Blacks in film

Story by Kianna Coleman and Terri McNair

Afro-Americans have come a long way in the entertainment world which has been dominated by other races for so long. Black people have come from singing in the fields to singing in helicopters in music videos. Progress has also been made in films. Long ago White Americans portrayed Blacks through the use of make-up. Years later, Afro-Americanswere allowed to perform but still had minor roles in films. Black actors ' and actresses such as Louise Beavers who in 1934 played a stereotypical mammy figure in "Imitation of Life." Today, Afro-Americans are still playing stereotypical roles such as "gang-bangers" and "project dwellers." It is a significant change from the past, but is it for the best?

Are African Americans today portrayed in a better way than in the past? Originally, in the days of mammies, coons, and Uncle Toms, degrading images depicted Black people with bugged eyes, pouted lips, and incorrect grammar just for a minor role. Now times have changed but only for the worse. Blacks are being stereotyped in television as killers, prostitutes, drug dealers, pimps, and unintelligent sidekicks. Shows such as "Martin," "Fresh Prince of Belair," and "Roc" were a few of the comedies that showed African Americans as funny, yet sometimes ignorant characters.

In 1996, it seemed as if things were looking better for Afro-Americans when fall TV introduced two networks, United Paramount Network (UPN) and Warner Brothers (WB) along with sev-

enteen predominantly Afro-American shows. Afro-Americans thought they were getting a long awaited representation. They soon woke up from that dream to face a horrible reality. The shows being aired on the two networks actually did more harm to the already deteriorated image Afro-Americans. Many of the shows , such as "The Wayans Brothers" (WB) and "Homeboys in Outer-Space" (UPN)

Illustration by Sabrina Tillman

contained overly simplistic characters. In recent news, the Beverly Hills/Hollywood chapter of the NAACP attacked the WB and UPN networks, claiming their minority-theme shows did not provide a fair representation of Black America.

Networks are afraid to dive into the world of black dramas, especially ones that center on the balck family. Television critic Ken Perkins stated , "Black dramas are among the most the

most difficult of all minority-theme shows to get approval for air play. A majority of shows that portray Afro-Americans in a dramatic sense, such as "Women of Brewster Place" and "Frank's Place" have made it on the air, but were also shot-lived."

Stereotypes of Afro-Americans are also present in film. Afro-Americans have made significant strides against their stereotypes in movies such as "Birth of a Nation" and " The Mack," however damaging images continues to exist. Instead of being portrayed as mammies and pimps, we are steadily barraged by images of us as gang-bangers and drug dealers. The 1990's introduced anew decade of films highlighting the Afro-American struggles of "hustling to get by."

Many Afro-American directors and producers claimed these films were a representation of Afro-American reality. But, exactly whose reality were they representing. The film industry is a billlion-dollar business, which means whatever films Hollywood executives will sell, will be made. That means that Afro-American's true reality, more often than not, will be put on the back burner in order for shoot-em-up hood movies and ridiculous sex comedies to be made. So should Afro-Americans blame Hollywood studios for not making and promoting positive Black films? That could be the case, however, the film "Love Jones" was highly advertised months before its release, and it still only earned $11.7 million. Why are Afro-Americans steadily responding to