

## Sidney Poitier

Sidney Poitier was born prematurely at sea while his family was on their way to the United States. His parents were poor farmers who traveled to sell tomatoes and other produce from their farm on tiny Cat Island in The Bahamas. His birth was formerly recorded in Miami, Florida. He spent the early part of his life on the tiny island of 1,500 with no electricity. During his early teenage years, Poitier was sent to Nassau to live with relatives and find a job but he displayed an increasing inclination toward juvenile delinquency. His parents eventually sent him to live with his brother in Florida at age 16.

Poitier served a short stint in the United States Army before moving to New York to pursue an acting career. Upon his release from duty, Poitier went to New York, did menial jobs and slept in a bus terminal toilet. He worked at a veteran's hospital was followed by more menial jobs in Harlem. An impulsive audition at the American Negro Theatre was rejected so forcefully that Poitier dedicated the next six months to overcoming his accent and performance ineptness. On his second try, he was accepted and made his Broadway debut in 1946, in an all-black production of *Lysistrata*, and moved into films four years later, with *No Way Out*.

Sidney's impressive turn in 1955's gritty *The Blackboard Jungle* brought him closer to stardom and, in 1958, he earned his first Academy Award nomination, in Stanley Kramer's *The Defiant Ones*. The film's focus on racial politics, as well as his increasing popularity, made Poitier a key figure in the civil rights movement. For 1963's *The Lilies of the Field*, he made history as the first African-American actor to win an Oscar in a leading role. The win marked the first Oscar awarded to a black actor and made Poitier cinema's first African American superstar, one who consciously defied racial stereotyping. Handsome and unassuming, he brought dignity to the portrayal of noble and intelligent characters, including Philadelphia detective Virgil Tibbs in *In the Heat of the Night*, and as Mark Thackeray in *To Sir With Love*. He continued to make racially provocative films, appearing in Kramer's *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* as the black fiancé of a white woman.

In 1969, Poitier founded the First Artists Production Company and, in 1972, announced his directorial debut with *Buck and the Preacher*. He directed and starred in his next three films, including *Let's Do It Again*. In 1974, he directed the Gene Wilder and Richard Pryor film, *Stir Crazy*. He began to decrease his workload; after two more features, he disappeared from filmmaking for the next several years. In 1988, Poitier appeared onscreen for the first time in over a decade, in the thriller, *Shoot to Kill*. In 1996 he starred in the long-awaited follow-up to his '67 success, *To Sir With Love*, in TV's *To Sir With Love 2*.

Sidney was appointed a Knight Commander of the British Empire in 1974, which entitles him to use the title "Sir," though he chooses not to do so. Poitier also has served as non-resident Bahamian ambassador to Japan, and to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). In these diplomatic roles, the Bahamian Ministry of Foreign Affairs refers to him as "His Excellency Sir Sidney Poitier". In 2000

he received the Life Achievement Award from the Screen Actors Guild (SAG), and in 2002 he received an Honorary Academy Award for his lifetime achievement in the film industry from the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. In June 2006, the AFI released its list of the *100 Most Inspiring Movies*. Poitier was the only actor to have five of his films appear on the list (*The Defiant Ones*, *A Raisin in the Sun*, *Lilies of the Field*, *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*, and *In the Heat of the Night*).

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