

## *Reed-ing Between the Lines: The Future of the Black Sitcom*

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At first glance, it appears that cable television will be the salvation for the black-oriented sitcom. The success of *House of Payne* on TBS in 2007 proved that black-sitcoms could work on cable. At the time of *HOP*'s debut, there were only three black sitcoms on the broadcast networks: *The Game*, *Everybody Hates Chris*, and *Girlfriends*. By summer 2009, all three shows were off the air while *HOP* aired its 125<sup>th</sup> episode. TBS added two additional black sitcoms *Meet the Browns* and *Are We There Yet?* and created a Wednesday night black comedy block. This is a familiar programming strategy also known as “televisual ghettoization” in which broadcast networks had black sitcoms on one night a week to attract young urban viewers.

TBS continues to add original sitcoms to its lineup as part of its “Very Funny” branding but not black-oriented sitcoms. In fall 2011, TBS moved its black-oriented sitcoms to Fridays. Although TBS added a third Tyler Perry sitcom, *For Better or Worse*, to the schedule, the basic cable channel only ordered 35 episodes (and not 100 like with *HOP* and *MTB*). The cable channel also announced that it was not ordering any more episodes of *MTB* or *HOP*.<sup>1</sup> *MTB* ended its 140-episode run in November 2011, and *HOP* ended in August 2012 with 254 episodes. *Are We There Yet?* returns for a new season in fall 2012, but not on Friday nights. New episodes air on Friday afternoons. The Friday move for all of Perry's shows and *Are We There Yet?* suggests that TBS is marginalizing its black-oriented programming and following a similar broadcast network template. Like Fox and The CW, TBS is moving to act more like a broadcast network and favoring its other (white) shows.

Also the success of black sitcoms on TBS did not result in an immediate increase in this programming form on cable. BET and TV One did not air original scripted comedies until 2011. In January 2011, *Love That Girl* premiered on TV One. *Love* is TV One's first original scripted program since the cable channel launched in 2004. In 2011, BET launched two sitcoms: *The Game* and *Let's Stay Together*. The success of *The Game* on BET in 2011 started as a positive sign for the future of black-oriented sitcoms, but its ratings have decreased significantly. The season five finale had 2.4 million viewers. Also the spring 2012 announcement that the show's leading lady, Tia Mowry, was not returning for the sixth season places the show in a precarious situation. *Reed Between the Lines* is also in a similar situation. In August 2012, BET announced that Tracy Ellis was not returning for the show's second season. For BET, the future of the black sitcom depends on if *The Game* and *Reed Between the Lines* can survive in the ratings without their leading ladies.

TV Land aired its first original scripted black sitcom with *The Soul Man* in summer 2012, but as of this writing, the show has not been renewed for a second season. *The Soul Man*, a spin-off of the TV Land sitcom *Hot in Cleveland*, started out strong with a debut of 1.9 million viewers, but

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<sup>1</sup> TBS had just ordered 42 additional episodes of *HOP* in September 2011.

by the end of the first season ( 13 episodes) the show had less than one million viewers per episode. *The Soul Man* proves that a big name/icon, Cedric the Entertainer, does not guarantee success.

Black-oriented sitcoms on cable are following their broadcast network predecessors in which they are limited to one night a week. Basic cable will use black-oriented sitcoms to build an audience but eventually remove these shows from their schedules. Yet at least cable is providing an outlet for this programming form, which has disappeared from the prime-time broadcast network schedule.