

Nu-wave TV feeds off radiation

by PRASAD BIDAYA (Excalibur)

For the first time since the 1970's, American networks have taken a sudden interest in black-oriented programming. *Who's the Boss?*, *Growing Pains* and *Cosby* were dumped for a new breed of African-American comedy. Coincidentally, when those cancellations were made last spring, L.A. was burning and African-Americans in general had very little to laugh about. But as shows like *Martin!*, *Here and Now*, *Out All Night* and *Hanging With Cooper* garner high ratings and overwhelming applause, the question remains whether black viewers should welcome this.

Obviously, this addition to network formats is long overdue. Television in the 1980's was conservative, hegemonic and an insult to the mentality of the non-white viewer. For a B-boy or fly-girl, what entertainment, let alone educational value, could Michael J. Fox pressing his pro-Nixon politics or suave Don Johnson picking off every criminal in MTV fashion provide?

From the *Arsenio Hall Show* to *In Living Colour* to *Martin!*, television has finally acknowledged the vitality of contemporary African-American culture, as well as its necessity to be broadcast in every American home. And rightfully so -- watching the premier of Fox's politically incorrect rookie *Martin!*, I can't remember laughing so hard in months! Though the same cannot be said of *Here and Now*, *Out All Night* or *Hanging With Cooper*, they are equally important.

For the first time ever in the history of American television, one finds programs that challenge the dirty, violent and obscene stereotype of the African-American male. Both Mark Cooper of *Hanging With...* and Malcolm Jamal-Warner of *Here and Now* play teachers; responsible, kind and even symbolic of the need for educators in the African-American community. Similarly is *Out All Night*'s Morris Chestnut; a well-groomed and successful gentleman who lacks more aggression than he does sensitivity.

Of course, none of these shows are devoid of sex-driven, manly characters. Unlike most "white" programs, this "Nu Wave" of television is socially deconstructive and presents a variety of personalities, likeable



Should black viewers welcome recent TV programs which present a new black stereotype?

and not, within the community. The best example being *Martin!*, in which the star is both macho and self-conscious, but always sweet and passionate to his girlfriend Gina.

But the wake-up call is hardly worth a parade

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in the full context of the movement for betterment of African-(North) American peoples. Hollywood has recognized the differences between African-American men, but has perpetuated its ignorance towards the other members of the community.

Without exception, all of the women in the Nu Wave are cast in supporting roles. And but for Dawn Lewis (*Hangin' With...*), they are all light-skinned, extraordinarily thin and fashionably dressed in as little clothing as possible.

In a recent episode of *Hangin' With...*, one actress was portrayed sympathizing with Mark's sensitivity and was impressed enough to bend over and reveal the fleshiness of her breasts for the camera's focus. Surprisingly, her role in this episode was a successful career-woman/feminist!

Another concern is the homophobic content in the shows. Television has yet to give an

accurate portrayal of gay and lesbian issues. "White" television ignores them and will probably continue to do so, but this can't excuse the producers of African-American shows. As representatives of a large underclass, they should know not to support the ignorance of another group. Ironically, contemporary media, long a bastion of avoiding non-white, non-straight issues, won't let them get away with it. African-Americans/Canadians are getting tagged as being homophobic.

The community must address these issues. The task is even more difficult when the media focuses on the overpublicized "spokesmen" like Public Enemy or Reverend Louis Farrakhan. This stereotype is a stigma in the movement for black unity and equality. Langston Hughes, the renowned poet of the Harlem Renaissance and an innovator for all artists of African descent, was gay. Can today's contemporaries ridicule his lifestyle when if it were not for him they would probably still be on BETV (Black Entertainment Television)?

Television content changes slightly for every generation. It's sad to let the tube set the agenda for a social movement. For those of us not of African descent, Nu Wave could help quell some racial concerns in our communities today. For those of us who are, shows like *Martin!* and *Here and Now* will entertain us this season and bore us for the rest of the decade. Even worse, it might simply keep the otherwise talented minds locked in the 'suckle of the cathode ray nipple' when they could be reading Belle Hooks, Audre Lorde or other educational and creative artists.

Black actors could be more visible, but only time will tell if they have more power. History has shown us they have access to the mainstream when it benefits whites. If this is the case, by 1999 the Nu Wave phenomena will simply be another name for blaxploitation. The substance of this work will indicate the power of its creators. Unless substantial change is soon to follow, expect media and politics to return to conservative/fascist values.

Enjoy *your* entertainment, but don't expect too much. Remember the revolution will never be televised! ■