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WHAT HE KNOWS FOR SURE

Tavis Smiley confronts the Obama candidacy.

by Kelefa Sanneh

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Smiley cautioned about “the hysteria and the hype” surrounding Barack Obama.

Twice a week, on Tuesdays and Thursdays, for twelve years, “The Tom Joyner Morning Show” came to a halt so that Tavis Smiley could hold forth. The show, which supplements R. & B. songs and comedy skits with listener call-ins and lots of good-natured banter, claims to have eight million listeners, making it the most popular radio broadcast in black America. Joyner, who once sang in a group with Lionel Richie, is a gregarious host with a high, wheezing chuckle, and he presides over a gently irreverent gang. Smiley, who hosts his own nightly talk show on PBS (in many markets it airs after “Charlie Rose”) and a weekend radio show distributed by Public Radio International, is a gifted orator and a budding media mogul: in an era that would seem to have little need for an old-fashioned black advocate, he has made himself just about impossible to ignore. On the “Morning Show” his job was to provide the uncomic relief. He said, “When I come on, they stand down.” The sidekicks were shushed, the sound effects silenced, and the music faded out so that Smiley could deliver a secular sermon, a rat-a-tat treatise on politics and the black community.

Smiley’s first commentary of the year was broadcast on Tuesday, January 8th, and his subject was Senator Barack Obama, who had won the Iowa caucuses the previous week. Joyner had emerged as an ardent Obama supporter, but Smiley, in his commentary, urged listeners not to be taken in by “the hysteria and the hype.” He said, “You can’t short-circuit the process of holding folk accountable just because you fall in love.”

The phone calls and e-mails started immediately. Listeners couldn’t understand why Smiley was speaking out against a man who could be the first black President. On his next show, he acknowledged the “pain, anguish, anger, and disappointment,” but he didn’t back down. And although he criticized Senator Hillary Clinton’s campaign in the following weeks, dissatisfaction with Obama was often the focus of his commentary. He was disgusted by the idea that the Senator “transcends race”—“Nobody asks white candidates to transcend *their* race,” he said. And he worried that, for some people, “voting for the guy who happens to be black might be the easy way out.”

On February 11th, Obama called in to the show. He seemed to be stifling a sigh when Joyner asked him about Smiley’s criticism. “I’m gonna have to call Tavis up and straighten him out on this,” he said. “I don’t know why he hasn’t called me directly.” The Senator added that he was a supporter of Smiley’s agenda: “There is no issue that he’s discussed—whether it’s health-care discrepancies for minorities or what have you—that isn’t central to my campaign.”

At the end of the month, Obama declined to attend the State of the Black Union symposium, an annual gathering of thinkers and politicians which Smiley has organized for a decade, and which this year was held in New Orleans. The event, which is broadcast on C-SPAN, is meant to publicize the concerns of black America, while providing a forum for leaders to discuss solutions. The symposium also underscores Smiley’s role on the political stage. This year’s

participants included civil-rights veterans (Jesse Jackson, Al Sharpton), academic celebrities (Michael Eric Dyson, Cornel West), congresswomen (Stephanie Tubbs Jones, Sheila Jackson Lee), and one Presidential candidate: Hillary Clinton. "It was a bad decision for him not to show up," Smiley later said of Obama.

Some of Smiley's critics voiced a suspicion that pride, not principle, was motivating him. In a much debated column published by TheRoot.com, an online African-American magazine owned by the Washington Post Company, Melissa Harris-Lacewell accused Smiley of "throwing a temper tantrum." Above a rather unflattering photograph of Smiley on the set of "Meet the Press," a headline evoked not only indignation but puzzlement, too: "Who died and made Tavis king?"

On April 10th, Joyner got a phone call from Smiley, who said he wanted to leave the show. "It hit me so hard," Joyner says now, and after a sleepless night he took to the airwaves to blast his listeners for driving Smiley away. Joyner turned this soliloquy into a blog post. "He can't take the hate he's been getting regarding the Barack issue," Joyner wrote, and he asked his listeners to persuade Smiley to stay: "I want you to call him, e-mail him, text him, hug him, kiss him, get him in a corner and wrestle him."

It didn't work. The next week, Smiley announced that he would move on in June, when his contract expired. But he wasn't leaving because of the Obama controversy, he said; he just wanted to "pursue certain other passion projects." He reaffirmed his love for Joyner's audience, and for Joyner himself. "I'd take a bullet for Tom Joyner," he said, but added playfully, "Not in my heart. Maybe in my arm. My *left* arm."

Tavis Smiley lives in a neat, well-appointed house in the elegant Los Angeles neighborhood of Hancock Park. (He enjoys telling guests that Nat King Cole integrated the neighborhood in the nineteen-fifties.) At forty-three, he is stocky and seemingly tireless, like an athlete, although his waistline reflects the fluctuating results of the ongoing battle between his allegiance to his trainer and his fondness for dessert, which he usually orders with an extra scoop of ice cream. He has never been married, and says, "I don't have kids, because I have tried to be responsible—knock on wood." He doesn't drink, and his nights out tend to be purposeful (concerts, ballgames, plays) and relatively short, though he is quick to explain that he has options. One evening, he reported that he had just received a message from Quincy Jones. "T, it's Q," he said, doing an impression of Jones's stentorian voice. "Naomi"—Naomi Campbell—"is having a party tonight and she's using my house." Smiley thought about it, or pretended to, before deciding not to go. "Three o'clock in the morning is gonna be an early call," he said.

Three o'clock was when he got up on Joyner days to make the five-mile drive south to the Smiley Group headquarters, in the middle-class South Central neighborhood of Leimert Park. It's a one-story building on Crenshaw Boulevard, wedged between a veterinary clinic and a burger joint, with a grand entry flanked by spindly twin shrubs. Smiley paid for the construction himself, because banks saw the neighborhood as high risk. When the building was finished, in 2001, he enumerated on Joyner's show the banks that had turned him down. The story he tells usually ends with "a parade of white men" coming down Crenshaw to apologize.

At five o'clock on a Tuesday morning a few weeks before he left the show, Smiley was hunched over a legal pad in his office, which is filled with Smiley memorabilia. (In one corner, a plastic case holds two of the Starbucks paper coffee cups—No. 257 in the company's "The Way I See It" series—that bear a quote from Smiley: "Love wins.") It was primary day in North Carolina and in his home state, Indiana, and he was organizing notes for his "Morning Show" commentary, which he read live.

Around five-fifteen, he ambled into the studio, exchanged a few long-distance words with Joyner, who broadcasts from Dallas, and, in an authoritative cadence that is not much different from his normal speaking voice, started talking. He reminisced about Indiana, and though he said he was excited about the state's unexpected turn in the political spotlight, he pointedly—and perhaps unnecessarily—announced that he himself had no plans to run for President. "This President thing, it can't be all that," he said. "Especially if it means that black people and black suffering have to be rendered invisible." He talked about the importance of hope, but added a qualifier: "Even hope needs help."

After he signed off, he went next door to the control room to see Sheryl Flowers, his longtime producer, who played his commentary back to him. When he heard himself say, "Hope needs help," he leaned forward. "That could have been taken as a tacit endorsement for Obama," he said. Flowers, who maintains an air of fond skepticism, said that she didn't think so. Later, he asked whether the commentary could be criticized for being "too much Tavis." She paused. "That's a possibility," she said.

The Smiley Group has about seventy employees, and at around twelve-thirty Smiley convened a meeting in his office with a half-dozen staff members, presiding over the group with pride and evident enthusiasm. He no longer swears, having been chastened years ago by an engineer who secretly recorded a profane rant, burned it onto CDs, and distributed them to Smiley's colleagues. But he gets a lot of mileage out of "golly," a word he modifies by elongating the first syllable and stressing the second one, which gives it the same general shape as an extended "God *damn*." Another one of his favorite words is "Negro." He sometimes uses it to express disdain, as when he told an audience, "Optimistic Negroes scare me." At other times, he uses it to express humble camaraderie with fellow African-Americans; he described the black population of Hancock Park as "me and two or three other Negroes." At one point during the meeting, he wondered "how many Negroes" were likely to attend a high-school forum that was being proposed. One of his staff corrected him: "Or whatever color"—all races were welcome. Smiley shrugged. "Negro is a universal term, for me," he said.

The Smiley Group, which was created a decade ago, has grown into a sprawling tribute to its founder's independent streak. He publishes some of his books through SmileyBooks and arranges his own lecture tours—his standard fee is in the mid-five-figure range—through his High Quality Speakers Bureau, which also represents Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and Jackie Joyner-Kersey, among others. At the meeting, he got updates about Tavis Smiley Presents, which organizes conferences, symposia, and speaking tours of black colleges, and about the nonprofit Tavis Smiley Foundation, which hosts a weeklong summer camp known as the Leadership Institute. And he briefed his lieutenants about his next big venture, "America I AM," a travelling museum exhibition on black history, in partnership with Arts and Exhibitions International—"the King Tut people," he said.

During a discussion of next year's State of the Black Union symposium, the tenth, to be held in Los Angeles, Smiley confirmed that Prince, whom he befriended several years ago during a lunch meeting (he is an accomplished befriender), had agreed to play a concert. And he reacted with mock outrage when it was suggested that he celebrate the anniversary by throwing himself a party. "The Prince party is enough, y'all," he said, laughing. "Come on!"

Tavis Smiley grew up poor, in a Pentecostal household in white rural Indiana. He was raised, alongside nine siblings and cousins, by a stern mother and a quiet but tough Air Force-officer father who was actually, he discovered when he was twelve, his stepfather. As with many kids of his generation, his life was changed by a stack of Motown LPs, but these were recordings of great speeches by Martin Luther King, Jr., released on a Motown imprint called Black Forum Records. Smiley memorized his favorite orations, paying particular attention to King's rhetoric and intonation. He decided that he would follow King's example, although he didn't know exactly how. "Since I was twelve or thirteen," Smiley says now, "I wanted to get started on this thing—this Kingian kingdom-building."

In his autobiography, “What I Know For Sure” (2006), written with David Ritz, Smiley remembers a boyhood confrontation with a bully, from which he extracted what he saw as an important lesson: “It was far better to confront those who oppressed me head-on, I realized, than to allow them to demean and disrespect me.” In the years that followed, Smiley found oppressors closer to home: his parents. His stepfather once beat him so badly, he says, that the police intervened and placed him in foster care, where he remained for almost half a year. He filled his high-school years with debate tournaments, student-government meetings, and an internship in the office of a Kokomo city councilman. His mother periodically forced him to prune his schedule and focus more on the church; in response, he cut himself off from her throughout much of his high-school career.

By his senior year, Smiley was barely speaking to either of his parents, but he got accepted at Indiana University, in Bloomington, and an African-American administrator helped him find the right loans and jobs. In Bloomington, he encountered a broader African-American culture. He saw his first movie, Richard Pryor’s “Live on the Sunset Strip,” and fell in love with Frankie Beverly and Maze, an R. & B. group that never crossed over—“The band belonged to the black community,” as he put it. He was a director of minority affairs for the student government, and he joined a black fraternity, Kappa Alpha Psi, although he says he had to pray about the decision—King had been an Alpha Phi Alpha. He remembers wondering, “How am I gonna tell Dr. King one day, when I meet him in Heaven, that I pledged Kappa?”

The case of Denver Smith, an African-American student who was killed during a confrontation with police, propelled Smiley further toward politics (he helped organize protests), but he wasn’t a radical. In 1985, during his junior year, he lobbied hard for an internship with Tom Bradley, the first African-American mayor of Los Angeles. When he was rejected by one of Bradley’s assistants, he sent a handwritten letter, with apologies for any smudges caused by “the tears rolling down my face,” to Bradley himself, who finally invited him to Los Angeles. Some students might have been disillusioned by all the meetings and committees, but Smiley loved to think that he was helping to run the city.

At the end of the summer, he returned reluctantly to Bloomington, though he didn’t stay long enough to graduate. (He finally got his bachelor’s degree in 2003, after completing a correspondence course at the university which required him to write about his own books.) By 1987, he was back in Los Angeles, where he worked as an aide to Bradley, then made an unsuccessful run for the city council. He next campaigned, also unsuccessfully, to become the president of the local chapter of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, King’s old organization.

During this time, Smiley noticed that there was a whole industry of people who got paid to talk and, even better, to opine. He conceived of a show called “The Smiley Report,” and persuaded the owner of an AM radio station to let him unburden himself in sixty-second installments. His focus was meat-and-potatoes black-community issues: police brutality, affirmative action, poverty. He quickly moved from AM to FM, from FM to cable, and from cable to KABC, Channel 7. In 1996, at a White House gathering for black media professionals, he met Tom Joyner, who was looking for ways to boost black participation in that year’s Presidential election. Smiley suggested that regular political commentary might get listeners motivated to register and vote, and he was hired.

Smiley likes to say that his motto is “Learn, leave, launch,” but he admits that the leaving hasn’t always been voluntary. Also in 1996, BET gave him his own show, “BET Tonight with Tavis Smiley,” and between Joyner and BET the exposure made him a black celebrity. He had a series of warm conversations with President Bill Clinton, who evidently saw the show as a sympathetic forum—he gave Smiley his first interview after admitting to his dalliance with Monica Lewinsky. But in 1999 Smiley got into trouble with Bob Johnson, BET’s founder, for telling *Newsweek* how “frustrating” it was “to be asked by young black people how I can work for a company with no social consciousness.” He survived that controversy, but two years later he angered Viacom, BET’s parent company, by selling ABC an exclusive interview with the former Symbionese Liberation Army member Sara Jane Olson. (He landed the scoop when Olson’s daughters, who happened to be BET viewers, suggested him to their mother.) Smiley was fired, but he remembers the incident with pride, saying that it continues to be seen as “one of the big blunders in BET history.” (Johnson said at the time that he was firing Smiley for “a number of public and private concerns.”)

Smiley rebounded with a daily show on NPR, but walked away in 2004, because, he says, NPR wasn’t doing enough to widen its audience of “educated white people.” (Or, put another way, it wasn’t doing enough to promote Smiley’s show.) On PBS and PRI, Smiley is an independent producer, not an employee, and this arrangement suits him better.

The PBS show, “Tavis Smiley,” which is aimed at a general audience, can be dull. (Smiley doesn’t have much to say to movie stars, though he excels with politicians.) But the PRI show, “The Tavis Smiley Show,” which is, he says, “designed primarily to reach out to people of color,” is looser and better, perhaps because the guests are often wonks, academics, or activists—his kind of people. Smiley’s best friend, Cornel West, the Princeton professor and public intellectual, makes regular appearances—during an episode taped shortly before Mother’s Day, West began by singing a snippet of the Intruders’ 1973 hit, “I’ll Always Love My Mama.” Smiley asked West—whom he calls Doc—about the bond between black men and their mothers. “We’re such a hated and despised people that unconditional love has tremendous weight and gravitas,” West said.

West and Smiley make an effective team: the tenured radical and the indefatigable entrepreneur, united by twin commitments to black politics and intellectual populism. Smiley likes to joke that he stalked West for a while after they first met, at the Los Angeles headquarters of the S.C.L.C. in the mid-nineteen-eighties, but West says, “Once I got to know this brother, I started stalking *him*.” West now has his own room in Smiley’s house, and in the summer they travel the world together, booking just enough lectures to get their expenses paid. At a dinner this spring in Connecticut, where Smiley was giving a commencement address, he listened in awe and amusement as West held forth on Japanese socialism, obscure funk bands, and the drinking habits of Richard Wright (“nothin’ but cognac”). Their friendship sometimes seems like a free-floating seminar, and in a sense it marks Smiley’s unlikely return to the academic life he left behind.

In 1996, Smiley published a book called “Hard Left: Straight Talk About the Wrongs of the Right,” but the title was slightly misleading. He has never really been a culture warrior, and the book now reads like a mild-mannered response to the partisan battles of the time. In 2006, he organized “The Covenant with Black America,” a collection of essays and calls to action by activists and scholars. The book, which topped the *Times* best-seller list, is studiously unpolemical, full of practical advice. (Altogether, he has written or orchestrated twelve books, as well as two decks of “Empowerment Cards.”)

Smiley learned how to leverage Joyner’s huge audience, and in this regard his work sometimes seems like a continuation of the nineteen-seventies campaigns of Jesse Jackson’s Operation PUSH: he petitions and challenges politicians and corporations on behalf of black America. In 2002, he led a letter-writing campaign opposing Charles W. Pickering’s confirmation to the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals. (Pickering had reduced the sentence of a white man convicted of burning a cross on the lawn of an interracial couple.) And he and Tom Joyner used public pressure, including the threat of a boycott, to force the electronics retailer CompUSA to respond to charges that, even though African-Americans were avid computer users, the company was underspending on advertising in black media outlets. (This, of course, was a case where political and business interests overlapped.)

Unlike Cornel West, Smiley has never had much patience for theoretical investigation. He often talks about his “love affair” with black people, and he calls his black-college tours “Talented Tenth,” after W. E. B. Du Bois’s famous essay from 1903, which began with a ringing proclamation: “The Negro race,

like all races, is going to be saved by its exceptional men." A century later, that notion might seem hopelessly paternalistic, and Smiley is often criticized for positioning himself as the latest in a long line of "exceptional" African-Americans.

But Smiley instinctively understands the sentimental appeal buried in Du Bois's formulation. In Smiley's vision of black America, the Talented Tenth comprises just about everyone within earshot. It's a club—a movement, really—that anyone can join, and its appeal is probably strongest to people who aren't customarily invited to think of themselves as heirs to the intellectual legacy of Du Bois, or, for that matter, of anybody else.

Smiley is a liberal, but he avoids potentially divisive issues, such as abortion and gay marriage, saying that he has nothing new to add. And while he often criticizes President Bush's prosecution of the war in Iraq, foreign policy isn't his specialty, either. He presents himself as a committed but relatively nonideological broker, bringing together influential people who are dedicated to making life better for Americans of African descent.

Smiley is also a broker in a different sense: a branding and partnership specialist. He offers companies a chance to position themselves as supporters of black political uplift without courting controversy. Nearly every project at the Smiley Group has had its own underwriters, from the college tour (Anheuser-Busch, Toyota) to the State of the Black Union symposium (Wells Fargo, ExxonMobil). "There are no perfect companies," Smiley often says. In 2004, he invited H. Lee Scott, the president and C.E.O. of Wal-Mart, which sponsors "Tavis Smiley" (and sponsored the "Morning Show" commentaries), to appear on the PBS show. Smiley began by quoting e-mails from three viewers, one of whom told him he was being used as a "little black pawn." Then he noted that Wal-Mart was "still No. 1" on *Fortune's*

list of the most admired companies in America. He asked Scott, "Who's right? These three people who wrote these e-mails or *Fortune*?"

Earlier this year, Smiley announced a three-year deal with Nationwide, the insurance and investment-services company. Nationwide supports the PBS show and is a national sponsor of the 2009 State of the Black Union symposium; the deal also includes a five-city tour to promote "economic empowerment and financial literacy." The first stop on the tour, in May, was Columbus, Ohio, where Nationwide is based.

The Columbus *Post*, a black weekly, made the visit its lead story, under the headline "SMILEY: TIME FOR ACTION!" And at a Friday-night jazz reception at M, an upscale restaurant, Jerry Jurgensen, Nationwide's C.E.O., talked about how greater "financial literacy" could have prevented the housing crisis, and how it could help get kids through high school and into college.

The next day, there were posters all over the Greater Columbus Convention Center, each one with a photograph of Smiley, an arrow, and the words "This way to Tavis." Publicists guided Smiley through a series of quick radio interviews and photo opportunities, and then into a ballroom, which held a few hundred people, nearly all African-American, with Nationwide executives sitting in the front row. Smiley spoke about the importance of insurance by talking about unpredictable tragedies, from the cyclone in Myanmar to Hurricane Katrina, and the audience murmured its assent. "Don't tell me that we don't live in a world of uncertainty," he said, and someone called out, "That's right!" He used the Bible, James 4:17, to explain the importance of financial planning: "To those who know to do good, or to do right, and doeth not, to them it is"—and the crowd finished for him—"Sin!" Smiley feigned surprise. "Ooh," he said. "Some of y'all didn't want to hear that s-i-n word."

Then he gave out his e-mail address, saying that if anyone had trouble with Nationwide he would intervene. "If they dis you," he said, "send me an e-mail." He also found a way to address any lingering doubts about Nationwide's motives, or his. "I know why they're doing this—because y'all got money," he said, to laughter and applause. "White folk don't ever come to us just because they like us. They come because they like making money. And I ain't mad at 'em for making money. I like making money, too. That's why I ain't here for free."

For Smiley, as for most power brokers, politics is a tangled web of alliances forged and broken, complicated, perhaps, by his own short, unhappy political career. For a time, he seemed to be on Obama's side. On July 29, 2004, two days after Obama delivered his galvanizing speech at the Democratic National Convention, in Boston, he paid a visit to Smiley's PBS show, and although Smiley seemed enthusiastic about Obama's new prominence, there was also a hint of uncertainty. "I heard Pat Buchanan say that you were great," Smiley said ominously. (He added, a bit skeptically, "Folk are trying to make you the next President, after that speech the other night.") Last October, Obama sat down again with Smiley, who wanted to know, among other things, why Obama wasn't doing better among African-Americans—a poll that month showed Hillary Clinton holding a twenty-four-point lead over Obama among African-Americans.

But after Obama won the Iowa caucuses his African-American support grew. Smiley tried to appear neutral: when he talked to Tom Joyner's audience on Thursday, May 8th, two days after the primaries in Indiana (which Clinton won, narrowly) and North Carolina (which Obama won, broadly), he was careful to praise the candidates evenly. But his audience was evidently not evenly split. Exit polls revealed that Obama won about ninety-two per cent of the black vote in Indiana and ninety-one per cent in North Carolina.

In this climate, Smiley's refusal to embrace Obama was all the more conspicuous. (In fact, Obama's overwhelming support in black America may have helped stiffen Smiley's resolve—to his credit, he loves being loved less than he hates being told what to think.)

But Smiley's complicated feelings about Obama's campaign can't be reduced to perceived slights and biases. In the 2004 Convention speech, Obama talked about his Kenyan father, who "got a scholarship to study in a magical place, America, that shone as a beacon of freedom and opportunity to so many who had come before." To Smiley, this sounded dangerously naïve. "I love America," he said, "but this ain't Disneyland. There's nothing 'magical' about America." In quieter moments, Smiley often strikes a note of concern about whether, after the campaign, Obama's "soul will be intact." One night, driving through Los Angeles with a friend, the actor Wren T. Brown, Smiley said, in a soft voice, "We are going to have to keep that brother at the top of our prayer list. As the old folk say, 'Keep that Negro on the altar.'"

This is an idea often expressed by Obama's African-American supporters: Obama must be kept safe from harm and true to himself. True to his people, too. But, as a matter of strategy, Obama had to avoid being marginalized as the black candidate. Michael Eric Dyson, speaking at this year's State of the Black Union forum, essentially asked African-Americans to trust that Obama had their best interests at heart. "Barack Obama will take his race into account. He is rooted in but not restricted by his blackness," Dyson said. "He's winking at Negroes, hollering at white folk, trying to bring us all together."

There is also the awkward fact that Obama has become the most popular politician in black America with relatively little help from the black leaders who have spent years or decades consolidating their bases of power. Some have registered misgivings about Obama's movement, which took shape in a matter of months, organized around no particular political imperatives (at any rate, none that seemed very different from those of his main rival). Cornel West is both a supporter and a critic: he pronounced himself "deeply disappointed" by Obama's decision not to travel to Memphis to observe the fortieth anniversary of King's death, but he also says that Obama's candidacy is "our last hope, in a way." Jesse Jackson recently (and inadvertently) revealed himself to be a supporter-critic, too, when he was caught on camera castigating Obama for "talking down to black people." And in an eloquent essay posted on the liberal Web site TalkingPointsMemo.com, the Brown University economics professor Glenn Loury argued that Obama's candidacy—especially his speech about race—constituted a kind of negotiation. African-Americans were being asked to give up their anger for the vague promise of "a more perfect union." If Obama was implicitly promising to leave behind the old recriminations, well, that, for Loury, was precisely the problem. He wrote, "My fear is that, should

Obama succeed with his effort to renegotiate the implicit American racial contract, then the prophetic African-American voice—which is occasionally strident and necessarily a dissident, outsider’s voice—could be lost to us forever.”

On June 26th, Smiley interrupted Joyner’s show for the last time. “Every word that I have ever uttered in this sacred space is born of a deep and abiding love for black people,” he said. He didn’t mention Obama. Joyner now says he accepts that Smiley isn’t leaving because of the Obama controversy. “Tavis did not quit because he was supporting Hillary Clinton,” Joyner says. “That’s the perception. But in our business perception is everything.”

Maybe it’s fitting that Smiley’s run on Joyner has ended now. He would have a hard time pretending to be torn between Obama and John McCain. And if he sounded a bit glum in the last few weeks of the primary maybe that’s why: he realized that the threat of a Clinton resurgence was his last bit of leverage, his last opportunity to get Obama to sit down and talk about his—Smiley’s—agenda, on his own terms.

Among African-Americans, in particular, an Obama victory in November would probably be celebrated as if it were a national holiday. (Even Smiley says, “If the brother wins, I’m gon’ be on the front line of the electric slide—I’m gon’ be there celebrating, like everybody else.”) But it could also be traumatic for anyone who makes a living talking about or to—or, especially, for—black America. Black leaders who opposed him might find themselves, as Smiley did, dissidents in their own communities. Bitter intra-racial debates over the policies of our first black President could only make the notion of a singular black community seem that much more illusory, emphasizing schisms that many black leaders have been at pains to ignore.

One day, after taping a series of interviews for PBS, Smiley decided to unwind by taking in a basketball game. It was Game 2 of the Western Conference Semifinals, the Los Angeles Lakers against the Utah Jazz, and Smiley was installed in a luxury box at Staples Center, the Lakers’ home arena. Just about everyone in the building seemed to be wearing identical yellow commemorative T-shirts—Kobe Bryant had just received the M.V.P. trophy—and the Lakers were putting on a cool, confident performance that made the night seem more like a coronation than a contest. He is a longtime Angeleno, and no fan of the Jazz, but he declined to join in the jubilation. Only when Utah pulled to within six points, halfway through the fourth quarter, did he truly seem engaged. “I just love a good game,” he said. “I *hate* blowouts.” ♦

ILLUSTRATION: ROBERT RISKO
