

BET faces challenges expansion in next 20 years

LOS ANGELES (AP) — As Luther Vandross, Denzel Washington and other stars paid homage to Black Entertainment Television at a Las Vegas gala, the channel's founder watched with satisfaction.

Robert L. Johnson, marking the 20th anniversary of a cable TV venture that began with a \$15,000 personal loan and has turned into a multi-million-dollar media empire, said he wasn't merely savoring his own success.

"I was reflecting on the fact that BET is a connecting point for African American creativity, the African-American political voice, African-American opportunity and African-American participation in the wealth creation of the economy," Johnson said after last weekend's Vegas bash.

BET's two decades have brought accolades and expansion — and criticism, as well.

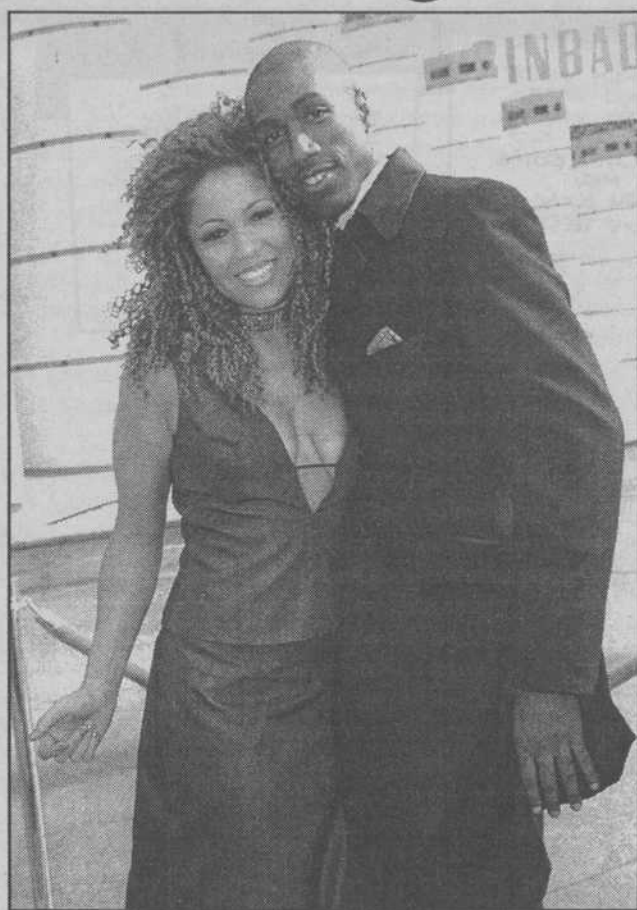
The singular role played by BET and its spin-offs — including four other cable channels, magazine and book publishing, and fledgling film and Internet businesses — is undeniable. While broadcast networks draw fire for excluding minorities, BET has provided an outlet for black artists and, at the highest corporate levels, for executives with ownership stakes in the company.

"We've created probably more African-American millionaires at BET than any other company and given opportunities for people to manage businesses and departments they never would have gotten if BET had not existed," said Johnson.

His Washington-based company is run by the cable industry's highest-ranking black executives, including Debra L. Lee, the president and chief operating officer of parent company BET Holdings Inc. Johnson is chairman and CEO of the \$200 million-a-year enterprise.

BET has spotlighted and explored black issues more fully than its white-owned cable or broadcast counterparts. The 1995 Million Man March in Washington received 24-hour coverage, and BET's "Teen Summit" talk show has been honored by the NAACP.

"I cannot imagine where we would have been without BET," said the Rev. Al Sharpton. "Many like me who operate in black America can only get our balanced story told nationally on BET talk shows."



"All" host Liza Michelle and Hits from "Hits From The Street" engage embrace in front of Bally's. "All," a Video Soul-styled television show, and "Hits From the Street," an humorous, music video-spliced show, were part of BET's 2000 lineup. (Above) BET founder and CEO Robert Johnson and Debra Lee, president and chief operating officer of BET Holdings, Inc., stroll into the hotel.

Sentinel-Voice photos by John Broussard

Such acclaim, however, is not universal.

BET's risqué stand-up comedy show and heavy play of sexy music videos have been attacked by some observers as irresponsible and unfair to viewers who would prefer more substantive or family-oriented fare.

One fledgling competitor, cable channel MBC, is staking its hope for national expansion on promises of providing black-oriented entertainment that stresses family values and avoids sleaze.

Critics also have decried the lack of original comedy or drama series on BET, although the channel has launched an ambitious slate of made-for-TV movies (based on the BET-owned Arabesque line of romance novels).

BET's economic treatment of performers has been another contentious area. Last fall, a full-page ad in Daily Variety blasted BET for refusing to pay union wages to performers on the channel's "ComicView" series, a rare non-union national TV program.

"Unfortunately, the show's success comes at the expense of its biggest asset — the comedians themselves," read the open letter signed by Richard Pryor, Jay Leno and more than 100 other comics.

The issue has even seeped onto newspaper comic pages. In Aaron McGruder's strip "The Boondocks," two characters debated whether black-owned businesses act in the best interests of black Americans.

"You don't believe in that anymore?" asks one. The reply: "Let's just say BET shot a few holes in that theory."

Although the anniversary celebration with actor-comedian Jamie Foxx as host was under the jurisdiction of the American Federation of Radio and Television Artists, the union is keeping a wary eye on future BET productions.

"We commend BET for 20 years of programming and their commitment to diversity in media," said AFTRA spokeswoman Pamm Fair. "We are hopeful that we get a union agreement for 'ComicView' and other shows on BET."

Johnson is adamant about dealing with unions only when necessary. Asked if the reported \$150 fee for a "ComicView" appearance might be increased, his reply was guarded: "We think we'll be able to give comics more financial support."

Whether or not the pay scale rises, Johnson is intent on spending more on programming and brand marketing to keep the cable channel on top among black viewers and to maximize the value of its sister companies, such as new Internet site BET.com.

"I have no problem spending money, investing in programming, but it's got to be economically viable," he said. That rules out TV series, he said, which cannot be profitable for a niche service like BET because they lack syndication value.

He won't apologize, either, for the heavy reliance on music videos. BET

boosted the careers of pop and hip-hop stars by providing an outlet for the black videos that record companies had been reluctant to make, he says.

"Music is the quintessential cultural expression for African-Americans. ... Why

would BET ever not be heavily invested in this creative experience?" Johnson said. On the public service front, Johnson said the channel will add a weekday news report and intends significant coverage of the Democratic and Republican conventions

this summer.

Sharpton offered a spirited defense of Johnson and BET.

"Sometimes we impose on our own that which we don't impose on others. Some who talk about BET have no problem with the exploitation of the entertainment industry against our people," the activist said.

Being the only game in town, Johnson contends, fuels attacks.

"Everybody wants us to be a Christmas tree. They want us to put under the tree their particular present ... We can't be a Christmas tree. We have to be a business that decides what is in the best interests of the business and the shareholders that we serve."

"I think within those parameters, BET has done more to give voice to African American issues than any institution that's ever existed in this country," he said.

The anniversary celebration, which also featured Stevie Wonder, LL Cool J, Boyz II Men and Kenneth "Babyface" Edmonds, will show 9 p.m. tonight (Thursday, May 18) on BET.

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