



Smiley loves conversations

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By Bill Keveney, USA TODAY

For a man widely known for conducting interviews, Tavis Smiley hates the word.

"When I hear that word, it's like fingernails on a chalkboard," says Smiley, who hosts talk shows on PBS and public radio. "What I do is conduct conversations."

To Smiley, 42, interview implies a list of unengaging rat-tat-tat questions. To elicit substantive information, he says, listening is at least as important as asking.

Smiley frames *What I Know for Sure* (Doubleday, \$23.95), his 10th book and a USA TODAY best seller, in similar terms. It relates Smiley's life story, as told to Marvin Gaye biographer David Ritz, from his poor upbringing in an all-white — save for his family — Indiana town to his current success.

"If you live long enough and have had certain experiences, there are things that you know for sure. If you can share these lessons with other people, not out of arrogance but in love or service, then you ought to," Smiley says.

In the book, satisfying moments are accompanied by painful ones, including a brutal beating at the hands of his stepfather that sent Smiley and his sister Phyllis to the hospital and ultimately to foster care.

Although he didn't want to relive the incident, he felt that it was necessary and that it has spawned those "me, too" moments with readers. "That story resonates (because) every one of us knows pain," he says.

For Smiley, that incident and his difficult upbringing fueled his perseverance and drive to succeed.

That has meant the occasional bumping of heads. Smiley was fired at BET, in a sequence started when he acknowledged critiques of the network in an interview. He later gave up a radio show when he felt NPR hadn't met its promise to add black executives.

A commitment to black America has long infused Smiley's work. To that end, his company, The Smiley Group, is responsible for another USA TODAY best seller, *The Covenant With Black America*. The collection of essays proposes a national action plan to address the concerns of African-Americans.

Smiley sees an opportunity to "introduce Americans to each other." On his late-night PBS show, *Tavis Smiley* (check local listings), an episode's guest mix can feature Prince and Sen. John McCain.

Smiley's quest for diverse guests meant controversy, too. He "caught hell," he says, for his recent interview of Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez, an unpopular figure in the USA who called President Bush "the devil" in a speech at the United Nations.

Some people think it's "wrong to talk to persons who they think are anti-American. But we can't just talk to people who love us in a world where increasingly people do not like us," says Smiley.