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Black frats say film out of step

'Stomp the Yard' focuses on a dance ritual and neglects the rest of black Greek life, some say

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When Stan Fleming thinks about Alpha Phi Alpha, community service, not stepping, comes to mind.

Fleming, a member of the African-American fraternity, worries that a new movie downplays the civic deeds of black Greek life while playing up its most visible aspect: the syncopated stomps and claps known as stepping.

"My main fear is that people who don't know anything about black fraternities and sororities will think that all that we're about is putting on step shows," said Fleming, of Des Moines. "For me, being an Alpha means being a role model."

Even before its nationwide release Friday, "Stomp the Yard," the first Hollywood depiction of black Greeks since Spike Lee's "School Daze," has stirred debate among the 1.5 million members of the country's nine black Greek organizations.

Most were founded during the early 20th Century at a time when lynching and Jim Crow segregation stalled the social and political advancement of African-Americans. And over the years, the organizations have nurtured a who's who of Black America--from Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. and Jesse Jackson, to Rosa Parks and Mary McLeod Bethune.

A few black Greeks have called for a boycott of the film, arguing that it mocks the rich histories of the organizations by portraying them as glorified dance groups. But many support the film due to its positive portrayal of black collegians and, in part, because its producers are black Greeks.

The film's plot centers on a rebellious college student who introduces street dancing into his fraternity's step show--highly choreographed performances in which the fraternities and sororities do intricate, rhythmic dance steps in unison.

Step shows, a popular feature of black Greek life, are sometimes used as fundraisers or part of member initiations. During the routines, dancers simultaneously stomp, clap and slap their hands against their bodies to create a beat. At the same time, they boast about their fraternity or sorority.

Mark Anthony Neal, professor of black popular culture at Duke University, said that with so few mainstream images of black Greek life, it is understandable some members are sensitive about their portrayal.

"Most of mainstream America has no idea about black Greek organizations," Neal said. "This is a wonderful opportunity to talk about this particular legacy, but because this is a Hollywood film, it's never really going to get at the real history."

In 1906, a decade after the U.S. Supreme Court upheld separate but equal education, a tiny group of black men at Cornell University created Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity Inc. to uplift one another.

"Secret societies such as fraternities and sororities provided students with housing, study groups and a social environment in which students could grow with others," author Lawrence Ross Jr. explains in "The Divine Nine," a history of black Greek organizations.

Alpha Phi Alpha became the first black Greek fraternity and eight similar groups followed: Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity, Omega Psi Phi Fraternity, Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Phi Beta Sigma Fraternity, Zeta Phi Beta Sorority, Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority and Iota Phi Theta Fraternity.

Some scholars note that stepping--not to be confused with the dance that originated in Chicago--wasn't associated with black Greeks until about 1970, well after members made headlines for their leadership and service during the Great Depression, World Wars I and II and the civil rights movement.

Controversy over the film began in November, when Alpha Phi Alpha denounced it and threatened legal action against Sony Pictures for the unauthorized use of the fraternity's trademarked symbols.

The dispute was settled after symbols belonging to Alpha and other black Greek organizations were deleted from the film and Sony donated money toward the King memorial under construction on the National Mall in Washington.

"Our goal for this film is simply to make college life seem accessible to all," executive producer and Alpha Rob Hardy said. "In a society where the value and relevance of black colleges and black Greek letter organizations are under increased attack, the mainstream circulation of the types of images in our film can renew interest among our youth."

At a recent screening in Chicago, black Greeks gave the film favorable reviews but said that it shortchanged other aspects of Greek life. For example, filmgoers noted that members of the fictitious frats are never shown doing community service. Others were pleased that it wasn't critical like Spike Lee's 1988 "School Daze," which ridiculed the social climbing and the hazing practices of black Greeks.

"Fraternities are not just about networking," said University of Illinois at Chicago student

Xeryus Johnson, a member of Phi Beta Sigma. "It could have emphasized the brotherhood aspect more."

Wilson Harris, a member of Kappa Alpha Psi and owner of a black Greek paraphernalia store on the South Side, applauded the filmmakers for employing stepping as a gimmick to excite teens about education.

"How can you tell a kid to go to college when they see Puff Daddy in a limo?" Harris said.

But some even quibble with the film's high-energy depictions of stepping, an art form with African roots.

Some say the film reflects the increasing evolution of stepping as the hip-hop generation joins black Greek organizations and infuses the dance with urban street moves. Others say the movie features more street dance than traditional stepping.

"It would be a travesty if our tradition of stepping on the yard became commercialized, if we stopped stepping and started `dancing' simply because that's what sells tickets and wins step shows," said Andre Lundkvist, an Alpha in California.

Walter Kimbrough, author of "Black Greek 101," said the organizations should use the attention to educate the public about their social mission.

"Outside of [a hazing incident], black Greeks don't make the news," Kimbrough said. "We have to use stepping as a vehicle to get a message out."

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