

Black History Month: Trailblazers In Film



In celebration of Black History Month, the firm’s African American Lawyers Network would like to recognize the many Black trailblazers who forged a path toward racial equality, influenced American culture and shaped U.S. history with their accomplishments. Many of these esteemed Black icons have been the subject of noteworthy films or are artists in their own right.

The following is a sampling of 21 films from the past 15 years that memorialize the lives of Black leaders, legends and visionaries or showcase award-winning work by Black actors, writers and directors.

“**42**” (2013), a box office biopic success, details how baseball legend Jackie Robinson became the first African American to play in the major league after signing with the Brooklyn Dodgers. The film stars the late Chadwick Boseman — lead actor in “Black Panther,” one of the highest-grossing superhero films in the U.S.

“**Bessie**” (2015) is an HBO film about American blues singer Bessie Smith and follows her career from a young, struggling singer to “The Empress of the Blues.” Queen Latifah, who stars as Smith, received the Screen Actors Guild Award for Outstanding Performance by a Female Actor in a Miniseries or Television Movie.

“**BlackKkKlansman**” (2018) is a comedic biopic nominated for an Oscar for Best Picture, written and directed by film icon Spike Lee, who was nominated for Best Director and won the Oscar for Best Adapted Screenplay. The story profiles Ron Stallworth, the first African American detective in the Colorado Springs Police Department, who infiltrates the local Ku Klux Klan chapter. Actor John David Washington portrays Stallworth.

“The Black List: Volume I, II & III” (2008-2019) is a series of films created as part of the Black List Project, which was conceived by photographer Timothy Greenfield-Sanders and film critic Elvis Mitchell. The series involves notable African American figures such as Chris Rock, Colin Powell, Serena Williams, Angela Davis, Melvin Van Peebles, Bishop T.D. Jakes, Tyler Perry, Whoopi Goldberg, John Legend and others, who share stories and insights into the triumphs, joys and struggles of Black life in the U.S. “The Black List” won the NAACP Spirit Award for Best Documentary in 2009. Note: Due to the production date, Volume I contains a pre-conviction discussion of Bill Cosby.

“Fruitvale Station” (2013) is a biographical drama film written and directed by Ryan Coogler, based on the events leading to the murder of Oscar Grant — a 22-year-old man and father who was fatally shot in 2009 by a Bay Area Rapid Transit police officer at the Fruitvale BART station in East Oakland, California.

“The Great Debaters” (2007) is a drama based on the true story of Melvin B. Tolson, a professor at historically black Wiley College in Texas. In 1935, he inspired students to form the school’s first debate team, which went on to challenge Harvard in the national championship. The film stars Denzel Washington, Forest Whitaker and Jurnee Smollett.

“Harriet” (2019) tells the story of Harriet Tubman’s escape from slavery and her courageous mission to free others from slavery. Kasi Lemmons directed the movie, which stars Cynthia Erivo, who was nominated for the Best Actress Academy Award for her performance in the title role.

“Hidden Figures” (2016) tells the story of three Black women — Katherine Johnson, Dorothy Vaughan and Mary Jackson — who were pioneering mathematicians instrumental in achieving NASA’s mission to send astronauts to space. Johnson, portrayed by Taraji P. Henson, was the only surviving member of the team to see her achievements memorialized by the film and she received the Presidential Medal of Freedom in November 2015 from President Barack Obama. Octavia Spencer — an Oscar, Golden Globe and Screen Actors Guild Award winner — plays Vaughan and actress and Grammy-nominated singer-songwriter Janelle Monáe plays Jackson.

“I Am Ali” (2014) is a documentary directed by Clare Lewis that covers the life of Muhammad Ali by utilizing personal audio recordings Ali made himself to various family members including his daughters during the 1970s as well as interviews with friends and family members.

“The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks” (2017) is an HBO film based on the book of the same name by Rebecca Skloot. The movie tells the story of Lacks, who was diagnosed with cervical cancer in the 1950s, and whose cancer cells changed the course of cancer treatment for all. Executive producer Oprah Winfrey also plays the role of Lacks’ daughter, Deborah.

“John Lewis: Good Trouble” (2020) explores Lewis’ 60-plus years of social activism and legislative action on civil rights, voting rights, gun control, healthcare reform and immigration. The documentary is available on Amazon Prime.

“Joseph” (2020) is of special interest to the McGuireWoods family as partner Jackie Stone’s husband, BK Fulton, is executive producer. A Jamaican doctor trained in Western medicine clashes with his parents, also doctors, about his belief in the benefits of bush medicine as practiced by his grandfather in Ghana and travels to Africa to prove them wrong. The film won “Best Diaspora Narrative Feature” at the 2020 African Movie Academy Awards, the African equivalent of the Oscars.

“Just Mercy” (2019) is the story of renowned civil rights lawyer Bryan Stevenson and his fight to free a wrongly convicted death row prisoner, Walter McMillion, in the 1990s. The movie stars Academy Award winner Jamie Foxx and Emmy nominee Michael B. Jordan.

“King in the Wilderness” (2018), an HBO documentary directed by Peter Kunhardt, chronicles the last 18 months of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s life, including the criticism he faced from both sides of the political spectrum. The documentary includes behind-the-scenes video of Dr. King’s private moments and phone conversations recorded by President Lyndon Johnson.

“Loving” (2016) spotlights the story of Richard and Mildred Loving, an interracial couple whose arrest led to a legal battle culminating in the U.S. Supreme Court’s landmark 1967 civil rights decision that ended anti-miscegenation laws. The film stars Ruth Negga, who was nominated for a Best Actress Academy Award for her role.

“Marshall” (2017) is a biographical legal drama that focuses on one of the first cases of Thurgood Marshall’s career, *State of Connecticut v. Joseph Spell*, before he became one of the principal legal strategists for the civil rights movement and the first African American U.S. Supreme Court justice. The late Chadwick Boseman delivers another compelling performance as Marshall and the film features Golden Globe winner Sterling K. Brown. Oscar nominee Reginald Hudlin directed.

“Miles Ahead” (2015) is an acclaimed biopic about the life of jazz legend Miles Davis, starring and directed by two-time Golden Globe winner and Oscar nominee Don Cheadle.

“Moonlight” (2016), a coming-of-age film written and directed by Barry Jenkins, chronicles the life of a young Black man who grapples with his sexuality and identity. It is the first film with an all-Black cast — and the first LGBTQ-related film — to win the Oscar for Best Picture. Actor Mahershala Ali also won a Best Supporting Actor Oscar for his role.

“One Night in Miami” (2021) marks the directorial debut of Oscar- and Emmy-winning actress Regina King. The film is a fictional account of one night after Muhammad Ali's 1964 World Heavyweight Championship win over Sonny Liston, when Ali, Malcolm X and Sam Cooke gather to celebrate Ali's win and discuss their roles in the civil rights movement and cultural upheaval of the 1960s.

“Self Made” (2020) is a Netflix original series inspired by the life of hair care pioneer and entrepreneur Madam C.J. Walker, America's first Black woman millionaire. The film stars Octavia Spencer, who was nominated for an Outstanding Lead Actress Primetime Emmy, and was co-directed by DeMane Davis and Kasi Lemmons.

“Selma” (2014) covers the story of the historic 1965 march led by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama, to secure equal voting rights. Nominated for a Best Motion Picture Academy Award, the film is directed by Ava DuVernay and stars Golden Globe nominee David Oyelowo, Carmen Ejogo and icon Oprah Winfrey.

“When They See Us” (2019) is a Netflix miniseries created, co-written and directed by Ava DuVernay about the Central Park 5. The miniseries explores the lives and families of the five male suspects who were falsely accused and then prosecuted on charges related to the rape and assault of a woman in Central Park.