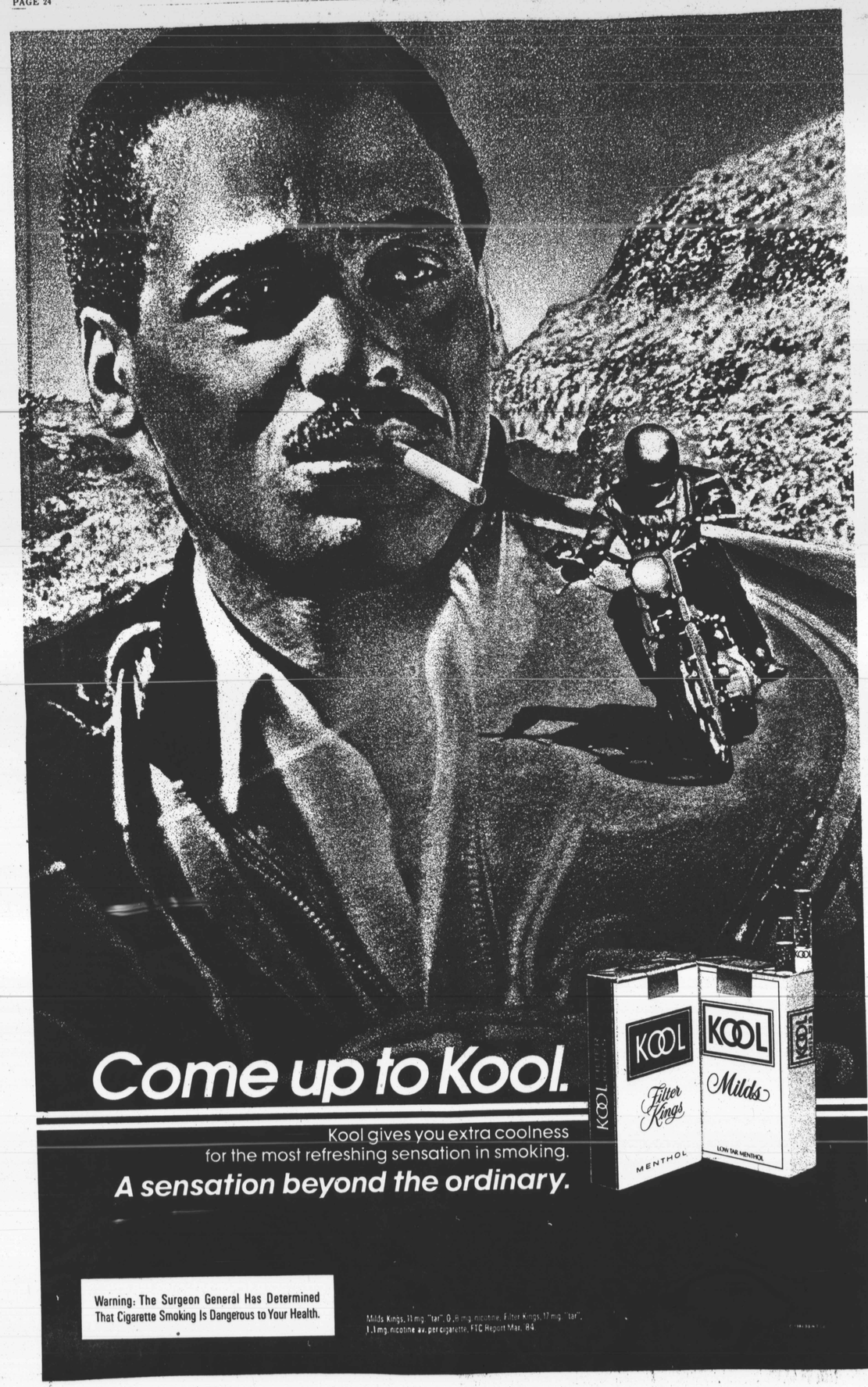

THE COTTON CLUB

By Ida Peters

When "The Cotton Club", the $47 million movie, touted as one of the most elaborate, violent and controversial movies ever made hits the silver screen this Christmas, what can we expect?

Most black people from the 1920s to 1940 only read or heard about the real Cotton Club or read stories and pictures in the AFRO-AMERICAN about entertainers who worked there. If black folks ever went there they sat in a booth in the back in the dark.

The film has received a lot of press about the film producer Robert Evans, Francis Ford Coppola ("Godfather") director and writers William Kennedy and Francis Coppola.

The AFRO asked Prof. Howard Johnson who served as technical advisor for the film what to expect.

He advises that 60 percent is about gangsters; 20 percent about the black hero, Gregory Hines and the heroine, Lonette McKee and 20 percent entertainment.

Johnson was a chorus boy at The Cotton Club in 1934. His sister, Winnie Johnson, was in the chorus from 1932-37 as was his brother, Bobby. The family originated in Orange, N.J. and moved to an apartment at 642 Lenox Avenue next door to the Cotton Club.

Johnson reports that he saw every show at The Cotton Club from 1932 to 1940. His father Howard Johnson Sr. was a waiter at the Club, was in the black underworld as a minor numbers writer as was Lena Horne's father, Teddy in Pittsburgh.

The Cotton Club really was the hangout of the underworld and Johnson says he saw Dutch Swartz, Owney Madden and Big Frenchie everyday as they were an "ominous bunch of hoodlums."

The story line of the black entertainers is a take-off of his Johnson family.

Johnson says that as Technical Advisor he thought that the film should have featured 60 per cent black entertainers such as Bill (Bojangles) Robinson, Ethel Waters, Nicholas Brothers, Berry Johnson, Duke Ellington, Cab Calloway, Jimmie Lunceford, Mills Blue Rhythm Band and Louis Armstrong.

He says that most people came to the club for the great entertainment and never knew about the gangland fights and crime.

Most black folks were not allowed in the club and entertainers and their friends were allowed the back booth near the kitchen. Black entertainers, such as Stephin' Fetchit, when they came, were seated at ringside. Johnson says when Teddy Horne, Lena's father came in, "he sat in the back like everybody else."

Howard Johnson went from The Cotton Club to Professor of Sociology at State University College at New Paltz, in Upstate, N.Y. in the Sony System. He taught Race Relations and Sociology and Jazz for eleven years.

After seeing "The Cotton Club" he thinks the movie is "wasteful and extravagant. It has the wrong emphasis and panders to the cult of violence in this country."

The entertainers and musical numbers are superb including "The Creole Love Song" and "As Long As I Live."

Christmas Movies

(Gordon Anderson Photo)

Backstage party at end of shooting of "The Cotton Club" shows from (L) Thelma Carpenter who plays Gregory Hines mother in film; Melvin Van Peebles; Marie Van Peebles who plays exotic ballroom dancer in film; Gregory Hines and his wife and Gregory Hines, Sr.

(Exclusive pictures by Gordon Anderson)

Maurice (L) and Gregory Hines are snapped by Baltimore-born photographer Gordon Anderson at a backstage party at end of filming of $47 million movie "The Cotton Club." They portray tap dancers in 1925. In real life, the brothers formed a tap-dancing trio Hines, Hines and Dad.

(Gordon Anderson Photo)

Gregory Hines hams it up on set during lull in shooting of "The Cotton Club" on block reconstructed at cost of thousands of dollars.

(Gordon Anderson Photo)

These musicians led by Jimmy Owens play the Cab Calloway band in "The Cotton Club." Note Super Shine hair spray and the chess games in progress.

Top Hits

Top Spiritual

1. No Time To Lose
   Andras Crouch
2. 'Salila'
   Shirley Caesar
3. Psalms
   Richard Smallwood Singers
4. Jesus Saves
   Little Cedric & the Hailey Singers
5. What He's Done For Me
   Rev. Clay Evans
6. No Tears In Clory
   Rev. F.C. Barnes
7. We Sing Praises
   Sandra Crouch
8. Rough Side of the Mountain
   Rev. F.C. Barnes
9. Miracle "Live"
   Rev. Milton Brunson
10. Made in Mississippi
    Jackson Southernaires

Showtime

Ida M. Peters

What's Happening

'2010'... images from the imagination and beyond

The Edge of Discovery

"It's like magic in the Houdini sense of the word", explains four-time Oscar winner Richard Edlund, whose artistic and technical wizardry never ceases to dazzle an ever-particular audience. From the fantasy of the "Star Wars" trilogy and the adventures of Indiana Jones, to the metaphysical manifestations in "Poltergeist" and the madcap mayhem in "Ghostbusters", the special effects Edlund and his colleagues have created over the past few years have been a major factor in the success of the films they have been featured in.

Effects, says Edlund, expand the realm of possibility for the filmmaker. "You cannot possibly film anything we do with any technique other than those we are using."

Peter Hyams, the producer, director and screenwriter of "2010", is the first to agree, as he pushes Edlund and his talented team to bring Arthur C. Clarke's epic deep-space adventure to the screen with vivid reality, "We are at the very limits of the state of the art. I don't think there is a single known techique we are not using."

The reason for all this supersophistication and technological innovation rests in Arthur Clarke's story, in Peter Hyams' vision, and in the spectacular splendor of "2010's" noble predecessors in the genre of science fiction. "The onus is upon us on each new film," Edlund observes, "to come up with something even more astounding than before."

That pressure is compounded by another factor that few special effects teams have to face — "2010" is not a fantasy. It has its foundations squarely rooted in facts that motion picture audiences know well, through the courtesy of the evening news and their morning newspaper.

In the years since "2001" revolutionized the concept of science fiction in film, audiences have watched men walk on the moon, have seen detailed pictures of the planet Jupiter and its moons, and thanks to television, have been able to travel into space alongside the nation's astronauts during the later Apollo, Skylab and space shuttle flights. Not all of us have experienced space travel first hand — but we are all very familiar with the look of space flight.

"The whole story is enormously feasible," explains Peter Hyams. "In order for films like 2010 to work, they must be credible in every detail. We must recreate things accurately and faithfully."

Switching gears from fantasy to reality provided an interesting challenge to Edlund, whose amazing equipment fills two industrial buildings in Marina del Rey, Cal. His first task was the modification of his photographic system, a computer-operated motion control device used on such films as "Star Wars" and "Close Encounters of the Third Kind." "We modified the system to give us a better look... a more realistic look," Edlund says. "It is a look more like the pictures we have all seen from the space missions." Yet modifying the motion control system was only the tip of the iceberg — two major problems lay ahead.

Most special effects shots enjoy a screen time of seldom more than three seconds — long enough to have an impact, but short enough to avoid the scrutiny of the attentive moviegoer. The average shot in "2010" will be on the screen for eight seconds, nearly three times as long. "In any effects shot," Edlund explains, "the longer the audience has to study the shot the more difficult it becomes. An effects shot is going to show itself to be an effects shot eventually, and the degree of detail and difficulty goes up almost logarithmically based upon the time it is upon the screen."

Step one in combating this problem began with the construction of superior models, executed by chief modelmaker Mark Stetson and his modelshop. Stetson, who built the mothership for "Close Encounters" and constructed the futuristic building of Los Angeles for "Bladerunner," started his "2010" models from scratch instead of beginning with the usual stock of battleship and airplane model parts. Stetson and his staff built some fifty models and miniatures, all meticulously detailed to withstand the most dramatic photography.