

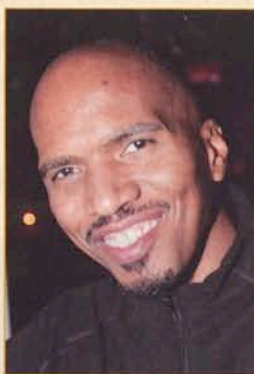
Family Man

Showrunner Warren Hutcherson on corralling an ailing star and avoiding sudden math geniuses during his weekdays with 'Bernie'

Writer/executive producer Warren Hutcherson joined "The Bernie Mac Show" after its pilot was picked up by Fox in 2001, and he has hung in with the trailblazing sitcom through every on- and offscreen twist, from the firing of series creator Larry Wilmore in Season 2 to the illness of its star, Bernie Mac, in Season 4. As one of the few constants on a writing staff that has seen three showrunners come and go, Hutcherson has worked hard to give the show its voice, and, as far as he is concerned, that voice is Mac's.

"A lot of times, a writer just puts their own voice in a character's mouth, and they say, 'This would be funny if the guy would just say it right,'" observes the 42-year-old Baltimore native, who was elevated to showrunner for this, the show's fifth season. "The problem with that is the guy's not necessarily saying it wrong, he's saying it like he would say it. And if you're doing a show that has the lead actor's name in the title, then you've got to write it to (suit) them."

After working in stand-up, Hutcherson spent two years on the writing staff of NBC's "Saturday Night Live" during the early 1990s, then segued into sitcoms as writer-producer on "Living Single," "The Parent 'Hood" and "Moesha" and was creator/executive producer of the short-lived comedy "Built to Last." Hutcherson spoke recently with **Todd Longwell** for **The Hollywood Reporter** about the continuing evolution of "Bernie Mac" and its prospects for the future.



dialogue

The Hollywood Reporter: What was it like coming to "Bernie Mac" after working on more traditional sitcoms such as "Living Single" and "Moesha"?

Warren Hutcherson: What I loved about coming here, which is different than those shows, is we're just writing a real situation and letting the jokes come out of that; we're not creating a joke situation and adding

more clever lines to it. If you watch TV, one sitcom looks like the next. If you look at the credits, you'll see the same people being recycled. So, they're pulling the same tricks out of their bags. We were like, "Get rid of your tricks, and start writing for real."

THR: Now that you're the showrunner, in what direction are you trying to steer the series?

Music Playa

He has scored films like Screen Gems' "The Gospel" and provided source music for features including 1995's "Panther" and 1998's "Permanent Midnight," but Stanley A. Smith, the composer and main-title creator on Fox's "The Bernie Mac Show," has no problem crossing over to the small screen. He simply keeps his mind in the movies.

"It's like a short film, how we treat the music (on 'Bernie Mac')," Smith says. "There's no laugh track, so there's a lot of room for emotion and letting the music become another character."

That said, Smith recognizes and heeds the difference between film and TV work while scoring each "Bernie Mac" episode. "We don't library the show like most half-hour sitcoms," he says. "(On most

shows), a guy just bangs out a bunch of cues, and then they place them where they can place them."

Being a fan of Bernie Mac's stand-up comedy helped when Smith composed the show's quirky theme song and episodic score. "On (Mac's) previous show on HBO (1995's 'Midnight Mac'), he had a live band and did that whole '70s funk thing," Smith says. "I knew that if we could couple those elements in with his personality, that would be a good sound for the show."

"Bernie Mac's" original music must compete with recognizable tunes that thread throughout the show, and Smith notes that his score work varies widely. And Mac's confessionals to the camera also require a different tone than the rest of the show. "The confessions are usually funky,

Hutcherson: My goal has always been to return to a character-driven show and base the character on Bernie Mac and then do episodes that are not absolutely predictable. I think the show had become a little predictable; you knew what was going to happen, and it had happened before; it's not like we were doing anything new. I wanted go back to doing the good show we used to do. Nobody has been in the way of that, and people seem to feel like we've done that.

THR: Season 5 is traditionally when family shows run low on fresh story lines and producers bring in a cute new juvenile character to spice things up. You haven't done that, but you have given more screen time to the three children.

Hutcherson: Because of (Mac's) illness (a flare-up of chronic inflammation disorder sarcoidosis), Bernie is very clear about keeping his work hours down. Without being able to use Bernie for 12 straight hours, we've got to do something else with the time and with the show. We've tried to open it up but still keep these characters growing, in a real way. Unless we explain it in an episode, we don't want (Bryana) "Baby Girl" (Dee Dee Davis) to suddenly be a math genius.

THR: Are you optimistic that the show will return for Season 6?

Hutcherson: My grandfather used to say, "The odds are always 50/50. It's either going to happen, or it's not," and I'm starting to feel like that. I don't work at a network, and I don't know why they make the decisions they make, but if they say, "You know what? No thanks," for whatever reasons, I'm OK with it. I can honestly say I'm proud to have worked on this show, and I think I have done, for the most part, what I've wanted to do. At least we'll have this season that's like the first two seasons, when the show was really good, in my opinion. ■

Show composer Stanley A. Smith proves he has the funk



but the score varies," he says.

It's a nice place to be for a Compton, Calif.-raised composer who has played in orchestras and jazz big bands but always returns to scoring. Smith's other TV credits include providing source music for the 1990s sketch-comedy show "In Living Color" and the '90s crime drama "Cracker."

"I like anything that's a little edgy," Smith says. "Everything doesn't have to be ghetto hip-hop just because you're a black guy; I want to be well-rounded and encompass everything."

— Rande Dawn