BLOOD BROTHER

Spike Lee talks new joint, the power of protest and changing the world

BY LINA LECARO
If the coronavirus made us seek out escapism while living in lockdown, this new moment of historic protest and social change seems to have had the opposite effect. The volume of people speaking out against systemic racism and getting behind the Black Lives Matter movement has led to a cultural revolution, but getting here has been anything but easy. It's demanded a new, more urgent kind of empathy and resolve for change, and it's made educating ourselves of the utmost importance.

In terms of entertainment, fantasy and frivolity feels wrong; we want and need to see truth — even if it's uncomfortable — and characters that reflect the complexities of life. It's this desire that makes the release of Spike Lee's Da 5 Bloods on Netflix not just timely, but prophetic-feeling.

Lee, however, is simply doing what he's always done: exploring racial and class disparities with unflinching realness and nuance, but also charisma and soul. Three decades in, the filmmaker has earned respect, awards and legend status, but he hasn't forgotten his days of being stereotyped as a troublemaker. “I was pilloried as the angry black man,” he tells L.A Weekly by phone from his Brooklyn office, the day before Da 5 Bloods premieres on Netflix. “And as the angry black filmmaker who by showing and playing the character Mookie and throwing a garbage can through a famous pizzeria, was inciting black people to riot all across America. [They'd say], ‘When this happens, blood is gonna be on Spike's hands!’ and 'With this film Spike Lee is putting dynamite under every seat in America!' and 'Pray to god that this film doesn't open in a city near you.”

Lee is of course referring to the critical judgments spewed his way back in 1989 when Do The Right Thing, his third feature and best known work, first came out. The film, which depicted racial tension in New York to the soundtrack of Public Enemy’s compelling anthem “Fight the Power,” climaxes tragically when a central black character, the boombox-toting Radio Raheem, is murdered by a white cop. Though the movie was undeniably vibrant and engaging, it was also caustic in its depiction of the anger between races — so much so that, even though it was lauded and Oscar-nominated, some people still couldn't handle it.

Lee would go on to make a multitude of less incendiary, great films (Jungle Fever, Mo Better Blues, Crooklyn, Summer of Sam, to name a handful), but his focus on the inequitable nature of society and the black point of view often saw him unfairly pigeonholed. Even if you think of his body of work as somewhat hit or miss, the hits have always offered unforgettable blows that sought to open minds and defy expectations. And they’ve all maintained the signature Spike Lee-style and swagger.

This is definitely the case in Bloods. The tale of Vietnam vets, who return to the land where they fought as American soldiers decades
prior, to retrieve a fallen soldier’s body (and hidden treasure) works with a very simple narrative. Which is probably for the best. The riveting performances by Delroy Lindo as the MAGA-hat wearing Paul, Jonathan Majors as his son David, Norm Lewis as Eddie, Isaiah Whitlock Jr. as Melvin, and Clarke Peters as Otis are front and center. Lee’s immersive editing and flawless score don’t compete either — they complement, so that the viewer takes it all in.

Of course, there’s a bigger subtext here, and it’s not meant to be subtle. Spike joints — what he calls all his projects — rarely are. More than maybe any other movie he’s ever made, including Malcom X and Black KKKlansman, the power in this film lies in its authentic reflection. The all-in approach aims to show how history repeats itself, and how most of us never understood the full scope of how much it does so because we never got the full picture to begin with. History, Lee says, is not taught in an inclusive or even honest way, and that is part of the problem.

“The education system of the United States of America has been delinquent in how history is taught, in what is left in and what is left out,” he asserts. So I’ve been in that battle as far as how it goes from the get-go. My first film at NYU, called The Answer, was about D.W. Griffith’s Birth of a Nation. So I’ve been fighting against the false narrative, and false history, the lies that the powers that be have put out about this country for a long time.”

Lee adds that in most interviews regarding Da 5 Bloods he makes it a point to ask journalists if they were writing down names they didn’t know during the film and googling them afterward. “I’m not faulting you or anyone else if you don’t know them all, because it was never taught,” he explains. “That’s the whole point of this film, that black folks — and I’m reciting words from the film — Even dying...we built this bitch.... And that’s what I want people to know. The first person to die for the United States of America in the an American war was a black man [Crispus Attucks, one of five men who died in the Boston Massacre of March 5, 1770]. So I don’t ever want to hear from some people, especially ‘Agent Orange’ and the White House, that black people are not patriotic.”

It’s been reported that Lee will not say the name Donald Trump in interviews anymore, from some people, especially ‘Agent Orange’ and the White House, that black people are not patriotic.”

“D.W Griffith is known as the father of the industry and a vicious racist,” Peters says. “To see the white people and the Black people together in a film. We worked with the script, and the script was written and very much in line with the Black people. That was the only thing that was different from the script that I was used to working with. The rest of it was very much like in theater, where we have round table talks and breaking down of character and storyline, which very few directors spend time doing.” Peters tells us on a call from the UK, where he lives. “That frees us up so that we can go away from those discussions and work on whatever it is that we need to work on. So that when we get on set, we have all been doing our homework. And what I know on Spike’s is that no one is going to be wasting time. He knows what he wants and he is expecting you to be on your best game...that’s a really enlightening and lovely place to be.”

“At NYU Film, where I graduated, I finished in ’82... Ernest Dickerson and Ang Lee were my classmates and we were all a few years behind Jim Jarmusch, who was our hero,” Lee, who is now a tenured professor at the school, recalls of his early years and influences’ impact on his current work. “What I wanted to do with this film, and we started doing this a bit with Black KKKlansman where at the end we go to Charlottesville) was use more archival footage and archival still photographs. I’ve done documentary films too and I feel very comfortable doing both, and so I had those skills in documentary forms and with this joint I put more of that stuff than I ever have into a narrative film.”

At 63 years old, Spike Lee has honed his visceral style and maintained the enthusiasm of his younger years, too. During our interview he raises his voice and speaks faster when he’s talking about something that excites him, and his zeal is contagious. Considering what is going on in the world right now, he has a reason to be roused. Is everybody finally getting what he’s been trying to say all these years? Black folks always understood, but have white peo-
people finally, truly had their eyes opened beyond performative wokeness? Before George Floyd and the heartbreaking video that captured his death at the hands of Minneapolis police went viral, the problem was there, but it was easy to push away for many of us not living it. But Lee has been addressing these problematic realities since Do The Right Thing, and last year he sought to revisit it with a new short film that drew parallels to today. Little did he know it would do that and more.

“I made the short film 3 Brothers about the death of Eric Garner, where I cut the video of him, going back and forth between the fictional death of Ray Raheem — which is based on the real life chokehold death by NY City transit cops of the graffiti artist Michael Stewart,” he explains. “So when I saw my brother King George Floyd and that footage, I said we got to do this again and add him to it.”

The short was premiered on CNN during a town hall special and sought to show that “to police forces it looks like black lives don’t matter,” Lee says. “It’s a problem that the world saw. That’s not to say that the U.S. is the only place that has racists, but that image that the world saw of the last eight minutes and few seconds of his life, that went around the world and that hit people’s hearts around the world. And that shows you the power of visuals.”

Lee goes on to share a bit more about Raheem. In addition to Stewart, the character was a homage to Robert Mitchum in the classic The Night of the Hunter directed by Charles Laughton. Mitchum had “love” and “hate” tattooed on his fingers and Raheem rocked the same words as gold knuckle rings, which Lee himself wore when he picked up his Oscar for Black KL klansman. “It’s all about love,” he expresses. “People in the streets, saying ‘Black Lives Matter’ are being very vocal and saying this bullshit of hate has to stop.”

His Netflix film (which was meant to debut at the Cannes Film Festival then have a theatrical release before hitting the streaming service) has been called timely, and it is, but it always was. The world has changed and one might argue that having the film come into all of our homes right now made it timelier than it could ever be otherwise. The struggles Lee has highlighted recently are not new to him or African Americans in general, and that’s the point. Still, he does acknowledge that we are all viewing his current work through new, more loving lens.

“I think that anyone that has a conscious mind and their hearts open can connect what’s in Da 5 Bloods and what is driving people to go to the streets and demonstrate all over the world,” the filmmaker says as we wind down our interview. Before he says goodbye, Lee shares that he’s been riding his bike in a mask and gloves throughout New York to check out and join in protests, and it has clearly inspired him and given him hope to see people finally doing the right thing.

“It makes my heart feel good when I see non-black people and non-black people, in the streets yelling and screaming and chanting peacefully, ‘Black Lives Matter.’ That is something new. That is something different. These demonstrations are acts of love and the repudiation of hate. Period.”

Da 5 Bloods is now streaming on Netflix.
Hollywood Boulevard has been an epicenter in the demonstrations following George Floyd’s murder, with peaceful Black Lives Matter protests, the All Black Lives Matter solidarity march for Pride month and a colorful new monumental street mural capturing the world’s attention over just the past two weekends. Among the many doorways already shuttered by the pandemic along this route is LACE (Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions), an outpost of progressive arts, culture and community operating for more than 40 years and which frequently activates their stretch of the Walk of Fame pavement as part of their programming, albeit on a more intimate scale.

It was just about a year ago that LACE hosted the incandescent performance artist and activist Patrisse Cullors in a performance work dedicated to the late Nipsey Hussle, during part of which she walked the stretch of Hollywood from the 101 to LACE’s cross-street at Schrader. And last September they hosted Freewaves’ performance festival LOVE &/OR FEAR: A Celebration of Genders, outside and all along their stretch of the block.

With the resonance of so much historical and present-day activity and the confluent advocacy of health and justice issues close to the LACE team’s heart, as well as their impending temporary move next year as part of a district redevelopment plan, the launch of their new Spanish language initiative Se Habla Español and the recent announcement of their 2021 Emerging Curators grant, it seemed like a salient time to check in. And in speaking with LACE executive director Sarah Russin and Emerging Curators awardees Alex Jones and Kevin Bernard Moultrie Daye, it’s clear that both LACE’s history and its future are more vital than ever.

LACE plans to re-open to the public with its October exhibitions, rescheduled from summer, Ser todo Es ser parte / To Be Whole Is To Be Part featuring artists from L.A. and Mexico, and Borders of Freedom/Contornos de Libertad, presenting video art from El Salvador. They’ll be by appointment only, with no open exhibitions, performances, experiences and more that it will contain will have been created according to a prompt to imagine the answer. “Parable of the Sower was written in the ’90s and takes place in 2024; it was always the present. We resist the concept of timeliness,” they say. “It’s always been time.”

Reaching out to an eclectic slate of artists, makers, and creatives across an array of disciplines, Jones and Daye are asking them, and us, to envision the contours of a new world, with free license to generate this reborn civilization’s useful and ritual spaces, objects and folklore — its future artifacts in a constellation of cultural assets. The project’s main graphic is an homage to W.E.B. Du Bois’ 1890s data visualizations concerning patterns of black community migration between urban and rural areas — a striking project that used artistry to expand sociological understanding. Conceptually defined and materially grounded, PARABLE 003 envisions an entire functioning world, not just a show of objects.

“No world is just one person,” they say, and this one is assertively communal, representing an alignment of individual radical visions and people working together. Daye especially appreciates the blueprint as a metaphorical framework for the platform, being both a specifically pragmatic and conceptually aspirational exercise, symbolic as well as actionable.

This vision is tethered to California’s history as a hub of radical thought and communal generative ideation, but at the same time, Daye and Jones imagine the expansion, transposition, and localization of this project on a truly global scale, positing world-building as an artistic practice. “There’s a whole big black world out there,” the curators say. And next spring all are welcome to experience it.

LACE, 6522 Hollywood Blvd., Hollywood; for more information on programs and events, visit: welcomelace.org.
PORCH PRIDE DISPELS BLUEGRASS STEREOTYPES
Virtual “queer-antine” festival takes on metronormativity

BY BRETT CALLWOOD

When considering the music associated with Pride marches and festivities, bluegrass is unlikely to be the first genre you reach for. This has more to do with stereotypes attached to the bluegrass scene than LGBTQ+ assumptions; the music is generally considered “old timey” with roots in the Appalachian region — two things not associated with tolerance.

But assumptions and stereotypes can be very dangerous things. Bluegrass Pride sprang out of the California Bluegrass Association in 2017, as a means to do outreach. “It became pretty obvious pretty quickly that this was a message that was much bigger than just California — we immediately received support from bluegrass musicians and fans all over the country, and even from abroad,” says Kara Kundert from Bluegrass Pride. “So, after two years as a project of the CBA, we incorporated as our own nonprofit last year and have been operating independently ever since.”

Kundert is keen to dispel the stereotype that bluegrass fans are all Southern, old and conservative.

“I’ve been continually inspired by the work of organizations like Queer Appalachia, which has been working to dispel the metronormative stereotype of queerness for years,” she says. “The symbol of the LGBTQ+ community is the rainbow — a spectrum of colors representing the broad diversity of ways people can love each other. But as a culture, we only really allow a couple of very binary ways to be gay. I’d like to see us apply that same symbol to queerness itself — there are countless numbers of beautiful and unique ways to be queer. At Bluegrass Pride, we’re proud to fight back against those stereotypes by highlighting the tight knit community of bluegrass and old-time music, and we wouldn’t have the budget to support both activities. However, as the weeks progressed and the writing appeared on the wall, we realized that our in-person Pride festivities in San Francisco, Portland and Nashville were probably not going to happen. So Jake and I started to discuss what a Bluegrass Pride digital festival might look like.”

“Bluegrass Pride has become a deeply important symbol to LGBTQ bluegrass and old-time musicians across the nation,” adds Blount. “With that said, most of us never get the chance to attend Bluegrass Pride events; the organization is still growing, and though chapters are springing up nationwide, our flagship annual event in San Francisco is a long plane ride away for me and my fellow East Coasters. I saw an online event as an opportunity to involve a far greater number of people than we ordinarily reach with this event, and to provide some much-needed support for my fellow LGBTQ artists who have found themselves out of work during the pandemic.”

Blount, too, is keen to help destroy some myths about the bluegrass community. It is, he says, no less welcoming that most other scenes.

“I find that in bluegrass, as with any other community, some spaces and people are more welcoming than others,” he says. “I would be lying if I said my experiences as an LGBTQ+ person have been universally positive, but they have been overwhelmingly positive nonetheless. I came to this music during my time as a college student, and frequently found myself fleeing my northeastern liberal arts college to spend time in the mountains of West Virginia with fellow string band musicians. Although I have always spent the lion’s share of my time in the more accepting old-time scene than in bluegrass circles, both have been a refuge for me in moments when environments stereotyped as less homophobic have proven unwelcoming. The other queer people I’ve met through this music have been more supportive and kind than any I’ve known elsewhere, and I think my involvement with the music has strengthened my ties to the LGBTQ community overall.”

The more you learn, huh? Porch Pride looks set to be a wonderful virtual event, and a colorful addition to the Pride programming. Still, Kundert says that there are challenges with putting something like this on.

“I think it’s going to be a challenge to create that same sense of community in a digital environment that you find on site at weekend bluegrass festivals,” she says. “There’s something unique and kind of magical about wandering around fairgrounds at night, jamming with your friends and running into the musicians that you saw on stage earlier that day grabbing a hot dog from the late-night stand. I don’t know if it’s possible to give people that same kind of community experience in this virtual way, but we’d really like to get close. We want this to be more than just a fundraiser for these artists and for our own organization — we want it to be a place for the community to gather and heal from all the stress and hardship of the past few months.”

As for Blount, he says that he’ll be joining up with The Vox Hunters for his set.

“They’re fantastically skilled singers and interpreters of traditional New England music,” he says. “We’ll be performing selections from my new record, Spider Tales, as well as their new record, Fresh From The Board. Music From The Ocean State Songster, Vol. 1. We have very different styles and repertoire, and I look forward to discovering the roles that squeeze boxes and vocal harmonies can play in my songs, as well as what my banjo and fiddle playing can add to theirs. The rehearsals have been incredibly fun, and I can’t wait for the show!”

Porch Pride on Saturday, June 27 and Sunday, June 28. Go to bluegrasspride.net for all the details.
Six months ago, Lemeir Mitchell watched his dream come true on Melrose Avenue: the construction of his Happy Ice storefront. What started as a frozen treat truck grew within months into an operation he describes as bigger than him. Having come to L.A. penniless from Philadelphia a scant year earlier, his signature rainbow-colored, water-based product soon had trucks parked on Melrose and stationed at Dodger Stadium and the Coliseum. That dream turned into a nightmare recently.

“I was outside the store from 11 a.m. to 10 a.m. the next day during the riots,” the former tattoo artist and star of Black Ink Crew: Compton tells us in his boarded-up shop. “I was up through the night standing in front of the store to make sure that nobody would break our stuff or set something on fire. Not only was I protecting the Happy Ice store, I was also protecting my neighbors because we all are connected.”

While the Happy Ice store survived, it was a sad moment for the company whose mission is to help people create memories. Once the smoke settled, Mitchell and partner Ted Foxman sat down and reconsidered their June 20 opening date for the store.

“We signed our partnership on Valentine’s Day, but I started buying trucks and equipment three months earlier,” says Foxman. “I was taking a big leap of faith doing it, but I could just get from his energy that it was going to be OK. For a 26-year-old kid to save up 75 grand and buy trucks and an ice machine and sleep on the floor of a tattoo shop for a year to do that — you’ve put in your time.”

The team is forging ahead with the original grand opening. Mitchell says the community needs Happy Ice now more than ever. There will be a limited-time charcoal black ice available at opening, with all proceeds going to Black Lives Matter. “It’s something to look forward to. Coronavirus is going on, people are stuck sitting in their homes and now this is happening. People have no good reason to go outside. It’s a time for unity and we want to make sure that people come with interracial friends. We want our opening to be a symbol of unity and a better future. Change is coming down.”

Mitchell credits change and solidarity with his shop’s survival, as well as facing looters. “It did make a difference that we were a black-owned business to the looters,” he says. “Not just because I’m black. When I was standing outside, and they saw me standing for my company they knew that this guy isn’t just black he’s a hardworking black guy. Some guy who hadn’t worked this hard wouldn’t be standing outside risking his life for a building. I was literally asking them ‘Hey, can you just leave my building alone?’ I worked so hard for this, please spread the word. It looked like they all had a group leader, who would then shout it out to the rest of the group, and everybody backed off because they knew I was fighting for something.”

“I truly don’t support somebody smashing up businesses and it was so sad seeing everybody else going down,” he added. “When they came, this was already a plan. They came 50 people at a time. When they came to the corner, they knew who they were going to hit. They came specifically for the stores next to mine. If I would have stood in the way of that, I don’t think they would have had much care for me. But when they saw my passion and my pain, they said, ‘You got it, brother,’ and everybody just stepped back. It was just scary, seeing the rage in people. I know that a lot of the looters were not about George Floyd that ignited the anger to make them not care. A lot of them were out here because of COVID-19 and haven’t had any income for the last three months. They’re at home with their families struggling too. I feel bad for small businesses, I feel bad for the looters, I really don’t know how to digest it all. There’s a lot of hungry people out here.”

Forever hopeful, the Philly native has faith in himself and humanity as a whole and believes that racism can be unlearned. “There are racist people in the world, but we all know you’re not born racist,” Mitchell says. “You learn that. I think people who are racist can change with the right support system. I came from very humble beginnings and have done some things that I’m not truly proud of because that was my environment at the time. This was all I knew when I grew up, getting money the wrong way. I accept that I used to be that way, but then I saw a different way, I saw an option — make new friends and find a new group of people to hang out with and remember there is always somebody more unfortunate than you.”

“I compare it to when people were afraid to come out as gay. This is just another moment. People at one point were scared to come out, they didn’t have any support. They all made new friends and developed a support system. They created their own new families and new groups. Right now we’re in that same stage. It was the gay moment and now it’s the racist moment. There is support, and if you come on this side we are going to love you and can still be a family.”