SUPERBAD!
THE SOUL OF THE CITY
1. THEME FROM SHAFT
   Isaac Hayes

2. FREDDIE'S DEAD
   (THEME FROM SUPERFLY)
   Curtis Mayfield

3. TROUBLE MAN
   Marvin Gaye

4. THEME FROM CLEOPATRA JONES
   Joe Simon featuring the Mainstereers

5. MASTERPIECE
   The Temptations

6. LOW RIDER
   War

7. ACROSS 110TH STREET
   Bobby Womack

8. THE PAYBACK
   James Brown

9. BROTHER'S GONNA WORK IT OUT
   Melvin Van Peebles

10. BACK STABBERS
    The O'Jays

11. ARE YOU MAN ENOUGH
    Four Tops

12. INNER CITY BLUES (MAKE ME WANNA HOLLER)
    Marvin Gaye

13. SUPERFLY
    Curtis Mayfield

14. SUPER BAD
    James Brown

15. PAPA WAS A ROLLING STONE
    The Temptations

16. CHECK OUT YOUR MIND
    The Impressions

17. SWEETBACK'S THEME
    Melvin Van Peebles

18. BE THANKFUL FOR WHAT YOU GOT
    William DeVaughn

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The early '70s were the heyday of blaxploitation films. Featuring all-black casts (with one white actor as the obligatory Anglo villain), these low-budget flicks offered loud, action-packed, humorous and often irresistible takes on black urban life, generally playing to stereotypical images of pimps, drug dealers and other denizens of the street. The movies were immensely popular with African Americans, who had rarely seen black heroes on the big screen, but white kids raised on a diet of Roger Corman exploitation films liked them too. The best, such as Superfly, transcended the stereotypes and clichés to achieve genre-film greatness.

In the beginning there was Shaft, directed by award-winning African American photographer Gordon Parks. In this groundbreaking movie, private eye John Shaft is hired by a Harlem crime boss to snatch back his kidnapped daughter. When Isaac Hayes was asked to read the script and compose the score, he thought he was being considered for the lead role. The part went to Richard Roundtree before Hayes even got to audition. The former Stax Records producer-songwriter had already committed to the project by then, so he went ahead and completed his score. The resulting Theme from Shaft was a No. 1 pop hit in 1971 and won an Oscar. Three more Shaft vehicles followed for Roundtree, while Hayes eventually got into acting after all.

Superfly was directed by Parks' son Gordon Jr. The film, featuring Ron O'Neal as cocaine dealer Youngblood Priest, captured the feel and mise-en-scène of black ghettos in the post-civil rights era better than any other of its genre, and Curtis Mayfield gave Parks the score he deserved. Mayfield said he wanted his score to "get past the glitter of the drug scene and go to the depth of it," and he succeeded with the title song, Superfly, and especially with the chilling Freddie's Dead (Theme from Superfly), about the movie's doomed drug addict.
Bobby Womack wrote and performed *Across 110th Street* for the gruesomely violent admonitory movie of the same title. To round out his score for *Shaft in Africa*, Johnny Pate had the Four Tops sing Dennis Lambert and Brian Potter’s *Are You Man Enough*. Another Motown figure, Willie Hutch, contributed *Brother’s Gonna Work It Out* to *The Mack*, featuring Richard Pryor. Melvin Van Peebles not only wrote, directed and starred in *Sweet Sweetback’s Baadasssss Song*—perhaps the lowest-budget film in the genre—he took care of *Sweetback’s Theme* as well. Joe Simon’s *Theme from Cleopatra Jones* enlivened the first of Tamara Dobson’s three movies from the ’70s. Dobson was the second-biggest female blaxploitation star, after Pam Grier, even though Dobson had far superior martial arts moves. *Trouble Man*, from the 1972 film of the same name, was Marvin Gaye’s contribution to the blaxploitation movement. The song is the only vocal effort on a jazzy sound-track album that reflects Gaye’s fascination with the Moog synthesizer. The LP is one of only two for which Gaye wrote all the songs, and his performance on it leaves little doubt that he considered himself a hero-victim just like the movie character. Gaye liked the title song enough to open his live show with it for the next few years. *Black Caesar’s Revenge* was to be the second collaboration between James Brown and director Larry Cohen—Brown had scored Cohen’s *Black*
**DiSCOGRAPhY**

*Indicates highest Billboard R&B chart position

1. **THEME FROM SHAFT**  

2. **FREDDIE'S DEAD (THEME FROM SUPERFLY)**  

3. **TROUBLE MAN**  
   *Marvin Gaye* • Music and lyrics by Marvin Gaye. Tamla 54228 (1973) No. 4* Jobete Music Co. Inc./Twentieth Century-Fox Music Corp. ASCAP. © 1972 Motown Records, a Division of UMG Recordings, Inc.

4. **THEME FROM CLEOPATRA JONES**  

5. **MASTERPIECE**  

6. **LOW RIDER**  

7. **ACROSS 110TH STREET**  

8. **THE PAYBACK**  

9. **BROTHER'S GONNA WORK IT OUT**  
10. **Back Stabbers**  
*The O'Jays* • Music and lyrics by Leon Huff, Gene McFadden and John Whitehead. Philadelphia International 3517 (1972) No. 1*  

11. **Are You Man Enough**  
*Four Tops* • Music and lyrics by Dennis Lambert and Brian Potter. Dunhill/ABC 4354 (1973) No. 2*  

12. **Inner City Blues (Make Me Wanna Holler)**  

13. **Superfly**  
*Curtis Mayfield* • Music and lyrics by Curtis Mayfield. Curtom 1951 (1970) No. 3*  

14. **Super Bad**  
Critic Music Inc. BMI. Courtesy of Universal Records, a Division of UMG Recordings, Inc.

15. **Papa Was a Rolling Stone**  

16. **Check Out Your Mind**  
*The Impressions* • Music and lyrics by Curtis Mayfield. Curtom 1951 (1970) No. 3*  

17. **Sweetback's Theme**  

18. **Be Thankful For What You Got**  
*William DeVaughn* • Music and lyrics by William DeVaughn. Roxbury 0236 (1974) No. 1*  
Delicious Apple Music Corp./EMI Jemaxal Music Inc./H&R Lastrada Music/Melomega Music Ltd./Music Sales Corp. ASCAP. © 1974 Dominion Entertainment, Inc. Under License from Dominion Entertainment, Inc.
Caesar—and The Payback was to be the opening song for the movie. Brown’s musical director, trombonist Fred Wesley, wrote the words and music based on a rough cut he’d seen, but Cohen felt the finished track wasn’t funky enough. The miffed Brown promptly took it back and put it out on his own, while Cohen, who’d changed the name of the movie to Hell Up in Harlem, used Willie Hutch for the sound track. Brown got the last laugh, though; his single went to the top of the black charts.

Super Bad was the second track Brown cut with his ’70s band, which featured bassist Bootsy Collins and other former King Records sidemen. (Brown had hired them on the spot backstage after his ’60s band quit en masse just before a concert.) Brown forged his new groove with this group by keeping the emphasis “on the one” (on the downbeat), a phrase that later became a rallying cry for Parliament-Funkadelic.

The Impressions’ Check Out Your Mind, powered by Curtis Mayfield’s incisive guitar, was the group’s last hit before Mayfield released his first solo album. Marvin Gaye wrote Inner City Blues (Make Me Wanna Holler) with James Nyx. The obscure Nyx had previously helped out on work that Gaye produced for the Originals, and had apprenticed under Gaye mentor Harvey Fuqua. The single became the third top-10 hit off What’s Going On, the 1971 song cycle in which Gaye declared his artistic independence from the Motown machinery. Though label boss Berry Gordy predictably hated that album, Gaye’s success with it opened Motown up to further experimentation. Writer-producer Norman Whitfield first produced the bluesy Papa Was a Rolling Stone, a ballad of broken black family life that he co-wrote with Barrett Strong, for the Undisputed Truth in 1972. But the song achieved its full potential later the same year when the Temptations rode it to the top of the pop charts. (It was their first No. 1 after Damon Harris replaced Eddie Kendricks.) Whitfield has said that he was trying to make music “with the scope of a movie”—maybe even a blaxploitation flick—when he put together the 14-minute Masterpiece, the title song to a Temptations album.
The Tempts, who appear on less than half of the track, resisted change as strongly as Gordy had, but Whitfield insisted on “keeping the sound up-to-date” in the wake of new trends in black music instigated primarily by Sly and the Family Stone. When the producer cut the song down to single length and it went to No. 1, the group reconsidered.

Like many War hits, the car anthem Low Rider was created in the studio with the entire group sharing writing credits, though the initial idea came from tenor player Charles Miller, who drove a tricked-out ’48 Chevy. William DeVaughn was a Washington, D.C., Jehovah’s Witness who raised $1,400 to pay a fly-by-night production company to cut his Be Thankful for What You Got at Sigma Sound Studios with top Philly International sidemen. Even after the song topped the soul charts in 1974, DeVaughn continued going door-to-door in D.C. for the Witnesses. Kenny Gamble and Leon Huff’s Philly International label had been broken wide-open two years earlier after John Whitehead and Gene McFadden, who lived in the same housing project and performed as members of the Epsilons, brought in Back Stabbers. Huff sat down at the piano to help them finish it, and though Whitehead wanted the song for his group, the producer demanded that it go to the O’Jays. The veteran group hated it but had a change of heart once the song became Philly International’s first No. 1.

With its bitter social commentary, Back Stabbers captured the African American mood as surely as did blaxploitation movies. Like numerous black hits from that era, the song could almost have been a movie in itself.

—JOHN MORTHLAND