

# Biographical Description for The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Melvin Van Peebles

PERSON

Van Peebles, Melvin, 1932-

**Alternative Names:** Melvin Van Peebles;

**Life Dates:** August 21, 1932-

**Place of Birth:** Chicago, Illinois, USA

**Residence:** New York, NY

**Occupations:** Actor; Film Director; Fiction Writer;  
Playwright

## Biographical Note

Filmmaker, author, and actor Melvin Van Peebles was born on August 21, 1932, in Chicago, Illinois. Growing up during World War II, he spent his adolescence with his father, a tailor. Van Peebles graduated from Township High School in Phoenix, Illinois, in 1949 and spent a year at West Virginia State College before transferring to Ohio Wesleyan University where he earned his B.A. degree in English literature in 1953.

During the late 1950s, Van Peebles served three and a half years as a flight navigator in the United States Air Force. After the military, he lived briefly in Mexico and San Francisco where he wrote his first book, *The Big Heart*, which was about the life of San Francisco's cable cars and their drivers. Moving to the Netherlands, he studied at the Dutch National Theatre before moving to France in the early 1960s. During this time, Van Peebles wrote several published novels in French, including *La Permission* in 1967. He filmed this story under the title, *The Story of the Three-Day Pass*, and it was selected as the French entry in the 1968 San Francisco Film Festival. It earned critical acclaim, which helped him obtain a studio contract with Columbia Pictures. In 1969, Van Peebles returned to the U.S. to direct and score his first Hollywood film *Watermelon Man*. The film was released in 1970, followed by his independent feature *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*, probably his best known work. Some of his other films include *Don't Play Us Cheap* in 1973, *Identity Crisis* in 1989, *Gang in Blue* in 1996 and *Le Conte du ventre plein* in 2000.

As a playwright and composer, Van Peebles wrote two Broadway hit plays: *Ain't Supposed to Die a Natural Death* in 1971 and *Don't Play Us Cheap* in 1972, for which he earned a Tony Award nomination. As an actor, Van Peebles has appeared in several films including Robert Altman's *O.C. and Stiggs* in 1987 and *Mario Van Peebles' Panther* in 1995, which he also wrote and co-produced. In 2005, Van Peebles was the subject of a documentary entitled *How to Eat Your Watermelon in White Company (and Enjoy It)*. He has been honored with numerous awards, including a Grammy and a Drama Desk Award. He received the Children's Live-Action Humanitas Prize for *The Day They Came to Arrest the Book* in 1987, and in 1999, he was awarded the Chicago Underground Film Festival's Lifetime Achievement Award.

Van Peebles resides in New York City.

## Related Entries

**Ohio Wesleyan University** [STUDENTOF]  
[from ? to ?]

**Thornton Township High School** [STUDENTOF]  
[from ? to ?]

**University of Amsterdam** [STUDENTOF]  
[from ? to ?]

**West Virginia State University** [STUDENTOF]  
[from ? to ?]

**United States Postal Service** [EMPLOYEEOF]  
[from ? to ?]

**Clerk**

**United States Air Force** [EMPLOYEEOF]  
[from 1953 to 1956]

**Flight Navigator**

**San Francisco Trolley Company** [EMPLOYEEOF]  
[from 1957 to ?]

**Gripman**

**Boy Scouts of America (BSA)** [MEMBEROF]  
[from ? to ?]

**Member**