

The roots of "good hair"

Written by William Reed

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Do Black women get their "hair did" to look European? Chris Rock's latest flick 'Good Hair' provides a timely focus on a multi-billion-dollar Black hair business. Rock was moved to film the subject after an occasion when, in the company of a white girlfriend, daughter Lola Simone asked him: "Daddy, why don't I have good hair?" The question has historical context and financial significance in regards to Black Beauty in America.

The real root of the question goes back over a century and Sarah Breedlove's hair loss problem. In the early 1990s, Sarah transformed her baldness into a line of Black hair care products; and a new name, Madame C.J. Walker. Black beauty actually started "in the eye of Madame Walker" around 1904 when she revolutionized the way Black women styled their hair by combining the use of the hot comb with her hair care products. Walker created scalp treatments and hair straighteners and in 1906 founded the Madame C.J. Walker Manufacturing Company marketing hair growing tonics, strengtheners and facial treatments. The significance of Walker and her products was the time in American history. One generation out of slavery pressures abound to be "acceptable". Based on white standards, Walker's beauty products promised "fairer complexions" and "straighter hair".

In addition to setting Black beauty standards, Mme. Walker made many Black families economically self-sufficient. Black women associated with Walker Methods made as much in a week as a month's salary would've brought from any other position they could've secured. Graduates of the Walker College of Hair Culture were trained to style hair, sell Walker products and open their own beauty salons. By 1916 Walker employed 20,000 door-to-door agents. She had a mail order business and a factory in Indianapolis.

The film should make more Blacks attuned to the wealth it represents. Black women spent \$1.1 billion on hair care products last year, outspending other American women by factors from two to six times. Black women spend the most money on hair care. The hair-raising part is that L'Oreal, USA, Alberto-Culver Co. and Procter & Gamble control the Black hair care products market. Vast numbers of Black women haughtily patronize white salons and 85 percent of the money Black women spend goes to white-corporations; and, second and third-generation Asians have cornered the distribution and retailing market.

Black successors to Mme. Walker have not gone quietly. Dudley Products Company, founded in 1967, is one of few Black-owned firms left. Dudley Products manufactures 400 hair-care products and runs Dudley Cosmetology University, which teaches haircutting, styling, and makeup application in US locations and in Zimbabwe. The Bronner Bros. International Hair Show in Atlanta is Black Beauty's biggest blast. It is a prodigious three-day trade fair for Black-oriented hair products that culminates with a competitive hairdressing competition. It is a combination of Mardi Gras costume ball, erotic dance routine and performance art. While many people either love or hate what the show represents, with 120,000 annual attendees, its popularity and appeal can't be denied. Family-owned, Bronner Bros. was founded in 1947 by Dr. Nathaniel H. Bronner, Sr. and his brother Arthur E. Bronner, Sr. Today Bronner Bros. is headed by the second generation, Bernard Bronner. The Bronner Bros. Enterprise consists of Bronner Bros. Beauty Products lines, UPSCALE Magazine, Cottonwood Hot Springs Spa and Motel in Alabama, Bronner Bros. International Beauty and Trade Shows, The Word of Faith Family Worship Center, and The Ark of Salvation Worship Center. Bronner Bros. employ over

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300 people in manufacturing and shipping operations, beauty stores and a hair weaving studio.

"Good Hair" is a smart and thought-provoking film without quite becoming confrontational. Rock raises the obvious fact that Black Americans have assimilated into a cultural standard of beauty that is European than African, but he doesn't treat it as a moral issue, or something that it is likely to change. But, Blacks' financial frivolousness in this industry sector needs change. In pursuit of that, an economics professor at Atlanta's Oglethorpe University, Devin Robinson, has announced a week-long national boycott of Non- Black Owned Beauty Supply stores November 16th–22nd (www.takingitbackblack.com).

(William Reed – www.BlackPressInternational.com)