



IN PERSON & PREVIEWS

American Fiction

+ Q&A with director Cord Jefferson and actor Sterling K. Brown

American Fiction

Directed by: Cord Jefferson

©: MRC II Distribution Company L.P.

Production Companies: T-Street, Almost Infinite, 3 Arts Entertainment

Presented by: Orion Pictures, MRC

Executive Producers: Rian Johnson, Ram Bergman, Percival Everett, Michael Bowes

Produced by: Ben LeClair, Nikos Karamigios, Cord Jefferson, Jermaine Johnson

Script Supervisor: Frankie Ferrari

Casting by: Jennifer Euston

Written by: Cord Jefferson

Based upon the novel 'Erasure' by: Percival Everett

Director of Photography: Cristina Dunlap

Still Photographer: Claire Folger

Edited by: Hilda Rasula

Production Designer: Jonathan Guggenheim

Art Director: Maddy Young

Costume Designer: Rudy Mance

Department Head Make-up: Michele Lewis

Department Head Hair: Gianna Sparacino

Music by: Laura Karpman

Orchestra: Synchron Stage Orchestra

Music Supervisor: Julie Glaze Houlihan

Production Sound Mixer: Jared Detsikas

Re-recording Mixers: Alexandra Fehrman, Richard Weingart

Supervising Sound Editor: Mandell Winter

Stunt Co-ordinator: John Mason

Cast:

Jeffrey Wright

(Thelonious 'Monk' Ellison, 'Stagg R. Leigh')

Tracee Ellis Ross (Lisa Ellison)

John Ortiz (Arthur)

Erika Alexander (Coraline)

Leslie Uggams (Agnes Ellison)

Adam Brody (Wiley Valdespino)

Keith David (Willy the Wonker)

Issa Rae (Sintara Golden)

Sterling K. Brown (Cliff Ellison)

USA 2023©

117 mins

Digital

A Curzon release

Author and activist James Baldwin once said, 'If I love you, I have to make you conscious of the things you don't see.' This quote then begs the question: What does it mean to be seen as Black? Who gets to define, evaluate, and authenticate Blackness?

Is society, industry, and media ready to breathe in the depth and breadth of Black identity beyond recycled perceptions and preconceived notions? Is it time to turn up the volume on Blackness so Black experiences can break through – in total living colour?

Tony® and Emmy® Award-winner Jeffrey Wright (*Westworld*, *No Time to Die*, *Angels in America*) leads the cast of *American Fiction*, a wickedly bold and smart comedy about the commodification of marginalised voices and portrait of Thelonious 'Monk' Ellison (Wright), a respected author and professor of English literature at a predominately white institution who experiences professional and personal events that force him to reexamine the terms of his integrity, ideals and artistic existence.

Thelonious' impatience with his students' cultural sensitivities threatens his academic standing, while his latest novel fails to attract publishers who claim Monk's writing 'isn't Black enough'. He travels to his hometown of Boston to participate in a literary festival where all eyes are on the first-time author of a bestseller titled *We's Lives in Da Ghetto*, a book Monk dismisses as pandering to readers seeking stereotypical stories of Black misery. Meanwhile, Monk's family experiences tragedy and his ailing mother requires a level of care neither he nor his complicated and self-proclaimed black sheep of a brother (Sterling K. Brown) can afford.

One night, in a fit of spite, Monk concocts a pseudonymous novel, *My Pafology*, embodying every Black cliché he can imagine. His agent submits it to a major publisher who immediately offers the biggest advance Monk's ever seen. As the novel is rushed to the printers and Hollywood comes courting, Monk must reckon with an identity of his own making.

Though the book on which *American Fiction* is based was released in 2001, it felt timeless for writer/director Cord Jefferson. 'When I finished reading it, I was just astounded. The material itself, just about the racial politics around culture and of being an artist in America – these are issues that I've been discussing with my friends and discussing with myself for 20 years now. The thing that's very clear is that all these issues are still pertinent to today's world, unfortunately, and there's still a lot of relevance to this book.'

Once the script was complete, Jefferson sent it to Ben LeClair at T-Street, unsure of the reaction he'd receive. Recalling the meeting about his vision for the film, Jefferson says, 'It was very emotional. I assumed it was going to be very difficult to get anybody on board. This is a movie that pokes fun at a lot of things and pokes fun at a lot of types of people. Ben and Nikos (fellow *American Fiction* producers) have both said to me, "I see myself being made fun of sometimes here and there." And yet they're not offended by it. They understand the intent.'

BECOME A BFI MEMBER

Enjoy a great package of film benefits including priority booking at BFI Southbank and BFI Festivals. Join today at bfi.org.uk/join

SIGHT AND SOUND

Never miss an issue with **Sight and Sound**, the BFI's internationally renowned film magazine. Subscribe from just £25*

* Price based on a 6-month print subscription (UK only). More info: sightandsoundsubs.bfi.org.uk

SIGHT AND SOUND

IN PERSON & PREVIEWS

Doctor Who Preview: Darkness & Light – The Life of Graham Williams + intro by director Chris Chapman

Sun 4 Feb 09:30

Doctor Who: Horror of Fang Rock + Q&A with Louise Jameson

Sun 4 Feb 12:00

TV Preview: The Way + Q&A with Michael Sheen, James Graham, Adam Curtis and cast members Steffan Rhodri, Mali Harries, Callum Scott Howells, Maja Laskowska

Mon 5 Feb 18:15

The Scent of Green Papaya Mùi đu đủ xanh

Thu 8 Feb 18:20; Wed 28 Feb 20:40

Paolo Taviani in Conversation

Sun 11 Feb 18:00

Mark Kermode Live in 3D at the BFI

Mon 12 Feb 18:30

Preview: Getting It Back: The Story of Cymande + Q&A with Tim Mackenzie-Smith and Cymande, plus afterparty

Tue 13 Feb 18:30

Christopher Nolan in Conversation

Thu 15 Feb 18:30

Tenet + intro by director Christopher Nolan

Thu 15 Feb 20:15 BFI IMAX

Preview: Evil Does Not Exist Aku wa sonzai shinai

Sat 17 Feb 18:00

TV Preview: This Town + Q&A with Steven

Knight, cast members Michelle Dockery, Jordan

Bolger, Ben Rose and Levi Brown, director Paul

Whittington and executive producer Karen

Wilson

Mon 26 Feb 18:15

BFI PLAYER

We are always open online on BFI Player where you can watch the best new, cult & classic cinema on demand. Showcasing hand-picked landmark British and independent titles, films are available to watch in three distinct ways: Subscription, Rentals & Free to view.

See something different today on player.bfi.org.uk

Join the **BFI mailing list** for regular programme updates. Not yet registered? Create a new account at www.bfi.org.uk/signup

'It all happened so fast, which is how it should be when you read something so affecting and original,' says Ben. 'While it was unlike any other script it also felt mainstream, loaded with universal ideas.'

Jefferson continues, 'I want this [film] to feel like a big tent. There's room for everybody to come in and enjoy themselves.'

Jefferson wanted the right people on board to bring *American Fiction* to the screen. From the start, Wright was the choice to portray Monk. '100 pages in, I was already thinking of Jeffrey Wright and what he would be like in the role,' says Jefferson.

Jefferson knew Wright could bring the perfect performance and attitude to the production, noting, 'Jeffrey's an actor that actors love. He was always somebody whose work I really respected. He was the first person we sent it to, and when he agreed to do it, I was just over the moon. He's somebody who thinks about these kinds of issues, who has made no secret that he's very politically active and interested in the issues of race in America and political issues in America.'

For Wright, Cord's storytelling drew him in, declaring, 'I thought the script offered a lot for me in terms of a character to wrap myself around, but also in terms of not just the themes, but also the construct, the ways in which the story is told,' says Wright. 'I found it very interesting and clever that it really kind of doesn't take sides. It just presents sides from a very specific perspective, but at the same time it's welcoming.' Continuing, Wright says, 'It's dealing with some super relevant, super tricky kind of age-old themes that exist both in our society and in our storytelling, but there's a deep thread of comedy running through it, and parody and irony.'

Producer Jermaine Johnson concurs, 'Our film is relevant for the same reason Percival's novel is still relevant 20+ years after publication. Because American society has indoctrinated people into a set of things to expect from people based on their race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, etc. And those very same people constantly find themselves tasked with the responsibility of reminding people that they are not a monolith. The reality is there's a complexity of stories to be told about every walk of human life. We just need to either be given or seize the opportunities to tell them.'

Production notes