

BET founder Robert Johnson reflects on Boomer generation



By H. Darr Beiser, USA TODAY

"I always have a lot of faith in people's ultimate rationality, if not their goodness," says Robert Johnson, founder of cable's Black Entertainment Television.

By David Lieberman, USA TODAY
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Robert Johnson became one of the most important members of the Baby Boom generation by being in the right place at the right time — and having a plan.

As a lobbyist for the cable television industry in 1979, he saw an opportunity to create the first cable channel that targeted African-American viewers: Black Entertainment Television.

Critics, including director Spike Lee, attacked BET's broadcasts of music videos that seemed to glamorize violence and degrade women. But with the cable industry booming, BET in 1991 became the first black-controlled company to go public on the New York Stock Exchange. When Viacom bought BET for \$3 billion in 2003, Johnson became the first African-American billionaire.

Johnson went on to build The RLJ Companies, a financial services empire. He also invested in enterprises such as the Charlotte Bobcats basketball team, and became a supporter of Hillary Rodham Clinton in her 2008 presidential campaign.

It's been an unusual ride for the Hickory, Miss., native who began his career in public relations after earning a master's from Princeton University's Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs. Here are his thoughts on his generation and career, edited for space and clarity:

Q: Does Baby Boomer have a special meaning, or is it just a term for people born between two particular years?

A: We are part of a generation that had some huge, complex challenges. It was the civil rights movement, Vietnam, the rise of the feminist movement, the changes in attitude about morality, and of course, raising children during all of these hectic changes. So there's a camaraderie there. There's an identity.

Q: College was a radicalizing experience for many in the age of Vietnam, the draft and the assassinations of Martin Luther King and Bobby Kennedy. What was your experience?

A: The experience for me was more about the civil rights movement as the black power movement came into vogue. Most African Americans were not really radical. They were trying to find their way and become successful, raise a family, get a degree, get a good job and do better than their parents. Make their parents proud.

Q: Business wasn't considered cool. Did you feel that way when you were in college?

A: Most people I knew didn't want to go into business. I wanted to become an ambassador.

The whole idea was, let's go back and rebuild our community. Most were focused on getting that law degree, getting that degree in business or social studies or philosophy or whatever it was. Not so much walking out of there and going into Wall Street and making millions of dollars.

Q: When did you warm to the possibility of a career in business?

A: My career in business was accidental. I happened to be at a party, and this lady came up to me, and we started talking and she said, 'You would make a great lobbyist for the cable industry.' I said, 'I don't know anything about cable.' She introduced me to the guy who was head of the National Cable Television Association, and he said, 'I'd like to hire you to become vice president for government affairs. You can go out and promote the deregulation of cable.' As they say, from that point on it was history.

Q: You had more faith in the system than a lot of your colleagues in the Baby Boom generation had.

A: Yeah. I was never one to say that this is a conspiracy by The Man who is out to get us, and we're always going to be tied down. I always have a lot of faith in people's ultimate rationality, if not their goodness.

Q: One rap against the Baby Boom generation is that they became yuppies — they gave up their ideals for the almighty dollar. Is that fair?

A: Disillusionment set in with the Baby Boomers. For a lot of African Americans, it set in around the time the civil rights movement didn't deliver as much as they'd hoped it would in terms of equal opportunity and jobs and wealth creation. It set the stage for it, but didn't deliver. And I think for Baby Boomers in general, it was obviously the war and the reaction to the peace movement.

I don't think they necessarily sold out. I think they began to focus more on themselves instead of societal changes because they felt that it was not really going to happen in a big way.

Q: When you founded BET, did you think of it strictly as a business opportunity, or was there any idealism behind it?

A: It was a business, and I've always focused on it as a business. But I could see that I could provide an outlet for black expression. BET was not so much a programming objective as an empowerment objective.

Q: It was a mirror on what was happening in black culture?

A: It mirrored what was coming out of the record companies. For a while, that mirror was R&B. Then over time, it changed to hip-hop, then to rap and now to a mix.

More than that, BET was the first African-American company publicly traded on the New York Stock Exchange in 1991. People now could see that African-American companies could create value in the public equities market. BET was both a programming achievement and a business achievement.

Q: Some people said that BET was coarse and misogynistic.

A: Having grown up in the black community, you understand this schizophrenia in the black community. There is a desire to want to have their images seen in the most positive light possible. But that was not what the creative community was delivering and what people want to see.

I understand the frustration. But there was not much I could do about that in the sense of trying to run a business — which was the primary purpose of BET — to create value for my investors and shareholders.

And it's not just the African-American community that wants us to be sanitized. It is also the liberal community that has a paternalistic view of the African-American community.

Q: Now you're criticizing liberals?

A: Liberals in general are not comfortable with powerful black men who are independent in their own thinking. We're always *Benson*. We're always *The Jeffersons*. We're always a loyal sidekick. We're the person who takes the bullet. We're *Driving Miss Daisy*.

It's that kind of viewpoint that I think goes to why there is not a lot of black economic power. Because we're not identified in that way of being able to manage wealth or create wealth.

Q: Wasn't this supposed to be the generation of civil rights and bringing people together?

A: When I came to Washington, there were more integrated parties. Today, it's almost completely back to white people partying with white people and black people partying with black people. It's just not happening.

Q: But we have a black president.

A: Yeah, we do have a black president. But we don't have the kind of interaction of blacks and whites in a social setting that you might think you would have. I remember when Hugh Hefner would have *Playboy After Dark*, and you'd always see the collection of black athletes and jazz musicians and black men and white women hanging out. Even the Rat Pack was integrated with Sammy Davis Jr. Today, you don't see that kind of thing.

Q: You don't see it on BET, either.

A: BET was designed to be a niche channel targeting African Americans. I didn't want to reinvent the wheel. I just wanted to paint it black. That was always the approach to BET, because there were at that time 50 or 60 other non-black channels.

Q: The Baby Boom generation wanted to be forever young. Are they comfortable about growing old?

A: Baby Boomers are worrying about where to leave their mark. What's the footprint in the sand that I want to leave? Your challenge becomes, 'How can I live healthier and longer?' It's not a sense of saying, 'I don't want to be old, or I don't want to mature.' It's, 'I don't want to be ravaged by disease or handicaps because I'm going to be around.'

Q: That sounds a little narcissistic. It's all about me. Is that the generation's mark?

A: It's probably been more about instant gratification than it has been protecting the future. That's part of the way the politics is playing out. Nobody wants to come to grips, so you've got a huge deficit growing up, and you've got a huge entitlement growing up.

That's going to be the greatest legacy the Baby Boomers will leave to their kids – the inability to solve the question of how you balance out (the needs of) those who are makers and those who are takers in a way that everybody in society benefits.

You can almost question whether there's enough courage and leadership within the Baby Boom generation.

Q: Would it have been different if Martin Luther King and Bobby Kennedy had not been assassinated?

A: I really don't know. Martin Luther King had a vision about what the world could be. I'm not sure that vision could have been implemented in this political process.

I've been focused on this whole idea of the growing wealth gap. In 20 years, the wealth gap between black and white Americans has increased from \$20,000 to \$95,000. In one generation. And almost 42% of African Americans whose parents were middle class 20 years ago will not attain the wealth of their parents. How do you account for that?

More importantly, how do you solve it?

Q: That sounds pretty bleak.

A: I don't want to sound pessimistic, but the clock is ticking. And it ain't getting better in terms of dealing with the problem. We haven't had a legitimate national dialogue on race since Martin Luther King.

And when I say race, I don't just mean African Americans. I mean Hispanic Americans. Because these two groups are going to be the future of the country, if you look at the demographic patterns. That's the one thing the Baby Boom generation is going to leave people. It's pretty much undecided as to how you're going to create that equilibrium.

Q: Because Boomers gave up?

A: We ossified. People's positions just hardened. People who have (wealth) became protective. The have-nots became demanding. And no one is saying, 'You give up some, and I give up some, and we move to the next level.'

Q: The generation went from 'All you need is love' to 'I got mine'?

A: We moved in the same wave of time. But we didn't move in the same wave of opportunity. That, to me, is what defines the Baby Boom generation.

I know a lot of African-American Baby Boomers who are sitting back and saying, 'I don't think I have enough to live on and retire on.' That, to me, is the dilemma: What happened in that 65-year span, that one group prospered and one group didn't? Had we solved the racial cohesiveness and togetherness, I don't think we'd have some of the problems we have today.