



HOOD MULTI-PLATINUM

BY HARRIS ROSEN

The story behind the blockbuster you couldn't get at Blockbuster.

Cess Silvera apologizes for the heavy breathing. Speaking over the phone from a gym in Los Angeles, the director of *Shottas* is trying to get right for summer with a little lifting. Just how much he's pressing these days he won't say; he doesn't want to bruise any egos. But with Hollywood finally noticing his muscle as a filmmaker, he'd better be pushing two plates per side. It's going to be a heavy season ahead.

Five years ago, Silvera wasn't pushing any weight with the studios, screenwriters and stars in Hollywood. *Shottas*, his gritty dramatic odyssey into Jamaican gang and gun culture, had just premiered at the 2002 Toronto International Film Festival and, other than big critical accolades from far and wide, that was pretty much it. Then the streets took over.

Between then and now - now being the winter's official DVD release via Sony - Silvera's directorial debut went hood multi-platinum. Bootlegs, pirates, knock-offs, unlicensed reproductions or whatever you call them to make you feel better about buying and watching them, so many thousands of copies of *Shottas* flooded streets from Trinidad to Toronto, Manchester to Miami, and Harlem to Hollywood that Silvera has recently discovered that money really does talk, even if you didn't get to collect it.

Before Sony's release of *Shottas*, the DVD has already gone hood multi-platinum. How much changed between the bootleg version and this official version?

In all honesty, it's not a lot. I moved a little thing here, cut it a little different. I had a whole lot of other footage, but I made a decision to not change this movie up a lot because I was afraid that I'm messing with the movie that the audience fell in love with. I might give them something they might reject. I took that step because I was aware, as everybody who saw the bootleg is, that an intelligent mind can tell that that's not a complete movie. Everybody was watching with stuff that said, 'Insert this here', 'Insert that there', time code written on the bottom, dirty, gritty quality. I did shift around a couple scenes here and there, add a little something here and there, but it wasn't really a significant amount.

You had Jay-Z tracks throughout it and then you didn't. Why didn't Jay-Z give you the music?

Me being a young film maker first time around when I did *Shottas*, I went along and threw all this different hip hop music in it that I was feeling. In all honesty, I really didn't decide to use that music, but when the bootleg got out and everybody fell in love with it I did step to Damon Dash, who was a close associate of mine, and was like, 'Yo, I would like to keep certain music in'. I stepped to Puffy and everybody, but the money that they were asking for, man?! It would have been enough to make another *Titanic*, you know?

They weren't taking Jamaican dollars?

Nah. I could pay them a lot of that! But they weren't

taking that at all. So I couldn't afford clearing all that music. I decided to go back to basics, and give them a whole different feel. The official DVD has a lot of vintage reggae music like some Little John. Not no hip hop Lil' Jon, the original Jamaican Little John. People like John Wayne, old Bounty Killa stuff and I went way back for some vintage stuff like Bob Marley because I did have access to the whole Bob Marley catalogue so I took advantage of that. Jay-Z is Jay-Z, but Bob Marley is a whole 'nother thing we talking about

Why did it take so long for the DVD deal with Sony to come along?

It took five years to get a deal because most of the studios in Hollywood were afraid to touch the movie. They did not understand the value of the movie after the bootleg. But I'm saying to them, How can you not understand something where, four years into bootlegging, it's still the number one most anticipated movie? Everywhere I turn, everywhere I walk in the world, people are like, 'When is *Shottas* coming out? I want the real thing'. I'm translating this to them but they aren't understanding that the whole world wants to see this movie in its splendor. *Shottas* was like an unsolved murder and everybody wanted to solve it, you know? So it took me some

Shottas. It has a fan base and is a movie that is gonna perform strictly word-of-mouth.

Where does *Shottas* fit in with the history of Jamaican cinema like *The Harder They Come*, *Third World Cop*, *Dancehall Queen*?

I think what *Shottas* did was create a whole 'nother path, you know? Just for the simple fact of the dynamics of how this movie was made. *The Harder They Come* which is one of my favorite movies, the first movie that I ever saw as a little kid in a theatre. Sometimes for me to compare *Shottas* to *The Harder They Come* feels a little sacrilegious. But *Shottas* is different from *The Harder They Come* and *Third World Cop*; there was no institution behind *Shottas*, you see? All these other movies have Chris Blackwell behind them, who has more money than God, who can do whatever he wanna do, get whoever, have all the political ties in Jamaica. *Shottas* is the first movie that's ever seen a young black kid from the ghetto back with a crew of fifty-something people and say, 'I'ma make a movie without the help of the institution, and I'ma do it my way'. It shows other kids from the hood that you can go pick up a camera and make a movie instead of go pick up a gun and become a shotta, you know? I hope it opens the door as far as being innovative, being entrepreneurial and being a trailblazer.

Has it opened the door for you?

Put it like this: I'm in Hollywood making movies, you know? I'm in Hollywood selling screen plays. I have one of the top three agencies in the world. I have one of the biggest lawyers in Hollywood. I run with the Hollywood crowd. I hang out. I do dinners with guys like Mark Wahlberg, who wants to be in *Shottas 2*. *Shottas* gave me a career that I'm very thankful for, something that was never expected.

Would you ever make a movie like *Shower Posse*, Duane Blake's book about his dad's life in Jamaica's

notorious criminal gang?

I would make a movie like *Shower Posse* because, the truth is, *Shower Posse* is a part of our legacy in America. It's just how the story is gonna be told. How's it gonna be told? What's gonna be the objective? How honest or how truthful can you be in telling that story? These are things that I take into consideration before I even approach a subject.

What's your next project?

Right now what everybody's pushing for is *Shottas 2*, but I have this other project called *My Dogs* that I really wanna do. It's about this kid that just came back from the war in Afghanistan, in Des Moines, Iowa, and he comes home to find that his whole circle is hooked on methamphetamine. Meth is a big thing in the mid west. We're closing out *Shottas*, the TV show, looking at either HBO or Showtime. It's like the Jamaican *Sopranos*, you know?



time to convince these executives. What happened was my manager at the time had a relationship with one of the Sony executives who never saw the movie before and, on a whim after dinner, he brought it to him and was like, 'You need to see this movie'. And he saw it, was like, 'We gotta have this! Let's put it out!' And that's how it happened.

Theatrical release or straight to DVD?

It was in the theatres on November 3rd. I'm very thankful that they picked the movie up, but they didn't do nothing for the movie as far as marketing. I mean, zero. Initially I was promised 250 screens. When it came down to it at the end of the day I only got five screens. One screen in Miami, New York, L.A., Boston, Chicago, and Oakland. It performed very well in all those cities. Miami was sold out, every show for two weeks, because I was there doing all my ground work, getting on radio stations, hitting up my friends that have the pirate radio stations. It it what it is, you know? *Shottas* is