



Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Marla Gibbs

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers® 1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Marla Gibbs
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Marla Gibbs,
Dates:	July 8, 2007
Bulk Dates:	2007
Physical Description:	6 Betacam SP videocassettes (2:41:50).
Abstract:	Television actress Marla Gibbs (1931 -) is best known for her role as "Florence" on The Jeffersons. She also starred in her own sitcom, 227. Gibbs was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on July 8, 2007, in Los Angeles, California. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2007_199
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Television actress Marla Gibbs was born on June 14, 1931 to Douglas Bradley and Ophelia Kemp in Chicago, Illinois. After graduating from Wendell Phillips High School in 1949, Gibbs attended secretarial school and went to work at Service Bindery in Chicago. She then was hired, at Gotham Hotel in Detroit, Michigan, and later worked for Detroit Street Railways (DSR). Gibbs worked for United Airlines as a receptionist. After being transferred to Detroit and later Los Angeles, she took acting classes at the Mafundi Institute and the Watts Writers' Workshop. In the early 1970s, Gibbs was cast in theatrical roles at the Zodiac Theater and small roles in "made for TV" movies. In 1973, Gibbs had a major supporting role in the 1973 movie "Sweet Jesus, Preacher Man."

Gibbs' big break came in 1975 at the age of forty-four when she was hired for a bit part as a household domestic named "Florence" in the CBS show "The Jeffersons," a spin-off of "All In The Family." Her character was a hit, and the writers decided to keep her on full-time. Gibbs quit her job at United Airlines only after the show gained widespread popularity, and she appeared in the television program as one of the main characters for all eleven seasons. "The Jeffersons" was one of the top ten rated television shows for four different years (1975, 1980, 1981 and 1982). Gibbs was nominated for prime-time Emmy Awards four times for Best Supporting Actress in a comedy series, for her role on "The Jeffersons." After the show ended, Gibbs bought the rights to a play that was produced by her daughter, Angela Gibbs, called "227" and sold the show to NBC, where she played the lead role ("Mary Jenkins") for five successful seasons.

Gibbs owned and operated Marla's Memory Lane, a jazz club and restaurant. Her daughter, Angela, founded the Cross Roads Theater Company in Leimart Park, Los Angeles, and Gibbs owned and operated the Vision Theater Complex. She continues to play guest roles on television and is still involved in the theater. Gibbs has performed dinner theater in Overland Park, Kansas at the New Theatre Company where she was showcased in Neil Simon's

play, "Proposals."

Marla Gibbs was interviewed by "The HistoryMakers" on July 8, 2007.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Marla Gibbs was conducted by Ron Brewington on July 8, 2007, in Los Angeles, California, and was recorded on 6 Betacam SP videocassettes. Television actress Marla Gibbs (1931 -) is best known for her role as "Florence" on The Jeffersons. She also starred in her own sitcom, 227.

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:

Gibbs, Marla, 1931-

Brewington, Ron (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Gibbs, Marla, 1931---Interviews

African American actors--Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

HistoryMakers® Category:

EntertainmentMakers

ArtMakers

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 Marla Gibbs, July 8, 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 8/11/2011 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, July 8, 2007

Video Oral History Interview with Marla Gibbs, Section A2007_199_001_001, TRT: 0:28:40
2007/07/08

Marla Gibbs begins by discussing her family history. Her mother, Ophelia Birdies Gibbs, was born in Monroe, Louisiana and remembers her always of the perfume Toujour Moi. Gibbs' grandmother, Hattie Sims, was an

entrepreneur who bought Big Jim Colosimo's house, and converted it into a boarding house. She remembers traveling to Racine, Wisconsin as a child to visit her Aunt Esther. On the South Side of Chicago, Illinois, Gibbs remembers the importance of gambling, or the numbers, on the wealth of the African American community. As a child, Gibbs kept a book of gambling figures that earned her thirty-five dollars a week; her lucky number was 618. When she moved to Los Angeles, California she met people that were involved in a similar gambling circuit.

Gambling--Illinois--Chicago

African American families--Illinois--Chicago

African Americans--Recreation--Social aspects.

African American grandmothers--Wisconsin--Racine.

Video Oral History Interview with Marla Gibbs, Section A2007_199_001_002, TRT: 0:30:40
2007/07/08

Marla Gibbs disputes the rumor that she married at the age of fourteen; she had her first child, Angela Gibbs, at the age of twenty-three. Gibbs has two other children, Dorian Demetrius and Jordan Joseph IV. During a family outing for her birthday, Gibbs was accompanied by actor Dick Anthony Williams. As a student at Wendell Phillips High School, Gibbs was introverted preferring the company of dogs over humans. As a child, Gibbs enjoyed watching movies but did not think that she would someday become an actress. While performing as Florence on the television show *The Jeffersons*, Gibbs realized that the publicity reporters wanted to only interview movie actors not television actors. Gibbs discusses how the Rodney King Riots and subsequent earthquake had a detrimental effect on her investment in *The Vision Theater*.

African American mothers--Illinois--Chicago

Childhood--Chicago (IL.)

African American families--Illinois--Chicago

African American Elementary School Students--Illinois

African Americans--Children--Illinois--Chicago.

Video Oral History Interview with Marla Gibbs, Section A2007_199_001_003, TRT: 0:29:40
2007/07/08

Marla Gibbs describes her induced stroke, and undergoing physical therapy to regain full mobility. Gibbs discusses the jobs she held during the 1950s and 1960s. She worked as a receptionist at the Service Bindery, ran an Address-O-Graph machine, worked for the Detroit Department of Street and Railways, and worked as a receptionist for United Airways. After taking acting courses at The Mafundi Institute, Gibbs was cast in "Native Son" as Mrs. Thomas, the mother of the protagonist Bigger Thomas. During the 1960s, Gibbs was cast in her first acting role in the movie "Sweet Jesus, Preacher Man," a movie that featured the actor Roger Moseley. Gibbs discusses purchasing Larry Hearn's jazz club in Los Angeles, California, renaming it Marla's Memory Lane.

Stroke--diagnosis.

Employment--Illinois--Chicago

Mafundi Institute (Watts, Los Angeles, Calif.)

Off-Broadway theater--African Americans.

Situation comedies (Television programs)

Video Oral History Interview with Marla Gibbs, Section A2007_199_001_004, TRT: 0:28:20
2007/07/08

Marla Gibbs discusses owning Marla's Memory Lane, the oldest African American jazz club in Los Angeles, California. Gibbs purchased this club to elevate it to its' former status. In 1981, Gibbs also purchased The Crossroads Theater and The Vision Theater Complex in Los Angeles, California. Florence's personality on "The Jeffersons" was based on Gibbs' aunt's and grandmother's personalities. Gibbs remembers Sherman Hemsley, her co-star on The Jeffersons, as being a generous performer. George Jefferson's iconic walk was based on the character Gitlow's gait from the musical comedy "Purlie." Gibbs believes that Isabel Sandford, Weezie on "The Jeffersons," was the true star of the show. "The Jeffersons" successfully ran for ten years, during its' eighth season it was the number three show in the country. Gibbs continues to watch "The Jeffersons," her favorite episode features Billy Dee Williams.

Race awareness--United States

Method Acting--Drama.

The Jeffersons (Television program)

Jazz clubs--California--Los Angeles.

Video Oral History Interview with Marla Gibbs, Section A2007_199_001_005, TRT: 0:29:10
2007/07/08

Marla Gibbs describes the joy of receiving four Emmy nominations. Gibbs was concerned that she would be typecast as a maid for the duration of her acting career due to the eight years she performed on "The Jeffersons" as Florence. While traveling in Korea, Gibbs realized that Florence was a relatable character that transcended language and cultural barriers. Gibbs met with Brandon Trtikoff of NBC to adapt "227," a theater script her daughter Angela wrote, to television. She wrote three episodes of "227," one of which dealt with the issue of homelessness in America. While shooting "227," Gibbs and Jackee Henry had a strained relationship, because Gibbs was a team player while Henry was aspiring to be a star.

The Jeffersons (Television program)

Emmy Awards

227 (Television Program)

Video Oral History Interview with Marla Gibbs, Section A2007_199_001_006, TRT: 0:15:20
2007/07/08

Marla Gibbs remembers suffering a severe stroke that landed her in the Cedar Sinai Hospital. This stroke was so severe that it caused Gibbs to lose several days of consciousness and required physical therapy. After she completely recovered, Gibbs performed in the "Vagina Monologues" with Penny Marshall. She was then cast in the Neil Simon play "Proposals" which was featured at The New Theater Restaurant in Overland, Kansas. She believes that there is a fellowship amongst African American actresses in Los Angeles, California. Gibbs is writing a book with the working title "It's Never Too Late." She believes in the universal theme of the importance of pursuing one's dreams, regardless of one's age.

Stroke--diagnosis.

Enslar, Eve, 1953-Vagina monologues.

African American actors--California--Los Angeles.