

ENTERTAINMENT

The making of Amistad: Who's history is it, anyway?

Special to Sentinel-Voice
Who's history is it, anyway?

COMMENTARY

That's the question Barbara Chase-Riboud is asking in a lawsuit about who tells the story of one of the most critical events of African-American history.

Her suit also highlights one of the biggest problems faced by today's African-American businesses — protecting their ideas and intellectual property from big companies whom they approach for distribution and capital.

Amistad was a ship that African captives seized from their captors and sailed into a United States port.

Their case made history because an American court upheld their freedom, in a case argued by former President John Quincy Adams.

The name Amistad, like that of Nat Turner, Denmark Vesey and the Maroons, has become a symbol of courage and commitment to fight for freedom.

Chase-Riboud, who has built a solid literary career with historical novels on such topics as Amistad and Sally Hemings, took notice when the news of this movie came out. She had sent a movie proposal based on her Amistad book to DreamWorks; years before, without response, she said.

Now she's asking to see the script, pointing out similarities between characters created for her novel and those portrayed in the screenplay.

The situation represents an almost insurmountable dilemma for creative

entrepreneurs like Chase-Riboud. Cutoff from insider networks at major distribution companies, Black businesses are often forced to send proposals blindly to anonymous offices.

Most times there is never an acknowledgment that the proposal has been received. Unfortunately, the first notice can come in public, when they see their proposal or product on the market. It behooves entrepreneurs to understand that their most valuable product is their intellectual property and that they must take measures such as registering trademarks and service marks before sending out valuable information.

However, a small company that sues a large company faces long odds, even when right.

I had the foresight to protect properties developed as part of my book "Our Roots Run Deep: the Black Experience in California."

Even so, a Southern California utility which was asked to sponsor our photo exhibition of the same name later decided to appropriate the term for its advertising to tout its minority business program, without paying for the privilege. How ironic?

And almost any Black vendor can tell their own horror story about seeing their work turn up under someone else's banner.

In the case of Chase-Riboud, along comes

Hollywood, no respecter of history, or even the present — particularly when it comes to African-Americans. That is a long-standing tradition.

In 1918, Noble Johnson and four partners began the Lincoln Motion Picture Co. to present a realistic view of Black America. Johnson was the first major Black contract player with a big studio (Universal).

The Lincoln's five films began to outdraw his movies for Universal, which forced Johnson to make a choice between his job and his company.

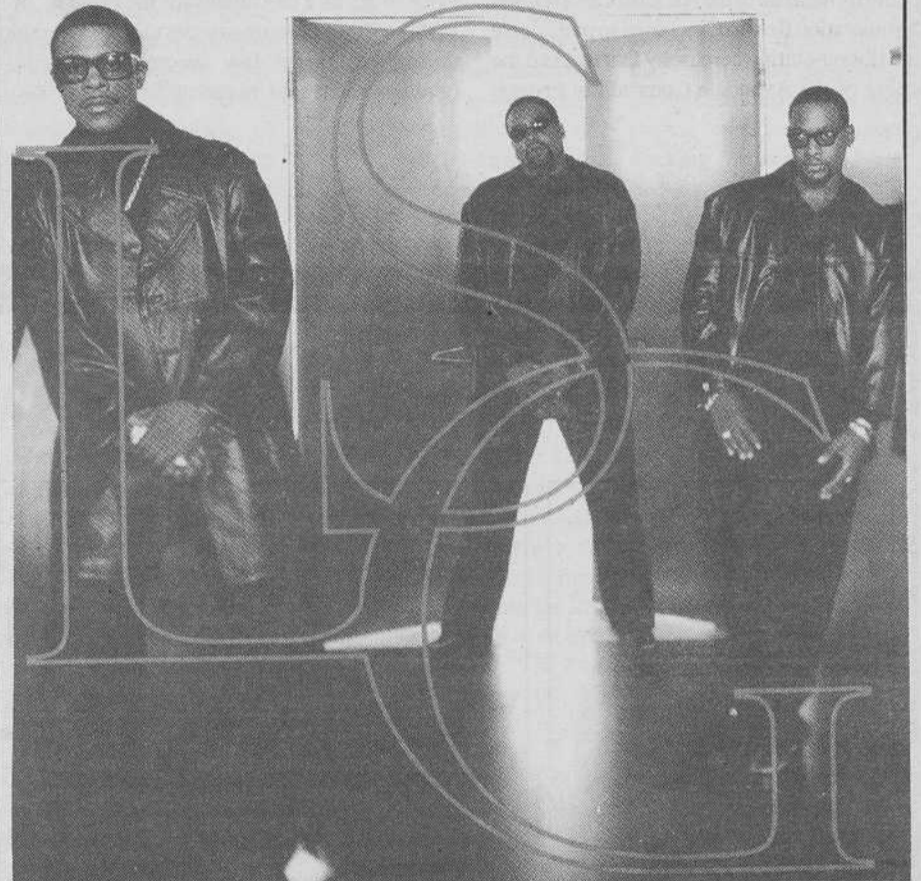
Johnson continued a long movie acting career, including breakthroughs as a makeup artist and as an animal trainer. But his movie-making voice was silenced.

George Johnson, his brother, fortunately preserved the films of the 50-year period that Black filmmakers valiantly competed with the major studios in a collection that is now held in the library at the University of California at Los Angeles.

Seventy years later, Hollywood still presumes to tell the African-American story — blocking the distribution of "Sankofa," Haile Gerima's independently produced account of the Middle Passage. Now, the appropriately-titled Dreamworks Studio has decided to film its own version of Amistad.

Choices made for key positions such as screenwriter indicate that we are headed for as warped a presentation as (See Amistad, Page 9)

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