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Media Man on a Mission: The Whirl of Tavis Smiley

By FELICIA R. LEE

Tavis Smiley bounded into the Manhattan twilight, fresh from an interview at the Venezuelan embassy with that country's president, Hugo Chavez. Passersby shouted their greetings at Mr. Smiley, tall and draped in a blue-gray suit, as he dashed to catch a train for Baltimore and a black health expo, one of the many public functions that fill his calendar. "They can see me in the dark," he marveled.

Mr. Smiley does not have a visibility problem. "**Tavis Smiley**," a television talk show, is broadcast five nights a week on PBS. On radio there's his weekly "**Tavis Smiley Show**," and twice a week he's a commentator on "The Tom Joyner Morning Show," the nation's most widely syndicated black-oriented radio program. He has created the **Tavis Smiley Foundation** to develop young black leaders. The best-selling book he edited, "The Covenant With Black America" -- 10 topical blueprints by 10 experts for improving the lot of African-Americans -- confirmed his stature as a cultural phenomenon.

"The Covenant," released in February as a paperback, has been the surprise hit of the

year. It has sold about 400,000 copies, was No. 1 on the New York Times best-seller list in April and has been the fastest-selling book in the 39-year history of its publisher, the Chicago-based Third World Press. Mr. Smiley, 42, conceived the idea for the book and wrote the introduction. He received essays from contributors including Marian Wright Edelman, founder of the Children's Defense Fund, and Marc H. Morial, president and chief executive of the National Urban League, on issues like health care, politics and education. Some critics called the book a manifesto, others a movement.

On the "Covenant" Web site (covenantwithblackamerica.com) the chairmen of the Republican and Democratic parties have pledged to address all the book's recommendations. Mr. Smiley is especially proud of the 500,000 wallet-size cards that list the 10 "covenants," or plans. "Anytime you run into somebody asking for your vote, pull out your covenant card and ask them where they stand," Mr. Smiley said he tells his audiences.

For those wanting to learn more, Mr. Smiley's memoir, "What I Know for Sure: My Story of Growing Up in

America" (Doubleday), written with David Ritz, goes on sale today. It tells the story of a boy who was reared in rural Indiana in a small trailer crowded with 13 people, whose upbringing was shaped by a strict Pentecostal church, who went on to write or compile inspirational and political books and own both his radio and television shows. Mr. Smiley manages his empire, the Smiley Group, which includes inspirational cards and a newsletter, from a renovated building in the South Central neighborhood of Los Angeles.

As many wonder how Mr. Smiley will continue to leverage his cultural capital, he says that his motives are simple. "I am tired of seeing black people live beneath our privilege," he said in a recent interview in New York, where he caught up with President Chavez after his controversial remarks at the United Nations critical of President Bush. "I am not trying to create another organization and I'm not trying to be Mr. Black America," he said.

"Do I cop to trying to motivate people, trying to inspire people, trying to uplift people through my symposiums, my books, my radio, my speeches?" he asked. "Yes, I cop to that. But it's all born of

love."

Mr. Smiley also says that some of his frenetic pace is born of pain. In his memoir he recalls how a brutal beating by his stepfather one Sunday morning in seventh grade changed his life.

"In a very real way, I think to this day that the work I do, the level at which I attempt to do it, the time I dedicate to it, is really trying to put as much distance between me and that moment as I can," Mr. Smiley said quietly in the interview. The memoir, he said, is the first time he has written in detail about the abuse.

His stepfather beat him and his sister Phyllis with an electrical cord until their skin hung in ribbons because he believed erroneous reports that they had misbehaved in church, Mr. Smiley writes. The beating put both children in the hospital; afterward they were placed in foster care. Mr. Smiley said that he had reconciled with his parents and is very close to his mother. But Phyllis Smiley never returned home and spent years fighting drug addiction and other demons. He dedicated the memoir to her.

"There is not a day in my life I do not wish I could have traded places with her," Mr. Smiley said, adding that his sister is now doing well and poised to enter nursing school.

His life lessons keep him humble, Mr. Smiley said, though some profiles over the years have portrayed him as controlling and ego-driven. He admits to past arrogance in

his memoir but says he is also simply self-confident and that he continues to belong to a Pentecostal church and prays every day.

But with his own power bases and years of chatting up an eclectic range of stars -- Fidel Castro, Newt Gingrich, Halle Berry, Nora Ephron, Prince and Bill Clinton among them-- Mr. Smiley is a celebrity in his own right.

"You have Oprah and you have Tavis -- they are the king and queen, they have great access, they are advocates for the underserved," Amy Alexander, a media critic and author of a forthcoming book on African-Americans and media, said. "He's very much in the mold of a long line of black journalists who were very upfront about being advocate journalists." He also fills a void, she said.

"There's no black version of Harper's or The New Yorker for African-Americans seeking meaningful commentary on politics or raising our children," Ms. Alexander said. " 'The Covenant' pulls it together."

Mr. Smiley's media saturation in service of his message echoes the same approach used by white conservatives like Rush Limbaugh and Ann Coulter, Ms. Alexander said. In a recent column in The Nation Ms. Alexander wrote that Mr. Smiley could certainly sound like someone running for political office and questioned whether he could turn "The Covenant" "into lasting, on-the-ground action."

Henry Louis Gates Jr.,

director of the W. E. B. DuBois Institute at Harvard, said that Mr. Smiley had served as a conduit between the black intelligentsia and everyday African-Americans. "He's reaching people emotionally and intellectually with a level of discourse that does not talk down to people," Mr. Gates said.

"If DuBois has two descendants, Cornel West is the scholar, and **Tavis Smiley** is the journalist-activist," he added. Mr. West, the writer and Princeton professor of religion whom Mr. Smiley considers "a big brother," wrote an essay for "The Covenant" titled "Call to Action."

For the past several years Mr. Smiley has presided over an annual State of the Black Union meeting, which has been broadcast on C-Span and brings together a broad swath of African-Americans to discuss their concerns. "It's when the King legacy interacts with postmodern mass media," Mr. West said of Mr. Smiley's impact.

Mr. Smiley, who said his hero was the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., knows how to make things happen. In 10 years on Mr. Joyner's show, the two have led numerous campaigns, from getting Christie's, the auction house, to donate slave artifacts to a museum instead of putting them up for bid, to persuading Congress to award Rosa Parks the Congressional Medal of Honor.

Mr. Smiley does not get a free pass because of his advocacy. For instance, an article in May in The Black

Commentator, an Internet magazine (blackcommentator.com), was headlined "Being the Covenant Watchdog: Does **Tavis Smiley** Need Watching?" Among other things, the article chided Mr. Smiley for discussing the idea that 2006 would be the year of the black Republican and for having Wal-Mart Stores underwrite his television show.

Some of that criticism is really the desire of people for a perfect savior, Mr. Smiley said. "They want some messianic figure to come back and crack the clouds and take them to the Promised Land," Mr. Smiley said. "That's not who I am trying to be."

Of his 10-year association with Wal-Mart, Mr. Smiley said that "if I were looking for a perfect partner, I wouldn't be doing any of the work that I'm doing." The company, which has been accused of discrimination and exploiting its workers, has never tried to influence him, he said.

Mona Williams, a Wal-Mart spokeswoman, rejected the criticism of the company. "Wal-Mart creates tens of thousands of American jobs each year," she said, "jobs with competitive wages and affordable health benefits."

Mr. Smiley's favorite expressions are "love wins" and "keep the faith." And he is not just preaching to blacks, he said. "You don't survive on public television with just a black audience," he said.

There was no racial breakdown available for Mr.

Smiley's show on Public Radio International, which is carried on 73 stations and in all of the top 10 markets. During the last year more than 400,000 households, according to Nielsen figures provided by PBS, watched each nightly episode of "**Tavis Smiley**." Among all PBS prime-time and late-night series, the audience had the highest percentage of "top-level occupations," at 28 percent, and, at 32 percent, the highest rate of African-American viewers.

Mr. Smiley said he was confident that "The Covenant" would remain influential through the 2008 election cycle.

"There is an awakening happening around the world, born of a hunger and thirst people have to turn this mess we are in around," Mr. Smiley said. "I tell people, 'It's not about me. It is about you making yourself a committee of one, of not surrendering our authority to people who don't always have our best interests at heart.' My friends hear me say it all the time -- in the end, love wins."

CORRECTION-DATE:
October 11, 2006

CORRECTION: An article in The Arts yesterday about **Tavis Smiley**, the television and radio host and author, omitted the co-author of his new memoir, "What I Know for Sure: My Story of Growing Up in America," in some copies. He is David Ritz. The article also misidentified the Congressional award given to Rosa Parks, for which Mr. Smiley campaigned with Tom Joyner, a radio host on whose

show Mr. Smiley appears as a commentator. It was the Congressional Gold Medal -- not the Medal of Honor, given for military service.

GRAPHIC: Photo: **Tavis Smiley** on the Los Angeles set of his television show. (Photo by J. Emilio Flores for The New York Times)

