

Roland reflects on Obama's historic run for the White House

Written by Kam Williams



Roland Martin; "The First" Interview

Between Barack Obama's declaring his candidacy for the Presidency and Election Day 2008, Roland Martin filed hundreds of reports about the campaign in his capacity as a political correspondent for CNN and TV-One Networks, as well as a radio talk show host and a nationally-syndicated columnist. Furthermore, Martin was also occasionally afforded access to Obama for intimate, 1-on-1 interviews. So, it only makes sense that he would decide to publish "The First: President Barack Obama's Road to the White House as Originally Reported by Roland S. Martin," a book recounting Obama's historic run for the White House.

Recently, Roland reflected with me about the campaign, the book, his career and his family life.

Kam Williams: Nice speaking with you again, Roland. Let me start by asking what inspired you to publish the book?

Roland Martin: I was thinking about the fact that I had written about a hundred columns during the campaign, and I realized I could do a book on it. So, I started pulling all the radio interviews I did during the campaign, and my blog posts, and my interview with Michelle Obama, and I realized I could put together an anthology from just my coverage alone. But then I thought of calling about 15 of the celebrities I had met on the campaign trail, like Common, Chris Tucker, Jessica Alba and Malik Yoba to speak with them about their involvement. And they all said, "Yeah, we'll do it!"

KW: How did you decide on the cover and on the book's title?

RM: I knew I wanted it to look like those "Hope" and "Change" campaign posters. Then, I was trying to figure out what the heck to even call it, and I remembered a book I'd read about the New York Times' coverage of Lincoln's election, presidency and death, called "Lincoln in the Times: The Life of Abraham Lincoln, as Originally Reported by The New York Times." [Buy it here](#)

KW: Barbara Darko asks, when did you start covering the Obama campaign?

RM: I was already doing my daily radio show, when I was signed by CNN in February of 2007. He declared his candidacy that same month. At that time, I was trying to figure out where I fit in.

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Everybody was saying, "Hillary Clinton's going to get the nomination," like it was a foregone conclusion. But I thought "Hey, I don't think anybody's paying serious attention to this guy." I decided my niche was to know anything and everything the Obama campaign was doing, so that when I went on the air, I would own that space. We had correspondents covering several candidates at once, but my approach was, "No, I'm going to own 'this' space."

KW: Larry Greenberg observed that this book comes with a DVD of your interviews with Obama. He asks, why did you decide to include that?

RM: I said to myself, "What could make this book unique?" The interviews add value and were part of the coverage anyway.

KW: When did you get a good sense that Obama could actually win the Democratic nomination? I assume earlier than the Iowa caucuses.

RM: No, because, remember, everybody thought Senator Clinton was going to get it. In hindsight, a turning point was the debate before Iowa when Clinton stumbled on the question about immigrants getting driver's licenses in New York. That crack in the armor gave Obama an opening to turn the tide. Prior to that, he had been having difficulty getting any traction. Obviously, Iowa changed the whole game.

KW: Did you find it hard to stay objective during the campaign as a black man?

RM: My role wasn't to be objective. As a contributor, I was there to be subjective. I was free to give opinion, and that's how I approached it.

KW: You interviewed President Obama recently. Does he seem like a different person, given his big drop in approval ratings compared to a year ago?

RM: I didn't get a sense that because of the drop in poll number things have changed. He's always this person who's on an even keel. But you certainly can tell that the weight of the presidency is there, as it is on any president, because their looks change in terms of their hair color and their facial expressions. It's a difficult job. It's not simple at all. If you want to age a lot of years, become president.

KW: Publisher Sonny Jiles, who used to be your boss when you wrote for the Houston Defender, says, "Tell him I love him and to give me a call."

RM: No problem.

KW: She also asks, "What advice do you have for young journalists, given the way the industry is changing?"

RM: I will say very simply, "Read! Read! Read! Read! Read! What has always helped me has been a reservoir of knowledge. So, whenever something came up, I could pull from historical elements for assistance in addressing present-day issues. I am also careful to cultivate professional contacts which might come in handy at a later time.

KW: Children's book author Irene Smalls admires the fact that you are a true family man. You often talk about your wife; you are paying for nieces and nephews to go to college. She asks, is family fidelity and true success ultimately compatible?

RM: I was attending an event years ago where the question "Who are your role models?" was raised. I heard people respond with names like "Oprah Winfrey" and "Bill Cosby." I have nothing against them but no celebrity ever fed me, clothed me, helped me with my homework, drove me to school or picked me up when it was late. It was my mom and dad. So, family to me is absolutely vital. Everybody can adore you because you're on television, but at the end of the day, when you're no longer on TV, who's still there? It's family. In terms of my wife and me raising my four nieces in Chicago, and also taking in my sister and her two kids at our home in Dallas, I felt like I couldn't speak out all around the country about saving our children, if I didn't

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do it at home. I can't talk about the education of black children, if I ignored two of my nieces who were a couple of grade levels behind. I believe that charity begins at home, and I take seriously the role of a godfather to fill the gap when the parents aren't doing their job. My wife is me, and a part of my life. When you hide that relationship, you stop being your authentic self.

KW: Irene also wonders whether when you were webmaster for BlackAmericaweb you ever imagined this broad-ranging, successful development of your career?

RM: Yes. Remember, I went to a communications high school in Houston, with a TV station, a radio station and a newspaper. I mastered all three media while still in high school. They tried to get me to focus only on one in college, but I said, "No!" Even while I ran BlackAmericaweb, I was news editor of Savoy Magazine, started my syndicated column and published my first book. And I was doing radio even before that. And I started appearing on CNN in 2002. So, I was doing 5 different media even then. That was always the plan. I never only wanted to settle for 1.

KW: Irene wants to know, what were your thoughts after your recent trip to China? She says, "Looking at how China has treated Africa and Africans do you see any problems with encouraging greater investment by China in the predominately minority inner cities of America?"

RM: First of all, China has invested upwards of \$100 billion a year in Africa. The Chinese certainly want access to natural resources. But you have to ask yourself, who else is investing in Africa? The Chinese are investing in dams, in highways, in construction. You don't see the United States making that level of commitment to the continent. I don't have an issue with Chinese investment in Africa as long as there is equal trade, and Africans are getting what they need in return. That's a win-win relationship.

KW: Is there any question no one ever asks you, that you wish someone would?

RM: You got me.

KW: The Teri Emerson question: When was the last time you had a good laugh?

RM: Last night. My wife and I watched Couple's Retreat. Man, that movie was funny!

KW: The bookworm Troy Johnson question: What was the last book you read?

RM: I read several books at one time. One is James Brown's "Role of a Lifetime." [Buy it here.](#) I'm also reading "Twice as Good: Condoleezza Rice and Her Path to Power" by Marcus Mabry. [Buy it here.](#)

And Byron Pitts book, "Step Out on Nothing." [Buy it here.](#)

And Gerald Boyd's "My Time in Black and White: Race and Power at the New York Times," an awesome book. He broke it all down. And I have about 60 more books waiting in the hopper.

[Buy it here.](#)

KW: When you look in the mirror, what do you see?

RM: An unapologetic black man.

KW: The Zane question: Do you have any regrets?

RM: No, because even if something didn't turn out well, it's still a part of me that makes me, me. So, I never look upon anything as a regret. It helps you regardless.

KW: What is your favorite dish to cook?

RM: Gumbo.

KW: The Flex Alexander question: How do you get through the tough times?

RM: Through God, and an absolute belief in self.

KW: The Ling-Ju Yen question: What is your earliest childhood memory?

RM: I never thought about that. I'll have to come back to that one.

KW: The Mike Pittman question: Who was your best friend as a child?

RM: My brother and my cousins. You gotta understand. My grandmother had 8 children. They

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averaged 5 kids each. We didn't have room for friends. I have no recollection of having a sleepover at a non-relative's house.

KW: If you could have one wish instantly granted, what would that be for?

RM: That not a single black kid would drop out of school.

KW: The Uduak Oduok question: Who's your favorite clothes designer?

RM: Sean Jean.

KW: The Boris Kodjoe question: What do you consider your biggest accomplishment?

RM: Being a strong uncle to my nieces and nephews.

KW: How do you want to be remembered?

RM: As a brother who didn't give a damn what anybody thought, but he brought his views to every venue in an uncompromising and unapologetic fashion.

KW: Well, thanks for another great interview, brother.

RM: Sounds good. Alright man, thanks a lot.

To order Roland Martin's book "The First," [click here](#) .