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American Commemorative Panels: Vintage Black Cinema

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Vintage Black Cinema



VIVID REMINDERS of a bygone era, these vintage movie posters highlight various facets of the African-American cultural experience as represented in early film. Whether spotlighting the talents of entertainment icons or documenting changing social attitudes and expectations, these posters now serve a greater purpose than publicity and promotion. They have become invaluable pieces of history, preserving memories of cultural phenomena that otherwise might have been forgotten.

In the 1921 silent film *The Sport of the Gods*, the family of a wrongfully convicted man flees disgrace in Virginia only to face immorality and temptation in New York City. Based on a novel by Paul Laurence Dunbar, the film was produced by the short-lived Reol Motion Picture Corporation, which made several movies for black audiences.

Remembered as the first screen appearance of Duke Ellington, the 1929 film *Black and Tan* features three songs by Ellington and his Cotton Club Orchestra. In this 19-minute short, Ellington, playing himself, is in danger of having his piano repossessed. When his fatally ill girlfriend dances at a nightclub, she saves Ellington's music — and asks to hear his “Black and Tan Fantasy” on her deathbed.

One of only four movies to star American-born entertainer Josephine Baker, *Princess Tam-Tam* tells the story of a novelist who discovers a simple African woman, played by Baker, and presents her as a princess to Parisian society. Released in France in 1935, this French-language feature remains a rare film showcase for Baker's singing and dancing.

Released in 1929, *Hallelujah* was one of the first major-studio films to feature an all-black cast. This dramatic story of a field laborer who is seduced away from his community by worldly temptations was filmed primarily in Arkansas and Tennessee. Noted for its portrayal of the rural African-American religious experience, *Hallelujah* earned King Vidor a nomination for Best Director.

Highlighting the talents of singer, saxophonist, and “jump blues” bandleader Louis Jordan, the 1945 short *Caldonia* is often cited as a precursor of today's music videos. The four musical numbers featured in this 18-minute film also appeared as individual “soundies,” short films shown on video jukeboxes at nightclubs and restaurants during the 1940s.



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