BY MARGARET BERNSTEIN

THE LITTLE ENGINE THAT COULD

Don't touch that dial! From the moment Soul Train's colorful caricature of an engine huffs across the screen, this is where Black America's television sets are tuned.

Soul Train has become a black classic during its 17 years — a weekend ritual that unites black households across the USA, a stop-off for black artists seeking TV exposure.

Without fanfare, it's evolved into the longest running black show on television.

As host Don Cornelius would say, "put your hands together." Give it up — because, in the face of TV ratings wars and an advertising system that bars black shows from demanding top dollar, just staying alive for 17 years is an achievement.

And Soul Train has done better than just stay alive. Cornelius has been a steady and ever-serious conductor, guiding his train at a steady clip up from a black-and-white low-budget Chicago show through the perils of syndication.

And today, "We've finally reached the promised land," says Cornelius.

In the last two years, he's seen the show reach its surest financial footing ever. With a new distribution company, Tribune Entertainment Co., Soul Train has beefed up its coverage up from 70 percent of USA television markets to a very respectable 81 percent. It can be picked up in 90 to 95 percent of black households.

In April, he'll take Soul Train yet a step further. Cornelius is bringing his show to the prime time screen with the "Soul Train Music Awards." Superstars Dionne Warwick and Luther Vandross will co-host.

It may be 17, but Soul Train doesn't look its age.

These days, the show is taped at a glitzy soundstage at an independent TV station in Los Angeles. Its dancers, now an integrated bunch, are as glamorous as ever. Many have danced off to stardom: Damita Joe Freeman, from the early '70s Soul Train Gang, had a part with Goldie Hawn in "Private Benjamin." Former dancer Jermaine Stewart went on to a solo singing career.

Cornelius concentrates on digging up the newest and hottest acts for his shows. "I love to have anyone who's happening."

Personally, he's not so fond of the hip-hop, scratching and other sounds coming from today's radio airwaves, confides Cornelius, who celebrated his 50th birthday during this television season. His personal tastes run more toward classic sounds from Dionne Warwick, Johnny Mathis and Aretha Franklin.

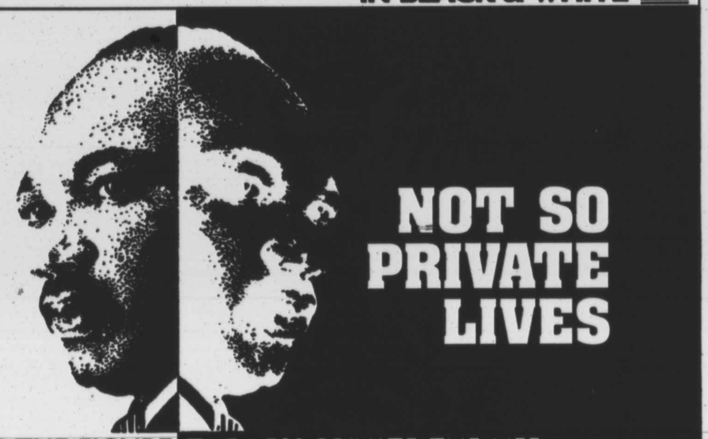
"Thank God," he sighs, taking a joking swipe at fellow dance show host Dick Clark, " the precedent has been set for an old guy talking to young groups' television.

"It's accepted for a guy my age to act like he's in tune with what's happening with young people in music."

"Although," he adds with a grin, "It is probably chemically impossible." ■

Margaret Bernstein is a freelance writer living in Huntington, W. Va.

BY WESTINA MATTHEWS



PUBLIC FIGURES NOT SO PRIVATE LIVES

THE MORE PUBLIC THE FIGURE THE LESS PRIVATE THE LIFE...

Especially If You Are Black

Having read several reviews in various newspapers and magazines, I was eager to get a copy of John Garrow's book "Bearing the Cross, Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference." Like so many of you, Dr. King is also my hero and role model. After reading the book, surprisingly what impressed me most was neither the content nor the subject, but rather the size of the book — 800 pages; more specifically, that 7 pages were devoted to Acknowledgements, 91 pages to Notes, 48 pages to the Bibliography, and 28 pages to the Index. A total of 175 pages has been devoted to the documenting, footnoting, and referencing of the life of one man!

I bring this to your attention because perhaps our interest in the book should not be in the questioning of the accuracy of Garrow's chronicling of Dr. King's life; or Garrow's reporting of the relentless campaign of the Federal Bureau of Investigation to destroy Dr. King's reputation; or the dark clouds painted over our romanticized Camelot with Garrow's dispassionate accounting and recounting of the minutiae. No, perhaps our interest should be that more than 20 percent of this book has been devoted to the documentation of one man's life, and a realization that even an idolized, immortalized, and deceased black public figure such as King is not permitted to have a private life.

An inverse relationship: the more public the figure, the less private the life. Not a new thought, just a reminder. The more public the figure the less private the life . . . especially if you are black. Oh yes, it is true for all public figures . . . but especially, especially if you are black.

Bearing the cross of leadership is indeed a heavy burden, and there are extra burdens for our black leaders — both elected and nonelected — in positions of power. Yet, the heaviest cross is placed upon the shoulders of our black political leaders — our mayors, our congressmen, our councilmen. It makes us wonder why. Why them? Why us?

As black people, the greatest gains we have made in recent years have been in our political empowerment. Therefore, the greatest threats to those who wish to maintain the status quo are the Blacks who have achieved political power. The difficulty arises when those blacks who have acquired positions of power and status in the political arena act as if they believe that they have the same rights and privileges as all others. But our society has never demonstrated, either by word or deed, that we can be like everyone else. Thus, it is still "just us," not "justice."

We know that those blacks placed in positions of trust and power, especially economic and political power, must be like Caesar's wife — very, very careful. It is always open season for the hunting of black public figures. When caught in anything that might be possibly perceived or construed as questionable, the cry from the masses for justice increasingly seems more like a single designation of "just us."

The disappointment and frustration is not that our black public figures have been accused or criticized. Knowing that truth needs no defense, the disappointment and frustration is that we must watch our black public figures begin to mount a defense against the accusations and criticisms. The disappointment and frustration is when those among our black leaders, who have struggled through the battle of power and have emerged as victors, seem to believe that they should be granted some special immunity — some special dispensation — for being human. No such immunity nor dispensation exists. Remember, justice is still "just us."

And so, our black public figures are crucified and buried, often without a hearing. The pasts of our deceased heroes such as Dr. King are resurrected and crucified in the reexamination and recounting. We are constantly reminded that black public figures have no private lives.

"By idolizing those whom we honor," Charles Willie, the black educator, is quoted as saying in the Epilogue found on page 625 of this 800 page book, "we fail to realize that we could go and do likewise." Lest we forget, we should all read "Bearing the Cross." Perhaps the sheer weight of carrying around an 800 page book for a few weeks will poignantly remind us of the cross we all must bear. ■

Westina Matthews is a freelance writer in New York City.