

Los Angeles Times

October 1, 2006 Sunday _Home Edition SUNDAY CALENDAR; Calendar Desk; Part E; Pg. 1

Is there anything he isn't doing?

Tavis Smiley's activism has put his face on TV, his voice on radio and his causes front and center.

MEDIA

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BARRELING through a staff meeting one morning in his Crenshaw Boulevard offices, **Tavis Smiley** suddenly stops and stares at a copy of Jet magazine. It has a story about Smiley's "The Covenant With Black America," which was a surprise hit earlier this year.

What stops Smiley in his tracks is his photo. "Where'd they get that picture?" he asks his staff. Someone speculates that it came from KCET, the PBS affiliate here that serves as the home for one of his other enterprises, "The **Tavis Smiley** Show," which airs weeknights at 11.

"OK, first thing, let's get that off the website," he orders. He squints at the photo, shaking his head, as if he were a teenager appalled by a geeky class photo. "Look at my eyes! Makes me look like I've been smoking marijuana!"

Don't worry -- if anyone can pass a drug test, it's Smiley, unless someone's invented a drug that fuels a fierce hunger for recognition and an overwhelming desire to support the disenfranchised.

Although he is best known to white America as the genial host of a PBS show, he is quick to correct that myopic view: "Being a TV host is the least of what I do."

The smooth-talking 42-year-old journalist and social activist has emerged as one of America's bright new media stars. He's penned and edited eight books, with a new one, the autobiographical "What I Know for Sure: My Story of Growing Up in America," due out later this month. He runs a foundation that helps fund programs to develop young leaders in the black community. He also funds the **Tavis Smiley** Center for Professional Media Studies at Texas Southern University. He oversees an annual State of the Black Union conference, hosts a weekly Public Radio International show, does commentaries on the nationally syndicated "Tom Joyner Morning Show" and spends most weekends on the road, speaking about leadership at high schools and black colleges.

Shaped as much by his religious upbringing as his progressive politics ("I literally spent every day of my life in church till I was 18," he says), Smiley is a product of the

post-Martin Luther King Jr. generation of black leaders, his enormous drive having as much in common with the entrepreneurial spirituality of the Dallas-based minister T.D. Jakes as civil-rights activists such as the Revs. Jesse Jackson and Al Sharpton. If Smiley isn't one of the most ambitious men in show business, he's certainly one of the most straight-laced. Growing up in Indiana in a deeply religious household -- his mother is a Pentecostal minister -- he wasn't allowed to go to movies or listen to R&B music, much less smoke or drink. The first time he saw a movie in a theater was at 18 after he left for college.

So Smiley doesn't really need to worry about anyone thinking he's been smoking pot. His concern about the Jet photo was more about losing control of his image. In Tavis World, control is everything. When I admire the look of his office one day, he beams. "Look around," he commands. "The carpet, the furniture, the baseboards -- I helped design the whole building."

It is not an uncommon trait among entrepreneurs of Smiley's generation to want to sculpt their image, whether it's

Steve Jobs forever having himself photographed introducing his company's new product or Mark Cuban penning his blog to make sure he gets the last word on anything written about him. But a big part of Smiley's need for control comes from a different place.

As an African American, he is keenly aware of how little access even the great icons of Black America had to mass media. When he interviewed King biographer Taylor Branch at the Los Angeles Times Festival of Books this April, Smiley made a big point of bemoaning the fact that the civil rights leader never reached an audience as big as -- well -- as the one Smiley reaches on his TV show. He also hasn't forgotten that he was abruptly canned from his first big media platform as host of a public affairs show on BET in a dispute with network founder Robert Johnson. Just to make sure he remembers, Smiley has a framed copy of the kiss-off letter on a wall outside his office.

"After that, I've always wanted to control my own destiny," he says, walking me around his headquarters, whose walls are lined with photos of him and the late Mayor Tom Bradley, the late Johnnie Cochran, and Warren Beatty. "I never do more than one-year deals. I never want to be in the position again of being fired without cause. So I told my lawyer, 'Every project we do, I want to be an owner.' Owning -- that's the way of controlling your future."

Odd pairing of guests

THE great thing about "The **Tavis Smiley Show**" is not just how much energy and diversity it's brought to staid old PBS, but that its booking policy -- with two guests sharing most half-hour broadcasts -- allows for all sorts of striking pop cultural mash-ups.

The first day I visited the KCET studios, where Smiley spends Mondays and Wednesdays taping shows, the host interviewed the eye-popping double bill of rapper Xzibit (who hosts MTV's "Pimp My Ride") and Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.).

These odd couple bookings happen all the time. One night Smiley followed philosopher Bernard-Henri Levy with LL Cool J, while another night UCLA basketball coaching legend John Wooden opened for singer Alanis Morissette. Even if the luminaries don't always meet, as a number of guests appear via satellite, the viewing experience is considerably more eclectic than anywhere else on television.

Smiley will do anything for a good "get." He went to San Quentin to interview Stanley Tookie Williams just before the notorious gang leader was put to death. He recently flew to New York for an exclusive broadcast interview with President Hugo Chavez, just days after the mercurial Venezuelan leader had compared George Bush to the devil. Smiley had an inside track, having met Chavez when the TV host was part of a fact-finding delegation to visit Venezuela last year. (He also sent Chavez a copy of an interview he'd done at BET

with Fidel Castro, Chavez's closest political ally.)

Smiley also shows impressive range as an interviewer, whether it's encouraging basketball god Bill Russell to talk about fatherhood or McCain to discuss the effects of King's "Letter From Birmingham Jail."

In an era where Jay Leno and David Letterman use guests as comedy fodder and Charlie Rose has become a courtier to the barons of the Eastern media elite, Smiley is a reminder of the days when talk show hosts were conversationalists, not sycophants or joke meters.

"The problem is that most of the people asking the questions these days aren't interested in the answers," he tells me over lunch at Harold and Belle's, a popular restaurant near his office. "They have a blue card full of jokes they need to set up. So they're the turkey and the guest is the garnish. I don't care about looking good. And if I'm good, it's because I'm genuinely interested in the answer. I have other outlets to get out what I want to say. With this show, it's all about my listening and learning."

His mother's son

IF there's one topic that Smiley seems to relish the most with his guests, it is talk about mothers. Earlier this year he interviewed Harry Flournoy, a member of the first basketball team with an all-black starting lineup to win the NCAA tournament, a feat dramatized in the recent film "Glory Road." Flournoy's account of his mother's fierce

efforts to keep him on the straight and narrow clearly hit close to home with the host.

"The mother stuff always pulls me in," Smiley says later. "I've had challenges in my relationship with my mother but it's hard to imagine how you navigate through life without a high-quality relationship with your mother."

I ask how often he speaks to her. He checks his watch. "It depends on how many times in the day I answer the phone. It's noon and she's already called three times."

Whenever Smiley has started a new job, his mother comes to Los Angeles to pray that his new enterprise will be off to an auspicious start. That's not to say that the path to success has always been smooth. As a boy, his family lived in an Indiana trailer park, with 10 kids crammed together, four of them cousins adopted by his parents after his aunt's death. After his duties at school and church were fulfilled, he would spend evenings mopping and scrubbing for his father's cleaning business. By seventh grade, he had become a prodigious talker. In high school, where he was one of the few African Americans, he was voted class president each year.

One day this year when he interviewed a diet guru on his radio show, the doctor advised that people should leave one-third of their food on their plates. Smiley was aghast: "My mother would've beaten me for doing that! I can hear her saying, 'Boy, we got other kids here who are hungry!'"

Until I read his autobiography I took the remark to be comic license. Not so. When his mother discovered that a bully named Ralph regularly beat up Smiley after school, her reaction was to take out a belt and beat her son even worse. "You cannot let people disrespect you," she told him. "You need to learn to defend yourself."

Suffering a few more days of beatings, first by the bully and then by his mother, he finally retaliated, punching the boy in the mouth and breaking his arm. The lesson Smiley took away was that it was better to confront his adversaries than ever allow them to disrespect him, something he has done throughout his career.

Fits and starts

WORKING his way up the media ladder, Smiley scored his high-profile position at BET but found himself out of a job one day in 2001, fired after a messy incident involving the sale of an exclusive interview to a rival network. By his own account, his relationship with BET's Johnson had already been frayed by an earlier incident. Feeling disrespected after Johnson dressed him down in front of the network's senior staff, Smiley responded with a bitter tirade

After leaving BET, Smiley began hosting a talk show on National Public Radio. He believed NPR would be the perfect outlet for his advocacy journalism, but he quit three years into the job, complaining that the radio network hadn't followed

through on promises to hire more blacks in key positions.

"After 33 years of black people paying their tax dollars, they'd finally figured out that maybe they should have a black person on the network," he says. "But they made no effort to get my pieces on 'All Things Considered' or other NPR programs. They weren't bringing in people of color in the executive hierarchy."

It's hard to say whether the dispute was about sticking up for people of color or about Smiley's own aspirations. "If it was all about me, I could've stayed there till I died," he responds. "But I want to expand the notion of inclusion and they couldn't come up with enough things to make that notion of inclusion real."

Smiley insists that PBS is different. "The people at PBS get it," he says. "They see the demographics of America changing and they realize there's a way to reach a broader audience without offending their core PBS viewers."

The biggest difference with his PBS show is that he owns the show, giving him complete control. But that control has come at a price. Smiley is a die-hard progressive who sees himself as an advocate "for people who are culturally and economically disenfranchised." And yet the show's prime sponsor is Wal-Mart, a company that has been hammered by liberals and African Americans for resisting efforts to unionize its stores, violating child labor laws, discriminating against female employees and

offering substandard wages and healthcare benefits.

As an outspoken progressive, isn't Smiley guilty of talking the talk but not walking the walk for allowing Wal-Mart to underwrite his TV show?

"It probably is a contradiction for some people," he acknowledges. "But if I had to wait for a perfect company to come along to sponsor my show, I wouldn't be on the air. My staying on the air is precarious. I've had to raise every dime myself and if one sponsor falls out, I'm in trouble. I'm the only brother doing what I do. Isn't it more important to have Tavis there, raising all the issues I do, than having silence?"

Smiley says shacking up with Wal-Mart is a small price to pay for all the consciousness-raising he does on PBS. His show has consistently offered a platform for those you don't see in mainstream media forums, including wonky professors, labor organizers, offbeat authors and filmmakers. Long before "Crash" won the Oscar for best picture, he devoted two shows to the film's depiction of race relations.

He also spends an extraordinary amount of time promoting leadership development in the African American community. Through his foundation, Smiley organized a Road to Health Expo that operates two-day events geared to educating blacks about health and obesity. His foundation has also published numerous empowerment manuals, including a guide to

scholarships and fellowships for African American students.

Lessons in humility

SMILEY says his devotion to work has taken its toll. The media figure, who recently moved to Hancock Park, remains single, his nonstop schedule having interfered with past relationships. Smiley's priorities seem clear. He is an advocate, always looking for a message to preach or a cause to advance. For him, the spirit must be moved. "In my day, from start to finish, I'm in constant meditative prayer. When I heard that we got a new book deal at Doubleday, for substantially more money than the last book, I stopped right there and said, 'Lord, I thank you for another victory here. It's a blessing.'"

In Tavis World, one is never shy about giving thanks or trumpeting achievement. When I teased him about relentlessly pushing his book, he was unrepentant. "How often do you accomplish something that's historic?" he responds. "Part of what makes life important for black people is taking notice of the markers, the groundbreaking moments.... And if I'm not out there shaking the trees, who's going to recognize it and give it the appropriate respect?"

During our interviews Smiley often noted that, despite all his success, the big establishment newspaper in his own backyard -- this newspaper, in fact -- had never seen fit to do a major profile on him until now. His frustration was not unwarranted, but it reminded me of a story he tells about

his mother who, when he was a boy, was impressed by his intelligence but worried about how he expressed it. Returning from a rare vacation, she brought him a pencil holder with an inscription that read: "It's hard to be humble when you're as great as I am."

Taken aback, Smiley asked what her point was. She told him he should never apologize for his talent. But she cautioned him that people wouldn't like him for pushing his gifts down their throats. It was good advice, for a schoolboy or a media icon eager to change the world.

"In praising yourself, you're making them feel bad," his mother explained. "The trick, Tavis, is to let others praise you."

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GRAPHIC: PHOTO: (no caption) PHOTOGRAPHER: Kevin Foley KCET PHOTO: TETE-A-TETE: Smiley's TV guest list is eclectic but not without newsmakers, such as Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez, left. PHOTO: (no caption) PHOTOGRAPHER: Kevin Foley KCET

