



A woman with dark hair is lying on her back on a sandy surface. She is wearing a white dress with a large red and orange floral pattern. There is a visible bloodstain on her neck. Her eyes are closed, and she has a serene expression. Her right hand is raised near her head, holding a small object. The lighting is bright, casting shadows on the sand.

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## CAST

Glynn Turman Isaac  
Lou Gossett Reverend Elija Bliss  
Joan Pringle Christella  
Carl Crudup Tony  
James Louis Watkins Carl  
Fred Pinkard Theotis Bliss  
Jo Anne Meredith Sara Devine  
Alice Jubert Robert Bliss/Betty Jo  
David McKnight J.D. Walker  
Stephanie Faulkner Phyllis  
Fuddle Bagley Enoch Land

## CREW

Executive in Charge of Production  
**Charles Stroud**

Director of Photography  
**Harry May**

Film Editor  
**George Folsey, Jr. A.C.E.**

Music by  
**Robert Prince**

"I Will Never Let You Go"

Lyrics by  
**Joseph A. Greene**

Music by  
**Robert Prince – Joseph A. Greene**

Written by  
**Jaison Starks**

Produced and Directed by  
**Arthur Marks**



# PSYCHIC CONNECTIONS

by Kim Newman

*When are you going to learn that it's medically proven that good gin cleanses your soul out?*

The blaxploitation boom began with crime movies, offering African-American takes on genre staples like the cop film (*Cotton Comes to Harlem*, 1970), the private eye movie (*Shaft*, 1971), the gangster biopic (*Black Caesar*, 1973), the vigilante avenger drama (*Slaughter*, 1972) and the heist picture (*The Split*, 1968). These might have jive talk, funky threads, soul scores, nods to Black Power and a distinctive inner-city vibe, but they are still redos of well-established forms with new black stars playing the sorts of tough guy roles white icons like Humphrey Bogart, Robert Mitchum or Clint Eastwood had owned for decades. In *The Split*, based on Richard Stark's 1966 novel *The Seventh*, Jim Brown plays a series character who has otherwise been cast with white hard-men: Lee Marvin (*Point Blank*, 1967), Robert Duvall (*The Outfit*, 1973), Peter Coyote (*Slayground*, 1983), Mel Gibson (*Payback*, 1999) and Jason Statham (*Parker*, 2013). A small run of 'hustler' movies focused on forms of 1970s crime especially associated with black crooks – a drug dealer in *Super Fly* (1972), a pimp in *The Mack* (1973) – but even they had whiter precedents in the noirish likes of *Night and the City* (1950) or *Pickup on South Street* (1953), in which Richard Widmark was on the run as a nightclub tout or a pickpocket. When blaxploitation expanded to other popular genres like the Western (*The Legend of Nigger Charley*, 1972), horror film (*Blacula*, 1972) and superspy fantasy (*Cleopatra Jones*, 1973), there was a tendency to default to cops and robbers. William Marshall's African vampire beats up (and lectures) drug dealers in *Scream Blacula Scream* (1973) and voodoo priestess Marki Bey takes on the mafia with zombie hitmen in *Sugar Hill* (1974). In fact, almost all black-themed 1970s horror films feature scenes with monsters getting into bar-fights with the same sharp-dressed, tough-talking bloods put in their place by Richard Roundtree, Pam Grier or any other black hero – while, typically, the lone black cop in an otherwise-white department is the one who susses that they're dealing with the supernatural as the mutilated corpses pile up.

*J.D.'s Revenge* (1976) came at the end of the brief black horror boom, and is at least as much a gangster film as a possession picture. In the wake of William Friedkin's *The Exorcist* (1973), there was a run of big-ticket supernatural dramas... so, naturally, there were black imitations too. *Abby* (1974), with William Marshall as a black episcopal exorcist, was



singled out for a lawsuit by Warner Brothers. The makers of *The Exorcist* were seemingly happy to let white-led Italian rip-offs like *L'anticristo* (1974, aka *The Antichrist* and *The Tempter*) and *Chi Sei?* (1974, aka *The Devil Within Her* and *Beyond the Door*) slide but pounced on AIP for cutting into their possession action. Scripted by Jaison Starkes, whose only other feature credit is *The Fish That Saved Pittsburgh* (1979) (no? me neither), *J.D.'s Revenge* was directed by well-connected (and white) Hollywood-ian Arthur Marks. After dipping a toe in blaxploitation with the black-and-white cop team actioner *Detroit 9000* (1973), Marks made vehicles for black stars Fred Williamson (*Bucktown*, 1975) and Pam Grier (*Friday Foster*, 1975) before handling his one and only horror film. *J.D.'s Revenge* gets away from the Roman Catholic priests and vomiting children of the *Exorcist* cycle, perhaps to avoid winding up in the dock with *Abby*. It is more closely attached to a mini-boom in psychic phenomena movies which slightly predates *The Exorcist* in which possession is mixed up with reincarnation and other psychic phenomena much featured in 1970s' paperbacks – *The Possession of Joel Delaney* (1972), *The Reincarnation of Peter Proud* (1975), *Audrey Rose* (1977), *Eyes of Laura Mars* (1978). In all of these films, regular folks start having flashes of traumatic past events and find themselves under the control of dead or evil people (not demons) with grudges to work out.

A specific inspiration for *J.D.'s Revenge* might have been *Come Back, Charleston Blue*, the 1972 sequel to *Cotton Comes to Harlem*, in which a string of razor killings seems to have been committed by the ghost of a black gangster gunned down by Dutch Schultz in 1932. Based on Chester Himes's novel, *Come Back, Charleston Blue* adds spooky touches – though there's a rational explanation at the end – to the traditional cops and crooks drama, but also taps into a history that '70s African-American crime films tended to shy away from. *Across 110th Street* (1972), *Black Caesar*, *Super Fly* and the like have contemporary settings, perhaps assuming audiences wanted the sounds and fashions of the '70s (even black Westerns tended to have soul scores). Until *The Cotton Club* (1984) and *Harlem Nights* (1989), black-themed movies held apart from the 1970s nostalgia trend for 1920s and '30s settings. *The Sting* (1973), a film about hustlers and con men scored with Scott Joplin rags, would make perfect sense with an all-black cast, but there might have been a reluctance on the part of Fred Williamson, Richard Roundtree or Jim Brown to conk their hair and wear drape pants, zoot suits and ties the shape of coat-hangers while strutting to the sounds of Cab Calloway or Duke Ellington (rather than Isaac Hayes or Curtis Mayfield) and talking in the kind of slang long associated with out-of-fashion black comedians like Mantan Moreland and Amos 'n' Andy. It wouldn't be until Bill Duke's *Hoodlum* (1997), with Laurence Fishburne as Bumpy Johnson (the inspiration for *Charleston Blue*), that black audiences got a 1930s nostalgia gangster film of their own – and that wasn't a hit.

The most interesting aspect of *J.D.'s Revenge* is that spectral gangster J.D. Walker (David McKnight), connected with the white tradition of crime boss by boasting a stereotype 'scarface' scar, is a type of criminal almost unseen in the movies, but obviously







well-remembered in black neighbourhoods. Because African-Americans were invisible except as comic sidekicks or speciality music acts in classic Hollywood, there were no 1930s and '40s gangster pictures featuring razor-wielding, numbers-running black bad guys. Even 'race films' aimed at black audiences tended to shy away from villains as nasty as the hoods played by James Cagney or Edward G. Robinson in *The Public Enemy* and *Little Caesar* (both 1931). The real-life models for Charleston Blue and J.D. Walker seeped into pop culture at two or three removes – in the singing pimps, gamblers and murderers of *Porgy and Bess* and *Carmen Jones* or the literally bleached-white comic-book zoot-suiter the Joker (ever wonder what colour he was before he fell into the chemicals? – in 1940, that purple suit and pimp hat would have been a dead giveaway). The double act of Starkes and Marks also looks to a very minor classic horror sub-genre to bring J.D. to the present day. Regular Joe's are possessed by gangsters – usually after a brain operation or a mix-up in transmigrating souls – and turned Jekyll and Hyde-style from mild-mannered, professorial goodfellows into snarling, dame-beating, gun-toting goodfellas in *The Man Who Lived Twice* (1936), *Black Friday* (1940), *The Phantom Speaks* (1945) and a few others. Mr Hyde, too, is a Soho thug who acts like a pimp and, in Fredric March's 1932 version, is even made up to look like a racist caricature of an African – paid back by Bernie Casey in *Dr. Black, Mr. Hyde* (1976), where Hyde is white.

It was almost impossible to make a black horror movie in the 1970s without tackling race and politics – even the disposable *Blackenstein* (1973) is about a badly-treated disabled black Vietnam veteran. *J.D.'s Revenge* is among a small clutch of odd, ambitious pictures which feature the return of repressed types of blackness. Before he gets possessed, Isaac (pronounced 'Isaic') Hendrix (Glynn Turman) diligently drives a cab but is earnestly studying to be a lawyer – "bettering himself". He isn't as much of a sell-out/Oreo/Uncle Tom as the white-coated Dr Pride of *Dr. Black, Mr. Hyde* or the hymn-singing, happily married housewife Abby (Carol Speed), but it is similarly a cause for embarrassment when supernatural influence makes him act like a whole different black stereotype. The cop who hates him (James Louis Watkins) isn't even surprised when this solid citizen starts acting like a thug – and seems happy to have his prejudices confirmed (unusually for the genre, he's not a white racist but Isaac's girlfriend's black ex-husband). Initially, the possession is almost comic as Isaac gets a 1940s hairstyle, and feels compelled to buy a snap-brim hat – in one set-piece, he struts his vintage style in a nightclub and impresses an old hooker with his retro look. But J.D. isn't funny – and Isaac's sudden sexual brutality and casual, violent abuse of his girlfriend Christella (Joan Pringle) is a nightmarish throwback to toxic masculinity. The most subtly disturbing element is that Isaac's best friend (Carl Crudup) – the idiot who drags him to a series of strip joints and hypnosis act during a couples' night out in New Orleans (the hypnosis triggers the possession) – is unfazed when he first beats up Christella and says "you have to go into your nigger act once in a while" to keep a woman interested.





Turman had a few blaxploitation credits (the 'Black Bonnie & Clyde' movie *Thomasine & Bushrod*, 1974), but mostly concentrated on more serious fare (*Cooley High*, 1975; *A Hero Ain't Nothin' But a Sandwich*, 1978; *Attica*, 1980). He began his career onstage opposite Sidney Poitier in *A Raisin' in the Sun* and had a major role on *The Wire* (2002-08), but is best remembered for a part he didn't get – he was George Lucas's original choice for Han Solo in *Star Wars* (1977). *J.D.'s Revenge* is Turman's only blaxploitation star role: he's outstanding in it, daring to play the possessed Isaac in an extreme, bizarre, theatrical manner. As J.D., his whole body language changes, his voice deepens to a sneering croak and he does a frenzied shuck-and-jive while slashing with his cut-throat razor. He's so scary that he overbalances the film – in flashbacks, McKnight seems almost genial as the real J.D. compared with Turman's demonic reading of the role. While the scares come from Isaac's bipolar behaviour – his domestic rape/abuse of his partner is very like a plot thread in *The Possession of Joel Delaney*, where white liberal Perry King is inhabited by a Puerto Rican street thug – the plot has more to do with the revenge, as J.D. sets out after the former friend he thinks shot him and his mistress in a meat market in 1942.

Like *Abby* and the higher-toned *Ganja & Hess* (1973), this pits its monster against African-American spirituality. The antagonist is a gospel-spouting revivalist preacher... though the situation is complicated because the ex-boxer Reverend Elija Bliss (Lou Gossett), whose sermons involve a lot of punching the air, is also main suspect in J.D.'s murder. It's an unexplored perverse twist that Isaac/J.D. seduces Bliss's slutty daughter (Alice Jubert), who is really J.D.'s child. In black crime movies, revivalist reverends are pretty much always hypocritical crooks – Calvin Lockhart in *Cotton Comes to Harlem* – so there's a tension here as the most qualified exorcist might well be a phoney and a killer. The situation turns out to be even more complicated, and an encounter with the possessed Isaac even does some good in inspiring the money-grubbing reverend – who has always been the patsy of his brother Theotis (Fred Pinkard), the fight manager who got him to take dives – to become genuinely religious. Cynical modern audiences might be less inclined to buy this – the way it's hard to warm up to the non-possessed devout good woman Abby as opposed to the sassy, fun-loving possessed harpy version – but Elija's redemption plays more credibly than the skimpy-seeming coda in which Christella takes the unpossessed Isaac back after all the abuse heaped on her. Is this a precursor of *A History of Violence* (2005), in which the good woman finds the violent gangster version of her husband sexier, or just one of those you-had-to-be-there-in-the-'70s developments?

*Kim Newman is a novelist, critic and broadcaster. His fiction includes the Anno Dracula series, The Quorum, Life's Lottery, Professor Moriarty: The House of the D'Urbervilles and An English Ghost Story. His non-fiction includes Nightmare Movies and BFI Classics studies of Cat People, Doctor Who and Quatermass and the Pit. He co-wrote the comic miniseries Witchfinder: Mysteries of Unland with Maura McHugh, art by Tyler Crook. He is contributing editor to Sight & Sound and Empire magazines.*





# ABOUT THE TRANSFER

*J.D.'s Revenge* has been exclusively restored for this release by Arrow Films. The film is presented in its original aspect ratio of 1.85:1 with original mono audio.

The original 35mm Interpositive was scanned in 2K resolution on a Lasergraphics Director Scanner at EFilm, Burbank. Picture grading was completed on a DaVinci Resolve. Picture restoration was performed using PFClean software. Thousands of instances of dirt, debris, scratches and other instances of film wear were repaired or removed through a combination of digital restoration tools and techniques. Image stability was also improved.

The mono soundtrack was created by MGM.

All original materials were made available for this restoration by MGM

**Restoration Supervised by** James White, Arrow Films

**Restoration services by Pinewood Studios Group**

Jake Chapman, Michael Davis, Lucie Hancock, Jashesh Jhaveri, Rob Langridge, Jon Mann, Leigh Reed, Jason Stevens, Patrick Wilbraham

**EFilm**

Sean Casey, David Morales

**MGM**

Scott Grossman

# PRODUCTION CREDITS

**Discs and Booklet Produced by** Anthony Nield  
**Executive Producers** Kevin Lambert, Francesco Simeoni  
**Technical Producer** James White  
**QC Manager** Nora Mehenni  
**Authoring** DCU  
**Subtitling** The Engine House  
**Design** Obviously Creative  
**Artwork** Sean Phillips

# SPECIAL THANKS

Alex Agran, Michael Brooke, Elijah Drenner, Greg Folsley Jr., Arthur Marks,  
Kim Newman, Jason Starkes, Glynn Turman





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