

TOP OBAMA IMPERSONATORS:

- 1) Iman Crosson www.youtube.com/user/Alphacat
- 2) "better than Fred Armisen," the actor of Venezuelan, German and Japanese descent who portrays Obama on Saturday Night Live.
- 3) Christopher B. Duncan has gotten good reviews on The Tonight Show with Jay Leno.
- 4) Reggie Brown, a young Chicagoan who resembles Obama (reggiebrown.net), is working on a movie with Charles Dutton called The Obama Effect.
- 5) Johnny Valentino, a comedy club veteran has a site, www.thebarackobamaimpersonator.com

Presidential pretenders finding Web success

Andrew Ratner-- On Blogs, February 17, 2009

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The C-SPAN video of Barack Obama's historic inaugural address has been viewed on YouTube 3.6 million times.

Iman Crosson's impersonation of Barack Obama singing a version of a pop song by Beyonce has been viewed 4.9 million times.

America voted for "change you believe in."

Crosson offers change you can make-believe in.

The 26-year-old actor and dancer from Ohio can't believe how his career has blossomed in the past six months since he posted a video on his "Alphacat" page spoofing Obama, to whom Crosson bears a striking resemblance.

He was focusing on a career in dance while waiting tables in New York last year when his co-workers nicknamed him "Obama." Crosson figured it was because he was the only black guy on the staff.

"I said, 'Yeah, ha, ha, that's very funny,'" he said. "Then I had an epiphany."

He set up a green backdrop in his apartment, projected a photo of the Oval Office on it and began adding videos of himself as Obama to a page on YouTube. More than a dozen of them have received a total of about 12 million views.

Crosson's rapid rise has been fueled by the power of viral video, which has made dozens of people famous in recent years, or at least famous to the millions who surf YouTube. Crosson's sendups have drawn high praise. Blogger Andrew Sullivan of The Atlantic described him as "better than Fred Armisen," the actor of Venezuelan, German and Japanese descent who portrays Obama on Saturday Night Live.

"Somebody needs to hire Iman Crosson (aka AlphaCat) immediately if they want to secure an Obama impersonator for the next 4 years, hopefully 8! Not only does he [have] his gestures down to a 'T,' his parodies are always hilarious!" wrote the blogger fungkeblakchik.com.

And the nationally syndicated show Entertainment Tonight aired a segment showing him dancing with tourists outside the White House last month.

Crosson, who studied dance and acting at Wright State University in Dayton, Ohio, has received many compliments about his dance moves as Obama - a skill that plays particularly well on YouTube, where more than half of the all-time top-20 videos involve dancing.

In a phone interview from his new home in Los Angeles, Crosson marvels at the opportunity that YouTube presented and at his instinct to try to capitalize on it.

"That's the thing I'm most proud of. It's exactly what I went for, and it worked. I've seen other entertainers have success on YouTube. It's a free platform," he said, referring to the Web site that allowed him to air his own professional-looking video. "I didn't have an agent. I still don't have an agent, but the fancy trimmings helped me get noticed. I want to corner the market before a lot of Barack impersonators start getting in there."

There are already several strong competitors vying to be Faux-bama: Christopher B. Duncan has won good reviews as Obama on The Tonight Show with Jay Leno. Reggie Brown, a young Chicagoan who resembles Obama, already has an agent and a Web site (reggiebrown.net) and is working on a movie with Charles Dutton called The Obama Effect. A comedy club veteran named Johnny Valentino pitches his services on thebarackobamaimpersonator.com.

John Morgan, who left appliance sales to make, by his estimate, \$1 million during the past five years portraying his lookalike, President George W. Bush, said YouTube has compressed the time frame for an impersonator to get noticed.

"There's no question it has made accessibility so much easier," said Morgan, 52. Back in pre-YouTube 2003, Morgan tested his potential as a possible Bush impersonator by going out in his neighborhood at Halloween dressed in a business suit with an American flag. A celebrity-lookalike convention in his hometown of Orlando, Fla., the following winter provided a breakthrough.

Crosson says that parodying the very popular Obama, whose election made history, is different from impersonating presidents who are more ridiculed.

"With Barack, as far as the country is concerned, they don't really want to see him portrayed in a negative light. They'd rather see him made to look kind of cool. Considering that he's the first black president, I try to make him more urban, a little more cool than he already is."

In his video that's drawn nearly 5 million viewers, he sings to the tune of Beyonce's hit "Single Ladies": "If ya voted for me, change is on the way, know it. If you didn't, get up with it cause I'm staying, homie."

Crosson marvels at the speed with which he can turn brainstorm to broadcast online. He text-messaged an actor friend with an idea he hatched two days before the Super Bowl, got the friend's video feed the next day and by Sunday had posted a new skit of a mock phone conversation between themselves - as Obama and ex- Illinois Gov. Rod Blagojevich.

Crosson intently watches Obama on TV and online, studying his deliberate cadence and his tendencies, like the way he points and twirls his index fingers inwardly.

Sometimes, he finds himself getting lost in his Obamaness.

"I'll be at home with my girlfriend and say, 'Oh ... can you ... pass me the remote,' and she's like, 'Oh, dang it.'"