

Special Report: Black History Month

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## Black History Month On TV and Beyond

Networks celebrate Black History Month with a plethora of themed programming every February. But more and more, programmers are expanding those documentaries, movies and specials across multiple platforms and creating new Black History Month content for digital. It's all part of the ongoing effort to be everywhere viewers are.

At **AETN**, Black History Month is a perfect fit for **History**, **H2** and **BIO**, which have already run specials on African-American contributions to D-Day during WWII (Feb 6) and "USS Constellation: Battling for Freedom" (Feb 13) about the famed U.S. Navy ship tasked with intercepting slave smugglers off the coast of Africa in the 1850s. Still planned is a program saluting black tank operators during WWII, as well as shows examining African-American inventor George Washington Carver, South Africa and Martin Luther King. In addition to making the shows available on traditional VOD this month, History has also put much of it online, along with exclusive digital-exclusive articles and short-form videos, on everything from King to Harriet Tubman to Rosa Parks to a fascinating video that gives an insider's look into the 1963 March on Washington.

**BIO**, meanwhile, has made a big splash online with "American Freedom Stories: Alabama Civil Rights," encompassing more than 25 original short-form videos stemming from key events, locations and biographies during the civil-rights battle in that state. Videos include interviews with the foot soldiers of the Children's Crusade of 1963 and activists who participated in the March from Selma to Montgomery, among many others. AETN went full in, actually sending its own camera crews and producers to Birmingham, Montgomery, Selma and other locations—all in an effort to create Web-only content for Black History Month. "We wanted to tell the stories of folks who had incredibly important roles in the Civil Rights Movement, but their stories weren't as well known," said AETN svp, digital media *Evan Silverman*. Noting that AETN chmn *Abbe Raven* was once a school teacher, Silverman said BHM has been the perfect vehicle to bolster History and BIO's overall mission. "We value our unique place in the cable landscape," he said. "Education has always been in the DNA of A+E Networks."

AETN also purposely focused more on supplemental video content rather than social media campaigns, contests or

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other interactive-heavy stunts. "At our core, we are video content producers. It's what we do best. We wanted to tell stories on digital platforms," he said, noting that AETN syndicates such content to other platforms such as **AOL** and **YouTube**, improving their viral reach. But Silverman noted that no one should write off old fashioned search engines, which still top how audiences find AETN's online content. Silverman said AETN even uses that search data to determine what kind of shows it puts on the air and online during Black History Month. So next year's video features may largely stem from what people searched for this month.



**BIO's "American Freedom Stories: Alabama Civil Rights" online series features more than 25 original short-form videos from key events in the state.**

### CROSS-PROMOTING PROGRAMMING

At **TV One**, Black History Month is all about supercharging the net's "opportunistic programming strategy," said svp, programming & production *D'Angela Proctor*. For one thing, TV One will leverage its airing of the **NAACP** Image Awards on Feb 22 to promote its original lineup. "We use the NAACP Image Awards as a tentpole to get extra audience for that day," she said. "It's our opportunity to show people our offerings."

One show getting major cross-promo will be "Unsung Hollywood" (Feb 26 premiere), which takes a historical look at the lives of underappreciated black entertainers similarly to TV One's popular music-focused docu-series "Unsung." The first ep, which highlights the career of actress *Pam Grier*, also will include a lower-third crawl announcing the winner of TV One's online "One List" contest asking viewers to vote on their favorite African-American-themed movie drama over the last 30 years. In fact, considering the original *Unsung's* "major interactive following," TV One is "putting a lot of focus" on *Unsung*-related digital offerings, including an online contest "Are You *Unsung*?" inviting users to upload videos of themselves singing royalty-free songs, said TV One senior director, digital media *James Hill*. "Unsung is such a signature brand for us and taps into our audience's fandom," he said. "Anything we throw at them, they eat up." In the future, Hill wants to extend multiplatform engagement with a branded app ("It's just a matter of investment and time," he said) and other features such as integrating more user-generated content. Noting TV One's series "R&B Divas," for example, he said he'd love to get fans to submit videos tracking their own diva-ish behavior. Also on deck: Hiring a "digital personality"—ie, talent that would embody all of TV One's digital activity, even sticking around to coordinate Google Hangouts into the late night hours when fans are still talking about shows.

Hill also said other multiplatform tie-ins are in the works for the Image Awards, which Proctor noted present a high-profile opportunity for TV One to engage affiliates. "Our affiliates, they're a constituent of ours as well, so we consider that in everything we do," she said. Not only will TV One be sure to invite affiliates to the Image Awards, but TV One will leverage related properties such as Radio One and Interactive One to promo the event. "We now have an aggressive strategy in everything that we do," Proctor said. "We contemplate all of our sister companies."

As TV One faces increasing competition from other nets that focus partly or wholly on the African-American audience, Proctor says the net tries to stay focused. "We definitely try to run our own race," she said. "One of the things

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that we pride ourselves on is that we're the real storytellers of the black experience. We know our customer base pretty well. And even though they'll go off and visit the neighbors, they come back because we give them such a robust offering year 'round."

### REFLECTING THE COMMUNITY

A big part of **BET Networks'** celebration of Black History Month is about focusing on multicultural consumers across platforms. "We've all heard that content is king," said *Vicky Free*, BET Nets evp/chief marketing officer. "Well, I'd like to suggest that marketing is queen because if the multicultural audience does not see a true reflection of who



**Honorees and presenters for the BET Honors show, which was taped in DC.**

they are in your creative product, then they won't be inclined to watch it, share it, stream it or download it." These multicultural, multiplatform consumers are "influencing pop culture... setting the trends... and determining what's now and what's next from a trans-media, global perspective," she said.

The emphasis is reflected in BET nets' Black History Month initiative **ICON MANN** "28 Men of Change," celebrating the positive impact that black men make domestically and across the globe. The initiative recognizes men from multiple countries and various industries spanning entertainment, business, art, law, finance, medicine, science, politics, education and professional sports.

BET and Centric are airing 30-sec vignettes on the personal story of 1 of the 28 men each day in Feb. BET.com is offering original videos, photographs and editorial features on them. The company seeks to make its Black History Month campaign as interactive as possible, featuring daily facts about iconic events and people titled "This Day in Black History." The series of interactive timelines, news stories, flipbooks, games and quizzes run all month.

The month is also about highlighting that Black History is American History. That's where BET's "Say It Loud" cross-platform creative campaign comes in. Featuring actor *Michael Williams* from HBO's "Boardwalk Empire" and "The Wire," it aims to illustrate the connection between Black History Month trailblazers and other famous Americans in the fields of arts, sciences, athletics, politics and entertainment. As part of the campaign, "BET Honors" premieres Feb 24, recognizing the contributions of 6 exceptional African-American leaders. It will be followed by "BET Talks Hollywood," featuring interviews with this year's top black nominees along with past Oscar winners discussing their race to the Academy Awards.

### A MISSION TO STAMP OUT INTOLERANCE

Sometimes recognizing Black History Month is a little more subtle. At **USA Network**, Feb is the month for recognizing both Black History and Characters Unite, its public service campaign dedicated to combating discrimination and promoting tolerance. "We chose to designate February as Characters Unite month for a whole host of reasons, but we certainly thought it fit nicely that it was also Black History Month," said USA Net *Toby Graff*, svp, public affairs. "The goal really is to use Characters Unite month to amplify the message. We definitely try to tie the two together... and then certainly we also tackle other issues related to combating hate and discrimination and promoting tolerance and respect under the Characters Unite umbrella as well." Some distributors make USA's Characters Unite content available through VOD for their special Black History Month programming.

The net took a more traditional route to honoring the month on Feb 15, airing the classic civil rights film "In the Heat of the Night" with limited commercial interruptions. It featured a new introduction from *Quincy Jones*, who created the film's original music score. By shedding light on the turbulent state of civil rights in the US, the film uses the "power of storytelling to highlight past and present social injustices, raise further awareness and inspire more positive change," Graff said. In addition, the net has used themes and messaging in the film as a bridge to engage viewers on CharactersUnite.com, which includes further resources from some of its nonprofit partners promoting racial justice and equality.



**USA Network held an NFL Characters Unite Sports Illustrated panel, sponsored by GMC.**

## A GROWING AFRICAN AMERICAN AUDIENCE

This is the first Black History Month in which **WE tv** has created elements both on-air and online speaking specifically to the month-long celebration. PSAs featuring a combination of network talent and prominent black politicians air on TV throughout the month as well as online. In addition, on Feb 20 the net will host a premiere screening of “Mary Mary’s” 3rd season at the Word of Faith EpiCenter headed by Bishop *Dale Bronner* in Austell, GA. Also included is a Q&A with the show’s gospel duo *Erica and Tina Campbell*, a performance by Erica from her solo album, a singing competition for attendees, and an opportunity to donate non-perishable food items as the price of entry to the Atlanta Community Food Bank. “They’re the kinds of activities that we don’t need Black History Month to celebrate,” said WE tv svp, marketing *Rosie Pisani*, but with Mary Mary’s premiere and the finales of “SWV Reunited” and “Braxton Family Values” (both Feb 20) all occurring this month was an opportunity around which to build an event in the community.

Braxton in particular has helped the network grow its African American audience significantly since its 2011 launch. “Black History Month was really just the natural progression of a commitment that we started 3 years ago,” said Pisani. She estimates that the demo has grown by 50% since the show launched. It’s an important audience for the network, and an underserved one, she said, both quantitatively and qualitatively. “We take particular pride in the fact that we’re serving this community, and they’ve really rallied for WE tv. With that and as we’ve grown with the number of shows that we have... we’re looking to take a lot of what we have on the air as well as the work we do in the community, whether it’s screenings or different contests, and try and take it to the next level,” Pisani said.

Added online elements to celebrate Black History Month include a gallery of images of celebrities and black leaders coupled with inspiring quotations, videos of WE tv talent voicing what the month means to them, a themed trivia quiz and a curated list of events in local markets that allows viewers to participate in Black History Month activities.

## OTHER BHM OFFERINGS

Just about every network on the guide has some sort of special programming planned for this month. A few examples include **UP**, which has a mix of comedies and dramas celebrating African Americans. Its VOD offerings include originals “What Would You Do for Love” and “Love will Find a Way,” while on-air, it’s turning to movies such as “Color of Love: Jacey’s Story.” Other nets airing BHM-themed programming include **Sony Movie Channel**, which ran a 20-hour *Sidney Poitier* marathon on Feb 1, followed by showings of “All the Young Men” and “A Raisin in the Sun” on Feb 4, and “The Long Ships” and “The Bedford Incident” on Feb 11. It bows “Brother John” and “Buck and the Preacher” on Feb 25. **AXS TV**, meanwhile, continues its largely music-centric mantra with a 9-hour concert marathon on Feb 22 featuring African-American artists such as *B.B. King, Darius Rucker, Seal, Mariah Carey, Snoop Dogg* and more.

At **ID**, the network is putting its muscle behind the 4th installment of “The Injustice Files” anthology (premieres Feb 24, 8pm). This year’s special focuses on “sundown towns”—all-white communities that African Americans were not



**Keith Beauchamp and sundown town expert Dr. James Loewen stand at the town line of Vienna, Ill., which was once known as a sundown town, the subject of ID’s upcoming “Injustice Files.”**

allowed to live in or visit after dark—and explores the theory that such places may still exist. ID is using social media, its CrimeFeed blog and ID.com to support the premiere, with digital content including behind-the-scenes material and commentary about the film. This is ID’s 4th year of original productions for The Injustice Files, with last year’s using the *Trayvon Martin* case as a jumping off point to discuss Stand Your Ground laws.

From *Martin Luther King, Jr.*, to ballet dancer *Misty Copeland*, **Aspire** is offering special vignettes featuring the “Because of Them, We Can” campaign, showcasing esteem-boosting images of various figures, both past and present. The net has also partnered with **Colgate-Palmolive** to produce 8 short video documentaries celebrating the 40th Anniversary of the Colgate Women’s Games. Titled “Change the Game” and “I Aspire,” the eight 60- and 90-second video documentaries

focus on women whose lives have been transformed through their involvement with the Colgate Women’s Games, many of whom have gone on to become Olympic Champions or mothers and coaches to those champions.

## A Conversation with NAACP about Its Image Awards

*Now in their 45th iteration, the NAACP's Image Awards were created to celebrate the achievements and performances of people of color in the arts, as well as those promoting social justice. The awards debuted 1 year after "The Amos & Andy Show" was taken off the air, following consistent legal pressure from the group. In recognition of Black History Month, we spoke with Leonard James, chmn of the NAACP Image Awards committee, about the awards and people of color in television.*

### How have the Image Awards evolved over the years?

The awards began in 1967. It was started by the Beverly Hills Hollywood branch and was created to recognize individuals or groups that presented positive images of African Americans and to improve their opportunity for employment within the motion picture and recording industry. The first Image Awards were presented to the producer of "Hogan's Heroes," "I Spy" and "Mission Impossible" [among others] ... The program has evolved to celebrate the artistic accomplishments of people of color in the fields of television, movies, literature... And we also honor individuals or groups who promote social justice through their creative endeavors.

### We understand that the awards were born out of the need to look at the portrayal of the black experience in film and TV. Is that part of it as well?

Yes, that was part of the initial concept. Some of the images of African Americans in some of the early TV programs and motion picture projects were not very positive. The Image Awards served to create those positive images. Also during that time, African Americans and other people of color were not receiving recognition from some of the more traditional awards shows. It gave individuals of color an opportunity to be recognized for their performances.

### How does the nomination process work?

It's very detailed and specific. I'd start by saying the NAACP as an organization doesn't really recommend nominees for the Image Awards. Artists are submitted by themselves, their managers, publicists, production companies, record labels, studios, networks or publishers. Those nominations are reviewed by a nominating committee made up of 300 individuals, 150 of those are industry experts and executives. The other 150 are individuals from the community in general, members of our board of directors, or other key individuals who have an interest in participating in that process. I would tell you that this year we received the largest number of submissions in the history of our Image Awards. We received over 1500 total submissions. This 300-[person] voting body then takes those submissions, and the top 5 nominees in each of the 54 categories are the projects or individuals that our entire NAACP membership will vote on.

### Do you think that record number of submissions

### bodes well for people of color in entertainment or is there still significant progress to be made?

I think the answer, quite honestly, is yes on both fronts. It does represent an interest in the African American experience. This year, there seems to be a large number of what I refer to as black-centric projects, but on the other hand, it in no way indicates that the work has been done.

### There has been some press about Robin Thicke and Justin Timberlake being nominated. How do they fit into the Image Awards' mission?

I think it's a wonderful fit for the Image Awards and NAACP in general. Keep in mind the NAACP is the National Association for Advancement of Colored People. White is a color. We are an organization that continues to recognize the importance of being very inclusive. For that reason, I'm very proud to say the NAACP Image Awards submission and nomination process is open to all people of color.

### This year, you have a new television partner in TV One, with the awards moving from broadcast to cable. Are you concerned about losing audience?

I think it's a general assumption that when you go from a major over-the-air network to any cable network, and this is not specific to TV One, there is an assumption there will be some degree of attrition. To date, we've not found that assumption to bear out. It's not anything that we're concerned about. We believe TV One will be an excellent broadcast partner, and the millions of people who were able to view the show on Fox or NBC in the past, we expect that same viewership to tune in on Feb 22.

### How do you feel the awards are viewed by the industry? Do you ever feel like they're seen as secondary to the Emmys or the Golden Globes?

Absolutely not. The same celebrity talent pool that those shows draw from, we attract... Kerry Washington is involved in a number of those shows, as well as our shows. This year we'll be honoring Forest Whitaker with the chairman's award. And for the 1st time ever in the entertainment industry, you have 2 African Americans—[Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences president] Cheryl Boone Issacs and [Directors Guild of America president] Paris Barclay—leading 2 very influential entertainment organizations. It's the same talent that will appear on our show that will appear on those other shows you just mentioned.