

THE REAL HIP-HOP NETWORK:

THE REVOLUTION

WILL BE TELEVISED

By Bill Kopp

In today's highly segmented media marketplace, it's fair and reasonable to ask if there is room for another cable channel. It often seems like every special interest has its own dedicated 24/7 programming these days. But according to Atonn Muhammad, there's a significant void in the programming menu. And he and his team are poised to fill it. "Now is the time," he said in a recent CNN interview, "to harness all the energy of hip-hop into a 24-hour cable channel."

AN OPENING IN THE MUSIC TELEVISION MARKETPLACE

Music television programming got its major-media start in the early 80s with the launch of Viacom's MTV. That groundbreaking channel transformed the music industry (and entertainment industry in general) with its music-centered programming. The early MTV broke new artists, and turned a whole generation on the new hybrid medium of music video.

Eventually, MTV found itself at the center of criticism and controversy for its seeming unwillingness to spotlight African-American artists. Under pressure from several directions, the channel made some concessions and broadened its programming to include major acts including Michael Jackson, Prince and Lionel Richie. But it wasn't long before the channel lost its original focus; these days one is left to wonder what the "M" stands for: MTV, devotes large blocks of its programming to non-music-oriented shows, including a large swath of so called "reality" programs.

Other channels have stepped in to try and fill part of that void. Both BET and VH-1 (like MTV, both Viacom properties) have worked in some soul, funk and hip-hop, but these channels too have- for any number of reasons-chosen not to focus on music videos.

Hip-hop is a huge factor in the entertainment industry: over the last five years, sales for the top ten R&B/hip-hop albums have topped 112 million units domestically, according to the latest Nielsen Sound Scan figures. Clearly, hip-hop is a market force to be reckoned with.

But hip-hop transcends the marketplace; it's a cultural phenomenon. Like jazz, blues and rock and roll before it, hip-hop is a uniquely American art form. And like all American culture, it's among this country's most popular exports. Atonn Muhammad recalls seeing a recent TV commercial for Chinese tourism. "There was a guy break dancing!" He cites the statistic that "seventy percent of all hip-hops sales internationally are in South East Asia and Europe."

Unfortunately, the elements most often focused on within hip-hop are gangsterism, misogyny and excessive materialism. There's much, much more to the genre, but many media outlets focus on the negative while giving short shrift if not completely ignoring- the cultural and historic importance of hip-hop. The music plays an important part in the

lives of many people. "It was," recalls Atonn Muhammad, "the soundtrack of my early adulthood. I am the demographic; hip-hop made me."



THE REAL HIP-HOP NETWORK

A new channel called The Real Hip-Hop Network has as its mission the addressing of both of these challenges; fill the void in hip-hop programming on television, and counter the negative stereotypes propagated in the media. "The Real Hip-Hop Network is the first 24 hour cable channel geared toward real hip-hop lifestyle and culture," says Atonn Muhammad, CEO for the new network. The stated mission of RHN is to "challenge the negativity in hip-hop and introduce to the world what 'real' hip hop represents." The channel approaches this challenge by focusing on what Mr. Muhammad calls "the four elements of hip-hop; deejaying, break-dancing, emceeing and graffiti art." To that he adds an all-important, "fifth element of knowledge, wisdom and understanding." He stresses that "our biggest goal is creating balance." Mr. Muhammad is unequivocal about the role he sees for RHN: "When you're building a brand, it's essential to establish a clear identity." And for RHN, that twin goal of spotlighting "real" hip-hop and countering the negatives is a fundamental theme. "Hip-hop right now is in a state of emergency," he said on CNN, "and RHN is the cure."

BEGINNING OF RHN

"The hip-hop that I grew up with was educational," says Mr. Muhammad. He speaks fondly of the term "edutainment": for "everything from religion to politics to events going on in the community, hop-hop was the source of information for many young people." It was, he says, "something of a 'black CNN.'" But as hip-hop gained in popularity, it was- to some extent- co-opted by the mainstream. "You saw less and less of the variety that we enjoyed in the late 80s and early 90s," he says.

A native Washingtonian, Atonn Muhammad played football for the University of Miami's Hurricanes from 1990 to 1994; while there he studied finance. Fresh out of college, he launched RAAMM Enterprises, a concert promotions firm dealing primarily with hop-hop. During this period, his profile rose, and he was featured in Billboard and the Washington Post, and he guested on Tavis Smiley's influential BET Tonight.

But the scene was changing. "The concert promotions business got pretty tight" in the late 90s, recalls Mr. Muhammad. "Hip-hop was under attack; a lot of venues had stopped allowing hip-hop events to take place because there had been a surge of violence at some of the events. As a business venture, it became less and less profitable." So he moved on- "to make my mom happy," as he puts it- and, putting his degree to work, took a position with Morgan Stanley as a financial advisor.

While Morgan Stanley-though on his own time- Mr. Muhammad developed the concept of the Real Hip-Hop Network. Around this time, the previously-independent BET was sold to Viacom, and as Mr. Muhammad recalls, "there was a lot of disappointment in the African-American community about 'losing' BET. A lot of people feared that the diversity of music-already homogenized-would be lost forever." One player-Viacom-now controlled all of the major music television outlets. The goal of The Real Hip-Hop Network, then, would be to, as Atonn Muhammad says, "connect hip-hop back to its foundation." RHN would create



an atmosphere where "real" hip-hop was represented. Muhammad left Morgan Stanley and begun pulling together a team who could bring his vision to reality.

Others had similar (but not identical) ideas. According to a 2004 cover story in The Hollywood Reporter, other competitive channels were being planned: Hype and 1AM. At the time, Mr. Muhammad claimed that those ventures would "lose out on the bigger marketing dollars. A company like Proctor & Gamble isn't going to go that route." Nearly five years later, he's been proven right that RHN's programming mix has greater appeal to mainstream advertisers. "What proved me correct is that those networks never got off the ground," he laughs, "and we're still here."

An important early supporter of the fledgling network was CNN co-founder Reese Schonfeld; he aided in developing content for RHN. Also critical to the network's success is Chief Advertising Officer Varick

young people. RHN can have a major impact-not just for African-Americans on people all across the cultural spectrum who have grown to love hip-hop.

RHN TODAY

Other industry heavyweights have gotten involved with the Real Hip-Hop Network. Amir Khan of Philly International signed on as Senior Director of Special Projects and Events. Mr. Khan spearheaded development of the RHN-sponsored Dreamstream web site (www.dreamstream.tv). He describes it as a marriage between "social networking and 'reality' programming." The site helps connect dreamers-aspiring rappers, for example-with their dreams. Monthly segments put the spotlight on the realization of a dream; a recent feature saw Patti LaBelle connecting with a disadvantaged young woman from Camden NJ.

Kenny Gamble of famed songwriting/production duo Gamble and Huff joined RHN's Board of Directors in 2007. In addition to his musical work, Mr. Gamble is renowned for his humanitarian efforts, especially in his hometown of Philadelphia. The goals of RHN- especially those embodied in its self-described "fifth element"- drew Mr. Gamble to his involvement on the network's board. There he "is a great source of guidance" according to Mr. Muhammad.

To paraphrase an ancient aphorism, "with popularity comes responsibility." Atonn Muhammad agrees: "We were invited to express that viewpoint in the halls of Congress. Rep. Bobby Rush, Chairman of the U.S. House Committee on Energy and Commerce, asked us to participate on the 'Imus to Industry' panel. We were there to speak on behalf of independent media that wanted to take responsibility for the messages that were being put out. We use hip-hop as a vehicle to do that, because of its influence."

"With the level of sophistication that we're going to approach the hip-hop demographic, we believe in being more gritty and real. We're drawing a distinction between our approach and that of sanitized 'reality' programming and some music videos; I don't see that as reality. A lot of bikini-clad women draped across Bentleys isn't part of any America that I've ever seen." He chuckles and notes that coming up he "didn't see too much Cristal bottle-poppin'." With the times in which we live-amidst economic upheaval-Mr. Muhammad notes that "there's still a lot of desire for optimism and social change. RHN can help shine a light on that more positive outlook."

Mr. Muhammad believes that the early success of The Real Hip-Hop network is affecting a shift in emphasis across the media spectrum. Asked in the CNN interview how he thought MTV and the other music networks would react to RHN, he asserted that "they're going to have to change their lineups." In fact that is happening; Mr. Muhammad cites programs

"HIP-HOP RIGHT NOW IS IN A STATE OF EMERGENCY, AND RHN IS THE CURE"
- ATONN MUHAMMAD

Baiyina, an advertising veteran with twenty year's experience. Mr. Baiyina explains the positioning of RHN in the marketplace: "Advertisers are yearning for a non-offensive outlet to reach their target audiences without the worry of exposing their valuable brands to a morally questionable environment." With other members of the RHN team he says, he has developed "an advertiser-friendly environment that will include partnership, flexibility, and carefully planned campaigns incorporating features like product placement and branding within programming."

Mr. Muhammad solicited input from wise and revered figures. He convened a meeting of the founders of hip-hop, including Afrika Bambaataa, Chuck D, and members of the break dancing Rock Steady Crew and asked them to help establish the direction of the Real Hip-Hop Network.

Meanwhile, Bill Cosby had been holding town hall meetings around the country, discussing the state of affairs among young people in the African-American community. Asked to speak at one of these functions, Mr. Muhammad "had an opportunity to meet with Dr. Cosby. He sat me down, and we spoke for close to four hours. His goal is to see positivism expressed for young people." That dovetailed perfectly with the goals of the Real Hip-Hop Network, which, Mr. Muhammad says, "can be a tool to enlighten and inspire

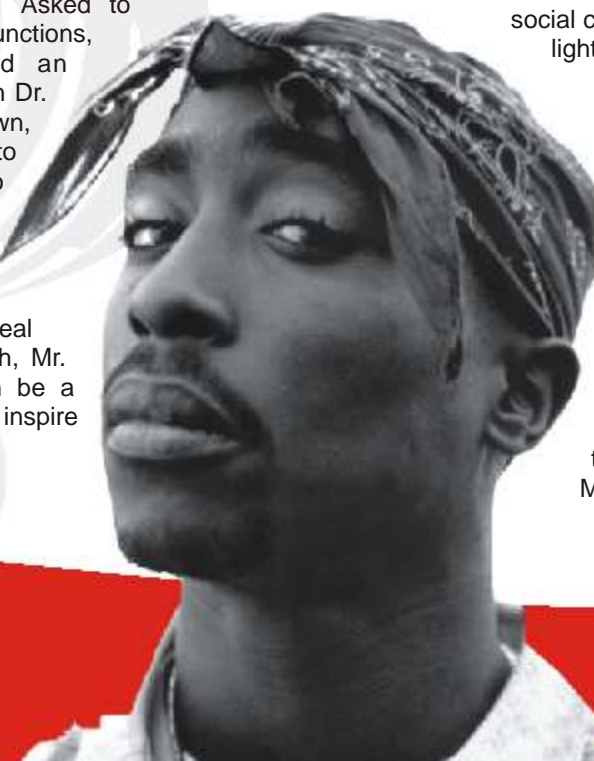
such as The Hip-Hop Honors and Flavor of Love and asserts that "VH-1 has entirely changed its demographic to try and gear more toward the hip-hop audience."

Bernard Taft is RHN's Quality Assurance Director as well as EVP for Artist Relations. In the 90s he was a member of DC gangster rap outfit Section Eight Mob. He discovered that "a lot of what we say and do affects people. I saw that I had a responsibility to make a change and talk about more than just gangster topics." He sees RHN as a way to allow new "artists who have something to say get on an even playing field with some of the more established acts like 50 Cent, Jay-Z and Kanye West." Mr. Taft echoes the concept of the five elements- deejaying, break-dancing, emceeing, graffiti art and knowledge/wisdom/understanding-as the real foundation of the network.

ACCOMPLISHMENTS AND PROGRAMMING

The RHN team has spent the last several months preparing for the channel's official launch (scheduled for the first quarter of 2009). Extensive test marketing and program development have established a firm foundation for that launch.

A year-long test launch in both the Washington DC market and on the Dish network allowed RHN to fine-tune its programming before a worldwide rollout. Programming was analyzed against the backdrop of the network's targeted 18-34 demographic. With the support of strategic advertising partner McCann-Erickson, RHN plans to launch out of the gate with a strong advertiser foundation. "We have taken the best of what the industry loves about hip-hop," Muhammad explains, "and taken away some of its worst flaws."



Azim Lateef (aka Prodigy) is Marketing and Creative Operations VP for the network. He stresses that RHN's content will differ significantly from that of the Viacom properties: "First of all, we actually play videos. And we try to lead the kids into a more positive direction, back to hip-hop's essence of lyricism." He notes that when that kind of content is shown on other networks, it tends to be on "second-tier" channels like MTV2. The Real Hip-Hop Network is positioned to be a top-tier channel, on the dial amidst the most popular channels.

In addition to music videos, RHN has developed a winning package of original hip-hop-themed programming. Highlights from the schedule include Keeping it Real with hosts IQ, and interview program spotlighting hip-hop moguls; There and Back Again, featuring rappers visiting historic landmarks and discussing what they mean today; and Out Da Trunk, a program highlighting unsigned artists. Breaking new artists is a driving force behind the channel. Mr. Muhammad explains that aspiring rappers will be able to submit content to the channel for potential showing on screen. "We want to give new independent and international artists mainstream exposure without the mainstream dollars." He notes that "BET and MTV will not play you if you're not 'SoundScanning' or getting enough spins on radio and records." RHN is positioning itself as a tastemaker, then, to break new talent.

A cornerstone of the programming lineup is Analyze This, hosted by hip-hop legend KRS-One. RHN has developed more than 300 hours of content on its own ("several terabytes full on our hard drives," notes Khalil Muhammad, EVP for Programming). Because RHN focuses on hip-hop, it has greater depth. "Why sacrifice the beauty of hip-hop's diversity," asks Muhammad, "when we can expand our programming? We can go a lot deeper than other networks. We don't have to follow their 'a mile wide and an inch deep' approach. We want to be the voice of the purists, and have the opportunity to show the underground, the grassroots, and even some of the mainstream artists who want to connect back to what made rap important."

RHN program offerings extend to kids' shows (former child actor Kellie Williams is VP for Children's Programming) as well as a wide variety of news, talk and perspective, plus hip-hop concerts, specials documentaries and movies. In addition to The Real Hip-Hop Network's original programming, they are able to draw upon a vast array of content from other domestic and international sources. Khalil Muhammad (no relation to Atonn) mentions that RHN will source content from "Ghana, Japan, Canada, Cuba and more...all over the world." A Sunday Hip-Hop Gospel program is in development as well.

The network also sponsors major events, including Summer Jam with Hot 97 in New York two years running, and Power 99 FM's Powerhouse concert in Philadelphia. Mr. Muhammad notes with pride that these and other efforts help RHN "get the respect of hip-hop notables like KRS-One." A Real Hip-Hop Expo is being planned to "showcase new digital media trends and other consumer trends, as well as new artists."

BEYOND THE BUSINESS

RHN's commitment extends beyond merely marketing a brand and a channel. Social responsibility is at the core of The Real Hip-Hop Network's mission. To that end, the organization has developed a charitable arm.

Richard Williams (renowned coach and father of tennis stars Venus and Serena) came on board to run the nonprofit arm of RHN called Real Hip-Hop Cares (realhiphopcares.org). In part, the stated mission of RHHHC is "to provide comprehensive social, educational, socioeconomic and cultural arts programs to 'at-risk' youth and their families. RHN is also partnering with other charitable organizations to promote relevant and worthy causes. RHN Advisory Board member Kenny Barnes (of Root, Inc. and the Guns Aside initiative) was involved in helping author related legislation in the U.S. House of Representatives. Overall, Mr. Muhammad says that the goal here is to "channel hip-hop's appeal to help fight gun violence."

RHN executives have been involved in the 2007 "brain trust" meeting held by the Congressional Black Caucus member Rep. Sheila Jackson Lee; they've taken a high-profile role in the Hip-Hop Summit Action Network; and Atonn Muhammad is often called upon to speak publicly about the synergy between media and the creative element with a goal of bringing about more positive images. Working in cooperation with Rev. Lennox Yearwood and the Hip-Hop Caucus, RHN has been a fixture at voter registration rallies across the nation; they've helped develop a voter registration database of more than 2.5 million people, mostly youth. RHN has membership in the National Press Club and is petitioning to join the "pool" of White House reporters in 2009. "All of this," Mr. Muhammad says, "is designed to provide viewers of The Real hip-Hop Network with more 'substance with their entertainment'."

THE FUTURE OF RHN

Nineteen broadcast channels nationwide have already signed on as RHN affiliates; they will broadcast selected programs from RHN's expansive offerings. Meanwhile, "we're preparing for our national launch in 2009," Mr. Muhammad says.



RHN/Chief Ad. Officer, Varick Baiyina
Music Artist, Master P. (Percy Miller)
RHN/CEO, Atonn Muhammad

Recording Artist, Neyo
RHN CEO, Atonn Muhammad

Prodigy and Friends

RHN Host, Jason Parker
Congresswoman, Maxine Waters
RHN CEO, Atonn Muhammad

(Left) HSNAN CEO, Rev. Ben Chavis
(Middle) RHN CEO, Atonn Muhammad
(Right) RHN Exec, William Chappelle
(Brother of Dave Chappelle)

Publicist, Christie w/ an Eye (Left)
Artist, Da Brat (Center)
RHN VP Label Relations Bernard Taft (Right)

RHN/Chief Ad. Officer, Varick Baiyina
Music Artist, DMC from Legendary RUN-DMC

RHN CEO, Atonn Muhammad
Real Hip Hop Cares Spokesman, Richard Williams
Father of Venus and Serena

HSNAN CEO, Rev. Ben Chavis
RHN VP of Promotions, Jerome "Romeo" Leaks
RHN CEO, Atonn Muhammad

Music Artist, MARIO
RHN HOST, Ade "I-QUE" Alexander

Actor/Philanthropist, Bill Cosby
RHN CEO, Atonn Muhammad

From left to right
Khalil Muhammad, Varick Baiyina, Rodney Bonds,
Atonn Muhammad, and Bernard Taft

"We've entered into negotiations with both Dish Network and DirecTV. Early next year we'll be doing strategic marketing for the network." He mentions a grassroots-oriented "Join the Real Hip-Hop R(evolution)" push not unlike the 1980's "I Want My MTV" campaign; the goal is to build buzz about RHN so that potential viewers request the channel from their cable providers. In early February, RHN will host a Grammy party to officially launch the network. At launch, RHN will reach an estimated 35 million households domestically as well as in Europe and Asia. And that's just for starters: "We take over the later," Mr. Muhammad laughs.

This being the 21st century, RHN is a truly multi-platform endeavor. "We are launching a version of the channel online-www.rhn.tv- where subscribers will be able to preview the network's content. (That launch is scheduled around the time this feature goes to print.) A mobile text platform of RHN will allow individuals to get selected network content via their cell phones. RHN has partnered with TA Broadcasting to provide voice, TV, Master Control, Production and Internet services via TA's Vidvo, a new IP platform service. The RHN channel is also currently available through Vidvo's video IPTV platform.

Khalil Muhammad adds that the network plans to leverage the popularity of new media like YouTube and MySpace, applying that sort of approach to less commercial/mainstream fare. Characterizing hip hop as wide-ranging "art that is an expression of life," he notes that RHN will even air cooking shows featuring hip-hop chefs."Prodigy mentions an important and innovative tie-in to the videos RHN shows. "We'll play a video from a new artist. And we'll offer a ringtone and download-with the info codes on the screen while the song is playing-so that viewers can download the content in real-time."

DIRTYGLASS vs. CLEANGLASS

The RHN team wants to be more than just a business; they see the network as a creative outlet/venue for artists. "We want," Mr. Muhammad says, "to be the 'hip-hop C-SPAN.' Open up the doors to all kinds of hip-hop ideas and styles, and put those across to the audience." He states the goal of "allowing, without criticism, the audience to determine what's good."

The Real Hip-Hop Network fills an important role for viewers, advertisers and society as a whole. "We subscribe to the clean glass/dirty glass philosophy," Mr. Muhammad explains. "When you've only got the dirty glass to drink from, you will drink from it. Because you don't have any other choice. But when people have the choice of making a better decision, they'll make the better decision. They'll choose the clean glass."

Real Hip-Hop Network at a Glance:

- **Number of Households Reached:** 35 million
- **Unique Selling Proposition:** The first television network dedicated to all things hip-hop, RHN challenges the genre's negative image, replacing it with the essence of its artistic form.
- **Target Demo:** 18-34 multiracial audience, domestic and worldwide
- **Official Launch:** February 2009
- **Categories of Programming:** music videos; artist collaborations; news, talk and perspective; concerts, specials, documentaries, movies; children's programming, and more
- **CEO and Founder:** Atonn Muhammad
- **Board Members Include:** Kenny Gamble, Teddy Riley, Rep. Maxine Waters, Richard Williams, Kid Capri, KRS-One, Kenneth Barnes Sr.



www.RHN.tv