

FILM

Who's the man with the perfect Afro?
Elvis Mitchell at the Cannes film festival.
David Thomson on David O. Selznick.

Sunday, May 26, 2002

PAGES 11, 16

For Fun, a Mucho Macho Black Hero

By DAVE KEHR

RESPLENDENT in a gold leather leisure suit with a wing collar that could support a B-52, his hypertrophied Afro trimmed into a perfect sphere, Undercover Brother, played by the stand-up comedian Eddie Griffin, is behind the wheel of a gold Cadillac convertible, circa 1971. Swerving to avoid an oncoming car, he goes into a violent spin but, with a few deft flicks of the steering wheel, he rights the car without losing a drop of the orange soda he is holding in a plastic cup. "It ain't no thang," he remarks to the camera, his voice unflappably cool.

"Undercover Brother," a comedy opening on Friday, is a parody of early 70's African-American macho familiar from the blaxploitation films of that era — "Shaft," "Superfly" and "Black Belt Jones."

"I grew up watching Jim Kelly films," said its director, Malcolm Lee, referring to the karate champion who starred in "Black Belt Jones" and other blaxploitation classics. "Here was the first black man doing martial arts, and his Afro was always perfect." Jim Kelly, more than anybody else, was the inspiration for Undercover Brother, said Mr. Lee, 32, who directed "The Best Man" in 1999 (and who started out as an assistant to his cousin Spike Lee.)

In his new film, our hero emerges from a time warp to rescue the image of black men, which has fallen into a pop-culture slump, which the film dates from Dennis Rodman's first public appearance in a wedding dress. Undercover Brother is recruited to

Malcolm Lee satirizes the 70's

blaxploitation genre in

'Undercover Brother,' which

began as an Internet cartoon.

join the Brotherhood, a secret organization dedicated to leveling the playing field for African-Americans. He takes on a faceless villain known as "the Man." With his evil (but secretly funky) henchman, Mr. Feather (Chris Kattan), the Man plots to neutralize black America by slipping a mind-control drug into a popular brand of fried chicken, sold by a well-known general-turned-politician (Billy Dee Williams).

"Undercover Brother" began on the Web, as a Flash-animated cartoon for Urban Entertainment (www.urbanentertainment.com), written by John Ridley, one of the few black writers for television ("Third Watch") and the movies ("U-Turn"). The cartoon soon picked up a following, and Mr. Ridley began adapting it to the screen. (He wrote the screenplay along with Michael McCullers, a contributor to the "Austin Powers" series.) It may be the first Internet piece to be turned into a movie.

"We discovered quickly that our shows became very popular, and they seemed to really lend themselves to any other medium," said Michael Jenkinson, the founder and chief executive of Urban Entertainment. "'Undercover Brother' seemed to really resonate with the audience, and it occurred to me

that it was possible perhaps to transfer that to film."

Mr. Jenkinson, a former vice president of feature film production at 20th Century Fox, decided to reach beyond the Internet and brought in Damon Lee (no relation to Malcolm Lee), a production executive at MGM, as the company president.

"They say a picture is worth a thousand words," Mr. Lee said, "and these moving pictures, in Flash animation, really helped to convey the potential of the live-action feature. There was actually a bidding war among a number of studios. But we made it clear early on that we wanted to go with Brian Grazer because we knew, because of his past success, that we would get the movie made that much quicker."

Mr. Grazer is one of Hollywood's most successful producers; he recently won an Oscar for "A Beautiful Mind," which he produced with the director Ron Howard for their company, Imagine Entertainment. "There was a time when everybody was surfing the Internet," Mr. Grazer recalled, "and I was on high frequency, looking at all the properties that were online. I saw this thing on Urban Entertainment, and I became very engaged. To me, it was about the whole world of cool and where it comes from. So I called the guys at Urban and said, 'I'd love to make a movie out of this.'"

But finding a living, breathing incarnation of 70's cool wasn't easy. Mr. Grazer has long been associated with Eddie Murphy; he produced Mr. Murphy's remake of "The Nutty Professor" and his animated television series "The P.J.'s." But he didn't see Mr. Murphy in the part.

"Eddie read it as a friend and gave me some

Continued on Page 20



Kerry Hayes/Universal Studios



Urban Entertainment
On the Internet, "Undercover Brother" was more sharply political.

In "Undercover Brother," a 1970's-style crime fighter played by Eddie Griffin, right, takes on the Man.

Just for Fun, a Muchò Macho Black Hero

Continued From Page 11

very good advice, but I never thought of it for him and nor did he think of it for himself," Mr. Grazer said. "You can't have a superstar as Undercover Brother, because that would overtake the idea."

A friend of Mr. Grazer's suggested the stand-up comedian Eddie Griffin, who had appeared in supporting roles in "Armageddon" and "The Mod Squad."

"I thought he was pretty funny," Mr. Grazer said, "though I believe he's a better actor than he is a comic."

Mr. Lee said he had known of Mr. Griffin's work but, "truth be told, I

wasn't a fan of his at all."

"I DIDN'T think he was right for the role," he added. "But I don't think anyone else could have done it better. He hasn't had the opportunity to play anything other than himself in a movie, but here he had to play a character. We were able to tap into his physicality and his funkiness. There aren't too many actors who could pull off wearing a blown-out Afro and pork-chop sideburns. He looks silly, but he also looks cool."

The concept was inevitably altered in the transition from a cartoon on a Web site to a movie that sought mass appeal. The film is warmer and less aggressively political than the Inter-

net version: in one online episode, Undercover Brother shoots and kills the rapper Eminem for the crime of misappropriating black music. The film version is content to get in some digs at the white soul singer Michael Bolton. The movie is also more ethnically inclusive: the Brotherhood now has a white intern, played by Neil Patrick Harris, who joins the operatives Aunjanue Ellis, Dave Chappelle and Chi McBride in the fight against the Man.

"The point is not that the Man, as we say in the black community, is the white man," said Damon Lee of Urban Entertainment. "In this, the Man is that evil thing that is stopping anyone and everyone from achieving what they deserve."

In the end, "Undercover Brother" may be more "Austin Powers" than "Shaft." After all, the secret-agent parody is a plot device that lends itself to infinite sequels, something that all the participants in "Undercover Brother" know but are careful not to take for granted. When asked about the possibility of an Undercover franchise, Mr. Griffin said, "From your mouth to God's ears."

Ultimately, Mr. Griffin's underlying vulnerability will determine whether Undercover Brother is an endearing — and quite possibly, enduring — figure.

"That's because I really haven't achieved cool," Mr. Griffin said. "I have the idea of cool, but at the end of the day, I'm a pushover." □