



Chris Rock, left, and W. Kamau Bell on the set of *Totally Biased*

They've Got Jokes

Chris Rock and rising comedian W. Kamau Bell serve up late-night laughs on FX's *Totally Biased* BY JANICE RHOSHALLE LITTLEJOHN

Three years ago, when Chris Rock first saw W. Kamau Bell perform at a “little artsy-fartsy theater in Manhattan”—Upright Citizens Brigade Theatre—he had no idea that a TV partnership would take hold. Today Rock executive-produces Bell's late-night gabfest, *Totally Biased With W. Kamau Bell*, returning May 9 on FX. Listen in as the two chat about how they work:

ESSENCE: You're still getting to know each other. How did you meet?

W. KAMAU BELL: Chris saw my solo show, *The W. Kamau Bell Curve: Ending Racism in About an Hour*, where I talked about the events of the day but with video, slides and audio clips.

CHRIS ROCK: It seemed like an easy transfer to television. So I took my own money and shot a mini version of the show, and I shopped that.

That was better than bringing people down to a club and having them watch him.

ESSENCE: Was being on TV always the goal?

W.K.B.: At that point I was renting theaters and booking my show independently at colleges. So when Chris comes to my show and tells me I'm funny, it changed my focus like, *I can try to get a TV show?*

C.R.: With Black talent, there's this unwritten rule that a person has to have attained some level of fame to get a TV show. I don't see people willing to take a chance with African-American talent. But you didn't know Jimmy Kimmel before he got his show. You didn't know Conan O'Brien. By the way, if Kamau was not Black and I thought he had talent, I'd still help him. But then he wouldn't need as much help. [Laughs]

ESSENCE: What tells you someone's got it?

C.R.: Really liking the artist. I saw this funny kid, Deshawn Raw, on YouTube. I called him, flew out to L.A. and did a sketch. I just want to do stuff I like. If you're doing good stuff, you're going to make money.

FREE SPIRIT

Singer **ALICE SMITH** returns with a new sound—and major attitude

We first heard Alice Smith's soulful voice on her debut, *For Lovers, Dreamers & Me*, which included her Grammy-nominated song “Dream.” Critics praised her staggering vocal range and clever songwriting, but a problematic relationship with Epic Records left her without a record deal. After a year of soul-searching, Smith



Alice Smith is back, to the delight of fans.

emerged with a plan to take her career into her own hands. “I couldn't give up on myself or what I do,” she says. “It's not really a question.” Now back with *She*, her first album in seven years, Alice Smith is one to watch once more.

—Elona Jones



IN A LEAGUE OF HER OWN

Actress **NICOLE BEHARIE** has a versatility that's guaranteed to keep her working

Nicole Beharie, 28, realizes she may have a reputation. “It looks like I'm obsessed with biopics,” confesses the Nigerian-Jamaican actress, who was raised in South Carolina. She's already played three real-life characters, including Jackie Robinson's wife, Rachel, in *42*. But the Julliard graduate is actually in love with all things sci-fi and fantasy. Until the *Avatar* sequel is cast, she's keeping busy with Fox's pilot *Sleepy Hollow*, a contemporary take on the story of Ichabod Crane, and *The Keeping Room*, a drama in which she portrays a formerly enslaved woman negotiating life after the Civil War. The admitted Luddite is trying to cozy up to Twitter and read a Spanish or French novel—in Spanish or French. “I say it every year, then I get a job, stop studying and am back to the translation,” she says. —A. B.