

Ebony Looks to Its Past as It Moves Forward



Nathan Weber for The New York Times
Desirée Rogers, left, and Linda Johnson Rice in the archives at Ebony.

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Pages from vintage issues of the magazine, which got its start in 1945.

DESIRÉE ROGERS, the C.E.O. of Johnson Publishing, which owns the magazines Ebony and Jet, and Fashion Fair, a makeup line aimed at women of color, can see many sights from her 21st-floor corner office across from Millennium Park. “This is a good view of Chicago,” Ms. Rogers told a recent visitor, gesturing at a panorama of Lake Michigan, Grant Park, Navy Pier, the Adler Planetarium and Soldier Field. But the sight that holds the most personal meaning for Ms. Rogers may be a portrait by Robin Harper just above her purple retro sofa, depicting the boxer Jack Johnson with a soft, wounded expression.

The portrait, Ms. Rogers said, reminded her of looking at pictures of Muhammad Ali in the pages of Ebony with her grandfather as a little girl growing up in New Orleans. “My grandfather really liked fighters,” she said. As they flipped through the magazines, she said, he’d tell her: “I hope you’re great. And I hope one day you’ll be in those pages.”

Ms. Rogers, 53, has been in the pages of Ebony many times since her first appearance in April 1989 in a photo from George H. W. Bush's [inauguration](#). Her name now sits atop the magazine's masthead, just below that of her best friend, Linda Johnson Rice, chairwoman of the company.

Ms. Johnson Rice's father, the late John H. Johnson, founded Johnson Publishing in 1942 with a \$500 loan he secured against his mother's furniture when he was 24. Since then, Ebony (the name was the suggestion of Ms. Johnson Rice's mother, Eunice Johnson) has gone on to become one of the most recognizable African-American publications in the world. The Harper image was part of the huge art collection of Mr. and Mrs. Johnson (no relation to the boxer), and it graced the cover of the magazine in March 1978.

Ms. Rogers joined Johnson Publishing just over two years ago after a short, controversial run as White House social secretary for President Obama. Among the tasks she has set for herself is making Ebony a lifestyle brand.

"We started looking at the assets that we have and also to really think about the Johnsons and what they were creating," Ms. Rogers said. "We have incredible loyalty and love from the community. We have great relationships with our clients, who have been rooting for us to turn around and modernize."

In early November, [Ebony.com](#) introduced The Ebony Collection, an online shop that sells framed prints of 2,000 photos selected from the magazine's million-image archive. Reprinted from the original negatives stored in a climate-controlled room, the images were selected by Ms. Johnson Rice, who spent months poring over her father's original commissions. "We kept everything," Ms. Johnson Rice said. "Every major event that's happened to African-Americans since 1945, with Ebony as a repository for all those photographs and as a voice for all that happened."

Paying respect to history is a theme repeatedly invoked in the Johnson Publishing offices, so much so that it was no surprise running into Henry Louis Gates Jr., the director of the Harvard W. E. B. Du Bois Institute for African and African American Research, in a conference room. Professor Gates was there with a film crew shooting a PBS series, "Many Rivers to Cross: The History of the African American People," and was being shown images from the archives by Ms. Johnson Rice for an episode that will cover 1940 to 1980. "My family got Ebony," he said later. "Every family subscribed to Ebony and Jet if they were black.

"They still have cultural resonance among all classes of African-Americans," Professor Gates said. "Very few organs of journalism reach a wider swath of the African-American community than Ebony and Jet."

In 2013, that community will once again welcome the Ebony Fashion Fair, which began bringing high fashion to 160 cities across the country in 1958, but has been on hiatus since Eunice Johnson's death in 2010. ("It's the No. 1 question I get as I travel the country," Ms. Rogers said. "When is the show coming back, Desirée?")

Ms. Rogers and Ms. Johnson Rice are also working closely with Suzanne Lovell, an interior designer, on a line of Ebony-branded textiles, with concepts being developed for bags, Hermès-inspired bangles and other accessories based on the flamboyant wall and floor coverings commissioned for Johnson Publishing's original headquarters. Eunice Johnson's personal style will be honored in March when the Chicago History Museum exhibits 60 pieces of haute couture culled from her collection of 7,000.



Vintage Ebony magazine pages.

The coming year is also the 40th anniversary of Fashion Fair Cosmetics, which has grown from a direct-mail promotion in Ebony into an internationally available line of 240 products. Clarissa Wilson, president of Fashion Fair, said that the search is under way for the face of an anniversary campaign.

Then there are the magazines themselves. Ebony has been redesigned: its original logo, a red banner with white lettering based on Life magazine's, has been replaced by one that Amy DuBois Barnett, the editor in chief, described as "retro cool." Jet, the 61-year-old digest, is also due for a redesign, and has recently begun getting attention for a stronger, more youthful voice (the magazine recently featured its first [same-sex wedding announcement](#)).

In addition to commissioning the new logo, Ms. Barnett, who took over as editor of Ebony two years ago, added a slogan to the magazine's spine that could function as a cri de coeur for all of Johnson Publishing as it extends Ebony across various platforms: "It's More Than a Magazine, It's a Movement."

"It's not just another magazine, it's something far greater," Ms. Barnett said. "There are very few magazines that hold the iconic place within their community and with their readers that Ebony does."

That may explain why some readers were taken aback by the appearance of NeNe Leakes, one of the "Real Housewives of Atlanta," on the cover of the December 2012-January 2013 issue. Ms. Leakes, who also stars in the NBC sitcom "The New Normal," was photographed in a bathtub full of diamonds holding a gold-rimmed Champagne flute, an image that struck some as the wrong one for the magazine, especially given that the issue also contained the Ebony Power 100 list of the most influential African-Americans, a conceit celebrated with a gala at Lincoln Center in New York.

"I think NeNe Leakes is fabulous and I very much respect what she's been able to accomplish in her life," Ms. Barnett said. "We didn't shoot NeNe in a business suit sitting behind a desk with a briefcase. We shot her in a very tongue-in-cheek setting to glorify the thing that turned her into a pop culture icon."

She added: "That speaks to our sense of humor. That speaks to the sense of irony we can also have. There's no reason Ebony magazine should only feature staid and conservative content."

It's hard to imagine another general-interest magazine editor having to justify putting a reality star on her cover. But then, few other editors are running a magazine that once employed Martin Luther King Jr. as an advice columnist and won a [Pulitzer Prize](#) for a photograph of Dr. King's widow, Coretta Scott King. "As with any

magazine, it's the same kind of work, but there's just another layer of historical responsibility," Ms. Barnett said.

"We've been here so long," said Ms. Johnson Rice in her own corner office, which has its own, equally impressive view of Lake Michigan. "The history and richness runs so deep within the community. We own this. It's personal. It's very personal."