

Jose de Paula Neto, AfroAmerica Network Black Man of Year 2006.

Jose de Paula Neto, better known as Netinho de Paula, a media-savvy 35-year-old who rose from the housing slums of Sao Paulo to become a household name, first as a samba popstar then as a television presenter is the driving force behind black renaissance in Brazil.



The Afro-Brazilian's TV da Gente – the People's TV – premiered November 2005 and celebrated its one year anniversary in high gears. Jose de Paula Neto is a singer and musician who attained fame as a vocalist in Negritude Junior, one of Brazil's most popular samba/pagode groups. Neto, commonly referred to as Netinho, successfully parlayed his singing career into TV appearances as a host and subsequently as a producer of TV shows. He hosted of a weekly television show, "Princess for a Day," in which he cruised through the slums of Sao Paulo in a limousine dressed in his trademark cocktail jacket and making the dreams of impoverished women and girls become reality, like in TV reality shows, Extreme Make-Over, in USA.

Now a successful entrepreneur, Jose de Paula acquired his fortune hardly in a society where Blacks in general have tough time getting ahead.

Born in a poor suburb outside Sao Paulo, Jose de Paula Neto learned early in life how to earn a living. At age seven he was selling candy on buses to supplement the family income. Despite the hardships of his childhood, he still had the big dream to become a TV star. "My mother didn't like to watch frivolous programs on TV so I used to watch TV with no sound. During the commercials I would turn the TV off. When the TV was off I was able to see my own reflection on the TV screen and I would pretend to be a singer," he said.

Orphaned when he was only 11 and, in order to cope with the pain of her loss, Neto began singing emotionally laden songs in homage of her mother's memory and to cope with pain. His singing career took over with timid appearances on TV and especially after his with the success of Negritude which gained him access to main Brazilian TV networks; first through guest appearances and later as a TV host. His access to TV studios served also as waking up call in the mind of the talented singer. *"I began to perceive, not only at the TV station where I worked but at other [Brazilian] networks, that the lack of black participation in the media was worse than I had imagined. When one talks about discrimination, you know who you have to fight against. You fight against the person who discriminates against you. But one who believes that they don't discriminate because there is no racial discrimination [in Brazil] compounds the problem immensely. The problem is viewed not as racial discrimination but simply as invisibility. This is*

much more difficult to confront," Neto observed.

Neto's acute observations on the absence of Afro-Brazilians on Brazilian TV are certainly not a figment of his imagination. Outside of sports and entertainment, Afro-Brazilians do not figure prominently on any of Brazil's three major networks: Rede Globo, SBT (Sistema Brasileira de Televisao) and Rede Manchete. . "Our country is marked by racial mixtures. But the actual model of TV does not represent the majority of Brazilians." This "invisibility" of the Black major component of the Brazilian society has historical antecedents and is deeply rooted in the subtle and not so subtle interplay between gross economic disparities and racism. White Brazilians are quick to point out that the lack of a significant black presence on TV networks is more grounded in the former and won't hesitate to name a litany of factors, such as inordinate illiteracy levels, criminality, drugs, etc., that coalesce to effectuate a "black vacuum" within Brazilian media networks. Afro-Brazilian militants however, are quick to counter that, while it's true that the aforementioned societal ills are commonplace amongst a significant cadre of black Brazilians, they are more indicative of an underlying current of institutional racism that is conveniently extricated from popular discussion surrounding the issue than any lethargic disposition or intellectual ineptitude on the part of Afro-Brazilians.

"Our TV will reproduce, for the first time, the true image of the people," said de Paula Neto. "We are trying to help our own people, given that nobody else seems to want to do it"

TV da Gente bills itself as the "color of Brazil" and the "new standard" which all networks will have to emulate. What immediately strikes one about the new channel is that Afro-Brazilians predominate in all of the shows offered – from children's programs, news broadcasts, hip hop, gospel and R&B videos to political commentary talk shows. The presence of black Brazilians is undeniable and absolute. This fact coincides with the stated objectives of TV da Gente which are to reinvigorate Brazilian TV and show Brazil's true racial plurality. According to Neto; "The goal of TV da Gente is to show the ethnic diversity within Brazil and to valorize its social integration. It will promote ethnic



pride as it is more than just a personal dream; it is a realization of a people who are finally able to see themselves on TV." With this November 20th marking its one year anniversary, Neto has a lot to celebrate about. He has firmly proved to Brazilian society that such a network is not only viable and capable of attracting a large audience but is also financially lucrative. As Neto further adds: "I see myself as a soldier who has to complete a mission. It's not about me. It's an obligation that must be carried out; just like Zumbi dos Palmares had to fight to liberate his people back in the days of slavery." Ironically, when he invested the 5 Million Dollars, the rest came from nowhere else than Africa. Investors from Angola,

another Portugese colony supplied the needed seed money. A mother land coming to the aid of its sons across the oceans.

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