

White Lies, Black Sheep



Written by [Laina Dawes](#)

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The Feature Film Debut From Afropunk's James Spooner

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"It's funny because a lot of people I've talked to have said, 'I hated you in the first part of the movie,' but there is so much emotion that comes out. If a character can bring out so much emotion in someone one, it's good. You're going to feel it, you're going to think about it. That's a great compliment," laughs Ayinde Howell.

Howell and director James Spooner are relaxing on a private patio located in a swanky downtown hotel, temporarily eschewing the madness taking over the Toronto streets during the Toronto International Film Festival. New York-based actor Howell and Spooner, who recently relocated from New York to Los Angeles, were in Toronto to promote *White Lies, Black Sheep*, a mockumentary - a documentary within a film - which was handpicked make its premiere screening as part of the Vanguard installation series at the Festival.

Howell plays AJ, a cocky club promoter fully immersed in New York's rock scene. With a penchant for blondes, booze and late-night rendezvous, AJ begins to question his racial identity and the unrealistic, yet comforting bubble he has surrounded himself in after experiencing a number of disappointments. "I just want to rock," AJ declares at the beginning of the film, choosing to ignore the racial politics (and his real name, Ajamu - too ethnic) that encapsulates the downtown club scene, where he is referred to as the 'token black guy who's really not black - he's like, cool.' Despite his hipster duds and his chemically straightened hair, it is evident by the documentary film crew (led by Spooner, playing himself) that follows AJ, wanting to capture 'the only black guy in the scene,' that despite his attempts at trying define himself as an individual in the segregated, racist club he works at, he is still, and always will be an outsider.

Howell, who grew up in Tacoma, Washington in the mid-eighties, understood where his character was coming from. "I was a Rasta kid, Vegan and I grew up in a predominately black neighbourhood, there were gangs... it was the 'hood. But me and my sisters always stood out as the little Rasta kids and we were home schooled, and kids were always like, 'what's one plus one?' " Howell smiles, now sporting a close fade after shaving off his locks for the film. "I was always like that outsider kid, anyway. So that was one of the things I immediately recognized when I first read the script and I could definitely recognize this guy this way, even though his experiences are different, I could understand being alienated by who you think should accept you."

Adds Spooner, "That's the part of what makes people hate him so much, when you see someone you can relate to. (The film) relates to the parts of you that you don't even want to admit are there and it

makes it that much more difficult.”

The feature film debut for Spooner, who directed 2003's *Afro-Punk*, a documentary that focused on black youth in the punk and rock scene, *White Lies, Black Sheep* is a continuation of his passion for delving into the socio-political issues that affect black youth who eschew music and cultural stereotyping. Thanks (in great part) to the website, which boasts a hugely popular community message board, the independent documentary is now an international hit. Though Spooner makes it clear that when creating his art (he is also a sculptor) he is not too concerned with capturing the attention of mainstream audiences, he does feel that *White Lies, Black Sheep* will have more of a wider appeal to audiences because of the variance of characters and its setting in the New York club scene. However, there are unnerving scenes of latent racism by AJ's well-meaning 'friends' that are guaranteed to make even the most liberal audience members cringe.

When asked about the responses to *Afro-Punk* and the Toronto debut of *White Lies, Black Sheep* from white audience members during film festival screenings, Spooner says that while the majority of the responses have been positive, there is a sense that there is still a lot of denial and misunderstanding in regards to how the seemingly harmless conversations between black and white people can affect one's self esteem. “The worst (during *Afro-Punk* screenings) was when you would get someone who says ‘well, it's not like that here!’ And that could be anywhere in the States or in Canada, and I would say, ‘I just spent an hour listening to black people telling me what it's like for them....’ ‘But I don't believe it.’ I don't know what else I can say,” Spooner smiles.

“They are so invested in themselves personally not being racist; that they can't...it's hard to have a dialogue. And say, ‘look, we're all guilty and I don't care how anti-racist you say you are you still have prejudices and there's no way around that. It is conditioning, whatever. So when they turn around and say, ‘it's not like that here! You can ask my black friends,’ It's like ‘It's your black friends that brought me here...obviously *they* think there is something behind this. If you really want to start breaking down racism and fighting racism then start listening. That's really the key. If a bunch of people are telling you something, just believe them.”

In *White Lies, Black Sheep*, after moving from Brooklyn to Manhattan to avoid the criticism he has suffered from his black neighbours and his disapproving father (Earle Sebastian), AJ soon realizes that despite his popularity and how his friends treat him, how they perceive other blacks and African-American culture is questionable. He realizes that his early actions in how he treats the other black people in the scene, such as Pinky, (Shaneka K. Wright) the gorgeous, heavily tattooed go-go dancer whom, after being rudely dismissed by AJ, decides to date his best friend, the well-meaning yet comically ignorant Josh (Jeremy Bobb) is actually a reflection in how he sees himself. AJ then embarks on a personal quest to investigate the side of him that he has been avoiding for years.

Other cringe-worthy moments in the film are derived during AJ's conversations with Josh, where AJ's comments say more about his own deep insecurity than his belief that his uniqueness has transcended his otherness. “I've heard it a lot where people say ‘the first half of the movie I didn't even know what I was watching. I was like, what am I doing watching this?’” explains Spooner. “Because he (AJ) is not being condemned for the things he thinks or he says. It's just is what it is, so I wanted to do it that way. That's the world he lives in. If he was being condemned all the time he wouldn't be doing it. Or he'd be going someplace where he could be doing it.”

Howell worked at the legendary New York bar, Joe's Pub, and it was through manning the door one night that he first met the casting director for *White Lies, Black Sheep*. Spooner, a veteran of the club scene who once worked as a promoter and a DJ, was able to get popular scenesters to appear as themselves in the film and also was able to convince some of the hottest Indie bands to contribute to the

soundtrack. But some of the most pivotal scenes in the movie involve the inter-dynamics concerning the self-segregation of club-goers and employees. “I’ve worked in different areas in promotion, and they’ll say things at the door, like ‘your crowd isn’t European enough,’ this or that. I think that it’s just the nature of New York and part of the promoting and whatnot. Just from the little that I have seen, yeah it’s definitely there,” says Howell.

“All that club scene stuff is directly taken from experiences that I’ve had. I did the door at an upscale night club for a couple of years, and I would repeatedly be told that it was ‘too dark’ in there, and I would have to be more selective,” adds Spooner. “So even that ‘black bitches’ line in the movie (referring to AJ’s hiring of African-American go-go dancers at the predominately all-white club) that’s what my boss said. The things that the actor (the owner of the club) said they were directly taken from him. Some of the most outrageous lines in the movie that don’t even seem feasible were real, but I could put them in there because I could back it up with actual experiences. I actually know someone who said, ‘I can’t date someone from my race because it would be like kissing my sister’ (spoken by AJ), I knew somebody who said that, so it wasn’t unfeasible to me to write that into the script.”

With such a visceral reaction to AJ’s character, *White Lies, Black Sheep* promises to spark dialogue between people about how they can better relate with their friends from different cultural backgrounds than theirs. “I got an email today from someone who was in the audience who was really going on about how it affected them, and it wasn’t even until the end when she said she was a white girl...I was thinking that I was reading this from a black person because she was talking about friends of hers and that she never knew how to approach them and at the end, she’s like, ‘as a white person I thankful that....’” Spooner trails off, not wanting to reveal the personal message.

“Even though in the past my audience has been young black people or black folks in general, I hope that this film will reach more white people because there are more white characters, all the attracting factors that were in *Afro-Punk* in this movie are white (oriented). The music, the rock nightlife, and it will be interesting to see how that plays out.”

For information on upcoming release dates, please visit www.whiteliesblacksheep.com.

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1. **Untitled**

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I'm truly impressed by Mr. Spooner's work and am anticipating seeing this film as well. It's been really hyped up in the scene.

Anyone have any ideas where i can view this?

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