

IN LIVING COLOR

TWO NETWORKS ARE SERVING UP BLACK TELEVISION FOR GROWN-UPS.
AS A MEMBER OF THE SO-CALLED "URBAN DEMOGRAPHIC," I SAY IT'S ABOUT TIME.

BY CHANDRA R. THOMAS

LOOK AT HER. SHE'S A MESS: lipstick chapped and dry from countless years of delivering goofy punch lines, shoes scuffed from years of gyrating to sexually explicit music. And that haircut, omigosh, it's so outdated and ragged, a sure sign of years of neglect.

She is black television. And she needs a makeover—make that an *extreme* makeover. Two networks—Atlanta-based MBC Network and TV One—hope to be the salve that eases the collective pain of African-American adults practically aching for intelligent,

mature programming that actually reflects the breadth of their true culture, instead of say, inane sitcoms on UPN or raunchy video shows on BET.

Maryland-based TV One was launched six months ago (on the Martin Luther King Jr. national holiday) in Atlanta and several other cities with considerable black populations including Baltimore, Detroit, Philadelphia,

STEPPING OUT ON TV ONE

Contestants vie in the *Gospel Challenge*;
Tom Joyner busts a move; and
Donna Richardson leads a workout.

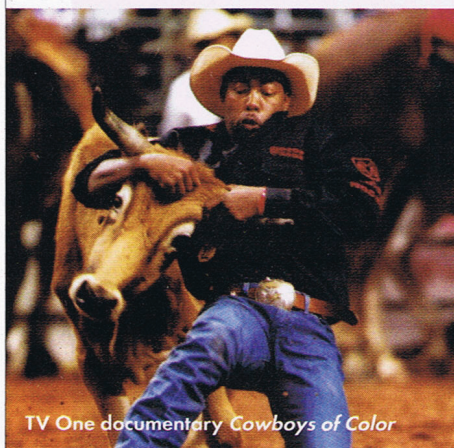
Oakland, Chicago and the metropolitan D.C. area. A joint venture spearheaded by Radio One (which locally owns radio stations Hot 107.9 and WJZZ), the nation's largest owner of African-American-targeted radio stations, and Comcast Corporation, the largest cable operator, TV One is helmed by Johnathan Rodgers, the former president of Discovery Networks. The new network is being touted as "Lifetime for African-American adults."

As an African-American woman who relishes intellectual discourse, I am relieved to know that, finally, we mem-

PHOTOS COURTESY OF TV ONE

bers of the so-called "urban television market" now have some new options. We're no longer relegated to explicit hip-hop videos and mindless comedy shows.

TV One's programming schedule already includes *The Tom Joyner Sky*



TV One documentary *Cowboys of Color*

Show, a broadcast of the country's top African-American radio host's traveling variety show; *TV One's Gospel Challenge*, a talent showcase; and *Living It Up with Patti LaBelle*, a talk show that offers a behind-the-scenes look at lifestyle trends including food, travel, fashion, jewelry, music and health.

But success will hinge not only on high-mindedness and culture. Key to TV One's success will be shows like Atlanta-based *Makeover Manor*. The program, in which friends and relatives surprise loved ones with a complete hair, makeup and fashion overhaul, was shot early this year in a Villa Rica mansion. The show is tentatively set to premiere in the fall, and features local celebrity hosts Sasha "The Midday Diva" from Kiss 104.1 radio and comedian Corey "Zoo" Miller. Makeup artist Nyssa Green and local fashion stylist Gigi Hunter also lend their expertise.

TV One, it seems, is trying to fill a void for adults like myself who crave enlightening yet diverse entertainment. For *The Learning Channel's A Makeover Story*, TV One has *Makeover Manor*. For *The Dating Game*, there's *Get the HookUp*. For *Martha Stewart Living*, there's *B. Smith With Style*. And for the History Channel's *Extreme History*, there's *American Legacy*. The net-

work also features a variety of documentaries on topics from slavery reparations to African-American cowboys on the rodeo circuit.

TV One, however, is not free from all questionable portrayals. Entertaining, yet somewhat stereotypical, classic sitcoms like *Good Times* and 227 also round out the network's line up. Fortunately that's tempered with dramas such as the critically-acclaimed series *City of Angels*, starring Blair Underwood and Vivica A. Fox, and *Under One Roof*, starring James Earl Jones.

Both are examples of well-written programs featuring a broad range of African-American characters. Both shows, coincidentally, were also previ-



Good Times

ously cancelled on major networks reportedly for low ratings. It makes you wonder if many African-Americans have actually grown so accustomed to demeaning images that they actually reject positivity. Or, is it a matter of who's doing the measuring?

Not to sound like a conspiracy theorist, but I worked in the television industry for six years and still have yet to meet anyone who has owned one of those coveted Nielsen ratings boxes. It's just one of those things that make you go hmm.

Then there's this question: Do we need a black carbon copy of every popular mainstream program? Probably not. But it wouldn't hurt. As a self-described "TLC junkie," I'll choose to watch an episode of *A Wedding Story* or *A Baby*

Story over *The Hughleys* on UPN or FOX's new urban "masterpiece," *Method and Red* (about two rappers who shake up a white New Jersey neighborhood), any day; but admittedly

I get a bit more excited about the programs when the people featured look more like my friends and family.

In theory, TV One is not that different from the five-year-old Atlanta-based Major

Broadcasting Cable (MBC) Network. Backed by boxer Evander Holyfield and baseball great Cecil Fielder, along with high-profile attorney Willie E. Gary and former Jackson Five member Marlon Jackson, MBC is dubbed the "urban family channel." Actor, director and producer Robert Townsend of *Hollywood Shuffle* fame joined the network in the spring as president and CEO of programming for its entertainment division.

Now available in more than 30 million homes across the country, MBC, a 24-hour digital cable network, features an eclectic mix of African-American-oriented original programs, religious shows, news, movies and sports. The current line-up includes *Spiritual Impact*, a talk show that explores education, economics, politics and morality from a spiritual perspective; *Portraits In Black*, a biography show; *Sports Lifestyles* and *Gospel Video Countdown*. The network also airs black college basketball and football games live.

Although it's apparent that both TV One and MBC share similar goals, it seems that Comcast's role as a chief investor may ultimately give TV One a leg up in the world of television. For example, MBC is accessible primarily to digital cable customers, but TV One is available both on satellite and expanded basic cable in most of its markets, which makes up the largest number of cable subscribers.

When you think about it, it's absolutely amazing that BET has managed to hold a relative monopoly on the black television market for some 24 years. Undoubtedly, the network filled an important niche when it premiered in

TV One airs locally on Comcast cable Channel 72; MBC is on Comcast digital cable Channel 127.

1980. However, since then its fleeting attempts at broadcasting shows that delve into important issues facing the African-American community (including *Teen Summit* and the popular *BET Tonight with Tavis Smiley*) have all but vanished, particularly since Viacom purchased the network three years ago.

It's even more disturbing when you consider the fact that African-American households watch more primetime television on average than all other U.S. homes across all age groups. We also make up the largest minority segment of the American television household population, comprising roughly 12 percent of the 102 million TV households. Cable television constitutes the largest entertainment expenditure in African-American households. Why, then, are we so limited in our choices of quality programming that accurately depicts our culture?

For starters, African-Americans don't own any of the major networks, mean-

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ing we have no real influence or control over the images, salacious or otherwise, that are being widely distributed. But I think the problem is also rooted in a major misconception that African-Americans don't have a desire to watch anything that is intelligent and is *not* a comedy. When looking at the Discovery Channel and History Channel buffs who make up my inner circle, I beg to differ.

Outlets like TV One and MBC provide young African-Americans with the opportunity to see images that convey that we are not all the one-dimensional, sex-crazed buffoons that are regularly depicted in most mainstream television programming. If my only view of African-Americans were exclusively based on media images, I wouldn't have a very favorable view of us either.

Obviously, start-up cable networks in a few cities won't undo the damage of years of damning media images. But it's definitely a step in the right direction. It remains to be seen if TV One or MBC will survive and prosper. I hope they do.

In the meantime, I'll find great pleasure curling up on the couch watching a hairstylist on *Makeover Manor* discuss why she chose a particular type of "relaxer" for a makeover candidate. If that doesn't make any sense to you, that's fine. I assure you that those of us watching TV One understand. ★

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