

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Dick Gregory

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Gregory, Dick
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Dick Gregory,
Dates:	July 29, 2007
Bulk Dates:	2007
Physical Description:	13 Betacame SP videocassettes (6:07:13).
Abstract:	Civil rights activist and comedian Dick Gregory (1932 - 2017) was hired by Hugh Hefner to perform stand-up comedy at the Chicago Playboy Club and performed on many television programs, including The Ed Sullivan Show. Gregory also devoted much of his time to championing the causes of civil rights and the raw foods vegetarian lifestyle. Gregory was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on July 29, 2007, in Washington, District of Columbia. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2007_220
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Comedian and civil rights activist Dick Gregory's career spanned four decades. Gregory was born Richard Claxton Gregory on October 12, 1932, in St. Louis, Missouri. A product of humble beginnings, Gregory relied on his exceptional running skills at Sumner High School to eventually earn him a track scholarship at Southern Illinois University Carbondale. While attending Southern Illinois University Carbondale, Gregory set records as a half-mile and mile runner.

Gregory's college education was put on hold when he was drafted into the United States Army. It was in the army that Gregory first performed as a stand up comedian, entering and winning several U.S. Army talent shows. After his military service ended, Gregory worked at the United States Post Office by day, and by night performed as a comedian in several small black nightclubs.

In 1961, Gregory was hired by adult magazine mogul Hugh Hefner to work at the Chicago Playboy Club. Hefner was impressed by Gregory's ability to perform successfully for a white audience. Soon after, Gregory received national acclaim, and in 1964 released an autobiography entitled *Nigger*, which sold seven million copies.

In the mid-1960s, Gregory became increasingly involved in the Civil Rights Movement and spoke out against the war in Vietnam and government policy. In 1967, he decided to run against Mayor Richard Daley in Chicago. Though unsuccessful, Gregory pursued higher political positions and ran for President of the United States in 1968 as a write-in candidate for the Freedom and Peace Party. Gregory was eventually defeated, but efforts landed him on the list of President Nixon's political opponents; his experiences in the political arena inspired Gregory to write a book entitled, *Write Me In*.

Throughout the 1980s, Gregory was principally known for his strong voice in the health food industry. Seen as a

nutrition guru, Gregory advocated diets consisting of raw fruits and vegetables. Gregory developed a beverage called the Bahamian Diet Nutrition Drink, and advertised the product on television. In 2005, during the last stages of the Michael Jackson trial, Gregory was invited by Jackson's father to advise him on his health.

In 2004 Gregory was listed as number eighty-one on Comedy Central's list of the 100 Greatest Stand-Up Comedians of All Time; has also his own star on the St. Louis Walk of Fame.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Dick Gregory was conducted by Paul Brock on July 29, 2007, in Washington, District of Columbia, and was recorded on 13 Betacame SP videocassettes. Civil rights activist and comedian Dick Gregory (1932 - 2017) was hired by Hugh Hefner to perform stand-up comedy at the Chicago Playboy Club and performed on many television programs, including The Ed Sullivan Show. Gregory also devoted much of his time to championing the causes of civil rights and the raw foods vegetarian lifestyle.

Restrictions

Restrictions on Access

Restrictions may be applied on a case-by-case basis at the discretion of The HistoryMakers®.

Restrictions on Use

All use of materials and use credits must be pre-approved by The HistoryMakers®. Appropriate credit must be given. Copyright is held by The HistoryMakers®.

Related Material

Information about the administrative functions involved in scheduling, researching, and producing the interview, as well as correspondence with the interview subject is stored electronically both on The HistoryMakers® server and in two databases maintained by The HistoryMakers®, though this information is not included in this finding aid.

Controlled Access Terms

This interview collection is indexed under the following controlled access subject terms.

Persons:

Gregory, Dick

Brock, Paul (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Gregory, Dick--Interviews

African American civil rights workers--Interviews

African American political activists--Interviews

African American comedians--Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Occupations:

Civil Rights Activist

Comedian

HistoryMakers® Category:

CivicMakers|EntertainmentMakers

Administrative Information

Custodial History

Interview footage was recorded by The HistoryMakers®. All rights to the interview have been transferred to The HistoryMakers® by the interview subject through a signed interview release form. Signed interview release forms have been deposited with Jenner & Block, LLP, Chicago.

Preferred Citation

The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Dick Gregory, July 29, 2007. The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection, 1900 S. Michigan Avenue, Chicago, Illinois.

Processing Information

This interview collection was processed and encoded on 5/30/2023 by The HistoryMakers® staff. The finding aid was created adhering to the following standards: DACS, AACR2, and the Oral History Cataloging Manual (Matters 1995).

Other Finding Aid

A Microsoft Access contact database and a FileMaker Pro tracking database, both maintained by The HistoryMakers®, keep track of the administrative functions involved in scheduling, researching, and producing the interview.

Detailed Description of the Collection

Series I: Original Interview Footage

Video Oral History Interview with Dick Gregory, Section A2007_220_001_001, TRT: 0:29:04 ?

Dick Gregory was born on October 12, 1932 in St. Louis, Missouri to Lucille Gregory and Presley Gregory. His father, who was born in Bells, Tennessee, left the family when Gregory was young; so Gregory and his siblings were raised by their mother, who worked as a maid, in her hometown of St. Louis. Gregory attended St. Louis' John Marshall School and Charles H. Sumner High School. He grew up in a predominantly African American community, where he frequented the black-owned restaurants, and enjoyed listening to his family's ancestral stories during holidays. After graduating from high school, Gregory matriculated at Southern Illinois University in Carbondale, Illinois. In the part of the interview, Gregory talks about color discrimination in the African American community; his early perception of race relations in Mississippi; the history of the Black Wall Street in Tulsa, Oklahoma; and the role of the Civil Rights Movement in securing better educational and career opportunities for African Americans.

African American civil rights workers--Interviews.

African American political activists--Interviews.

African American comedians--Interviews.

Video Oral History Interview with Dick Gregory, Section A2007_220_001_002, TRT: 0:29:39 ?

Dick Gregory was raised in an all-black community in St. Louis, Missouri, where he witnessed the poor working conditions endured by African Americans during the 1940s and 1950s. He became a social critic and activist; and, in 1975, was selected by the students of Harvard University in Cambridge, Massachusetts to deliver their commencement speech. At this point in the interview, Gregory, who took part in the anti-war movement, talks about the history of the Buffalo Soldiers, as well as the negative influence of warfare on African Americans members of the U.S. military. Gregory describes his interest in race relations and African American history, which led him to conduct oral history projects and social research with Dr. James Carter and Dr. Joseph Allain, Jr. He also talks about the psychological impact of police brutality, in reference to E.L. Doctorow's book, 'Ragtime'; and reflects upon his son's, Greg Gregory's drug addiction, and the impact of addiction on families.

Video Oral History Interview with Dick Gregory, Section A2007_220_001_003, TRT: 0:29:18 ?

Dick Gregory attended the all-black Charles H. Sumner High School in St. Louis, Missouri. He was discouraged by the African American faculty's preferential treatment of the students with lighter complexions, and was also bullied for his thin stature, leading him to leave school for a time. During that period, Gregory developed an interest in opera, and attended musical productions by The Municipal Opera Association of St. Louis. Because of their low body weight, Gregory and his brother were placed in the Charles Turner Open Air School, a school for children with disabilities and compromised immune systems. Later, Gregory returned to Charles H. Sumner High School, where he competed on the track team under Coach Warren St. James. Upon

graduating in 1952, Gregory received over 130 offers of college scholarships, and ultimately decided to attend Southern Illinois University in Carbondale, Illinois. Gregory also talks about the portrayal of Africans Americans in early films.

Video Oral History Interview with Dick Gregory, Section A2007_220_001_004, TRT: 0:29:48 ?

Dick Gregory was the star of the track team at the all-black Charles H. Sumner High School in St. Louis, Missouri; but, because of segregation, his record breaking victories were not counted in the national yearbooks. In response, Gregory organized a demonstration to integrate the public schools' cross country teams, which led to the integration of all public high school sports programs in the State of Missouri. At the integrated track meets, Gregory and his teammates faced discrimination, and were barred from hotels and restaurants. Nevertheless, they became the first African American competitors to win the state cross country championship. Upon Gregory's graduation, Coach Warren St. James encouraged him to attend Southern Illinois University in Carbondale, Illinois. There, Gregory was mentored by college president Delyte W. Morris; confronted his discriminatory history professor, John R. Wright; and formed a social activism club with his African American classmates, Leo Wilson and Spencer Hackney.

Video Oral History Interview with Dick Gregory, Section A2007_220_001_005, TRT: 0:31:04 ?

Dick Gregory matriculated at Southern Illinois University in Carbondale, Illinois, where he was close with President Delyte W. Morris. He formed a social activism club with Leo Wilson and Spencer Hackney, and set out to integrate the campus and community. First, the group secured the integration of the movie theater and a local restaurant; and Gregory then successfully advocated for integrated dormitories and black fraternity houses on campus. During this time, he pledged to the Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity. Gregory was the star of the track team at Southern Illinois University, and was the first African American student to be named athlete of the year. He went on to advocate for the selection of an African American homecoming queen, and voted to raise tuition to improve the university. In addition, Gregory talks about African American professional baseball players, including Barry Bonds, Hank Aaron and Satchel Paige; and shares his criticism of Malcolm X.

Video Oral History Interview with Dick Gregory, Section A2007_220_001_006, TRT: 0:29:41 ?

Dick Gregory was a student at Southern Illinois University in Carbondale, Illinois in 1955, when he was drafted into the U.S. Army. There, he became known for his quick wit, and was encouraged to participate in the all-Army comedy contest. He received first place, but was denied the title and prize of appearing on 'The Ed Sullivan Show' because of his politically charged jokes. While in the U.S. Army, Gregory investigated a series of car accidents involving African American soldiers. He also befriended Jim Ellis, an All-American football player at Michigan State University; and, upon completing his military duty, joined Ellis in Chicago, Illinois. There, Gregory found work at the post office, and began performing comedy routines at nightclubs like the Esquire Show Lounge. He also remembers his childhood experience of frostbite, including the white police officer who failed to help him seek treatment; and talks about hospital integration in St. Louis, Missouri.

Video Oral History Interview with Dick Gregory, Section A2007_220_001_007, TRT: 0:30:06 ?

Dick Gregory developed his satirical comedy routines at the Esquire Show Lounge in Chicago, Illinois. During this time, Gregory met and married his wife, Lillian Smith Gregory, who worked at the University of Chicago while he made a living as a stand-up comedian. He went on to perform with singer Nancy

Wilson at the Crescendo in Los Angeles, California, where jazz musicians Cannonball Adderley and Nat Adderley were the opening acts. He also performed at Freddie's Café in Minneapolis, Minnesota, and the Roberts Show Club in Chicago, Illinois, which was owned by entrepreneur Herman Roberts. As Gregory's reputation grew, he was profiled in publications like The New York Times. At this point in the interview, Gregory describes the styles of his favorite comedians, including Lenny Bruce, Mark Twain and Richard Pryor; and shares his criticism of Flip Wilson. Gregory also talks about religion, police brutality and the murder of James Byrd, Jr. in Jasper, Texas in 1998.

Video Oral History Interview with Dick Gregory, Section A2007_220_001_008, TRT: 0:29:27 ?

Dick Gregory was a vocal participant in the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, and worked closely with leaders such as Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Andrew Young, Ralph Abernathy and Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth. He was once invited to perform at a segregated prison in Baltimore, Maryland, but refused to go onstage until the facility was integrated. During his career, Gregory released numerous comedy albums, including 'In Living Black and White' and 'East and West' in 1961, and 'The Two Sides of Dick Gregory' in 1968. In this part of the interview, Gregory talks about Alex Haley's working relationship with Malcolm X, and Haley's infringement on Margaret Walker's copyrights. He also remembers his investigation into the death of U.S. Secretary of Commerce Ron Brown; and describes the history of the Tuskegee Institute, including the roles of Booker T. Washington and George Washington Carver, as well as the Tuskegee Experiment. In addition, Gregory remembers actors John Wayne and Stepin Fetchit.

Video Oral History Interview with Dick Gregory, Section A2007_220_001_009, TRT: 0:28:17 ?

Dick Gregory published his autobiography, 'Nigger,' in 1964. The book was met with apprehension by the publisher and book store owners; but went on to sell over 7 million copies, and received critical acclaim. Gregory talks about the cultural significance of books like Mark Twain's 'The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn' and Harriet Beecher Stowe's 'Uncle Tom's Cabin,' including the impact of their depictions of African Americans on white audiences. In 1968, Gregory became the first African American to run for the presidency of the United States, campaigning as a write-in candidate for the Freedom and Peace Party. In addition, Gregory shares his criticism of the NAACP; Albert J. Lingo, who was the head of the Alabama Department of Public Safety during the Civil Rights Movement; and the policies of President William Jefferson "Bill" Clinton. He also talks about urban violence, the African American prison population and the use of derogatory language.

Video Oral History Interview with Dick Gregory, Section A2007_220_001_010, TRT: 0:29:34 ?

Dick Gregory became a major figure in the Civil Rights Movement, protesting alongside NAACP field secretary Medgar Evers, as well as SNCC leaders Stokely Carmichael and H. Rap Brown. Ignoring President John Fitzgerald Kennedy's warning not to become involved in the demonstrations in Birmingham, Alabama, Gregory was arrested there with Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in 1963. In 1977, Gregory and Mark Lane published 'Code Name Zorro,' which followed their investigation of Dr. King's assassination in Memphis, Tennessee in 1968. During their inquiry, Gregory and Lane interviewed the witnesses of the shooting at Memphis' Lorraine Motel; Grace Walden Stephens and Charles Stephens, who were residents of the rooming house across the street; and James Earl Ray, the escaped criminal who was convicted of Dr. King's murder. Gregory also recalls appearing in the 1999 film 'Children of the Struggle,' which was set in 1964, during the height of the Civil

Rights Movement.

Video Oral History Interview with Dick Gregory, Section A2007_220_001_011, TRT: 0:29:30 ?

Dick Gregory met Grace Walden Stephens, a white witness of Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination, shortly after her release from a mental hospital, where she had been committed after refusing to name James Earl Ray as Dr. King's murderer. Her interview contributed to Gregory's book, 'Code Name Zorro.' During the 1980s, Gregory fasted to increase awareness of the famine in Africa. Through his starvation research, Gregory developed a nutritional formula to help combat hunger, which he modified to create the Slim Safe Bahamian Diet, a weight loss supplement. Gregory and his wife, Lillian Smith Gregory, settled in Plymouth, Massachusetts, where they raised ten children, including Michele Gregory; Stephanie Gregory; health food store owner Lynne Gregory; New York City prosecutor Miss Gregory; and truck driver Greg Gregory. Gregory insisted that his children attend historically black colleges to avoid the discrimination he experienced at Southern Illinois University in Carbondale, Illinois.

Video Oral History Interview with Dick Gregory, Section A2007_220_001_012, TRT: 0:30:35 ?

Dick Gregory performed as a comedian at the black-owned Roberts Show Club in Chicago, Illinois, where he became acquainted with African American entertainers like Count Basie, Billy Eckstine, Sammy Davis, Jr. and Nipsey Russell. At this point in the interview, Gregory remembers the advice of the nightclub's elderly caretaker, and meeting Playboy magazine publisher and club owner Hugh Hefner after a comedy show. Gregory went on to perform at the Chicago location of Hefner's Playboy Club. During this time, he aspired to appear on 'Tonight Starring Jack Paar,' although his hopes were criticized by Billy Eckstine, who warned him of Paar's discrimination towards black performers. Gregory also describes his children, including daughters Pamela Gregory, Paula Gregory and Ayanna Gregory; and sons Christian Gregory and Yohance Gregory. He reflects upon his life, including his philosophy about religion; and remembers how he fulfilled the prophecy of a psychic from his youth.

Video Oral History Interview with Dick Gregory, Section A2007_220_001_013, TRT: 0:11:10 ?

Dick Gregory was hired by Hugh Hefner to perform as a comedian at the Playboy Club in Chicago, Illinois, where he was paid \$250 per week. Due to his success there, he was invited to appear on 'Tonight Starring Jack Paar,' where he was the first African American guest to be seated on Paar's sofa. Gregory's performance received widespread acclaim, and increased his weekly salary to \$5,000. He reflects upon his legacy of activism, including his role as an inspiration to his successors, including activist Harry Edwards. Gregory also talks about the importance of Pullman porters and the Montgomery Improvement Association during the Civil Rights Movement.