

Film Review: *The Green Book* (1962)

This is a delightfully charming and entertaining film about stereotypes, but it carefully avoids being overly preachy or unbalanced. Its recurrent theme is that we are all guilty of harboring stereotypes of others, and blacks are no less guilty of this than are whites. In fact, the film's white screenwriters clearly engage in this very practice, whether knowingly or otherwise.

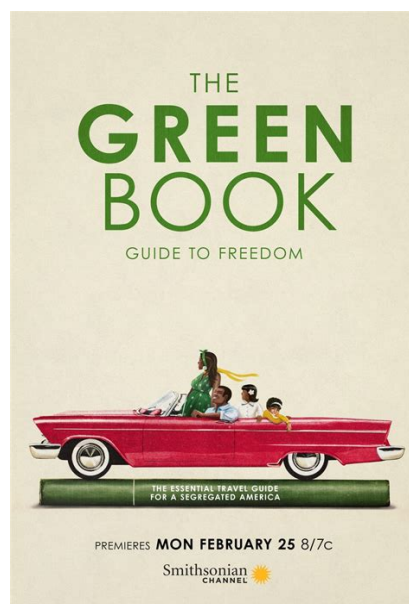
Dr. Donald Shirley (Mahershala Ali,) is a black man and renowned concert pianist, whose **Don Shirley Trio** makes an annual concert tour that includes the deep South. *Dr. Shirley's resume`* includes two Honorary Doctorates and a Ph.D. from the **Leningrad Conservatory of Music**. He twice performed with the **Boston Pops**, as well as with many other notable symphony orchestras. *Dr. Shirley* lives in a spacious suite above **Carnegie Hall**, and speaks Italian and Russian, so he is hardly your average, *run-of-the-mill* black man. He is not shy about sharing this impression with others, and seems to have nothing in common with his own race, or anyone else for that matter. Thus, he is quite lonely.

Because his concert tour includes performances across the deep South, *Dr. Shirley* needs a driver who can handle difficult situations effectively and protect him if the need arises. The man he hires is **Tony "Lip" Vallelonga** (Viggo Mortenson,) a resident of an Italian neighborhood in the Bronx. Tony's primary qualification is that he is also a bouncer at the **Copacabana** night club in New York City. Prior to Christmas in 1962, the **Copa** had to close for two months during renovations, which left "*Tony Lip*" without regular income to support his wife and two boys. Because he's a dedicated family man, he has the class and good sense to politely decline offers of work from a local mob boss. Then, after initially rejecting *Dr. Shirley's* offer, *Tony Lip* eventually agrees to drive him through the Midwest and across the deep South on his concert tour.



Tony Interviewing with Dr. Don Shirley

The film's title is based on *The Negro Motorist Green Book*, a publication that served as a guide for blacks while traveling through the *Jim Crow* South prior to the "*Public Accommodations Laws*" enacted in 1960s-era civil rights legislation. Despite his credentials and erudition, *Dr. Shirley* was denied access to *whites-only* accommodations in the Deep South, whereas *Tony* usually stayed in nearby *whites-only* hotels and motels.



Initially, *Dr. Shirley* and *Tony* bicker over nearly everything. *Dr. Shirley* appears to be arrogant, imperious and condescending, and is frequently irritated at *Tony* so he never passes up an opportunity to correct him with sarcasm that often flies over *Tony's* head. Ironically, the film's screenwriters were themselves guilty of stereotyping by initially depicting *Tony* as a dull, gluttonous, ignorant, occasionally devious, and backward Italian "*dago*." Consequently, *Dr. Shirley* picks at *Tony's* grammar, his elocution, his smoking, his enormous appetite, his lame jokes, and his tendency to take his eyes off the road while driving. *Dr. Shirley* finds *Tony* unsettling and uncouth.

Although the two men couldn't be any more different, over the course of the film they slowly begin to develop respect and an appreciation for each other, and even begin to learn from each other. They were both better men for the experience. This leads *Tony* to become increasingly irritated by the indignities that *Dr. Shirley* must often endure in the South, even from the very hosts who celebrate his virtuosity.

***Tony* loves music, including the jazz, blues and gospel music of black entertainers like Aretha Franklin, Little Richard and Chubby Checker. Their music he introduces to *Dr. Shirley* for the first time over the car's AM radio. Later, at *Dr. Shirley's* initial performance in Pittsburgh, *Tony* is astonished when first exposed to the virtuosity of this classically-trained pianist. That's probably when *Tony* first begins to perceive *Dr. Shirley* in a more positive manner than he has ever viewed any black man before, eroding his stereotype of black men. It was the love of music which they had in common, and which slowly helped to bridge the gap between their two, very different worlds.**

Tony's wife *Dolores* (Linda Cardellini) made him promise that he'd write home every chance he got. It soon became obvious from his efforts that *Tony* had little in the way of a formal education, and even less ability to commit his thoughts to paper. Given a chance to read one, *Dr. Shirley*

judged it "*pathetic*" and thereafter began to help *Tony* compose his letters so they weren't so banal. Afterward, his letters were significantly more elegant and romantic, and sometimes brought *Dolores* and her sisters to tears. (After *Dolores* read one to her younger sister, the sister yells to her husband across the room, "*John, I want a letter.*" To this he responds, "*Yeah, soon as you make a meal.*")



Dolores Reading a Letter From Tony

There's one scene in the film that sets the tone for the remainder of the film. *Tony* is preparing for bed in his hotel room when he receives a phone call. He then hurries to Macon, Georgia's **YMCA**, where the police have handcuffed *Dr. Shirley* and a young white man. They were arrested for engaging in an unnatural act, and are still in the nude. *Tony* adroitly handles the situation by promising the two arresting officers that he and *Dr. Shirley* will be gone in the morning, and then subtly bribes the two cops by making a "*donation.*" *Dr. Shirley* later chastises *Tony* for bribing them, but *Tony* probably saved the concert tour and *Dr. Shirley's* professional reputation. He then angrily denounces *Dr. Shirley* as an

"ungrateful bastard" for criticizing his efforts. The next day, there is sparse conversation on the road to Memphis.

Outside their Memphis hotel, Tony runs into two Italian *wise guys* he knows from New York. When they see him working for a black man, they laughingly ask him in Italian if he lost a bet or something, and then offer him more lucrative work. All three agree to meet at the hotel's bar at 8:00 pm to discuss it. *Dr. Shirley* is waiting in the hall when *Tony* emerges from his hotel room, and in fluent Italian, proceeds to offer him a promotion and a larger salary not to quit. *Tony* now realizes that *Dr. Shirley* understood every word of his earlier conversation with the two mobsters. He then reassures *Dr. Shirley* that he sincerely intends to honor his contract, and was simply on his way downstairs to tell his friends *thanks, but no*.

As he is descending the stairs, *Dr. Shirley* blurts out an apology to *Tony* for the embarrassment and humiliation *Tony* may have experienced while coming to his rescue at the Macon YMCA the night before. To his eternal credit, *Tony* grants him a form of absolution by replying in a sympathetic manner, **"Forget about it. I've been working in night clubs in New York City my whole life. I know it's a complicated world."** He then shrugs his shoulders and continues to the bar where he tells the New York mobsters he isn't interested. The deft and sensitive way he handled both situations makes it clear that *Tony Lip* didn't come by his name and reputation without a good reason. His sensitivity and empathy didn't fit *Dr. Shirley*'s stereotype of him, either.

The most moving scene occurs near the end of the film, after *Dr. Shirley* refuses to play at the trio's last engagement. It was a Birmingham, Alabama country club where *Dr. Shirley* was barred from its dining facilities despite being its *"Guest of Honor."* This was the club's big *Christmas Celebration*, but its management would not make an exception even for its celebrated guest. In a dignified manner, *Dr. Shirley*

declares that **"Either I'll eat in this room, or I'm not performing tonight."** Despite a blizzard of threats from the club's manager, *Dr. Shirley* and *Tony* leave the club to begin their return journey to New York. Since both are famished, they stop at a black establishment down the road from the country club called ***The Orange Bird***. It creates quite a stir when they enter because *Dr. Shirley* is wearing a white-tie tuxedo with tails, and *Tony* is the only white guy in the place.



At The Orange Bird

When they sit down at the bar, the barmaid asks *Tony* if he's a cop, assuming that all white guys are policemen. He answers, **"Do I look Irish to you?"** which makes her laugh. After enjoying some drinks and a meal at the bar, the barmaid asks *Dr. Shirley* **"Hey darlin', what you all dressed up for like that?"** *Tony* interrupts by answering her with, **"He's only the greatest piano player in the world."** She then asks if that's true, and when he humbly acknowledges that he does play, she encourages *Dr.*

Shirley to have a go at the upright piano in the corner of the room. It was temporarily abandoned when the evening's musical entertainment took a break from their gig. She states, "**Don't tell me, show me.**"

I don't want to spoil this scene for readers or viewers, but *Dr. Shirley* "**breaks some keys**" with a classical piece (Chopin, *Etude Opus 25, No. 11: "Winter Wind,"*) which was so impressive that even the cook came out of the kitchen to see what the hell was going on. Very much impressed by his performance, the other black musicians join *Dr. Shirley*, who seamlessly accompanies them in a number of improvisational jazz compositions, while doing a bit of "*scatting*," himself. Pretty soon, the whole place is rocking with jazz and its energy.



"Breaking Some Keys"

The significance of the scene at *The Orange Bird* is profound. This may have been the first time *Dr. Shirley* found something in common with his own people. For many years he's felt alienated from whites as well as blacks, owing to his race, his homosexuality and his erudition. He was humbled by the enthusiastic reception he received from patrons

of *The Orange Bird*, which was just as enthusiastic as those he received from white audiences, and possibly more sincere. As *Dr. Shirley* and *Tony* are leaving, he utters a rare laugh and declares that *"I'd do that once a month for free."* Again, it was music that bridged the gap between *Dr. Shirley* and others.

Several times before, *Tony* had asked the other members of the *Don Shirley Trio* why *Dr. Shirley* puts up with the insults and slights he endures in the Deep South. Their initial reaction was to ignore him, and stare at him as if he were a fool. At one performance, the trio's cellist, *Oleg Malacovich* (Dimitar Marinov,) informs him in broken English that *"Dr. Shirley could have stayed up north getting rear end kissed at Park Avenue parties for three times money. But he asked for this."* *Oleg* later reveals *Dr. Shirley's* true rationale for his concert tours to the Deep South. He informed *Tony* that in 1956, Nat King Cole was invited to perform at the *Municipal Auditorium* in Birmingham, where he was pulled from the stage and badly beaten by a mob of whites for playing *"white man's music."* *Oleg* then explains, *"Genius is not enough. It takes courage to change people's hearts."*



Tony Lip Driving Dr. Shirley

Of course, if every black man were like *Dr. Shirley*, America would not have race problems, and our grammatical lapses would be instantly corrected. Thus, the film offers a very skewed perception of blacks in general, which is often the case in literature and the arts. There, audiences are expected to generalize from exceptional blacks -- who are held up as examples -- and then extrapolate those characteristics to the entire population. That's hardly the reality.

In the real-world, the uncomfortable reality is the overwhelming majority, who lower societal standards wherever they are found. As if to prove this very point, at ***The Orange Bird*** *Dr. Shirley* made the mistake of flashing a wad of \$100 bills in front of two n*gger barflies, who later lay in wait for him behind his car in the parking lot as he and *Tony* left the restaurant. With his characteristic "*street-smarts*," *Tony* had earlier noticed their interest in *Dr. Shirley's* wad of cash, but dispersed them like *cockroaches-when-the-lights-come-on* by twice firing his pistol into the air. *Tony* then calmly schooled *Dr. Shirley* by telling him never to flash a wad of cash in a bar.

I don't doubt that *Dr. Shirley* and others like him endured the kinds of indignities and injuries depicted in this film, and that they were entirely unmerited. During the *Jim Crow* era, it was probably a missed opportunity that exceptions could not be made for the civilized and dignified minority of well-behaved and talented blacks, such as Nat King Cole or Dr. Don Shirley.

Those in the ***Screen Actor's Guild*** were right to award this film with three Oscars, but based on their record, they probably did so for all the wrong reasons. It garnered *Best Picture*, *Best Original Screenplay*, and *Best Supporting Actor* for Mahershala Ali. Still, this was a wonderful film, and deserving of all three awards.

-- by Earl P. Holt III