

THEM

Season One

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Created and executive produced by Little Marvin, along with executive producers Lena Waithe, Miri Yoon and Roy Lee of Vertigo Entertainment, David Matthews, Don Kurt and a co-production from Sony Pictures Television and Amazon Studios, ***THEM*** is a limited anthology that explores terror in America. The 1950s set first season centers on a Black family who moves from North Carolina to an all-white Los Angeles neighborhood during the period known as The Great Migration. The family's idyllic home becomes ground zero where malevolent forces, next-door and otherworldly, threaten to taunt, ravage and destroy them.

Conceiving ***THEM Season One***

Creator and executive producer Little Marvin began writing the show a few summers ago, during a period where he says he felt like he was waking up every morning to the same thing. "I'd go through my social media feeds and I would see iPhone video after iPhone video of Blacks folks—women, men, children, families—being terrorized in some way," he says. "Watched. Harassed. Surveilled. Threatened by the police, or with the police."

Little Marvin says the incidents made him think about terror in a very specific way: the weaponization of public and private space against Black folks in America. "The last four years also had me thinking a lot about the American Dream—who gets their keys to it and who has to fight for their keys," he says. "My father's family relocated from Alabama to Massachusetts during The Great Migration. My mother, an Indian woman, is an immigrant to America. The African-American migrant and immigrant experiences in America – though obviously unique and varied in myriad ways - are also quite similar. Both fueled by a desire for opportunity. The difference is that Black folks had to fight to make those journeys of opportunity within the boundaries of their own country." With these intertwined narratives in his mind, Little Marvin says he "wanted to write a love letter to all the Black families who scrapped, scraped and drove impossible distances to get to cities where they thought they would escape the terror and injustice of the Jim Crow South, but found themselves confronted with the exact same things they left in their rearview."

His own family's journey made Little Marvin further reconsider the quintessential dream of home ownership, which he says has been anything but a dream for Black people in America. "The show examines and interrogates the American Dream of home ownership through the lens of terror," he notes. "And what darkness undergirds that Dream."

When considering the individuals with whom he wanted to work, the addition of Lena Waithe to the team was a dream fulfilled for Little Marvin. "I'm a big believer in vision boards and I put a lot of notes

to myself in my cell phone. When I wrote the pilot, I typed 'I want Lena Waithe to executive produce this show.' Then, I put the note away and let it go." When executive producer, Miri Yoon asked Little Marvin who his dream collaborator would be, he answered "Lena Waithe" automatically, almost like a dare. "Three days later, I had a meeting with her," he says. "We had brunch and before the meal was done, Lena was on board. She instantly championed the script and me from day one; she put her words into action. I'm forever grateful to her."

As the catalyst who brought Little Marvin and Waithe together, Yoon, of Vertigo Entertainment, was "blown away" by the spec script Little Marvin had written. "From the moment I read the script, and he walked in the room, I was sold," she says. "I decided right then we (Vertigo) needed to be the ones to help bring this incredible new work to life. It was the depth of LM's talent, his intention, how uncompromising he was in telling this story, without judgment and without fear. It's rare."

In addition to Waithe being "it" for Little Marvin as a collaborator, Yoon also knew they wanted someone who would understand the context of the story and take it seriously. "Lena came to this project with all of what Lena Waithe represents, bringing that extra layer of support," she notes. "Lena and I knew one another and I called her and said we found the one. To her credit, she read it overnight and called the next day ready to meet. That's a testament to the power of LM's work."

In addition to the series, Waithe notes that what resonated for her is that Little Marvin is Black and queer, and is an artist who is not afraid to tell the truth, however painful. "I never understood covenants until this project because LM had done all the research and brought me into this fascinating history," Waithe says. "He had the creative part of this project under control and I trusted him. For me, it's always rewarding to help someone avoid making the same mistakes as I did and help set them up for success."

Waithe also adds that she loves how there's no limit to how deep Little Marvin can go. "He's not afraid to walk up to a scary image and make us look at it and deal with what's in front of us," she muses. "He's much braver than me in that regard. That's why I think it's super important to have his back as an artist. We need LM and his voice and vision now more than ever. LM does not believe in safe art. He's not afraid to make art that triggers people."

As an artist, Little Marvin had a clear vision of who the Emorys were, but acknowledged "real-life-flesh-and-blood people in the form of this troupe of amazing actors came in and knocked what [he] thought this family could be to the ground."

Little Marvin discloses that actor Ashley Thomas's audition was so profound that he found himself sobbing. "I honestly didn't know or care if that was inappropriate," he laughs. "His delivery was that powerful!" Thomas says it was important for him to come to the role of Henry Emory in the most authentic way possible. "I learned a lot from a gentleman who lives in the apartment building where I stayed during production," he notes. "He is a Black man, in his 70s, who experienced firsthand what it was to be a part of The Great Migration, having moved from Texas to Chicago, then back to Texas and eventually to Los Angeles." Thomas says he spent a lot of time talking to the man about what he experienced and learning from the stories he shared. "When it comes to the Black American experience, in particular, I had to study and learn," Thomas says. "I had to acknowledge and appreciate that [my] Black British experience and the Black American experience are not entirely the same in order to fully use myself as a vessel to bring forth Henry. But fundamentally, I am a Black man, and the common ground, regardless of where you grew up or live, of racial discrimination exists in the face of wanting to provide a better and safe life for one's family."

Little Marvin is equally enthusiastic about the performance of Deborah Ayorinde who plays Lucky Emory. “My day one warrior. Her ferocious commitment to this role inspired us all,” he says.

Ayorinde notes that her own childhood experience of moving from London to San Jose made Lucky a relatable character. “I was viewed as ‘other’ because I had a thick accent and my skin was a darker hue,” she says. “I was smaller, because at first I was in a higher grade than expected, and I was treated as if I did not belong, and that was scary.” Ayorinde reveals that school was such an isolating experience that she used to eat lunch in the bathroom and she faked being ill so her mother would have to pick her up. “My sisters and I deliberately worked on changing our accents by watching television so we could feel like we fit in,” she says. “When I watched [character] Ruby Lee’s scene as she sat in the janitorial closet at school by herself, it brought back those feelings and I cried. It was hard to watch because I understood what she felt so intimately and deeply.”

Noting that actress Alison Pill was “a ferocious talent,” Little Marvin says she “came in fearlessly” and understood that her character, Betty Wendell, was not going to be liked. “And both of our young stars [Shahadi Wright Joseph as Ruby Lee Emory and Melody Hurd as Gracie Emory] are preternaturally gifted,” he says.

Little Marvin adds that what’s so moving about the show is the nuance and vulnerability each of the actors brought to their roles. “In entertainment, Black actors are often expected to be strong and noble and, as a result, can oftentimes feel one dimensional,” he says. “The Emory family are haunted by grief, each coping in their own unique way with that trauma. We needed actors who were unafraid to use their instruments to ‘go there’.”

Why Compton?

While Little Marvin says he could have placed the Emorys in any number of cities or suburbs across America from LA to Chicago to Levittown PA, he was drawn to Compton specifically because in researching Los Angeles, it became clear to him that LA is one of the most segregated cities in America. “Segregation is built into the fabric of the city,” he says.

Once Little Marvin dug in and immersed himself in the lore of Los Angeles, he learned that 60 or 70 years ago, East Compton was exclusively white. “In 1953, the folks living in East Compton were virulently protective of their community and their whiteness,” he says. “The first gang activity was actually white gangs, working in coordination with law enforcement, patrolling the streets to make sure Blacks stayed outside. That was definitely a ‘Wow, I never knew’ moment.”

Little Marvin now sees the Compton story as emblematic of a history of real estate disenfranchisement for Black folks across this country. “The ability to accrue intergenerational wealth is often built with ownership of real estate,” he says. “A home bought in 1950 for \$10,000 can become a home worth \$300-\$500,000 by 2021. White families were able to pass that wealth down through generations.” What was magnified for Little Marvin was the fact that if you are Black and not allowed access to reputable financial institutions from day one, you are often left with debt, the inability to get credit, and consequently, become a target for predatory lending. “There is a reason why ‘communities of color’ exist,” he says. “How are they created? Have they been planned and designed that way at the federal, state and local level?”

Terror vs. Horror

In considering the distinctions between terror and horror, Little Marvin notes that while very few of us will ever experience actual supernatural horror in our lives, terror is something we've all experienced. In thinking about his own experiences with 'the gaze', but also the history of that gaze and the terror of navigating this country in Black skin, Little Marvin was driven to explore the tension between the public and the private. "What happens when that safest of private spaces – the home – also becomes menacing? What happens when the inexplicable sound in your basement is as frightening as your next-door neighbor or the community in which you live?" Little Marvin wanted to explore these questions and in doing so, ends the season on a defiant note.

As Little Marvin reflected upon episode five (*COVENANT I*) he says, "The entire team set out to create 'the safest of spaces for perilous things to happen.' That sense of creative safety began in the writer's room and extended all the way to set with the tremendous work of episode five's director Janicza Bravo. Janicza was paramount in creating a net of love and safety around Deborah as she embarked on some of the most challenging moments in the series, and that net extended outward to all of our actors and our crew."

In discovering the Emory's back-story, Little Marvin says, "It truly was borne of a nightmare, like most things in horror writing... Mining the subterranean. Somehow, though, this experience was different. I usually wake up in the middle of the night and quickly grab my phone, type a few notes in so as not to forget, then wake up the next day and get to work on a scene. But I couldn't with this one. It was so visceral and raw, the crime at the center of our story so abominable, that it terrified me."

Little Marvin reveals the dream haunted him for the next few days until he decided to explore it. "As artists, I believe we have a responsibility to interrogate the things that scare us most," he says. "Though I couldn't quite articulate it 2 years ago when I sat down to write it, in retrospect I realize that we needed the crime at the heart of our series to wrestle with a history of violence against Black folks in this country, a history that is inextricable from our nation's founding. Unfortunately, I think we move too quickly to flattening and memorializing victims of white supremacist violence, turning what were once living, breathing human beings into hashtags and icons and emblems. George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery and Breonna Taylor were not icons. Trayvon Martin was not an icon. And countless folks too many to name stretching back to and past Emmett Till were not icons. They were not hashtags. They were human. They were men and women. They were children. I also think it's important to see the Jim Crow era not as something trapped in the amber of time or flattened by black and white photography, but as the domestic terror regime it truly was."

In plumbing the horrors of our nation's past, episode nine (*COVENANT II*.) invites viewers down into what the *THEM* team thought of as, "the basement floor for evil."

"We wanted episode nine to feel almost biblical in a sense, like a parable. It is also allegorical in the sense that it explores not just the birth of evil within our story but also the roots of white supremacy in this country," Little Marvin says. From its genesis, he envisioned the episode in black and white. "Director Craig MacNeill, DP Checco Varese and I wanted the episode to have an almost primordial feel, to strip away all of the artifice and the bright and sunny color saturation you see in the rest of the series," he says. "We wanted to plunge the viewer directly into the heart of darkness, and I think the

stark, high contrast black and white photography that our team captured primes the viewer for that plunge.”

Speaking of plumbing the nation’s past for horror, one of the most terrifying characters in the series is ‘The Tap Dance Man,’ a minstrel in blackface, which Little Marvin says is borne of Henry’s grief, guilt, and rage. “Henry is a man who has buried his grief and the vast well of guilt he feels for his inability to protect his wife and child on the day an unthinkable nightmare visits them. This coupled with the rage he feels at the constant barrage of micro-aggressions doled out by his new boss Berks, has given birth to a very specific demon that haunts him.... one that mocks, emasculates and terrorizes, played so very fearlessly (and terrifyingly) by Jeremiah Birkett.”

“I’d worked in corporate America for many years before committing to life as a writer/creator”, Little Marvin says, “and though I never stepped into a men’s room stall and shoved a fistful of paper towels down my throat to stifle a rage-scream like Henry does, I’d be lying if I said I haven’t wanted to,” he laughs. “Let’s just say there’s a lot about Henry’s experience as one of the only Black faces navigating largely white corporate spaces that I can relate to.”

On *THEM*’s fusion of horror with history, Little Marvin says, “I have always loved horror’s ability to interrogate and mine complex issues in the form of a thrill ride, and I’ve been a lifelong fan of the domestic thrillers and chillers of the 50’s, 60’s and 70’s since childhood. Marrying those twin loves in the form of an homage and lovingly crafted throwback to my favorite cinematic terrors was the ball our insanely talented and hardworking production teams picked up and ran with beyond my wildest dreams. We set out to make a show about the 50’s that felt like it was made in the 70’s, and that ambition afforded the teams a lot of anachronistic fun from costume and production design to shooting style, cut patterns and score/soundtrack.” He adds, “Our soundtrack is pretty bomb, not gonna lie.”

Creating a series like *THEM* was not always something Little Marvin imagined as possible for himself. “Growing up, folks who looked like me rarely, if ever, populated the centers of the kinds of stories I loved most, particularly in genre filmmaking. We were largely relegated to the margins, while the white characters populated the center of the frame (and narrative) as the heroes and heroines. One thing I hadn’t counted on was how humbling and emotionally cathartic it would be to center a Black family in the kind of domestic thrillers I’ve loved since childhood. There were many days when I would just stare at the monitor speechless (if not put on sunglasses real quick to keep the crew from seeing my tears!), because there, in the center of a DePalma-inspired split diopter shot or nod to a classic Hitchcock frame, are Deborah and Ashley – Black and dazzling – looking every bit the epitome of old Hollywood glamour. As a kid, you don’t realize how by never seeing yourself in the things you love, you’re being erased from those things... Told in subtle and not-so-subtle ways that you can love these things but not be *in or of* them. Reclaiming those classic frames and centering the historically un-centered has been the most thrilling and rewarding piece of the journey thus far.”

Season One Takeaways

Little Marvin’s vision, combined with the directors’ ability to extract vulnerability and raw emotion from the cast as they tackle devastating historic incidents and difficult racial issues, provided a wellspring for the actors to further understand and bond with their characters.

“The Great Migration involved six million Black people leaving the rural south to escape the horrors of Jim Crow,” Ashley Thomas says. “In the series, Henry and Lucky left North Carolina and headed to California to escape tragedy—only to face similar terror in their new home,” he says. The Emorys’ relocation and settlement in East Compton illustrates that racism and bigotry were prevalent across America and embedded in communities far removed from the south.

Of his character, Henry, Thomas notes that in the 1950s, you had to be deliberate and measured in your responses as a Black man, even when being threatened. “I think about the scene where Henry is on the roof of his home, fixing the antenna, and three White male neighbors confront him on his property,” he says. “[He] had to remain quietly calm while also defending his home and family on his own property. Or when Henry showed up for his first day of work and the White female receptionist ignored him, even though he tried to tell her that he was a new member of the engineering team. Any sense of the slightest provocation literally meant the difference between life and death.”

Deborah Ayorinde says her character, Lucky, is the closest to who she is than any character she has ever played. “I had to come out of myself to play her,” she says. “I wondered whether maybe elements of Lucky’s experience were within me all along that I unlocked through this role—the hurt, anger and pain that Black women carry and feel—that we shut down from feeling.” Ayorinde adds that she and Lucky are both layered: nurturers but also fighters, vulnerable but also guarded. “I thanked Little Marvin for allowing me to let loose, to yell, scream, cry, be imperfect,” she says. “It was challenging to be Lucky but it also gave me a sense of freedom.”

For Alison Pill, the role of Betty Wendell gave her an opportunity to explore the contrast and contradictions of White womanhood. “I don’t think you can tell this story without taking apart White women’s part in this history...and the role they played in helping drive the segregation and terror,” she says. “I hope that THEM creates a point of reflection for White women, to look at how their own acceptance of power and privilege at the cost of others’ freedom and safety only re-enforces systems that are harmful to everyone.” Pill also hopes viewers are left with the concepts of Black excellence and normalcy because, “beautiful families exist in every race, socioeconomic group, and in every community.” She also stresses that while we talk about systemic racism, “THEM sheds an important light to help bring about a real understanding of the systems that have been put in place to maintain racial hierarchy. To see it laid out this clearly,” she says, “while at the same time putting at the center of the story the love of a mom and a dad for their daughters, is an amazing, important story to tell.”

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