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Black Stand-Up Comedy of the 1960s

By Claudia Mariscal

Abstract: Vast research can be found on African Americans' culture and their use of humor to overcome struggles within American society. Much of the research found focuses on the study of African American humor in literature, folk tales, art, and theatre, but little has been done on the study of black stand-up comedy in the 1960s and comics' use of humor to overcome and combat racism and social struggles during this decade. Different methods of approach are used to gain a broader understanding of the use of humor as a combative tool by black comics in the 1960s. The comedic performances and styles of Dick Gregory, Godfrey Cambridge, Bill Cosby, Flip Wilson, and Jackie "Moms" Mabley are analyzed as well as newspaper and magazine articles during the 1960s for an in-depth perspective in how their humor impacted American society. The comedic styles and performances combated racism by breaking down racial barriers in stand-up comedy, helped change the image of black comedy, and integrated audiences from different racial and ethnic backgrounds. The study of black stand-up comedy in the 1960s allows scholars to broaden their understanding of the tradition of humor within African American culture to overcome struggles in American society and the impact that comedians of the 1960s had on contemporary stand-up comedians.

Introduction

In the 1960s, prominent and successful comedians such as Bill Cosby, Godfrey Cambridge, and Dick Gregory, used humor to address a wide array of issues that minority groups faced, such as racism, family, community, and politics. They galvanized society and laid the foundation for the success of black stand-up comedians and forged a new image for black comedians; one that is articulate and witty. Stand-up comedy is not seen as a viable or traditional source of analysis when interpreting the obstacles that African Americans faced in this decade. However, stand-up comedy is a form of art equivalent to music, literature, and paintings. It is fundamental when understanding the mindset and perspective of those living in the turmoil of the rapidly changing 1960s. Skits and jokes performed on stage can be used as a window into the social and political atmosphere of the day and provides a way of examining how these events were interpreted by prominent cultural figures. This paper will analyze the skits and jokes used in comedic performances by black stand-up comedians and dissect evidence of resistance against cultural hegemony and how comedians reshaped black comedy. These comedians reshaped comedy from a genre that used the physique of blacks as a derogative form of humor, which reinforced negative black stereotypes, into a genre of humor where they resisted using their physique as a source of humor. These comedians based their humor, instead, on the absurdities of racial, social and political issues of the day.

In the 1960s, African Americans engaged in a number of battles to desegregate public institutions and businesses in the South as well as fight for equality, social justice, and liberty throughout the country. Mainstream success in stand-up comedy was not likely for African Americans before 1960, but doors gradually opened after talented African American comedians such as Dick Gregory and Bill Cosby gained national recognition. Though they used comedy in different ways, both were successful in breaking down racial barriers and integrating night clubs and television shows. With the integration of night clubs in major cities and appearances on popular television shows such as “The Tonight Show,” black stand-up comedians had the opportunity to express their views and experiences openly to a wider audience and reiterated to the world the absurdities of racism and negative black

stereotypes, such as those reinforced by images of Blackface caricatures. Black comedy, along with its comedians, evolved with the changing political and social tides of the day and became social activists in their own right.

Historians, such as Lawrence W. Levine, have noted the historical importance of understanding the ways in which African Americans have used humor as a tool against racial oppression. In *Black Culture and Black Consciousness* he focuses on black consciousness and the oral culture that emerged from the days of slavery through the 1960s. He analyzed a number of songs, stories, and jokes used throughout the decades that revealed thoughts and expressions shared among African Americans and how they coped with the issues that they faced. His methodology of analyzing shared expressions and thoughts within the African American community help shed light on ways in which African Americans' reacted and responded to their political and social circumstances. According to Levine in his study of "Black Laughter" people began to identify their problems with others around them thus allowing them to build a community of support and understanding.¹ His study of "Black Laughter" lays the groundwork for defining and understanding Black comedy in the 1960s and how laughter was used as a source of power and agency in a time of significant change in American society.

In *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, James C. Scott used a similar methodological approach to that used by Levine in identifying the complex relationship between the powerful and the powerless and coping mechanisms used by the powerless to adapt to their position within society. Scott goes further by interpreting forms of expression shared among subordinate groups as forms of resistance against dominant groups. In public, subordinate groups disguise their discontent and criticism of dominant groups behind theatre, literature, songs, and jokes, among other things to avoid punishment from dominant groups. Scott suggested "how we might interpret the rumors, gossip, folktales, songs, gestures, jokes, and theater of the powerless as vehicles by which, among other things, they insinuate a critique of power while hiding behind

¹ Lawrence W Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 299.

anonymity or behind innocuous understandings of their conduct.”² Black comics in the 1960s used their jokes to critique, ridicule, undermine and resist the social and political conditions of the decade. Behind each joke and story lay a hidden discourse not easily recognizable to those who identified themselves as the dominant class in America. Subordinate groups in America understood the messages and laughed in recognition. As Levine purported, laughter gave stand-up comedians power and agency. With Scott’s analysis of class relations and hidden discourse, there is enough evidence to suggest that resistance against hegemony can come in many forms, including stand-up comedic performances and jokes from black comics of the 1960s.

When looking specifically at stand-up comedians of the 1960s through the 1970s, Matthew Daube in *Laughter in Revolt: Race, Ethnicity, and Identity in the Construction of Stand-Up Comedy* focuses on comedians Lenny Bruce, Bill Cosby, Dick Gregory and Richard Pryor. Daube discusses the background and careers of these comedians and how their stand-up performances were linked to issues of race, ethnicity and identity.³ He gives a thorough analysis of each comedian but fails to discuss how comedians addressed issues that were not entirely linked to race. The comedians he mentioned went beyond stories about racism and ethnicity; they had great insight regarding the politics and economics of the day. For example Dick Gregory’s performance at Berkeley University in 1965, was centered on the Vietnam War and contradictions in foreign policy; not just racism. Daube also fails to mention how Bill Cosby’s background was the main factor as to why he did not highlight racial injustices in his stand-up routines. Cosby’s comedy was different from others such as Dick Gregory because his material did not focus on issues of race; instead he focused on everyday struggles and family as a way to connect with white and black audiences alike. This may explain why his success surpassed that of Gregory.

In 1970, Bill Cosby had been characterized as having a “Blackness of his own” in an *Time* magazine article called

² James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (Yale University Press, 1992), xiii.

³ Matthew Daube, “Laughter in Revolt: Race, Ethnicity, and Identity in the Construction of Stand-Up Comedy” (PhD diss., Stanford University, 2010).

“Community with Laughter.”⁴ According to the writer for *Time*, Cosby had a unique and appealing comedic style and did not need to follow the comedic trend of going the “racial route,” as other black comedians had done to become successful. The writer also suggested that Cosby’s attitude and perhaps even his unique approach to comedy may have been due in part to his personal background, upbringing status and values. The author wrote:

All ghetto humor is basically ethnic. U.S. minorities have traditionally preserved their identities by laughing at their origins. Cosby's North Philadelphia is as rich in ethnic grist as Manhattan's Lower East Side was for a generation of Jewish comedians.⁵

Cosby’s avoidance of the race issue in his stand-up routines was not merely a career move as Daube suggests, but rather a genuine reaction to circumstances in which he grew up. He recognized that experiences and situations outside of race could be ridiculed. He also understood the importance of developing a universal humor that people of different backgrounds could connect to. Though there are gaps within Daube’s research, his analysis has been helpful in structuring my own research on stand-up comedy of the 1960s. In addition, his analysis reinforces the views of Levine when elucidating the significant role of black stand-up comedy.

Many historians have addressed the issue of comedy as a historical source and have analyzed comedy as evidence of African American intellectual and cultural history. However, my research will fill a critical gap in the literature by analyzing the writings and performances of black stand-up comedians in the 1960s such as *The Redd Foxx Encyclopedia of Black humor* by Redd Foxx and *Nigger an autobiography* by Dick Gregory as well as recordings of stand-up performances from Dick Gregory, Godfrey Cambridge, Bret Williams, Bill Cosby and others. In addition, newspaper and magazine articles along with published interviews with the comedians will provide further insight into the ways in which these comedians transformed black comedy in the 1960s and used this genre to break down racial barriers and diffuse stereotypes. African

⁴ “Communicating with Laughter,” *Time* 95, no. 14 (April 6, 1970): 58, accessed April 20, 2012. <http://web.ebscohost.com.libproxy.lib.csusb.edu/ehost>.

⁵ Ibid.

Americans have used humor throughout history to overcome the trials and tribulations in their lives and in this context, the 1960s were no different than the more thoroughly studied experience of slavery. By using newspaper and magazine articles to interpret the impact of stand-up comedians as well as their own writings and performances, this paper will build on existing research that contextualizes African American humor within the larger framework of intellectual history and resistance to cultural hegemony.

Slave Humor

Shortly after the abolition of slavery, scholars developed a new found interest in collecting and interpreting slave folk tales and songs. In her article “Negro Patois and its Humor,” Mamie Meredith purports that one of the earliest studies of slave humor and language had been conducted by N.S. Dodges. He collected and analyzed traditional slave folktales and presented his analysis in an article featured in *Appleton's Journal of Popular Literature, Science, and Art* in 1870. The collection and interpretation of humorous slave folktales and songs continued well into the twentieth century as scholars such as Henry D. Spalding, Phillip Sterling and Mamie Meredith spent their careers studying slave language, and the development of slave humor during times of struggle. They found that slaves’ humorous response to struggle has helped in the development of a unique African American culture. This led future historians to look at humor as a way to understand the cultural history of African Americans.

Black Culture and Black Consciousness by Lawrence A. Levine and *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* by Eugene D. Genovese analyze the origins of black humor and its importance within black culture. According to Genovese, “Slaves made an indispensable contribution to the development of black culture and black national consciousness.”⁶ There is no doubt that slaves helped develop a unique black culture; they looked to religion, kinship, and humor as mechanisms to combat the oppression they faced on a daily basis. Slaves’ joyous and uplifting attitude helped them overcome the trials caused by slavery, and as

⁶ Eugene D Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (New York: Vintage Books, 1976), 3.

Genovese and Levine argued, it was far better for slaves to laugh than cry. Slaves did not accept slavery and responded to the hegemony of the powerful by using passive and aggressive forms of resistance, one being humor. The strength and unity that developed from laughter allowed slaves to preserve aspects within their community, such as empowerment and self-consciousness. Laughter provided a source of power for them in a world in which they were powerless.⁷

Though humor was used as a form of resistance, which also became a unifying force and a power source for slaves, whites misunderstood slave humor in ways that reinforced negative stereotypes. Slaves used stories and jokes to poke fun at their masters as well as themselves. They would sing songs and dance on the plantations where the slave masters would sometimes sit in, hold competitions and watch, not knowing that slaves were making fun of them. Whites misunderstood the slaves' humor, and mistook their mannerisms as being mere reflections of their true character. Unfortunately this misinterpretation reinforced whites' delusion that slaves were "happy, go lucky folk" who enjoyed their lives of servitude. The Blackface caricature in the nineteenth century would reflect these images in minstrel shows across America.

Minstrel shows

In early minstrel shows, Northern white entertainers performed as black men, painted their faces with burnt cork, and purported that the black songs, dance, jokes, and images that they portrayed were real.⁸ Beginning as early as the 1820s, a group of white men promoted themselves as "Ethiopian delineators."⁹ These performers travelled with circuses and performed in blackface in between acts. Many white audiences in the North had never seen or encountered many blacks in their lives and believed the joyous, goofy, happy, country-talking buffoons were actual characteristics of blacks.¹⁰ Out of these performances, negative stereotypes formed which would affect Blacks well into the twenty-first

⁷ Ibid., 584.

⁸ Redd Foxx, *The Redd Foxx Encyclopedia of Black Humor* (Pasadena, Calif: Ward Ritchie Press, 1977), 12.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ *Ethnic Notions*, directed by Marlon Riggs (1987; California Newsreel, 2004).

century. According to David R. Roediger in *Wages of Whiteness*, stereotypes were created intentionally by white performers to distinguish themselves from blacks wherein they highlighted physical differences such as skin color. He stated, “the simple physique – elaborate cultural disguise – of blacking up served to emphasize that those on stage were really white and that whiteness really mattered.”¹¹ For white performers and their white audiences, minstrelsy helped to preserve their hegemony over blacks by portraying blacks as unintelligent and incompetent.

Minstrelsy not only reinforced negative black stereotypes, according to historian, Scott Lott, minstrelsy was used to justify racial oppression. In *Love and Theft*, he explains how the depictions of black slaves in minstrel shows reinforced racial oppression as whites believed that blacks were inept or unable to conform to American society and thus, needed to be controlled. According to Lott, “from our vantage point, the minstrel show indeed seems a transparently racist curiosity, a form of leisure that, in inventing and ridiculing the slow witted but irresponsible “plantation dandy” and the foppish “northern dandy negro” conveniently rationalized racial oppression.”¹² The depictions of slaves in minstrel shows solidified whites’ belief that they were a superior race and blacks were their subordinates. These images justified slavery in the South for many Americans and also justified segregation and inequality for freemen and women in the North. Even white performers and club owners who made money taking black people’s image and portraying them on stage, barred black people from attending or performing at minstrel shows.¹³ It would not be until after the Civil War when black men and women would be able to perform on stage; though not as themselves, but in blackface.

According to Redd Foxx in *The Redd Foxx Encyclopedia of Black Humor*, black entertainers appeared on stages all over the country in the 1860s and tried to “out black” white impersonators to gain more work as entertainers.¹⁴ Black minstrel shows traveled

¹¹ David R. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class*, rev. ed. (1991; repr., Verso, 2007), 117.

¹² Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class, Race and American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 15.

¹³ Foxx, *The Redd Foxx Encyclopedia of Black Humor*, 15.

¹⁴ Ibid.

the world and became a huge success. Black entertainers conformed to their blackface role to become successful or to be allowed on stage because white audiences would not accept black entertainers any other way.¹⁵ By accepting and reinforcing racial stereotypes through their own performances on stage, African Americans were allowed to enter into spaces previously reserved for whites only. There were few options for blacks in the workforce, and many jobs designated for blacks provided little pay and left no room for advancement. Although these early roles as entertainers were not glamorous, they were a way for blacks to make a decent living. Blackface entertainment marks the beginning of blacks performing on stage in front of white audiences, and it laid the foundation for widespread black entertainment.

One notable and highly successful black who performed in blackface in the 1920s, named Bert Williams, was the first black American to perform in a leading role on Broadway and helped push racial barriers for black entertainers. Williams “produced laughter out of pain.”¹⁶ He formed humor that would enable black audiences to laugh at themselves and at the absurdities of the American racial situation. His humor created a community among black people who were tied by their common experiences.¹⁷ Williams used his comedy in such a way that encouraged blacks to overcome their struggles. Bert Williams was among the most successful and highly regarded black comedian of the 1920s. However, his ongoing battle to be viewed as ‘equal’ to whites was not successful. He faced discrimination and segregation in his daily life and was never allowed to perform on stage outside of blackface. Although Williams and other black minstrel performers gained the opportunity to perform on stage and achieved worldwide popularity, they continued to face limitations. It was socially unacceptable at that time for black performers to portray themselves as anything other than blackface. These limitations reinforced negative black stereotypes and kept black performers from enjoying the full extent of their accomplishments and popularity.

Harlem Renaissance and the New Black Comic

¹⁵ Ibid, 23.

¹⁶ Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*, 360.

¹⁷ Ibid.

Changes in America at the turn of the century influenced changes in the way African Americans thought and expressed themselves, especially through art. The Great Migration and the First World War motivated blacks to define their world on their own terms, and not how white Americans perceived them. Following this renewed self-determination and consciousness an explosion of art, literature, theatre, music, and other forms of artistic expression emerged among African Americans with the goals of establishing unity and pride within black communities in order to combat racial stereotypes and prejudices. This cultural movement came to be known as the Harlem Renaissance. Large waves of young black artists and writers gathered in Harlem, New York and shared ideas and aspirations through art.

Many prominent black artists during this time understood humor to be a distinct aspect within their culture and made efforts to reclaim it from minstrelsy. *African American Humor: The Best Black Comedy from Slavery to Today* by Mel Watkins discusses a transition in black comedy from minstrelsy to vaudeville acts where instead of poking fun of themselves using blackface, they focused on “black-on-black situations, poking fun at henpecked husbands, unfaithful wives and rural or “country” attitudes.”¹⁸ According to Watkins, their jokes and stage performances were too risqué for white America, thus they were kept from mainstream entertainment and secluded to the black circuit stage.¹⁹ Although whites had not accepted this new form of comedy it is important to note that blacks were taking the initiative in rejecting popular blackface comedy and creating new comedy acts of their own.

Jessie Fauset, a prominent writer during the Harlem Renaissance, recognized the change in comedy and believed that this had been the result of Blacks’ unique gift of laughter.

Through laughter we have conquered even the lot of the jester and the clown. The parable of the one talent still holds good and because we have used the little which in those early painful days was our approach we find ourselves slowly but surely moving toward that most glittering of all goals, the freedom of the American stage.²⁰

¹⁸ Mel Watkins, *African American Humor*, 112.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Alain Locke, *The New Negro*, 167.

Taking control of the stage and producing humor that did not conform to traditional white American ideals was a step towards liberty and equality on and even off the American stage. These changes gave black entertainers a new sense of control and pride in their talents and abilities, and would lead to the gradual shift into stand-up comic routines and styles in the 1940s and beyond.

Black comedy continued to evolve as comics of the late 1940s and 1950s continued to use risqué jokes and antics pioneered by comics during the Harlem Renaissance. Their routines also included criticism of American racism. Most blacks, especially black soldiers who returned home from war, commented segregation, integration, immigrants, and other social and political issues with jokes. By acting as joke-tellers, blacks gained a sense of superiority over those whom they ridiculed. These attitudes and jokes allowed comedians such as Redd Foxx, Slappy White, and Leonard Reed to trade Blackface antics for dialogue that reflected attitudes and events in the 1940s and 1950s. In addition, it enabled them to abandon the image of illiteracy or incompetency that plagued black comedians for decades.²¹

Minstrelsy began its decline after the Second World War. Due in part to the millions of human rights violations and atrocities that had been committed during the Holocaust, society began to view more cognitively the inhumanness of racial oppression. According to Michael Rogin “the racial extermination of Jews during the war called to the attention of African American racial oppression in America.”²² This along with the rise of black pride and consciousness at the turn of the century inspired many blacks to believe that minstrel caricature was a negative portrayal of their image and actively protested against forms of entertainment that displayed such imagery. Their criticism helped to shed light on the negative effects that minstrelsy has had on African Americans. As a result, the entertainment industry and their performers began to look at other forms of entertainment such as variety shows, musical comedies, burlesque, and the circus to replace minstrel shows. Entertainers began to abandon minstrelsy and replaced it with light musical comedies that resembled vaudeville shows. The impact that the Civil Rights movement had on breaking down negative stereotypes and segregation gave black comedians fresh

²¹ Foxx, *The Redd Foxx Encyclopedia of Black Humor*, 149.

²² Michael Rogin, “‘Democracy and Burnt Cork’: The End of Blackface, the Beginning of Civil Rights,” *Representations* vol. 46 (April 1, 1994): 6.

ideas and material to use in their performances. No longer were they constrained by having to mimic the stereotypical roles created by white entertainers in the minstrel era. Black comedians had the freedom to express themselves openly in front of black audiences and found acceptance and understanding. Though they had much more freedom of expression, it was limited to only black audiences in black clubs. The greatest obstacle for black stand-up comedians was to cross over into white clubs and perform in front of white audiences as themselves and as social satirists. White audiences were not ready for this type of black comedy and black comics remained bound by limitations established by whites.

Black Stand-Up Comedy

After the 1940s, black comics began to speak directly to and interact with audiences and used humor to address racial and non-racial issues. Since stand-up comedy is a relatively 'new' artistic phenomenon, scholarly work is scant, especially when discussing the impact comics from the 1960s had on American society. Comics provide unique perspectives of the time and environment in which they live. They also represent the socio-cultural makeup of their specific ethnic and racial groups, and unite people from different backgrounds all through laughter.²³

Scholars such as Lawrence E. Mintz purports that stand-up comedy is a component of visual and oral art and a viable source in defining American society and culture.²⁴ Stand-up comedy has had a long history in the United States stemming from the nineteenth century with minstrel shows, the circus, vaudeville and burlesque theater. Mintz argues in *Stand-up Comedy as Social and Cultural Mediation* that stand-up comedy is a neglected art form that should be studied because it helps to define a society and is a part of American culture. He states, "clearly it is a popular art that is central to American entertainment, but in the universal tradition of public joking rituals it is more than that as well; it is an important part of the nation's cultural life."²⁵ Arguments such as this evidently gained momentum in the twenty-first century as

²³ Bambi Higgins, *Laughing Mad: The Black Comic Persona in Post-soul America*, 6.

²⁴ Lawrence E. Mintz, "Standup Comedy as Social and Cultural Mediation," *American Quarterly* 37, no. 1 (April 1, 1985): 71, doi:10.2307/2712763.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 82.

more scholars have begun to study stand-up comedy, giving power to the cultural and ethnic significance stand-up comedy has played throughout America.

Laughter in Revolt: Race, Ethnicity, and Identity in the Construction of Stand-up Comedy by Matthew Daube, *Punchlines* by Leon Rappoport and *Laughing mad: the Black Comic Persona in Post-Soul America* by Bambi Haggins focus on, not just the history of ethnic and racial comedy, but also the performances and material used by influential black stand-up comedians throughout the years. Daube and Rappoport focus on Jewish and black stand-up comedy. These groups may come from different backgrounds, but the comedy that has emerged from these groups is very similar and has similar origins. Daube compares Lenny Bruce, a Jewish comedian, with black stand-up comedians Dick Gregory, Bill Cosby, and Richard Pryor. He argues that the comedic style and success of Lenny Bruce allowed black comedians to follow suit and speak openly in front of white audiences. According to Daube, “Dick Gregory and Bill Cosby built on the approaches established by Bruce as they introduced black comedy to the integrated main stage in the early 1960s, each of them pioneering a model of how African American comics could intervene in a racial discussion within comedy that had been initiated by non-blacks.”²⁶ Both groups have used humor as a means to combat prejudice and stereotypes in America and more than any other ethnic group, these groups have the most successful comedians. According to Rappoport, their use of humor to criticize politics, institutions and society is appealing to the public.²⁷ He mentions comedians such as Jon Stewart, Woody Allen, Dave Chappelle, and Richard Pryor, to name a few, who are successful comedians from black or Jewish backgrounds. Their success is to their comedic analysis and criticism of American society and politics.

Aside from finding connections between different ethnic groups in stand-up comedy, Haggins looks specifically at the black comic, whether their medium is stand-up, film, or television. Haggins discusses how the environment which a comic is from and reflects on his or her comedy. The works of Haggins, Daube, and Rappoport demonstrate how comedians from different minority groups have used humor to criticize and reveal the absurdities of

²⁶ Daube, *Laughter in Revolt*, 177.

²⁷ Leon Rappoport, *Punchlines: The Case for Racial, Ethnic, and Gender Humor* (Westport, Conn: Praeger Publishers, 2005), 70.

American society and political atmosphere. Black and Jewish comedians alike have used humor as a vehicle against the hegemony of the powerful in America. Also due to their continued success over the years it has become socially acceptable for these groups to express themselves openly.

Though a new trend has emerged among historians to study stand-up comedy and its affects within American society and among specific ethnic and racial groups, works focusing specifically on the 1960s black comic and their contributions are lacking. Black comics contributed to the evolution of black comedy by paving the way for contemporary comics in the mainstream, combated racism in American society using humor and helped change the image of the black comic.

Comedians of the Decade

In the 1960s, African Americans encountered struggles for equality and justice under the law and within American society. It had been over a hundred years since the abolition of slavery and yet African Americans remained at the lower echelons of American society and politics. African Americans were ready for change. As black pride and consciousness was on the rise, black comedians found opportunity to move beyond the “blackface” past and to prove that black comedians can still be funny without having to portray themselves as a dancing, babbling, buffoons. Though attempts during the Harlem Renaissance were made to break from blackface imagery in order to defuse negative stereotypes, they were not as successful as black comics from the 1960s. In the 1960s, prominent stand- up comedians, such as Dick Gregory, Bill Cosby, Godfrey Cambridge, Flip Wilson, and Jackie ‘Moms’ Mabley found an outlet using humor to directly or indirectly combat and overcome racial issues of their day. Unlike generations of comics before them, their exposure on television, film, and other media outlets allowed them to reach larger audiences and gain international recognition presenting a respectable black image. Regardless of their success, black stand-up comedians faced criticism within the African American community, along with religious and ethnic groups.

Dick Gregory

For Dick Gregory, having the opportunity and ability to tell racist jokes gave him a sense of freedom and empowerment that would not be there if it weren't for humor.²⁸ "When you're free of fear, man you feel power!"²⁹ These feelings allowed him to openly express his thoughts and feelings about the race issue while also provoking laughter and awareness to his audience. Gregory learned early in his life how humor can be uplifting and used as a mechanism against ridicule and degradation.

Gregory used humor to reveal the absurdities of the race issues in America and made countless jokes making fun of stereotypes, integration, and the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) to name a few. When joking about integration he recalls the day swimming pools were integrated in his hometown, St. Louis "Ah, but they were nice to us that day in 1951; they hired a new lifeguard for us. He was blind. We got up on the new diving board and jumped. They drained the pool."³⁰ In addition, no matter how threatening and intimidating the KKK were to a black person's psyche, Gregory was not discouraged from ridiculing them in a number of his jokes: "Nothing free anymore, you can't even hate for free, don't you think it's free to join KKK and hate me; there is a \$250 initiation fee and you buy your own sheet, you even have to keep up your dues."³¹ "A man from the KKK once threatened to burn our house down, his sheet caught on fire. We threw water at him, but we missed. So we went and filled out buckets with gasoline!"³² Not even Santa Claus was safe from Dick Gregory: "Yes well my daughter, she doesn't believe in Santa Claus. She knows doggone well no white man is coming into a colored neighborhood after midnight."³³ Gregory fought the racial issues of the 1960s by confronting them and exposing how truly ridiculous hate and racism were. Both blacks and whites understood these problems in their own ways, either through experience or inner guilt, and laughed in recognition as one people.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Thomas B. Morgan, "Two Worlds of Dick Gregory," *Holiday* 36 (December 1964): 128b.

³⁰ Dick Gregory, *East and West*, 1961.

³¹ Dick Gregory, *In Living Black and White*, 1961.

³² Morgan, "Two Worlds of Dick Gregory," 126a.

³³ Ibid.

Dick Gregory did not just present racial material to his audience. He knew early in his career that if he wanted to become a success in show business he had to reach out and appeal to white audiences, not just black audiences. He strategically developed a style in which he told racial jokes as well as non-racial jokes in his performances to draw in his audiences. “It took me until 1960 to realize that I needed 80% white material; you know mother-in-law jokes and Khrushchev. I bought white man’s joke books to figure out what whitey was laughing at. Then I made a mixture 20% black and 80% white.”³⁴ To keep himself up to date with the political issues of the day, Gregory read newspapers on a daily basis and would later give his take on these issues on stage.³⁵

From the late 1950s to early 1960s, the Cold War led to the unpopular Vietnam War and the nuclear arms race with the Soviet Union. Americans, from all backgrounds, empowered themselves to speak openly about political issues and expose problems, led by Cold War diplomacy, at home and abroad. In an Anti-Vietnam war rally at Berkeley in 1965, Gregory tells a humorous story about a time when he called President Lyndon B. Johnson to talk about the Vietnam crisis: “I call him now and then, it’s very important to me because I am not about to fight the Red Chinese, if you stop and think about it they’ve got 688 million folks in China. They’ve got more census takers than we have people and if them cats ever start saying we shall overcome, they will!”³⁶ At another performance, Gregory jokes about the outer space program. He recalled a newspaper article that he read in which a chimp returns to earth from a voyage in outer space: “The caption read, ‘Chimp returns’, that was a lie, that was a man that we sent up there and that’s how he looked like when he came back.”³⁷ When the U.S.S.R. announced that they had put a man in space, Gregory was ready with some new lines: “Thing that amused me most was when that man reached a state of weightlessness. He floated out of his chair and he had to hold on to the pad. I get like that every Saturday night and it don’t cost this country no two billion.”³⁸ Gregory

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Various Artists, *Berkeley Teach-in: Vietnam*. Folkways Records FD5765, 2009, compact disc. Recorded May 1965.

³⁷ Dick Gregory, *In Living Black and White*.

³⁸ Gilbert Millstein, “Negro Says It with Jokes,” *New York Times Magazine* (April 30, 1961): 34.

exposed the absurdity of Cold War politics and openly criticized them in a humorous way. The issues raised by the Cold War crossed color lines and affected all Americans not just white or black. By using comedy, Gregory revealed to people that they faced political issues together, and that blacks are literate and competent.

Godfrey Cambridge

Godfrey Cambridge believed that if blacks and whites were going to get along, issues involving race had to be displayed and laughed at by everyone. “We must bring things out into the open. There are some people you can’t reach. You neutralize this kind. If two men are laughing at each other, nobody gets stabbed. You people aren’t going back to Europe and we aren’t going back to Africa. We got too much going on here.”³⁹ Like Gregory, Cambridge wanted black and white relations to improve. In addition, he sought to improve the public image of blacks. As mentioned, stereotypes have affected blacks negatively for decades and in the eyes of many Americans at this time, blacks were still lazy, illiterate, slow, and unmannered buffons.

Through the title of his record “Them Cotton Pickin Days is Over,” Cambridge indicates his quest to reveal that blacks were no longer subservient slaves to whites, but were equal members within society and deserved to be seen and treated as such. According to Levine, “. . .blacks used the majority’s stereotypes in their humor in order to rob them of their power to hurt and humiliate. To tell jokes containing the stereotype was not invariably to accept it but frequently to laugh at it, to strip it naked, to expose it to scrutiny.”⁴⁰ In “Them Cotton Pickin Days is Over” Cambridge strips stereotypes of their harmful effect on black images by turning them inside out and exposing them to ridicule and laughter. At the start of his act captured in this recording, Cambridge exposed the lazy and slow black stereotype by running onstage and saying, “I hope you noticed how I rushed up here. We do have to do that to change our image. No more shuffle after the revolution; we gotta be agile.”⁴¹ Another stereotype that he

³⁹ “They Have Overcome,” *Time* 85, no. 6 (February 5, 1965): 100.

⁴⁰ Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*, 336.

⁴¹ *Godfrey Cambridge -Them Cotton Pickin's Days Is Over, Part 1*, 2011, accessed April 21, 2012,

exposes and ridicules is blacks love for fried chicken: “People used to think of Negroes as going around with fried chicken in a paper bag, but things have changed. Now we carry an attaché case with fried chicken in it. We ain’t going to give up everything just to get along with you people.”⁴² By exposing and laughing at the absurdities behind these familiar stereotypes, Cambridge aspired to revolutionize black images and change common perceptions of blacks’ attributes. This would help diminish any lingering shame associated with being black, and build confidence and pride in people to overcome the racial problems of the 1960s.

Bill Cosby

Bill Cosby used mainly non-racial humor based on everyday topics, such as family, religion, and childhood. Bill Cosby grew up in Philadelphia, and as a college student at Temple University, he made money on the side by performing stand-up comedy at Greenwich Village clubs.⁴³ He began his career by telling racial jokes, but changed when his manager Roy Silver in 1962 told him to change his act.⁴⁴ Cosby would realize that there can only be one Dick Gregory and wanted to bring something to black stand-up that was unique. He also believed that racial jokes made some people uncomfortable and did not want that reaction while he performed. In a 1965 interview in *Saturday Evening Post*, Bill Cosby remembered, “When I began telling racial jokes, the Negroes looked at the whites, the whites looked at the Negroes and no one laughed—and then I had to tell the jokes all over again. So I tried reaching all the public so folks would say, Hey man here’s a Negro who doesn’t use racial material.”⁴⁵ His success increased as many whites felt less ‘exposed’ with Cosby’s humor. He recorded a number of comedy albums and most of his jokes deriving from his experiences in life and everyday characters.

One of Cosby’s albums called “I Started Out as a Child,” reflects on his childhood growing up in Philadelphia. In one skit he

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SpOzym0fs3E&feature=youtube_gdata_player.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Daube, *Laughter with Revolt*, 149.

⁴⁴ Stanley Karnow, “Bill Cosby: Variety is the Life of Spies,” *Saturday Evening Post* 238, no. 19 (1965): 86–88.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

talks about a childhood friend named Ruddy, who was the first of his friends to have a pair of sneakers, and reenacts a conversation with Ruddy about his sneakers: “They make you run fast, Ruddy says. I can run and stop on a dime and give you nine cents change and see these rubber balls on the side, they keep me from making sparks that’ll set my pants on fire cause’ I run so fast!”⁴⁶ Cosby brings his performances to life as he uses amusing words like “whoosh” and changes the tone of his voice when representing Ruddy in his skit. Aside from telling funny stories about his childhood, Cosby portrays himself as a number of familiar characters such as Superman and the biblical figure of Noah. In his Superman skit, he talks about how a police officer stopped superman from changing in a phone booth. As ‘Kent Clark’ dashes into a phone booth and loosens his tie a police officer says, “what the hell you doin’ in there? Changing my clothes, Superman answers. You can’t change in a phone booth, snaps the cop. Who the hell do you think you are?”⁴⁷ Cosby’s reflections on life and childhood allowed blacks and whites to realize that they have much more in common than they might have thought. People from all backgrounds may not have grown up in the same neighborhoods or with the same amount of wealth, but their experiences are similar and that is what Cosby wanted people to come to terms with. His audiences laughed in recognition and established a brotherhood that may not have existed without this type of humor. Cosby was able to combat the racial issues of the day without using racial comedy. He did not criticize or confront racial issues directly like Gregory or Cambridge. Instead Cosby brought together different races with humor that targeted universal life experiences and situations.

⁴⁶ Bill Cosby, *I Started Out as a Child*. Warner Bros., LP. Released November 1964.

⁴⁷ Bill Cosby, *Bill Cosby Is a Very Funny Fellow...Right!* Warner Bros., LP. Released November 1963.

Flip Wilson

Flip Wilson is another comedian who exposed the absurdities of racial issues in American society, but in a more practical and less controversial form than many of his peers including Gregory or Cambridge. One of his techniques utilized historical events to parody the social climate of the 1960s. For example, when bringing up racial discrimination in America, he used Indians to parody prejudices against blacks.

When I was back there, thinking about what I'd do out here, I asked myself if I should do any racial material. So I decided why not? Why should I hesitate to express my opinion about the racial problem? Why shouldn't I say to you: Ladies and gentlemen, we've got to do something about the Indians! There are some who say the Indians aren't ready yet. Now some say that's a pretty harsh statement, but it depends on how you look at it. Let's ask ourselves questions like, 'How would you like to build a \$50,000 home and have some guy put a wigwam next to it?'⁴⁸

One *Ebony* article in 1968 described this method as "Flip's trick to make the audience laugh first at the ludicrous situation of the Indians being discriminated against by negroes, but when they finish laughing, on their way home in the car, they'll think of what they laughed at."⁴⁹ He wanted to demonstrate to his audiences that, although funny, racial issues can be approached in different ways. He provided various avenues in his performances when approaching racial issues to make people of all backgrounds laugh without feeling threatened.

Jackie "Moms" Mabley

The most successful Black woman stand-up comedian of the 1960s was Jackie 'Moms' Mabley. She connected with her audiences by portraying an image of the universal mother and told familiar jokes to people of different backgrounds. Her jokes targeted

⁴⁸ Ponchitta Pierce, "All Flip over Flip," *Ebony* 23 (April 1968): 64.

⁴⁹ *Ibid*, 71.

relationships, the community, family, everyday occurrences, and racism. As Lawrence A. Levine stated, “she dealt with her audiences not as a professional entertainer but as a member of their community.”⁵⁰

Before the 1960s, Mabley found success within the black community and performed regularly at Harlem’s Apollo Theatre. Her popularity reached larger audiences after playing at Carnegie Hall in 1962 and making numerous television appearances throughout the decade. She recorded a number of successful albums and was named “The Funniest Woman in the World.”⁵¹ Her ‘mother-like’ persona allowed her to step outside the bounds of “acceptable” behavior and humor for a female comedian and shed light on controversial racial and social issues.⁵²

In “Moms Mabley at the Playboy Club” she raises the racial issue and reveals its absurdities by telling a story about a black man who wanted to join an integrated church in the South.

I want to tell you about this fellow who joined integrated church, down in one of them foreign countries, I think Alabama or Mississippi one of the foreign countries down there, and time comin’ for him to be baptized. The minister dumped him down in the water and brought him up and asked him do you believe? He answers, yes sir I believe. The minister dumped him in again, held him a little longer and brought him up and asks do you believe? The man answers (choking) yes sir I believe. The minister dumped him down again and held him longer and pulled him up and asked do you believe? The man answers (choking harder) yes sir, I believe you tryin’ to drown me, that’s what I believe.⁵³

Along with addressing the racial issues of the day, she also targeted the human condition. She addressed the hardships and sorrows of the black community in a humorous fashion and used

⁵⁰ Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*, 366.

⁵¹ Elsie A Williams, *The Humor of Jackie Moms Mabley: An African American Comedic Tradition*, Studies in African American History and Culture (New York: Garland Pub, 1995), 48.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Moms Mabley, *Moms Mabley At the Playboy Club*. Chess, Lp 1460. Released 1961.

humor and absurdity make light of hard times. In a skit performed at Sing Sing Prison in New York she addresses hard times by telling prisoners she feels safer with them than on the streets:

I feel safer than I felt in a long time, cause baby it is rough out there. A little boy ten years old walked up to mom and said 'stick em up'. I say 'you to little son to be talkin' on like that.' He says 'momma I don't want that damn jive give me some money!'⁵⁴

She raised the issues of poverty and violence within the Black community in a humorous fashion to not only recognize the fact that situations like this existed, but to also bring the Black community together and laugh in unison over their hardships as a way to overcome them.

Critics

Though black stand-up comedians gained popularity and became successful in their careers, they were not without critics. Most articles of the 1960s, complimented their success, but others found the material used by comedians as offensive and damaging. In the *Chicago Defender* 1961 an article entitled "Comics 'Best Yesterday or Today? Take Your Pick'" highlighted the opposing views on the changes in black comedy. It recognized that people seemed to enjoy the new style that black stand-up comedians like Gregory were using, but others thought otherwise. "There are those who refer to their lines as being crude and downgrading on racial matters and none too clean on many occasions."⁵⁵ Even Cosby, whose material was not as controversial as that of his peers, had to apologize for humor that some found to be offensive; The *Los Angeles Times* published, "Bill Apologizes for Monolog," in which Cosby apologized to the Catholic Church for calling communion wafers "individual pizzas."⁵⁶ Gregory also faced backlash in 1965 after humorous comments on his views on Edgar J. Hoover and

⁵⁴ Moms Mabley, *Moms Mabley Live At Sing Sing*. Mercury Sr- 61263. Released 1970.

⁵⁵ "Comics Best Yesterday Or Today? Take Your Pick," *Chicago Daily Defender*, November 29, 1961, p. 16.

⁵⁶ "Bill Cosby Apologizes for Monolog," *Los Angeles Times*, March 22, 1969, B2.

elderly blacks at a rally at Bogalusa, Louisiana. The article called “Off the Deep End” in *Christian Century*, condemned Gregory for his remarks, “such rabid extremism sets up road blocks in the Negro’s progress towards peace [...] it betrays the Negro and his just crusade. Frank criticism of the F.B.I.’s activities in the South and Uncle Tomism is needed, but there is a point beyond which frankness becomes destructive acrimony.”⁵⁷ These articles are glimpses into some of the negative views on the content used by black stand-up comedians in the 1960s. They also demonstrate that there was a shift away from criticism of comics on the basis of skin color and for performing outside of blackface, instead critics began to focus on content. This is a major transition from what historians verified before the 1960s when black performers were forced to conform to the images and portrayals that whites accepted for those black performers. This also demonstrates that people did not fully accept or understand the reasoning behind the bold or open remarks that stand-up comedians used and unfortunately, it is likely that many people never will. Black comedians had demonstrated to America that they were as skilled and were able to perform as well as, and at times even better, than white performers. Their jokes and skits were more than just that, they were windows into the trials and tribulations that blacks had faced and combated within American society. Not only did critics fail to recognize this, they overlooked the impact that these comedians had within, not just the entertainment industry, but society as a whole.

Conclusion

Broad study has been conducted on African American culture and their use of humor to overcome struggles within American society, but little has been done on black stand-up comedy in the 1960s and comics’ use of humor to overcome the turbulent social and political atmosphere during this decade. By analyzing black stand-up comedy of the 1960s, this study helps contribute to a wide array of literature that focuses on the social and political atmosphere of the decade as well as the cultural and intellectual history of African Americans.

⁵⁷ “Off the Deep End,” *The Christian Century* 82 (1965): 670.

The 1960s was a transitional period for black stand-up comics on and off stage. On stage, they had been accepted, to some degree, to speak about the social, racial, and political conditions of the day with some limitations. As Dick Gregory explained in one interview, for him to perform in front of white audiences and become successful he had to find out what whites found to be humorous.⁵⁸ He had to create jokes and skits that would appeal to whites and not just blacks. Also, if one would like to compare the success of Bill Cosby with the success of other 1960s black comics, Cosby's use of universal humor and avoidance of racial jokes allowed for his long term success and recognition to surpass those of others. Racial jokes and social satire were popular to many, yet they were too risqué or offensive for some and limited the long-term success and recognition of comedians like Dick Gregory and Godfrey Cambridge. This demonstrates that many within society, particularly whites, were not entirely comfortable with being blatantly confronted with racial issues. Whites laughed at themselves, but preferred to be entertained with humor that they could relate to over humor that clandestinely blamed them for the racial issues in America. Although black comics' limitations are evident, they broke down racial barriers on stage and paved the way for the success of future black comics. They also helped impede negative racial stereotypes by representing themselves.

Further, it is also important to note that black comics of this decade were not criticized for the color of their skin. The focus of criticisms towards them focused more on the content of their jokes than on their appearance. This is evidence of a transitional period in American society where people were shifting away from judging a person by the color of their skin. Although racial tensions continued, the Civil Rights movement and the rise of black consciousness and pride brought attention to the racial oppression that African Americans had faced. Americans began to recognize the importance of social equality and freedom of expression for all regardless of a person's race, gender, background, or ethnicity.

Black stand-up comedians created a community of laughter in which people of different backgrounds came together and laughed in recognition of specific jokes and skits. These comics integrated audiences without focusing on one specific racial or

⁵⁸ Morgan, 126a.

ethnic group. They created humor that people of all backgrounds could laugh at, which contributed to their widespread popularity and success. It had been essential that during this time of turbulence and change, people come together as one and just laugh with one another. This gathering together and community building is defined in *Imagined Communities* by Benedict Anderson where he stated “regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each [community] that nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship.”⁵⁹ The country had been trying to repair wounds that had been created by social, racial, and political issues of the decade. People wanted to overcome these differences and struggles. They were able to manifest a mutual understanding and establish a sort of brother/sisterhood from laughter. Stand-up comedy helped form a community of people who had been open and willing to laugh at themselves and each other.

Examining and interpreting the jokes and performances of black comics during this decade exposes and broadens one’s understanding of the trials and tribulations African Americans faced during this time. Comics used humor as a tool to bring awareness to the masses, to combat racial stereotypes and to comment on political issues of the 1960s. They fought their battles using laughter just as the slaves utilized it over a hundred years prior. Humor gave comedians a source of power and agency that may not have existed without their gift of story-telling and ability to make people laugh. They reversed stereotypes by making fun of those very stereotypes that degraded them and revealed to the world that blacks were more than just the images that have been portrayed in popular culture. Their gifts led to the integration of audiences and allowed whites and blacks to develop a community of laughter and a mutual understanding of everyday struggles.

⁵⁹ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (Verso, 2006), 7.

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