

Pump up the volume!

Written by William Reed
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Evidence of Black political and economic empowerment is mixed. On political empowerment, Blacks now hold high rankings in Congress, but their impact for Blacks in general is negligible. The economic empowerment is represented by Cathy Hughes, founder and chair of Radio One, Inc. And the battle has been drawn, Hughes, and cast, at Radio One is waging a war against targeted members of the Congressional Black Caucus (CBC) is worth note.

As Black Members have risen in seniority and status on Capitol Hill there has been a contrasting chorus accusing them of "not being accountable" to Blacks. Cathy Hughes is upset that Black radio properties are "in jeopardy, at the hands of a Black man". That Black man is John Conyers; the 80 year old Detroit Congressman and Chairman of the House Judiciary Committee. The longest-serving African American in the history of the House is a jazz aficionado. Conyers developed an interest in jazz as a teenager in Detroit and played trumpet. In 2007, Conyers introduced the Performance Rights Act, the focus of Ms. Hughes' ire. The Chairlady of the nation's largest chain of Black radio stations alleges that Conyers' bill, H.R. 848, will cost her money.

Under current law, stations only pay copyright royalties to artists who compose hit songs, not those who perform them. Station owners say a law requiring them to pay additional royalties would bankrupt them. Recording artists get money for concerts and make money selling downloads or CD's. But they don't get a cent when their songs play on the radio. That money goes to the people who write and publish the songs. Radio stations say if they had to "pay out to play out" they might go out of business.

On the national stage is a clash of Black political and economic Titans. Radio One controls a host of airwaves in Districts where Black Members of Congress reside and has the clout to attack their legislation actions in ways never before. How many times have you heard adverts on Radio One stations propagating that the legislation is a "performance tax" that is going to destroy Black Radio? Hughes has the power to put a legislative issue that normally would have escaped public attention on the minds of millions. Some will argue whether the issue is a legitimate "Black Concern," the battle has brought about a new dimension that could work against lawmakers used to easy reelections. Hughes' ads have targeted a number of Black lawmakers and even most questioned the integrity of Chairman Conyers. The fight has divided the civil rights community, with the NAACP and the League of United Latin American Citizens supporting Conyers while Blacks such as Rev. Al Sharpton and Rev. Jesse Jackson line up with Hughes, Radio One and other Black-owned stations. Radio One operates stations in or near the Districts of Reps. Sheila Jackson-Lee (Houston); Mel Watt (Charlotte.); Hank Johnson (Atlanta); and Robert "Bobby" Scott (Richmond/Tidewater, Va.) and aired ads criticizing them.

While the whole of Black America may not see Performance Act legislation impacting their personal plight(s), the issue and Hughes' practices could make major impact on the national Black political landscape. The barrage Hughes has wrought has begun to take a toll on Black long-time lawmakers accustomed to cruising to reelections. In chiding CBC Members that support Conyers' legislation Hughes says: "All five of these Black elected officials continue to ignore the imminent danger to Black media ownership". Criticizing Jackson-Lee for claiming that Conyers's bill would not force any Black-owned stations out of business, Hughes says,

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"How could she possibly know anything about what it takes or doesn't take to operate a broadcast facility?"

Radio One owns and/or operates 53 radio stations located in 16 urban markets and has interests in TV One, LLC, a cable/satellite network; and Reach Media, Inc., owner of the Tom Joyner Morning Show and businesses associated with Tom Joyner. As Congress returns to sessions, Ms. Hughes is encouraged to pump up the volume to defeat H.R. 848. It's a brand of political activism others should well follow.

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