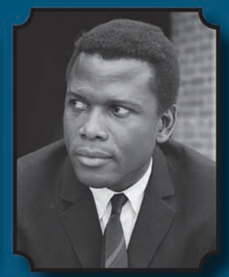
Black Film and Television

The history of black film and television is symbolic of the struggles and triumphs of the larger black community in this nation. Due to this difficult history, it has taken decades to recognize some of the important pioneers in this field for the good they were able to accomplish.

When movies were first introduced in the late 19th century, black characters were often portrayed by white actors and actresses who wore "blackface" to indicate their race. They also incorporated other cosmetic clues into their wardrobes, like ill-fitting clothes, to indicate to white audiences that the characters were black. The message behind these portrayals was often that black people were inferior to white people both physically and mentally. The introduction of black actors and actresses by the early 20th century did not end the stereotypes that were regularly portrayed to white audiences. Many of these black actors and actresses were forced to portray characters that were lazy, immoral or ignorant. This trend continued as the medium of television became more popular.

I love her-she loves me/words by Irving Caesar & Eddie Cantor, a popular musical in the early 1920's that featured a white man in "blackface" makeup. Photo Courtesy of the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts/Music Division

Actress Thelma "Butterfly" McQueen Photo Courtesy of the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Photographs and Prints Division



Sydney Poitier, became the first African American actor to win an Academy Award for Best Actor in 1963. Photo Courtesy of the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Photographs and Prints Division

While actresses like Thelma "Butterfly" McQueen may have perpetuated negative stereotypes of black people in film, they helped introduce Americans to the notion that black people could act in the same film as Clark Gable or Vivian Leigh. This was an important moment for men and women who were still segregated in almost every other aspect of their lives.

Gradually, the pioneering work of these early thespians opened the door to more mainstream roles for future generations of black people. Stanley Kramer's 1958 film, *The Defiant Ones,* introduced Sydney Poitier to audiences and his popularity helped change the types of roles other black actors and actresses would start to get offered. In 1962, Brock Peters starred as Tom Robinson in the film *To Kill a Mockingbird*. His portrayal of a man wrongly accused because of race moved audiences and played an important role in bringing the injustices that black people suffered to the forefront of people's consciousness.

Bert Williams, was a key figure in the development of African-American entertainment. In an age when racial inequality and stereotyping were commonplace, he became the first black American to take a lead role on the Broadway stage and was considered by leading entertainment journals as "one of the great comedians of the world." ca. 1910 Photo Courtesy of the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Photographs and Prints Division

By the latter half of the 20th century, black film and television were leaving an important mark across American society. Black people were no longer being asked to just act in these productions; some were beginning to write, direct and produce them. Alex Haley's "Roots" became an eight-part miniseries that introduced not only many black celebrities into millions of homes, but also demonstrated to television and Hollywood executives that black writers could produce compelling material for every demographic. Later, filmmakers like Spike Lee proved that their movies could be commercially as well as critically successful.

Poster for the 1992 release of Malcolm X, a biographical film directed by Spike Lee and based off the 1956 book, The Autobiography of Malcolm X. Photo courtesy of Largo International N.V