter their beauty pageant, where she won. She competed for the title of Miss Colorado Universe and was runner up, however two talent agents approached her after the pageant. David Baumgarten and Marty Klein represented several actors between them that appeared in the late 1960s popular television show *Laugh In*. One of the talent agents, Marty Klein represented Richard Roundtree whose first leading role was *Shaft* (Gordon Parks, 1971). Both convinced her to go to Hollywood. At this time, the film industry was undergoing a change particularly for African American actors who historically were restricted to servitude roles.

Grier's meeting with Baumgarten and Klein proved pivotal as she was about to become the face of a new genre of movies that focused exclusively on African Americans. Blaxploitation movies appeared not long after Mario Van Peeble's *Sweet Sweetback's*  Baadasses Song in 1970. The film was a major financial success (it was made on a limited budget) and received mixed critical reviews particularly from African American film critics in its depiction of the African American man. Two other films, *Shaft* and *Cotton Comes to Harlem* (Ossie Davis), also came out in 1970. The former, which focused on an African American detective named John Shaft, was directed by former *Life* magazine photographer Gordon Parks. *Shaft* received excellent reviews from film critics and featured an Oscar-winning soundtrack produced by Isaac Hayes. Richard Roundtree's portrayal of an African American private detective was immensely popular with the young, urban African American movie audience. Pam Grier's was about to become the "Queen of Blaxploitation" movies with her portrayal of an everyday African American woman thrust into circumstances that forced her character to protect her loved ones and in doing so created the prototype for the action heroine.

She left Denver and moved to Los Angeles. Initially, she wanted to attend film school, but needed a job so that she could save money to go. In her autobiography, Grier states that she contacted David Baumgarten who hired her as the receptionist in his office (79). She began to meet many people in the film and music industry and for a while worked as a back-up singer for the late R&B singer Bobby Womack. Soon, she moved to the position of head receptionist for American International Pictures (AIP), founded by Samuel Arkoff, AIP produced well over 200 Blaxploitation movies between 1971 and 1975. When an agent told Grier about Roger Corman's The Big Doll House (Jack Hill, 1971), she auditioned for a part and won the role. She starred in another Corman-produced movie Women in Cages (Gerardo de Leon, 1971) and during this period performed in two more of Corman's productions including The Twilight People (Eddie Romero, 1972) and The Big Bird Cage (Jack Hill, 1972). Even before appearing in Corman's movies, she had a role in Russ Mever's Bevond the Vallev of the Dolls (1970), and Black Mama, White Mama (Eddie Romero, 1973) – a female version of the Sidney Poitier and Tony Curtis vehicle The Defiant Ones (Stanley Kramer, 1958), before landing the one that would cement her status as an actress. Coffy (Jack Hill, 1973), Audiences responded to Grier, and she felt, as she notes in her autobiography. "they were hungry for a female action hero" (124). Grier was astute in recognizing that urban audiences wanted action heroes and heroines they could identify with long before they would appear in mainstream films.

Grier writes "to me, what really stood out in the genre was women of colour acting like heroes rather than depicting nannies or maids" (126). After *Coffy*, Grier became the 'Queen of Blaxploitation" with starring turns in *Scream Blacula Scream* (Bob Kelljan, 1973), *Foxy Brown* (Jack Hill, 1974), *'Sheba, Baby'* (William Girdler, 1975), *Friday Foster* (Arthur Marks, 1975). Throughout the 1970s, Grier worked consistently. Originally she achieved fame in Blaxploitation movies, but with the demise of the genre, she continued to work. *Ms.* 

*Magazine* recognised Grier as an actress portraying empowering figures for women and featured her as a cover star and interviewed her about her roles.

Many African American actors did not enjoy the same success once audiences no longer responded to Blaxploitation movies and moved onto blockbusters. The 1980s were not as good for Grier as the early 1970s had been, nonetheless she continued to appear in films, television and Denver-based theatre, with roles in films including *Fort Apache, the Bronx* (Daniel Petrie, 1981) and *Above the Law* (Andrew Davis, 1988) and the popular TV-shows *Miami Vice* (Anthony Yerkovich, 1984-90) and *Crime Story* (Chuck Adamson, Gustave Reininger, 1986-88).

The 1990s fared better and would bring recognition in the form of a Best Actress Golden Globe nomination for her performance in Quentin Tarantino's *Jackie Brown* (1997), a role which brought her a new generation of fans. Based on the late novelist Elmore Leonard's *Rum Punch* (1992), many, including Tarantino, thought Grier's character was an older version of Foxy Brown.

The movie was a success and revitalised her acting career. Tarantino has not been shy in admitting his love of Blaxploitation movies and who better to play this heroine than the Queen of Blaxploitation herself. Since *Jackie Brown*, Grier has found great success in television with *The L Word* (Michele Abbott, Ilene Chaiken, Kathy Greenberg, 2004-09) where she starred in all the show's seventy episodes. Grier continues to work in film and television and while she may not necessarily embrace the "Queen" moniker for her Blaxploitation work; it is precisely her earlier work that in many ways has kept her busy as an actress. Grier and Blaxploitation remain synonymous; and this is her lasting contribution to the genre.

Yvonne D. Sims is a Professor at South Carolina State University where her research interests include race, ethnicity and gender in popular culture, film studies. She is also the author of Women of Blaxploitation: How the Black Action Film Heroine Changed American Popular Culture.





## **About the Transfer**

*Coffy* was transferred from a 35mm Interpositive. The film was transferred in High Definition by Ascent Media. The audio was transferred from a restored 35mm mono mag. Additional picture restoration was performed under Arrow's supervision at Deluxe Restoration, London.

Some minor picture and audio issues remain, in keeping with the condition of the original materials.

Restoration Supervisor: James White/Arrow Video Restoration Technicians: Clayton Baker, Tom Barret/Deluxe Restoration

## **Production Credits**

Disc and Booklet Produced by Francesco Simeoni Production Assistants: Louise Buckler, Liane Cunje Technical Producer: James White QC and Proofing: Anthony Nield, Francesco Simeoni Authoring: David Mackenzie Subtiling: IBF Digital Artist: Gilles Vranckx Design: Jack Pemberton

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## **Further Viewing**

*Foxy Brown*, Jack Hill's follow up to *Coffy*, also starring Pam Grier is available from Arrow Video on Blu-ray along with the earlier works, *Spider Baby* and *Pit Stop*, starring his regular collaborator Sid Haig, are also available on Dual Format DVD and Blu-ray.

