

Will The Days of "A Different World" Ever Return?

Written by Madame Noire
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One of my favorite sitcoms of all time is "A Different World," the "Cosby Show" spin-off series that followed the lives of students at Hillman College, a fictional historically black college located in Virginia. Though the series had a slow first season, "A Different World" ultimately managed to captivate audiences and was critically praised for displaying an accurate depiction of life on the campus of an HBCU.

"A Different World" masterfully captured a piece of the black aesthetic, which had been mostly avoided on network [television](#), by following characters such as Dwayne Wayne, Whitley Gilbert, Freddie Brooks and Kimberly Reese. I was so hooked on that show that I had made up my mind that I would attend an HBCU. Apparently, I wasn't alone in that regard because by the end of the series, enrollment at HBCUs increased considerably. Many believed that the sitcom had something to do with that.

It's unfortunate to say that a groundbreaking show like "A Different World" probably won't make its way to television again. In today's bottom-line market, shows featuring African-Americans are considered risky business, which only makes it harder for black-themed [TV shows](#) to get produced and financed. But it wasn't always this way.

In 1968, Diahann Carroll became the first African-American woman to have the lead in the hit [TV show](#), "Julia." The success of the series not only helped to normalize black life on the small screen, but it also helped to usher in a slue of other black sitcoms, many with black writers and directors, including "Sanford and Son," "Good Times," "What's Happening," and of course, "The Jeffersons." By the 1980s, the tradition of black sitcoms continued—if not excelled—with shows

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such as "Amen," "Webster," "Diff'rent Strokes," "A Different World," and the ever popular "The Cosby Show."

By the 1990s, black sitcoms reached new heights with such programs as "In Living Color," "Family Matters," "Hangin' with Mr. Cooper," "The Jamie Foxx Show," "Martin," "The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air," "Sister, Sister," "Living Single," "Moesha," "The Steve Harvey Show," "The Parkers," and "Girlfriends." It appeared that not only had black talent been standardized in front of the screens, but was finally being appreciated from behind the lens too.

But at the end of the 90's, black sitcoms began to appear less and less as the major networks moved on to pursue more mainstream demographics. The WB, which had become the new staple channel for black sitcoms, dropped at least 4 of their black comedies and it slowly transitioned away from the genre all together. By the mid-2000's, UPN, the only other station catering to a black audience, slowly began to fade out its black line up. Eventually, both channels merged and followed in the direction of their major competitors.

While it would be easy to just chalk up the disappearance of the black sitcom to the whims of the networks, many of these black-themed [television shows](#) began to lose credibility within the black community itself. Whereas shows like "A Different World" created a mini-renascence of love for the HBCU – and in particular black life – new black TV sitcoms have offered us little to no celebration of black life and culture.

In fact, today's shows seem to be largely focused on the homogenous representation of the black experience. Not only is there no diversity of characters, but we also rarely see the characters relating to or making any reference to the black experience at all. In short, white characters could just as easily be casted in these sitcom roles as blacks are.

What made "A Different World" so special was that Debbie Allen, the show's director, largely [dr](#)
[ew](#) on her own experiences of being a student at Howard University to create the essence of the show. As a result of Allen's connection to the subject matter, she was able to beautifully capture the diversity of the black community – not only did the characters not all look the same, but they hailed from different social-economic backgrounds and had different political beliefs. Most importantly, "A Different World" made college a viable option for many minority students, proving that positive images of African Americans excelling in the classroom and in life was something worth tuning in for.

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