

THE *Art* OF CONVERSATION

FOR LUMINARY AWARD WINNER TAVIS SMILEY, IT'S ALL ABOUT LISTENING AND HOMEWORK

BY TED JOHNSON

Tavis Smiley doesn't call his interviews "interviews." He prefers the word "conversations."

It's an important distinction. "A conversation is more fluid. A conversation is more organic," he says. "I start with a comment or a question that opens the guest up. From that point on, it is about generous listening."

That approach is obvious to anyone who has ever heard or seen him in action, and he's in action a lot. Smiley hosts "Tavis Smiley" on PBS and "The Tavis Smiley Show" on Public Radio International.

Yet listening is only part of the process. Much of what happens on air is possible because of what happens off air, long before the conversation begins.

"If I have listened and done my homework, I will know what my next question

is," Smiley says. "In a great conversation, the host is not leading. The host is following. If you are listening to them they will lead you and guide you to where the next question is."

As one of broadcasting's best conversationalists for decades, Smiley is being recognized tonight with the Los Angeles Press Club's Luminary Award for career achievement. In receiving the honor at the National Arts and Entertainment Journalism Awards, he joins past recipients including Janice Min, Joe Morgenstern, Nancy O'Dell and Kenneth Turan.

The conversations are only part of what Smiley does. He is also the author of 16 books, including the recent *My Journey with Maya*, about his 28-year friendship with Maya Angelou. His best seller *The Real Story of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s*

Final Year is being produced as a television series special by J.J. Abrams in partnership with Warner Brothers.

Born in Gulfport, Miss., Smiley grew up in Bunker Hill, Indiana, as one of 10 children to Joyce Marie Roberts and his stepfather Emory Garnell Smiley. He worked as an aide to Los Angeles Mayor Tom Bradley and, in the early 1990s, launched a career in radio as a commentator. He gained nationwide recognition later in the decade as the host of "BET Tonight" on BET, followed by a show on NPR.

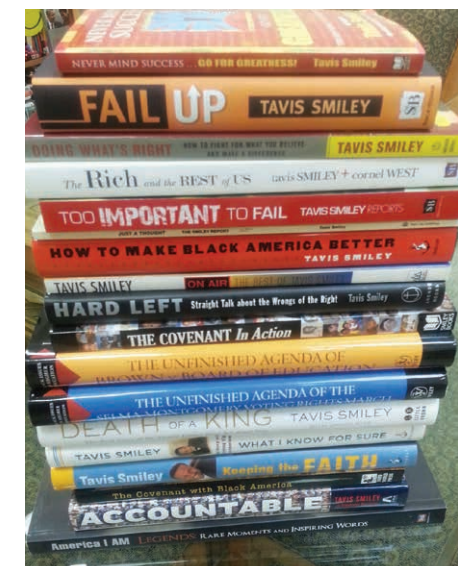
Over the years Smiley has emerged as an important voice on American culture, particularly on the experience of African Americans. Last month, he wrote a commentary for *USA Today* in which he asked whether the recent University of Missouri protests over race-related incidents



In 2014, Smiley moderated "Behind the Score: The Art of the Film Composer," sponsored by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences: music producer Gustavo Santaolalla, music director Gustavo Dudamel, Academy President Cheryl Boone Isaacs, and film composer John Williams.



Did the young Tavis Smiley imagine a career that encompassed writing books and dancing with stars?



on campus are the makings of a “new civil rights movement.”

He wrote, “At Mizzou, we saw black men defying the scourge-on-society label, and taking control with the most American of all strategies—protest.”

“Movements are very, very rare in our society,” Smiley says. “It takes a lot to build a movement. But every movement starts with a moment that builds momentum,

and it absolutely has momentum.”

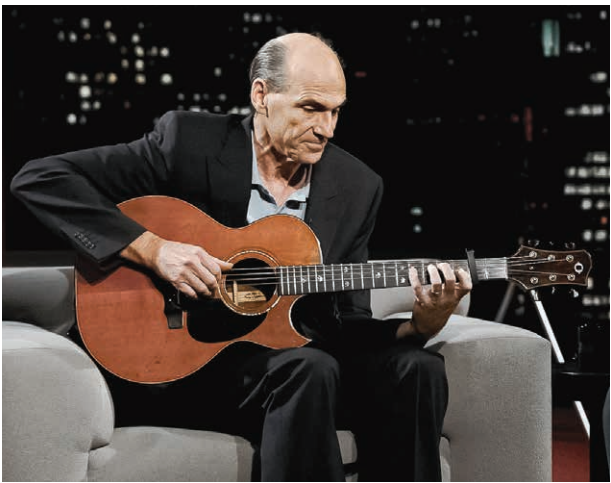
The list of political, entertainment and society figures Smiley has interviewed runs the gamut—recent guests have included Ian McKellen, Twyla Tharp, Bernie Sanders and Ann Coulter. Still, there is one dream guest he wishes he had sat down with for a conversation. That is Nelson Mandela, although the two met several times.

Smiley’s good friend Larry King once

asked him, “Who do you want who you haven’t gotten? When Smiley mentioned Mandela, King answered, “Oh, I have talked to Mandela a number of times.”

Then King asked, “Who do you think are some of the good ones you got?” Smiley answered, “Fidel Castro.” King never interviewed him.

“I said, ‘Yes, someone Larry King did not get,’” Smiley says of the friendly rivalry.



Over the years, Smiley’s guests have included people from all walks of public life: musicians, politicians, comedians, and actors. Clockwise, from top left: Prince, President Obama, Mel Brooks, Hillary Clinton, Sean Penn, and James Taylor.



The Best in Search Engine Marketing and Search Engine Optimization.

LA WEEKLY
laweekly.com

DIGITAL SERVICES
vdigitalservices.com

It’s what we use to keep **LAWEEKLY.COM** on page one for online searches on local news, music, movies, arts, restaurants, nightlife and events throughout Los Angeles.

We can now offer this same service to your company to help customers to find you online and get them in your doors.

Request a **FREE** digital audit of your business today by contacting your LA Weekly representative or call **310-574-7303** for more information.

Social media, Smiley believes, “has the capacity to be used to both comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable, and in that regard I feel some solace.”

Smiley was too young to ever meet Martin Luther King Jr., but the civil rights leader’s role in society lives on for him, and not just in the book. Smiley regards King’s legacy as embodying three things: “Justice for all. Service to others. And a love that liberates people.”

“My whole work and witness has been about trying to make the world safe for that legacy,” he says.

Like many successful hosts, Smiley is quick to credit those on his team who don’t appear on camera. Ho recognizes all the



Smiley, with Jay Leno and Larry King.

preparation and research they do for the conversations he has with guests.

“It does begin and end with a good staff,” he says.

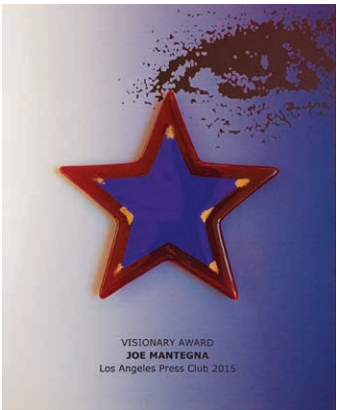
There’s another thing that Smiley says helped prepare him for his job, but it came decades before he ever stood in front of a camera. He cites participating in the high school speech and debate teams, “because I am always thinking about the other side of the equation.”

He’s embraced social media—albeit not to the extent that others have—and sees strong benefits in the move to digital platforms. Social media, he believes, “has the capacity to be used to both comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable, and in that regard I feel some solace.”

The drawback, he says, is that “with so much noise out there,” there can be times when “everything gets drowned out.” He refers to Linda Ronstadt’s term for it: “Ear pollution.”

Last year, Smiley received a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame. His siblings and parents were all there, along with King and Jay Leno.

“I remember saying in my brief remarks that day that it all started with making a commitment to make my mama proud,” Smiley says. It wasn’t to save the world, or host a talk show or write a best selling book. Instead, he adds, “It was just about making my mama proud. In many ways, that is the way it is today.”



Congratulations to all of tonight’s winners.
It is an honor to be a sponsor and bring the Awards to Hollywood.

Peter Gårdström
Partner BDO, Gothenburg



Tavis – A great broadcaster.
A great man.

His Friend,
Larry King

Indiana University congratulates Luminary Award winner
Tavis Smiley!



We're proud of our alumnus and grateful for all he does for IU:

Member of the IU Advisory Council for Diversity

Supporter of SPEA diversity initiatives

Provider of the Tavis Smiley Scholarships

