

Post-Soul Pusherman: Curtis Mayfield's "Pusherman" and The Hangover 2

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Abstract

Picture by Flickr User Popculturegeek.com My husband and I looked forward to seeing *The Hangover 2* for our weekly movie date. A sequel to the wildly popular *The Hangover*, *The Hangover 2* centers around Stu's wedding (played by Ed Helms), bachelor party and its aftermath.

Keywords

Music (Subfield), Article, Black Studies, Film/Movies/Cinema, Music, Sound Studies



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Picture by Flickr User Popculturegeek.com

My husband and I looked forward to seeing [The Hangover 2](#) for our weekly movie date. A sequel to the wildly popular [The Hangover](#), *The Hangover 2* centers around Stu's wedding (played by Ed Helms), bachelor party and its aftermath. Following the first film's bottom line, *The Hangover 2* unfolds after a drugged and drunken stupor leaves the friends unsure of the previous night's events—and a missing brother-in-law. Sleazy motels, drug deals, homosexual encounters, and a monkey are the friends' only clues about what happened and where Stu's missing brother-in-law is located. Considering the awkward and absurd plot trying to pass for humor in *The Hangover 2*, I wasn't surprised to see the monkey was a drug dealer. I was struck, however, by one of the monkey's scenes where he completes a drug transaction. Sitting atop a light pole, a buyer signals for the monkey's attention. The monkey struts across the wire and completes the transaction. After taking the buyer's money, the monkey drops it off to his masters (two French men), eats an apple, goes back to his post, and lights a cigarette. The dope boy, er, monkey worked to the sonic backdrop of [Curtis Mayfield's](#) "[Pusher Man](#)." My husband laughed. I cocked my head to the side.

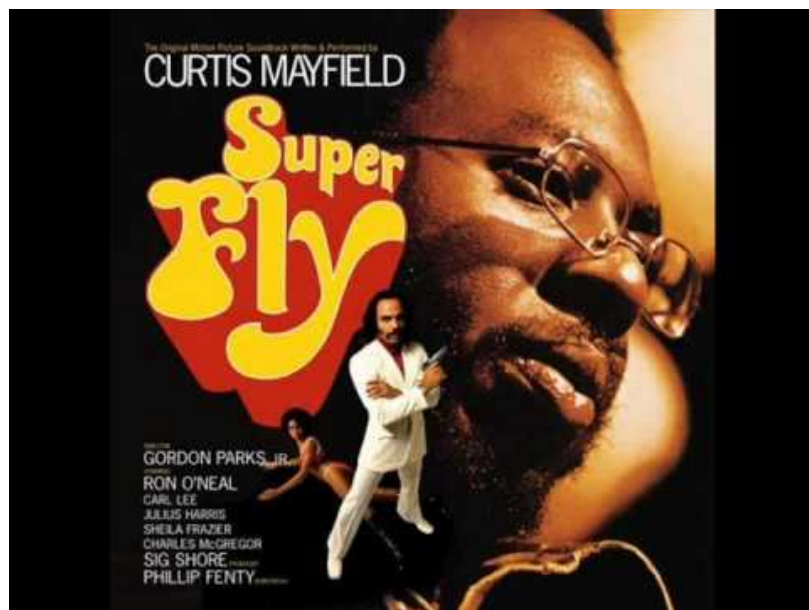
One of the most recognizable tracks from Mayfield's extensive body of work, "Pusher Man" (which is street slang for "drug dealer") was on the [Super Fly](#) soundtrack released in 1971. In its original context, "Pusher Man" provided insight into the purpose and agency of drug dealing in the inner city. However, in *The Hangover 2* "Pusher Man" is subverted for comic relief and consumption by a multicultural audience. The result is that the film neutralizes "Pusher Man" and overrides the cultural significance behind the song for the film's comedic purposes.

In order to discuss the subversion of "Pusher Man" in *The Hangover 2*, one must consider its original context as a sonic complement to *Super Fly*. A blaxploitation film directed by Gordon Parks, Jr. (son of famed African American photographer and [Shaft](#) producer [Gordon Parks, Sr.](#)), *Supafly* focused on the tug-and-pull of poverty, drugs, and the urban black experience in the immediate aftermath of the Civil Rights and Black Power movements. The plot revolves around the

narrative of Priest, a dope dealer who wants to reform his ways and "do good." Priest is continuously tempted throughout the movie by associates and friends who see drug dealing as the only way out of a hard inner city life. The film highlights drug dealing as a coping mechanism instead of an illegal activity. Although critics argue that the film glorifies pathological blackness through drug culture, Mayfield's soundtrack provided hard-hitting social commentary that followed suit of similar themed albums like [Marvin Gaye's *What's Going On*](#) (1971).

Borrowing from and building upon a blues aesthetic showcasing an instrumental ensemble of percussions, horns, and guitars Mayfield updates the "bad man" trope to reflect the post-Civil Rights urban black experience. (By post-Civil Rights I'm suggesting that urban blacks encounter in this period more subtle forms of discrimination that are deemed irrelevant or non-existent due to the Civil Rights legislation put in place.) The immediate update to the trajectory of the bluesy/folkloric trouble man to reflect this shift is the drug dealer, whom is celebrated and highlighted in many of the 1970s blaxploitation films. Previous manifestations of the bad man reflected an opposition to open racial discrimination held in place by Jim Crow laws and other forms of white supremacy. In blaxploitation films, this type of racism is signified by "The Man," an anonymous, "hands off" yet omniscient body of white (male) supremacy.

"Pusher Man," complicates an anonymous drug dealer's narrative by weaving introspective thoughts with popular and accepted characteristics of a drug dealer. The track opens with the latter, essentializing the power of a drug dealer in the inner city:



<https://youtu.be/hCDAfa-NI-M>

I'm your mama

I'm your daddy

I'm that nigga in the alley

I'm your doctor when in need

Want some coke?

Have some weed

You know me

I'm your friend

Your main boy

Thick and Thin

I'm your pusher man

The pusher man's depiction of himself as a universal power – parent, healer, friend, brother – is established through hard hitting percussion and guitars. His delivery, however, is "cool," signified in Mayfield's soft voice. Aside from direct suggestions of black cool, i.e. "Ain't I clean/bad machine" and "super cool/super mean," Mayfield's voice is critical in establishing this coolness. His smooth delivery symbolizes the tension between popular definition and the drug dealer's humanity as well as opposing the hardness of the song's sonic backdrop. The steady, quiet aggression of Mayfield's voice – he never raises his voice – further solidifies the coolness of the track. The drug dealer's reasoning for pushing illegal drugs, "silent life of crime/a man of odd circumstance/a victim of ghetto demands," is afforded space through Mayfield's voice and delivery. The loudness and "noise" of the instrumentals substitutes Mayfield's voice as a gauge of the chaos and instability of the inner city. The song signifies the frustration of being urban, poor, and black with few options in a moment where racial equality should be heralded but has not yet been achieved. "Pusher Man" is tethered to the understanding that the laws changed but the social practices remained intact.

Yet this connection between the song and the social context is distorted if not lost by how *The Hangover 2* situates the track into the plot. While the film maintains the surface narrative – drug dealing – numerous other signifiers have shifted to reflect this more contemporary moment of American culture and history. The track is globalized by providing background to a drug deal taking place in Bangkok (which, I hope, is not strictly for comedic purposes). It helps situate the reality that poverty is not necessarily black or American but global. The African American male drug dealer is replaced with a chain-smoking monkey. While it is possible that the film uses the track to emphasize the monkey's drug dealing ways, it is also quite possible that the track's original intentions and context are watered down in order to resonate with a multicultural audience.

Instead of making the audience think about the angst of the African-American working class, the song becomes a comedic prop. The humanity of Mayfield's drug dealing protagonist, emphasized through the juxtaposition of Mayfield's cool voice and gritty lyrics is overwhelmed by the inhumanity of the drug dealing monkey—not to mention the absurd situations the characters face. Even more disturbing, "Pusher Man" serves as a sonic signifier of the audience's racial and social-economic detachment from the seriousness of the scene (and song) instead of an indicator of its

social relevance. Instead of the focus being Mayfield's attempt to shed light on the drug dealer's harsh realities, the focus shifts to the monkey's illegal activities as humorous.

Indeed, Curtis Mayfield certainly wrote his fair share of songs for films – *Claudine* and *Sparkle* immediately come to mind – but this particular song was a sharp piece of social commentary put to music. "Pusher Man" is reduced to background noise instead of a complement to the discourse struggling to remain intact despite the film's efforts.

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