



**PAM GRIER: FOXY, FIERCE AND FEARLESS**

# Original Gangstas

The story of *Original Gangstas* is built round a confrontation with the imagery of gang violence, and the first indication of its revisionist intent is the fact it's produced by Fred Williamson's own company Po'Boy Productions, which churned out some of the most inept Black movies of the late 70s and early 80s (*Death Journey*, *Mr Mean*). The director is Larry Cohen, who had also directed Williamson in *Black Caesar* and *Hell Up in Harlem*. The film is set in Gary, Indiana, where a Black youth, Kenny, is shot dead by a gang, the Rebels, after he wins a bet at a basketball game. The owner of the local corner shop reports the drive-by car's licence number to the police, and is shot and wounded in his turn. His son, John (Williamson), who 20 years earlier was a founder member of the Rebels, flies into town. Shocked by the violence that the gang is now visiting in its own neighbourhood, he begins recruiting his old buddies to break up the Rebels.

Though modelled on *The Magnificent Seven*, the plot subverts the preening macho of the 70s. As it must. When Fred Williamson's screen father is shot and he arrives to sort matters out, you're almost tempted to tell him to get his old ass out of there. This may be an action movie, but the old action hero is to be flanked by his even older Blaxploitation colleagues Jim Brown (*Three the Hard Way*), Ron O'Neal (*Superfly*), Pam Grier (*Foxy Brown*) and Richard Roundtree (*Shaft*). The idea seems ridiculous. As the story unfolds, however, it becomes clear that the use of the 70s stars has a deliberate and polemical purpose. All five, it transpires, were founder members of the Rebels, now run by Spiro and Damian, drug-dealing gang leaders in the *New Jack City* mould, who hold the local community hostage by killing witnesses, burning down houses and shooting all who get in their way. Williamson is now a famous Black football star who now lives in luxury in California – OJ perhaps? Brown is a decayed fighter who has deserted his wife and son Kenny (whose murder begins the film). Grier is Brown's wife, mourning her dead child. O'Neal and Roundtree have remained in the old neighbourhood but abandoned all pretensions to leadership, keeping their heads down in order to survive. Williamson faces the same accusation on all sides: that he started the gang, pioneered its methods, then moved away and abandoned the old neighbourhood to its fate. 'You're pissed off,' the mayor tells him, when he demands police protection for the neighbourhood, 'because you've become a victim of something you started.'

'These kids aren't like we used to be,' everyone tells him. 'They don't even want to get out.' So Brown, when he arrives, is faced with the parallel charge of having created a culture of violence around him, then leaving his wife and child to try and survive it.

The arguments don't simply echo Black critiques of the Blaxploitation heroes. By implication the film aims these charges at Brown's and Williamson's generation of Black men. The world to which they have returned is a dysfunctional and crazy place where the lunatics have taken over, and in the sense that they themselves have created these conditions it's their own fault. When Brown confronts the gang leader and accuses him of murdering his

son, the boy replies, 'I am your son. You created me, and now you want to kill me?'

Framing this discussion about the role of Black fathers and their relationship to ghetto violence is another argument about employment and the economy. The first frame tells us Gary is a steel town where the industry has collapsed. Williamson's father talks about the life he's given to his job in the steel mill, and how the decline of the local economy has affected the town. The gang members dance the night away in an abandoned warehouse, and another gang occupies the former steel mill. Everything is rusting and dilapidated. The mayor manages crimewaves by negotiating to contain their gang activities within their neighbourhoods.

The use of the five former Blaxploitation stars creates a curious dialogue across time, as if the actors were personalities arguing with younger, more naive, less sensitive versions of themselves; which in a sense is precisely what's happening. This is a debate which has been heating up among African Americans, sparked off partly by Louis Farrakhan's lectures, partly by the challenges of Black women, partly by the sickening parade of violence and addiction among young Black men. In comparison with their younger selves the five are racked by doubt, uncertainty and the consciousness of failure. Nevertheless, the film signals an interesting indication that the core of Black opinion, bolstered by groups like the Muslims, is preparing to wrestle with the contemporary heroes of gangster chic for control of the imagery of Black identity.

As a result I suspect that *Original Gangstas* will be seen in very different ways by Black and white audiences. What's extraordinary is that Cohen, its white director, has entered the argument in a more or less unselfconscious mood, so that (as with all the better Black films of recent years) it delivers arguments and debates with its core audience's interests in a way which can sound crudely polemical to whites untouched by the emotional resonances. On the other hand, its five big names were once the hottest items in town – and stars never quite fade, even in the movies. In all the years since I last saw Williamson and Brown on the screen it never occurred to me that they could be touching, but when the old warriors end the movie by walking off into a metaphorical sunset I swear I was moved.

**Mike Phillips, *Sight and Sound*, August 1996**

## ORIGINAL GANGSTAS

*Director:* Larry Cohen  
*Production Companies:* Po'Boy Productions, Orion Pictures  
*Producer:* Fred Williamson  
*Line Producer:* Linda Williamson  
*Unit Production Manager:* Bob Manning  
*Location Manager:* Scott Jager  
*Post-production Supervisor:* Judith Blume  
*2nd Unit Director:* Paul Kurta  
*1st Assistant Director:* Forrest Futrell  
*2nd Assistant Director:* Brian W. Boyd  
*2nd 2nd Assistant Director:* Tim Christenson  
*Script Supervisor:* Linda Leifer  
*Casting:* Craig Campobasso  
*Casting (ADR Voice):* L.A. MadDogs  
*Screenplay:* Aubrey Rattan  
*Director of Photography:* Carlos González  
*B Camera/Steadicam Operator:* David McGill  
*Special Effects:* Bob Shelley  
*Editors:* David Kern, Peter B. Ellis  
*Production Designer:* Elayne Barbara Ceder  
*Costume Designer:* Lisa Moffie  
*Wardrobe Supervisors:* Deborah Araya, Sandra Jensen  
*Wardrobe Supervisor:* Susan Kaufmann  
*Key Hair/Make-up:* Connie Kallos  
*Titles/Opticals:* Cinema Research Corporation  
*Music:* Vladimir Horunzhy  
*Executive Music Producers:* David Chackler, Eric Brooks  
*Music Editor:* Lisé Richardson  
*Music Scoring Mixer:* Andy Mackenzie  
*Sound Mixer:* J. Byron Smith  
*Recordist:* Mark Harris  
*Re-recording Mixers:* Steve Pederson, Scott Ganary, Jim Fitzpatrick  
*Supervising Sound Editor:* Richard Taylor  
*Dialogue Editors:* Dennis Gray, Ben Beardwood, Ralph Osborn  
*Sound Effects Editors:* Joseph Earle, Mitch Gettleman, Myron Nettinga, Kenneth Johnson  
*ADR Editor:* James Hebenstreit  
*ADR Mixer:* Greg Steele  
*ADR Recordist:* Tami Treadwell  
*Foley Editors:* Eric Erickson, David Hankins  
*Foley Artists:* Alyson Dee Moore, Nancy Parker  
*Stunt Co-ordinator:* Bob Minor  
*Utility Stunts:* Tony Brubaker, Walter King, Ousaun Elam, David Hernandez, Dwayne Mcgee, Angel Devalle, Gerard Williams, Darren Bond, Carlos Murray, Bob Stuart, Thomas Boone, Orvell Sterling II, Joseph Caballero

## Cast

Fred Williamson (*John Bookman*)  
Jim Brown (*Jake Trevor*)  
Pam Grier (*Laurie Thompson*)  
Paul Winfield (*Reverend Dorsey*)  
Isabel Sanford (*Gracie Bookman*)  
Ron O'Neal (*Bubba*)  
Robert Forster (*Detective Statten*)  
Charles Napier (*Mayor Ritter*)  
Wings Hauser (*Michael Casey*)  
Frank Pesce (*Detective Waits*)  
Richard Roundtree (*Slick*)  
Christopher B. Duncan (*Spyro*)  
Tim Rhoze (*Blood*)  
Eddie 'Bo' Smith Jr (*Damien*)  
Godfrey C. Danchimah (*Marcus*)  
Oscar Brown Jr (*Marvin Bookman*)  
Seraiah Carol (*Thelma Jones*)  
Dru Down (*Kayo*)  
Shyheim Franklin (*Dink*)  
Dawn Stern (*Princess*)  
Timothy Lewis (*Kenny Thompson*)  
Lisa Marie Bright (*Lisa Bookman*)  
Kevin Watson (*Bobby*)  
Anthony Snowden (*doctor*)  
Nick Edenetti (*TV announcer*)  
Jacqueline Swike (*TV news reporter*)  
Kimberly Shufford (*lady in gym*)  
Idella Haywood (*2nd lady in gym*)  
1st Baptist Church Choir (*Christian Chapel Choir*)  
Raymond Taylor (*boy left in street*)  
Scarface (*rebel guard at party*)  
Bushwick Bill (*party cigar smoker*)  
Dani Girl (*dancer at party*)  
Luniz (*customers at Thelma's cafe*)  
The Chi-Lites (*themselves*)

USA 1996  
99 mins

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