

BET founder Johnson likely to cede control

WASHINGTON (AP) - Robert Johnson and Black Entertainment Television are known for one thing: each other. Soon, they could go their separate ways after a profitable 25-year relationship. Johnson is busy with other projects, including his losing NBA franchise in Charlotte, N.C., while the deal that let him stay on as BET's chief executive after he sold the network in 2000 expires this year.

Stepping down at BET would give Johnson more time to pursue his varied interests.

A divorced father of two, Democratic Party donor and consummate schmoozer who counts former President Clinton among his friends, Johnson set his sights high early on.

Not taken seriously when he first talked about serving a then-untapped market, Johnson was 34 when he launched BET — which is celebrating its silver anniversary this year — from the basement of his Washington home in January 1980.

It is the country's first and largest Black-oriented cable network, and has proved an unmatched success.

"Nobody had a clue about cable back then," says Herman Penner, a college roommate of Johnson's. "Obviously he dreamed a little bit bigger than that and was successful at it."

A Mississippi native with a master's degree from Princeton, Johnson led in other areas, too.

He became the country's first Black billionaire after BET's sale for \$3 billion nearly five years ago. He is the first Black owner of a major sports team, the NBA's first-year Charlotte Bobcats, which Johnson named after himself.

A lifelong sports fan, Johnson was a partner in the effort to return baseball to the nation's capital, but he pulled out to focus on



BET founder Robert Johnson's contract with the channel will expire at year's end.

basketball before the Washington Nationals arrived.

He owns several Hilton and Marriott hotels, one of the country's largest Black art collections and several film rights. He has a stake in a jazz record label, is interested in developing real estate and sought unsuccessfully to buy majority control of Independence Federal Savings Bank, one of the largest Black-owned thrifts.

His plan to become the first Black owner of a commercial airline failed several years ago when the government opposed a proposed merger that would have created a new carrier he sought to own.

Johnson, who turns 59 on April 8, is more than just BET.

"What he's doing is sort of the traditional way in which people with a lot of wealth use it," said Ronald Walters, a friend and professor at the University of Maryland. "They don't just do one thing."

BET officials declined to discuss Johnson's future at the network, which reaches more than 79 million U.S. homes — about three-fourths of those with television — and 95 percent of Black homes with cable TV, according to Nielsen Media Research.

But he suggested in a recent Newsweek interview that the end might be near. He declined requests for an AP interview.

"I don't plan to continue in my current capacity," he said he told officials at Viacom, the New York-based media company that owns CBS and MTV and bought BET in 2000.

Some analysts said they would not be surprised if Johnson stepped down, noting that he largely has given up control of day-to-day operations since the sale to focus on his other business ventures.

"He's no longer the figurehead that he used to be," said Christopher Holmes Smith, a communications professor at the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Southern California.

If Johnson leaves, the question then becomes, "What happens to BET?"

Will its lineup, largely of Black comedies and hip-hop and rap music videos, remain or will Viacom step in and shake things up in response to criticism of BET's programming choices?

Michael Lewellen, a spokesman for Washington-based BET, said via e-mail that the network will continue as an autonomous business unit of Viacom, the same as its other broadcast outlets.

Debra Lee, now BET's president and chief operating officer after joining the network in 1986, is considered the most likely person to succeed Johnson.

Last year, cable provider Comcast Corp.

and Black-oriented Radio One launched TV One for blacks age 25 to 54, an older group than BET's mostly youthful audience. Black Family Channel also is on the scene.

With more competition on the airwaves now for Black cable TV viewers, one analyst did not see much change in store for BET without its charismatic founder at the controls.

"There will be an opportunity to either find another symbolic figurehead or do an actual reshuffling of the deck of BET's brand and its organizational structure," Smith said. "But my feeling is that won't happen. I think that in the near term it will be pretty much full steam ahead in the direction that it's going."

Friends and former associates credit Johnson's determination and business savvy for his accomplishments in areas where few of those at the top are Black. But where there is success, there usually is some criticism along the way, and so it has been with Johnson.

He has drawn criticism from some quarters, perhaps most notably from director Spike Lee, for BET's content. Critics have accused him of "selling out" to the White owners at Viacom and took issue with his decision to replace respected but unprofitable news and public affairs programs with Black comedies, music videos and other, more profitable entertainment.

Johnson's defense is that he went into business to make money, just as his White counterparts did. He also has complained that MTV was praised for programming similar to BET's.

Said pop culture critic Ed Robertson: "If BET wasn't making an impact it wouldn't be a target for satire or criticism. It's called 'Black Entertainment Television.' It's not the 'Black News Network.'"

Radio One/TV One wants to put new offices in D.C.

By Valencia Mohammed
Special to Sentinel-Voice

Broadcast Center Partners, a development team comprised of three local developers, submitted an unsolicited proposal to the National Capital Revitalization Corporation to bring Radio One back to Washington.

"We have not finalized anything yet. If everything goes right and we decide to relocate to that site, we will give the [news media] the full story," said Alfred H. Liggins III, president and CEO of Radio One.

According to Broadcast literature, the site has adjacencies to the historic Howard Theatre on the northeast, several vacant warehouse buildings on the east and the entranceway of the Shaw/Howard University metro stop on the southwest corner.

Two D.C.-based developers, Ellis Enterprises and The Jarvis Company, along with the Virginia-based West Group, have partnered on the proposal, a 304,000 square foot mixed-use development that would incorporate:

- a seven-story structure with 76,000 square feet for

the Broadcast Center One Office Building, including ground floor studios open for live public viewing for Radio One/TV One

- a 250-space parking garage constructed below grade
- 21,000 square feet of commercial retail space intended for a vibrant activity center

- 202 high-quality condominium units, with 5 percent of the units set aside for families earning \$30,000 to \$50,000 and 20 percent for families earning \$51,000 to \$80,000 annually

According to the Radio One's website, the company is the nation's seventh-largest radio broadcasting company (based on 2003 net broadcast revenue) and the largest company that primarily targets African-American and urban listeners. Radio One owns and/or operates 69 radio stations located in 22 urban markets in the U.S. and reaches approximately 13 million listeners every week. Radio One also programs "XM 169 The POWER" on XM Satellite Radio and owns approximately 40 percent of cable

channel TV One, a joint venture with Comcast that targets African-American viewers.

"This is an opportunity for NCRC to bring one of the largest minority-owned communications companies in the country back into the city and into a neighborhood with a rich history of support for music and the performing arts," said Anthony C. Freeman, president and CEO of the National Capital Revitalization Corporation.

Cathy Hughes, Radio One's founder and chairwoman of its board, started her career in broadcasting in 1973 as general sales manager for Howard University's WHUR.

By 1980, Hughes owned and operated WOL-AM radio, which was located at 400 H St. in northeast Washington.

According to NCRC, more than 50 percent of the general contractors will be minority-owned businesses, and the project will use local small and disadvantaged business enterprises and other local minority-owned businesses.

"We hope that this promise of inclusion of minority contractors holds true and that it is not just something to get the deal through the city," said Robert Green III, president of the Capitol Minority Contractors and Business Association.

Radio One is prepared to donate \$250,000 in scholarship funds over a five-year period specifically for Shaw community high school students to attend the Howard

University School of Business or the Howard University School of Communications.

Broadcast Center Partners will contribute \$150,000 to the Community Fund of the National Capitol Region for Shaw community initiatives outlined by MANNA, Shaw Main Streets, the local advisory board commissions and the LeDroit Park Civic Association. BCP will also commit to a 15-year agreement to

apply \$12 monthly to the residential condo fees, generating a quantifiable donation of \$436,320.

"We believe this is a great opportunity for the development of a mixed-use project to benefit the community, businesses and homeowners," said Chip Ellis, president and CEO of Ellis Enterprises.

Valencia Mohammed writes for the Afro Newspapers

Nevada's First African American Owned Beauty School



eXpertise School of Beauty

Supervised Student Services In A Salon
Atmosphere... Without Salon Prices!

OPEN ENROLLMENT
Call for Class Schedules

A Multi-cultural School of Beauty offering instruction in the following courses:

- Cosmetology
- Hair Design
- Manicuring
- Instructor Training

Financial Aid Available For
Those Who Qualify

www.expertisebeauty.com



902 W. Owens
Las Vegas, NV 89106
(702) 636-8686
Fax: 636-0367

Open Tues. - Sat.
9:30 am - 3:30 pm