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Black films earning big at box office

It was considered something of a box-office upset when "Guess Who," a comedy about an interracial romance starring Bernie Mac and Ashton Kutcher, trounced Sandra Bullock's sequel to "Miss Congeniality" to take first place over the Easter weekend.

But it's less of a surprise when you consider that "Guess Who," which had a \$20 million opening, is the fifth 2005 movie starring an African-American to open at the top spot.

It follows fellow box-office champs "Diary of a Mad Black Woman," the Will Smith comedy "Hitch," the basketball drama "Coach Carter" with Samuel L. Jackson and Ice Cube's "Are We There Yet?"

"I think we're talking about this because it's so unusual and unprecedented and exciting," said box office analyst Paul Dergarabedian, president of Exhibitor Relations Co. "It just says that all these No. 1 films have struck a chord with audiences, and, more than anything, it has to do with the universal appeal of most of these movies."

MGM will attempt to keep the momentum with "Beauty Shop," a comedy starring Queen Latifah with a largely black cast that opened Wednesday. "I think there's more savvy on the part of Hollywood in terms of casting and in terms of developing more authentic African-American roles," said Howard Buford, chief executive officer of **Prime Access** Inc., a multicultural **advertising** agency based in New York City. "African-Americans, besides being a strong moviegoing market, have a very strong desire to see themselves and their lives reflected on screen."

Three of the films--"Hitch," "Guess Who" and "Are We There Yet?"--were released by Sony Pictures Entertainment. The studio pointed out that 55 percent of the opening weekend audience for "Guess Who" was non-Caucasian but also stressed the overall appeal of the films.

"I think what these movies that we released have in common is that they are three broad comedies with stars in them, whether it be Ice Cube, Will Smith or Bernie Mac and Ashton Kutcher, which is an incredible pairing," said Rory Bruer, Sony's president of distribution. "It sort of transcends color with very accessible stories that audiences love."

While the studios seek to release movies with widespread appeal, Buford said, the critical key to the success of many of these films lies in appealing to black audiences first and foremost.

"The African-American population is younger overall, and you tend to have larger families, so, per household, there tend to be more people of that prime moviegoing age of up to 25," he said. "They are very strong trendsetters among overall American culture, so these movies also tend to pull in white youth because that culture is their youth culture."