

KINO LORBER

PERSONAL PROBLEMS (1980)



Presented by Ishmael Reed and Steve Cannon
Original Idea by Ishmael Reed
Directed by Bill Gunn

With Vertamae Grosvenor, Walter Cotton, Jim Wright, Bill Gunn, Sam Waymon

– **Restoration World Premiere, Metrograph Theater** –
164 min. – USA

NEW YORK PRESS CONTACT:

Michael Lieberman, Metrograph
michael@metrograph.com

DISTRIBUTOR CONTACT:

Jonathan Hertzberg – jhertzberg@kinolorber.com
Kino Lorber, 333 W. 39th Street, Suite 503, New York, NY 10018

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LOG LINE

Operating in defiance of the racially exclusive Hollywood studio system, novelist Ishmael Reed, director Bill Gunn and a renegade group of artists banded together to film a “meta soap opera” about the struggles of a working class African American couple in New York City.

SHORT SYNOPSIS

Johnnie Mae Brown (Vertamae Smart-Grosvenor) and Charles Brown (Walter Cotton) are a working-class African American couple in New York at the beginning of the 1980s. While reliant upon one another, the husband and wife have grown emotionally estranged and are each having relationships outside the marriage. Charles’s father, Father Brown (Jim Wright) lives with the couple, and their lives are further complicated when Johnnie Mae’s brother Bubba (Thommie Blackwell) and his wife Mary Alice (Andrew W. Hunt) come to live with them. After the sudden death of Father Brown, a funeral wake allows simmering family tensions to rise to the surface. Charles spends an introspective day reminiscing with Father Brown’s friends. As a result of these events, Johnnie Mae and Charles rediscover their love for one another and make a conscious effort to strengthen their relationship.

LONG SYNOPSIS

Volume 1 focuses on the strained relationship between Southern-born Johnnie Mae Brown (Vertamae Smart-Grosvenor) and her husband, transit worker Charles (Walter Cotton). They share an apartment with Charles’s retired father-in-law, Father Brown (Jim Wright).

A night nurse at Harlem Hospital, Johnnie Mae finds escape from her bleak reality through her friendship with co-worker Della (Margo Williams) and in a blossoming relationship with a mellow keyboard player, Raymon (Sam Waymon). Johnnie Mae and her friends attend one of Raymon’s performances and witness a combative discussion about racial politics between the owner of a hot dog restaurant (Ishmael Reed) and a white radical (Kip Hanrahan).

Family tensions are further strained when Johnnie Mae announces that her brother Bubba (Thommie Blackwell) and his wife Mary Alice (Andrea W. Hunt) are coming to live with them, having suffered legal problems and lost custody of their child. The stress of the unhelpful, unemployed apartment-guests—combined with the discovery that Charles has been carrying on an affair of his own, with Sharon (Michele Wallace)—pushes Johnnie Mae to her emotional breaking-point, and she demands that everyone make more of an effort to contribute to the maintenance of the household. *Volume 1* concludes as Johnnie Mae says goodbye to Della, who is moving back South, making Johnnie Mae yearn for the simple pleasures of the Southern life she has left behind.

In *Volume 2*, Father Brown tells Charles that he is going to have surgery on his leg, if he can cover the cost of the operation. Bubba and Mary Alice are arrested for jumping bail in California. While in jail, a fellow inmate, Boom Boom (John Di Benedetto) offers to

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introduce Bubba to a criminal boss, Mr. Damien (Bill Gunn) who could provide him with new opportunities. Charles visits the hospital and is told by Dr. Bill Curry (Renauld White) that Father Brown has died from complications of his surgery. After a few drinks at a cocktail party—also attended by Mr. and Mrs. Damien (Lamarries Moses)—Ramon and Johnnie Mae have an argument and their relationship ends in bitterness.

Personal Problems cuts immediately to a wake for Father Brown, where family resentments bubble to the surface. Father Brown's daughter Rose (Barbara Montgomery) accuses Johnnie Mae of neglecting her father's care, and an uninvited guest (Mizan Nunes) creates tension among the mourners. Later, Johnnie Mae accuses Rose's husband Herb (Bill Terry) of paying improper attention to her daughter Beckey (Stacey Harris).

Charles, Herb and two other men (Leonard Jackson and Norther Cullins) go to a bar and drink to Father Brown's memory, and wander to the waterfront, where Charles is welcomed into the fraternity of older men, and enjoys an introspective moment as he imagines playing a melancholy saxophone solo.

Charles decides to end his relationship with Sharon, and enjoys a quiet moment with Johnnie Mae, with whom it appears he will be reconciled.

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PERSONAL PROBLEMS: AN INTRODUCTION

by Ishmael Reed

George Bernard Shaw said that “If you do not tell your stories others will tell them for you and they will vulgarize and degrade you.” With few exceptions, this expression can be applied to Hollywood’s treatment of Blacks from the creation of the industry to now.

So what happens when a group of unbankable individuals tell their stories? Actors who have final say over their speaking parts? A director, who was found “too difficult” for Hollywood? A composer, who would not submit to the formulaic mediocre soundtracks required by the industry? A Black male lead, who was not black enough? A Black actress lead who was not light enough? An actor who had been retired because he belonged to another era? He was a star during the “Race Films” era. A cinematographer who chose art over expediency? An unmarketable male, a roguish charming home wrecker who didn’t look like Clark Gable?

Three producers - Walter Cotton, Steve Cannon and Ishmael Reed - who, having no experience in producing movies, organized a production with the amount of money that a Hollywood spends on catering? Maybe less. Some consider the result to be a classic.

Personal Problems, a legendary, meta-soap opera, has held small audiences since 1981, when the final part was produced. It debuted with a bang with showings at the George Pompidou Museum after which there were showings at the Pacific Film Archive in Berkeley, KQED TV San Francisco, and the Roxie Cinema in San Francisco. The National Endowment for the Arts selected *Personal Problems* as one of those projects to tour select American cities. It was shown in Buffalo, New York, a town in Appalachia, Los Angeles, Rochester and elsewhere. WNYC proposed a series based upon *Personal Problems*, but nothing came of it. I traveled to Washington, D.C. and showed *Personal Problems* to members of PBS TV’s staff. One of those present made disparaging remarks about our director, Bill Gunn, and filmmaker Kathleen Collins, and rejected *Personal Problems*. She went on to have an important role in Ken Burns’s *The Civil War*, which repeated the message of *The Birth of a Nation*, which viewed the war as an act of Northern aggression. For this effort Ken Burns was honored by the Sons of the Confederacy.

A showing of *Personal Problems* at the New School Of Social Research was applauded by some, but puzzled others, who were among the Black artistic and intellectual elite. They weren’t accustomed to this kind of hybrid. The Kitchen distributed it to select audiences. There was a showing at the Whitney Museum as part of a Bill Gunn retrospective, but otherwise the project lay fallow for decades. Gunn’s own problems with Hollywood were voiced in his novel *Rhinestone Sharecropping*, and his play *Black Picture Show*, both of which were published by Steve Cannon and me.

Our meta-soap opera made an immediate connection to the Black public which had been exposed to hurtful stereotypes from such Nazi sympathizers as Walt Disney. The

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morning after the video was shown on WNYC TV, the co-star, Vertamae Grosvenor, was greeted by a Black bus driver who addressed her by her character's name, Johnnie Mae. Hollywood, which catered for decades to Southern audiences, would not accept a script about ordinary Blacks and their day-to-day struggles. Hollywood was where the only role available to a great Jazz artist, Abbey Lincoln, was that of a maid.

Black intellectuals like Walter White, Marcus Garvey, Lena Horne and Paul Robeson tried to persuade Hollywood to act right for decades. Walter White, one of those leaders of the NAACP who have opposed the stereotypical depiction of Blacks, tried to persuade Darryl Zanuck to base his movie on W.E.B. DuBois's classic movie about Reconstruction called *Black Reconstruction*. Instead, in order to achieve sales in the South, he chose Margaret Mitchell's *Gone With The Wind*, which is even used by universities and colleges to inform students of that period. This masterful piece of propaganda perpetuated the myths of the contented slave, the merciful slave master, and even proposes that the White underclass suffered more than those who were enslaved. This is the Hollywood that glorifies Confederate terrorists and mass murderers like Jesse James whose gang was led by a psychopathic Confederate, William Quantrill of Quantrill's Raiders. In the classic Western *Shane*, the Confederacy is romanticized. This is the Hollywood that prefers script writers who haven't a clue about Black life over the great James Baldwin. Columbia Pictures blocked his every attempt to create a Malcolm X like the one whom he befriended. The producers considered his script to be "inflammatory" which means that it would make a White audience uncomfortable. He wrote bitterly about his Hollywood experiences in *The Devil Finds Work*. The rejection by Hollywood affected his physical and mental health. He tried to form an independent film company, but chose incompetent partners. He tried to negotiate with a Hollywood which regards Quentin Tarantino as an expert on Black history.

Personal Problems is a breakthrough because it shows how Black life looks away from the intervention of mediators at the Hollywood Studios, HBO, Showtime, etc. where Black actors get to play pimps, thugs and whores most of the time. Reed, Cotton and Cannon assembled a group of artists, largely composed of young people, mostly unknown at the time, and the result was first a radio drama and then a video production. The project began when I called Steve Cannon, the leader of a Lower East Side arts factory who was recently dubbed by *The New York Times* as "The Emperor of the Lower East Side," a description that they borrowed from me, and told him that people were calling me about their personal problems and that we should do a parody of the soap opera called *Personal Problems*. Steve had a show on New York's WBAI at the time and I persuaded him to begin episodes on his show. Walter Cotton was someone whom I knew in Buffalo, New York. One day in 1962, a few months after I had arrived in New York, I was walking across Washington Square Park on the way to work and saw Walter sleeping on a park bench. I invited him to bunk in the room that I had in the Midway Hotel, a rundown cockroach infested dump located in the West 90s. We became close friends. Walter had come to New York to try his chances in the theater. I chose Walter to produce *Personal Problems*, both the radio and television versions, and

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it was through Walter's connections that some of the leading Black actors joined the project. Some were well known. Others would achieve fame on television and in film.

Poet Joe Johnson brought us director Bill Gunn, and Kip Hanrahan, producer of the Conjure series that includes concerts and CDs based upon musicians interpreting my songs and poetry, brought us photographer/videographer Robert Polidori. The first version of *Personal Problems* was produced by Bill Stephens of Peoples Communications in 1979. Stephens also had a role in the radio series, as well as my former student Terry McMillan, who later achieved fame as an author. One of the supporting stars of *Personal Problems* is singer Sam Waymon, who appeared in Gunn's horror classic, *Ganja and Hess*. I also chose the late author and actress Vertamae Grosvenor, who was considered one of the most versatile of American performers, besides being a writer, dancer, author and a singer with the legendary Sun Ra Arkestra. For his part, Walter was able to recruit Lewis Musser and John Di Benedetto who had performed in his play "New York City is Closed." Thommie Blackwell, Marsha Schwann, Barbara Montgomery, Renauld White, Mizan Nunes, and his daughters Stacey and Christy Harris.

As a bridge to a former generation, the father was played by Jim Wright, a veteran of the famed Orson Welles 1936 *Macbeth* produced by the Federal Theater Project. He played Dollar Bill in W.D. Alexander's *Race Film*, and *Souls of Sin*, which was produced in 1949. Leonard Jackson had starred in the film *Five On The Black Hand Side*, based on a work by Charles Russell. The music score was composed by Carman Moore, who later would conduct his compositions before prime ministers including Mikhail Gorbachev and who received a commission for new work from the president of Costa Rica. He has the distinction of having works premiere at the San Francisco Symphony and the New York Philharmonic a day apart. Robert Polidori, who would be described as one of "most esteemed practitioners of large-scale photography," led the production crew. Polidori has received the admiration of filmmakers for the photography that he designed for *Personal Problems*. Because of his art, Polidori was selected to photograph the restoration of the Château de Versailles.

Had it not been for Jake Perlin, who arranged to have the fifty-eight ¾ inch tapes stored in a trunk in my storage room digitalized, *Personal Problems* would have suffered the same fate as most of those films produced by Black filmmakers from the early 1900s to the 1950s: wearing out until vanishing. It was Jake Perlin who revived interest in the project by having it screened at BAM and Lincoln Center. Jake is a throwback to those who view film as an art form and not a place where people can passively receive large screen video games that blast them out of their seats. Where films can't be made unless they have a profit-making star.

Personal Problems could not have been done without ¾ inch technology and the dedicated actors, crew, composers and videographers who made sacrifices to achieve one of the best and most sophisticated portrayals of Blacks yet done.

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Black actors continue to beg Hollywood to act right. Even those films that have all Black casts are managed by those who have never been profiled racially. Hollywood ain't going to change. Just as revolutions in print technology opened the door for more authors to bypass the Manhattan publishing establishment, revolutions in video and film technology made it possible for producers like Steve Cannon, Walter Cotton and I to enter the field. We are part of a tradition. Pearl Bowser and others have uncovered the hidden history of independent Black films which were produced outside of the Hollywood system and designed to "counter prevailing caricatures of African-Americans on film." Between 1909 and 1954, 125 companies produced hundreds of silent movies. Always under-financed, the introduction of sound put these companies out of business, because of the financial strain that went into producing talkies.

In 2018, the distribution and equipment problems that brought the production of "Race Films" to their end have been solved by online distribution. Now, through the support of Kino Lorber, and the restoration efforts of Bret Wood, using technology that was not available in the early 80s, *Personal Problems* will be available to wider audiences. The fact that *Personal Problems* was originally done for \$40,000.00 will be an inspiration to younger Black, Brown, Yellow and Red filmmakers who protest their stories being framed by the tired and worn clichés.

Black, Hispanic, and Asian American actresses no longer have to appear in films and television series merely as prostitutes or maids and minority men, no longer pimps and thugs. Hollywood will become a bejeweled Dinosaur unaware that a meteor is about to hit.

— Ishmael Reed, Visiting Scholar, The California College of the Arts

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“IMPROVISATIONAL JAMMING”: THE PROCESS AND PRODUCTION OF *PERSONAL PROBLEMS*

by Nicholas Forster

It all began with an idea that to many seemed inconceivable.

In 1977, the United States Commission on Civil Rights published *Window Dressing on the Set: Women and Minorities in Television*, a report detailing the troublingly narrow possibilities for many to work in American television. Nearly 200 pages long, the report concluded what so many within the industry knew: “minorities and women—particularly minority women—continue to be underrepresented in dramatic programs and on the news and their portrayals continue to be stereotyped. Insofar as employment is concerned, they are underrepresented on local station work forces and are almost totally excluded from decision making positions.” Despite the culture shifting mini-series *Roots*, which aired on ABC in January that same year, and limited programming on public television, broadcasting remained a white space.

The 1970s had seen *Shaft* swagger across 42nd Street, *Superfly* cruise through Manhattan and *Foxy Brown* declare that justice was imminent and she'd handle the revenge. In 1977 *Window Dressing on the Set* established that those opportunities, once available in Hollywood, were absent on television: the inequalities of American television were not created by occasional oversight, so much as they were embedded in the industry's very structure which strangled opportunities and propelled romantic white visions of American life.

Four years before *Window Dressing on the Set* was released, writers Ishmael Reed and Steve Cannon, along with the poet Joe Johnson formed Reed, Cannon, and Johnson Communications Co., a small bi-coastal publishing house. *Francisco* (1974), the debut novel by Alison Mills, an actress, singer, and star of the Emmy nominated sitcom *Julia*, was their first release. Now out of print, Mills' autobiographical tale cataloged the fraught and dangerous conditions for a Black actress in the nation's dream factories.

Francisco marked what would become a longstanding connection between Reed, Cannon and Black Hollywood. Two years after *Francisco* was published, Reed, inspired by artist friends calling him and recounting their own struggles, came up with an idea: create a vision of everyday Black life for television. As the writer told an audience at the University of Nevada in the spring of 1977, “everybody's got personal problems.” Working with the actor/producer/playwright Walter Cotton and Cannon, Reed began to develop what would become the first self-described Black soap opera written, acted, and produced by Black artists.

Before it was pitched to various networks as a television show, *Personal Problems* was an episodic radio drama about a Black middle class family living in the Lower East Side of Manhattan. The first episode was funded by small grants from the NY State Council of the Arts, the NEA, and the Coordinating Council of Literary Magazines and it was

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recorded in Cannon's apartment. There were only three actors: Walter Cotton, a Buffalo-born stage actor who was one of the original cast members of the New Heritage Theater Company in Harlem; Vertamae Grosvenor, an actress, writer, and culinary anthropologist (author of the classic *Vibration Cooking: or The Travel Notes of a Geechee Girl*) who had previously toured as a singer with Sun Ra's Arkestra; and Jim Wright, a retired actor with an illustrious career that included a stint at the Cotton Club, performances in the Federal Theater Project, and the lead performance as Dollar Bill Burton in William Alexander's *Souls of Sin* (1949). Using a treatment by Reed as the foundation, the three recorded a series of improvised scenes onto tape. These recordings were then transcribed, edited and re-performed. The "script" that developed focused on the minor rhetorical battles waged between Johnnie Mae Brown (Grosvenor), her husband, Charles (Cotton) and her father-in-law, Father Brown (Wright). This was a bottom-up production where writing was sculpted through improvisatory performance.

The first episode never left the kitchen of the Browns' apartment and over the course of 30 minutes, this initial episode (at one time titled "What Time Did You Get in Last Night?") charted the dull hum that persists between people who share their life together, but ultimately find themselves neither happy nor unhappy. The absurd realities of ordinary life are braided with humor, and topics shift as quickly as attitudes sway. Grounded in a kind of love that only develops over time, it is clear that the arguments between Johnnie Mae and Charles have played out before and they will likely play out again. Each word seems to carry a history of interactions, as the Browns discuss coffee, the possibility of Johnnie Mae's brother Bubba coming to stay (a plot point returned to in the film version), and the peculiar way that Charles's favorite film, *The Guns of Navarone* (1961), is constantly being broadcast on the television. *Personal Problems* zoomed in to extrapolate meaning in the mundane and emphasize that people often express as much in what is not said as they do in explicit action.

Word about *Personal Problems* began to circulate in the press throughout 1977 and before the show made it to the airwaves it was introduced in a new line of cassette tapes produced by Reed, Cannon, and Johnson Communications Co. The series of tapes would go on to feature readings and interviews with prominent writers including Al Young, Ntozake Shange, and June Jordan. The debut tape included the first episode of *Personal Problems* on one side and a reading of Reed's satirical novel *The Last Days of Louisiana Red* on the other. In November 1978, Cannon aired the first episode on WBAI in New York City, as part of his radio show. Three months later Reed shared *Personal Problems* on his own program on KQED in California, where he introduced the show with a nod to its importance as "the only soap opera conceived, directed, and produced by colored people..." He wryly added, "eat your heart out Norman Lear [producer of *All in the Family*, *Sanford and Son*, and *The Jeffersons*.]" For anyone who wasn't yet aware, Reed clarified that this was something different.

Over the next two years, four episodes of *Personal Problems* were broadcast. As listeners in New York City and Northern California tuned in, Reed, Cannon and Cotton

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continued to expand the show. With the assistance of an NEA grant, Reed and Cannon brought together friends and artists to work on a video pilot of *Personal Problems*. Bill Gunn, a groundbreaking writer, director and stage actor, known for his art horror masterpiece *Ganja and Hess* (1973) agreed to direct the pilot while Bill Stephens, who played Johnnie Mae's brother on the radio show, became the cinematographer. Stephens, a film and video artist (who made *Congo Oye!* with Kathleen and Eldridge Cleaver) operated the People's Communication Network, an arts organization and workshop space in Harlem.

Rather than shoot the pilot on film, the crew decided, in part for financial reasons, to shoot on video. Even though it was far less expensive than film, analog video brought its own share of technical challenges, such as the fluctuating exposures created by an automatic iris and the visual "ghosting" that appears when bright objects move across the screen (an artifact of tube-based video cameras). The cameras were portable but cumbersome and even with proper expertise the technology still presented unforeseen challenges for most users.

The first production meetings were held in the spring of 1979 and by the end of May a version had been rehearsed, shot and edited, with most of pilot taped in Bill Stephens' apartment on Riverside Drive. Reed was eager to get the project in front of producers at PBS, however the pilot made its public debut at the San Jose Fine Film Series in March 1980 as a "work in progress." Two months later *Personal Problems* screened as one feature in a two-night event showcasing the work of Bill Stephens at the New York Visual Anthropology Center, where Stephens emphasized how the project questioned conventional notions of "real images vs positive images."

Beyond proving that a Black soap opera was possible, the pilot also served as a demo reel for further financing and fellowships. PBS rejected the show but Reed won an NEA grant and the crew quickly began to work on *Personal Problems Volume 1* and *Volume 2*. Though money remained tight (Reed once described the budget as equivalent to the price of a "red carpet gown"), the grant allowed the team to expand to a production staff of nearly 30 people and work on *Volume 1* between September and October of 1980. Michele Wallace, who had recently published *The Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman* (1978) joined the cast, along with a number of other artists and intellectuals including Renauld White (the first Black model to appear on the cover of GQ), LaMarries Moses (a prominent model), Kip Hanrahan (a jazz musician) and Sam Waymon (a musician and composer of the score for *Ganja and Hess*). Perhaps the most notable change in form came when cinematographer Bill Stephens was replaced by Robert Polidori, an artist who worked as an assistant at Anthology Film Archives and previously studied with experimental film and videomakers Paul Sharits and Woody Vasulka.

For the twenty-nine year old Polidori, *Personal Problems* offered a space to experiment with form. Using two Sony cameras, he shot *Personal Problems* on 3/4" U-Matic tape, taking advantage of the capacity to record up to sixty minutes of footage. Working with

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Gunn and Cotton, he often kept the camera running even after a scene seemed to be completed. The set was driven by a number of political and aesthetic commitments and the young cinematographer followed Gunn's lead as the director created an atmosphere of what Polidori called "improvisational jamming." Energized by Gunn's direction and inspired by the D.A. Pennebaker's work with Jean-Luc Godard on *One A.M.* (1972) and Norman Mailer on *Maidstone* (1970), Polidori joined in on the jamming, as he explained, to "set up the dramatic tensions" where "the outcomes" were not "predetermined."

While the shooting schedule was limited, Gunn allowed actors to build their own backstories and develop dialogue on the set. Following a number of planning meetings and a few days of rehearsals, the cast established a strong sense of mutual trust. There were rarely more than a couple of takes for any one scene and while improvisation reigned, that improvisation rested on a foundation of collaborative practice and calm, if intense, focus. When Polidori looked back, he recalled Gunn's low-key nature and insightful instruction to actors to "just be there in your own head." For the actor John DiBenedetto, Gunn's animating questions created a sense that "you didn't feel like you were being judged...[when Gunn] asked you do something different it was like he had an idea rather than a problem [with what you did]." This generosity and back-and-forth between actors and directors further distinguished *Personal Problems* from similar soap operas of the era. The crew worked in conjunction with one another, sharing ideas and moving as a singular unit. The actress Mizan Nunes recalled the production an indelible experience where Gunn orchestrated actors with such a deft hand that he seemed to be conducting "classical jazz." The notes may not have been perfect but they were always motivated.

While Gunn had some misgivings about shooting on tape, the technology foregrounded the project's already experimental form. Apparent in the scan lines, shot composition and muffled sound *Personal Problems* confounded the lines distinguishing documentary and fiction, and in doing so it undercut the widely-held misapprehension that Black art was sociological first and aesthetic second. Echoing Bill Stephens' earlier comments, Carman Moore, who composed the score for the radio show and video project, explained that *Personal Problems* was "nominally a fiction [movie] but it behaves like a documentary." For Black artists, video offered a tool to sidestep Hollywood's protocols and create new worlds. Reed was clear about this, telling one audience that video will help Black artists "go out and create their own [image]... video cameras are cheaper than cinema technology. There is a possibility now of converting video into cinema." This sentiment was shared by the Black feminist writer Alice Childress who claimed that, video "give[s] us more freedom than we've ever had." At the dawn of the Reagan years that freedom was always attenuated. Polidori, one of the few white members of the crew, recalled going to rental stores and being rebuked by racist store managers who were uneasy lending cameras to a predominately Black production.

Personal Problems Volume 1 had its world premiere at the Centre Pompidou in November 1980. That same month *Volume 1* premiered stateside at the New School's Parson's Auditorium (previously known as the historic 5th Avenue Cinema.) Working

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tirelessly Reed brought the project to SUNY Buffalo, an academic conference in Atlanta, Georgia, and the Pacific Film Archive before the year was over. In 1981, the same year that footage for *Personal Problems Volume 2* was shot, local affiliates KQED in California and WNYC expressed interest. However, video, the very medium that was essential to *Personal Problems* existence, soon became an impediment as the stations were hesitant to broadcast the ever-degrading tapes Reed owned.

Some restoration work was done and KQED broadcast Volume 1 in November of 1981 at 11:35 PM on a Saturday night. The following year the show made its way to WNYC where it aired at 9PM on a Sunday. While the program was well received by viewers, the troubling time slots made a large audience unlikely. The hopes for distribution dried up again. In 1982, as the NAACP was beginning to support a boycott of Hollywood due to the continually shrinking number of roles for Black creative laborers, television seemed to follow Hollywood's lead. Reed failed to find financial support among major networks and the show didn't find a home on the recently launched BET either. Producers and executives repeatedly turned to the same refrain in their rejection: the notion of a Black soap opera was too esoteric.

Almost a decade after the initial idea, Reed continued to showcase *Personal Problems* throughout the country. In 1982, The Kitchen, the venerable New York performance space, began distributing and exhibiting *Volume 1 and Volume 2* while the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston included the project in their New Soap Video series, and Rice University welcomed the show for a special event. Perhaps the most successful "run" came in 1984 when Reed traveled with the movie as part of the Southern Circuit, a program developed by the South Carolina Arts Commission with funding also provided by the NEA and the Japan Foundation. Over the course of a week, Reed screened *Personal Problems* in six different southern cities. Gunn, who had continued working on a number of his own projects for television, was astonished, telling one of the actors that it seemed as though Reed was "traveling with [*Personal Problems*] like it's his baby under his arm, across the world." Even after the idea was realized, it needed to be brought to life again and again.

The assignment of authorship to a single director has always been an illusion. To call this Gunn's movie would be a misnomer that imposes the same language that has historically devalued the work of Black artists. The dictatorial regime of the television writers room or the power granted by the director's chair was dispersed among a group of artists that ranged from actors, poets and writers to anthropologists, experimental filmmakers, jazz musicians, and models. As Nunes recalled the project was the work of "outlaw artists" and the cast and crew made their own rules. This is apparent in the concluding credits, with a note that the project began with "an original idea by Ishmael Reed," and the lead actors and director clearly delineated, other roles were fluid. Throughout the production actors served as editors and producers when needed just as writers became assistants when necessary.

Seen now, it is apparent that *Personal Problems* is less a product than a process where

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an idea went through numerous translations and transformations. From idea to radio show to video, *Personal Problems* has never been a stable entity. For years, the project has required qualifications, amendments and annotations as it has moved across media and been shown under different viewing conditions. Typical categories fail to describe it: when the pilot was shot, the team envisioned something serialized and longer than a movie. Although later episodes aired on television, the project was more commonly screened in museums and theaters and art institutions. And yet the project's narrative emphasis and production process seem to push it outside of the bounds of what, in the 1980s, was considered "video art." These thorny, not-quite-right, descriptions only further highlight the unique intervention *Personal Problems* was and remains.

Not only does *Personal Problems* present a new vision of life, one Reed described as falling in line with Bill Gunn's longstanding depiction of Black characters who "know about old furniture, azaleas, and who can order their wine in French... though they may be a few months behind in their MasterCard payments, they will never have to return to the real sharecropping," but the project's production and form serve as startlingly poignant examples of collective artistic practice.

In 1989, the night before Bill Gunn's *The Forbidden City* premiered at the Public Theatre, the artist known for crossing mediums and destabilizing conventions died. With his death, it became clear that were there ever to be another volume in the *Personal Problems* series, it wouldn't be the same. The following summer, Reed organized a retrospective of Gunn's career at the Whitney Museum of American Art. This historic event, nearly a decade after the museum had turned down Cannon and Reed's submission of the original video pilot, featured rare screenings of projects Gunn worked on, including *Personal Problems* and the never released film, *Stop*. Twenty years later, in 2010, interest in *Personal Problems* was ushered anew by film programmer Jacob Perlin, who during the curation of the series "The Groundbreaking Bill Gunn" at BAMcinematek in New York, organized for the initial digitization and first attempted re-organization of Reed's massive collection of original video materials. In 2015, Perlin and Reed, with series co-programmer Michelle Materre, organized a screening and reunion event in 2015 at the Film Society of Lincoln Center, which featured Reed, Sam Waymon and Carman Moore. Kino Lorber's director of restorations, Bret Wood, first saw *Personal Problems* at the Whitney. Years later Wood began working with Perlin and Reed to restore *Personal Problems* to its best possible quality and reintroduce it to a new generation of viewers.

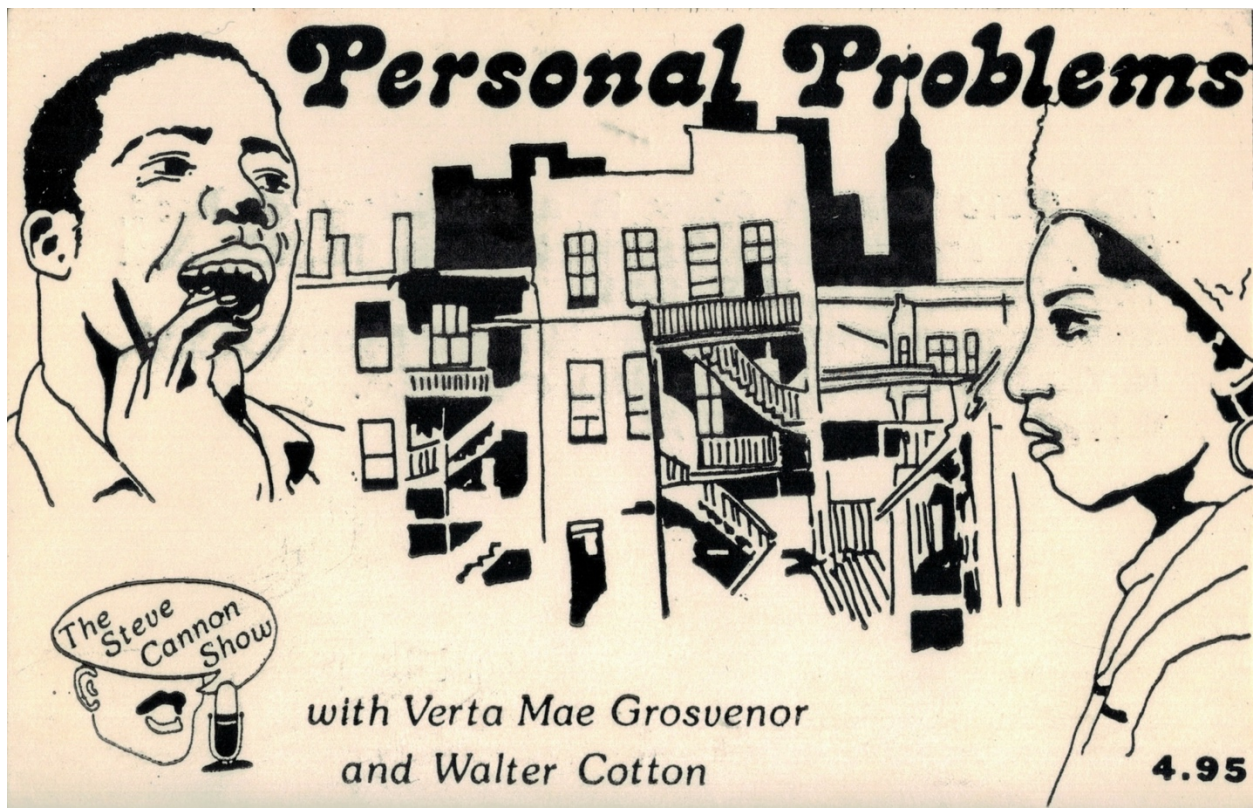
For decades, there has been no definitive version of this groundbreaking experimental soap opera. Kino Lorber's release, Wood's restoration work and the premiere exhibition at Metrograph in New York, is an important call not only to hear and see the possibilities of collaborative improvisation in action, but also to rethink what histories of cinema and television we tell. This work was never lost, rather it was suppressed by the same forces of white supremacy that *Window Dressing on the Set* detailed in the late 1970s. Reed's exhaustive search for audiences was unique, but not unheard of. Decades earlier the pioneering Black filmmaker and writer Oscar Micheaux drove around the country selling

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books door-to-door and carrying his films state to state, recutting them as he traveled. Though technology changed by the late 1970s, the film (and growing television) industry remained gated and locked. Nearly forty years since the radio show premiered this release stands as an invitation to question what creative possibilities for representation and employment might be made available in the future.

It all began with an idea but it has taken so much more.

~Nicholas Forster is a writer and PhD Candidate in African American Studies and Film & Media Studies at Yale University. He is currently writing a biography of Bill Gunn.



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ABOUT THE FILMMAKERS (Listed Alphabetically)

Steve Cannon (presenter)

Steve Cannon is a writer, publisher, and cultural critic who has spent more than forty years as one of the most important facilitators and architects of underground art for the underrepresented. Born in New Orleans, Louisiana, Cannon made his way to New York City in 1962 where he eventually became, what Ishmael Reed called, "The Emperor of the Lower East Side." It was in the 1960s that Cannon, like Reed, was a member of the important collective of black writers in New York City known as the Society of Umbra. In 1969 Cannon's debut novel *Groove, Bang, and Jive Around* was published. Wildly successful but scarce, the book became what Darius James called "an underground classic of such legendary stature that new York's black cognoscenti have transmogrified the work into urban myth." Throughout the 1970s Cannon hosted an important radio show on WBAI featuring guests and artists including Bill Gunn and Ntozake Shange. In 1991 Cannon founded A Gathering of the Tribes, a gallery and organization on the Lower East Side of Manhattan that has become a mecca for multicultural mentorship and art.

Walter Cotton (producer/actor: Charles Brown)

Born in Buffalo, New York, Walter Cotton was a writer, actor and producer. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s Cotton was a formidable presence in the New York City theatre scene. He was one of the founders of the Clowns Repertory Theater Company and served as an original member of the prominent Cornbread Players, an all-black theater troupe that was in residence at the Public Theater. On screen he appeared in supporting roles in classic works of the 1970s including two films directed by Ossie Davis: *Cotton Comes to Harlem* (1970) and *Gordon's War* (1973). His numerous plays include *Candyman's Dance* (1974) and the AUDELCO-nominated *Melting* (1987). Cotton was a lifelong friend of Ishmael Reed who wrote, in his satirical novel *The Last Days of Louisiana Red*, that: "Walter Cotton dominated five frames in *Gordon's War*. Remember that name. Walter Cotton." Walter Cotton passed away in 2013.

Bill Gunn (director/co-writer)

Though Bill Gunn is now primarily recognized today for his art-horror masterpiece *Ganja and Hess* (1973), his career crossed mediums over the course of four decades. Gunn first gained national attention in the 1950s when he served as James Dean's understudy in a production of *The Immoralist* (1954) before going on to star in Louis Peterson's *Take a Giant Step* (1956). In the late 1960s, Gunn wrote numerous screenplays including two that were produced in Hollywood, *The Landlord* (1970) and *The Angel Levine* (1970). As he transitioned to the director's chair, the obstacles in the industry became all the more pronounced and Gunn's feature debut, *Stop*, was shelved (and remains so to this day) by Warner Brothers after the MPAA stamped the film with an X-rating. Gunn also wrote two novels, *All the Rest Have Died* (1964), *Rhinestone Sharecropping* (1981, published by I. Reed Books). Gunn's career began to take off in the New York theater scene as he wrote dozens of plays including the Tony-nominated

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Black Picture Show (1982) and *The Forbidden City* (1989). In a 1990 tribute to Gunn at the Whitney Museum of Art, Ishmael Reed wrote "Gunn used the stage and the page to rail against these Movie Industry forces, not in the manner of the diatribe, but in the style of the samba and the bossa nova. With subtlety and with wit." Bill Gunn passed away in 1989.

Carman Moore (composer)

A graduate of Ohio State University and the Julliard School, Carman Moore has quietly composed one of the country's most eclectic and important musical catalogs.

Throughout the 1970s he was commissioned by leading orchestras including the San Francisco Symphony Orchestra and the New York Philharmonic, who premiered Moore's *Wild Fires and Field Songs* with Pierre Boulez conducting. In 1989 the New York Times praised his "voracious curiosity" and his "multi-media extravaganzas" writing that Moore doesn't only "defy categories, [he] simply treats them with disdain." Moore has written for the New York Times and the Village Voice and his autobiography *Crossover: An American Bio* was published in 2011. Many of Moore's works can be heard at: <http://www.carmanmoore.com/>

Robert Polidori (director of photography)

Born in Montreal, Canada, Robert Polidori is a photographer and filmmaker whose work has exquisitely crossed boundaries between the ordinary and the baroque. He began his career studying with filmmakers Woody Vasulka and Paul Sharits, and in the 1970s he became an assistant at the Anthology Film Archives. In the early 1980s Polidori began documenting the restoration of Versailles and his career as a photographer blossomed as he detailed the intricacies and complications of the relationship between architecture, the environment and human life in places like Havana, Chernobyl and New Orleans. In 1998 Polidori became a staff photographer for The New Yorker. His most recent show *Fra Angelico/Opus Operantis*, which features photographs of Fra Angelico's frescoes in Florence, is currently on display until April 14, 2018 at the Paul Kasmin Gallery in New York City. Examples of Polidori's work can be seen at: <http://www.robertpolidori.com/>

Ishmael Reed (original concept)

One of America's most prolific and prominent artists, Ishmael Reed has published more than 30 books. Among his groundbreaking works of fiction are *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down* (1969), *Mumbo Jumbo* (1972), *Flight to Canada* (1976), and the forthcoming *Conjugating Hindi*. Born in Chattanooga, Tennessee but raised in Buffalo, New York, Reed has consistently challenged commonly held notions about race, nation, and culture. With biting wit and sharp insight Reed has charted a unique path through American letters, wielding a philosophy he described as "neohoodooism." In 1998, Reed won a Macarthur Genius Grant and he has received awards from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Guggenheim Foundation. Twice nominated for the National Book Award, Reed's accomplishments are evident not only in his own writing but also in his tireless advocacy for under-recognized artists. In 1976 he cofounded the

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Before Columbus Foundation which has been dedicated to the “promotion and dissemination of contemporary American multicultural literature.” He has also edited over a dozen anthologies and developed numerous publishing houses. The literary critic Robert Elliot Fox described Reed as “a great improviser, a master of collage with an amazing ability to syncretize seemingly disparate and divergent materials into coherent ‘edutainments’—forms of surprise, revelation, and frequent hilarity.”

Vertamae Smart-Grosvenor (actress: Johnnie Mae Brown)

Born in Fairfax, South Carolina, Vertamae Smart-Grosvenor was a culinary anthropologist, singer, actress and producer. Smart-Grosvenor considered herself a “culinary griot” and her work stretched across mediums and cataloged the history of black cooking and culture in America. In the 1960s she appeared on Broadway and also designed costumes and sang with Sun Ra’s Arkestra. Beginning in the 1980s she frequently contributed to NPR, perhaps most notably as the host of *Seasoning*. Her screen credits include roles in Julie Dash’s *Daughters of the Dust* (1991) and Jonathan Demme’s adaptation of Toni Morrison’s novel *Beloved* (1998). Smart-Grosvenor’s *Vibration Cooking: or the Travel Notes of a Geechee Girl* (1970) is a foundational and genre-bending work that examines the relationship between food, place and society. Her essays were featured in a number of publications including *The Village Voice*, *The New York Times*, and *The Washington Post* and she is the subject of Julie Dash’s currently in progress documentary *Travel Notes of a Geechee Girl*. Vertamae Smart-Grosvenor passed away in 2016.

Samuel L. Waymon (actor: Raymon)

Samuel L. Waymon is an award-winning composer, singer, pianist and arranger/producer. He has composed music for Broadway and off-Broadway musical productions and he has scored numerous films including *Just Crazy About Horses* (1978), *Philadelphia* (1996), and Bill Gunn’s second feature *Ganja and Hess* (1973), in which Waymon co-starred. A consummate collaborator Waymon and Gunn worked on many projects including the theatrical productions of *Black Picture Show* (1974) and *The Forbidden City* (1989). For years Waymon was a friend, accompanist, writer, and manager to Nina Simone, his sister. In 2017 he appeared in the debut episode of CNN’s documentary series: *Soundtracks: Songs that Defined History*.

Jim Wright (actor: Father Brown)

Jim Wright was an actor, dancer and performer. Wright starred in a number of stage productions throughout the twentieth century including Broadway productions of *Cabin the Sky*, *Mamba’s Daughters*, and *Tobacco Road*. Wright’s illustrious career included performances in the Federal Theater Project production of *Macbeth* (directed by Orson Welles) and numerous television appearances including a role on the WOR-produced *Harlem Detective*. Wright also appeared in William Alexander’s *Souls of Sin* (1949) an independent “race film” written and directed by Powell Lindsay. He passed away during the shooting of *Personal Problems Volume 2* and the crew dedicated the episode to him.

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ABOUT THE RESTORATION

Restoration produced by Bret Wood and Jacob Perlin

Produced on a micro budget prior to the digital filmmaking revolution, *Personal Problems* suffers from a great many technical drawbacks typical of independent videography of the era. The film was shot on 3/4" video cameras, mostly in natural light. Being tube-based cameras with automatic irises, there is much "ghosting" and "smearing" in the image, especially when panning or zooming on "hot spots" of light.

Because the film was assembled on a tape-to-tape editing deck, the final master was at least one (and often two) generations removed from the original source tapes. Having been played a number of times on a variety of machines, the 3/4" edited master was suffering from tape dropouts and other visual artifacts. To gain the maximum clarity, Kino Lorber returned to the first-generation camera tapes which Ishmael Reed had stored under proper conditions. These camera originals were re-digitized and up-converted to high definition via a Blackmagic Teranex system. The frame rate was kept at 29.97 fps so as not to introduce unwanted frame blending, which would have been an unavoidable bi-product of 24p conversion. Even so, there is considerable interlacing in some scenes, which is present on the original camera tapes.

Using the edited master as a blueprint, the film was completely reconstructed (with frame-accuracy) from these digitized original camera tapes. Being magnetic tapes, these originals had suffered some fading over the intervening 38 years (exposed to the earth's natural magnetic fields). Shot-by-shot color grading restored the faded color and provided a consistency of color, contrast, and brightness that was impossible for the filmmakers to achieve during the 1979/1980 assembly. (Note: Original camera tapes could not be located for certain shots, and viewers may detect an occasional shift in the quality of color and sharpness.)

Finally, analog tape hits were digitally repaired and the credits were reconstructed in the "chyron" style of the original.

Just as the filmmakers had limited tools for videography and editing, the sound was also subject to technical compromises. The edit system and master tapes only allowed for two channels of audio, and these were usually played at competing volumes (if played in stereo today, dialogue would be heard full-volume in one ear, and music full-volume in the other ear). These tracks have now been "centered" and remixed for a more natural balance, and the mono mix-downs of Carman Moore's music have been

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replaced with true stereo tracks, when available. Excess noise and distortion have also been removed.

The technical flaws of *Personal Problems* have not been entirely eradicated. Nor will they ever be. But they have been diminished to the point that 21st-century viewers can enjoy the film with minimal distraction, yet still appreciate the unique audio-visual texture of this rare shot-on-video indie production.

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PUBLICITY DEPARTMENT KQED INC. 500 EIGHTH ST SAN FRANCISCO CA 94103 415 864-2000

11/3/81

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:

Contact: Rachel Ross
(415) 553-2288

"PERSONAL PROBLEMS," A BLACK SOAP OPERA,
PRODUCED BY ISHMAEL REED, AIRS ON KQED.
(AIRDATE: Sat. Nov. 21, 11:35 p.m.)

"Personal Problems," a videotape production by Ishmael Reed, is a cooperative effort by Black writers and performers to present the Black-American experience through genuine images challenging those customarily seen on commercial sitcoms. Airing Saturday, Nov. 7, at 11:30 p.m., on Channel 9, "Personal Problems" reflects the diversity of working people's real life struggles. Ishmael Reed, noted poet, author, and journalist from Berkeley, chose the standard T.V. soap opera format as a vehicle because, he says, "it is an American invention and not much has been done to develop it by serious artists."

True to the soap opera format, "Personal Problems" presents characters defined by their problems alone, but their frankness and unsentimental response to their own human drama distinguishes this 90-minute program as highly original. The performers, director and producer improvised upon the video treatments to create scripts. This unique style of dialogue is handled with depth and humor by a professional cast including Walter Cotton, Verta Mae Grovesnor, and Jim Wright.

"Personal Problems" follows Johnnie Mae Brown (played by Verta Mae Grovesnor) through her depressing hospital workday (a sequence actually filmed in Harlem Hospital), to a country scene with her lover and back home to her unfaithful husband and freeloading relatives. Her delicately balanced life collapses dramatically, but her strength never flags.

The concept of a Black soap opera was originated by Reed in 1978. He launched the project in radio episodes which were aired on WBAI in New York and KPFA in Berkeley. Beginning with two writers and a handful of actors, "Personal Problems" has grown to a dedicated production staff of thirty. "The whole crew contributed their labor to this project," said Reed. "They are our most valuable assets."

A quality, low-budget independent production, "Personal Problems" was shot in and around New York city and escapes the interior confines associated with conventional soaps. The drama was directed by Emmy-Award-winning playwright, Bill Gunn; produced by Ishmael Reed and Walter Cotton; photographed by Robert Polidori; with an original music score by Carman Moore.

(over)

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"Personal Problems" p. 2

This unique videotape premiered in Paris in 1980 and was later screened in New York and Berkeley. Audience reaction to "Personal Problems" has been unanimous in applauding the portrayal of Black Americans as they really are. In light of the glossy and comic images of Blacks fabricated by commercial television, "Personal Problems" is a new alternative.

This program was acquired especially for local broadcast with funds provided by the members of KQED.

* KQED *

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Ishmael Reed & Steve Cannon

invite you to

A SCREENING

of their full-length Tele-movie

"PERSONAL PROBLEMS"

[illegible]

starring

Verta Mae Grosvenor, Walter Cotton & Jim Wright

directed by

produced by

with music by

Bill Gunn

Walter Cotton

Carmen Moore



Director Bill Gunn, Producer Walter Cotton, Ishmael Reed, & Actor Calvin Lockhart at N.Y. Premiere of "Personal Problems."

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Sunday DECEMBER 14th

showings at 2:00 & 3:45 p.m.

PACIFIC FILM ARCHIVE

2650 Durant Ave., Berkeley

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Reception follows at 6:00 p.m.
at the SCARAB, 2136 San Pablo Ave.,
(1½ blocks south of University Ave.) in Berkeley

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CAST:

Vertamae Smart-Grosvenor (as Johnnie Mae Brown)
Samuel L. Waymon (as Raymon)
Jim Wright (as Father Brown)
Walter Cotton (as Charles Brown)
Thommie Blackwell (as Bubba)
Andrew W. Hunt (as Mary Alice)
Margo Williams (as Della)
Michelle Wallace (as Sharon)
John W. Wells (as Numbers Man)
Tres / Marshall M. Johnson, III (as Aikijutso Waiter)
Niamani Mutima (as Woman in Café)
Carey Barnes (as Patient's Uncle)
Michael Watts (as Patient)
Lester Williams (as Patient's Brother)
Dr. Alan Beckles (as Doctor)
Dr. William Grant (as Doctor)
Kip Hanrahan (as White Radical in Bar)
Ishmael Reed (as Manager of Doggie Diner)
Kenny de Louche and Vincent Hall (as Musicians in Bar)

CREW:

Director – Bill Gunn
Producer – Walter Cotton
Original Idea – Ishmael Reed
Composer – Carman Moore
Director of Photography – R. Polidori
Assistant Director – Niamani Mutima
Unit Production Manager – Kip Hanrahan
1st Camera – R. Polidori
2nd Camera – Jim Anderson
Sound – Marshall Johnson
Production Assistant – Leothy Miller Owens
Post Production Engineers – Janice Putney, Jody O'Brien, David Pentecost

Editors
Bill Gunn
R. Polidori
Kip Hanrahan
Niamani Mutima
Walter Cotton

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Soundtrack Musicians

Carman Moore – Conducting and Piano
Jerry Gonzalez – Percussion and Fleugelhorn
Cecil Mc Bee – Bass
Eric Johnson – Piano

Special Thanks

Harlem Hospital
Quintessence Nightclub
Liberty House
Howard Moore, Jr.
National Endowment for the Arts/Media Div.

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