

Breaking Through TV Color Barrier

(LOS ANGELES TIMES columnist Hal Humphrey recently did an interesting column on the problems being encountered by Negro artists in their efforts to "crack" TV, as seen through the eyes and caustic wit of comedian Godfrey Cambridge. It follows.)

One of comedian Godfrey Cambridge's sharper routines has to do with the "breakthrough" which Negroes are supposed to have made into television.

"Ho, yes, the breakthrough is there," says Godfrey, "but only for a certain type Negro. He must have a deep voice, be nine feet tall, slim like Harry Belafonte, and be a mixture of Billy Eckstein, Herb Jeffries and Turhan Bey."



Godfrey Cambridge

"Then," continues Godfrey, a deep sigh rising from his barrel-shaped frame, "they tell him he will play a cabdriver. Not just any cabdriver, y' understand, but one with a social conscience."

"And somewhere in this script will be the word 'Nigger' with the big 'N' and they will congratulate themselves for getting rid of their guilt. Yes, sir, when TV producers cast a Negro they try to relieve the NAACP pressure for one whole year."

Godfrey's own TV breakthrough came a year ago after Jack Paar ran off two tape shows of the comic's performance at Morgan State College at Baltimore. So much favorable comment resulted from the first show, Paar stretched Godfrey's appearances to three by cutting the second tape into two segments.

This Friday Godfrey makes his eighth visit to the Paar show, something he happily would do for nothing if necessary, because without Paar's first invitation Godfrey's future might still be behind him.

Godfrey is happy for his comedy colleague, Bill Cosby, who has a co-star role with Robert Culp in a new TV series, I Spy, coming up on NBC next season. It could be another "breakthrough," but Godfrey is waiting to see.

The Ratings Will Tell

"That series will go one of two ways—either Madison Ave. will say, 'OK, we got a series with a Negro in it now, so get off our backs,' or, if the ratings go way up, they'll holler, 'Gee whiz!' and, man, next season we'll be all over that tube," Godfrey predicts.

What is it the Negro wants from TV? Godfrey's answer to that is so simple that nobody on Madison Ave. understands it, because that is a street which deals only in "syndromes" and "concepts."

"When my agent tries to sell me to some TV producer," says Godfrey, "the answer is always, 'Fine, we like Godfrey—we'll look for a script.'"

"But I don't want them to look for a script, because

that means one of those 'problem' shows where everybody but me gets rid of his guilt.

"When a casting director calls me and a white actor to read for the same part, that's what I'll call a breakthrough. I saw a documentary on NBC about Lewis and Clark, but I didn't see any Negroes, and we were on that expedition.

"There's a new book out called 'The Negro Cowboy,' which proves among other things that three out of every eight trail hands in the migration West were Negroes.

Negroes Bought the Book

"Do you know that book was sold out in Hollywood the first day, and my friends and I all wanted to think that TV producers here had run right out and bought it to make TV shows from. But in our hearts we knew better. It was Negroes who bought that book."

Godfrey and most of his talented colleagues keep looking for signs of a genuine breakthrough, but they know they are kidding themselves.

"The Dick Van Dyke show is a sign of health, and so is Cosby's getting a series, but then recently my agent tried to get me on the Red Skelton show and the answer was, 'But Skelton does insult humor, and we couldn't put a Negro in that spot.'"

"I'd like to think it won't take a Selma to get us on TV the right way, but it probably will. I know I don't watch TV now, because I don't want to break up a \$400 TV set, or worse yet, find myself talking back to it."

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