

FILM AT REDCAT PRESENTS

Mon Apr 27 | 8:30 pm |

Jack H. Skirball Series

\$11 [members \$9]

"Race Movies" Visionary: SPENCER WILLIAMS and *The Blood of Jesus* A Screening and Talk with JACQUELINE STEWART

Spencer Williams (1893–1969) was, along with Oscar Micheaux, among the very first African American directors of independent features. His great cultural morality tale, *The Blood of Jesus* (1941, 57 min.), is a landmark of American cinema. Still known primarily as a screen actor (Andy on the *Amos 'n' Andy* television series), Williams made more than a dozen films with all-black casts. *The Blood of Jesus* was a huge hit with African American audiences for years. A story of sin and redemption, the film's vivid depiction of spiritualism and folk beliefs has a power that few big-budget movies have ever achieved. Scholar Jacqueline Stewart, who is preparing a biography of Williams, will introduce the work and give a talk on the filmmaker's life and career.

In person: Jacqueline Stewart

"A masterpiece of folk cinema that has scarcely lost its power to astonish." – J. Hoberman

The Blood of Jesus was the second film directed by Spencer Williams, one of the few African American directors of the 1940s. Williams began his career in the 1920s as an extra, and was later able to move up into writing scripts for all-black short comedies produced by the Al Christie studio. In 1928 he directed the silent film *Tenderfeet*, which was released by Midnight Productions. In 1939, he wrote two screenplays for the race film genre, the Western *Harlem Rides the Range* and the horror-comedy *Son of Ingagi*, and he also acted in these films. Williams was invited by Alfred N. Sack, president of the Dallas, Texas-based production/distribution company Sack Amusement Enterprises, to write and direct a series of all-black films that would be released to the U.S. cinemas catering to African American audiences. *The Blood of Jesus* was produced in Texas on a budget of US\$5,000. To present the

afterlife, Williams used scenes from a 1911 Italian film called *L'Inferno* that depicted souls entering Heaven. In addition to Williams, the cast was made up of amateur actors and members of Reverend R.L. Robinson's Heavenly Choir, who sang the film's gospel music score. The film's soundtrack included the songs "All God's Children Got Shoes," "Amazing Grace," "Go Down, Moses," "Good News!," "I've Heard of a City Called Heaven," "On Jordan's Stormy Banks I Stand," "Run, Child, Run," "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot," "Weary Blues" and "Were You There When They Crucified My Lord?"

The Blood of Jesus was screened in cinemas and in black churches across the country. The film's commercial success enabled Williams to direct and write additional feature films for Sack Amusement Enterprises, including two films with religious themes: *Brother Martin: Servant of Jesus* (1942) and *Go Down Death* (1944).

Recent critical appraisal of *The Blood of Jesus* has been highly positive, with Dave Kehr of *The New York Times* calling the film "magnificent" and J. Hoberman of *The Village Voice* stating it is "a masterpiece of folk cinema that has scarcely lost its power to astonish." *Time* magazine counted it among its "25 Most Important Films on Race." Historian Thomas Cripps, in his book *Black Film as Genre*, praised *The Blood of Jesus* for providing "a brief anatomy of Southern Baptist folk theology by presenting Christian myth in literal terms." From its opening voiceover, the film became an advocate for the most enduring traditions of Afro-American family life. Julie Dash cited the baptismal sequence in *The Blood of Jesus* as the inspiration for a similar scene in her first feature, *Daughters of the Dust* (1991).

In 1991, *The Blood of Jesus* became the first race film to be added to the U.S. National Film Registry.

<adapted from Wikipedia>

See the review in *Shadow and Act*

<http://blogs.indiewire.com/shadowandact/spencer-williams-groundbreaking-race-movie-the-blood-of-jesus-to-screen-at-redcat-in-la-in-april-there-is-a-story-behind-that-image-20150205>

Jacqueline Stewart's research and teaching explore African American film cultures from the origins of the medium to the present, as well as the archiving and preservation of moving images, and "orphan" media histories, including nontheatrical, amateur, and activist film and video. She directs the South Side Home Movie Project and is co-curator of the L.A. Rebellion Preservation Project at the UCLA Film and Television Archive. She also serves as an appointee to the

National Film Preservation Board. She is currently researching the racial politics of moving image preservation and is also completing a study of the life and work of African American actor/writer/director Spencer Williams.

Stewart is the author of *Migrating to the Movies: Cinema and Black Urban Modernity*, which has achieved recognition from the Society for Cinema and Media Studies and the Black Caucus of the American Library Association. She participated in the Public Voices Thought Leadership Fellowship Program, offered by Northwestern University, and the OpEd Project. She has also been awarded fellowships from the Shelby Cullom Davis Center for Historical Studies at Princeton University, and the New York Public Library's Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture Scholars-in-Residence Program. She is currently Professor, Department of Cinema and Media Studies at the University of Chicago.

Presented as part of the Jack H. Skirball Series. Curated by Steve Anker and Bérénice Reynaud.