

February 15, 2007
Op-Ed Columnist

For Tavis Smiley, Promises to Keep

By [BOB HERBERT](#)

One of the better-kept secrets in the U.S. is the wide reach and extraordinary commitment of Tavis Smiley.

Mr. Smiley is reasonably well known as a media personality. He's the host of a television talk show broadcast on PBS five nights a week and a weekly radio show. He's also a regular commentator on the widely syndicated black-oriented radio program "The Tom Joyner Morning Show."

But that doesn't begin to capture the ever-widening swirl of activities, projects, programs and initiatives set in motion by this energetic, fast-talking, charismatic advocate and mentor, described by The Times's Felicia R. Lee as "a cultural phenomenon."

Largely out of the sight of the broader public, Mr. Smiley has quietly become one of the most effective black leaders in the nation. He's always in motion, giving speeches, meeting with national leaders, conducting annual seminars on the "State of the Black Union" and offering how-to tips on important aspects of daily life for African-Americans.

Mr. Smiley constantly exhorts his followers and admirers to make better use of the traditional tools of advancement — education, hard work, citizen activism — to transcend the barriers of continued neglect and discrimination.

Next June, thanks to Mr. Smiley, the major presidential candidates will meet in a pair of prime-time debates on PBS — one for each party — to focus on issues of concern to African-American voters. That has never happened before.

About a year ago Mr. Smiley, who has written several books, edited a paperback titled "The Covenant With Black America." It's a guidebook, on matters large and small, for African-Americans, offering information and advice on issues that range from the importance of a healthy diet to closing the digital divide.

No one, except perhaps Mr. Smiley, expected much from the book. There's nothing in the way of

pizzazz in it. There are no celebrity scandals, no sex, no drugs, no rock 'n' roll.

“I said let’s put a book together that’s easy to read,” said Mr. Smiley, “and that lays out what each individual can do, what the community together can do and what the body politic should do about these problems.”

Published by a little-known black-owned company in Chicago, Third World Press, the book became an astonishing success, rising to No. 1 on the New York Times best-seller list.

“That book went to No. 1 without any mainstream exposure,” said Mr. Smiley. “I didn’t mention it on my NPR and PBS shows because I don’t do that — I don’t use the shows to promote things that I’m connected to. Other than that, though, I drove the book as hard as I could.

“But Oprah wouldn’t touch it. ‘The Today Show’ wouldn’t touch it. ‘Good Morning America,’ NPR, Larry King — not a single mainstream media outlet said or did anything with that book. And it still went to No. 1. That tells me that there is a hunger and a thirst in black America for trying to turn this mess that we are in around.”

For all of his 21st-century media savvy, Mr. Smiley is in many ways an old-fashioned, idealistic leader who has managed in an era saturated with cynicism to cling to the eternal verities. His hero is Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. He believes it is still possible for ordinary citizens to hold public officials accountable. (“I’m still baffled, befuddled,” he says, “by how the president did not even mention New Orleans or Katrina in his State of the Union speech.”) He speaks openly about the importance of bringing love — yes, love — into the public discourse.

“When I was 13,” he said, “I vowed to God that that if I ever got the chance to make something of myself, I’d spend the rest of my life trying to love and serve other people. I still believe that love is the most powerful and transformative force in the world today. I love people and I get joy out of serving people.”

The cynics, of course, will have a field day with this. But Mr. Smiley, on his way to catch a flight, or hop a train, or racing down the highway to his next event, will no doubt be too busy to notice. He’s eager to do what he can about the sorry state of the public schools in the big cities, and the fact that there are too few jobs that pay a living wage, and all manner of other issues: child care, health care, the environment.

He is trying to do nothing less than generate a movement among black Americans that will “help make all of America better.”

The companion volume to “The Covenant” was published two weeks ago. It’s called “The Covenant in Action.”

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