



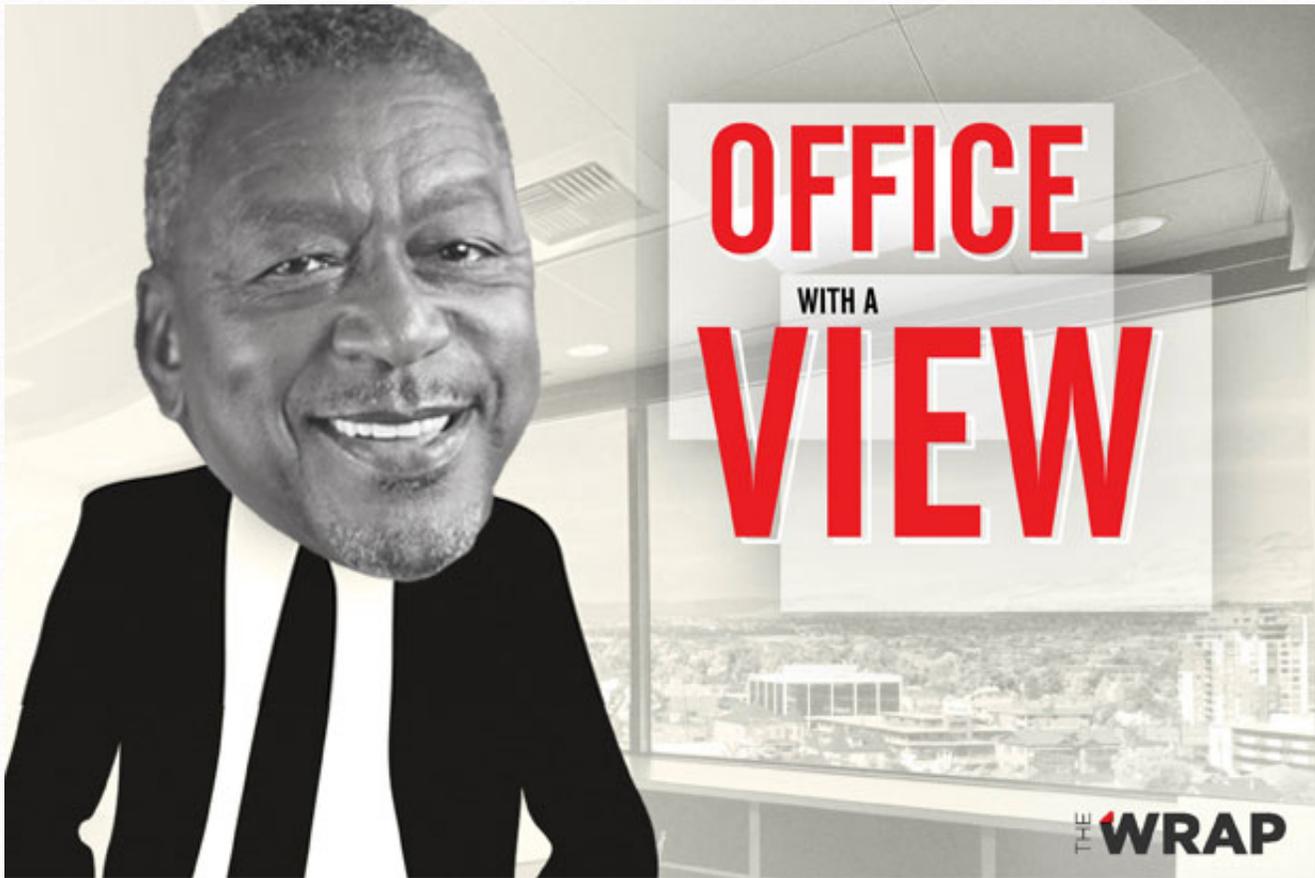
THE WRAP

Covering Hollywood

BET Founder Bob Johnson on Leap From Cable to Digital With Urban Movie Channel

TV | By **Anita Bennett** on April 22, 2015 @ 7:03 am

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“The goal is to become the preeminent distribution site in digital form for content targeting urban and African-Americans,” Johnson tells TheWrap in “Office With a View”

Robert L. “Bob” Johnson is best known for launching Black Entertainment Television (BET) back in 1980. The Mississippi native started the channel with an initial investment of \$500,000 and turned it into a billion dollar empire.

Johnson sold BET to Viacom for a reported \$3 billion in 2000 and remained CEO until 2006. He has

since severed ties with BET, and through his RLJ Entertainment, last year launched Urban Movie Channel (UMC) — a digital, subscription-based service devoted to distributing feature films, comedy specials and documentaries for the African-American and urban audience.

As TheWrap **previously reported**, UMC announced earlier this month that it had acquired “Where Children Play,” starring Grammy Award-winning singer **Macy Gray**. And RLJ Entertainment is releasing coming-of-age drama “Blackbird” theatrically in five markets on April 24. The film starring **Mo’Nique**, **Isaiah Washington** and newcomer Julian Walker will be available via VOD on UMC this summer.

Also Read: [Hollywood's Love Affair With Mature Audiences Is Heating Up](#)

Johnson spoke with **TheWrap** about his goals for UMC, how he plans to undercut HBO and Showtime with a \$4.99 subscription price and why he thinks Hollywood continues to fall short when it comes to diversity.

Also Read: [Hollywood's Streaming Pile-Up: Should Netflix Be Running Scared From HBO, CBS, Starz?](#)

TheWrap: What prompted you to launch Urban Movie Channel?

Robert Johnson: We recognized that there’s a need for content that appeals directly to African-Americans. I recognize that there’s a tremendous amount of talent within the urban African-American community that is looking to tell their creative, provocative story and are looking for a financial model that will allow them to tell those stories and to make a profit off of those stories that they want to tell. Then, the third thing is, I realize that just as cable and satellite were the pathway to get BET all around the country, today digital transmission and over-the-top streaming is the way to hook up the world.

What about people who say a streaming service geared toward African-Americans is not needed in this age of Netflix?

When I created BET, people would say the same thing, “We don’t have white entertainment television; why do you need Black Entertainment Television? You can watch shows on ABC, CBS, NBC and Fox.” The reason you want this is because this is a nation of diverse people and a nation of diverse cultures, and people always want to have access to diversity, particularly the kind of diversity that appeals directly to their viewing interests. With the Internet and indeed with cable, you can offer people whatever they want to see over digital without depriving any other audience of their programming. This is additive! It’s in no way detracting from what I call “the melting pot of diversity and content and creativity” that has made this country what it is.

Also Read: [Macy Gray Drama 'Where Children Play' Picked Up by Urban Movie Channel](#)

What are the goals of Urban Movie Channel?

The goal is to become the preeminent distribution site in digital form for content targeting urban and African Americans... There are 10 million African-American households now taking in both HBO and Showtime, or some variation of the two. Ten million households paying about \$40 a month — when you combine the two — to get HBO and Showtime, which in my opinion, is great programming, but they don't target the African-American urban audience. We think at \$5 a subscriber, we could pull anywhere from 20 to 30 percent of that ten million.

Will you just distribute pre-produced content?

We don't just distribute content on our proprietary channel, the Urban Movie Channel. We distribute content to everybody from Netflix to Hulu to Walmart to the Redbox machines you see in the grocery stores to Amazon Prime. So we're what they call "agnostic." We deliver to everybody who wants to see creative content, and we license that product from the producers and we distribute it on their behalf and we share in the revenue with them.

What about producing original content?

We definitely help fund content based on what we think that content will produce when we distribute it. We provide financial support to producers who come to us with a project that we think is going to be attractive to our consumers and attractive to our distribution model. We've got a number of ways that we can help provide the funding. We can give them a letter of commitment on distribution, which they can then take to film financiers to get money to produce the film. We sometime give them an advance against the product, because we believe in the product... We don't have a production arm in the sense that we read scripts.

Also Read: [Mo'Nique on Why Black Hollywood Actors Shunned Gay-Themed 'Blackbird': 'Everyone Was Afraid of It'](#)

You are distributing "Blackbird," starring Mo'Nique and Isaiah Washington. How did this relationship come about?

It's a very provocative, timely film that focuses on a young man in a small, rural town dealing with his sexuality and lifestyle of his particular form of sexuality. It's something that both Mo'Nique and Isaiah are passionate about. It's the kind of project that the Urban Movie Channel wants to premiere to show that we don't have to deal with gatekeepers or the studio system. It proves that we are changing the model of how urban content can be distributed and how creative and provocative stories like "Blackbird" can be told.

Let's talk about Hollywood. Is there enough diversity on television and in film?

There's never enough diversity... There are over 300 million people in this country and a billion in China and billions of people in India and every person born every day is a new spark of creativity. I don't see how anybody can say there's too much diversity. The most boring thing in life is not to have diversity.