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BLACK JOURNAL: A FEW NOTES FROM THE EXECUTIVE PRODUCER

WILLIAM GREAVES

When the urban riots of 1965-1966 erupted in all their fury, it slowly dawned on the leaders of this society that high among basic causes stood this stark fact: the black communities of America had no important public platforms of expression. In particular, the television screens of America were notoriously lacking in black faces and black thinking. On those few occasions when blacks were shown, we were usually slandered or put down in some chauvinistic way. Only on occasion does one see a black or brown face even today; and of course there are few Indians, Chinese and other peoples in TV's racist image of America. From this state of affairs, it is easy to see how rage and anger might develop in the minds of all black people, whether on the block hanging out or in an office hanging in.

The rage stems also from the *lack of a mass media communication mechanism* to adequately *protest* the outrages perpetrated against

WILLIAM GREAVES serves as Executive Producer and co-host of National Educational Television's unique monthly news magazine, *Black Journal*. He brings to his current post a wide background in production work with the National Film Board of Canada, and also heads his own film production company. He has furnished TELEVISION QUARTERLY with a frank and hardhitting personal assessment of the life to date of *Black Journal*, the sole program in all of national television that is produced and controlled by blacks. In inviting Mr. Greaves' contribution, the QUARTERLY again acts as a forum for a continuing dialogue on the vital question of blacks and broadcasting.

the black man in housing, employment, education, politics—in all those areas crucial to his existence. Most important, he doesn't gain from the one-eyed monster *constructive information about himself* and his people, information that will enable us to survive in a generally, though often subtly, hostile white environment. We are *prevented from communicating among ourselves over the airwaves*, a privilege lavished on White America.

It is in the context of a racist society that *Black Journal* has meaning and relevance.

An hour-long TV news magazine airing once a month, *Black Journal* is the first network television series of its kind in the United States. On June 12, 1968, it was introduced over 141 National Educational Television-affiliated stations, and now appears on roughly 180 such stations. Its purpose: to focus on Afro America. A production staff composed of blacks and whites created the new series in the first major attempt to implement recommendations of the President's Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, which had called on the communications media to "expand and intensify coverage of the Negro community...to recognize the existence of Negroes as a group within the community."

Black Journal provides blacks and whites a continuing view of life in Black America. It explores problems and contributions of Afro Americans and delineates the obstacles to black fulfillment and better race relations. Its emphasis is on news and cultural developments in the Afro-American community, ranging from politics to business, from education to the arts, from hard news to humor.

A prime objective in creating *Black Journal* was to train and develop black television reporters, editors, producers, and technical personnel—again in keeping with the recommendations of the President's Commission that cited the urgent need for more black people in broadcasting. The series is specifically geared to serve as a *training workshop* through which Afro Americans can develop the skills and experience to build careers in broadcasting.

Needless to say, *Black Journal* is no more than the proverbial drop in the bucket. But, judging by the feedback that we get from the black and white community, it would seem that our efforts are meeting with unusually high levels of appreciative response. We are convinced that it is not only the artistic quality of *Black Journal* that people are responding to, but the fact that so far as candor and relevance are concerned, *Black Journal* is, in network terms, an oasis in a very large desert.

Almost two years after the Kerner Report, *Black Journal* remains the only network program of its kind. This gives some idea of how slowly television is moving in this regard. As a matter of fact, out of the 1,800 hours a month of television network programming across the country, *only one hour, Black Journal*, is black controlled! This glaring statistic, in our opinion, graphically illustrates the extent to which white racism permeates the airwaves of America.

During our production meetings at *Black Journal*, we find mounting up on the desk in front of us a wide variety of subject matter that should go on the show. As a result, there is tremendous competition for air time. One hour a month makes it obviously impossible to cover the multitude of subjects relating to the black community.

Our production meetings are filled with endless frustration. We want to talk about the black man in prison, about the problems of our young men who have come out of prison. We want to talk about the black man in the labor movement; the problems of black senior citizens, the lack of old-age homes; birth control and genocide; air pollution and sanitation; the lack of proper health facilities in the North as well as the South.

We want to discuss the government's poverty programs and model cities: who runs them, who plans them, who benefits from them. We want to investigate and expose violations by federal and state laws of the American Constitution; we want to correct distortions of Afro American and African history and give honest reporting of current events. Yes, we even want to examine the black "silent majority."

A film segment on our fourth show dealt with the Southern Louisiana Consumer Co-op and produced exciting, widespread response from black people around the country. Inspired by it, these viewers wanted to adapt some of the measures developed by the Louisiana Co-op to their own communities. This is just one example of the lasting positive benefits that can emerge from *Black Journal* programming—that is, we are putting before the Afro-American public the many problems the black community faces, and ways that can lead to some type of solution. As a matter of fact, more and more *Black Journal* is concentrating on programming that assists the black community in its problem solving efforts, whether in the fields of politics, labor or business.

AUDIENCE REACTIONS

Unlike most television programming, *Black Journal* is not targeted to middle-class viewers since the number of Afro Americans who are middle class is inordinately small. Rather, its target audiences are lower-class and leadership groups within the black community.

Some white viewers complain, we are told, that *Black Journal* is not for them—that it is not interested in a dialogue with the white community. Yet, curiously, they continue to watch us. We are fascinated by such reports. While *Black Journal's* primary target is the black community, its second major target is the white community—especially those within the white community who feel that it is *not* for them, who are often surprised and irritated by the content of our shows.

There are those who find *Black Journal* “too militant, too nationalistic” and think of us as “uppity niggers.” We can assure them that *Black Journal* is a mirror image of the thoughts and feelings of the black community *when* it has the chance to freely express itself. That these people respond emotionally, gives us on *Black Journal* considerable satisfaction. The fact that month in and month out, they continue to watch without turning us off—and that, when they do turn us off, they continue to think about what has been said and shown—also gives us satisfaction. These responses indicate to us that *Black Journal* is fulfilling the primary task of all educational programming: sensitizing the general public to the issues and problems with which our world is faced.

One of the objectives of Black Journal is to sensitize White Americans to those mechanisms of prejudice and discrimination by which they consciously and unconsciously oppress the black community. Black Journal is, after all, merely an answer to the thousands of “White Journals” that proliferate from American television screens. The need for Black Journal and more of the same will cease when, and only when, White America stops making White Journals.

The white community has felt an on-going need to learn what goes on at the back of the black man's mind. Paradoxically, the same people who wish to know what is at the back of the black man's mind also wish to block information from that region. We hope that for these people *Black Journal*, in its own way, is serving to answer their on-going need rather than to indulge their escapist wishes.

Some people within the white and black communities view a program like *Black Journal* as one of the national safety valves—to release the pressure increasingly building up within the black community as a result of the pressure it faces in turn from the white community. In that we do serve as an outlet through which legitimate grievances can be aired in a democratic society, perhaps our program *does* constitute a safety valve. While this safety valve school of thought may be simply another tactic in riot control, our primary task at *Black Journal* remains the more constructive business of providing the black community with those facts from which dignity and enlightened community action flows.

As would be expected, the whole character of television industry *staffing*, commercial and non-commercial, has in the past reflected the racially discriminatory hiring practices of most job sectors of American life. Now, with the stated commitment toward integration of Afro Americans into the industry, the search is on for potential black television filmmakers and other personnel.

From various quarters, the constant complaint is the difficulty of finding interested and qualified black personnel. These complaints do not include the larger fact: that, until recently, the idea of black people working in the film and television industry on a professional level was met with a pervasive hostility. No machinery, no procedures existed through which an aspiring black person might crack the walls of discrimination. (As a matter of fact, I was obliged to spend 11 long years outside of America in film and television production, due to these practices of the industry in America.)

Very early in the life of *Black Journal*, the black members of the staff rebelled against white control of the show. Walking off their jobs on the *Journal*, the staffers insisted on a black Executive Producer heading the show. Conceding the fact that the show should be black controlled, NET management approached me to become Executive Producer. There was no question about my qualifications on all levels of production since I had worked on close to 100 productions at the National Film Board of Canada and also now operate my own film production company. But as NET found out, the number of black people in the United States who can point to that kind of track record can be counted on one hand.

TRAINING PROGRAMS

Today, thanks to the existence of *Black Journal* and the relatively few local programs across the country, so serious is the interest of

black people in film and television production that National Educational Television has set up the *Black Journal* Training School to develop aspiring black talent. Ably headed by our Associate Producer, Peggy Pinn, the Training School is considerably oversubscribed.

The classes now total 65 with a waiting list of close to one hundred. The twelve-week intensified course, covering still photography, cinematography, sound recording, and editing includes some on-location filming. The students choose their locations; write the script; direct, photograph, and edit the film under expert supervision. At present the school is hanging by a thread as it seeks funding to continue through the year.

Black Journal and other production units are now hiring some of the training school's graduates. *Black Journal* has thus served as a vehicle for the further development of black filmmakers who heretofore have not had the opportunity to participate in a major network television series.

Our staff is quite an expert one and we are indeed pleased with the work of people like Kent Garrett, Stan Lathan, St. Clair Bourne, Phil Burton, Tony Batten, and Bob Wagoner. These men are hard-working full-time producers capable of holding their own in any production situation. We have a very able host in the person of Lou House, and I am co-host.

The growth and development of the black members of the staff is illustrated in the ever-increasing professionalism of the program. The New York *Times* TV critic, Jack Gould, gave the following review of the show:

By the acid test of professional and perceptive journalism, *Black Journal* has earned its rightful niche as a continuing and absorbing feature of television's out-put. . . By any color standard the program is rendering a thoroughly worthwhile journalistic contribution, one deserving to be judged on merit alone. Mr. Greaves is simply covering a story that should be covered and covering it with distinction. White journalists could well share his pride of craft.

In last night's repeat, involving too many gifted people to enumerate, *Black Journal* reminded the viewer of its accomplishments in the first year over National Educational Television and reminded him, too, that at least on TV a black editorial staff can detect and obtain stories that may escape its white counterpart.

Despite this level of critical reaction, some local stations have made sporadic attempts to take the show off the air because of its "militance." Most such attempts have failed because of the strong viewer support the show enjoys in the black community.

Budget has constituted one of the major problems that have plagued *Black Journal* since its inception. The costs per show have undergone considerable change since its beginning, starting at roughly \$100,000 per show and now standing at \$50,000. We have tried to stay within the confines of our latest grants; but it is virtually impossible to produce a major hour show each month (that covers the black community throughout the country, and now internationally) without exceeding these budgetary limitations. From \$100,000 to \$50,000 per show constitutes a 50 per cent reduction, and puts considerable pressure on the staff to maintain the quality of *Black Journal*. Despite this fact, the quality of the show is still going up. However, in the light of projected cuts for the summer period, we may not be able to maintain past standards.

Each year it seems we must struggle to stay on the air because of the lack of funds. It is incredible that this *should* be so for the single black-controlled show in all of television. How this tenuous state of affairs might reflect the workings of American society at large and the industry in particular is, of course, an interesting question.

As long as government involvement in public broadcasting does not mean or imply government control or censorship, we of the *Black Journal* staff are not at all hostile to the idea. Thus far, our relations with the Public Broadcasting Corporation have not involved any editorial strings on the monies received from them. It is to be expected that, through our political representatives, the black community will strive to make certain that public broadcasting in the future will more accurately reflect the multiracial character and realities of this country.

This kind of pressure we regard as positive in a situation manifestly negative as far as black people are concerned. We would hope that with the coming of the public broadcasting system, *Black Journal* will thrive. We hope, in fact, that there will be more *Black Journals*, *Black and White Journals*, *Black, Brown, Yellow and White Journals*—and fewer *White Journals*. We would also hope that, with the emergence of the Public Broadcasting Corporation, the integration of technical, production, and management personnel of all stations will accelerate.