



PAM GRIER and actor-comedian Richard Pryor star in the action-drama movie Greased Lightning, based on the life of bootlegger-turned-NASCAR racing champion Wendell Scott. Beau Bridges co-stars as Wendell's mechanic and best friend. Star movie critic Clyde Gilmour says Pam Grier is wasted in her role of the hero's wife.

Pryor plays racing hero with a quiet authority

Brimming with affectionate memories of several other movies, Greased Lightning tells the more-or-less true story of Wendell Scott, the first black American to become a champion race-car driver. It's at the Imperial, Backstage and several other theatres.

This simple-minded but likable film is bound to remind some viewers of Rocky, another story about a plucky contender who comes up out of nowhere.

It recalls The Jackie Robinson Story about a baseball player who doggedly penetrated the color barrier. It also calls to mind The Last American Hero in which another Deep South moonshine driver went on to become a stock-car champ.

Greased Lightning offers comedian-actor Richard Pryor as Wendell Scott and the real Wendell Scott served as technical adviser. A squad of four writers did the script, which has its full share of well-worn narrative clichés. It was put on film by Michael Schultz, a black director who earlier did Cooley High and Car Wash.

Schultz has made it clear in interviews that he wants "to show the underlying humanity in all people." He does not endorse the Get Whitey hate-operas of the '60s.

Significantly, Greased Lightning opens with a pre-credits sequence in which Wendell Scott, a small black boy, defeats a grudgingly admiring white challenger in a rural bike-race.

"You wanna know sumpin?" the loser sings out. "You're one crazy nigger!"

The comment is accepted as a compliment by the black lad. He goes on from there to become a spunky grown-up

who refuses to let his skin color hold him back in the white folks' world.

Pryor plays the central role with an air of quiet, jocular authority. He never tries to project the granite majesty that such black actors as Jim Brown have made their stock-in-trade in Hollywood. At times, in fact, Pryor's wide eyes and quick, nervous smile look almost like a black comedian's put-down of the Frightened Darkie routine copyrighted by Stepin Fetchit in the days of crude racist caricatures.

As usual, the cops chasing the moonshiners in this movie are clumsy and stupid. They keep driving off the highway into ponds. Not once but twice a police car crashes right through a barn, which then slowly and comically collapses.

Unlike most of their screen counterparts, however, these cops have no real malice in them. The sheriff (Vincent Gardenia) even mellows into an ostensibly liberal-minded politician while the '50s give way to the '60s and then the '70s.

Beau Bridges is both amiable and convincing as a poor-white-trash driver who becomes Wendell's mechanic and best friend. But the magnificent Pam Grier is wasted in a routine role as our hero's loyal wife. She looks like a goddess from mythology, ready to do battle with dragons, and it's not easy to imagine her peering blithely into the oven in her Virginia cottage.



Movies
Clyde Gilmour

Avengers crew begins work in Toronto

The crew and actors from the British television series The New Avengers began work yesterday on the first of seven episodes to be filmed in Metro.

The pilot show of the first episode, entitled Complex, has the team of John Steed, Purdey and Gambit involved in foreign embassy intrigue.

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