

ENTERTAINMENT

Black Family Channel starts eight new shows

LOS ANGELES (AP) — Robert Townsend first caught the film industry's eye with 1987's "Hollywood Shuffle," a clever satire about Black actors trapped in demeaning roles. Now he wants the country to pay attention to what he calls a new kind of television, entertaining but with a sense of responsibility, especially toward young Black Americans.

Black Family Channel, which Townsend joined as president and chief executive officer of production five months ago, is starting an ambitious slate of eight new programs geared for children, teenagers and families.

"With this network, we want to give people a sense of quality, integrity programming that speaks to them," Townsend said.

"We don't want to be an old-school network where people don't want to tune in, but we want to get back to some of those old-fashioned values."

He cites Bill Cosby as an inspiration, both for Cosby's groundbreaking '80s sitcom and for his provocative argument that Black youth is be-

ing undermined by factors including poor parenting and attitudes toward language.

"Everything that Bill Cosby is saying about families working together... (that) we've got to reprogram these kids and we've got to shake it up, that's what we're doing," Townsend told The Associated Press.

It's as big a change for the channel as it is for Townsend, who moves from writing, directing, acting and producing to steering a rare minority-owned and operated TV channel (co-founders include boxer Evander Holyfield, baseball's Cecil Fielder and attorney Willie E. Gary.)

The major competitor is BET, Black Entertainment Television, owned by media giant Viacom Inc. and criticized in the past for giving viewers more music programming flash than substance.

Townsend — whose projects have ranged from TV and film comedies ("The Parent 'Hood," "The Meteor Man") to drama ("10,000 Black Men Named George") — figures his eclectic body of work prepared him to run



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a network.

While the career change is abrupt for Townsend, the channel is undergoing a more gradual transition.

Begun in 1999 as the Major Broadcasting Cable network, Black Family Channel will keep elements of the gospel programming that was part of its original mission. Music programs and documentaries also remain in place.

Following a plan of adding programming blocks, the channel was launching five new Thursday night shows this week. An "urban kids programming block" of three new daytime shows debuted last Saturday.

Among the new series: a

talk show about teenage issues; a series celebrating spoken-word artists; and "Souled Out," a critical look at the messages in music videos.

The channel also plans to reinstate and increase its coverage of football games at historically Black colleges, temporarily dropped while the new schedule was developed.

Townsend, who has four children aged 4 to 14, is passionate about his belief that television can help kids make the right choices in life. He urged Gary, the channel's chairman, to bring him on board.

"My mother raised four kids on her own; my father was not there. I was watching

"The Andy Griffith Show" and Opie's lessons were my lessons. I think he taught me well," Townsend said. "He reinforced what mom was teaching me and the church was teaching me."

He cites one of the channel's new youth-oriented shows, "Lisa Knight & The Round Table," as a chance to influence youngsters.

"If some young kid is thinking about having sex and watches a 'Round Table' discussion and hears, 'Watch yourself, don't give into peer pressure, I've done my job,'" said Townsend.

Black Family Channel is available in 14 million homes and virtually all of the top Black TV markets, said Rick Newberger, the channel's president and chief executive officer.

He argues that Black viewers represents a huge, untapped consumer market which, unlike the Hispanic one, is underserved by targeted channels.

Black Family Channel is sure to grow with the continuing conversion to digital cable, which allows for carriage of more TV channels,

Newberger said. Discussions also are under way for satellite distribution.

"In most major cities viewers just have to call their cable operator and they can get us," Newberger said. "If they have a digital box in their home, more than likely we're there."

Industry analyst Larry Gerbrandt acknowledged there is concern among parents and others about the free-wheeling content that is widespread on TV.

But Gerbrandt, head of the media and entertainment practice for Alix Partners, an operation and financial consulting firm, expressed skepticism about the growth prospects of a channel aimed at a defined audience.

"You want your programming to reach a maximum audience," said Gerbrandt. "The economics of television dictate that the bigger audience you can reach, the more successful you are. Limiting yourself up front limits your economics."

Townsend said the channel is not solely for Black viewers and suggested it may consider a name change sometime in the future.



A portrait of singer/songwriter Ray Charles hangs on display at the entrance to the Charles exhibit at the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and Museum in Cleveland.

Charles still popular after death

CLEVELAND (AP) — Less than six months after his death, Ray Charles may be more popular than ever with a movie about his life and a posthumously released album.

Now he is being recognized with an exhibit at the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and Museum in Cleveland. "The Genius of Ray Charles" exhibit opened Nov. 19, and a reception to celebrate the opening is planned for Wednesday.

Charles memorabilia is on loan from his Los Angeles studio/headquarters and includes electronic keyboards, a saxophone, sunglasses, and a collection of awards. The exhibit, expected to remain through Labor

Day, also includes video recordings of his performances.

"Ray was very gracious for anything done for him," said Joe Adams, Charles' friend and business manager of 47 years. "He fussed about it, but he loved it. This would have been meaningful to him, definitely. He was among the first people inducted into the Rock Hall, and he was very honored by that."

Charles, 73, died June 10 of liver disease. His final studio recording, "Genius Loves Company," is an album of duets that was released this year. His life story is told in the movie "Ray" starring Jamie Foxx that is now in theaters.

After 3 years, Smiley bolts NPR

WASHINGTON (AP) — Talk-show host Tavis Smiley said Monday he will be leaving National Public Radio, which he said has tried hard but fallen short of reaching "a broad spectrum of Americans who would benefit from public radio."

Smiley, 40, said Monday that Dec. 16 will be his last day as host of "The Tavis Smiley Show."

Launched in January 2002, the show is a daily, one-hour program, a collaboration between NPR and public radio stations with predominantly Black audiences.

Smiley said he decided against renewing his contract, which is up at the end of the year.

In a statement, he thanked NPR stations and said he has come to care even more for public radio and its potential.

"Yet, after all that we've accomplished towards our goal of seeking a broader, more diverse and younger audience for public radio," he said, "NPR's own research has confirmed that NPR has simply failed to meaningfully reach out to a broad spectrum of Americans who would benefit from public radio but simply don't know it exists

or what it offers."

NPR's vice president for communications, David Umansky, said, "The success of this show is a testament to our continuing commitment to reach out to all of these audiences with all of the resources available."

Umansky said the network wishes Smiley well, and "he will always have a place in our hearts and our history." NPR will launch a nationwide search for a new host.

The show offers a mix of news and pop culture coverage. Smiley's guests have

included politicians — Presidents George W. Bush and Bill Clinton — and celebrities — Halle Berry and Bill Maher.

The show draws 900,000 listeners every week. Its audience is 29 percent Black, and 40 percent of his listeners are 44 years old or younger.

Before joining NPR, Smiley was the host of "BET Tonight with Tavis Smiley" on Black Entertainment Network.

Smiley did not disclose his future plans.

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