

BET Likely To Revert To Private Ownership Network Expanding Cable Presence, Other Ventures

BY CARLA HAY

NEW YORK—With an anticipated move back into the private sector, Black Entertainment Television (BET) is undergoing a metamorphosis that includes ambitious expansion plans such as the acquisition of Festival Productions, new spinoff channels, and new restaurant, casino, and nightclub ventures.

On March 16, BET Holdings Inc., BET's parent company, said its board of directors accepted an acquisition offer from BET chairman/CEO Robert Johnson, Liberty Media, and Johnson and Liberty's newly formed BTV Acquisition Corp. (Billboard Bulletin, March 19).

BET, headquartered in Washington, D.C., has been a public company for the past seven years. If the deal with Johnson and his associates becomes official, it would revert the

organization back to private ownership.

"A vote by minority shareholders will be held this summer," says Johnson, "and I'm confident that the deal will be approved."

Johnson's first bid to bring BET back to the private sector began in September 1997, with an offer of \$48 per share, but that offer was rejected by the BET board. The board now has reportedly accepted an offer of \$63 a share, or \$387 million. The day news broke of the accepted offer, BET shares rose 11%; they have since been hovering in the \$60 range.

Johnson, who founded BET in 1980, explains why he felt the time was right to make BET a private company again:

"When BET went public in 1991, we had three objectives," he says. "First, to raise liquidity; second, to establish a price on the company; and third, to

raise capital. In 1998, we've reached those objectives. Now we have strategies that are focusing on long-term valuation instead of short-term earnings."

Soon after BET announced the acceptance bid, the company revealed it was buying 80% of Festival Productions Inc. That company produces approximately 50 events a year, including the JVC Jazz Festival.

The acquisition of Festival, which is being made for an undisclosed sum, is expected to benefit the fledgling cable network BET on Jazz: The Cable Jazz Channel, which BET launched in 1996.

"Our objective is to marry the two organizations and integrate their assets," Johnson says.

Johnson confirms that Festival president/CEO George Wein will "stay with the company as long as he wants to stay. George is a treasure to the jazz world, and he brings a wealth of expertise to the company."

The sale is expected to be finalized "in 30-45 days," according to Johnson. As for other changes at Festival after the sale to BET, Johnson says, "We don't anticipate that anyone will be laid off. In fact, we plan to expand the Festival staff. The plan is to promote Festival events with BET on Jazz in ways that are mutually beneficial. BET on Jazz is skewed to a younger audience than what we normally see at a JVC Jazz Festival, and I think you'll see changes in [Festival Productions] events that will show us reaching out to a younger audience."

He adds, "We also plan to stage festivals in smaller, urban cities, especially those that don't yet have BET on Jazz. We're hoping to build BET on Jazz's cable distribution in those markets."

According to the network, BET on Jazz reaches approximately 3 million U.S. households. BET, whose programming mainly consists of video-clips and other entertainment geared to African-Americans, reaches 53 million U.S. households, according to the network.

Don Lucoff, a spokesman for the jazz label Blue Note Records, says of the BET/Festival Productions deal: "Ideologically, this is a sound partnership, but it's too early to tell how it will work out. It'll be interesting to see how this new structure will deal with artists booked for their festivals and played on BET on Jazz. Will they cut special deals with certain artists? If the new BET structure is a success, it could open the doors for more record companies to free up more marketing and promotion dollars for [jazz] artists."

BET Holdings has operations that also include BET Movies, the BET Action pay-per-view service, Emerge and BET Weekend magazines, MSBET (a Microsoft/BET venture), BET Financial Services, and a BET SoundStage restaurant in Largo, Md.

BET also plans to open two new establishments in June: a BET SoundStage nightclub in Orlando, Fla., and a BET on Jazz restaurant in Washington, D.C. BET has also partnered with Hilton Hotels Corp. to build a hotel and casino in Las Vegas.

According to the network, BET
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SOUNDTRACKS AND FILM SCORE NEWS

EDITED BY CATHERINE APPLEFIELD OLSON

STRICTLY BAZ: Leave it to director **Baz Luhrmann** to create a commercial album out of what initially was a compilation of music he put together to play through the phone when callers to his studio in Sydney, Australia, were placed on hold. Capitol Records will release Luhrmann's "Something For Everybody" April 7 in the States.

The director of "Romeo + Juliet" and "Strictly Ballroom," among other films, has had a longtime relationship with 20th Century Fox; he says the politically correct explanation of the album's genesis is that it was released to help generate a buzz on the high-tech studio Fox is building in Sydney. That studio will serve as a hub for film and music projects of Luhrmann and other directors, including the upcoming "Babe 2."

"The serious reason we wanted to do a small music project is to get the music part of the organization going," he says. "But the truthful story was that we have at the office that call-waiting music, and we first put on the Gregorian chanting and that **Garbage** track [from the "Romeo + Juliet" sequel album], so there was a lot of sort of dark music coming through. Then I started hearing that people were being traumatized, saying every time they came off call waiting they were really depressed. So we thought, 'Why don't we put together a CD with the really positive, romantic tracks from all the works we've created that make you feel good?'"

When some callers began to ask if they could purchase the music—which kind of makes you wonder how long they were on hold!—Luhrmann says he decided to take the opportunity to get imaginative and create a new album. He rerecorded the songs using a variety of artists and voice-overs. Some stick closely to the originals; others are complete reworkings that bear little resemblance to their predecessors.

"I think of it as a lounge music album for swingers," he says. "It's meant to be comical in a way. We are introducing pieces of music you don't usually hear. It's a soundtrack for summer."

Several of the songs are from "Romeo + Juliet," including "When Doves Cry," "Angel," "Lovefool," and a really funky incarnation of "Everybody's Free" that winds around the now-infamous faux **Kurt Vonnegut** speech that swept through the Internet community last year before it was revealed that it had actually been written by a Chicago journalist. There are also a few tunes from "Strictly Ballroom": "Love Is In The Air," "Perhaps Perhaps Perhaps," and "Os Quindos De Ya Ya" among them. There are also a few songs Luhrmann hand-picked from various musicals and operas and even a song, "Jupiter," from an election campaign.

"Something For Everybody" was released last November in Australia, and it already has gone platinum in that country after the usually conservative Australian radio contingency jumped on board. The first Australian single was the spoken-word cut "Everybody's Free (To Wear Sunscreen) Mix."

"They played it on the alternative station, and they said they had never had as many phone calls about anything and . . . suddenly it was on classical FM on high rotation," Luhrmann says. "We decided to release it to rest of the world based on such an incredible reaction."

TUBE TALK: Whether or not they are flying off retail shelves, TV soundtracks continue to pique the interest of record labels. The latest player to make the move is Sony Music Soundtrax. On May 5, Sony will release the soundtrack to Fox series "Ally McBeal" through 550/Epic. The company has plans to release at least two additional TV soundtracks in 1998; among them will be the soundtrack to Comedy Central's "South Park" on American Recordings/Columbia (Billboard, Feb. 21).

Glen Brunman, executive VP of Sony Music Soundtrax, says Sony previously hadn't jumped on the TV soundtracks bandwagon because of the difficulty in promoting music on the small screen. "We've avoided them because the television medium limits your ability to have substantial musical use," he says. "When you have a 30-minute show, which is really 22 minutes with commercials, it's kind of hard to lay in songs in a major way. But each of these shows in different ways is, or will shortly be, showing how to transcend the limitations of the television medium." As a case in point, Brunman points to Vesper Alley recording artist **Vonda Shepard's** recurring role as a musical show in "Ally McBeal." Aside from selected Shepard performances from the show, including its theme song, "Ally McBeal" also will include selections from the score.

Sony's first TV soundtrack project, however, is actually for a miniseries. On March 31, the company will debut the album complement to a highly touted HBO miniseries, "From The Earth To The Moon." The series is a chronicle of all the Apollo space missions, with **Tom Hanks** as executive producer. The album will be released on Play-Tone/Epic, the label made famous in Hanks' film "That Thing You Do!" The "Earth" soundtrack contains a collection of '60s feel-good hits as well as a few key instrumental cues.

In other TV soundtrack news, Mercury Records on March 31 will release "Fame L.A.," which contains new material from Motown Records group **98°**, **Brian McKnight**, and newcomer **Deborah Morgan**.



LUHRMANN

amusement business		BOXSCORE		TOP 10 CONCERT GROSSES	
ARTIST(S)	Venue	Date(s)	Gross Ticket Price(s)	Attendance Capacity	Promoter
U2	Tokyo Dome Tokyo	March 5	\$2,439,230 (\$305,757,481 yen) \$71.42/\$63.49	34,265 38,000	Tokyo Dome Entertainment Corp. TNA International Ltd.
U2	Osaka Dome Osaka, Japan	March 11	\$1,404,722 (\$179,481,330 yen) \$71.42/\$63.49	19,735 25,000	Tokyo Dome Entertainment Corp. TNA International Ltd.
GARTH BROOKS TRISHA YEARWOOD	Reunion Arena Dallas	Feb. 13-15	\$1,059,494 \$21.10	50,213 52,000 three shows, one sellout	C&M Prods. Gienn Smith Presents
GARTH BROOKS TRISHA YEARWOOD	Fort Worth/Tarrant County Convention Center Fort Worth, Texas	Feb. 20-22	\$781,017 \$21.10	37,015 three sellouts	C&M Prods. Estrelia Entertainment Group
PUFF DADDY & THE FAMILY DRU HILL LIL' KIM MACE	CoreStates Center Philadelphia	March 15	\$592,399 \$45.75/\$40.75	14,394 15,000	Haymon Entertainment
BRYAN ADAMS	General Motors Place Vancouver	Feb. 26	\$405,570 (\$575,910 Canadian) \$40	11,440 15,569	Paul Mercs Concerts
EROS RAMAZZOTTI	National Auditorium Mexico City	March 11	\$249,245 (2,143,510 pesos) \$52.32/\$12.79	9,801 sellout	Ocesa Presents/CIE
LUIS MIGUEL	Selland Arena Fresno, Calif.	March 6	\$246,945 \$65/\$40/\$20	5,626 7,073	Villalobos Entertainment
LEANN RIMES BRYAN WHITE	John F. Savage Hall, University of Toledo Toledo, Ohio	March 3	\$165,145 \$32.50/\$22.50	6,454 8,200	Belkin Prods.
BROOKS & DUNN TERRI CLARK	Sioux Falls Arena Sioux Falls, S.D.	March 7	\$147,539 \$24.50	6,369 sellout	Steve Litman

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