



Buck and the Preacher

Director: Sidney Poitier

©: Columbia Pictures Industries Inc.

Production Companies: E. & R. Productions Corporation, Belafonte Enterprises

Producer: Joel Glickman

Associate Producer: Herb Wallerstein

Unit Production Manager: Sheldon Schrager

Production Consultant: Alfonso Sánchez Tello

Location Contact: José Haro

2nd Unit Director: Chuck Hayward

Assistant Directors: Sheldon Schrager, Jesús Marín

Script Supervisor: Malcolm Atterbury Jr

Castings: Billy Gordon

Screenplay: Ernest Kinoy

Story: Ernest Kinoy, Drake Walker

Director of Photography: Alex Phillips

Camera Operator: Manuel Santaella

Key Grip: Rafael Delong

Crane Grip: Salvador Serrano

Special Photography: Gilbert-Waugh Productions

Special Effects: León Ortega

Film Editor: Pembroke J. Herring

Assistant Editor: Garner M.J. Morris

Apprentice Editor: Jason Starks

Production Designer: Sydney Z. Litwack

Set Decorator: Ernesto Carrasco

Prop Master: Antonio Mata

Costume Designer: Guy Verhille

Wardrobe: Adolfo Ramírez, Ermon Sessions

Hairdresser: Harold Melvin

Titles: Maury Nemoj

Music: Benny Carter

Featuring: Sonny Terry, Brownie McGhee

Music Editor: Else Blangsted

Sound Mixer: Tom Overton

Dubbing Mixer: Richard Portman

Sound Effects: Ltd. Edit International

Dialogue Coach: Alice Spivak

Wrangler: Jose Maria Hernandez

Cast:

Sidney Poitier (*Buck*)

Harry Belafonte (*Preacher*)

Ruby Dee (*Ruth*)

Cameron Mitchell (*Deshay*)

Denny Miller (*Floyd*)

Nita Talbot (*Madam Esther*)

James Mceachin (*Kingston*)

Clarence Muse (*Cudjo*)

Enrique Lucero (*Indian chief*)

Julie Robinson (*Sinsie*)

John Kelly (*sheriff*)

Lynn Hamilton (*Sarah*)

Tony Brubaker (*headman*)

Bobby Johnson (*man who is shot*)

Doug Johnson (*Sam*)

Errol John (*Joshua*)

Ken Menard (*Little Henry*)

Pamela Jones (*Delilah*)

Drake Walker (*elder*)

Dennis Hines (*Little Toby*)

Fred M. Waugh (*Mizoo*)

Bill Shannon (*Tom*)

Phil Adams (*Frank*)

Walter Scott (*Earl*)

John Howard (*George*)

Shirleena Manchur (*Esther's girl*)

La Markova (*Esther's girl*)

Hannelore Richter (*Esther's girl*)

Valerie Heckman (*Esther's girl*)

Stephanie Lower (*Esther's girl*)

José Carlos Ruiz (*brave*)

Ron Fletcher (*Logan*)

BLACK RODEO: A HISTORY OF THE AFRICAN AMERICAN WESTERN

Buck and the Preacher

The screening on Saturday 8 February will be introduced by season programmer Mia Mask

Among the more successful elements of Jordan Peele's flawed, ambitious space-cowboy foray *Nope* (2022) is the film's intelligent engagement with cinema history and visual culture. A particularly significant reference is to Sidney Poitier's 1972 film *Buck and the Preacher*, the poster of which is seen displayed in the home of horse-wrangler protagonists OJ and Em Haywood (Daniel Kaluuya and Keke Palmer), as Peele places his film in the context of Black western forebears.

Rooted in 1970s western revisionism and burgeoning Blaxploitation, *Buck* casts Poitier alongside Harry Belafonte as cowboys in the late 1860s who end up uniting to lead a wagon train of Black settlers from Louisiana to Kansas, all the while trying to outwit the white raiders hired to either intimidate the travellers back to the plantations of the South, or murder them. With echoes of John Ford's *Wagon Master* (1950) and numerous westerns focused on the bonding of contrasting male characters (Poitier's wagonmaster Buck is a wily former soldier; Belafonte's 'Preacher' is really a hustler), *Buck and the Preacher* is highly allusive. But to view the film merely as a Black Butch and Sundance is to diminish it: Poitier's film goes deeper, supplementing shoot-outs, chases and comic high jinks with more serious intent, evident in its credit sequence and title-card preamble. This opening, with sepia-toned images of African American pioneers, not only lays out the film's post-Civil War context from a Black perspective but also announces its intention to challenge historical erasure: 'This picture is dedicated to those men, women, and children who lie in graves as unmarked as their place in history.'

A subversive streak is evident in numerous aspects, from the film's nuanced depiction of the relations between African-American and Native American characters to the space given to the character of Buck's wife Ruth (invested with strength and complexity by the vital Ruby Dee). Poitier's own performance is compelling, but the film's wild card is Belafonte's turn as the wisecracking Preacher, who packs a pistol between the pages of his Good Book.

Introduced during some enthusiastic al fresco ablutions, Belafonte's pleasure in roughing up his image and persona – yellowed teeth, wild eyes – is palpable; he also has the film's strongest character arc. Despite some heavy-handed elements (Benny Carter's score, performed by bluesmen Sonny Terry, Brownie McGhee and Don Frank Brooks, is over-insistently employed in the film's opening stages), Poitier – replacing Joseph Sargent as director – shows great assurance for a first-time filmmaker in modulating shifts from action and comedy to more reflective, emotional moments, bringing out the strengths of Ernest Kinoy's screenplay. Poitier's career as a director would encompass both worthy efforts (the 1973 romance *A Warm December*) and woeful ones (the 1990 Bill Cosby comedy *Ghost Dad*); this film, undervalued on release, remains a highlight, and richly rewards rediscovery.

Alex Ramon, *Sight and Sound*, November 2022

Jerry Gatlin (*deputy*)
Ivan Scott (*express agent*)
Bill Cook (*man in express office*)
John Kennedy (*bank teller*)
USA 1972
102 mins
Digital 4K

Restored in 4K in 2022 by Sony Pictures
Entertainment at Cineric laboratory, from the
original negative. Colour grading completed by MTI

BLACK RODEO: A HISTORY OF THE AFRICAN AMERICAN WESTERN

The Legend of N*** Charley**

Sat 1 Feb 12:45; Wed 19 Feb 20:50

Duel at Diablo

Sat 1 Feb 16:10; Fri 7 Feb 20:40

100 Rifles

Sat 1 Feb 20:45; Tue 18 Feb 18:10

Sergeant Rutledge

Sun 2 Feb 13:30; Sat 8 Feb 17:40 (+ intro by
season programmer Mia Mask)

The Learning Tree

Wed 5 Feb 20:40; Fri 21 Feb 18:10

Skin Game

Thu 6 Feb 20:40; Sun 2 Mar 18:30

Take a Hard Ride

Sat 8 Feb 15:00; Thu 13 Feb 20:30

Django Unchained

Sat 8 Mar 20:00; Sun 16 Mar 17:40

Buck and the Preacher

Sat 8 Feb 20:30 (+ intro by season programmer
Mia Mask); Sat 15 Feb 12:50

Concrete Cowboy

Sun 9 Mar 16:00; Sun 16 Mar 15:00

Introducing Black Rodeo

Mon 10 Feb 18:20

Posse

Mon 10 Feb 20:40 (+ intro by Mario Van Peebles);
Tue 25 Feb 20:40

Rosewood

Wed 12 Feb 20:30; Sat 15 Mar 12:15

The Harder They Come

Sat 15 Feb 15:20; Tue 4 Mar 20:55

The Harder They Fall

Sat 15 Mar 17:30; Mon 17 Mar 20:20

Nope

Sat 15 Mar 20:30; Tue 18 Mar 18:10

Please note that many of these films contain
excessive violence along with racist, misogynist
and other discriminatory language, images or other
content that reflect views prevalent in its time but
will cause offence today (as they did then). The
titles are included here for historical, cultural or
aesthetic reasons and these views are in no way
endorsed by the BFI or its partners.

Find Mia Mask's book *Black Rodeo: A History of
the African American Western* in the BFI Shop

Buck and the Preacher, which marked Sidney Poitier's directorial debut, focuses on a hitherto neglected part of (Black) American history: the post-Civil War period when freed slaves moved west to found homesteads, but were tracked down by white marauders hired to stop the exodus of cheap Black labour from the South. Poitier also stars in the film, as the devoted ex-Union cavalryman who becomes wagon-master to a group of Black migrants.

Structurally, *Buck and the Preacher* is a fairly conventional western, employing many of the set-pieces found in the genre. However, it re-interprets elements of the genre in Black terms, reversing many of the conventions (or expectations) in order to articulate a specifically Black perspective. At times this places a lot of strain on the generic conventions, particularly in view of the western's roots in white supremacy. Consequently, the positive relationship between the Blacks and the Indians (as opposed to the negative one between the whites and Blacks on the one hand, and the whites and Indians on the other) can only be sustained by strident civil rights polemic.

The militancy of the 1970s is nevertheless clearly evident, although the film avoids the more extreme, controversial imagery of the 'blaxploitation' cycle of films made during the period. The image of freed slaves seeking a new life elsewhere not only has a contemporary significance, but also provides a constant reminder of the Southern plantation from which the migrants are escaping. By implication, it is not the big white mansion and cosy white aristocracy that they want to leave behind, but brutal slavery. Thus, within the film's framework, it is wholly unnecessary to engage in polemics around the Southern milieu as such.

Not surprisingly, *Buck and the Preacher* was well-received by both white and Black audiences, and widely acclaimed as a serious historical film depicting the Black American experience positively.

Jim Pines, NFT programme notes

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