
Party with a P

BY ANIKA MYERS PALM

IN THE BEGINNING (1942), JOHN H. JOHNSON created *Negro Digest*, followed by *Ebony* and *Jet*. There was a void—the country had no national publications both by and for black Americans—and with his creations, he was able to exercise vast influence over the black magazine publishing landscape. Johnson spoke to advertisers and said, “Black Americans have lots of disposable income.” And it was so. Advertisers saw that Johnson was right and started pitching such products as Zenith radios, Hennessy cognac and cars to black Americans. And younger men went to Johnson for advice, and he told them to start their own magazines. Inspired by his example, Earl G. Graves said, “Let me start a personal finance magazine,” and so *Black Enterprise* was born. And Ed Lewis said, “Let me start a magazine for black women,” and so *Essence* was born. And they all saw that there were enough advertising dollars for everyone. Other publishing companies started other publications: *Emerge*, *Savoy*, *Honey*. But now, the big four remain: *Ebony*, *Jet*, *Black Enterprise*—and *Essence*.

In the universe of magazines designed to appeal to black women, only *Essence* has become a major success. It is so successful, in fact, that just five years after signing a joint venture agreement to buy 49 percent of *Essence*, Time Warner was impressed enough to purchase the remaining 51 percent from founder and chairman Ed Lewis in 2005.

But what is the secret of *Essence*'s success? Its great covers and special issues like the annual “Men We Love” number? Tell-all interviews with controversial subjects who have mostly been ignored by white media (like the Black Panther Assata Shakur, exiled in Cuba for more than 20 years)? Lewis's leadership, which guided the magazine through the publishing industry's tight times? Capitalizing on the name of editorial director Susan Taylor, whose tightly braided hairstyle and regal carriage have come to be seen as something of an emblem for the magazine?

All of those things play a part. But what really distinguishes *Essence* from other black publications—and white ones, as well—isn't a direct part of the magazine at all. It's the annual Essence Music Festival.

Magazines have long used award shows or competitions as ways to attract additional revenues and readers to their brands. *GQ*, *Vibe* and *The Source* all present award shows; and *Black Enterprise* and *Folio*, among others, stage trade shows. *Vanity Fair* famously throws an annual party in conjunction with the Academy Awards, but readers can't participate in the party's glamour.

The *Essence* event has allowed readers to take part in a long week-end vacation in what was, until Hurricane Katrina, the country's best-known party city, with nightly concerts by some of the biggest names in popular music. The festival serves the magazine in four main ways: With

more than 200,000 people attending annually, it makes good money at the box office; it bonds advertisers and others to the magazine; it results in new subscribers; and it extends the brand. “It's very important to us,” said Michelle Ebanks, president of Essence Communications Inc.

The Essence Music Festival burst onto the scene in the mid-1990s, in the same decade as several other mass events targeted middle-class black America. The comedian Sinbad established the Soul Music Festival, an annual excursion to one or more Caribbean islands, culminating in a performance by 1970s funk artists. The radio disc jockey Tom Joyner started the Tom Joyner Family Reunion, held annually at Walt Disney World in Orlando. And Black Entertainment Television's recently renamed BET J unit presents a jazz music festival on the island of St. Lucia every year.

These events make a lot of money, mostly because they're targeted at an audience with both disposable cash and a willingness to spend it. The typical *Essence* reader is a 39-year-old woman who lives in a household with a median income of \$45,138 (in comparison, the average black household has a median income of \$30,134, and the average white American household has a median income of \$48,977, according to the U.S. Census Bureau).

And oh, is she loyal. *Essence*'s media kit boasts that a full one-third of all black Americans read the magazine one way or another—via single-copy purchases, subscriptions or pass-along. Those women have stayed with *Essence* even when other magazines aimed at them—*Honey* and even *Suede*, Essence Communications' own attempt to reach young, hip readers—have failed. Taylor, the editorial director, is so popular that women around the country sign up to attend seminars based on the “In the Spirit” column she has written for more than 20 years.

By the time the magazine launched its music festival 11 years ago, its readers had already proven their willingness to travel to other music festivals, and so magazine officials were certain they'd come to one carrying the *Essence* brand. When they heard about the magazine's plans, corporate sponsors wanted in: Budweiser, Kraft Foods, Chevrolet and Southwest Airlines are among the companies that pay to put their wares in front of this audience every summer.

The magazine doesn't disclose how much money it makes from the festival, but Ebanks did say that it turns a profit. “It is not a loss leader,” she said. “It is definitely something we do as a for-profit concern.” Although the company has a few people on staff who work on the festival year-round, it mostly outsources the production work. “Partnering with someone who is in that business and provides a high level of expertise, so the event retains its quality, has been essential to our success.”

Analyzing the economics of the festival, “I would say you're looking at more than a million dollars in just the talent bill for three days’

urpose

A music festival is the
essence of *Essence's* success

worth of music," said Jamie Kitman, an attorney and manager of rock bands, including They Might Be Giants and The Violent Femmes. At the least, he said, organizers would take in \$10 million in ticket sales, based on the minimum \$45 ticket price. Sponsors would add to the bottom line. "I wouldn't be surprised to learn that [*Essence*] made a couple million dollars of pure profit doing this."

Essence refers to it as "the party with a purpose," because during the day visitors can attend various seminars on subjects like spirituality, finance and personal relationships. Last year's event featured the singers Aretha Franklin, Alicia Keys, Destiny's Child, John Legend, Lionel Richie and Teena Marie on the main stages. More than 230,000 people—a record—attended over five days, according to *The Times-Picayune* of New Orleans.

But then came Katrina. What to do?

Spectator Management Group, which manages the New Orleans Superdome, proposed moving the festival to one of its arenas in another city, according to Jordy Tollett, president of the Greater Houston Convention and Visitors Bureau. "After the Superdome situation [in New Orleans], it became apparent that it was not a viable venue," said Tollett. "Some community members and I initiated a conversation with *Essence*." At that time, *Essence* was considering both Houston and Atlanta as temporary sites, according to Ebanks.

Tollett said he wanted nothing more than to see the festival come to Houston. "It ranks up there with the big events, like the World Series and the Super Bowl," he said. "This is a very huge music festival, and a lot of things are going to happen around it that play to the African-American market."

The decision was made: Houston it is, the first week of July.

This year's musical draws to the festival include the gospel singer Yolanda Adams; R&B singers Keyshia Cole, Toni Braxton and Mary J. Blige; the older acts Earth Wind & Fire, Charlie Wilson, and Maze featuring Frankie Beverly; rapper LL Cool J; comedians Mo'Nique, Cedric "The Entertainer" and Steve Harvey; and New Edition, the 1980s-era boy group, with erstwhile member Bobby Brown.

So far, it looks like it will work. By early April, a significant number of the tickets, ranging in price from \$45 to more than \$100, had already been purchased, according to *Essence*.

But what will happen next year to *Essence's* cash cow? "New Orleans has been our home," said Ebanks. "Our hope is to go back." Can the hurricane-ravaged Big Easy be ready in time? Even if it is ready, a competition for the business is already under way. Houston will fight to keep the festival beyond 2006.

Wherever it is, *Essence* is confident that its loyal readers will come and the festival will continue to be a perfect storm of opportunity for the magazine. ♦



Cedric the Entertainer



Keyshia Cole



Earth, Wind & Fire



LL Cool J



Mary J. Blige



Steve Harvey



Toni Braxton



Maze



Charlie Wilson



Yolanda Adams