

MICHAEL JAI WHITE FLASHBACK



**THE KYOKUSHIN KARATE EXPERT'S
EARLY DAYS IN HOLLYWOOD**

Editor's Note:

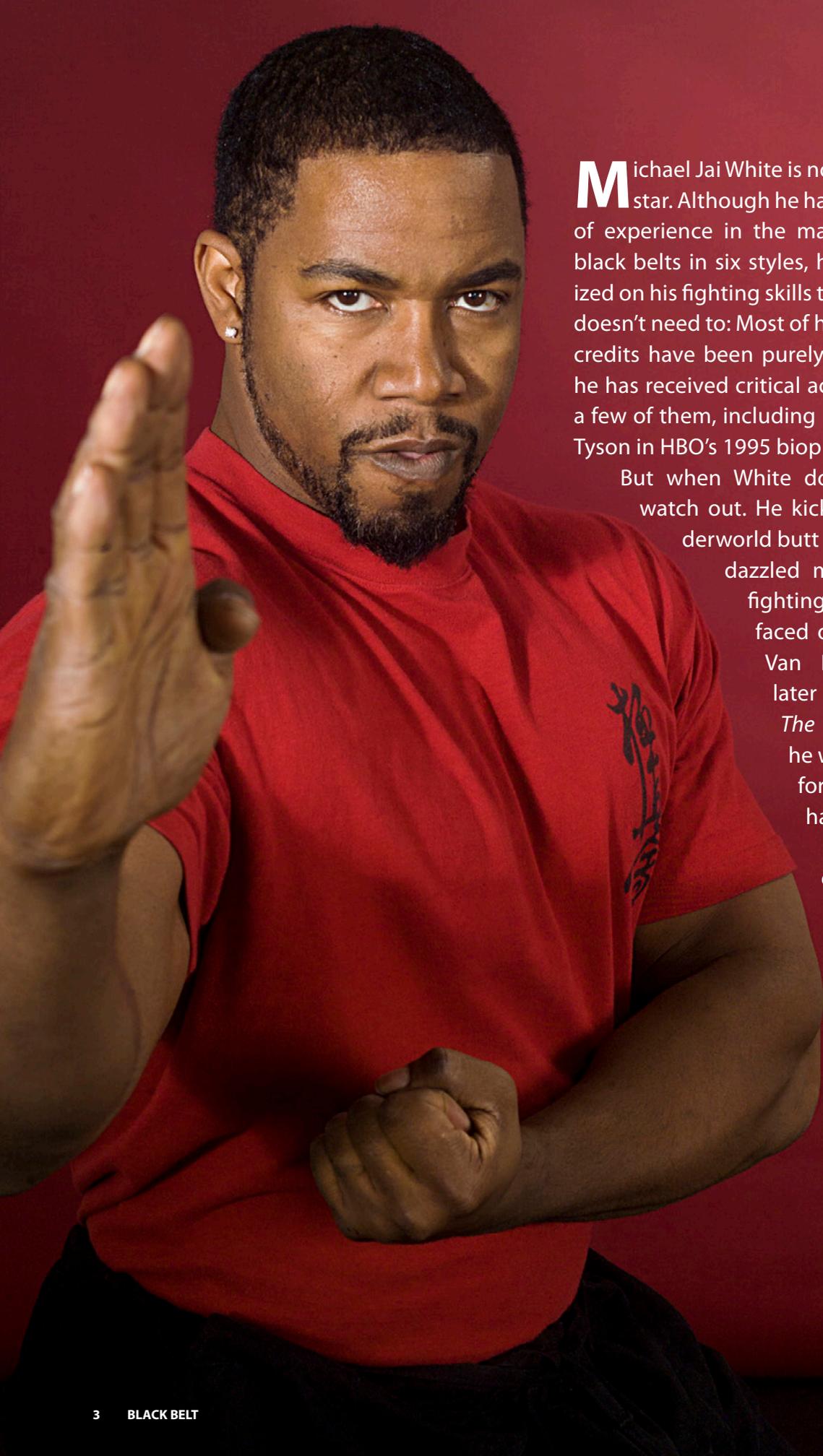
This piece was originally published as "Man of Action," the cover story for the February 2002 issue of *Black Belt*. In the interest of this being a "flashback" to Michael Jai White's start in movies, all time-based references have been preserved except where noted.



Cover Photo by Doug Churchill

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Michael Jai White is not your typical action star. Although he has more than 20 years of experience in the martial arts and owns black belts in six styles, he has never capitalized on his fighting skills to land a part. And he doesn't need to: Most of his film and television credits have been purely dramatic roles, and he has received critical acclaim for more than a few of them, including his portrayal of Mike Tyson in HBO's 1995 biopic *Tyson*.

But when White does fight on-screen, watch out. He kicked some major underworld butt in 1997 in *Spawn*. He dazzled moviegoers with his fighting prowess when he faced off with Jean-Claude Van Damme two years later in *Universal Soldier: The Return*. And in 2001 he was almost too much for Steven Seagal to handle in *Exit Wounds*.

Whether he takes on drama, action or comedy, you can be sure Michael Jai White will shine with a stellar performance.



Photos cCourtesy of Michael Jai White

<< **Michael Jai White earned his first black belt in shotokan karate, which he studied under Shigeru Oyama.**

Although White's martial arts skills continued to improve, other aspects of his life became more difficult. He moved with his family to Bridgeport, Connecticut, when he was 12, but by the time he was 14, the headstrong youth was living on his own, working as an assistant instructor for a men's *kyokushin* class at a local YMCA, he says. By that time, he already stood 6 feet tall and looked much older than his age; many people believed he was an adult and treated him like one. Some of the *sensei* in the karate class had come from

Martial Beginnings

White was born in Brooklyn, New York. A natural athlete, he took up the martial arts to combat his insecurity, he says. When he was 7, he started practicing *shotokan* karate under Shigeru Oyama, the former head of the United States Kyokushin Karate Association. Soon after that, the youngster also started training in *kyokushinkai* karate. He earned his first black belt in shotokan several years later, and today the Los Angeles resident also has *dan* rankings in *tang soo do*, *goju-ryu*, *kobudo* and *taekwondo*.

An avid competitor, White participated in every martial arts tournament he could enter while he was growing up. "I went anywhere and fought anyplace," he recalls. He counts titles in the U.S. Open and a North American Japan Karate Association tournament among his competition accolades.

Michael Jai White plays the title character in *Spawn*. >>



MJW Filmography

<i>Toxic Avenger, Part II</i>	1989
<i>Tune in Tomorrow</i>	1990
<i>The Krays</i>	1990
<i>True Identity</i>	1991
<i>Universal Soldier</i>	1992
<i>Full Contact</i>	1993
<i>Living Single</i>	1994
<i>Ring of Fire III</i>	1994
<i>Tyson</i>	1995
<i>Ballistic</i>	1995
<i>NYPD Blue</i>	1995
<i>2 Days in the Valley</i>	1996
<i>Captive Heart: The James Mink Story</i>	1996
<i>City of Industry</i>	1997
<i>Spawn</i>	1997
<i>Ringmaster</i>	1998
<i>The Bus Stop</i>	1998
<i>Mutiny</i>	1999
<i>Thick as Thieves</i>	1999
<i>Universal Soldier: The Return</i>	1999
<i>Breakfast of Champions</i>	1999
<i>Freedom Song</i>	2000
<i>Wonderland</i>	2000
<i>Exit Wounds</i>	2001
<i>Boston Public</i>	2001
<i>Soul Food</i>	2001

Japan, and because he was so much taller than they were and looked so mature, they would give him their car keys and send him on errands, White recalls. "I learned how to drive without them really knowing; they just thought I was older," he says. "It was my little secret."

White graduated from high school with honors, but his early academic performance was not exemplary. Describing himself as a member of the nerd class, he often picked fights with bullies. "One of my favorite things in the world was fighting," he says. "I couldn't stand bullies, so I'd challenge them. It wasn't a praiseworthy thing; I went after bullies because they'd give me better fights and I could justify kicking somebody's behind. I looked for an excuse because I had this angst in me and I wanted to fight that off. Bullies were the logical target."

White attributes the angry stage that characterized his early adolescence to the fact that he did not have a traditional nuclear family and was jostled between an impoverished lifestyle and a middle-class lifestyle. The martial arts became his only solace. "I was very sensitive. I was building up a fortress just to protect myself. Inside, I was really feeling the harshness of my reality."

Martial Ethics

As White made peace with those issues, his priorities began to shift, and developing himself as a martial artist became more important than fighting, he says. "I had a room full of

Michael Jai White scraps with Jean-Claude Van Damme (left) on the set of *Universal Soldier: The Return*. >>

trophies that I had no connection to. A lot of them [were] for this championship or that, and what does it really mean? I'd gotten off on an exit from the highway of my evolution because I drove down a road where people were passing me on the right. That's one of the reasons I always continue to be a student and why I always train in different arts."

He started to spend more time perfecting his techniques and *kata*, as well as developing his focus and discipline. "I continued fighting, but my philosophy was quite different," he explains. "I used the other people I fought to make me better, and I'd work on techniques that I wasn't strong at."

Over the years, White has trained with *Black Belt* Hall of Fame members Joe Lewis, Benny Urquidez, Bill Wallace and Gene LeBell, and he gets together with friends to work on his grappling skills. Now 32, he continues to

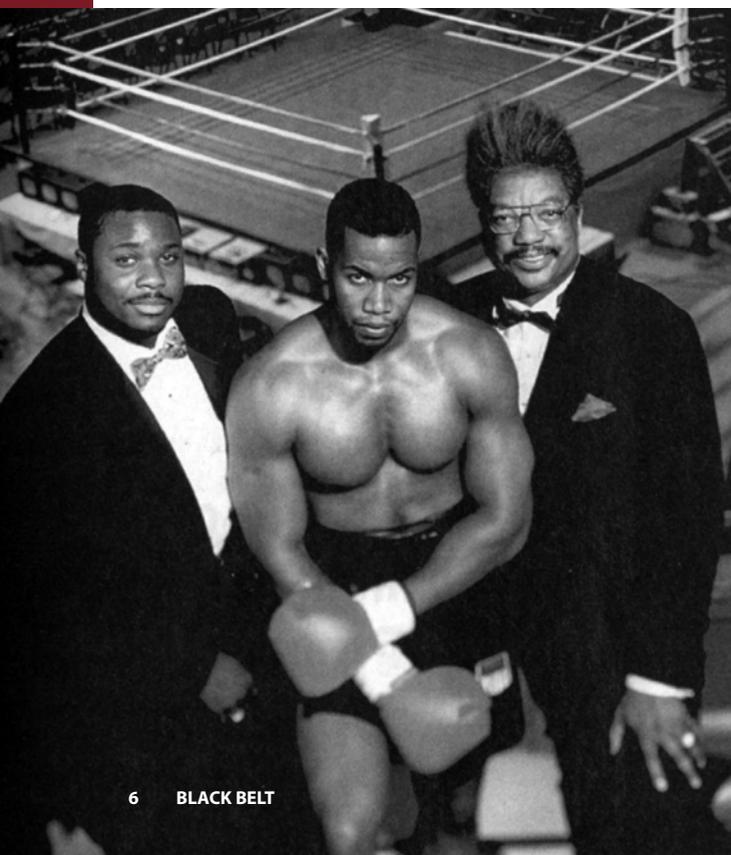


Photos Courtesy of Michael Jai White

thirst for more martial arts knowledge. "To put on a white belt is great for me," he says. "I'm looking forward to learning something new. Getting a black belt is just the beginning. I'm leery of resting on my laurels and accepting the adoration of others because that starts to feed your ego. And the ego is not a good thing to feed."

If a person limits his training to what he already does well, he will not grow as a martial artist, White contends. "If I take the bait and concentrate on my physical gifts, I do myself a disservice. A true martial artist tries to be the best that he can be, regardless of what anyone else is doing. I know that is what has

<< Flanked by Malcom-Jamal Warner (left) and Paul Winfield, Michael Jai White is convincing as the heavyweight champ in HBO's *Tyson*.





gotten me where I am, but I don't consider myself to be anywhere near to where I want to wind up."

Martial Success

White took drama classes in college, but he never expected to make a career out of acting. Indeed, he was a junior high school teacher before he ultimately sought work in Hollywood. "In school, I kept taking acting courses because I enjoyed it, but I didn't think I'd make a living at it," he says. "But there came a time when it became obvious that I owed it to myself to really see it through."

His first roles included parts in off-Broadway theater and commercials, and a spot advertising soup in Japan with Steven Seagal. White landed his first feature-film gig in 1991's *True Identity*. He did not initially disclose his martial arts prowess or seek roles in action films, nor did he perceive an automatic connection between his acting and his karate skills. Later, when studio big-wigs found out about his past, they offered to commission writers to create fight films for him, but White steered clear of the genre.

"I want to be considered an actor first because it's something that I studied and made a living doing," he explains. "I've

In His Own Words

You know Michael Jai White as an actor and martial artist, but he's also a budding screen-writer. "I've written a romantic comedy, straight drama and two martial arts screenplays," he says. "One of them is like a modern-day *Karate Kid*. It pays homage to all martial artists and the essence of the martial arts. A lot of films just use the martial arts as eye candy when they are really something that galvanizes a certain type of individual. When we look at fighters as the only representatives of the martial arts, we miss a lot."

picked until now to guard the action part of it because as far as Hollywood is concerned, the powers-that-be first see me as the guy that played Tyson. The major networks see me only as an actor; they have no idea about the action quotient."

Although White drew on his combat skills for the boxing scenes in *Tyson*, the producers had no idea their leading man was an accomplished martial artist. When he appeared in a film with Van Damme, Hollywood moguls were left wondering who did White's fighting.

Now that he has established himself as an actor, he feels free to do more action films. He also plans to choreograph more of his martial arts scenes. "The thing is to be talented enough to pull myself out of [the stereotype]," he says. "Well, I've already proved that part, which is why I've chosen now to go ahead with the action stuff."

One project he has in the works is a remake of Jim Kelly's 1974 classic *Black Belt Jones*. Two additional films — *Six* and *Mad*, the latter being a semi-autobiographical story penned by White — are also on the table. "I've let it be known that I'm going to do some martial arts-type [stories]," he says. "I want to put something out there that hasn't been seen for a long time and bring back the 'martial' part of the martial arts. There is a lot of art out there, but it's not always martial.

"I like things that concentrate on the more important aspects of the martial arts. Of course, there's the entertainment aspect of it — the fighting — but sometimes we have fighting for no apparent reason. [Hong Kong-style cinema] certainly had its place with *The Matrix* and things of that nature, where it's kind of a heightened reality. But it would be good for the martial arts if we got back to some of the basics — like when someone has a technique that's sharp enough to look totally effective without camera tricks."

Many modern martial arts movies emphasize the flash rather than the aspects of training that help a person build character, he says. "Quality in some cases has taken a back seat to fanfare, and that's unfortunate."

With recurring roles on Fox's *Boston Public* and Showtime's *Soul Food*, plus several major film projects in the works, you can be sure you have not heard the last of Michael Jai White. He brings a professionalism and maturity to every part — and he doesn't need to score a punch or land a kick to nail his performance. Even when his fighting skills are not showcased on-screen, you can sense that the martial arts are always center stage in his life.

To read about Michael Jai White's kyokushin karate roots and watch him in action in the dojo, visit blackbeltmag.com/mjw.

FOLLOW IN MICHAEL JAI WHITE'S MARTIAL FOOTSTEPS!

