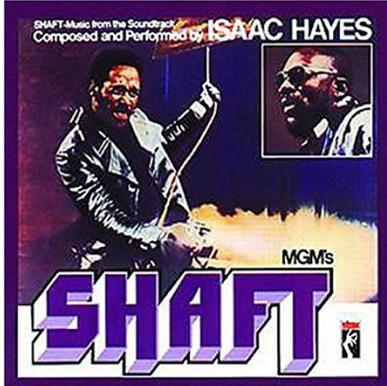


“Theme from ‘Shaft’”—Isaac Hayes (1971)

Added to the National Registry: 2013

Essay by Josiah Howard (guest post)*



Original album cover



Label



Isaac Hayes

“My only responsibility was to make sure [director Gordon Parks] didn’t hand me my head on a platter,” remembered Isaac Hayes about creating “Theme from ‘Shaft’,” the number one pop and soul hit culled from his “Shaft” soundtrack album. “It was my first movie gig and I wanted to make sure I did it right.”

He did: but only after passing a necessary test. Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, the film studio that produced the blockbuster hit, charged Hayes with scoring the opening scene of the film. It was a make-or-break moment—and Hayes passed with flying colors. “Theme from ‘Shaft’” not only told private detective John Shaft’s story, it made clear his intentions: John Shaft was going to get what he wanted by whatever means possible—and he was going to do it according to his own terms.

Characterized by a splendid 16-note high hat ride pattern, “Theme from ‘Shaft’” had an expansive list of merits. There was the funky, incessant wah-wah guitar pedal, the lulling flute, the dynamic strings, the unrelenting bass drum, the haunting horns, and the punctuating—distinctly ethnic—female background vocals. It was a masterwork conceived and executed by an established musician.

Isaac Hayes came to prominence in the early sixties as a jack-of-all-trades at the Memphis, Tennessee-based Stax Records. Hayes made his mark at the label first as a songwriter and then as a solo artist known for his seductive baritone and his elaborately conceived theme albums like “Hot Buttered Soul” (1969), “The Isaac Hayes Movement” (1970) and “Black Moses” (1971)—works that featured exploratory musical outings with songs that often ran for more than 15 minutes.

“Theme from ‘Shaft’” changed Hayes’ standing in the recording industry. At the age of 29, he was jettisoned into super stardom and the record books. No longer considered to be just an “album artist,” he was now recategorized as a more valuable commodity: a “singles artist”—a performer capable of attracting the all-important record buying demographic: teenagers.

“When I gave [MGM] ‘Theme from ‘Shaft’” there were no lyrics,” explained Hayes years later. “I thought that that was what a ‘theme’ song in a movie was supposed to be: an instrumental. They told me it was cool but it needed lyrics or the kids wouldn’t buy it. So, I wrote the lyrics in twenty minutes. The lyrics on the song are the exact same lyrics that I wrote on the fly.”

It was 20 minutes well spent. The following year Isaac Hayes’ “Theme from ‘Shaft’” won the Academy Award for “Best Original Song” (at the time, he was only the third African American to win the prize). Additionally, the “Shaft” double-album soundtrack won the Golden Globe Award for Best Original Score and the Grammy Award for Best Original Score Written for a Motion Picture.

Today, almost 50 years after it was released, “Theme from ‘Shaft’” remains a cornerstone in popular music: a fascinating melding of pop, soul, jazz and disco (the 4:34 album version was played in discos while the 3:15 single edit was a radio hit). And the song captured the public’s imagination. Front and center was its unapologetic flaunting of contemporary African American idioms, catchphrases and slang. “Cop out,” “cat,” “we can dig it,” and “bother-man” were jive expressions of the day, while the exclamation “you damned right!” proved to be the very first time a number one pop song featured the word “damn” in it.

And there was more: “Theme from ‘Shaft’” contained two provocative double-entendres. “He’s a black private dick who’s a sex machine to all the chicks” was a line that left nothing to the imagination, and “he’s a bad mother... (shut ‘yo mouth!)” was a pointed and daring unfinished sentence: an unblushingly direct shout out that brought the narrative to the streets.

“Shaft” provided the prototype for the macho black action heroes (and anti-heroes) that permeated the more than 200 blaxploitation films released during the 1970s, and Isaac Hayes was an integral part of the films’ success. In fact, his work on “Shaft” led to many other opportunities; he was the featured performer in 1973’s concert film “Wattstax,” he starred in 1974’s “Truck Tuner,” and he joined an ensemble cast in the same years’ “Three Tough Guys” (he also composed and released soundtrack albums for the latter two films).

Hayes’s easy entry into Blaxploitation cinema was facilitated by this visual presentation: Isaac Hayes *looked* like a Blaxploitation cinema hero. Known alternatively as “Black Moses” (an appropriation of one of his album titles) and “Black Elvis,” in performance, Hayes eschewed clothing for Black Power-themed costumes which often consisted of chains, capes, furs, spangled suits and elaborate hats. His dynamic visual statement was heightened by his signature dark sunglasses and shiny bald head. And he was respected. Isaac Hayes donated generously to African American associations and causes, performed benefit concerts, and, even at the height of his success, remained forever available to the African American press.

Catchy, topical, political, innovative and distinctly aware of its audience and the time in which it was created, “Theme from ‘Shaft’” presents a perfect musical picture of the crossover from the 1960s to the 1970s: the changes in both music and audience expectations. With its superb continuum, layered choruses and beautifully realized articulation, the song was more than a fleeting pop concoction: it presented a guidebook for those who might follow—most notably Barry White and his Love Unlimited Orchestra.

Today, “Theme from ‘Shaft’” remains a unique and original contribution to the American Songbook. Used again and again in films, television and commercials, it is one of very few songs that borrowed from the past but decidedly looked toward to the future. It’s true that other soul music stars released superb blaxploitation soundtrack albums and singles: James Brown (“Black Caesar”), Curtis Mayfield (“Superfly”), and Marvin Gaye (“Trouble Man”) but none topped Hayes’ masterpiece; not even the sound-alike “Blowin’ Your Mind” by O.C. Smith, the theme song from “Shaft’s” sequel, “Shaft’s Big Score!”

“Theme from ‘Shaft’” changed things: it shimmied and shook, winked and whistled and, most profoundly, inspired a generation of music lovers and musicians. It was the first—and it was the best.

Josiah Howard is the author of four popular books including “Donna Summer: Her Life & Music” and “Blaxploitation Cinema: The Essential Reference Guide.” His many writing credits include articles for “The New York Times,” “Reader’s Digest” and “The Village Voice.” Currently he is a senior contributor at The Grindhouse Cinema Database and Furious Cinema. Visit his website: <http://www.josiahhoward.com/>

*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.