

# *The Blood of Jesus*

By Mark S. Giles

In 1941, “The Blood of Jesus” delved deeply into cultural themes related to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and Depression era black community such as the importance of conservative family values, Christianity, and questions of “virtuous” rural life compared to “sinful” urban living. Spencer Williams (1893-1969), wrote the script, directed the film, and appeared as co-star, was an experienced Hollywood veteran. Williams became better known for his television portrayal of Andy in the controversial but popular Amos & Andy sitcom of the early 1950s, proved himself a highly talented filmmaker routinely working with limited budgets (Cripps, 1993). Alfred Sack, a white movie producer of many ‘race films’ collaborated with Williams on “The Blood of Jesus,” which realized some financial success.

Williams filled the movie with fundamental southern Baptist religious overtones and conservative moralizing. In addition, this film expressly used gospel music to help convey the story. Scholar Gloria J. Gibson (1987) carefully documented how important the contrast of religious and secular music was to the plot and helped position this film as a classic in the race movie genre. Spencer Williams, like Oscar Micheaux before him, developed film making skills through the audacity of doing rather than any type of formal study. With “The Blood of Jesus,” Williams exhibits an impressive technical skill with camera movement, special effects and symbolism. I found myself relating both Micheaux and Williams’ style to mid-20<sup>th</sup> century African American painters such as, Jacob Lawrence. They created highly stylized, culturally relevant movies that spoke directly to their communities, providing elements of predictable entertainment and uplift morality messages.

The opening montage sequence shows a black man plowing a field, young black boys lounging under a tree, while an unseen narrator extols the virtues of hard work, sacrifice and conservative morality. The audience receives the clear message that there is a basic religious fundamentalist moral to the story and that the film intends more than entertainment. Adrienne Lanier Seward (1985) documented the significance of African American folk traditions in the film and Williams’ effectiveness in connecting famil-



*On her deathbed, Sister Martha (Cathryn Caviness) has visions of an angel (Rogenia Goldthwaite). Courtesy National Film Preservation Foundation.*

iar cultural tropes to his intended audience through religious symbols, metaphor and language.

The two main characters, Razz, played by Williams and Martha Jackson are newlyweds in a spiritual crisis. We are introduced to Martha while she walks in a procession to a riverside Baptism. The choir is singing and walking in procession. At the river, we learn from two gossiping women that Martha’s husband is not at the Baptism, but is instead out hunting. When Martha returns home with Sister Jenkins, we learn that Razz has shot two shoats (piglets), probably belonging to a neighbor, claiming they are “big” rabbits. Both Sister Jenkins and Martha realize Razz is lying. Martha plainly states that they would be so much happier if he would “get some religion.” It becomes obvious that there is a spiritual rift between them and their happiness as a newly married couple is on the line.

The story gains momentum when Razz’s shotgun, carelessly left leaning against a wall, accidentally falls and discharges with the buckshot striking Martha, going “clean through her,” and lodging symbolically in a picture of Jesus hanging on the wall. Visual prompts help the viewer link Razz’s lying, stealing and carelessness with sinfulness, and Martha’s baptism and gunshot wound with sacrifice and salvation. In a following scene, church members gather around the dying woman’s bed singing, “Swing low, sweet chariot.” Here is one example of Gibson’s (1987) analysis of the use of music in “The Blood of Jesus” as a communicative tool. I found this

scene important because it is Sister Jenkins who delivers a powerful prayer at Martha's bedside. Both Gibson (1987) and Seward (1985) take note of this scene and the importance of the prayer because it frames the remainder of the film and the epic battle for salvation that Martha is about to embark upon.

I viewed this film as a well-planned project and Williams' use of Sister Jenkins as the deliverer of the prayer is intentional and meaningful. Williams seems somewhat ahead of his time in trying to highlight the leadership role of black women in the shaping and strengthening of the black community, however, he falls into the patriarchal pattern showing the primary role of women is to put her man first. Martha is the film's protagonist and focal point of the action. The doctor is unable to help and indicates that Martha is dying. Sister Jenkins, kneeling at the dying Martha's bedside seemed compelled to pray for her fallen sister, stating that Martha was new to "the word" but not yet been tested. The following scenes are a mix of jazz and rhythm and blues entertainment expected from any number of all-black cast films of the 1930s and 1940s, and a clear religious moralizing that creates a visual testament to Martha's faith in God being sorely tested and eventually rewarded.

The "near death" dream sequence Martha experiences visually confirms the southern Baptist fundamentalist message of the film. From the guidance of a brown-skinned female angel guiding Martha to a gravel covered crossroad that leads to signs on a pole indicating the roads to either Salvation or Hell, to a stern warning from the angel to be not deceived by any man and to beware of false prophets, viewers know that Martha's eternal soul is at stake. Of course, this metaphoric moment is a perfect cue for the devil to make an appearance. Williams' incorporates comedy throughout the film, and the appearance of the devil is both humorous and an obvious narrative device to present a moral-spiritual choice to Martha. Later, when Martha has learned her spiritual lessons, she returns to the crossroad.

From our first glimpse of Martha, she wears a small gold cross around her neck. Still present, this small simple cross symbolizes her Christian faith and love of God. The blood of Jesus drips onto Martha's face as she lay at the foot of a cross, which now appears

at the crossroad. This symbolic moment ties the story together. The blood of Jesus washes away her sins, her spiritual doubts, "symbolically cleansing her soul and restoring her life" (Gibson, 1987, p.69). I understood this scene to indicate that the blood of Jesus also washed away the sins of Razz whose name Martha calls when she suddenly awakens in bed. Through her sacrifice and tribulations, she saves her husband's soul as well as her own.

Williams creates a hard line between notions of good and evil in the film and represents the distinction visually, through music, and narrative. Obviously steeped in black folk traditions of southern fundamentalist Christianity (Seward, 1985), Williams skillfully used the complex layers of Depression era rural and urban black culture and religious symbolism to convey a message any viewer can grasp.

### References

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