



# Turning **Comedy** Into **Business & Opportunity**

BYRON ALLEN, WHO HAS KICKED OPEN DOORS FOR BLACK ENTREPRENEURS AND BUILT A MEDIA EMPIRE, RECEIVES THE PRESS CLUB'S IMPACT AWARD

BY JOHN GITTELSON

**B**yron Allen started work as a comedian, but his career is no joke.

Allen is the founder, chairman, CEO and sole owner of Allen Media Group, a Century City-based conglomerate started in 1993 and now worth about \$4.5 billion. Tonight he receives the Los Angeles Press Club's Impact Award for Influential Contributions to Culture and Society. The prize honors his fearless and relentless pursuit of opportunity for Black entrepreneurs.

"I hope to make the world better and more inclusive," Allen, 61, said in an email. "My goal is to create the world's largest media company."

Allen Media's vast holdings include 27 local television stations in 21 U.S. markets; 12 networks, including the Weather Channel in English and Spanish, Pets.TV, Comedy.TV, Recipe.TV and Cars.TV; a syndication group that produces 70 shows out of studios in Culver City; a motion picture production arm that made a series of shark-themed horror films as well as "Chappaquiddick," the 2018 film about Teddy Kennedy's fateful car accident; and the Griot, a media network focused on African-American news and culture.

He's not slowing down.

He bid \$4.5 billion this year to buy the National Football League's Denver Broncos, though he did not get the team. Now he is eyeing the NFL's Washington Commanders.

"Don't play the game," Allen said during an interview on Bloomberg Television in April. "Own the game."

Allen is focused on media, not just because of his roots in entertainment, but because he sees the industry as a wellspring of power and influence.

"The most powerful person in the world isn't the President of the United States," he said on a Bloomberg TV interview with basketball legend Chris Paul. "The most powerful person in the

world is the person who controls media. Because we control what you hear, what you see, what you think."

He sued the biggest cable TV carriers—Comcast, AT&T and Charter Communications—for discrimination, contending they discriminated against Black-owned broadcasters like himself. The cases were settled out of court.

"The greatest trade deficit in America is the trade deficit between white corporate America and Black America," he said during a February interview with "CBS News Sunday Morning."

Last year, Allen and a group of Black media entrepreneurs including Ice Cube took out a full-page ad in the *Detroit Free Press* accusing General Motors and its CEO, Mary Barra, of "systemic racism" for failing to spend more ad dollars with Black-owned media.

"He's kicking open doors so that the future generation has



Allen may have played baseball growing up, but his sights were set on being an executive from when he was 5 or 6 years old, according to his mother, Carolyn Folks, at right.



From his offices in Century City, Allen's business and philanthropic interests stretch his spheres of interaction from entertainment to finance. Clockwise from top right: Norman Lear, Warren Buffet, Jamie Foxx, and Babyface.

those opportunities," Marcus Collins, a marketing professor at the University of Michigan's Ross School of Business, told the *Detroit Free Press* after Allen took on GM.

Allen was born in 1961 in Detroit. His father worked for Ford Motor Co. His mother, Carolyn Folks, who is now an executive producer with Allen Media, was a 17-year-old hair stylist. Her precocious son showed ambition early on.

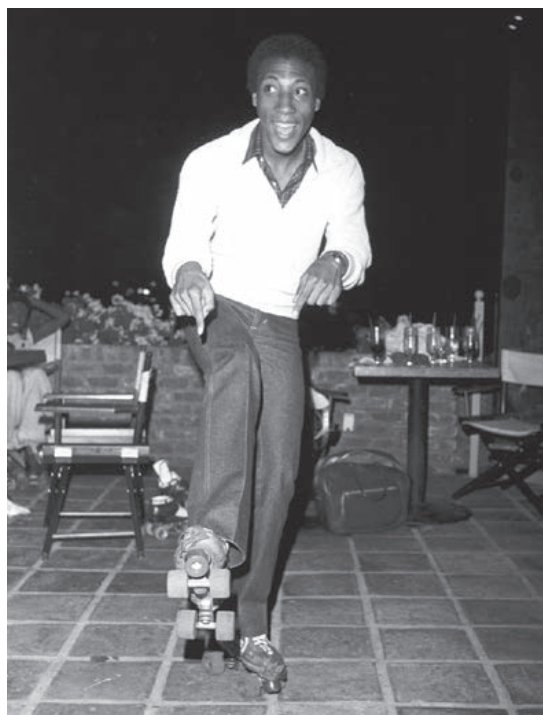
"I can remember that he was playing executive when he was like 5 and 6 years old," Folks told CBS. "He had an office and his office was in the basement."

His parents split up in 1968 and Allen moved with his mother to Los Angeles, where she enrolled in an entertain-

ment program at UCLA. She couldn't afford child care, so he often went to class with her. After graduation, she arranged an internship at NBC and bought her son along.

The NBC lot teemed with soap opera and sitcom productions and stars: Bob Hope, Merv Griffin, "The Tonight Show Starring Johnny Carson," Redd Foxx shooting "Sanford and Son," Gabe Kaplan in "Welcome Back, Kotter."

Allen, in typical fearless fashion, once asked Kaplan how to get started as a comic. He was told to try out at open mic night at the Comedy Store in West Hollywood. He was 14 and the club owner worried she'd lose her liquor license if



Clockwise, from far left: In younger days as a comic, hanging with Whoopi Goldberg; invited by Jimmie Walker at age 14 to join a writers' room, which included up-and-comers Jay Leno and David Letterman; demonstrating his roller skating skills; at 18, Allen became the youngest standup in the show's history when he was asked to fill the guest spot on the "Tonight Show with Johnny Carson."

she let Allen perform, but she gave him a break as long as he promised to leave immediately after his set.

He spent the day of the show writing gags and tried not to get too nervous when he took the stage. After the appearance, he got a call from comedian Jimmie Walker, star of TV's "Good Times," and an invitation to join a writers' room that included a couple of up-and-comers named Jay Leno and David Letterman.

In 1979, Allen landed the most coveted gig for a comedian of that era—a guest spot on Carson's stage. At 18 he became the youngest standup in the show's history. He enrolled at USC but didn't graduate, going straight into show business, spending years touring as an opening act for stars including Lionel Richie, Kenny Rogers, Dolly Parton, Whitney Houston and Smokey Robinson.

Increasingly, his role models weren't the stars, but the people who hire the talent and write the checks. One was Motown founder Berry Gordy.

"I've watched him go after his dreams with passion, hard work, and a relentless drive to succeed," Gordy said of Allen in a 2021 statement to the *Detroit Free Press*. "With a fire in his belly, he created his own opportunities."

Allen started his company at his dining room table. His first show, "Entertainers with Byron Allen," was a once-a-

week hour-long series of celebrity interviews that went into syndication in 1993. It still airs almost three decades later.

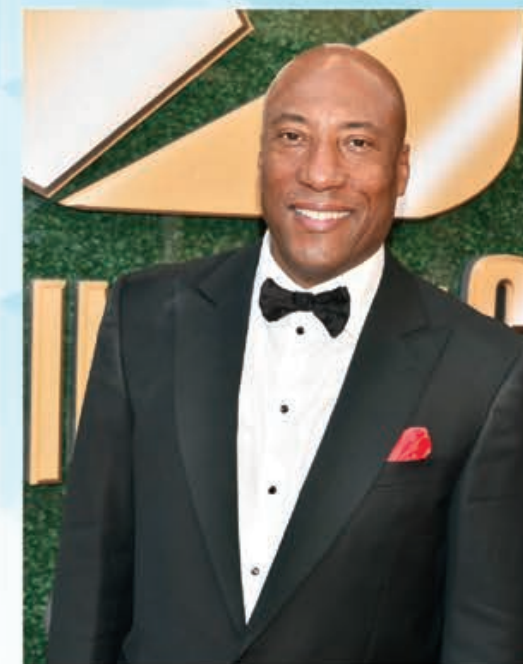
It was slow to make money. Allen spent his days "smiling and dialing" TV stations to carry the show and line up advertisers. He almost lost his home to foreclosure, but persistence paid off and he grew his business through new productions and acquisitions.

"Byron is a media pioneer," said Howie Mandel, a frequent guest on Allen Media Group's "Funny You Should Ask" syndicated series. "As a creator and an entrepreneur, Byron always finds new and interesting ways to break the mold of how the entertainment industry works."

Allen's next breakthrough came with the \$300 million acquisition of the Weather Channel in 2018. It is one of the most-watched broadcasts when hurricanes, blizzards, heat waves and floods strike. Allen knew it was a big deal, telling Bloomberg Television that it showed Black entrepreneurs aren't confined to "the Negro leagues." He added, "We don't just do business in our neighborhood. We do business in every neighborhood."

Allen is married to TV producer Jennifer Lucas, with whom he has three children: Chloe, Olivia and Lucas. He hopes his kids will one day join his business.

His advice to any aspiring entrepreneur is, "Start where you are. Start now. And find a need and fill it!"



**BYRON ALLEN**  
**THE IMPACT AWARD 2022**

For Influential Contributions to Culture & Society

Everyone at Allen Media Group & The Weather Channel proudly congratulates our amazing Founder, Chairman & CEO, Byron Allen for this prestigious LA Press Club honor.

We are humbled to be in the company of such distinguished colleagues: Marla Gibbs, Jennifer Lee, Tanya Tucker and Ryan Seacrest, and we congratulate them for their achievements and honors.



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