

# 'American Gangster' show, film striking chords

By Charlene Muhammad  
Special to Sentinel-Voice

LOS ANGELES (NNPA) - Black Entertainment Television has won higher ratings and critical acclaim for its "American Gangster" series on the rise and fall of Black criminals. But in the wake of the docudramas and a hit movie of the same name, many are concerned about the portrayal of Blacks and images they believe help inspire youth to destructive behavior.

BET initially indicated the show's purpose was to "explore without glorifying, and investigate without celebrating" the criminal minds of the infamous men featured during the weekly, one-hour shows, which are broadcast at several different times.

According to executive producer Nelson George, dope dealers and criminals like "Freeway" Ricky Ross, Leroy "Nicky" Barnes, Troy and Dino Smith, the Chambers Brothers and Lorenzo "Fat Cat" Nichols were chosen because of legendary crimes with national and sometimes international dimensions.

BET's "American Gangster" debuted last November with the second best numbers in the network's history with a 1.6 rating and 1.6 million viewers in 1.3 million households, according to Nielsen Media Research.

"American Gangster," the movie, starring award-winning actor Denzel Washington as Frank Lucas, a 1970s New York drug kingpin, opened No. 1 in November with \$16.5 million. It ranked seventh among the all-time top 10 openings for R-rated films and by its first weekend, brought in more than \$47 million, despite being released early via the Internet and bootlegged DVDs, which were of unusually high quality.

"Someone high in that access wanted this to be widely seen amongst people, who maybe couldn't have afforded to go and see it in a first run theater, not only amongst the national popula-



Denzel Washington stars in the movie 'American Gangster'.

tions but in particular amongst the so-called urban or ghetto youth," said Keidi Obi Awadu (a.k.a. the Conscious Rasta), of LIB Radio, an Internet broadcasting company and media literacy organization. Awadu believes the American media is obsessed with the notion of a "Black gangster."

People should remember that Black heroin distributors, historically, were working in league with White drug lords, but were given license to operate only if their lethal products were distributed to Black people, he said.

The lack of visible, vocal protest against the project's negative impact on Black male youth was suppressed by love for the movie's leading man, Mr. Awadu argued.

"We know that the choice of Denzel Washington as the character to play this is going to make us particularly vulnerable to assault. We loved Denzel Washington in his portrayal of Malcolm X, Steven Biko — two characters in our pantheon of heroes," he said. That love and credibility transfers even when he portrays lesser characters, such as those in "American Gangster" and "Training Day," where Washington won an Oscar for his portrayal of a crooked cop, argued Awadu.

"American Gangster" the series, proves now that BET is White-owned, it will continue to undermine the core fundamental values of Black

youth, critics charge. Five minutes of fame on TV and in movies is enough glory for young men thirsty for attention, no matter how they achieve it, said Fared Thomas, who was recently released from a California penitentiary. The BET episodes showcase the money and so-called good times the gangsters enjoyed, but a fraction of the time was spent on how they went to jail, Thomas said.

Historically, American gangsters have been European and portrayed in films like "The Godfather," "Scarface," "Bugsy," "King

of New York," "Casino," "Gangs of New York" and "Good Fellas." The problem, said Mark, a L.A.-based gang member, comes with the BET series singling out Black men and ignoring the criminal history of gangsters of various ethnicities.

"It is hypocritical to a point. If BET just didn't do it as Black, that would be one thing, but if you're going to showcase one gangster, then showcase them all. Why is BET only stopping at the Black gangster? Do only Black gangsters go to prison?" he said.

Mark, not his real name,

who spoke on condition of anonymity, believes the gangster image is perpetuated to keep people coming to prison.

"They are creating jobs for their people. We can't be mad at them for marketing; but we can't fall into their trap and become their commodity," he said.

Considered a "gangsta" in his younger days, Mark pointed out the difference between true gangsters and youth who are gang members.

"In these corporate buildings, where they're laying (See Gangster, Page 6)

Why Not a 42" flat screen instead of a 36". Why Not leather upholstery instead of that plaid. Why Not Bora Bora instead of the backyard. Why Not the fifty yard line instead of a nosebleed. Why Not a room with a view instead of a room. Why Not the sirloin instead of the chuck. Why Not sleepaway camp instead of day camp. Why Not a ski week instead of a ski weekend. Why Not a new wardrobe instead of a new suit. Why Not first class instead of coach. Why Not surround sound instead of 'what'd he say?'. Why Not April in Paris, Paris, Texas. Why well as the horses. Why Not a private video tape. Why Not to go with the clubs. Why Not a club membership Why Not a great wine cellar instead of a row center instead Why Not a third of the balcony. Why Not a DJ instead of a party mix. Why Not of the regular. Why Not the sapling. Why Not 80 gigs instead of 20. Why Not the yacht instead of the dinghy. Why Not the castle instead of the cottage. Why Not the antique instead of the repro. Why Not season tickets instead of scalping. Why Not the sloop instead of the sunfish. Why Not the signed print instead of the print. Why Not a house on the beach instead of the bay. Why Not 'I'll take it' instead of 'I'll think about it'. Why Not the autographed jersey instead of the jersey. Why Not Rome, Italy instead of Rome, New York. Why Not a 3-carat solitaire instead of 2. Why Not the gold instead of the silver. Why Not go to the playoffs instead of watching them. Why Not have your cake and eat it too, in Venice. Why Not five acres instead of two. Why Not the coupe over the sedan. Why Not the cruise instead of the jaunt. Why Not a limo instead of a taxi. Why Not a safari instead of a zoo. Why Not the mags instead of the radials. Why Not a new deck and a pool instead of a new deck or a pool. That's right. Why Not ?

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(Continued from Page 4)

passing, agreed. "Black lawyers handled some of the country's most important civil rights cases out of this city," he said.

DBCBA also intends to act as an information clearinghouse that will educate citizens on how to gain access to resources within the criminal justice system and provides information online at www.dcbca.com.

Gordon Jackson writes for the Dallas Examiner.