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"I Got Something to Tell You": The Life and Comedy of Jackie "Moms" Mabley

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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This dissertation is a biographical study that places Jackie "Moms" Mabley within major moments of African American and U.S. cultural history, including the Theater Owners' Booking Association (T.O.B.A.), the Great Migration, the Harlem Renaissance/New Negro Movement, the black film movement of the 1930s and 1940s, and the civil rights campaigns. Through an analysis of primary sources including comedy recordings, interviews, and newspaper coverage, this dissertation illustrates that Mabley was an artist-activist who used her platform as an entertainer to speak out against racism and sexism, and to raise people's consciousness about black liberation movements. She was often subtle in her commentary, and by embodying the "Moms" persona when leveling her critiques of Jim Crow and sexism, her statements were more readily accepted by broad audiences. Mabley's life and comedy is historically significant because she used the stage to discuss the struggles of women and African Americans, while critiquing the inequality and marginalization these groups often faced. Mabley used comedy as a way to engage in social protest by expressing critical commentary about racism, politics, gender

issues, and sexuality. Her work was also significant because she exposed multiracial audiences to the forms and traditions of African American humor. Jackie "Moms" Mabley had an intersectional identity that provides a lens to better understand issues of race, gender, and sexuality and how they have worked together historically. This sets her apart from her male contemporaries because using an intersectional lens provides a clearer understanding of race and gender issues than looking at them separately would provide. It is the combination of Mabley's identity and the content of her comedy that makes her a valuable index for the experiences of black people, especially black women, in early to mid-twentieth century America.

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Introduction: The Comedy Pioneer in a Housedress

"I got somethin' to tell you!" So began countless comedy routines by Jackie "Moms" Mabley, a comedian of the mid-twentieth century whose career as a performer spanned from the vaudeville period of the 1910s through 1975. As an African American woman entertainer, Mabley's life and career demand serious study because she was an artist-activist who represented a transition between the vaudeville period and the Civil Rights Movement. Cultural theorist Bambi Haggins asserts, "By following the trajectory of Mabley's career, you can trace the development of black comedy from the waning days of the minstrel show to the civil rights era and beyond."[1] This dissertation is a biographical study that places Mabley within major moments of African American and U.S. cultural history, including the Theater Owners' Booking Association (T.O.B.A.), often referred to as the "Chitlin' Circuit", the Great Migration, the Harlem Renaissance/New Negro Movement, the black film movement of the 1930s and 1940s, and the civil rights campaigns.

Comedy as Protest

Jackie "Moms" Mabley was an artist-activist who used her platform as an entertainer to speak out against racism and sexism, and to raise people's consciousness about the black liberation movements. She also supported civil rights by performing at

[1] Bambi Haggins, "Moms Mabley and Wanda Sykes: 'I'ma Be Me," in *Hysterical: Women in American Comedy,* ed. Linda Mizejewski and Victoria Sturtevant (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2017), 213.

fundraisers and benefits, and sometimes donated money from her shows to civil rights causes. While she may not have been as outspoken or as active in the Civil Rights Movement as artist-activists such as Dick Gregory, Harry Belafonte, and a few others, her work should still be considered as representative of the relationship between popular culture and protest. She was often subtle in her commentary, and by embodying the "Moms" persona when leveling her critiques of Jim Crow and sexism, her statements were more readily accepted by broad audiences. She was able to reach many people with her messages, especially when she started making television appearances and releasing comedy albums in the 1960s. Indeed, her success helped open the door for later generations of Black comedians who were much more overt in their racial critiques and consciousness-raising commentary.

Biography

This study uses three different names for its subject. Mabley began her life as Loretta Mary Aiken, and the first chapter discusses her early life and refers to her by this name. The second and third chapters refer to her as Jackie Mabley, because this was the stage name she initially adopted. Over time she began to be referred to as "Moms" backstage by her colleagues and friends. Eventually she started being referred to as "Moms Mabley" in the press and in her stage credits. This is reflected in chapters four and five. In addition to her shifting moniker, this study also contends with the incomplete and inconsistent biographical information available about Jackie "Moms" Mabley. Like many African Americans living during the early twentieth century, Mabley's life was not well-documented in official public records. She and her family are listed in the census,

but not consistently. In addition, Mabley provided inconsistent details about her personal life and background in interviews and onstage. Over time she would omit information or change what she shared. For these reasons, incorrect information about Mabley is often included in otherwise reliable sources about her. For instance, an incorrect birth year of 1894 is often cited. This may be a result of the fact that she lied about her age when she left home to become a performer. Another incorrect story about her mother dying when she was a young girl is often included in biographical essays about Mabley. In fact, her mother lived into Mabley's adulthood. This dissertation makes every effort to utilize information about Mabley's life that is corroborated by official census and other records, family accounts, and other reliable primary sources. This study will note when the information provided is not confirmed. The incomplete and inconsistent nature of Mabley's biography is not enough reason to exclude her from the historical record with a detailed study of this kind. In fact, her biographical information aligns with that of many other African Americans whose experiences were similarly obscured in the public records.

Mabley's life and comedy becomes historically significant because she used the stage to discuss the struggles of women and African Americans, while critiquing the inequality and marginalization these groups often faced. Her commentaries on politics, race, and gender warrants scholarly attention because her comedy was not only shaped by her own experiences as a Black woman, but because she also provides insights into the experiences and attitudes of African Americans in general at specific points in the twentieth century. Mabley used comedy as a way to engage in social protest by

expressing critical perspectives on racism, politics, gender issues, and sexuality. By engaging with gender as well as race, Mabley was unique and her work set her apart from her male contemporaries such as Dick Gregory and Godfrey Cambridge. She reflected the stuggles of African American women by embodying the intersection of gender and race in her comedy. Scholars and comedians, particularly female standup comics, argue that Moms Mabley was a pioneer and role model for generations of performers. This dissertation will fill in gaps in the literature about this artist and performer who made important contributions to American comedy and culture.

Historiography

Chapters one through four are organized chronologically, moving through Mabley's life from her birth and upbringing in Brevard, North Carolina in 1897 to her rise as a performer, culminating with her fame in the 1960s and 1970s. Chapters four and five both cover the period from 1960 to 1975, when Mabley achieved crossover success with record sales, television appearances, a multitude of comedy club performances, and star billing in the 1975 feature film *Amazing Grace.* This time period is discussed in two chapters because of the wealth of information available about her life and career during this time. Rather than moving chronologically in these two chapters, they are presented thematically.

This dissertation intervenes in the historiography on Jackie "Moms" Mabley's life and career. The most extensive work published on Mabley is *The Life and Humor of Jackie "Moms" Mabley* (1995) by cultural critic Elsie A. Williams. In the text she assesses Mabley's comedic work from a literary perspective, and focuses on her role as a

storyteller in the African and African-American traditions. Williams argues that the longevity of Mabley's career provides a lens for understanding the evolution of black humor; and that Mabley's comedy and use of black cultural tropes reflect African American culture and history. Williams demonstrates how Mabley exemplifies the adaptive nature of African American comedy using four categories: "the plantation survivalist, the accomodationist, the in-group social satirist, and the integrationist."[2] Williams's book is predated by literary critic Trudier Harris's 1988 article, "Moms Mabley: A Study in Humor, Role Playing, and the Violation of Taboo." Harris pays special attention to Mabley's use of the "Mammy image" when she remarks that Mabley "had the uncanny ability to take traditional, sometimes comforting and stereotypical, images of black women and literally force her audience to see something other than what their eyes had been trained to see."[3] Harris finds significance in Mabley's ability to create a stage character and embody the character to the point of blurring the line between her art and her reality.[4]

Mabley's stage character and engagement with racial stereotypes is explored further in the more recent work by communication theorist Abby Morgan. In her article, "'No Damn Mammy, Moms!: Rhetorical Re-invention in the Stand-Up Comedy of Jackie 'Moms' Mabley," Morgan argues that "Mabley's rhetoric provides new grammar for

[2] Elsie A. Williams, *The Humor of Jackie Moms Mabley: An African American Comedic Tradition* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1995), 7.

[3] Trudier Harris, "Moms Mabley: A Study in Humor, Role Playing, and the Violation of Taboo," *The Southern Review* 24, no. 4 (1988): 1.

[4] Ibid., 765-776.

addressing black female identity by claiming the body, making sexual choice visible and narratively crossing out old representations of identity to write new ones."[5] Morgan utilizes a black feminist framework to analyze Moms Mabley's comedy and her fictional identity in her stage persona. Similarly, in the article "Laughter in the Archives: Jackie Moms Mabley and the Haunted Diva," theater historian Katelyn Hale Wood calls for a black feminist lens when assessing Mabley's comedy.[6] According to Wood, "Mabley employed Black feminist humor to unite and ignite a sense of freedom–to revel in the joy that comes from laughter and to complicate and challenge racism and sexism.[7]" Wood offers three main arguments aimed at a reconsideration of Mabley's work. The first is that current scholarship on Mabley fails to acknowledge the artist's queer identity and the queer structuring of her work. The second argument is that the limited documentation of Mabley's work is a reflection of the ways Black people, women, and people who identify as queer are relegated to the margins "of our cultural past and present." Wood's third point is that "Mabley's work as a stand-up comic solidifies important precedents for Black female comics in contemporary U.S. Performance."[8]

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[5] Abbey Morgan, "'No Damn Mammy, Moms!': Rhetorical Re-invention in the Stand-Up Comedy of Jackie 'Moms' Mabley" in *Standing Up, Speaking Out: Stand-Up Comedy and the Rhetoric of Social Change,* ed. Matthew R. Meier and Casey R. Schmitt (New York, Routledge, 2017), 40-41.

[6] Katelyn Hale Wood, "Laughter in the Archives: Jackie 'Moms' Mabley and the Haunted Diva," *QED: A Journal in GLBTQ Worldmaking,* vol. 1, No. 3 (Fall 2014).

[7] Wood, "Laughter in the Archives," 106.

[8] Ibid., 87.

Wood's second and third arguments are also expressed in the documentary film *Whoopi Goldberg Presents Moms Mabley* (2013).[9] As Goldberg asserts, "when you look at Moms' history, I guess it's the history of black folks in America 'cause all of the information is not there." Her inspiration for making the documentary was the fact that the elder comedian's impact on Goldberg was "profound, and I really wanted to know if she impacted other people like that." In an effort to find an answer to this question, Goldberg interviewed a variety of performers to determine the influence Moms Mabley had on them, including Quincy Jones, Eddie Murphy, Bill Cosby, Sidney Poitier, Harry Belafonte, Arsenio Hall, Joan Rivers, and Kathy Griffin. The documentary combines film and audio footage to tell Jackie "Moms" Mabley's story and is organized chronologically, combining Mabley's life and career with analysis and personal recollections interspersed with audiovisual material from her performances. Most recently, *Furiously Funny: Comic Rage from Ralph Ellison to Chris Rock* by Terrence T. Tucker includes a chapter that discusses Moms Mabley, along with Dick Gregory and Redd Foxx. Tucker argues that Mabley used African American comedy to "serve as an act of psychic healing and cultural sharing" and emphasizes her role at the intersection of race and gender.[10] Mabley immersed herself in black folk humor, embracing African American comic traditions with which her black audiences were familiar. She simultaneously "remains part of a larger African American female tradition that

[9] Whoopi Goldberg, *Whoopi Goldberg Presents Moms Mabley.* 2013. HBO Documentary Films.
[10] Terrence T. Tucker, *Furiously Funny: Comic Rage from Ralph Ellison to Chris Rock* (Gainseville: University Press of Florida, 2018), 105.

fearlessly engages themes beyond the domestic sphere. Usually involving attempts to turn racial and sexual stereotypes on their heads, African American female humor moved from daily mother wit to sexual ridicule to racial critique."[11]

Chapter one of this study discusses the beginnings of Mabley's life in Brevard, North Carolina, where she was born as Loretta Mary Aiken on March 23, 1897. The chapter details her upbringing and family, including the impact the Black Church had on her developing identity. Evelyn Higginbotham's *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church* (1994) provides a context for her experience.[12] According to Higginbotham, the Black Church provided a space where women were empowered and held a central role, providing leadership and guidance to their congregations. She describes how women in the Black Baptist Church were able to create a space for public discourse where they could challenge issues of racism and gender discrimination. Mabley's upbringing in this environment inspired a resistance to discrimination that she would voice throughout her career. Mabley's time in the church as a young girl also would have instilled in her the importance of black respectability.

Kelly Brown Douglas's *Black Bodies and the Black Church: A Blues Slant* (2012) connects the history of Black women in the church with the tradition of the blues.[13] Douglas discusses their religious experiences and argues that the lyrics of black blues

[11] Ibid., 77.

[12] Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994).

[13] Kelly Brown Douglas, *Black Bodies and the Black Church: A Blues Slant* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2012).

women reflected the way they were treated as both central and marginalized within the Black Church. Douglas argues that the aspirations for respectability that were often emphasized in the Black Church were problematic when she asserts that "as black people tried to gain acceptance within white society by changing the black image in the white mind, they adopted white cultural standards of 'respectability.' In the main, these standards reflected Western dualistic perspectives that did not respect the body."[14] In addition to learning about respectability from the women in her church when she was a child, Mabley also learned about dissemblance as a survival mechanism. In the article, "Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women: Thoughts on the Culture of Dissemblance," Darlene Clark Hine emphasized that "rape and the threat of rape influenced the development of a culture of dissemblance among Southern black women. By 'dissemblance' I mean the behavior and attitudes of black women that created the appearance of openness and disclosure but actually shielded the truth of their inner lives and selves from their oppressors." Dissemblance was a significant feature of Mabley's stage persona and her engagement with the press later in her career. Hine argues that the primary reason Southern black women participated in the Great Migration was to protect themselves and their families from exploitation and rape, which is true of Mabley's experience, given that she left Brevard before becoming a teenager.[15]

[14] Ibid., 168-169

[15] Darlene Clark Hine, "Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women: Thoughts on the Culture of Dissemblance," in *Hine Sight: Black Women and the Re-Construction of American History* (Brooklyn: Carlson Publishing, 1994)

Victoria Wolcott's *Remaking Respectability: African American Women in Interwar Detroit* continues on the trajectory Hine provides by rethinking the reasons behind the Great Migration during the interwar period. Rather than migrating to the North or to cities simply for economic reasons, Hine and Wolcott argue that black women migrants were seeking out personal autonomy and protection from potential exploitation. This argument applies to Mabley's experience. She had been raped in her hometown of Brevard; and after her father's death she was vulnerable to exploitation. Marriage was a popular solution offered to women at the time, one she may have been presented with, but migration was the path she took. When Aiken's family moved to the northern city of Cleveland, she eventually followed them. She lived in Cleveland, and even though she returned to the South as a performer, the context was different because she was with troupes of entertainers. Moreover, when she performed in the South on the theater circuit, she was primarily traveling to southern cities. Dissemblance is important for crafting a new identity, which was a central component in the way Aiken approached her career.

Respectability also played an important role in dissemblance, according to Wolcott. While there were class differences in how respectability was enacted and expected from African American women, Wolcott argues that it "reflected more than simply bourgeois Victorian ideology; it was a foundation of African American women's survival strategies and self-definition irrespective of class."[16] Respectability worked to challenge negative stereotypes of African American women, and was a tool for racial

[16] Victoria W. Wolcott, *Remaking Respectability: African American Women in Interwar Detroit.* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 7.

uplift more generally. They were able to create spaces in their public and private lives that allowed them to provide for and protect themselves and their families, while also upholding the expectations of their communities regarding respectability. Wolcott also highlights the performative nature of dissemblance when she explains, "because public displays were crucial to the enactment of respectability, the city was often the theater in which the drama of respectability was most elaborately performed."[17] Aiken did not subscribe to the requirements of respectability in the way Wolcott describes–arguably she was doing the exact opposite as a performer with her suggestive humor. However, the expectations Wolcott discusses provide a further explanation for why Aiken adopted the persona of a clownish older woman. This character placed her outside the normative expectations for young African-American women, and enabled her to reject notions of respectability both onstage and off. This persona also allowed her to protect her inner life by portraying herself as someone different onstage.

In addition to learning about dissemblance and respectability as a young black girl in Brevard, Mabley also would have been exposed to the act of signifying performed in her community. Signifying is an element in black expressive culture. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. provides an analysis of this tradition in *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (1988). Signifying is complex and incorporates the use of figurative and indirect speech and language, implication, contradiction, innuendo, repetition, and revision. Signifying devices can be found in black literature and

[17] Ibid., 5.

vernacular, and play an important role in African American comedy.[18] Her involvement in the Black Church as a young woman, as well as her introduction to the traditions and practices of signifying and dissemblance, also exposed her to some of the defining elements of the blues. This exposure prepared her to leave her home and join a traveling performing troupe at a young age, beginning her career in tent shows and circuses.

Mabley's entry into a life of the performer is discussed in chapter two of this study. According to Paige McGinley in *Staging the Blues: From Tent Shows to Tourism*, blues developed alongside other forms of Southern black popular culture, including tent shows, vaudeville, and minstrel shows.[19] McGinley emphasizes the role of Black women in these art forms, suggesting that Mabley was influenced by the blues for the entirety of her career. Chapter two focuses on Mabley's early years as a performer and draws upon the literature on black female performance in the early twentieth century, most notably Jayna Brown's *Babylon Girls: Black Women Performers and the Shaping of the Modern* (2008).[20] In this study, Brown focuses on African American female dancers performing in variety shows between 1890 and 1945. Her discussion of dance applies directly to Mabley's early career as a dancer. Brown argues that performances "signified" on multiple levels to different audiences, suggesting that performers layered their dance and modes of expression with multiple meanings. Brown pushes past the usage of W.E.B. Du

[18] Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).
[19] Paige A. McGinley, *Staging the Blues: From Tent Shows to Tourism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014).

[20] Jayna Brown, *Babylon Girls: Black Women Performers and the Shaping of the Modern.* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008).

Bois's concept of "double-consciousness" to capture this notion and asserts that Black women had to glance in multiple directions that acknowledged gender as well as race.[21] "Their artistic efforts were multi-signifying practices of dissemblance," declares Brown. "Their performances must be understood as 'double-operation,' exploiting the spurious racialism of their time as well as enabling a space for satirical comment on the absurdity of such depictions."[22] By obscuring parts of themselves and their identities, Black women were able to exploit racist depictions by upholding them, while simultaneously utilizing these depictions and stereotypes in order to mock them and the structures that created and upheld them. Dissemblance and signifying allowed performers to express multiple meanings to different audiences. The techniques of dissemblance and signifying that Mabley developed as a child were found in her career as a performer from the beginning, and would continue to help to define her work.

Jayna Brown also makes an important point about performance and resistance that informs the way this study considers Mabley's work when she engages in the act of reclaiming her body in dance performances. While she acknowledges the critical and resistant nature of performance, Brown does not characterize all dance performances as resistance. She asserts that it can sometimes be impossible to trace the intention of the performer, especially in dance which does not leave clearly traceable evidence. Brown does leave space for performers who were engaged in "often-times bald commercialism

[21] Ibid., 17. For a discussion of double-consciousness, see W.E.B. DuBois *The Souls of Black Folk* (Chicago: A.C. McClurg &Co., 1903)

[22] Brown, *Babylon Girls*, 6.

and a resilient striving for the body's creative autonomy."[23] Simply looking for resistance and protest in all acts of expression and performance flatten the intentions of historical agents and discount the complexities in their lives and work. Brown sees resistance in some of the performances she analyzes, but does not impose these expectations on all the performers she addresses. By allowing for multiple intentions to come across when interrogating performances in the past, scholars came to realize that they were sometimes participating in and upholding racist structures.[24] Mabley's performances offered resistance to racism and sexism, but she was not consistent in this regard, and her intentions were not always clear.

Another work that explores the careers of black women performers in this time period is *The Royalty of Negro Vaudeville: The Whitman Sisters and the Negotiation of Race, Gender, and Class in African American Theater, 1900-1940* (2000) by Nadine George-Graves.[25] She offers a history of the Whitman Sisters Company, and the way they engaged with and presented race, class, and gender on stage in the early twentieth

[23] Ibid., 7.

[24] This argument builds on the work of Walter Johnson in his article "On Agency," *Journal of Social History* 37, no. 1 (Autumn 2003): 113-124. In this article he highlights the problems that come from asking questions about the agency of enslaved people. Focusing on agency and humanness, and pushing historical scholarship to fit this framework, flattens the meaning of what enslaved people did. It empties their behavior of "personal meaning, political meaning, and cultural meaning." Furthermore, by using these frameworks and guiding their research toward discovering agency and humanness in enslaved historical subjects, "historians unwittingly reproduce the incised terms and analytical limits of a field of contest…framed by the white supremacist assumptions which made it possible to ask such a question in the first place" 114. In the same vein, by framing all historical inquiry about African American expression in terms of resistance and protest, scholars are limiting the complexity of these historical actors and their intentions, while engaging with the racist mode of thought that necessitates these types of questions by viewing these historical actors as two-dimensional or by assuming they did not have the capacity to resist.

[25] Nadine George-Graves, *The Royalty of Negro Vaudeville: The Whitman Sisters and the Negotiation of Race, Gender and Class in African American Theater 1900-1940* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000).

century. They signified on the Mammy image in order to critique this stereotype of black womanhood, a technique Mabley would also develop in her performances. Similarly, *Beyond Lift Every Voice and Sing: The Culture of Uplift, Identity, and Politics in Black Musical Theater* (2009) by Paula Marie Seniors focuses on the black musical theater team of Bob Cole, J. Rosamond Johnson, and James Weldon Johnson and how they engaged with black representation in theater.[26] The team emphasized respectability in their shows, and Seniors examines the ways black performers during this time had to struggle over blackface minstrelsy, deciding how to engage this stereotypical image by refusing or rewriting black characters onstage.

Chapter two of this study also draws on literature on the New Negro Movement, since the chapter discusses Mabley's performance career from the 1910s through 1930 and the ways she was part of the movement. *Escape from New York: The New Negro Renaissance Beyond Harlem*, edited by Davarian L. Baldwin and Minkah Makalani, is relevant because it provides global coverage and moves beyond Harlem in its investigation of the New Negro Movement, and Mabley lived and worked in many cities outside Harlem, including Chicago and Washington D.C.[27] *Escape from New York* also considers gender in the assessments of how conceptions of femininity and masculinity impacted cultural productions. Erin D. Chapman takes this approach a step further in *Prove It on Me: New Negroes, Sex, and Popular Culture in the 1920s* (2012) by bringing

[26] Paula Marie Seniors, *Beyond Lift Every Voice and Sing: The Culture of Uplift, Identity, and Politics in Black Musical Theater* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2009).

[27] Davarian L. Baldwin and Minkah Makalani, *Escape from New York: The New Negro Renaissance Beyond Harlem* (University of Minnesota Press, 2013).

a black feminist perspective to her examination of the New Negro Movement.[28] She is critical of the limitations black women faced, particularly in the ways they were portrayed in mainstream media. Chapman offers two major frameworks to illustrate this point: the "race-sex marketplace" and "race motherhood." The race-sex marketplace consisted of popular culture, fashion, and entertainment and offered commodified identities for Black women. According to Chapman, the "race-sex marketplace" was "both an actual marketplace offering tangible goods for sale and…the ideas, fantasies, thrills, hopes, and judgments that were sold along with the goods–steeped in racialized and sexualized language and significance."[29] The race motherhood framework was built on the assumption that black women existed to "mother the race." This applies to Mabley's experience because she embodied the matriarch persona onstage and off beginning from a young age.

Chapter three focuses on Mabley's work in theater and film in the 1930s through 1950s. Clifford Mason's *Macbeth in Harlem: Black Theater in America from the Beginning to* Raisin in the Sun (2020) documents the ways African Americans fought to present authentic Black voices and stories onstage and attempted to push back against racist stereotypes.[30] Mason contextualizes the challenges Mabley faced in her stage career to gain recognition and access to empowering roles and characters. Mason explains how African American performers struggled against white racism in order to enrich American

[28] Erin D. Chapman, *Prove it on Me: New Negroes, Sex, and Popular Culture in the 1920s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012)
[29] Chapman, *Prove it On Me,* 7.

[30] Clifford Mason, *Macbeth in Harlem: Black Theater in America from the Beginning to* Raisin in the Sun (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2020)

theater. *Black Broadway: African Americans on the Great White Way* (2015) by Stewart F. Lane documents the contributions of Black performers on Broadway over an extensive time period.[31] Lane emphasizes the political role of many Black Broadway productions and the importance of African American Broadway performers to the enrichment of American theater culture.

Thomas Cripps's *Slow Fade to Black: The Negro in American Film, 1900-1942* (1993) highlights the contributions of African American film actors in the years before World War II, as well as the challenges they faced in securing roles that depicted them as something other than servants.[32] Cripps acknowledges the complexity of stereotypes in film and mass media, and illustrates how important it was for many African Americans to see successful black actors even when they were playing stereotypical roles. This was the period when Mabley acted in movies, and like the other actors Cripps discussed, she was limited in the choices of film roles. Donald Bogle's *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks* (2016) also explores the stereotypical film roles historically available to African Americans, and argues that it is important to focus on what Black actors have been able to do with the roles they were given.[33] His book focuses on the five primary stereotypes African American actors have been limited to in film, including the Mammy, in the first half of the twentieth century.

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[31] Stewart F. Lane, *Black Broadway: African Americans on the Great White Way* (Garden City Park: Square One Publishers, 2015)

[32] Thomas Cripps, *Slow Fade to Black: The Negro in American Film, 1900-1942* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993)

[33] Donald Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, & Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films, Updated and Expanded 5th Edition* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016)

Divas on Screen: Black Women in American Film (2009) by Mia Mask specifically focuses on the history of African American women in film.[34] Mask discusses the limitations African American actresses have historically faced, arguing "many of the trailblazing pioneers…possessed untapped talents they were never given opportunity to cultivate or regularly exhibit."[35] Her study also explores charisma and stardom, considering how they are a reflection of consumer culture and lend complexity to African American celebrity. Charlene Regester's *African American Actresses: The Struggle for Visibilty, 1900-1960* (2010) also focuses on Black women.[36] Like Cripps and Bogle, Regester notes the ways many actors balanced their drive for success and the necessity of accepting work, with the desire to challenge stereotypes and resist racism in Hollywood. Regester documents how African American actresses had to fight against the sexism as well as the racism in the industry and argues that over the course of the twentieth century, black actresses became increasingly resistant to marginalization as they struggled for greater visibility, and in some cases they were successful. This was the case with Mabley's film career, particularly when she pushed for more cultural accuracy for her character in *The Emperor Jones* (1933).

Chapter four documents Moms Mabley's comedy career in the 1960s and 1970s, when she achieved success with multiracial audiences and enjoyed increased exposure

[34] Mia Mask, *Divas on Screen: Black Women in American Film* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2009)

[35] Mask, *Divas on Screen,* 2

[36] Charlene Regester, *African American Actresses: The Struggle for Visibility, 1900-1960* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010)

through comedy albums, television appearances, and a starring role in a feature film. This chapter focuses on the pathbreaking approaches she took to discussing gender and sexuality as a comedienne, and draws on literature about African American comedy. Mel Watkins's *On the Real Side: Laughing, Lying, and Signifying—The Underground Tradition of African-American Humor that Transformed American Culture, from Slavery to Richard Pryor* (1994) examines the relationship between public and private expressions of African American humor, and how these traditions have changed over time.[37] In his discussion of Moms Mabley's comedy, he argues that she adopted the persona of an older woman in order to suppress resistance to a Black woman doing a solo comedy routine. He acknowledges Mabley as "one of the pioneers of social satire at the Apollo" Theater in New York City.[38]

Justin T. Lorts's study "Black Laughter/Black Protest: Civil Rights, Respectability, and the Cultural Politics of African American Comedy, 1934-1968" (2008) centers on the role of comedians in the civil rights era.[39] He argues the importance of their work because they were prominent members of the black community and performed for audiences that were large and often multi-racial. They were able to use their platforms to make civil rights part of the dialogue with their audiences and to challenge racist ideas and beliefs. He provides examples of comedians supporting the

[37] Mel Watkins, *On the Real Side: Laughing, Lying, and Signifying—The Underground Tradition of African-American Humor that Transformed American Culture, from Slavery to Richard Pryor* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994)

[38] Watkins, *On the Real Side*, 391.

[39] Justin Lorts, "Black Laughter/Black Protest: Civil Rights, Respectability, and the Cultural Politics of African American Comedy, 1934-1968" (PhD diss., Rutgers University, 2008)

cause through performing at fundraisers, integrating performance venues, and testifying before government officials. Their impact on social and political consciousness during this time moved beyond the nightclubs where they performed, and were more expansive than what was traditional for comedians before that time. Mabley was one of the earlier comedians to embody this role in the Civil Rights Movement, and she incorporated discussions of gender and sexuality in her criticism of racism and Jim Crow.

The article "Black Humor: Reflections on an American Tradition" (2010) includes contributions from Gerald Early, Glenda Carpio, and Werner Sollors.[40] Gerald Early builds on Mel Watkins's discussion of the relationship between private and public Black humor, explaining the divisiveness and anxiety that comes when sharing in-group humor, as some worry that outsiders may laugh at characterizations at the expense of members of the in-group, or marginalized community. He asserts that

> humor is an important creative act that binds a group together, gives it an identity, and defines its view of itself and the world outside itself…With so much of the history of black humor rooted in slavery and minstrelsy, it is no wonder that blacks are ambivalent or deeply divided about what the group should think is funny.[41]

In the same article, Glenda Carpio discusses three "theories of comedy" and how African American comedy fits into the concepts of signifying, comedy as a comforting balm, and comedy as a creative outlet. Carpio asserts,

> Mabley challenged the notion of black women as domineering and emasculating while offering black Americans group recognition, a sense of affiliation, and

[40] Gerald Early, Glenda Carpio, Werner Sollors, "Black Humor: Reflections on an African American Tradition," *Bulletin of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences* 63, no.4 (Summer 2010): 29-41.

[41] Early, "Black Humor," 30.

> comfort. But Mabley's approach was not without risk. Her decision to adopt a grandmother persona reinforced a notion of black femininity patterned after the asexual Mammy figure. For, although she was known for telling risqué, even bawdy jokes (usually about how much she liked younger men), she used the mantle of her grandmother figure and demeanor to hide any real possibility of marking her body as sexual. Her guise would ultimately betray any gesture toward liberated sexuality.[42]

Similarly, DoVeanna S. Fulton's "Comic Views and Metaphysical Dilemmas: Shattering Cultural Images Through Self-Definition and Representation by Black Comediennes" (2004) analyzes the work of Black comediennes performing on "Def Comedy Jam," a 1990s HBO television series featuring Black standup comedy, and argues that they are drawing on a tradition established by Moms Mabley.[43] She shows that even when these women perform content that is risqué, explicit, and critical, they are able to present themselves as familiar and nonthreatening just as she did.

Chapter five focuses on the Civil Rights Movement and Mabley's role in the movement as an artist-activist. The historical literature specifically discusses African American women's role in the movement, as well as the role of black culture. *Women in the Civil Rights Movement: Trailblazers and Torchbearers, 1941-1965,* (1993) edited by Vicki L. Crawford, Jacqueline Anne Rouse, and Barbara Woods, argues that the involvement of black women in the movement of the 1950s and 1960s was a continuation of a long-standing tradition of black women playing significant roles in the struggle for

[42] Carpio, "Black Humor," 35.

[43] DoVeanna S. Fulton, "Comic Views and Metaphysical Dilemmas: Shattering Cultural Images Through Self-Definition and Representation by Black Comediennes," *The Journal of American Folklore* 117, no. 463 (Winter 2004), 81-86.

African-American freedom and equality.[44] The text also discusses the cultural significance of song in the freedom struggle, the contributions of the Free Southern Theater, and the role of women as transmitters of culture. While *Women in the Civil Rights Movement* does include some discussion of culture, it is limited and locally focused. *Sisters in the Struggle: African American Women in the Civil Rights-Black Power Movement,* edited by Bettye Collier-Thomas and V.P. Franklin, describes the wide variety of ways women were involved in black liberation movements of the twentieth century, and the volume offers a range of cultural and political perspectives.[45] The text focuses on national and local leaders, and provides an overview of the experiences of female activists. By exploring black women's involvement in the Civil Rights and Black Power movements, *Sisters in the Struggle* asserts that the women's involvement impacted their political and social consciousness, particularly as it related to gender issues.

Danielle L. McGuire's *At the Dark End of the Street: Black Women, Rape, and Resistance-A New History of the Civil Rights Movement from Rosa Parks to the Rise of Black Power* centers on black women's resistance to sexual violence in this study of the Civil Rights Movement .[46] McGuire demonstrates how the sexual exploitation of black women by white men was a tool used to maintain institutionalized racism. By protesting against sexual exploitation, black women inspired "larger campaigns for racial justice and

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[44] Vicki L. Crawford et al., *Women in the Civil Rights Movement: Trailblazers and Torchbearers, 1941-1965* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993)

[45] Bettye Collier-Thomas and V.P. Franklin, *Sisters in the Struggle: African American Women in the Civil Rights-Black Power Movement* (New York: New York University Press, 2001)

[46] Danielle L. McGuire, *At the Dark End of the Street: Black Women, Rape, and Resistance-A New History of the Civil Rights Movement from Rosa Parks to the Rise of Black Power* (New York: Knopf, 2010)

human dignity."[47] *At the Dark End of the Street* is especially relevant to Jackie "Moms" Mabley because she was likely a victim of sexual abuse. Her performance work provided a critical response to this often overlooked reality, and was a site of resistance to sexual domination.

Ruth Feldstein's *How It Feels to Be Free: Black Women Entertainers and the Civil Rights Movement* (2013) makes the case for the significant role black women artists played in shaping the Civil Rights Movement.[48] She demonstrates how African American women performers connected activism with cultural work, even if it sometimes seemed to be just for purposes of entertainment. They used their art to represent Black womanhood and express Black freedom, and through these women's artistic work Feldstein demonstrates the relationship between entertainment and politics. The book also highlights the significance of New York City in the 1960s, paying special attention to Mabley's home stage, the Apollo Theater, as a place that "offered performers…a sense that they were not alone, that they belonged to communities in which activism and entertainment intermingled."[49]

"Hollywood, the NAACP, and the Cultural Politics of the Early Civil Rights Movement," by Justin Lorts discusses the NAACP's efforts to encourage the film

[47] McGuire, *At the Dark End of the Street,* xix.

[48] Ruth Feldstein, *How it Feels to Be Free: Black Women Entertainers and the Civil Rights Movement* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013)

[49] Ibid., 26.

industry to produce positive representations of African Americans.[50] He explains that "The NAACP's Hollywood campaigns provide critical insight into how civil rights leaders understood the relationship between culture and politics and the role of the mass media in the civil rights struggle."[51] Lorts explains how cultural productions such as music, dance, television, and film were both sites of conflict and weapons of protest. He cites historian Brian Ward who argued that, "African American art and culture did not just reflect…putatively more important developments in the formal, organized, conventionally 'political' freedom struggle; they also played an active role in creating that Movement, defining its goals and methods, and expressing them to both the black community and a wider, whiter American public.'"[52] Lorts's article and Ward's analysis highlight the significance of Moms Mabley's work on stage, television, film, and albums during the Civil Rights Movement. She was able to use these platforms to challenge racism for a broad audience during the civil rights era and brought "the Movement" to a large following. One cannot understand the impact of stage and film artists in the civil rights campaigns without examining the roles of the entertainers in general and Jackie "Moms" Mabley in particular. She is an important example of an artist-activist using the stage for social protest.

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[50] Justin Lorts, "Hollywood, the NAACP, and the Cultural Politics of the Early Civil Rights Movement," in *Freedom Rights: New Perspectives on the Civil Rights Movement,* eds. Danielle L. McGuire and John Dittmer (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2011)

[51] Ibid., 40.

[52] Brian Ward, ed. *Media, Culture, and the Modern African American Freedom Struggle* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2001), 2-3, cited in Lorts, "Hollywood," 42.

Chapter 1: Brevard Beginnings

The story of Moms Mabley begins on March 23, 1897 when she was born as "Loretta Mary Aiken" in the small, rural town of Brevard, in Western North Carolina. There is limited documentation of her early years, partly because of inconsistencies and omissions in her later interviews and because she does not show up regularly in the census and other official records. However, it is possible to piece together a picture of her origin story based on existing census records featuring her and her family; the sparse information she provided in interviews later in her career; history written about Brevard in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century; and secondary source materials that allow us to contextualize her experience.

Jim Aiken's Legacy

James P. Aiken, Loretta Mary's father, was a successful business owner with several enterprises patronized by both the white and black customers in Brevard. Jim Aiken, as he was called, was born into slavery near Brevard on March 1, 1861. He was the son of Mary Jane Aiken Rhodes and her enslaver, Benjamin Franklin Aiken. Jim Aiken grew up in poverty, but worked to become a prominent entrepreneur. He got his start selling apple cider and homemade gingerbread. After a few years he built his own store on Main Street in Brevard, which housed a cafe, barbershop, and mercantile store. He ran a bakery and a dray service, delivered mail between the post office and the railway station, and sold caskets. He also kept boarders at his home, as reflected in census

records.[53] He owned the building the store was housed in, as well as several homes that he rented out. The local paper often featured advertisements for Jim's store, rentals, and other enterprises. Many of these ads displayed wit and humor later captured by his daughter, Loretta. One such ad exhibited the "ethnic humor" that was commonplace at the time with the assertion that "J.P Aiken beats the Jews, for low prices on dry goods, notions, hats and shoes."[54] Other ads exemplified the folksy, straightforward sensibility that Moms Mabley would later use in her performances, such as one reminding readers that "looking costs nothing. Examine my goods all you like—the more you investigate, the more you'll buy."[55] Some ads even provided a play on current events, such as a shoe ad that ran during the 1905 Russo-Japanese war. "Shoe news and new shoes at Jim Aiken's. While the wiry little Jap is fiercely fighting the rugged Russian in the Far East, I am just as bravely battling for shoe supremacy." This type of absurdist humor and irreverence will later present itself in Moms Mabley's commentary on international issues in her standup routine.[56] The census of 1900 shows that he owned the family home outright with no mortgage.[57] Brevard had a very small black population, so the majority of Jim Aiken's customers were white. One source asserts, "his home was among the finest in Brevard for that time." As a result of Jim Aiken's success, Loretta Aiken grew

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[53] Ancestry.com. 1900 United States Federal Census [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations Inc, 2004.

[54] *Sylvan Valley News,* April 19, 1907.

[55] *Sylvan Valley News,* April 15, 1904.

[56] Ibid.

[57] Ancestry.com. 1900 United States Federal Census [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations Inc, 2004.

up somewhat wealthy and relatively privileged for a black girl in early twentieth century North Carolina.

In addition to being financially successful, Jim Aiken was also very highly regarded and influential in the Brevard community. He was active in fraternal organizations, serving as the Noble Grand of the United Order of Odd Fellows. The Brevard chapter of the national organization was founded in 1898 and the group held their meetings above Aiken's store. He was also a charter member of the Mountain Lily chapter of the Masonic Order, founded in Brevard in 1905.[58] Aiken was part of the governing committee for the community's black school. Multiple mentions of Aiken in the local newspaper suggest he was well-liked and respected among the white and black residents of Brevard. He was repeatedly referred to in newspapers as the "best Negro in Western North Carolina." In later years D. H. Orr of Pisgah Forest in Transylvania County recalled, "My most memorable Christmas was just before the turn of the century, about 1898-1899. It was the opening of a package given to my parents by Jim Aiken. Jim Aiken… was a large Negro man, always immaculately dressed. He owned a store on Main Street in Brevard. … On this particular Christmas, after my father and mother had bought the usual Christmas things, oranges, raisins, candy etc., he gave them a box 'For your Children,' but not to be opened until Christmas Day. Never will I forget the joys we had when the box was taken from under the tree and opened. Among other things for my sister was a doll and for me a small book of children's stories."[59] Another example of Jim

[58] Bruce Whitaker, "James 'Jim' P. Aiken, Businessman," *The Fairview Town Crier*. January 29, 2016.
[59] *Asheville Citizen Times,* December 25, 1971.

Aiken's generosity was in 1907 when he paid for the coffin and burial expenses for two deceased Brevard residents. Loretta Mary and her family enjoyed an esteemed position in their community because of Jim Aiken's success and influence.

Jim Aiken's impact and reputation reached beyond the small town of Brevard. After his passing he received a glowing eulogy in the newspaper *The French Broad Hustler*, based out of Hendersonville, twenty miles away. The article praises Aiken's character and work ethic, and the editor declares him "the best Negro in the United States." The way Aiken was described in the local newspaper was indicative of racial attitudes in Brevard during Jim Crow, as well as of his reputation in the community. In this same eulogy he was commended for being respectful and knowing his place as a black man, with the notice asserting that "he possessed many noble traits of character and members of his race would profit by emulating the example of their deceased friend."[60]

Coverage of his activities was often condescending, and regarding him as exceptional among African Americans. One notice highlighted when he was in Washington, D.C. in 1909 to witness the inauguration of President William Taft. The *Sylvan Valley News* reported that "Brevard is to be represented at the inauguration of Taft on Sunday–and by a negro. We are informed that Jim Aiken, our enterprising colored merchant, has gone east to buy his spring stock of goods, and will take in the inauguration as a sort of side-show."[61] A 1908 article in another local paper tells a story of Jim Aiken paying the mortgage of his former enslaver. The article, titled "The

[60] *The French Broad Hustler*, September 2, 1909.

[61] *Sylvan Valley News*, March 5, 1909.

Gratitude of Jim Aiken, Ex-Slave," reads like fictional propaganda for white supremacy and antebellum nostalgia. The story may or may not be true, but even if it is fictional, the fact that Aiken is the protagonist is indicative of the way he was perceived in Brevard. Again, he is depicted as an ideal and exceptional black man. His portrayal is stereotypical and even though he is exemplary in his actions, he is described as inarticulate. When he learns that his former enslaver owes $2,000 on her mortgage and is unable to pay it, he becomes uncomfortable. "He twists and turns and scratches his head and has many curious half-formed thoughts. He then offers her the money to save the house, explaining "'I 'members how kind the old master an' you all was her me, an' haint a-goin' to ter forget it." The article ends by proclaiming that her home was saved by the "love and devotion of a fine example of a fine and disappearing race, the old slaves of the South."[62]

This article paints Aiken as a caricature of an obedient and ignorant slave, a Sambo-like archetype that played into white racist longing for the time before emancipation. Aiken was undoubtedly admired and seen as a role model by the black community in Brevard, so emphasizing his loyalty to his former enslavers was likely a tactic to suggest that other Blacks be like him. Jim Aiken's impact on Brevard was still strongly felt over twenty years after his death. A 1931 article in *The Brevard News* reports that several residents of the city had seen his ghost roaming the town. The article remembers him as "king of the colored people and well liked by the white people." The article ends by explaining that many people believe Aiken's spirit has returned to Brevard because of the "ungodly manner" many were living. These people felt that he was

[62] "The Gratitude of Jim Aiken," *French Broad Hustler*, June 18, 1908.

coming to warn about the "wrath to come."[63] This piece once again indicates just how influential he was in the Brevard community, especially among African Americans. He was remembered twenty years after his death so that people believed they saw his ghost, and these sightings held meaning for those who claimed they witnessed it. Not only had Jim Aiken returned to Brevard, but he'd returned with a message. His leadership role continued even after death.

Loretta's Matriarchs

Loretta Aiken admired her father's mother and was very close to her growing up. Mary Jane Aiken Rhodes had a major influence on the young girl. Her grandmother was an independent and strong woman who helped to shape Loretta Aiken during her formative years. According to Moms Mabley, it was her grandmother who encouraged her to go out in the world and make a way for herself because the older woman was never able to. Selena Robinson, Moms Mabley's paternal cousin, shared memories of her grandmother in a 2002 interview. According to Robinson, "Jane Aiken had been a slave from the age of nine and had served four masters. The last one brought her to Transylvania County. After she was granted freedom, she married Dennis Cleveland Hall. Uncle Jim used to come by our house…and we always wondered about his light skin. We would ask our grandma. 'How come Uncle Jim is so light and Daddy is so dark?' She said, 'When you get old enough, I'll tell you.' And…later she sat us down and told us that he was born by her boss [Mary Jane Aiken Rhodes's enslaver, Benjamin

[63] "Strange, Weird Tale Told of Seeing Shadowy Form of Jim Aiken About Town," *The Brevard News*, January 15, 1931

Franklin Aiken] and you couldn't do anything about it then. You had to do what the boss said.' And [Mary] said 'they let me keep my child and that made me so glad. And they never did beat me.' She also said, 'No matter what anybody does to you, don't you ever hate them because hate will destroy you.'"[64] Moms Mabley recalled in a later interview her grandmother "was never sold or nothing, but she was a slave…she did all her cooking in her fireplace…she told me, 'Child, you look into that fireplace and see the future in those flames, 'cause you're gonna see the world like your granny never did.'"[65] She was also inspired by her grandmother's religiosity, and later recalled the time when she told young Loretta to "put God in front and go ahead."[66] Her grandmother presumably saw potential in Loretta, as well as opportunities that she was not afforded herself–although they were still limited for a young black woman in the early twentieth century South. Her grandmother would prove to be a source of inspiration for Moms Mabley's performance career. In later interviews, Mabley described her grandmother as "the most beautiful woman I ever knew. She was the one who convinced me to go make something of myself…she was so gentle, but she kept her children in line, best believe that."[67]

Aiken's memories of her grandmother may be exaggerated somewhat, such as her assertion that "my granny lived to be 118 years old."[68] In actuality, the 1930 census lists

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[64] Interviews, July 16, 1999 and October 21, 2002, cited in Betty J. Reed, *The Brevard Rosenwald School: Black Education and Community Building in a Southern Appalachian Town, 1920-1966* (Jefferson, MO.: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2004), 142.

[65] Ibid., 46.

[66] "Current Biography," *NY Newsday,* January 1975, 28.

[67] Mark Jacobson, "Amazing Moms," *New York Magazine*. October 14, 1975, 46.

[68] Laurence Maslon, *Make 'Em Laugh: The Funny Business of America* (New York: Twelve, 2008), 329.

her age as 101 years old and her death certificate in 1933 lists her age as 104.[69] While a formerly enslaved woman may not have known her exact birth date thanks to limited records and forced family separations, the notion that she lived to be 118 may have been based on what her grandmother told people. Perhaps claiming this age may have been a way her grandmother engaged in dissemblance. By providing what was likely a made-up age, Jane Aiken Rhodes was possibly protecting her inner life by keeping an aspect of her identity and personal history private. By stating her age was 118, her grandmother took on an almost other-worldly persona in Loretta's eyes that affected Loretta's impression of the woman and how she later utilized her grandmother's identity to fashion her stage persona. Nonetheless, Loretta believed her—or at least included this information in her stories about the woman.

The newspaper reported her death in 1933 and described her as the oldest person in that section of the state when she died at 104 years old. She was commended, like her son, for being well respected by white and black residents and claimed she "rendered faithful service to her 'folks' long after slaves were freed."[70]

Moms Mabley also spoke in later interviews about her great-grandmother, Harriet Smith. In a 1971 *Asheville Citizen* article she claimed that Smith was Cherokee, resided at Davidson River (in Brevard), and lived to be 118 years old. It is a striking coincidence that she gave the same age for her paternal grandmother in other sources. Other details

[69] Ancestry.com. 1930 United States Federal Census [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations Inc, 2004.

[70] *Sylvan Valley News* June 8, 1933

about the two women also overlap in her recollections, such as the statements attributed to both women that "I never had the chance but I want you to go. Put God in front and go ahead."[71] Mabley may have embellished and combined their biographies to create the archetype that informed her stage persona and to offer something compelling for interviews. Regardless, she was undoubtedly influenced by at least one grandmother in her early life.

Loretta's mother, Mary M. Aiken (née Smith), was also a strong woman she would have looked up to. Mary Smith was born in November 1875, and very little is known about her parents and early years. She married Jim Aiken when she was fifteen years old. Mary and Jim Aiken raised eight children, and Loretta was their fifth. Their family included a daughter named Jennie, James's daughter from a previous marriage to Dafney Keith. Jennie was seven years old when her father married Mary Smith. When Loretta was young and expressed an interest in being a performer, her mother declared, "[S]he's too much like me, let her do what she wants"; and told Mabley "you're too much like me not to be something."[72] Moms Mabley's adopted son, Charles, later recalled about Mary Aiken that "Mother adored Grandmother. And Grandmother ruled the Aiken family in the finest tradition of the black matriarchs. What she said, when she finally did say something, was what happened." Her strength and resilience was also evident after the death of her husband, which will be discussed.

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[71] Bob Terrell, "Moms Mabley…Genuine Mountain Bred Character," *Asheville Citizen-Times,* October 22, 1971, 17.

[72] Charles Witbeck, "Moms Day," *Los Angeles Herald Examiner,* February 28, 1968.

Brevard, North Carolina

Brevard at the turn of the twentieth century was a small, rural town. The 1900 census lists a population of 584 people.[73] People in the community knew one another, and it was common for the local paper–*The Sylvan Valley News*–to print familiar features that mentioned people by name visiting friends and family in town, taking ill, traveling, or thanking the community for one reason or another. The construction of a railroad line connecting Brevard to the rest of the country in 1894 largely contributed to the prosperity of the town. Natural resources like timber and fresh water attracted business to the area including the logging and tanning industries. Tourism was also a significant component of the local economy because of the beautiful landscape and abundant waterfalls. Boarding houses were part of the tourism industry in Brevard, and the boarders who show up in the census records for the Aiken home may have been an example of Jim Aiken taking advantage of this business opportunity, in addition to his many other ventures. Brevard had a very small African-American population. There were not enough black children in Brevard to warrant the construction of a "colored school" during Reconstruction when public schools were opening around the country. The local paper very rarely mentioned a black community, and African-American newspapers in North Carolina did not cover Brevard.

Despite the small size of the population, African Americans were significant to the community's character and development. Jim Aiken played a large role as a successful and well-known merchant. The first mail carrier in Brevard was an African-

[73] U.S. Census Bureau. Population Density, 1900. Prepared by Ancestry. (Accessed August 24, 2020).

American man named Andy Whitesides.[74] According to Betty J. Reed, author of *The Brevard Rosenwald School,* the African American residents in Brevard occupied a section referred to as "colored town," and "within its confines, supportive family interaction, bustling economic activity, and lively community involvement existed. Of greater importance, the education of children was a tri-institutional effort–a trinity of home, church, and school united to enlighten the community's children and youth."[75]

Brevard was considered moderate in its race relations compared to other southern towns, a legacy traced to the antebellum period. The western region of North Carolina was largely opposed to secession and the town had less than 500 enslaved workers and no large plantations. Slavery did not factor in as largely in Brevard's economy and culture as it did in other southern towns. Although the racial climate in Brevard appears to have been mild compared to other areas of the South, African Americans were not immune from the racist practices of the time. While Jim Aiken and his family enjoyed moderate success and respectable social standing, the town was still part of the Jim Crow South and newspaper accounts reflected that reality. Aiken was often noted as a role model for others because of his business success and contributions, but also because of his deference toward whites. For example, a newspaper article in the *Sylvan Valley News* in 1910 noted the death of Jennie Sharp, who is "familiarly known to the white people as 'Aunt Jennie.'" The paper recounted how she was "the best type of the old time darky" and laments that there are fewer like her as years pass by. She was considered a "favorite

[74] Susan M. Lefler, *Images of America: Brevard* (Charleston, Arcadia Publishing, 2004), 15.

[75] Reed, *Brevard Rosenwald School*, 5.

among the whites because of her faithfulness and kindness and good sense."[76] When introducing a story about the development of an industrial school for black children, the article emphasized that, "It has always been the policy of this paper to give publicity to the colored people only when they do something meritorious and deserve it."[77] One incident of racial conflict was described in a 1903 article, with the headline "An Embryonic Race War." It explained that a "fracas occurred that came near being a race war in Brevard, and as a result two colored women are in jail." The fight resulted in a white woman being injured.[78]

Church

The Aiken family belonged to the French Broad Baptist Church in Brevard, a community that undoubtedly shaped young Loretta Mary in many ways. The church was where she first performed in front of an audience. She later recalled that she enjoyed playing the comical parts in church plays, and this experience inspired her to go on stage as a teenager.[79] The French Broad Baptist Church was located just outside Brevard in neighboring Pisgah Forest. Established in 1866, it was as an offshoot of the other black church in Brevard–Bethel Baptist Church. The French Broad Baptist Church was initially established for those congregants who lived far away from Bethel Baptist Church, so they

[76] *Sylvan Valley News,* December 30, 1910.

[77] Ibid., May 28, 1909.

[78] Ibid., November 13, 1903.

[79] "Moms Day," *LA Herald Examiner*, February 28, 1968.

would not have had to travel as far.[80] Loretta likely had some ties to Bethel Baptist and spent time with that congregation because her grandmother, Jane Rhodes Aiken Hall, was a member. Moms Mabley considered herself a religious person for the rest of her life, and her faith was developed at an early age through church membership and the influence of her family.

Loretta Aiken learned much from women in her community, particularly from those in the Baptist church, about how to navigate and impact the world as a black woman. The church was a central space within African American communities in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century. Since African Americans were not allowed access to public spaces, the church served as space for large gatherings and housed a variety of social service programs. Scholar and activist W.E.B Du Bois identified the black church as a "multiple site–at once being a place of worship, theater, publishing house, school, and lodge."[81]

The black church provided a space for political participation beginning in the Reconstruction era when African American men were enfranchised. After Southern Redemption, the church became a surrogate political arena. Historian Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham reported, "The Baptist convention offered black men and women a structure for electing representatives, debating issues, and exercising many rights that white society denied them. Through their conventions, African Americans refuted notions

[80] "New French Broad Church Has Homecoming," *Transylvania Times*, May 20, 2004

[81] W.E.B. DuBois quoted in Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), 7

of their inability or unreadiness for equal political participation."[82] The Baptist church would have been a central training ground for Loretta in terms of respectability, the importance of hard work, political organizing, and resistance. Black Baptist churches in general, and specifically the arm of the Women's Convention formed in 1900, provided powerful platforms for black women in the United States to contest racism and sexism. These spheres provided leadership opportunities for women, so that even if the Aiken family was not directly involved in church leadership, Loretta would have seen people in her church community taking part in everyday resistance. She would have witnessed an expanded role for women in the church at large. Black women in the Baptist church were involved in fundraising, establishing community programs and youth protective homes, training centers, public health programs, and other forms of community support and racial self help.[83] Black women in the Baptist church advocated for gender equality within the church, and according to Higginbotham "it was the church, more than any other institution, where black women of all ages and classes found a site for 'signifying practice'–for coming into their own voice."[84] Loretta Aiken was coming of age at the same time that the women's movement was growing in the black Baptist church–between 1900 and 1920–and this growing strength of black women in her church community would have had an impact on her.

Dissemblance and Respectability

[82] Ibid., 12.

[83] Ibid,. 184.

[84] Ibid., I85

Loretta Aiken learned about dissemblance and respectability from the women in her church as well as the women in her family. These discourses served as tools for women to protect themselves, their families, and their communities. Respectability politics enabled black women to counter racist stereotypes and resist white supremacy. Higginbotham points out that "Through the discourse of respectability, the Baptist women emphasized manners and morals while simultaneously asserting traditional forms of protest, such as petitions, boycotts, and verbal appeals to justice."[85] Black Baptist women subscribed to respectability politics and standards to protect their sexual identities as well. As historian Darlene Clark Hine asserts, African American women adopted a "culture of dissemblance" to protect their inner lives and provide a shield against rape and sexual exploitation.[86] Dissemblance fits into the larger framework of black women "deploy[ing] manners and morals to challenge charges of black immorality. Such manners and morals, as deployed by black women, were perceived as protection from sexual insult and assault."[87] These skills would prove to be crucial for Loretta's safety and survival, starting at a young age.

Respectability was also important for winning over the hearts of white allies, undoubtedly important to the Aiken family that lived in a predominantly white town and when the majority of Jim Aiken's customers and community contacts were white.

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[85] Ibid., 187

[86] Darlene Clark Hine, "Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women: Thoughts on the Culture of Dissemblance" in *Hine Sight: Black Women and the Reconstruction of American History.* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 37.

[87] Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent,* 194

Another central tenet in the discourse of respectability was the "valorization of work." Labor and productivity were deeply valued by black Baptist women, and were seen as beneficial for the individual as well as for African Americans as a group. Devotion to hard work was a value Loretta subscribed to for the rest of her life and was a driving force in her entertainment career–an attribute she likely inherited from her industrious and hard working parents as well as from the women who surrounded her in the church.[88]

Respectability politics in the church also provided a platform for demanding equality and civil rights for African Americans, and a space to protest segregation and Jim Crow. As Higginbotham asserts, "The politics of respectability, while emphasizing self-help strategies and intra-group reform, provided the platform from which black church women came to demand full equality with white America. Speaking up for rights constituted not the antithesis of respectability but its logical conclusion."[89] Furthermore, respectability politics provided black women a tool to resist racism and sexism and laid the groundwork for them to engage political activity.[90] The Aiken family held a position of respect in Brevard. The family was well off and contributed to their community.

Loretta Aiken likely would have learned about respectability from her mother as well. Mary Aiken was a well-to-do woman during the Progressive Era. The mores among women during this period were to uplift their communities, and this was especially true for African American women. Middle class black women like Mary Aiken were invested

[88] Ibid. 211

[89] Ibid., 221

[90] Ibid., 227

in reform and respectability politics. This is evident in some of her social activities, including collecting money to install new pews at her church and serving as an officer of the Woman's Home Missionary Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church. She was elected first vice president in 1904, and in that role was involved in "visiting the sick and strangers, and in assisting the needy." The society also supported a scholarship at the Brevard Industrial School.[91]

The church also would have been the space where Loretta was first introduced to the cultural practice of signifying, and would have provided the source material for her to later "signify" in her stage performances. The Black Church influenced black popular culture, especially in the blues music that played an important role in Moms Mabley's performance career. The influence of the church would be reflected in her performance work.[92] Mabley would later signify on the themes she learned in the church, while drawing from blues and secular performance traditions.

Despite the impact of the church and the lessons she learned from its female parishioners who surrounded her in her youth, the Baptist church and its teachings for women also would have presented sites of conflict and tension for young Loretta. The rhetoric of respectability taught in the church included criticism of conspicuous consumption and leisure entertainment, as technology of the early twentieth century made these things more accessible in the theater, movies, music performances, nickelodeons,

[91] *Sylvan Valley News*, February 26, 1904

[92] Kelly Brown Douglass, *Black Bodies and the Black Church: A Blues Slant* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012)

and dance halls. As Higginbotham puts it, "The black Baptist woman would neither appreciate nor acknowledge the rich contribution of black secular music and dance to American culture. They could not perceive the creative genius or the legitimacy of black working-class cultural forms such as jazz and dance, much less their importance as expressions of resistance to social privation and despair."[93] While Loretta found opportunities to perform in church plays, the religious culture clearly drew a line in regards to how far a young woman could go in participating in secular entertainments. At some point in her young life, Loretta clearly split with the church and its expectations of young women.

While the politics and rhetoric of respectability did concern itself with protecting black women's virtue and sexual identity, once a woman had been raped, she may have felt alienated by the teachings and expectations of Baptist women in terms of comportment and purity. According to interviews, biographies, and her adopted son's recollections, Aiken had been sexually assaulted twice as a preteen, and both rapes resulted in pregnancies.[94] Loretta may have been blamed for what happened to her, especially if she did not exemplify the teachings of respectability in the Baptist church. Similarly, she may have chafed against the proscriptions placed against African American teen girls. At some point, Loretta Aiken may have felt that she no longer fit the mold and upheld the expectations for respectable black women according to the Baptist

[93] Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent,* 200.

[94] "Moms Mabley," *Current Biography,* January 1975, 28; Geoffrey F. Brown, "Moms Mabley Didn't Die; She Just Chuckled Away," *Jet,* June 12, 1975; "Charles's Memories," Interview with Charles Aiken, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, 19-20.

church. She may have felt that there was no longer any point in trying to do so, and would have been willing to enter the entertainment field that the respectability rhetoric criticized. Even though she would remain religious later in life, she likely experienced a some degree of alienation from the Baptist community she grew up in.

Education

Loretta Aiken was educated in Brevard, but where and to what extent is not clearly documented. The 1910 census, taken when she was thirteen years old, lists her as being able to read and write and having attended school. Given that her father was on the governing committee for the black public school, it is to be expected that education would have been a priority for his children. What remains unclear is which school she attended, and for how long. The same 1910 census only lists her older brother, William, as currently being in school. However, this is stated in the "industry" entries for his census. Since William was eighteen at this time, this information may have been listed for him because he did not have a job other than being a student. None of her other siblings were listed as being in school, but all were listed as having attended school. A later biographical file from the United Artists Corporation notes that Mabley attended high school in Brevard.[95] As we will later see, she left home and began a stage career when she was a young teen, but she may have attended some high school in Brevard before leaving.

[95] "Moms Mabley Goes to the 'Top' Writer for Inspiration and Material," *United Artists Corporation,* (New York: An Entertainment Service Transamerica Corporation), 2.

What we do know about Loretta Aiken's early education is based on the schooling available to black children in Brevard at the turn of the twentieth century. According to Nathaniel C. Hall, author of *The Negroes of Transylvania County: 1861-1961,* there was a one-room schoolhouse in Shady Grove near Brevard that operated from 1862 to 1901. However, the school more likely attended by the Aiken children was originally established by the French Broad Baptist Church. It was destroyed by fire in 1866 and then moved to the stockyards before becoming part of the Glade Creek Church, educating children up to seventh grade. The 1897 papers of Transylvania County Superintendent Judson Corn indicate that there were three schools operating for African American children.[96] According to a document from the same year cited in Betty J. Reed's study of the Brevard Rosenwald school, there were 94 students in the "Colored District #2" in Transylvania County. This document was signed by J.P. Aiken, as he was the committeeman for this district. After Jim Aiken, died Dr. J.H. Johnstone from Knoxville, Tennessee, lived in the Aiken family's former home.[97] Johnstone's purpose for moving to Brevard was to open a colored school.[98] Betty J. Reed explains that "Officially, the Rosenwald School opened its doors as an educational institution in 1920, an expansion of the Brevard #2 Colored School that had opened in 1910. Unofficially, both began in the late 1800s." The Rosenwald rural school building program began in 1912 when Booker T. Washington used some of the money Julius Rosenwald donated to

[96] Ibid. 46

[97] Reed, *The Brevard Rosenwald School,* 45.

[98] Sylvan Valley News October 22, 1909

the Tuskegee Institute for the purpose of building six schools in Alabama. This grew into a larger program with the goal of improving education for African Americans in the early twentieth-century South. The Julius Rosenwald Fund was established in 1917 and by 1928 one in every five schools for African Americans in the rural South was a Rosenwald School.[99]

There were several schools established in Brevard and the surrounding area between the end of the Civil War and the official opening of The Brevard Rosenwald school in 1920. This was despite the fact that "from the Civil War era to the first half of the twentieth century, a lack of cooperation in Transylvania County had delayed the opportunity for blacks to receive an academically targeted education."[100] Local legislation limited education opportunities for African Americans in the late nineteenth century, such as the North Carolina Constitutional Convention of 1875 which restricted the rights of black citizens and prohibited school integration. This was exacerbated by the limited funds for education in the region. According to historian Betty J. Reed, "eliminating funds from taxes severely restricted educational opportunities for both whites and blacks…Mountain counties were especially poor…[and] education was regarded as a luxury, a non-necessity."[101] Furthermore, the small African American

[99] Mary S. Hoffschwelle, *The Rosenwald Schools of the American South* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2006), 87.

[100] Reed, *The Brevard Rosenwald School*, 40.

[101] Reed, *The Brevard Rosenwald School*, 41; John Haley, *Charles N. Hunter and Race Relations in North Carolina* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987); Ina W. Van Noppen and John J. Van Noppen, *Western North Carolina Since the Civil War* (Boone, NC: Appalachian Consortium Press, 1973); Sue Depsey Brewer, *A History of the Education of Negroes in North Carolina* (Raleigh, North Carolina: Irving Spring Press, 1961); Louis R. Harlan, *Separate and Unequal: Public School Campaigns and Racism in the Southern Seaboard States, 1901-1915* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1958); James

population in the western counties of North Carolina made it difficult to establish a separate school for black children in each district.[102] Prior to Brevard Colored School #2 officially opening its doors, African American students had to receive their education informally as "parents united to provide an education for their children, organizing assemblies in churches, log cabins and frame buildings."[103] Some students may have had to walk to another neighborhood or town to attend school, even in an informal setting. In the Transylvania school board minutes, two 'colored' teachers are listed in 1880, but no "colored school" was listed in the minutes in 1901-1902. These teachers were likely teaching in private ventures schools. In the 1904-1906 minutes, one "colored school" was listed. Two "colored schools" show up in a 1909 report–Boyd Colored School and Brevard Colored School.[104] A 1906 editorial in the *Sylvan Valley News* asserted that "there are only three colored schools in this county…every colored child in the county is assigned to one of these districts, no matter how far it may be from the school house."[105]

Despite these challenges, support for African American education in Brevard gradually expanded. For example in 1907, a black teacher named Rev. I. Z. Phillips published a letter in the *Sylvan Valley News* thanking white citizens for their financial

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L. Leloudis, *Schooling the New South: Pedagogy, Self, and Society in North Carolina, 1880-1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996).

[102] Reed, *The Brevard Rosenwald School,* 41.

[103] Reed, *The Brevard Rosenwald School,* 1.

[104] Ibid., 43-44

[105] *Sylvan Valley News,* April 20, 1906

support of the Davidson River School.[106] Newspaper articles indicate that efforts to build and develop a school for black children in Brevard began early, and that it took years for the school to finally open.[107] Brevard also had an industrial school for black students, which Jim Aiken was involved in developing. A 1909 newspaper article described the aims of the industrial school's promotors to teach black men and women industrial service skills like cooking, laundry, cleaning, sewing, garden work, farming, and using tools so they can be hired at decent wages. At the time of reporting, the school had already been in operation for two years and had secured land. The newspaper article was used to solicit help to build the school, and the article notes the black community collectively raised cultural capital for the school and that "they have done well and we believe they deserve encouragement."[108]

Jim Aiken's Death

Jim Aiken died on August 25, 1909 when Loretta was twelve years old. He was a volunteer firefighter and was killed in a firetruck explosion. One source indicated he was the acting fire chief when he died in the line of duty. His death was devastating for his family, but also had a major impact on the community. So many people attended his funeral that it was held at the white First Baptist Church because none of the black churches in Brevard were large enough to accommodate the attendees, and even then

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[106] Ibid., 42

[107] *Sylvan Valley News,* January 14, 1910

[108] *Sylvan Valley News,* May 28, 1909; V.P. Franklin and Carter Julian Savage, eds., *Cultural Capital and Black Education: African American Communities and the Funding of Black Schooling, 1865 to the Present,* (Charlotte: Information Age Publishing, 2004)

there was not enough room for the mourners. It was reported that Brevard citizens of both races congregated outside the church to pay their respects to Jim Aiken and his family. Local businesses closed on the day of his funeral and his passing was covered in the local newspaper with commentary about how much of a loss it was to the entire community. The prominent position of the Aiken family in Brevard meant that they received an outpouring of support after Jim's passing, as indicated by a "thank you" note placed in the local paper by Mary Aiken, which read, "Card of Thanks. To the many friends, both white and colored, who so kindly came to our assistance after the calamity which deprived us of husband and father, J.P. Aiken, we would express our thanks. May our Heavenly Father bless and comfort them in all earthly afflictions is the prayer of Mary Aiken and family."[109]

In addition to being an emotional loss for Loretta and her family, Jim Aiken's death eventually resulted in economic insecurity for his wife and children. Some sources suggest that they inherited his business and six homes, including the family's house on Oak Lawn Avenue.[110] However, this does not seem to be entirely correct. According to Selena Robinson, Jim Aiken's niece, the Aiken family provided financial support for the establishment of Jim Aiken's business. These family members retained ownership of his home after Jim Aiken's passing, which they helped purchase. They did not offer any support to Mary Aiken and her children. Robinson suggested this as a possible

[109] *Sylvan Valley News,* September 10, 1909

[110] Bruce Whitaker, "James 'Jim' P. Aiken, Businessman," *The Fairview Town Crier*. January 29, 2016

explanation for why Loretta Mary Aiken left home in search of new opportunities in entertainment.[111]

Will and probate documents support this narrative and suggest that Mary Aiken had to fight for any claim to her late husband's property and business through legal channels. Soon after Jim Aiken's death, Mary Aiken petitioned the local government for financial assistance and submitted claims to James Aiken's estate. Beginning in September 1909, Mary Aiken ran a regular advertisement in the local paper informing Brevard residents that the store was still open and soliciting patronage. It read "Mary Aiken (successor to J.P. Aiken) Dealer in General Merchandise Brevard, N.C. To the many friends and customers of J.P. Aiken, I wish to announce that the business established by my late husband will be continued at the old stand to the best of my ability, and I would most respectfully ask for your continued patronage and support. I will exert myself in every way to please you. Very respectfully, Mary Aiken."[112] She also ran an ad at this same time noting she had "qualified as the administrator of the estate of J.P. Aiken, deceased." She asked that those who had claims against his estate to submit them within a year and requested that those who owed money to the estate to submit payments. The notice was dated August 30, 1909.[113]

The 1910 census lists Mary as a business and home owner, so she presumably inherited her husband's property after these petitions. Mary may have been able to recoup

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[111] Selena Robinson interview, October 21, 2002, cited in Reed, *The Brevard Rosenwald School*, 140.

[112] *Sylvan Valley News*, September 3, 1909

[113] Ibid.

some of her family's financial losses after Jim's death, and she undoubtedly set an example for young Loretta as a strong and resilient woman operating a business and making legal claims to her family's inheritance. However, the family did not maintain the privileged economic and social standing they enjoyed when James was alive.

Troubling Times

In a 1960 interview, Moms Mabley mentioned to interviewer Studs Terkel that she was a wet nurse for a family in Asheville, North Carolina when she was fourteen years old. This information is strongly indicative of her family's situation following the death of Jim Aiken. Black women nursing children other than their own is a practice that dates back to the era of enslavement. Although Loretta Aiken was paid for her services, being a wet nurse was an incredibly exploitative role. That she was so young further indicates how vulnerable she and her family had become, and how desperately they must have needed the money she earned. The parents of the baby, Lois, tested multiple women to nurse because her mother could not produce milk, and Loretta evidently passed the test. Mabley later talked about growing attached to the child and having to deny her own daughter, Lucretia, milk to be able to feed Lois who was weaker. She said she loved the baby and would tell her "some day I'm going to make you proud of me."[114] Mabley tried to find Lois years later with no luck. This arrangement certainly suggests Mabley must have been facing hardship and economic vulnerability.

[114] Studs Terkel, *The Spectator: Talk About Movies and Plays With the People Who Make Them* (New York: The New Press, 1999), 281.

Wet nursing has been a longstanding practice for centuries among many different cultures. Enslaved African American women were exploited as wet nurses in the United States, and as Emily West and R.J. Knight assert, "wet-nursing is a uniquely gendered kind of exploitation, and under slavery it represented the point at which the exploitation of enslaved women as workers and as reproducers literally intersected."[115] While young Loretta Aiken was working as a wet nurse a half a century after the end of slavery, her role represents a similar mode of exploitation due to her age and the fact that she denied her own child milk in order to feed Lois. A sizable body of literature exists about enslaved African American wet nurses. However, there appears to be much less written about the practice carrying over into the twentieth century. It is difficult to determine if Aiken's experience was unique at this time. Although connections can be made between Aiken's experience as a fourteen-year-old wet nurse shortly after the turn of the century with those of enslaved women, her circumstance does differ because she was paid for her labor. However, as West and Knight point out, "wet-nursing is a complex and contingent process that has commonly involved women in unequal power relationships in a variety of different regimes whereby wealthier women use women from lower down the social scale as wet nurses."[116]

The baby she spoke of, to whom she had to deny milk, was the result of rape. She had been raped twice, both assaults resulting in pregnancies. According to some

[115] Emily West and R.J. Knight, "Mothers' Milk: Slavery, Wet-Nursing, and Black and White Women in the Antebellum South," *Journal of Southern History* 83 (February 2017), 1.

[116] Ibid.

accounts, such as in the book *Make Em Laugh: The Funny Business of America* by Laurence Maslon, both of these children were given away.[117] In other accounts, she left her children in the care of a woman who then disappeared with her children. This story is corroborated by an interview with her son who mentioned, "I had two older sisters, never saw them. All I knew about them was that they'd grown up and gone somewhere." Charles Aiken recalls his grandmother, Mary Aiken, supporting this narrative. "It was grandmother who told me how mother had become pregnant and run away from home in Brevard, North Carolina when she was twelve years old… When she told me how mother had left her infant child with a woman and joined a carnival, she also explained to me that Mother was a child of thirteen herself when she did this. She told me how Mother had been raped by a white sheriff and had her second child." Mabley discussed her experience being raped as a young woman when she told her son, "long time ago, a white man took me, beat me and did it to me. I was a baby. I got pregnant with this evil man's child."[118] It is not entirely clear when Aiken ran away from home. She is listed in the 1910 census as a thirteen year old girl who is not married and still lives with her family on Oakland Avenue in Brevard. She may have run away after this accounting was taken, or she may have run away, but later returned to her family home. When she was sixteen years old, she sued a man named Bunyan Mills for seduction with promise of marriage. The case was dismissed because there was no evidence of a marriage contract.[119] This

[117] Laurence Maslon, *Make 'Em Laugh: The Funny Business of America* (New York: Twelve, 2008), 329.
[118] "Charles's Memories," Schomburg Center, 18.

[119] *Sylvan Valley News,* September 5, 1913

may have been an attempt of Loretta to defend herself and seek retribution after being raped, or it could have been her response to a broken engagement. In a later interview she reported that she never got married, but was engaged a few times.[120]

Loretta Mary's Stepfather

In 1910, Mary Smith Aiken married Reverend George W. Parton. A September 1913 *Sylvan Valley News* article reported that George Parton purchased the Jim Aiken store building on Main Street, and that he had plans to tear it down. However, a January 1914 article in the same paper reported that a man named T.H. Shipman purchased the building instead, and proceeded to tear it down and convert it to kindling. As Loretta Aiken's stepfather, George Parton may have tried to marry her off. As an adult she sometimes suggested that she was married as a young girl or teenager, both in her standup and in interviews. While census records do not reflect this, it is possible that she was part of an unofficial arrangement–a sort of common law marriage. It was not uncommon for young black women to enter into these arrangements with older men, especially in situations of economic hardship or for personal protection. For Aiken, who lost her father at a young age, had children of her own, and whose family was experiencing financial instability–a marriage of this sort may have been arranged for her and seen as beneficial and necessary. An attempt at this sort of marriage may explain the lawsuit described in the local paper when she was sixteen. There is no documentation of her being married as a teenager, but even if she did not enter into one of these arrangements, she may have known women in her community who did. By crafting this

[120] Judy Bacharach, "Moms Mabley: A 61-Year Career," *The Washington Post*, Dec. 26, 1974

part of her biography later in life, she was using her own life to represent this reality for large audiences.

Regardless of whether or not the arranged marriage took place, interviews with Mabley later in life indicate that she did not get along with George Parton. The entire family moved to Cleveland, Ohio around 1910 where George and Mary had three more children. This move to the urban North indicates the Aiken-Parton family was part of the Great Migration, when six million black southerners moved to the northern and western United States in search of better lives.[121] They were hoping to leave behind the devastating daily injustices of the Jim Crow South, while seeking new economic opportunities offered in the urban industries in the North and West. For black women, this movement away from the Jim Crow South held deeper meaning because they were also seeking an escape from economic and sexual exploitation and the ability to better protect themselves and their families.[122] According to Darlene Clark Hine, "the combined influence of rape (or the threat of rape), racism and sexism is the key to understanding the hidden motivations of major social protest and migratory movements in African-American history."[123] As a victim of sexual assault and physical exploitation, Loretta Aiken could have been drawn to Cleveland with its promise of a better, safer life.

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[121] Isabel Wilkerson, *Warmth of other Suns,* 9.

[122] Darlene Clark Hine, "Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women: Thoughts on the Culture of Dissemblance," in *Hine Sight: Black Women and the Re-Construction of American History* (Brooklyn: Carlson Publishing, 1994)

[123] Ibid., 38.

Departure

According to a 1971 interview with the *Asheville Citizen,* Loretta Aiken lived in Asheville for four years after her grandmother told her to go out and see the world. She was fifteen years old, pregnant, and living with her cousin. "I already had one baby and I was raped and was gonna have another one. I was going to see my mother who had moved to Cleveland and [I] was staying with a man named Reverend Speaks and his wife." This suggests that her mother moved to Cleveland by 1912, without Loretta, and that she and her new husband George Parton must have been much less wealthy than she was when Jim Aiken was alive. Loretta Aiken had planned to travel to Detroit for an abortion, but decided against it. She prayed for a way to support herself and the baby, and claimed she heard a voice telling her to "go on the stage." When staying at Reverend Speaks's house in Cleveland, she met Bonnie Belle Drew, an actress from Chicago who was staying next door. Drew offered her a job and told her that she and the other performers she was staying with were leaving town the next day, suggesting Loretta join them. Loretta Aiken snuck away from the Speaks home by throwing her belongings over the fence that night and left the next morning to pursue a life on the stage.[124]

[124] Bob Terrell, "Moms Mabley…Genuine Mountain Bred Character," *Asheville Citizen-Times*, October 22, 1971

Chapter Two: Tent Shows, the T.O.B.A., and the Road to Harlem

Loretta Mary Aiken left her family and friends in Cleveland in 1912 to join actress Bonnie Belle Drew and a group of performers for a life as an entertainer, and she never looked back.[125] She began her career in the all-black tent shows that were the popular entertainment venue for African American performers of the early twentieth century. Troupes of black artists would travel to various towns and perform in tents or theaters, often as sideshows to circuses and carnivals. Her son mentioned later in an interview about her leaving home when she was so young to go work at the "carnival."[126] At the turn of the century, carnivals, circuses, and tent shows had become a prominent form of entertainment in the United States, largely thanks to the efforts of P.T. Barnum. The big carnivals were usually segregated and catered to white audiences, but some included side shows (called "dirty shows" or "jig shows") that featured African American artists performing for black audiences. It was within this context that the black tent show circuit emerged.[127] "Silas Green from New Orleans" was an extremely popular tent show where many black performers entertained for decades, and may have been a venue for Loretta Aiken early in her career. According to African-American composer J. Homer Tutt, "Every big actor of Harlem has at some time or another played with 'Silas Green.'" She most likely performed with other traveling tent shows popular at the time, such as

[125] Bob Terrell, "Moms Mabley…Genuine Mountain Bred Character," *Asheville Citizen-Times*, October 22, 1971

[126] "Charles's Memories," Interview with Charles Aiken, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, 19.

[127] Mel Watkins, *On the Real Side: A History of African American Comedy from Slavery to Chris Rock* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1999), 151.

"Pat Chappele's Rabbit Foot Company," "Tolliver's Smart Set," and "A.G. Allen's Minstrels."[128]

Minstrelsy, Tent Shows, and Vaudeville

This was during the Progressive era, characterized by social activism and political reforms largely aimed at addressing serious problems caused by the expanding urbanization and industrialization. This movement greatly impacted popular culture at the time, and some blackface performers were modifying their routines to move away from minstrelsy and find acceptance in other venues, such as vaudeville.[129] Minstrelsy was almost entirely based in negative stereotypes and caricatures of African Americans, with both white and black performers wearing blackface makeup. Minstrelsy was the most popular form of American entertainment in the mid-nineteenth century, and continued until around 1896. This form of theater was structured in three parts. Shows would begin with a "walk around," where the troupe would dance onstage and engage in wise-cracking dialogue. The second part of the show, referred to as the "olio," was a variety section that consisted of music and dance, often parodying popular operas, stage plays, and well-known performers. The third section usually consisted of a skit that was often comedic. Minstrelsy was one of the major influences for vaudeville, which was popular from the 1890s to the 1930s when films became the dominant form of popular entertainment. Vaudeville featured a variety of acts, ranging from eight to thirteen "turns"

[128] Ibid., 152.

[129] Ibid., 139.

in a show. These turns included magic, musical and dance numbers, acrobatics, and comedy routines.[130]

Indeed, the circus and minstrel show formats were prominent from the mid-nineteenth century. According to Eric Lott in *Love & Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class*, "many minstrel performers began their careers in the circus, perhaps even developing American blackface out of clowning (whose present mask in any case is very clearly indebted to blackface), and continually found under the big top a vital arena of minstrel performance."[131] Modified minstrel performances making their way to the circus and tent show stages were an example of this history coming full circle. In his book *On the Real Side: A History of African American Comedy from Slavery to Chris Rock,* Mel Watkins argues that, during the period from 1890 through World War I, "black road shows provided the primary proving ground for the host of comedians who surfaced in black theaters and in films during the twenties."[132] Historian Michelle R. Scott elaborates on this point, asserting that "between 1900 and 1921, African Americans had built a small presence in Broadway and musical theater, filled minstrel troupes and circus bands, but truly rose to prominence on the makeshift stages, tents, and halls of black vaudeville."[133] These shows were performed before black audiences, which

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[130] "Forms of Variety Theater," Library of Congress, last modified October 31, 1996, http://lcweb2.loc.gov:8081/ammem/vshtml/vsforms.html.

[131] Eric Lott, *Love & Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy & the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 25.

[132] Watkins, *On the Real Side,* 152.

[133] Michelle R. Scott, "These Ladies Do Business With a Capital B: The Griffin Sisters as Black Businesswomen in Early Vaudeville,"*The Journal of African American History* 101, no. 4 (2016): 471.

provided some artistic freedom for the artists. This enabled the performers to push against and challenge the stereotypes and negative imagery common in minstrelsy.

In vaudeville at the beginning of the twentieth century when Loretta Aiken began her career, she performed in blackface. As Watkins asserts, "although many still worked in blackface, these comics, performing in tents and so-called 'dark' houses, before dark audiences, were among the first black professional comedians subtly to alter the minstrel stage presentation of black humor."[134] The comedy was critical of these racist tropes and mocked them.[135] One example of this was when black composers and performers would alter the lyrics of popular songs to appeal to their black audiences and to "get in a barb or two."[136] It was within this context that Loretta Aiken developed her craft. She was also heavily influenced by female blues singers she encountered on the road, such as Ma Rainey who began her career in tent shows around 1902; and Bessie Smith, who was performing with "Walcott's Rabbit Foot Minstrels" by 1915.

Aiken's early years in vaudeville prepared her for a life of performing. As she described it, "I was taught to work; I couldn't jive my way through. You talk about rehearsals–honey, we rehearsed before shows, between shows, and after shows."[137] This experience undoubtedly built up her work ethic, endurance, stage presence, and understanding of how to engage an audience and create routines. She was surrounded by

[134] Ibid.

[135] Ibid., 151.

[136] Ibid., 153.

[137] "Moms Mabley: She Finally Makes the Movies," *Ebony*, April 1974, 87.

talented performers who influenced her craft, including Tim "Kingfish" Moore, vaudeville star and comedian who would later become famous for his starring role in the television show *The Amos and Andy Show*; Dusty Fletcher, best known for the "Open the Door, Richard" comedy routine; Pigmeat Markham, comedian, singer, dancer, and actor who drew his stage name from a routine where he called himself "Sweet Poppa Pigmeat"; Cootie Williams, trumpeter most famous for playing with Duke Ellington; Bill "Bojangles" Robinson, tap dancer and actor popularly known today for his performances with Shirley Temple; dancer Peg Leg Bates; and John "Spider Bruce" Mason, the actor who created the "Open the Door, Richard" routine with Dusty Fletcher.[138]

The tent shows were performed outdoors for rural areas, primarily in the South.[139] It was Bonnie Belle Drew, her first mentor, who encouraged young Loretta to join her and the performers on the road. Drew helped Aiken develop her monologues and more than likely guided the young woman to her first job on the carnival show circuit. Aiken's name does not show up in any of the carnival show rosters that were consulted, but it is likely based on the records of her contemporaries such as Drew, Aiken performed with A.G. Allen's Minstrels in the company's fall 1914 tour of the Mississippi Delta.[140] Several sources state that Aiken started her show business career in Buffalo, which was a

[138] "Moms Mabley," *Current Biography,* January 1975, 29.

[139] Paige A. McGinley, *Staging the Blues: From Tent Shows to Tourism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 34.

[140] Doug Seroff and Lynn Abbott, *Ragged but Right: Black Traveling Shows, "Coon Songs," and the Dark Pathway to Blues and Jazz* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2007)

stop on the performance circuit for the traveling troupe she joined.[141] Her biographical entry in the *Ebony Success Library* states that Aiken had a room in a boardinghouse in Buffalo with show business friends.[142] Black boardinghouses or rooming houses were an important aspect of life for traveling artists during Jim Crow because they could not stay in the hotels for whites. According to historian Michelle R. Scott, artists "refashioned a concept of home" as they traveled. One way they would do this was by communicating with friends and family through the black press. She provides the example of the famous vaudeville duo, The Griffin Sisters, using the *Chicago Defender* and the *Indianapolis Freeman* as their mailing address.[143] Aiken very likely performed with Pat Chappelle's Rabbit Foot Company with her contemporaries Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith, Butterbeans and Susie, and Tim Moore. The comic duo Butterbeans and Susie, who would mentor Aiken and guide her later entry into the Harlem theater scene, got their start with the Moss Brothers Carnival and Tent Show in 1910, and it is possible that Aiken met them there.

The tent show presented a variety show format that was common to vaudeville and minstrelsy. Like most of the performers on the black tent show circuit, Aiken learned multiple musical and artstic forms. As she later recalled, "Lord, I done everything. I'd

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[141] Hy Gardner, "Glad You Asked That!" *Honolulu Star-Bulletin*, August 21, 1969, B-11.

[142] "Jackie 'Moms' Mabley: Black America's 'First Lady of Laughter,'" in *The Ebony Success Library, Volume II: Famous Blacks Give Secrets of Success* (Nashville: The Southwestern Company, 1973), 158.

[143] Michelle R. Scott, "These Ladies Do Business With a Capital B: The Griffin Sisters as Black Businesswomen in Early Vaudeville,"*The Journal of African American History* 101, no. 4 (2016): 477.

sing, dance, act, tell stories and jokes, whistle—anything they wanted.[144]" In a 1974 interview with Mark Jacobson for *New York Magazine* she mentioned the dark side of those years on the black stage circuit when "all the entertainers had to be a 'triple threat' because you never knew when the lead dancer might get lynched and they'd need a fill-in."[145] She also told her son about the violence she faced as a performer at that time. "[S]ometimes…we'd be working a town, all colored people with the T.O.B.A. [Theater Owners Booking Association]. White men come in, beat us, break everything." She implied that these attacks would go unpunished since it "didn't matter though, we was niggers."[146] Her years performing in the tent shows and the T.O.B.A. were in a era characterized by ongoing racial terror in the United States. After World War I, many white Americans were eager to return to a period of "normality" and were resistant to social change. This led to many assaults on groups that posed a threat to white privilege. The Ku Klux Klan experienced a resurgence in the late 1910s and 1920s. Their promise to unite "native-born white Christians for concerted action in the preservation of American institutions and the supremacy of the white race" attracted a massive growth in membership across the United States.[147]

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[144] "Moms Mabley Goes to the 'Top' Writer for Inspiration and Material," *United Artists Corporation,* (New York: An Entertainment Service Transamerica Corporation), 2.

[145] Mark Jacobson, "Amazing Moms," *New York Magazine,* October 14, 1974, 46.

[146] "Charles's Memories," Interview with Charles Aiken, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, 38.

[147] Philip A. Klinkner with Rogers M. Smith, T*he Unsteady March: The Rise and Decline of Racial Equality in America* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1999), 113-115.

The "Red Summer" of 1919 marked one of the worst periods of racial violence in American history. Starting in 1917, there was an increasing number of lynchings of African Americans taking place, and by the second half of 1919 approximately twenty-five race riots broke out across the country. One of the major factors that contributed to this period of backlash against African Americans was the economic recession that followed the booming economy of World War I. In many places, white and black Americans were competing for jobs, affordable housing, and other resources, and as a result many white Americans reacted violently. The second major factor contributing to this racial violence was the large number of African American veterans returning from serving in the war. These veterans sought equal treatment in exchange for defending their country and were less willing to submit to racial inequality and subjugation. Their resistance would often encourage violent backlash from racist whites.[148]

Dissemblance and Respectability

While Mabley would later discuss some of the violence and difficulties she faced as a performer in the 1910s and 1920s, she was protective of the details about her private life. In later interviews she would share some details while omitting others, and would also offer contradictory accounts. These were examples of her engaging in dissemblance. Dissemblance meant providing an appearance of openness, while shielding details of her private life. It offered a way for black women to address the racism and sexism they faced. Given that Aiken's difficult childhood included sexual assault and losing her father at a young age, it makes sense that she would engage in dissemblance, especially when

[148] Ibid.

entering the challenging environment of popular entertainment. Aiken practiced this performative dissemblance throughout her career, where she would portray a character who was open and inviting to her audience. She would embody the persona of an elderly matriarch, and later referred to the audience as her "children."[149]

Despite this motherly connection, she was strategic about what personal information she shared onstage or in interviews. Mabley would sometimes share conflicting details of her biography, or perhaps fabricate information depending on the situation. This portrayal of openness was incredibly important for her persona and comedy act. By crafting a stage persona that was markedly different from her personal identity and that gave her the authority of a matriarch, Mabley was able to maintain a protective distance between herself and her audience beginning in the early years of her career.

Even as a young woman, Loretta Aiken began to portray herself as old and frumpy. According to the Darryl and Tuezday Littleton in *Comediennes: Laugh Be a Lady*, early in her career Aiken appeared onstage as the beautiful young woman she was, engaging in flirtatious banter with the men in the audience, while expressing the sarcastic and salacious sentiments that would continue to mark her comedy. Members of the audience, particularly the women, reacted negatively to her approach. Her boyfriend and mentor at that time, Jack Mabley, advised Aiken to tone things down. The Littletons explain that this inspired her to develop the old woman persona she adopted for the remainder of her career. Embodying the old woman allowed her to say what she wanted

[149] Whoopi Goldberg, *Whoopi Goldberg Presents Moms Mabley*. 2013. HBO Documentary Films.

onstage, and get away with flirtatious statements, without seeming to be a threat. She played the titular role in the "Rich Aunt from Utah" with Butterbeans and Susie in the early 1920s, and that may have influenced her stage persona as well.[150] She fashioned this persona, which she would employ for her entire career, as a guise and form of protection. By portraying herself as an older woman, she appeared harmless and non-threatening. At a time when the behavior and comportment of women, especially black women, was loaded with restrictions and expectations, Aiken enjoyed relative freedom because she appeared to be an aged raconteur.

T.O.B.A.

After some time on the carnival and tent show circuit, Loretta Aiken began performing in theatrical variety shows and on the black theater circuit, including the T.O.B.A. This was the circuit of theaters where African American entertainers performed in black vaudeville shows. There is some disagreement among historians about the founding of the T.O.B.A. Mel Watkins writes that the T.O.B.A. started in 1907 and was created by Italian businessman F.A. Barasso.[151] In his book, *The Chitlin Circuit and the Road to Rock n Roll*, Preston Lauterbach argues that the T.O.B.A. was actually created in 1921 by Sherman H. Dudley and his colleagues.[152] Historian Michelle R. Scott is in

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[150] Darryl and Tuesday Littleton, *Comediennes: Laugh Be a Lady* (Milwaukee: Applause Theater & Cinema Books, 2012), 32.

[151] Watkins, *On the Real Side*, 365.

[152] Preston Lauterbach, *The Chitlin' Circuit and the Road to Rock 'N' Roll* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2011), 302-303. While Sherman H. Dudley had established a Black theater circuit in the 1910s, the T.O.B.A. was formally established later. Lauterbach asserts "Dudley and his cohort formed the Theater Owners Booking Association (TOBA) in early 1921. It's been misreported that TOBA began in 1909." Lauterbach cites "New Organization," *Chicago Defender*, January 29, 1921, 4-5 for "news of TOBA's founding." He also cites an annotated bibliography created by Monica Burdex, a research librarian at

agreement with this timeline, and asserts that Dudley started out as a popular performer in medicine shows, tent shows, and minstrel shows until he became a theater owner in 1910 and started his own chain of black theaters in the South and Midwest by 1912.[153] According to Scott, "Dudley used his resources to plan a merger between the Dudley Circuit and the white-owned, black-patronized circuits in Chicago that would form the basis of the Theater Owner's Booking Association (TOBA) by 1920."[154] The T.O.B.A. was the progenitor of the so-called "chitlin' circuit."

Despite arguments for a later date of the T.O.B.A.'s founding, the majority of the sources refer to Mabley (née Aiken) performing on the black theater circuit. Many well-known African American artists of the mid-twentieth century began their careers there. Black vaudeville theaters had opened in great numbers around the turn of the century, and entertainers would perform at these venues. This was hard work for entertainers because typically there were two shows a day, seven days a week, often fifty-two weeks a year. They would travel from theater to theater with their props and costumes and would have to do much of the set-up work in each theater. They paid their own travel expenses. Segregation presented challenges in finding lodging and places to eat, and they struggled to maintain personal safety. Many of the places where they performed had curfews for African Americans, and were known as "sundown towns." They would sometimes have

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California State University, Northridge, that lists black newspaper articles detailing the timeline of the T.O.BA.

[153] Michelle R. Scott, "These Ladies Do Business With a Capital B: The Griffin Sisters as Black Businesswomen in Early Vaudeville,"*The Journal of African American History* 101, no. 4 (2016): 490.

[154] Ibid., 494.

to sleep in the train car they traveled in, perhaps not knowing when they could safely eat their next meal.[155]*[156] Michelle R. Scott noted that, "Jim Crow extended to salaries as well." She quotes black vaudeville artist Leonard Reed, who asserted that the pay between white and black vaudeville performers was "no comparison." Black vaudevillians were limited in their ability to formally challenge racist labor practices because they were excluded from most white vaudeville unions. In response, they formed the Colored Vaudeville Benevolent Association in 1909 to support black performers and raise wages and standards for their working conditions.[157]

Despite the difficult conditions presented by the T.O.B.A., Aiken's $14 a week salary in black vaudeville theaters was an improvement over wages paid in rural tent shows.[158] She expressed her appreciation for the T.O.B.A. in a 1960 interview with Studs Terkel, declaring that the T.O.B.A. "was the greatest thing and should be today, because it taught young people how to be entertainers. Both as in character as well as ability."[159] The T.O.B.A. was also beneficial for black performers because it helped them to secure bookings and enabled them to mount tours.[160] At its peak, the T.O.B.A. had forty

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[155] Watkins, *On the Real Side,* 367.

[156] That was why some performers referred to the T.O.B.A. as "Tough on Black Asses."

[157] Scott, "These Ladies Do Business With a Capital B," 484.

[158] Littletons, *Comediennes,* 32.

[159] Studs Terkel, *The Spectator: Talk About Movies and Plays With the People Who Make Them* (New York: The New Press, 1999), 278-279.

[160] For the purpose of continuity, discussions of the black theater circuit will be generalized as the T.O.B.A. for the remainder of this chapter, since that is how most sources refer to the theater circuit Aiken performed on at this time. As a result of this practice, it is not clear when Aiken transitioned from another circuit to the T.O.B.A.

theaters. Despite the challenges black performers faced and the mistreatment they often endured from theater owners, the organization of the T.O.B.A. provided some protection against payment being withheld or bookings being canceled on a whim.[161]

Performing on the T.O.B.A. also provided performers with a space to build community. They developed life-long friendships and supported one another through the difficult experience of navigating segregation and living on the road. This was exemplified by the friendship between Jackie "Moms" Mabley and Stephen Fetchit (real name Lincoln Perry), who would appear together in the film *Amazing Grace* in 1974 and discuss their shared history in an interview conducted in that year.[162] The community of performers provided support for many artists who left their families for a life on the road. Aiken was rejected by many in her family for her career choice, so her fellow performers became her chosen family.[163]

Like the tent and carnival shows, the black vaudeville theater shows catered to black audiences. The T.O.B.A. performers worked and traveled as troupes, including dancers, comedians, and singers. The troupes would travel across the Midwest and segregated South, hitting the major black theaters including the Regal and Monogram theaters in Chicago, Standard and Earle in Philadelphia, Lincoln and Lafayette in Harlem, Palace in Memphis, Lyric in New Orleans, Royal in Baltimore, and the Howard in

[161] Watkins, *On the Real Side*, 365.

[162] "Stepin Fetchit, Moms Mabley Relive 'Glory Days' in Atlanta Interviews," *Boxoffice*, September 9, 1974.

[163] "Charles's Memories," Interview with Charles Aiken, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture.

Washington D.C.[164] There were multiple black theater circuits by the early twenties, but the T.O.B.A. was the best known.[165] The black theater circuits had a significant impact on Americans' performance styles and mainstream culture. According to comedian Redd Foxx, "new words and phrases created on the Toby [popular name for T.O.B.A. Circuit] not only were to become part of the white entertainers' language, but part of America's street language."[166]

Some aspects of minstrelsy continued in T.O.B.A. performances, especially with the comedy acts. Indeed, some African American performers continued to wear blackface makeup, especially in the early years. These carry-overs from minstrelsy occurred because many T.O.B.A. artists got their start there. According to Mel Watkins, they were performing the popularly accepted forms of humor, while gradually "infusing those stage exaggerations with the real-life humor they experienced every day in their own community."[167] Foxx explains that this was because these artists "had become so well identified with the image of the blackface comedian."[168] With regard to content, the troupes on the black theater circuit primarily featured vaudeville, and the variety show was the most popular format in the early twentieth century. There was some overlap with

[164] Lauterbach, *The Chitlin' Circuit,* 302-304 n. 8.

[165] Amiri Baraka, *Blues People: Negro Music in White America* (Perennial: New York, 1999), 89.

[166] Red Foxx and Norma Miller, *The Redd Foxx Encyclopedia of Black Humor* (Pasadena: Ward Ritchie Press, 1977), 72.

[167] Watkins, *On the Real Side*, 368.

[168] Ibid.

tent shows still offering minstrelsy at the same time that the T.O.B.A. and other theater troupes were featuring vaudeville and blues music.

Blues legends Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith worked the T.O.B.A. circuit at the beginning of their careers. As performing arts scholar Paige A. McGinley points out in *Staging the Blues: From Tent Shows to Tourism*, "black theatrical entertainment and early women's blues share a tangled history: their performances took place on the same stages, often using the same actors, songs, and conventions." The blues shared their roots with the performance styles on the T.O.B.A., and McGinley describes the form as "growing out of the vaudeville and ragtime tunes of popular entertainment and the work songs that regulated black labor in the unreconstructed Jim Crow South. [B]lues was, from its beginnings, a hybrid form, musically and genetically indebted to a variety of early influences: male and female, rural and urban."[169] The thread between the blues and Aiken's early performances arguably links her to the church, since it had a significant influence on the genre. As blues and gospel legend, Sister Rosetta Tharpe, stated in a 1960s interview, "Blues is just the theatrical name for gospel."[170] These connections and her exposure to blues performances influenced Mabley's comedy style for the remainder of her career, (to be discussed in chapter four). There was an exchange of style and inspiration among the T.O.B.A. performers, where comedians were learning from the musical acts and vice versa. Sammy Davis Jr., who started performing on the circuit as a

[169] Paige A. McGinley, *Staging the Blues: From Tent Shows to Tourism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 17.

[170] Ibid., 8.

young child, in later years recalled, "I learned how to dance by watching great stars like Bill Robinson, Buck and Bubbles, and others. You naturally picked up comedy stories as you listened to [comedians] go through their routines. I began to imitate all the comedians that I saw."[171]

Introducing Jackie Mabley

According to the Littletons in *Comediennes: Laugh Be a Lady,* it was during her T.O.B.A. years that Loretta Aiken changed her name to "Jackie Mabley." She was dating a Canadian actor named Jack Mabley and he mentored her, while also taking advantage of her financially. When her brother expressed disapproval about her stage career, she decided to take her boyfriend's name and became Jackie Mabley to placate her family.[172] According to Jackie "Moms" Mabley, "I was real uptight with [Jack Mabley]. He certainly was uptight with me; you better believe. He took a lot off me and the least I could do was take his name."[173] While she went by Jackie Mabley during her T.O.B.A. years and beyond, it was also during this time that she also earned her famous nickname. According to multiple sources, including her own recollections, she regularly nurtured fellow performers and this is how she eventually earned her title of "Moms" offstage. The nickname stuck, and would eventually make its way into her stage name starting in the 1940s. In writing their book, the Littletons relied on interviews with comedian Timmie Rogers, who worked with Mabley for many years on the T.O.B.A. circuit.

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[171] Foxx and Miller, *Redd Foxx Encyclopedia,* 93.

[172] Littletons, *Comediennes,* 33.

[173] "Moms Mabley," *Current Biography,* 29.

Thanks to Rogers's recollections, they were able to expand on the origin story of Jackie Mabley's "Moms" moniker. As the story goes, she was performing with a troupe on the T.O.B.A. circuit at a theater in the South. Members of the Ku Klux Klan started a fire at the theater so entertainers and audience-members rushed out to safety. She tended to those performers who were injured in the incident, and this helped earn her the Moms nickname among performers.[174]

The Aiken family's fortunes changed when Loretta was a young teen. After her father died, the family struggled financially and she had to work as a wet nurse, as discussed in chapter one. However, it was her time performing on the carnival circuit and the T.O.B.A. that really exposed her to the experiences of working-class African Americans. For most of her young life, she experienced financial stability and prominence in her small hometown of Brevard thanks to Jim Aiken's businesses and prominent position in the community. She surely would have come into contact with African Americans of different classes in her youth, but once she left home and entered the world of entertainment, she experienced this firsthand. She met and formed relationships with performers who experienced poverty and perennial financial insecurity. Many of the T.O.B.A. sketches addressed class issues and poverty through humor.

In addition, Aiken's/Mabley's travels on the performance circuit exposed her to the experiences of African Americans throughout the country. Her worldview was expanded far beyond what she saw in Brevard. Her own social position changed during this time as well. Even when her family struggled financially after her father died, she

[174] Littletons, *Comediennes,* 33.

was still known as Jim Aiken's daughter in her small town and could claim that level of social status. Once she left Brevard and joined the carnival and T.O.B.A. circuits, she was making very little money and the people she traveled with and performed for did not connect her with her prominent family. Her mother did send her money to keep her afloat during these early show business years, but it was a small amount. Aiken was working-class, just like her fellow entertainers. Her experience transitioning from wealthy to poor, and eventually returning to being wealthy, had a significant impact on the way she talked about class in her comedy.

Speaking out and Signifying

The T.O.B.A. also provided a space for Mabley and her contemporaries to speak more directly about racial segregation and injustice than they had previously. They were not as limited to playing a comical character and used satire to subtly critique racial inequality, especially for black audiences. Mel Watkins explains that the T.O.B.A. performers were able to move away from the stereotypes of minstrelsy to a "performance style that more accurately reflected the majority tastes of the black community" and that the venue was crucial because "mainstream America was unprepared to accept black humor that did not clearly mirror minstrelsy's coon images."[175] Elements like slapstick humor and vaudeville gags were combined with familiar aspects of life in black communities, the social rituals and various facets of daily life. As Redd Foxx and Norma Miller described it, comedy on the T.O.B.A. "primarily focused on the immediate

[175] Watkins, *On the Real Side*, 367.

problems of their day-to-day existence."[176] They also explained that "the comedian was the most important part of the show…so the show with the best comic was usually the most successful."[177]

Performers on the T.O.B.A. stage were speaking to an audience that they connected with, and could engage in the in-group humor that would become a signature of Jackie Mabley's routines for years to come. The laughter of recognition was shared between performers and audience and this continued when she was a famous standup act during the civil rights era. Mabley probably learned about "signifying" during her early years with the T.O.B.A., and even though she and her contemporaries were performing for black audiences, they still needed to veil their messages. Signifying is a vital component of black literary and vernacular culture, and popular entertainment. Signifying played a crucial role in African-American comedy as a performative tool used by entertainers. Like dissemblance, signifying allowed the performers to protect themselves while providing for avenues of self-expression. Jackie Mabley, like her contemporaries, utilized signifying in her comedic performances, particularly the "double-voice device," which infuses multiple meanings into a speaker's statement while the layers of humor conveyed messages of protest and resistance. Mabley and other performers could not openly critique white racism and had to be subtle with their social critiques in venues owned by whites. But when performing for black audiences, they could engage in the African American rhetorical style with which their audiences were familiar. Signifying

[176] Ibid., 368.

[177] Ibid., 369.

enabled Mabley and other artists to speak truthfully and critically, but concealed the explicit meanings from the white theater owners and audience members.[178]

Initially Mabley performed as a singer and dancer on the T.O.B.A. For one of her earliest stints she toured as a chorus girl with the vaudeville show *Bowman's Cotton Blossoms* along with her mentor Bonnie Belle Drew in 1919. This show was produced by W. Henry Bowman and black theater entrepreneur Sherman H.Dudley.[179] But according to Mel Watkins, she "dabbled in comedy almost from the beginning."[180] Mabley was mostly in comedy skits early on. Like other female performers in vaudeville, she would team up with male performers like Dusty "Open the Door Richard" Fletcher, Tim "Kingfish" Moore, and John "Spider Bruce" Mason. The format in these comedy routines usually made the woman as the foil for the men's jokes. In one sketch, positively reviewed in *The Billboard* magazine, she teamed up with Bobbie Broadway who did a female impersonation in their sketch. Their act included "songs, dancing, and a line of chatter" and according to reviewer Wesley Varnell, their performance "picked up enough applause to warrant calling it an 80 per cent act.[181]" However, over time Mabley took center stage and reversed this role and used her male partners as her foils. She would continue using male entertainers as the butt of her jokes in later years. Once she became a

[178] Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), xx, 4-5.

[179] Bernard Peterson, Jr., *Profiles of African American Stage Performers and Theatre People, 1816-1960* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2001), 172-173.

[180] Watkins, *On the Real Side*, 390.

[181] "J.A. Jackson's Page: Wesley Varnell's Reviews," *The Billboard*, August 26, 1922, 34.

stand-up comedienne and monologist, she engaged her piano player or the master of ceremonies in comedic banter.[182]

Although the standup comedy routine as a separate act did not begin until after the Great Depression, Mel Watkins argues that it was "foreshadowed by minstrel show stump speeches and the monologues of humorists such as Bert Williams and Will Rogers."[183] The comedy on the T.O.B.A. circuit was performed in duos or trios, relying on situational comedy, and was prominent in vaudeville skits. The dialogue was typically fast-paced and often incorporated sexual innuendo. Mabley began doing comedy in this format, but eventually started doing standup on the T.O.B.A. Watkins cites Mabley as one of the rare exceptions of a performer who did monologues and standup, and one of the earliest black comics to do so.[184] Yet she did not limit herself exclusively to comedy monologues; she continued to sing and dance in her performances even into the 1940s.

Harlem Renaissance/New Negro Movement

The T.O.B.A. ended with the coming of the Great Depression, when the theaters on the circuit were struggling financially and many were forced to close. As a result, some of the circuit's best performers moved on and found work in Harlem, particularly at the Apollo Theater. However, Mabley's career transition predated this shift by several years. In 1921 the duo Butterbeans and Susie (real names Jodie and Susan Edwards) took her under their wing and mentored her, guiding young Mabley in finding better work in

[182] Donald Bogle, *Brown Sugar: One Hundred Years of America's Black Female Superstars* (New York: Continuum, 2007), 161.

[183] Watkins, *On the Real Side*, 372.

[184] Ibid., 390.

New York City. Butterbeans and Susie were major stars of the T.O.B.A., one of the first husband and wife teams on the circuit. They were known for their marital squabbling and double entendres onstage, and risque songs including "I want a Hot Dog for My Roll."[185] They performed with and mentored singer and actress Ethel Waters early in her career, when she was known as Sweet Mama Stringbean.[186]

According to the Littletons, Butterbeans and Susie saw Mabley perform in Dallas and felt she was too good to be where she was so they introduced her to an agent to help her secure better bookings. As a result she started making more than $90 a week. She then moved to New York City in 1923 "and found herself in the middle of the Harlem Renaissance" where she continued to perform comedy in the city's nightclubs, including Connie's Inn and the Cotton Club, along side of such big names as Louis Armstrong, Count Basie, Duke Ellington, and Cab Calloway. In addition, she auditioned for more serious theater roles.[187] She appeared in "colored revues," satirical variety shows, as well as musical comedies such as *Miss Bandana* (1927), produced by Clarence Muse; and *Devil's Frolics* (1929), produced by Addison Carey and Charles Davis.[188] It was at this point that she sought out Harlem Renaissance writer Zora Neale Hurston with hopes to collaborate. According to Bambi Haggins, Mabley fully formed her "Moms" persona in

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[185] Bambi Haggins, "Moms Mabley and Wanda Sykes: 'I'ma Be Me," in *Hysterical: Women in American Comedy*, eds. Linda Mizejewski and Victoria Sturtevant (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2017), 213.

[186] Foxx and Miller, *Redd Foxx Encyclopedia,*73-76.

[187] Darryl and Tuesday Littleton, *Comediennes: Laugh Be a Lady* (Milwaukee: Applause Theater & Cinema Books, 2012), 32.

[188] Henry T. Sampson, *Blacks in Blackface: A Source Book on Early Black Musical Shows* (Metuchen: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1980), 261.

Harlem during the 1920s.[189] A 1964 article stated that she began her first New York engagement at Connie's Inn and appeared there between 1923 and 1926.[190]

Mabley's career started taking off in the 1920s, a decade that marked a high point for African American artistic movements, particularly in northern cities, referred to as the "New Negro Era." The Great Migration was a contributing factor, as well as the end of World War I. The concept of the New Negro emphasized renewed and revitalized political and artistic activity with a particular focus on the younger generation of African Americans. Artists and intellectuals understood the importance of rejecting African American stereotypes and creating literary works that honored black values and sensibilities. In Harlem, people from different parts of the South and the Caribbean came together and brought with them elements from multiple black cultures. Jazz and blues music took off and there was a flowering of cultural activities and a celebration of the African past among black artists and intellectuals. Negro History Week, the precursor to Black History Month, was born in this period.[191]

Harlem contained a dynamic black cultural community. Literary greats such as Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, and Claude McKay were highly productive during this decade, and for the first time on Broadway black actors were featured in serious roles and black singers and dancers starred in musical productions. Visual artists Aaron Douglas, Jacob Lawrence, and others documented the black

[189] Haggins, "Moms Mabley and Wanda Sykes," 213.

[190] "'Moms' Mabley Heads Show," *The Pittsburgh Press,* February 27, 1964, 10.

[191] Alain Locke, ed., *The New Negro* (New York: Albert and Charles Boni Inc., 1925).

experience, and jazz exploded in popularity. However, there were negative aspects as well. Many whites viewed Harlem as exotic and filled with "primitives." They would visit its dance halls, jazz clubs, and speakeasies, and considered this "slumming." However, many Harlem residents faced poverty and were limited to low-wage work and housing and employment discrimination. The Cotton Club, one of the most famous jazz clubs in Harlem, catered to a white clientele, even though it featured black artists. African Americans were allowed to attend the cabaret shows only after band leader and composer Duke Ellington insisted.[192]

Jackie Mabley began receiving press notices for her performances in the mid-1920s. In 1925 *The Pittsburgh Courier,* a widely circulated African-American weekly newspaper, wrote "Jackie Mabley, a strong favorite of the laughter, made a wonderful hit" when she performed at the Orpheum Theater in Newark.[193] She played at Connie's Inn in Harlem the same month and her performance was given detailed coverage in *Variety,* indicating that she was somewhat well-known at that point. The cabaret review begins with a description of the venue and an explanation that "Connie's Inn, like the Cotton Club and others of its ilk in New York offering colored floor shows…has its draw on the 'whites,' otherwise the chance against its operation to profit would be against it in its present conduct."[194]

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[192] Eric Foner, *Give Me Liberty: An American History, Seagull Volume 2, 5th edition* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2017), 807-809; Nathan Irvin Huggins, *Harlem Renaissance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), xvii-xix.

[193] Helen Mack, "Newark, N.J.," *The Pittsburgh Courier,* October 10, 1925, 15.

[194] "Cabaret Reviews: Connie's Inn," *Variety,* October 14, 1925

Mabley is listed as one of the principals of the show, and her performance is described as a surprise because of the "dialog of low comedy material…exchanged by Miss Mabley and [fellow principal Dewey] Brown." This description could refer to off-color humor, or the type of comedy popular on the T.O.B.A. that reflected every day life. This type of humor would come to define Mabley's comedy for years to come. The reviewer expressed surprise at witnessing an audience out to dance, eat, and drink become quiet and attentive for the show. This was a sign that they really enjoyed the performances of Mabley and her costars. The review continues with a description of Mabley engaging in physical comedy where she kicks and shoves her costar before they break into dance. The reviewer describes Mabley as "doing the kind of stepping that has long been such a hit in the T.O.B.A. houses."[195] These two reviews are notable in their differences. In *The Pittsburgh Courier* the reviewer was reporting to a black audience familiar with Mabley's comedy routine. The review is brief, but complimentary. Her review in *Variety* is also complimentary, but is colored by the fact that it reflected the racist attitudes common at the time. For instance, at the beginning of the review the critic suggests that Connie's Inn was only able to succeed because of its white patrons.

While she frequently played comedic roles at this point, Mabley was also a singer. In 1926 she was part of a Sunday concert series at the Ambassador Theater in New York City. The concert was directed by Will Marion Cook, an African-American composer and violinist known for producing popular songs and musicals such as *In Dahomey* (1903). The concert included "spirituals, folk songs, jubilee songs and modern ensembles."

[195] Ibid.

Mabley and the other singers were accompanied by a sixteen-piece orchestra, and the show was advertised as featuring African-American music.[196]" Mabley was featured in the 1927 show *Look Who's Here!* headed by husband-and-wife duo Drake and Walker at the Gibson Theater in Philadelphia. The show included fifty performers of music and comedy, with Jackie Mabley one of the few listed by name in the *Pittsburgh Courier* advertisement. This suggests she had enough recognition among black audiences to be a draw for the show. While it is unclear from the review or the advertisement if Mabley performed comedy, song and dance, or a combination of the two, the review of the show was very positive.[197] Mabley also appeared in the show *My Lucky Day* at New York's Lafayette Theater in 1927 as part of "Billy King's Policy Players." Her name was listed in the advertisement with just a few others, when the show presumably includes many other acts, giving the impression that she had headliner status.[198] Another article mentioned that the show had been running for eight months in Chicago at the Grand Theatre. Critics reviewed it there positively, saying it was "one of the finest revues on the stage." The show was brought to New York City for a one week engagement and the reviewer noted that this was unusual. Indeed, the management of the Lafayette spared no expense in doing so because of the show's great reputation.[199]

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[196] "Land O'Melody: Melody Mart Notes," January 16, 1926. *The Billboard,* 21.

[197] September 10, 1927, *The Pittsburgh Courier,* 11.

[198] November 12, 1927 *The New York Age,* 6.

[199] "Billy King's New Show at Lafayette Next Week," *The New York Age,* November 5, 1927, 6.

This is not surprising considering that Frank Schiffman, the manager of the Lafayette, was incredibly competitive. He would pay performers more than competing theaters like the Alhambra, enabling him to hire the best talent, and was even known to institute a blacklist to discourage artists from performing at competing theaters.[200] The Lafayette was regarded as the best theater in Harlem in the early twentieth century. According to Ted Fox, author of *Showtime at the Apollo: The Story of Harlem's World Famous Theater*, the Lafayette was the "granddaddy of all black theaters."[201] When Frank Shiffman and Leo Brecher took on ownership of the Lafayette in 1925, "they inherited a theatre with more than a decade's tradition as the 'cradle of the stars.'"[202] Historian Nathan Irvin Huggins declared that "midnight shows at the Lafayette were really community social events; the real drama was the audience."[203] The previously mentioned *New York Age* article gives the impression that *My Lucky Day* was only in town for one week, presumably returning to Chicago or moving on to another city once it completed the New York run.[204] Multiple sources indicate that Jackie Mabley made her home in New York City after Butterbeans and Susie took her there in 1923, and she regularly performed there. The *New York Age* article indicates a long term engagement in

[200] Ted Fox, *Showtime at the Apollo: The Story of Harlem's World Famous Theater* (Rhinebeck: Mill Road Enterprises, 2003), 55.

[201] Ibid., 25.

[202] Ibid., 26.

[203] Huggins, *Harlem Renaissance*, 291.

[204] "Billy King's New Show at Lafayette Next Week," *The New York Age*, November 5, 1927, 6.

Chicago, so she was probably traveling regularly for performances, but spent most of her time in New York City in the 1920s.

The late 1920s saw many more performances by Jackie Mabley, with her name moving up the list of headliners. She performed at the Lafayette regularly in shows such as the musical revue *Creole Vanities.*[205] She was praised along with the rest of the "exceptionally good" supporting cast performing with Ethel Waters in the *Banjoland* revue at the Lafayette the following year, where "chief amongst this cast…is Jackie Mabley who had the audience holding their sides with laughter with a new comedy act."[206] She was in the cast of *Harlem Girl* at the Lafayette in August 1929, listed as one of the singers and dancers in the show. In the review the critic noted that "Jackie Mabley was, of course, the comedy star of the show. Her new imitations and chatter made the audience howl with laughter."[207] She performed in *The Devils Frolics* the same year, and was listed as one of the main comedians. The review of the musical comedy revue noted that "with such a cast, the show could hardly fail to be as delightful as it is.[208]"

As the 1920s came to a close, Jackie Mabley's star was rising in the Harlem entertainment scene. While still considered a triple-threat who performed song, dance, and comedy routines, she was beginning to establish herself as a comedienne above all else. She was accumulating positive reviews in the press and a growing reputation among

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[205] *The New York Age,* May 19, 1928; *The New York Age,* August 25, 1928

[206] "Theaters of Harlem," *The New York Age,* June 15, 1929

[207] "Theaters of Harlem," *The New York Age,* August 10, 1929

[208] "Athletic News and Happenings of the Stage," *The New York Age,* November 9, 1929, 6.

both black audiences and the white theater owners in Harlem. Her career would soon mark a transition as the country entered the Great Depression following the stock market crash in 1929. While the Harlem Renaissance would end in the early 1930s, the black arts would expand into new outlets including film and mainstream theater. It was through these venues that Mabley would continue to grow as an artist and expand her audience.

Chapter Three:Showtime at the Apollo and Beyond

Between the 1930s and 1950s, Jackie Mabley continued performing as a triple-threat with acts that included singing, dancing, and comedy. During this period, however, she focused primarily on comedy. This thirty-year period saw major changes in Mabley's personal and professional life. Despite the continuing limitations she faced as a result of racial segregation, her career expanded as she moved into the realm of film, Broadway and other theatrical venues, and the Apollo Theater. She continued to travel as a performer, but much less frequently than she had when she was on the T.O.B.A. and carnival circuits. She established home bases in Harlem and Washington, D.C. and traveled to her other bookings from these locations. Mabley continued to hone her act and refine her persona with varying degrees of success with her audiences. When the 1930s opened, Mabley was a young actress on the Harlem nightclub circuit making a name for herself. By the close of the 1950s, she was on the verge of becoming a breakout star with black and white audiences. This time period was crucial in determining the nature of her artistry, particularly the content and style of her comedy.

Broadway and Stage Revues

While Jackie Mabley continued performing at black nightclubs and musical revues into the 1930s, it was at this time that she began to diversify her performance venues. She started performing in stage shows, and in 1934 she began to play at the Apollo Theater–the same year it opened under the Schiffman/Brecher management team that would oversee this iconic venue for decades. As the nation entered the Great

Depression, Mabley faced the same challenges for other black artists as black clubs and theaters struggled financially. She adapted by branching out to different types of venues such as church socials and "rent parties.[209]" Rent parties, gatherings where African Americans hosted "speakeasies" that sold bootleg liquor in residential apartments and also charged a small admission fee. These activities were important in the context of the New Negro Renaissance and the Great Depression because they provided accessible entertainment that was affordable because African Americans were often excluded from other performance spaces in the city.[210] The rent party also played an important cultural role in the Great Migration. As social scientist Katrina Hazzard-Gordon argues, rent parties were a way for migrants from the South to adapt the rural "juke joint" tradition to their new urban, industrialized environment. Juke joints, referred to by Zora Neale Hurston as "Negro pleasure houses," were informal venues in rural areas where black men and women drank, socialized and danced.[211]

Despite the challenges she faced, the 1930s was a time of opportunity for Mabley. She added new revues to her resume, collaborated with Zora Neale Hurston on the 1931 Broadway revue *Fast and Furious*, and had her first film roles. She also developed important friendships with entertainers Pearl Bailey, Lena Horne, Dizzie Gillespie, Ethel Waters, Louis Armstrong, Billie Holiday, and others. It was during this period that more

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[209] Darlene Clark Hine, Elsa Barkley Brown, Rosalyn Terborg-Penn, eds., *Black Women in America: An Historical Encyclopedia* (Indiana University Press, 1994), 740.

[210] Nicholas L. Gaffney, "'He Was a Man Who Walked Tall Among Men': Duke Ellington, African American Audiences, and the Black Musical Entertainment Market, 1927-1943," *The Journal of African American History*, vol. 98, no. 3 (Summer 2013): 374.

[211] Gaffney, "He Was a Man Who Walked Tall," 373-374.

black audiences became familiar with her work as she established her stage persona and technique as a stand up comedienne and monologist.

Mabley appeared in several black musical revues in the 1930s. She was in the principal cast for at least three revues in 1930, including *The Joy Boat* alongside Dusty Fletcher, an act that had her in blackface.[212] She was also in *Red Pastures* that year, produced by Irvin C. Miller, an African-American playwright, actor, and producer.[213] He was known for producing musical comedies in the 1920s and 1930s, most notably *Brown Skin Models.*[214] Mabley starred in the production of *Sidewalks of Harlem* in 1930, produced by Addison Carey and Charles Davis.[215] She collaborated with Zora Neale Hurston in writing and performing in the 1931 Broadway revue *Fast and Furious*. The variety show featured a large cast, including Dusty Fletcher and Tim Moore, with Mabley credited as a writer, singer, dancer, and actor. She played several roles in the sketches, including Lady Macbeth and a cheerleader at an onstage football game. She is mentioned in a lukewarm *Variety* review of this show for singing "Rhumbatism." The reporter believed that the song "has an idea" whereas the "more serious numbers [were] not so good." The reviewer described Mabley as "gold-toothed and buxom" and concluded that

[212] Henry T. Sampson, *Blacks in Blackface: A Source Book on Early Black Musical Shows* (London: The Scarecrow Press, 1980), 507.

[213] Ibid., 508.

[214] Bernard L. Peterson, Jr., *Profiles of African American Stage Performers and Theatre People, 1816-1960* (London: Greenwood Press, 2001), 181-182.

[215] Sampson, *Blacks in Blackface*, 508.

the sketches were not very funny, and that this version of *Macbeth* brought "no amusement save perhaps to the colored portion of the audience."[216]

This review highlights black performers' relying on the in-group humor and cultural references that would characterize Mabley's comedy throughout her career. The reviewer noted that this version of *Macbeth* "claimed to have been culled from away down South."[217] The show was performed in 1931, so many in the audience were migrants originally from the South who felt connected to the material. The reviewer for *Variety* also panned the show, but did not refer to Mabley directly as a positive or negative.[218] In 1939 she played the role of Quince in *Swinging the Dream,* a jazz adaptation of *A Midsummer Night's Dream.* As cultural theorist Elsie A. Williams points out, her role in Pyramus and Thisby, the "play within the play," provided Mabley with an opportunity to satirize opera and literary classics–something she would continue to do in her later performances.[219]

Fast and Furious opened on September 15, 1931, and according to Bessye Bearden of the *Chicago Defender,* Mabley was in another show that opened the following day. She was one of the cast members of the Broadway show *Singing the Blues*, along with comedian Tim Moore. That she was performing in two Broadway shows during the same period speaks to her strong work-ethic, as well as her success in landing jobs, even

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[216] "Legitimate: Plays on Broadway - FAST AND FURIOUS." *Variety*, Sep 22, 1931, 55.

[217] Ibid.

[218] Eugene Burr, "Legitimate: The New Plays on Broadway, Fast and Furious," *Variety* Sep 26, 1931, 15.

[219] Elsie A. Williams, *The Humor of Jackie Moms Mabley: An African American Comedic Tradition* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1995), 46.

during the Depression. Mabley was one of the principal cast members in *Blackberries of 1932*. The show received mixed reviews, and was noted for the cast's extensive dancing. Cultural Critic Elsie Williams suggests that "apparently, [the comedians] were doing what they had been doing on the T.O.B.A. circuit–ethnic humor–which was not received well by the white, Broadway audience."[220] J. Brooks Atkinson, the reviewer for the *New York Times,* specifically named Tim Moore, Mantan Mooreland, Eddie Green, Johnny Long, and Dewey "Pigmeat" Markham as the comedians for the show, omitting Mabley.[221] However, she is listed in Henry T. Sampson's *Blacks in Blackface* as performing comedy, singing, and impersonations in that show.[222] This suggests that she did not take part in comedy sketches, or she may have been overlooked by the reviewer.

Growing Family

Around 1929 Jackie Mabley became an adoptive mother to four-year-old Charles Aiken. He was her nephew, and was brought to live with her after her brother George, the boy's father, died of leukemia. She raised him as her son, and he shared his recollections of life with Mabley in an interview conducted after her death in 1975. This interview is an incredibly valuable source because Charles Aiken discusses what Mabley was like in her private life, the conflicts within her family, and the ebbs and flows of her theatrical career. According to Aiken, Mabley hired female secretaries over the years who were

[220] Ibid.

[221] J Brooks, "Over the Coffee Cups with George Bernard Shaw in a Play Entitled "Too True to be Good," *New York Times,* April 5, 1932; Jack Mehler, "The New Plays on Broadway: The Liberty," *The Billboard,* Apr 16, 1932, 21.

[222] Sampson, *Blacks in Blackface,* 508.

sometimes her romantic partners. Aiken recalls that they would serve as mother figures to him, while Mabley embodied the father figure. She would dress as a man in her private life, as well as onstage in the early years of her career. As she became more successful in the 1930s, Mabley and the family moved into a large, nicely decorated apartment in Harlem.[223] Aiken recalled that "mother had an affinity for the seedier side of life. So in addition to the agents, chorus girls, and entertainers who'd come to St. Nicholas Avenue [where they lived], there were the hustlers, pimps, numbers men…No one was ever turned away."[224]

Charles Aiken also explained how she earned the "Moms" nickname for helping her friends. She would entertain houseguests wherever she happened to be at the time, whether it was the kitchen, bathroom, or bedroom if she hadn't gotten out of bed yet. Her bed was her most prized possession. It was custom-made and very large, before king-sized beds became common. It was ebony teakwood, with a canopy and lights set into the arch. She had this bed for forty-five years, until her death, and brought it each time she moved to a new home. Her son reported that she developed a ritual of smoking marijuana and praying in the wings before she went onstage. She would pass time backstage by playing cards and board games with her costars, a fact supported by a photograph of her playing checkers with Pegleg Bates, taken for an *Ebony Magazine* article in later years.[225] And according to Aiken, she was very competitive and hated to lose, and would

[223] "Charles's Memories," Interview with Charles Aiken, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, 2.

[224] Ibid., 3.

[225] "Behind the Laughter of Jackie 'Moms' Mabley." *Ebony,* Aug. 1962, 90.

sometimes even cheat at games. Mabley and her son were very close and she would bring him to theaters where she'd perform when he was a young boy.

Moms Mabley on Film

Film was an expanding arena for African American artists and entertainers in the 1930s and 1940s. While they were often limited to roles that relied on negative stereotypes, portraying servants or clowns in films, many of these artists managed to include subtle criticisms of these stereotypes. As film historian Donald Bogle asserts, "many black actors…have played–at some time or another–stereotyped roles. But the essence of black film history is not found in the stereotyped role, but in what certain talented actors have done with the stereotype."[226] African American artists established independent film companies to exert more control over their representation, and a number of these enterprises flourished in the 1920s and 1930s. The films they produced, referred to as "race movies," aimed to move away from the demeaning roles featured in Hollywood films and provided employment opportunities for actors, directors, and other film professionals. However, as Bogle points out, "more often than not they were trapped by the same stereotype conceptions as their white competitors."[227] They were also plagued by budget and distribution challenges. Nonetheless, these independent films were important for providing portrayals in film that more accurately represented African American life in the early twentieth century.

[226] Donald Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies & Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2001), *xxiv.*

[227] Ibid., 89.

During the Depression, white writers, producers, and directors began making independent black films, incorporating genres popular in Hollywood films at the time such as mysteries, musicals, and westerns. Many white moviemakers worked under pseudonyms, but these films featured all-black casts and continued to portray African Americans more positively than their Hollywood competitors. *The Emperor Jones* (1933), starring Paul Robeson, was an example of this type of film. As film historian Thomas Cripps explains, the film was notable for moving away from limiting racial stereotypes and was a success because black "intellectuals drifted toward naturalistic drama."[228]

Based on the play by Eugene O'Neill, the film tells the story of a railroad porter who becomes a king in a Caribbean nation through a series of malevolent schemes. Mabley plays the role of Marcella, a house matron who operates a speakeasy and lodging house, complete with music and dancing. Mabley's Marcella greets Robeson's Brutus Jones saying "hello big boy. I got your fish and rice all ready for ya. You know, I'm from South Carolina myself." Jones's friend, Jeff, and the other men standing with them all feign surprise, noting that Marcella had told them she was from locations ranging from Georgia to Virginia. Jeff laughs, saying "Marcella sure has been around. She been born in every state south of the Line." During this dialogue she is smiling suggestively at Jones and stroking her lapel. Although in this scene she is wearing a suit with her short hair slicked back, she is flirtatious with the men, changing her birthplace to impress whoever

[228] Thomas Cripps, *Slow Fade to Black: The Negro in American Film, 1900-1942* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 216.

she is speaking with at the time. The scene continues with the men going into the next room to meet Jeff's girlfriend, and when he catches her kissing another man, a fight breaks out. Marcella jumps in to break up the fight, behavior that was typically expected of men at the time, and yells "watch yourself! Hey, don't do that. Not a brawl in my house. You ain't gonna send me to jail. Y'all go ahead and dance."[229]

While Mabley's role in the film was small, it was notable in providing a platform for her persona that blended masculinity with flirtatiousness toward men. She also used the opportunity to ad-lib in order to more accurately portray the experience of African Americans. As she later recalled, she threw away the script that was initially given to her because she objected to the dialogue. Mabley recalled, "the people had written a thick book with all these lines. Now how can a white man write lines for a Harlem landlady? I saw it live. I knew what to be true, they didn't."[230] Marcella's connection to the South and description of southern food is significant because she, like so many others in Harlem at the time, was a southern migrant.

Her role in the film is also significant because of the importance of the film. *The Emperor Jones* is arguably Paul Robeson's most famous film role.[231] The movie marked the first time an African American actor received top billing in an American feature film. It was one of the few American-made films in which he performed. Robeson acted primarily in films produced abroad in an attempt to avoid the stereotyping typical of

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[229] Dudley Murphy, dir., *The Emperor Jones* (1933; New York: John Krimsky and Gifford Cochran, Inc.)

[230] Williams, *The Humor of Jackie Moms Mabley*, 47.

[231] Library of Congress, LC Information Bulletin, "American Film Treasures: Library to Restore *The Emperor Jones,"* May 1999; American Film Institute Catalog, 573.

Hollywood films.[232] According to Thomas Cripps, the film was very successful and "at the box office…confounded the dire predictions…[A]udiences loved it, save for the reserved black bourgeoisie…it was an impressive debut of blacks into independently produced and financed feature films outside the confines of Hollywood and crafted with finer stuff than that of the race movies."[233] Despite the film's unexpected success, Cripps points out that its impact was limited at the time. *The Emperor Jones* and other black independent films "served as indirect inspirations and models…In their own time they could contribute no more than a 'fading effect'… to the dominant stereotypes…" He notes that "the independents had made a few blacks aware of the possibilities, although they would wait in vain through the thirties for equal development in popular movies."[234] Cripps connects the challenges for Black progress in the film industry to the end of the Jazz Age and Harlem Renaissance, noting that white intellectuals and patrons were no longer interested and invested in Black art forms by the early 1930s. He quotes NAACP leader Walter White, who stated in 1929, "Because the producers of moving pictures must depend upon a nationwide distribution which includes the South, it is almost impossible to start off with the presentation of anything but the old stereotyped concepts of the Negro."[235]

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[232] Bogle, *Toms*, 83, 86.

[233] Cripps, Slow Fade to Black, 217.

[234] Cripps, Slow Fade to Black, 217-218.

[235] Cripps, Slow Fade to Black, 218.

Showtime at the Apollo

Mabley's career hit a major turning point in 1934. While she continued to perform in venues in Harlem and beyond, this was the year she made her debut at the Apollo Theater. The Apollo had been reopened that year by Frank Schiffman and Leo Brecher and quickly became the premier venue for African American artists and would remain so for decades.[236] According to theater historian Paige A. McGinley, "the Apollo almost immediately became the most important springboard to success in the black entertainment industry…[I]t played a signal role in the consolidation and centralization of black mass culture."[237]

Several factors contributed to the Apollo's success. Frank Schiffman was a shrewd businessman, who successfully competed against other venues for Harlem's talented artists. This sometimes included "blackballing" performers if they worked at other theaters in the area. He would also undercut competing venues and offer artists more money. He was domineering and was said to mistreat some performers, and he demanded high quality shows.[238] Schiffman had been cultivating talent since the vaudeville era, and booking agents knew to come to see shows at the Apollo to find promising entertainers. For example, Joe Glaser, later the manager for Louis Armstrong

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[236] Ted Fox, *Showtime at the Apollo: The Story of Harlem's World Famous Theate*r (Rhinebeck, NY: Mill Road Enterprises, 1983), 4.

[237] Paige A. McGinley, *Staging the Blues: From Tent Shows to Tourism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 112.

[238] Fox, *Showtime,* 29-30.

and Jackie Mabley, went to Apollo shows every week for twenty years for this purpose.[239]

Frank Schiffman and his son Bobby managed the Apollo for many years, and they remained in touch with what was popular in African American culture. The Apollo was vital to the local community, and businesses in the vicinity on 125th Street in Harlem benefitted from the theater's presence.[240] The Apollo offered a variety of shows to appeal to diverse black audiences. The ticket prices were low, which was significant during the Depression when entertainment was a luxury many found difficult to afford. Furthermore, the demise of the T.O.B.A. and the shuttering of many theaters in the South led many black artists to move to Harlem. According to Ted Fox, author of *Showtime at the Apollo*, "the events of Harlem's early years made the Apollo possible, and in a sense, the Apollo until its demise was the only institution in Harlem to keep alive the hope and promise of these years."[241] The Apollo became a community, a home away from home, for African American entertainers. It was also a proving ground, and if a black artist wanted to reach any respectable level of success, he or she needed to prove themselves on the Apollo stage. Sammy Davis, Jr. recalled,

> The Apollo Theatre became the Mecca for so many black performers after the Toby [T.O.B.A.] Circuit closed down during the Depression. Without this work on the circuit, they came to Harlem and continued to perform. It was here in

[239] Ibid., 19.

[240] Ibid., 37.

[241] Ibid., 40.

> Harlem when the black comics gathered that black humor began to blossom and grow and set the stage for what it was to become after World War II.[242]

The Apollo offered vaudeville shows in its first two decades, a carryover from tent shows and the T.O.B.A. that Fox argues appealed to working-class audiences.[243] The theater opened at 10:00am and typically offered thirty-one performances each week–four a day, with an extra show on Wednesdays, Saturdays, and Sundays. The shows, typically referred to as reviews, were based on a specific theme and had titles such as "Harlem Goes Hollywood" or "Modern Rhythm." First there was a short film, a newsreel, then a feature film. Then the master of ceremonies would announce the live show with the exclamation, "Ladies and gentleman, it's showtime at the Apollo!" The house band would play a number joined by a chorus of singers, followed by the "sight act"–this could be a "tap dancer, acrobat, or animal act." This would be followed by a singer or the chorus of singers, a comedy act, and the show would then close with the featured act as the finale.[244] The comedy acts were rarely the headliners for Apollo's shows, but as writer Mel Watkins points out, "comedy was a pervasive element in the theatre's mystique."[245] The Apollo had a major influence on American culture. For example, radio broadcasts from the Apollo beginning in 1934 were the first exposure for many whites to black swing music.[246]

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[242] Davis quoted in Red Foxx and Norma Miller, *The Redd Foxx Encyclopedia of Black Humor* (Pasadena: Ward Ritchie Press, 1977), 94.

[243] Fox, *Showtime,* 74; McGinley, *Staging,* 112-113.

[244] Fox, *Showtime,* 75.

[245] Mel Watkins, *On the Real Side: A History of African American Comedy from Slavery to Chris Rock* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1999), 386.

[246] Fox, *Showtime,* 71.

Although the Apollo shows were immensely popular, Ted Fox points out that many middle-class African Americans were embarrassed by what was performed and considered the entertainment as somewhat tasteless.[247] The *New York Age* consistently criticized the Apollo during its early years, taking issue with the "'vulgarity, suggestive dancing, and blackface comedy.'[248]" Another journalist took issue with the comedy acts at the Apollo and expressed concern about how the material reflected on the African American community. "I am told that there should be a racial flavor preserved in our comedy so as to make it definitely recognizable as belonging to the Negro race. But when that comedy remains absolutely in the gutter, I wonder how many of what kind of people will be content to have it reflect their lives, thoughts, and actions to the outside world?"[249]

Focusing on Comedy

Comedy at the Apollo was performed in a sketch or skit format in the 1930s and 1940s. Most of these acts involved several comedians, and Frank Schiffman referred to them as *lebenspilder* (pictures of life). Most of the performers wore blackface makeup, which inspired protests from the NAACP and others for the degrading nature of this performative tradition. Mel Watkins asserts that the comedy at the Apollo was becoming increasingly direct in its social critiques, largely in response to the Depression and the 1935 Harlem riot. The conflict began in response to reports that a black boy was killed by

[247] Fox, *Showtime,* 74.

[248] *New York Age* quoted in Fox, *Showtime,* 74 (no citation provided).

[249] Fox, *Showtime,* 91. The author and newspaper not named in the text.

police for stealing a penknife. As Apollo master of ceremonies Ralph Cooper noted, "the so-called riots helped end the grand illusion that Harlem was full of happy-go-lucky blacks too busy singin' and dancin' and struttin' to want a piece of the American pie.[250]" According to Watkins, "the Apollo audience–many of whom presumably had taken part in the riot of 1935–began demanding less veiled expression of actual black sentiments regarding the larger society. More and more often, they received it."[251] Watkins points out that, even though the commentary did not yet reach the assertiveness that would later be present in Dick Gregory's and Richard Pryor's comedy, comedians at the Apollo were including more observations and jokes that were reflective of the black community at that time. Watkins identifies Mabley as "the comic who most successfully and frequently combined the emerging mood of assertiveness and increased worldliness with traditional black stage motifs in the thirties and forties" and identifies her as "one of the pioneers of social satire at the Apollo."[252]

Paige McGinley differentiates between the music and comedy performances at the Apollo during these early years. She argues that there was a divergence between the two forms, and artists such as Butterbeans and Susie, Ma Rainey, and Jackie Mabley, who had previously been triple-threats performing song, dance, and comedy, transitioned and focused on just one of these forms. For Mabley that meant a transition to performing mostly comedy at this point in her career. McGinley also points out that the expectations

[250] Watkins, *Real Side,* 384.

[251] Ibid., 388.

[252] Ibid., 391-392.

of respectability directed at Apollo performances were largely targeted at music acts. She asserts that comedians were given more license and that "in the performances of self-consciously 'down-home' stars such as [Pigmeat] Markham and Mabley, comedy at the Apollo was allowed, even encouraged, to reference a black Southern past, to indulge in racy sexual content, and to resurrect the material of the tent show, from minstrel routines to vaudevillian duos."[253]

One of Mabley's contemporaries who also transitioned from the T.O.B.A. to the Apollo was Sam Theard, who went by his stage name Spo-Dee-O-Dee. He was one of the first comedians to discontinue the use of blackface and in his recollections of comedy at the Apollo, asserted, "our comedy was ethnic, sexual, cruel, and quite often, slapstick."[254] He provided an example of this in a skit he performed with Mabley at the Apollo where she was a washerwoman, and he was demanding money from her. In the skit he approached her saying "Hey, woman! Where's the money?" When she resisted and said she needed money for food, he retorted, "You ate yesterday. You want food every day?" He claimed, "I was a cruel bastard as I took the money. 'Here woman, get yourself some saltine crackers and save some of them for me.'"[255]

Laughter and Controversy

Several newspaper reviews of Mabley's performances during this time took issue with the content of her humor, with the *New York Age* the most prominent. The

[253] McGinley, *Staging the Blues*, 116.

[254] Foxx, *Encyclopedia*, 98.

[255] Ibid.

publication reviewed a 1934 performance Mabley gave at the Lafayette Theater, another popular venue for black entertainers in Harlem. The newspaper reported "Jackie Mabley, our sole comedienne, collects her usual amount of laughs in her droll matter of fact manner. She has genuine talent which she allows to run to waste on suggestive situations and lines, instead of getting down to intelligent character portrayals. Jackie would be a female Bert Williams if she would only get wise to herself."[256] This critique suggests the type of performances many African American audiences were seeking at this time, while also pointing out Mabley's popularity and consistency in making her audiences laugh. The review indicates that she was the only known African American female comic, a title she would maintain for many years. Mabley would be criticized along these lines throughout her career because some audiences took issue with her relying on African American stereotypes, like the Mammy character. Her son suggested that "she made them laugh at everything they never wanted to be, before they ever knew what they didn't want to be."[257]

The press often referred to Mabley's risqué or "blue" material, especially in her performances at the Apollo in the 1930s and early 1940s. Her vulgar humor and reliance on stereotypes drew mixed responses from audiences and reviewers, but this type of comedy allowed her to fit in with the type of shows that were popular at the Apollo and arguably made the theater such a success. This was noted in reviews, such as a 1946 write

[256] "John Henry Raises Spooks in New Show at Lafayette," *New York Age*, November 10, 1934.

[257] "Charles's Memories," Interview with Charles Aiken, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, 1.

up in *Variety* that described her singing a "deep blue" song "which could only pass in this house," a phrase frequently used to describe Mabley's off-color comedy.[258] An especially critical review of an Apollo appearance in *Variety* described her act as "filthy" and "indigo blue." The reviewer found that her act was "out of place in 'vaude[ville]," more fitting in burlesque, and describes the "hushed silence" of the audience at some of her jokes.[259] Another reporter for *The New York Age* lamented, "[I]t is a pity that Jackie, one of the best ad-libbers on the uptown stage, has to be rated as a low [comedienne] because of her failure to eliminate suggestiveness from her repertoire of jokes."[260] Alternately, the press also noted when audiences enjoyed her suggestive humor, as in a 1954 review of her comedy monologue at the Apollo, asserting that the audience "eats up" her blue material and off-color innuendos.[261]

Mabley's comedy was included in a citation against the Carroll's Club in Philadelphia in 1941. The club was investigated by the Pennsylvania Liquor Board, and during the hearing the agents testified that they heard her sing "lewd and smutty ballads."[262] Part of the issue might have been the venue in which she was performing. Content and style that was standard at the Apollo was sometimes poorly received elsewhere, and this was acknowledged when she performed at Greenwich Village's Cafe

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[258] "House Review: Apollo, N.Y.," *Variety,* June 19, 1946.

[259] "House Reviews: Apollo, N.Y.," *Variety,* May 15, 1940.

[260] Augustus Austin, "'Bama State Collegians Well Received in Harlem," *The New York Age* Aug 18, 1934, 4.

[261] "House Reviews: Apollo, N.Y.," *Variety,* November 3, 1954.

[262] "Philly Niteries Pay Fines in Rum Board Citations," *Variety,* July 9, 1941, 45.

Society, considered the first integrated nightclub in New York City.[263] The reviewer believed that she was "out of place," noting the double entendres in her act and her inappropriate clothing and persona.[264]

Hitting Her Stride

Her early years at the Apollo undoubtedly impacted her performance style for the remainder of her career. Mabley would connect with her audiences and encourage laughter of recognition, whether she was sharing stories of her relatives in the South sending her food–an incredibly powerful anecdote in light of the Great Migration and the fact that many in her Harlem audience were recent transplants who were likely missing the food from their southern homes. As Ted Fox observes, "like all great comedians, her routines sought to touch her audience's sense of recognition, to create a sense of community that insulated the theater from the injustices of the outside world."[265] Although Mabley would not become a regular until 1939 and would achieve star billing only near the end of her career, she was listed as one of the headliners in advertisements for the Apollo's shows as early as 1934.[266]

Mabley was the first comedienne to appear solo on the Apollo stage and was well-known in black entertainment by that point.[267] Ted Fox indicated that she became one of the most beloved and successful performers there. She started off making $85 a week,

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[263] Sarah Bean Apmann, "Cafe Society, Wrong Place for the Right People," *Greenwich Village Society for Historic Preservation,* Dec 30, 2015, https://gvshp.org/blog/2015/12/30/cafe-society-the-wrong-place-for-the-right-people/.
[264] "Night Club Reviews: Cafe Society Downtown," *Variety,* October 26, 1949, 70.
[265] Fox, *Showtime,* 97.
[266] "Moms Mabley," Current Biography, January 1975, 28; Watkins, *Real Side,* 391; *Daily News,* April 13, 1934.
[267] Watkins, *Real Side,* 391.

which is notable for being $10 more a week than what Pigmeat Markham made at the beginning of his stints at the Apollo. Both stars have been credited with performing at the Apollo more than any other artist over the course of their careers.[268] Mabley would continue to call the Apollo home for over thirty years, regardless of how popular she became. In a career marked with high and low points, she was always welcomed on the Apollo stage. The style and techniques that she cultivated in her early years would continue to characterize her comedy, and according to Mel Watkins, "perhaps more than any of the other early Apollo comics, she foreshadowed the shift to direct social commentary and stand-up comic techniques that would define humor by the late fifties."[269] The Apollo also became an important venue for polishing and fine-tuning her material and technique. Charles Aiken explained that she knew who she was and was effective in using the positive and negative experiences in her life to develop characters onstage.[270] A 1942 review notes that after performing at the Apollo "numerous times before, she's definitely a more polished funnymaker now, keeping the small house in an uproar…" The review also mentioned her effectiveness in handling a heckler in the audience.[271]

Although the Apollo became Mabley's home base, she performed widely at venues throughout New York City, including popular clubs such as the Alhambra

[268] Ted Fox cites Markham as performing there the most: see Fox, *Showtime,* 95. Elsie Williams cites Moms performing there the most in Hine, *Black Women in America,* 740.

[269] Watkins, *Real Side,* 393.

[270] "Charles's Memories," 6.

[271] "House Reviews: Apollo, N.Y.," *Variety,* January 21, 1942.

Theater, Small's Paradise, and the Harlem Opera House. She would also perform with Gladys Bentley at the Ubangi Club. Bentley, a lesbian entertainer, who at that time was "the only black male impersonator," according to Charles Aiken. Bentley was risqué and would sing to women in the audience with a gravely voice, undoubtedly influencing Mabley who did the same toward her male audience members, especially later in her career.[272] By the early 1940s Mabley had hit her stride and was making much more money, performing alongside Count Basie, Lucky Millinder, and the Nicholas Brothers. She performed regularly in other cities, including Chicago, Washington D.C., and Philadelphia. Mabley also had a long-standing engagement in Atlantic City where she and her family would relocate to Atlantic City for a month every summer so she could work at Club Harlem. According to Charles Aiken, she helped make the club a successful venue.[273]

Killer Diller and *Boarding House Blues*

Mabley returned to the movie screen in the late 1940s with roles in *Killer Diller* (1948) and *Boarding House Blues* (1948). These films were produced at a time of transition in Hollywood. For decades, the NAACP had been pushing for better opportunities in Hollywood for African Americans in terms of employment offscreen and portrayals onscreen. The organization advocated even more strongly during World War II and after to have African Americans in film presented "as human beings instead of

[272] "Charles's Memories,"; *New York Age* Oct 20, 1934.

[273] "Charles's Memories," 18-19; "Out of Billy Rowe's Harlem Notebook," *The Pittsburgh Courier,* Jul 2, 1938, 11.

clowns, heavies, moronic servants or as superstitious individuals scared of ghosts."[274] While there was some progress in the industry after World War II, it was often limited. Stereotypes were still prominent in films, even if the storytelling was less demeaning and African Americans were more frequently portrayed in crowds and otherwise taking part in everyday life. In reference to this time in Black film history, historian Thomas Cripps cites actor Bill Greaves who said "there was nothing in Hollywood until its 'sharp turn left' in the coming message movie era."[275] This was a period of downturn for "race movies." According to Cripps, "The genre had fallen far short of its former ideals of advocacy, heroism, and cultural nationalism…"[276] He notes that race movies were falling out of favor in this time period, and the quality of these films suffered in comparison to those that came earlier and those that would follow in later decades.

There were also two major obstacles to significant progress in the film industry. First, the fierce anticommunism of the early Cold War period fostered a climate of fear and intimidation, especially after the 1947 HUAC hearings and the blacklisting of the Hollywood Ten. This environment discouraged people from being vocal about civil rights and publicly supporting liberal politics. This was especially true of Ronald Reagan, who was president of the Screen Actors Guild from 1947 to 1951.[277] A second factor that

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[274] Walter White quoted in Stephen Vaughn, "Ronald Reagan and the Struggle for Black Dignity in Cinema, 1937-1953," *The Journal of African American History* vol. 87, The Past Before Us (Winter 2002), 84.

[275] 145

[276] Thomas Cripps, *Making Movies Black: The Hollywood Message Movie from World War II to the Civil Rights Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993),148.

[277] Ibid., 89.

limited progress toward racial equality in the film industry was the resistance of many African American actors who worried that eliminating roles that the NAACP deemed objectionable would limit their employment opportunities. Hattie McDaniel, who often portrayed the stereotype of black maids and won an Oscar for this kind of role in *Gone With the Wind,* was one of the most vocal opponents to the involvement of NAACP leader Walter White with Hollywood filmmakers.[278]

Both *Killer Diller* and *Boarding House Blues* were produced outside the Hollywood studio system by E.M. Glucksman, president of the the *All-American News* production company. *All-American News* was established in 1942 to produce and distribute newsreels depicting African American life and contributions to the war effort during World War II. The company reached an estimated audience of four million by the end of its first year; and according to Glucksman the newsreels were regularly shown in 365 of the 451 black theaters across the United States.[279] Glucksman claimed that his company was the only one regularly producing newsreels that focused on African American subjects. When the war ended, *All-American News* began producing films for African American audiences that featured all-black casts. Glucksman collaborated with director Josh Binney, "an old-time western director who also handled Stepin Fetchit," and animator Hal Seeger, who served as screenwriter for *Killer Diller* and *Boarding House Blues.*[280] The trio, who were all white, also worked together on other "race films" with

[278] Ibid., 88; Jill Watts, *Hattie McDaniel: Black Ambition, White Hollywood* (New York: Amistad, 2005).

[279] Raymond Fielding, *The American Newsreel: A Complete History* (New York: McFarland and Company, 2011), 111.

[280] Ibid. Binney "handling" Fetchit most likely refers to him directing the actor in other films.

African American casts in the 1940s, including *Hi De Ho* (1947), starring Cab Calloway; and *The Joint is Jumpin'* (1949), starring John "Spider Bruce" Mason.

Killer Diller presents a variety show format of black artists performing in the film. Mabley does a comedy monologue and is introduced by the master of ceremonies as a "dynamic personality" who prefers to be called "just plain Mom." In her performance she refers to the audience as her children and explains that "Moms don't know no jokes, but I can tell you some facts." She advises her audience to not believe fairy tales and tells a joke about ole Mother Hubbard really retrieving alcohol from her cupboard. She demonstrates her strong stage presence and ability to handle a lukewarm audience when she tells the crowd "laugh a little louder, Mom can't hear you up here." She established her popular trope of placing herself in government positions and other leadership roles when she shares with her audience that she was asked to come to Washington to "handle some business down there." The story concludes with a double-entendre where she misunderstands the flight attendant who, after Mabley complained about clogged ears from the cabin pressure, advised her to drop her jaws. Mabley misunderstood her and leads the audience to believe she dropped her drawers. She then directs her pianist to play for her, the way he does for those "big people"–presumably famous, successful artists. She sings a song titled "Don't Sit on My Bed."[281]

Mabley's performance in *Killer Diller* is significant because it is the earliest footage of her performing her comedy material, as opposed to her role in *Emperor Jones* when she plays a specific character. *Killer Diller* shows her embodying the Moms

[281] Josh Binney, dir., *Killer Diller* (1948; All-American News)

character and includes tropes that would characterize her performances for years to come. Although she started going by Moms in the earlier 1940s, this is the first time it is documented on film. She refers to the audience as her children and gives them advice, trademarks of her comedic style. She includes the theme of being called on to help political leaders, a topic to which she frequently returns. Her physical presence is also significant, because she presents herself as female onstage. Before this she dressed in a masculine style, as documented in her *Emperor Jones* appearance and in her son's recollections. According to Charles Aiken, during the early years of her career she would sometimes dress as a man onstage "the way she dressed at home" or she'd dress "like a funny old lady in comedy clothes, her red wig and flap shoes."[282] He noted that in the early 1940s she transitioned her look to combine male and female attire, such as wearing a skirt along with men's clothes.[283] Her appearance in *Killer Diller* seems to depart even more from these early years because she is dressed in a feminine house dress. However, she is wearing a wig, a floppy bucket hat, and large shoes. While she is not dressed in the comedic fashion that Aiken describes, for which she would later be known, her appearance in *Killer Diller* does show the transition in her comedic persona. Her embodiment of the "Moms" persona was even more prominently featured in *Boarding House Blues*, in which she had a starring role.

[282] "Charles's Memories," 18.

[283] Ibid.

Becoming "Moms"

Jackie Mabley eventually transitioned into the role of "Moms Mabley," which would remain her persona and stage name for the remainder of her career. This shift can be traced to 1943 when she is first referred to as "Moms" in the press.[284] It is possible that fellow performers, and perhaps audience members, began using Moms before then. By 1948 this new stage name was well in place, with the *Boarding House Blues* film carrying the alternate title of "Mom's Boarding House," referring to her role in the film. In *Boarding House Blues*, her character runs a boarding house for entertainers, and when she was not able to pay the rent and the boarders risk losing their rooms, the performers come together to put on a show to save their home. Like her character in *The Emperor Jones*, she is a caretaker who runs a boarding house; however, in this film, she has a much more prominent role and the audience is treated to her comedic talent throughout it. Her style and humor are representative of her stage work, and includes tropes and plays on words, physical comedy, double-entendres, and tough love for her "children." She runs the house with a strict but loving hand, which is similar to how she addresses her audiences. She embodies the matriarch, and at one point she exclaims that when her children are happy, it makes her feel good. Dressed in a tailored house dress with an apron, she is well-groomed and put together. Her face is incredibly expressive, with her eyes widening to express surprise or to emphasize a point.[285]

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[284] "Night clubs-vaudeville: Paradise, Detroit, Set Till Closing," *The Billboard*. April 3, 1943.

[285] Josh Binney, dir., *Boarding House Blues* (1948; All-American News)

The film captures the experience of poverty for many black artists in the 1940s, with the main conflict in the story centered around the boarders who did not have money to pay the rent. This depiction reflected reality for many of the actors in the film. As Slappy White recalls in one scene showing a table set with food, "it wasn't hard to pick out the cast because the actors were out of work before they got the job and out of work when the picture was completed…there are more actors than there is food…in fact there isn't any food on the table," presumably because the hungry actors ate all the food meant for the scene.[286] Mabley brings in the direct, common sense that she used in her stage performances when she explains the financial situation for the boarding house. "Everything is going out, nothing is coming in. Moms is broke."

Mabley's monologue toward the end of the film most effectively demonstrates her comedic style. She wears a wig and floppy hat, which she did not wear in the rest of *Boarding House Blues,* but did wear in *Killer Diller*. This was her stage costume at this point, as described by Charles Aiken. The costume approaches her full stage persona that she adopted later, but is more subtle. She mocks class distinctions when she shares the story of losing her job working for the mayor. A duke and duchess were visiting and she was advised to refer to them as "her royal highness" and "your majesty." One day the duchess was taking a bath when Mabley was asked where the duchess was. Mabley explained that she was taking a bath, "scrubbing her royal hide. I didn't know it was wrong. They fired me." She laments that when she loses her man, she loses her job–a trope reminiscent of the blues women she worked with on the T.O.B.A. who would

[286] Slappy White quoted in Williams, *Humor of Jackie Moms Mabley,* 47.

continue to influence her later routines. She mentions her ongoing love for youth and laments the fact that she is getting older; and while there is no disgrace in getting old, "but darn if it isn't inconvenient." She includes an insult for Cab Calloway, who she actually did have a professional friendship with in real life, when she tells the audience that he treats her "like a dog." She says that she wishes she was a dog, and Calloway was a tree.

Mabley concludes her monologue with a dance segment. Luther, the pianist, begins to play music and she interrupts him, saying "don't play it like that. Play it like you play for one of them big people…real pretty…" She then asks the light operator to make her look like Lena Horne and begins a soft-shoe tap routine. These demands are self-deprecating and comical, but also allow Mabley to insist on being respected and given the same treatment as other stage stars. Her dancing is skillful, reflective of Mabley's many years as a performer with the tent shows and T.O.B.A. Her comedy routine does not end while she dances. She tells her audience, "I love to dance, at least I used to love to dance…I'm getting too old for this." After completing her final dance steps, she joyfully exclaims, "Made it made it made it! Haha!" as if she is surprised and relieved to complete the dancing.

Playing a version of her stage persona in *Boarding House Blues* allowed Mabley to bring the character to the screen for a larger audience. The style of her performance and the persona were representative of what audiences saw when Moms Mabley performed in the theater. According to Bambi Haggins, "Moms Mabley's comic persona, as revisionist mammy, presented one of the few iterations of black female sexual agency

in mainstream comedy that was seen as acceptable because her artifice made it impossible for her to be seen as a sex object."[287] This was noted in a 1949 article about Mabley, suggesting that she wanted "to make people proud of her profession, by being prim and proper in public." The reviewer believed note that "immaculate, trim, and conservative, she is the extreme opposite of the screamingly comic character you see behind the [footlights]."[288]

Mabley became increasingly well known in the 1930s and 1940s as a result of her appearances at the Apollo and other theaters in New York and other cities. Her films exposed her to even larger audiences. Her performances are well documented in newspaper and magazine reviews and films, and she usually incorporated dancing and comedic songs in her monologues. A 1943 article in *The New York Age* emphasized her popularity as well as her content. "[A]lways a Harlem favorite, she has blossomed out as a genuine star. Jackie is without a peer as an extemporaneous humorist, singer of comedy songs, and comedy dancer. This will be her second appearance at the Apollo this year. Scores of requests have been made for her."[289] She was also frequently cited for her "down-to-earth comedy."[290] In one review of her performance 1947, the reporter noted that she received the most applause in the show. Her "Mammy act in the honey chile tradition was a bit of [all] right," well-received by audiences, while her singing of "Ol'

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[287] Bambi Haggins, *Laughing Mad: The Black Comic Persona in Post-Soul America.* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2007), 48.

[288] "Bobby Dorsey's Character-tures," *The New York Age,* November 26, 1949, 19.

[289] "Jackie Mabley to Head [Star] at the Apollo," *The New York Age*, Jan 9, 1943, 10.

[290] "Notes from Nite [sic] Clubs," *The Cincinnati Enquirer,* Oct 12, 1947, 2.

Man Mose" and "debunking of Mother Goose rhymes struck particularly responsive notes."[291] Her "debunking" of nursery rhymes was regularly featured in her comedy, which highlighted her common sense and "homespun words of wisdom."[292] She was referred to in the press numerous times as a "female Burt Williams" and a "sepian Sophie Tucker" for her singing and comedy.[293]

Taking a Stand

She also began to comment on politics at that time, and lent her talents to political and social causes. For example, during the Cold War she defined a "commie" as "someone who'd rather see inside Oak Ridge than *Inside U.S.A.*"[294] Oak Ridge was a location associated with the Manhattan Project in Tennessee; and *Inside U.S.A.* was a musical revue based on a 1947 book about author John Gunther's travels throughout America. Presumably a "commie" would be more interested in nuclear weapons than American life and culture. In a 1950 performance she included a sketch entitled "Vote for Moms Mabley for a Seat in the U.N.," a powerful trope frequently featured in her comedy where she projected herself into positions of power. In seeking these political posts, she drew attention to her marginalized role as an African American woman– highlighting the idea that sending her to the U.N. would be highly unlikely in 1950. Furthermore, in referencing these positions of power, she used her stage performances as

[291] "Latin Quarter," *The Cincinnati Enquirer,* Oct 11, 1947, 6.

[292] Al Salerno, "Brooklyn and Broadway Nightlife," *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle,* Oct 14, 1949, 11.

[293] *Detroit Free Press,* Feb 5, 1954, 19; *The Cincinnati Enquirer,* Oct 5, 1947, 50.

[294] Earl Wilson, "It Happened Last Night," *The St. Louis Star and Times,* June 26, 1948, 8.

platforms to critique political events.[295] She reunited with Spo-Dee-O-Dee (listed in the review as Sammy Theard) for a comedy sketch at the Apollo that evolved into a "strong plea for equal rights and an anti-lynching bill."[296] She was using her platform and captive audience to advocate for civil rights. And with regard to the anti-lynching bill, despite decades long campaigns by the N.A.A.C.P. and other organizations, it was never passed by the U.S. Congress.[297] Contemporary politics would become even more prominent in her humor in later years, and would be central to her comedic style.

It was also during this time that she began lending her talents to charitable and social causes. Mabley performed at a USO benefit in Englewood, New Jersey in 1942, demonstrating her support for the U.S. Armed Forces.[298] In 1950 she performed at the "*Atlanta Daily World* Health Jamboree." This was an entertainment festival intended to encourage citizens to take advantage of the free health care and testing program in the Atlanta area. The show was sponsored by the *Atlanta Daily World* in collaboration with the Atlanta Health Department, and offered free admission to the show for those who took the "health test."[299] Mabley was noted for discussing juvenile delinquency during

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[295] "4 Ink Spots Star in Earle Stage Show," *The Philadelphia Inquirer,* December 9, 1950, 8.

[296] "Variety House Reviews: Apollo, N.Y.," *Variety,* April 19, 1939.

[297] Vincent P. Mikkelsen, "Fighting for Sergeant Caldwell: The NAACP Campaign Against 'Legal' Lynching After World War I," *The Journal of African American History* vol. 94, no. 4, 465-466. For further reading on the antilynching campaign, see Robert Zangrando, *The NAACP Crusade Against Lynching* (Philadelphia, PA, 1980); Manfred Berg, *"The Ticket to Freedom": The NAACP and the Struggle for Black Integration* (Gainesville, FL, 2005), 56-130; Patricia Sullivan, *Lift Every Voice: The NAACP and the Making of the Civil Rights Movement* (New York, 2009), 61-144.

[298] "Show in Englewood Tomorrow for USO," *The Herald News,* April 9, 1942, 18.

[299] No further details were given about what kind of test was administered.

her sets.[300] The settings for her performances and the content are significant because they suggest the beginnings of her artist-activist role, discussed in the next chapter. Moreover, her commentaries in the 1960s were heavily focused on youth and young people. This connects to her "Mammy" persona, where she referred to her audience as her children and assumed a motherly role; but it is also based in her investment in young people. She "wowed 'em" at a NAACP benefit show that celebrated the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision in May 1954 and raised money for the organization's Freedom Fund.[301]

Mabley also explored other performance opportunities during the 1940s and 1950s, branching out beyond performing comedy, song, and dance on city stages. She performed on the radio for a short period in 1948, headlining a program recorded at the Apollo Theater that followed "numerous successful radio appearances" that year.[302] Another newspaper article from 1948 noted that radio executives were looking for new talent for shows, but had been overlooking established talent. The author of the article suggested that Mabley would be great on radio after thirty years of performing in nightclubs. However, it wasn't until her film roles garnered her greater recognition that she was presented with the opportunity. In 1948 she was finally set to star in a NBC radio variety show.[303] She also appeared on the *Billboard* charts during this period, thanks to a duet she recorded with her friend Pearl Bailey. They sang "Saturday Night Fish Fry" on

[300] "Over 18,000 See World Health Jamboree," *Alabama Tribune,* June 30, 1950, 1.

[301] "Brooklyn NAACP Stages Benefit for Freedom Fund," *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle,* May 29, 1954, 2.

[302] The New York Age, October 9, 1948, 13.

[303] "Looking and Listening with Sid Shalit," Daily News, July 1, 1948, 19C.

the 1949 record released by Columbia, and it was well-received.[304] Her radio appearance and record duet with Pearl Bailey may have contributed to Mabley being signed by the Aladdin Record Company in 1951. *The Billboard* magazine announced the deal, noting that the company would "bring Jackie Mabley to the [West] Coast for a series of wax dates," probably in Los Angeles.

The 1951 *Billboard* article revealed that the label would bill Mabley as a "fem Louis Jordan," the big band and swing era singer and bandleader known for his comedic flair.[305] This comparison with Jordan and the announcement's placement in the "Rhythm and Blues Notes" section of *Billboard* suggests that Mabley was signed as a musician with a comedic touch, rather a comedy album. Although she was typically headlining as a comedienne in her stage performances, she was still working in several media and was viewed in the industry as a musician as well. She was utilizing her T.O.B.A. and Apollo experiences working as an artist in multiple arenas. The record deal with Aladdin never came to fruition, however, and there are no additional references to Mabley being signed or releasing an album under that label.

Mabley was highly regarded as a comedienne and racked up numerous positive reviews of her performances from the 1930s through the 1950s thanks to her talent and technique. By 1939 she was noted for having "no peers in the field of comedy,"[306] A

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[304] "Music Popularity Charts," *The Billboard*, vol. 16 issue 51, Dec. 17, 1949, 32; Bernie Woods, "Jocks, Jukes, and Disks," *Variety* Dec. 7, 1949, 42.

[305] Hal Webman, "Rhythm and Blues Notes," *The Billboard,* February 24, 1951, 31.

[306] Billy Rowe, "Orlando Robeson Back with Claude Hopkins; Set for Apollo Date," *The Pittsburgh Courier,* September 23, 1939, 20.

1949 article about her first performance at the Greenwich Village club, Cafe Society, commended her for "spreading wit and humor the greys never dreamed could come from a woman! She's real great and exemplifies the highest tradition in show business."[307] A 1952 article referred to her as a "beloved comedienne" and a "joy to behold. She's regarded by all as the nation's number one comedienne."[308] She was also acknowledged for the frequency of her performances, and for her longevity in the entertainment business. A 1955 article in *The Pittsburgh Courier* discussed plans to celebrate her 35 years as an entertainer, noting that "Jackie has appeared in most of the nation's best theaters and niteries and has become famous for her personal treatment of everything from nursery rhymes to standard tunes."[309] However, she still faced challenges in her career even after achieving far-reaching fame in the 1940s.

Tragedy and Struggle

Jackie Mabley's mother, Mary Aiken, was hit by a mail truck and killed in 1947. Mabley was devastated by the loss, and canceled engagements in order to grieve.[310] Her return to the stage was slow. According to the recollections of Charles Aiken, some white agents who were working with other black performers did not want to work with her because she was a lesbian. He also speculated that she was not getting booked at the same

[307] "Dan Burley's Backdoor Stuff: Introducing Backdoor Merit Keys," *The New York Age,* October 29, 1949, 16.

[308] "Apollo Books the Orioles, 'Moms' Mabley," *The New York Age,* March 1, 1952, 14.

[309] "A 35-Year Veteran: Show Biz Maps Plans to Honor Moms Mabley," *The Pittsburgh Courier,* May 7, 1955, 15.

[310] "Charles's Memories," 21; "Billy Rowe's Notebook," *The Pittsburgh Courier,* Jan 11, 1947, 16.

level as before, or as much as other successful black artists, because of the content of her humor. According to Aiken, black audiences were moving toward more sophisticated entertainment and she wasn't getting bookings at the same places she had been before. While she continued to work during the late 1940s and early 1950s, she didn't work as frequently or at venues of the same caliber and prestige as she had before. By the early 1950s she was largely limited to small black clubs on the East Coast.[311]

Mabley shows up in the newspapers less during this period than she did in the 30s and early 40s. She was referred to as "old school" in an article praising her longevity and accomplishments, while also suggesting that her performance style was outdated.[312] In addition, there are references in the press to conflicts she had with others in the industry. For example, *The Pittsburgh Courier* reported in 1950 that she did not get a good offer to perform in Atlantic City, where she had previously been going for the summer every year.[313] Another article revealed a dispute with the bosses at the Harlem Club in Atlantic City club because of this, eventually doing a show at a rival theater closer to the boardwalk instead.[314] Even amidst difficulties in her career, she always respected the craft and took pride in her work. When she would perform at smaller clubs she would still treat them like star billings at big clubs. She was consistently driven and

[311] "Charles's Memories," 28.

[312] "Notes from Night Clubs," *The Cincinnati Enquirer,* October 5, 1947, 50.

[313] "Billy Rowe's Notebook," *The Pittsburgh Courier,* Jun 17, 1950, 20.

[314] "Billy Rowe's Notebook," *The Pittsburgh Courier,* Aug 13 1949, 18.

professional.[315] Charles Aiken became a professional dancer and landed a job for Mabley with a show where he was working. She charmed the audience and teased Aiken after he introduced her, saying, "ok, boy, you done your bit. Move along now, Daddy [her nickname for Aiken]…These youngsters today think they's somethin' else…" He recalled that "the place broke up and applauded. They loved her."[316]

Building Toward Success

Her performances in the 1930s through the 1950s were crucial to Jackie Mabley's development as an artist. She was transformed from a young actress who danced, sang, and performed comedy to a bonafide comedienne and monologuist with a distinct stage persona. She established Harlem as her home base, becoming a fixture at the Apollo and other venues and used the stage to reflect the experience of African Americans, while diversifying and performing in films and on radio. She began using her platforms as a performer to express social commentary on race relations and politics, which she would continue to do for the remainder of her career. An analysis of Mabley's experience and performances from the 1930s to the 1950s is valuable in understanding the larger shifts taking place in African American life, entertainment, and culture by the mid-twentieth century. The shifts that characterized Mabley's technique and style in this period would set her up for the crossover success she would experience in the 1960s.

Mabley fine-tuned her persona and altered her career approach in the 1950s. While she would continue to rely on ethnic humor, social satire, and blue humor, she did

[315] "Charles's Memories," 25.

[316] "Charles's Memories," 29-30.

make some important changes. Through her friendship with Louis Armstrong she started working with agent Joe Glaser of Associated Artists/Associated Booking Corporation in the mid 1950s. Glaser guided her in refining her act and encouraged her to keep her personal life private, especially her gender identity, and to dress as an old lady (rather than an old man) onstage, as she sometimes had in the 1930s and 1940s. She took his advice, further solidifying the Moms Mabley persona that would characterize her for the remainder of her career. The changes she made and her new management helped Mabley attain more success in the second half of the 1950s. Charles Aiken marks 1955 as the year her career took off again.[317] Her big break would come a few years later after appearing at the Playboy Club. This would lead to television appearances and her success in a new medium–comedy albums.

[317] 'Charles's Memories," 31.

Chapter Four: Crossover Success

Moms Mabley's career went through a significant transformation in 1960.[318] After years performing in night clubs including countless shows at the Apollo, she experienced crossover success and gained exposure with new, multiracial audiences thanks to television appearances and comedy albums. What she said on television, her records, and in print was important because she reached a broad audience. Unlike more assertive artist-activists like Dick Gregory, her material was seen as approachable and down-to-earth. Her comedy was usually viewed as harmless and playful, rather than an attempt to promote social change. While framing her work in this way, she was able to question the racial, gender, and sexual status quo and point out the absurdities to her audiences.

The beginning of this productive period can be traced to her signing with Chess Records in 1960. Her first album with the label, *The Funniest Woman in the World* (1961) sold over a million copies, earning gold record status and helping her reach a much larger audience.[319] The success of this album led to more releases, eventually more than twenty albums in total, and she signed with the even more prominent Mercury Records in 1963.[320] The increase in exposure and rising popularity Mabley experienced in the 1960s also led to more opportunities to perform for diverse audiences at

[318] She started being referred to as Moms Mabley more than Jackie Mabley at this time. Her albums were released under the name Moms Mabley, and that was how she was usually referred to in the press.

[319] "Moms Mabley: She Finally Makes the Movies," *Ebony*, April 1974, 90. Alternate album title: *Moms Mabley Onstage*

[320] "Moms Signs Mercury Pact," *Billboard*, October 19, 1963, 6.

mainstream venues, moving beyond the all-black nightclubs she had been limited to up until this point. One of the earliest integrated venues where she performed was the Playboy Club in Chicago, which had opened in 1959 as an exclusive members-only club that charged a high fee and was sometimes referred to in the press as the "snob club." Her performance at the Playboy Club was described in *Jet Magazine* in 1961. "[F]ollowing closely behind comedian Dick Gregory's break-through of the big-time entertainment barrier, comes long-time sepia favorite Jackie (Moms) Mabley, the latest wise-cracking tan performer to be discovered by the sophisticated night club crowd."[321] She performed at a wide variety of theaters and nightclubs in the 1960s, ranging from New York's Carnegie Hall and Washington D.C.'s Kennedy Center, as well as the regular engagements at African-American venues such as the Apollo in Harlem and the Regal in Chicago.

The "Moms" Stage Persona

Moms Mabley's stage persona was a significant part of her comedy. She used the "Moms" persona as a mask that allowed her to speak out against segregation and racism, to critique political leaders, and to subvert stereotypes and gender expectations. Mabley developed this persona early in her career and carefully honed it over the years. Beginning in her twenties, she portrayed herself as an older woman onstage to protect herself, and to be able to say things that she wouldn't have been allowed to say if she was perceived as an attractive young woman. Portraying herself as an older woman, and taking that portrayal to a clown-like character, helped Mabley develop trust with her

[321] *Jet*, June 8 1961, 60.

audiences. As Joan Rivers points out in the documentary *Whoopi Goldberg Presents Moms Mabley,* Mabley's image as a homely older woman made her "harmless." Rivers shares that she did something similar herself, and by taking on a harmless image, both women are given license to make people laugh and say controversial things onstage.[322] Bambi Haggins explains in the film documentary that Mabley's costume gave her freedom, and in her book *Laughing Mad: The Black Comic Persona in Post-Soul America*, Haggins asserts that Mabley's persona was a "stone's throw" from the Mammy figure "thus supplying some degree of comfort to audiences to whom the minstrel archetype still appealed."[323]

In an interview, Bambi Haggins pointed out that Mabley "was able to use what people thought she was from her appearance to say something about so many other issues–from the harrowing experiences that black people were having in the South to the civil-rights movement to the way she talked about LBJ and Lady Bird and JFK and Jackie."[324] In her article "Laughter in the Archives: Jackie 'Moms' Mabley and the Haunted Diva," theater historian Katelyn Hale Wood asserts that "Mabley's performance of a grandmother was funny to audiences because she not only spoke the kinds of truths characteristic of older family and community members, but also because she strayed from

[322] *Whoopi Goldberg, Whoopi Goldberg Presents Moms Mabley. 2013. HBO Documentary Films.*

[323] Bambi Haggins, *Laughing Mad: The Black Comic Persona in Post-Soul America*. (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2007), 150.

[324] Lou Chibbaro, Jr. "Moms Mabley was 'out' as lesbian to friends, entertainers," *South Florida Gay News,* October 16, 2014.

the many other roles that older women are expected to occupy in white, ageist, and heterosexist frameworks."[325]

Mabley disrupted the Mammy and Jezebel stereotypes, effectively mocking and challenging these negative images of black womanhood rooted in slavery and Jim Crow. She problematized the Mammy image with her outspoken sexuality and sociopolitical critiques, while embodying aspects of that stereotype in her physical portrayal and constant expression of love for all her "children." This trope recalled the experience of the enslaved black woman who was forced to raise slaveholders' children. She protested being labeled as "Mammy," for example, in her stand up performance *Moms Mabley at the White House* (1966) when she encountered a Ku Klux Klansman who referred to her in that way. She told her audience, "I said 'no damn Mammy, Moms, I don't know nothin' 'bout no log cabin; I ain't ever seen no log cabin–split level in the suburbs, baby!"[326] She was confronting the stereotype of the Mammy, asserting her status as a successful entertainer and rejecting the image. Another way she challenged the Mammy stereotype was by sometimes wearing fur coats in her performances and casually tossing them, implying her wealth. On the same album she described herself wearing mink to the White House and revealed that her neighbors became jealous, adding that she "throws mink all over the place."[327] As producer Ellen Sebastian Chang discusses in *Whoopi Goldberg Presents Moms Mabley,* the juxtaposition of wearing expensive furs over her

[325] Katelyn Hale Wood, "Laughter in the Archives: Jackie 'Moms' Mabley and the Haunted Diva," *QED: A Journal in GLBTQ Worldmaking*, vol. 1, No. 3 (Fall 2014), 92.

[326] Moms Mabley, *Moms Mabley at the White House Conference*, Mercury MG21090, 1966.

[327] Moms Mabley, *Moms Mabley at the White House Conference*, Mercury MG21090, 1966.

sloppy house dress and slippers was a way to remind her audiences that "this was all an act," and what they were seeing was really part of her persona.[328] There was a clear difference between the Moms image and the Mammy, even if the latter informed the former. Starting as early as the 1920s when restrictions were even tighter than they were when she reached crossover success in the 1960s, she continued to deconstruct the stereotype and challenge the audience's expectations.

Mabley was also able to effectively challenge the Mammy and Jezebel stereotypes by simultaneously playing the two negative images against one another. The Jezebel was on the opposite end of the spectrum from the Mammy, portraying the black woman as amoral, oversexed, and dangerous. While Mabley's physical presentation was more in line with a grandmotherly image, her assertion of her sexuality, raunchy humor and double-entendres, and pursuit of younger men was reminiscent of the sexualized Jezebel. Deconstructing and challenging these stereotypes, which contributed to the exclusion of black women from white Americans' conceptions of beauty and femininity, allowed Mabley to problematize both images and use her persona to encourage audiences to question their validity. Indeed, Mabley was engaging in the ethnic humor as described by scholar Omotayo Banjo quoted in *Pretty/Funny: Women Comedians and Body Politics*, who asserts that "'ethnic humor in America is about power differentials,' with

[328] Whoopi Goldberg, *Whoopi Goldberg Presents Moms Mabley*. 2013. HBO Documentary Films.

oppressed groups confronting power by 'owning' the degrading stereotypes and lampooning the social hierarchy."[329]

A Funny Woman

Like other female comedians, Moms Mabley made fun of traditional ideas about femininity and notions of what makes a woman pretty. This was a powerful critique for comediennes like Mabley because of the "historic binary of 'pretty' versus 'funny'" as discussed in feminism scholar Linda Mizejewski's *Pretty/Funny: Women Comedians and Body Politics*, who observed, "[W]omen comics, no matter what they look like, have been located in opposition to 'pretty,' enabling them to engage in a transgressive comedy grounded in the female body–its looks, its race and sexuality, and its relationship to ideal versions of femininity."[330] She believes "that the female body and its looks become uproarious material for women comics who bridle against the loaded cultural expectations about feminine ideals."[331] In Mabley's case, age also played an important role in expectations of femininity and what makes a woman pretty. Mabley portrayed herself as elderly, even before she reached an advanced age, to provide a disguise that allowed her to speak critically about contemporary life and society.

Moms Mabley discussed her pursuit of and relationships with younger men, pushing against the assumption that her age would exclude her from these pairings. She challenged the funny/pretty binary by making her audiences laugh and by embodying an

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[329] Linda Mizejewski, *Pretty/Funny: Women Comedians and Body Politics* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2014), 166.

[330] Mizejewski, *Pretty/Funny*, 5.

[331] Ibid., 155.

unattractive persona onstage complete with mismatched and ill-fitting clothes and a mouth without dentures, while simultaneously claiming her sexuality and asserting her desirability. Mabley's black, elderly, and plus-sized body enabled her to be raunchy and funny and engage in sexual innuendo in her act with minimal recourse. As Mizejewski points out, "scholars have amply demonstrated how black women have been portrayed 'as the antithesis of the American conception of beauty, femininity, and womanhood,' often masculinized through attributes of aggression, size, and independence."[332] Mabley's answer to this was asserting her sexuality while embodying the physicality of an elderly, frumpy black woman.

Stand-up comedy has historically been a predominantly male domain. According to comedian Lily Tomlin, "A woman couldn't stand up and tell jokes because it was too powerful. To make an audience laugh meant you have control of them in some way." Joan Rivers echoed this remark when she explained, "comedy is masculine. To stand up and take control of an audience is very difficult."[333] Embodying a persona provided a disguise that allowed Mabley to effectively navigate these challenges. This was because, according to scholar John Limon, "in the first decades of stand-up comedy, a woman comic who added 'sexual allure to her wit' would have been threatening instead of entertaining and that a woman comic who was 'not grotesque' would trigger a 'vacillation…between pleasure and displeasure.'"[334] This was Mabley's experience early

[332] Ibid., 24.

[333] Ibid., 15.

[334] Ibid., 16.

in her career, as mentioned in chapter two. Linda Mizejewski also cites Sigmund Freud's explanation of "the social taboo of women publicly and assertively speaking about their own desires. In mainstream culture, this taboo remained in place until the sexual revolution of the 1960s."[335] In Mabley's case this taboo was magnified by race and the politics of respectability that inhibited black women's expression of their sexuality and desire. Katelyn Hale Wood suggests that the disguise was effective because "the persona of Moms allowed Mabley to perform alone and outside the confines of sexually exploitative expectations played upon many other Black female performers of her time."[336]

Mizejewski also notes that black female bodies have been "criminalized and pathologized as oversexed, so the black female body is seen not only as not pretty but as threatening."[337] She cites Glenda Carpio, who points out the challenge for black female comics, asserting that they "deal with the 'triple jeopardy' of race, gender, and sexuality in their self-presentations."[338] Mabley contended with this positioning as an outsider and as a threat by leaning into her position as a community elder. Mabley's age, and the way she handled her age, was an important aspect of her comedic persona. One of her techniques was to avoid sharing her age. While it was a topic in her comedy, she was indirect and coy about it. She would not tell her exact age when asked in interviews, often

[335] Ibid., 17.

[336] Wood, "Laughter in the Archives," 89.

[337] Mizejewski, *Pretty/Funny*, 156.

[338] Mizekewski, *Pretty/Funny,* 160.

being evasive.[339] She would playfully respond with statements like "Moms is old enough to know what she's doing" and then change the subject.[340] This should not be attributed to vanity or the shame about advanced age that plagues many older women; rather, by refusing to share her age, she was keeping herself beyond the reach of her audiences, creating distance and solidifying her role as a community elder. Since she had already been "old" for many years before the 1960s, sharing her age would reveal too much about how she crafted her persona. This elderly woman persona had allowed her for many years to "come on like a feisty old woman who has lived too long to be afraid of anybody or anything."[341] The persona empowered her as a community elder and an authority figure, and Katelyn Hale Wood adds, it was "through the comedic persona of a grandmotherly figure [that] Mabley was able to speak truths about white supremacy, gender inequality, class dynamics, and sexuality in blunt confrontational ways that would otherwise be dangerous for a Black American woman to do in the public sphere."[342]

Her age and her portrayal of an elderly woman for most of her career were part of what gave Mabley authority, and her matriarchal role empowered her even more. She would use the stage and her persona to give advice on child-rearing as well as political leadership, sometimes in the same breath as she demonstrated on the record *The Funny Sides of Moms Mabley* (1963). There she presented a fictional scene in which she

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[339] "Moms Mabley: She Finally Makes the Movies," *Ebony*, April 1974, 88.

[340] Earl Calloway, "Moms Mabley Makes Mirth in New Movie," *New Pittsburgh Courier*; June 8, 1974.

[341] "Moms Mabley: She Finally Makes the Movies," *Ebony*, April 1974, 88.

[342] Wood, "Laughter in the Archives," 87.

discussed the appropriate age to "hip" a child, or teach a child the ways of the world. Differing with former president Dwight D. Eisenhower, who suggested school age as the right time, Mabley said that it should start at birth. She then went on to chastise Eisenhower, telling him "no wonder the country is going to pot."[343] While Eisenhower was no longer in office when Mabley recorded this joke, it was one she had previously performed during his presidency.

Whoopi Goldberg Presents Moms Mabley emphasizes the dichotomy between Moms Mabley's stage persona and the person she was offstage. Onstage she was dressed in her signature frumpy house dress layered under a mismatched Hawaiian shirt with a floppy hat and slippers, speaking without her dentures. She paired this image with her frequent references to her pursuit of young men. Alternately, in her private life she had relationships with women and dressed in very sophisticated clothing–sometimes in masculine style, especially early in her career. She kept her personal life private by using a stage name and carefully controlling the narrative she shared in interviews. She would leave pertinent details out, or tell contradictory and inconsistent stories. By doing so, Mabley was engaging in the practice of dissemblance, as discussed in chapter two. As historian Darlene Clark Hine observed, this practice included "the behavior and attitudes of black women that created the appearance of openness and disclosure but actually shielded the truth of their inner lives and selves from their oppressors."[344]

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[343] Moms Mabley, "Hip to Be Square," *The Funny Sides of Moms Mabley*, Chess LP1482, 1963.

[344] Darlene Clark Hine, "Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women in the Middle West: Preliminary Thoughts on the Culture of Dissemblance," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 14, no. 4 (1989): 912.

Moms Mabley's Techniques

Using the "double-voice" device of signifying, Mabley would play to white audiences' expectations by using and then challenging sexist and racist stereotypes. In this way she was able to infuse her messages of anger and protest beneath funny stories about claiming political rights, serving as a presidential advisor, and pursuing young men. These stories came off as absurd and encouraged laughter among her audiences when taken at face value. However, the true nature and value of Mabley's comedy was in the deeper messages conveyed. Since Mabley's black audiences were likely more familiar with the African American tradition of signifying and the double-voice technique, her messages of protest worked as in-jokes with them. This was especially true as she attained crossover success and performed before diverse audiences.[345] Linda Mizejewski roots Mabley's technique in the "rhetorical devices of African American comedy–innuendo, cryptic reference, the trickster," which some have "attributed to the double consciousness that resulted from the colonial structure that displaced Africans to another language and culture."[346]

Mabley engaged in call-and-response techniques based on the blues and gospel music to create participatory relationships with her audiences. The blues tradition also informed her performance work when she portrayed frankness and honesty, rejected taboos, occupied traditionally male spaces, affirmed black culture, used double-entendre,

[345] Sarah Michelle Wolk, "Moms Mabley and the Civil Rights Movement" (M.A. thesis, California State University, San Marcos, 2012), 16-17.

[346] Mizejewski, *Pretty/Funny* , 166.

and asserted her independence. The blues artists of the early twentieth century foreshadowed a feminist consciousness that Mabley expressed in her comedy and stage work. Mabley adapted the structure of blues to her comedy, and as cultural historian Angela Davis in *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism* declared, she "contested patriarchal assumptions about the women's place both in the dominant culture and in African-American communities" by establishing herself in the male-dominant profession of comedy while being outspoken about her sexuality.[347] Lisa Pertillar Brevard, author of *Whoopi Goldberg on Stage and Screen,* cites a Moms Mabley joke about being a spy for the American government as an example of her embodying African-American cultural tropes in her work. She argues that Moms's joke "provides a significant entry into the Black American masking tradition and related blues philosophy."[348] Brevard goes on to highlight the unique significance of African-American humor, and Moms Mabley's representation of the "in-group social satirist model" and embodiment of "mother wit" which is an African-American folk concept referring to common sense.[349]

An important aspect of Moms Mabley's comedy was her role as a truth-teller. As she explained in an interview, "the way the world's going now, it's funny. It is, it's comedy. And especially the truth. The things that I record, very few of them are

[347] Angela Y. Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1998), 120.

[348] Brevard, *Whoopi Goldberg*, 20.

[349] Brevard, *Whoopi Goldberg*, 22-23. See chapter two of Elsie A. Williams, *The Humor of Jackie 'Moms' Mabley: An African American Comedic Tradition* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1995) for further discussion of "in-group social satirist."

jokes."[350] In another interview she asserted, "I just give 'em the truth. And the truth is funny."[351] She made this assertion multiple times in her recorded performances as well, such as on *Moms the Word* (1964) when she warned her audience, "They done wrong when they gave Moms the freedom of speech, cuz I'm gonna tell the truth, although they might put Mom in jail for what I'm gonna say. But I'll say it anyway."[352] A 1968 newspaper article remarked on a television appearance, "after forty years of telling the truth [she has been] collecting laughs."[353] This association was attached to her after her death and became part of her legacy, so performers who were influenced by her, such as Wanda Sykes, often continued in the role and "echo[ed] Mabley's self-positioning as 'truth teller.'"[354] The importance of truth telling dates back to the African griot or community storyteller. As Mel Watkins observes in *On the Real Side: Laughing, Lying, and Signifying*, "griots are popularly and properly known as the verbal historians of African society…they were consummate performers."[355] Patricia Tang, in her article "The Rapper as Modern Griot," declared, "griots have played a significant tole in cultures

[350] Studs Terkel, *The Spectator: Talk About Movies and Plays With the People Who Make Them* (New York: The New Press, 1999), 281.

[351] Charles Witbeck, "Moms Day," *Los Angeles Herald Examiner*, February 28, 1968.

[352] Moms Mabley, *Moms the Word*. Mercury MG20907, 1964.

[353] Charles Witbeck, "Moms Day," *Los Angeles Herald Examiner*, February 28, 1968.

[354] Mizejewski, *Pretty/Funny*, 172.

[355] Mel Watkins, *On the Real Side: Laughing, Lying, and Signifying-The Underground Tradition of African-American Humor that Transformed American Culture, From Slavery to Richard Pryor* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994), 64.

throughout West Africa for more than seven centuries, serving as oral historians…genealogists, and storytellers."[356]

For these performers, the goal was not simply to create a punchline to elicit laughter, rather, using their public platforms to tell the truth, they were resisting marginalization, racism, and the silencing effects of white supremacy and sexism. Bambi Haggins describes Mabley in this vein, referring to her as "the black 'truth sayer'…who made clear her willingness to speak her mind regardless of whether her particular stance was popular with her audience. As her stage name suggests [and her entire persona elaborates], Mabley drew on the authority of the granny–albeit, in her case, a bawdy granny–to speak out about civil rights and social injustice of the 1960s and 1970s."[357] And as Whoopi Goldberg observed, "Moms was able to do a lot of what she did because the people [in charge] recognized that she was telling the truth–they let her do certain things they wouldn't let other comedians do, because they understood Moms was reaching out to everyone."[358]

An "Overnight Success?"

To those unfamiliar with Moms Mabley and the black entertainment world in which she worked for decades, she appeared to be an "overnight success" in 1960 when she was 63 years old. This concept of her attaining success as a performer with little work

[356] Patricia Tang, "The Rapper as Modern Griot: Reclaiming Ancient Traditions," *Hip Hop African: New African Music in a Globalizing World, ed. Eric S. Charry* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2012), 79.

[357] Mizejewski, *Pretty/Funny*, 176.

[358] Laurence Maslon, *Make 'Em Laugh: The Funny Business of America* (New York: Twelve, 2008), 329.

is a commonly held stereotype for African American entertainers. Cultural historian Ruth Feldstein in *How It Feels to Be Free: Black Women Entertainers and the Civil Rights Movement* pointed out that there is an inherent assumption among many whites that African Americans are natural performers. "Racial stereotypes of African Americans as 'natural' entertainers had been a mainstay of a white-dominated entertainment industry for centuries, and for just as long, many black performers [have] worked to debunk those stereotypes."[359] Feldstein cites song stylist Nina Simone as an example of this debunking when Simone informed audiences of her training and background in classical music.[360] Moms Mabley addressed these assumptions in a similar fashion, when she would discuss in interviews her training and commitment to rehearsals. She may have been talented, but she was not naturally inclined to be a performer. She worked hard for many years at her art. In her article, "Laughter in the Archives: Jackie 'Moms' Mabley and the Haunted Diva," Katelyn Hale Wood emphasizes the way Mabley's work ethic is underplayed in the documentary *Whoopi Goldberg Presents Moms Mabley*. For example, actress and comedian Anne Meara asserts that Mabley wasn't trying to be a trailblazer, she was just "trying to say her stuff." Wood argues that this makes it "as if Mabley's artistry was accidental, as if Mabley had little drive to be as successful as she was…Meara harkens to racist archetypes that characterize Black people as 'naturally' gifted and happy to entertain with apolitical performance material and motives."[361]

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[359] Ruth Feldstein, *How it Feels to be Free: Black Women Entertainers and the Civil Rights Movement* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 88.

[360] Ibid., 89.

[361] Wood, "Laughter in the Archives," 104.

Alternately, in an interview with Studs Terkel, Mabley described learning about timing and explained that it does not come overnight. Timing is not something that can be learned in university, she noted.[362] In a 1974 *Ebony* interview she shared that her big break took a long time to come, but not for lack of talent. She explained that she could do pretty much anything in show business, because she was taught to do everything–again emphasizing her training and experience. She was critical in this interview of young, unprepared performers, noting how much she loved youth, but that many lacked "showmanship." She emphasized how much she rehearsed. She commented, "Kids these days can make one record and if it sells, they are launched into a career at the top of the heap without learning the fundamentals of timing and musicianship…Without that basic foundation in showmanship, an act can't remain at the top…I was taught to work; I couldn't jive my way through. You talk about rehearsals–honey, we rehearsed before shows, between shows, and after shows."[363]

Love for Young People

Despite her criticisms of underprepared younger performers, her love for young people was a common theme in Moms Mabley's comedy routines and interviews. She constantly professed her love for younger men in some of her best known bits, and she referred to audiences as "her children." She often talked about the importance of telling children the truth. She was protective of young people, telling her audience to "stop

[362] Studs Terkel, *The Spectator: Talk About Movies and Plays With the People Who Make Them,* (New York: The New Press, 1999), 281.

[363] "Moms Mabley: She Finally Makes the Movies," *Ebony*, April 1974, 92.

passin' the buck to these children. I get along with them cuz I dig em…[but] you don't dig em!" Mabley's advanced age was not an issue when connecting with young people.[364] She talked about writing a children's book on her album *Moms the Word* (1964). She again asserted that adults should be truthful with children, remarking that it "don't make no sense to tell these kids lies and call them delinquents. Nothing wrong with these children. They love Moms and Moms loves them."[365] Mabley sympathized with the younger generation. On the same album she talked about how she would do anything for her "kids and teenagers," professing her loyalty to the younger generation.[366] She liked to perform at colleges and concerts in order to reach younger audiences.[367]

Mabley frequently discussed her love for younger men and disdain for older men, both in her standup performances and in her press interviews. This trope was even featured in her album titles, such as *Young Men, Si, Old Men, No!* (1963) and *Her Young Thing* (1969). Her schtick of liking younger men was layered with meaning. On one level, it was seen as funny because of the paradox it created with her persona as an elderly, matronly woman. Her appearance juxtaposed with her professed desire for younger men was unexpected and viewed as comical. On another level she was challenging and reversing the more commonly-accepted pairing of younger women with older men. Finally, she was challenging the heterosexual status quo by objectifying men

[364] Moms Mabley, "Children," *The Funny Sides of Moms Mabley*, Chess LP1482, 1964.

[365] Moms Mabley, *Moms the Word*, Mercury MG 20907, 1964.

[366] Ibid.

[367] Charles Witbeck, "Moms Day," *Los Angeles Herald Examiner*, February 28, 1968.

in the way men typically objectified women. On her 1961 record *Moms Mabley at the Playboy Club* she asserted, "I'd rather pay a young man's way from here to California than tell an old man the distance.[368]" After a few years of mainstream success she had established this trope and was able to unapologetically refer to her reputation onstage in the 1964 recording of *The Funny Sides of Moms Mabley* when she commented, "Now I'm old and they accusing me of liking young men. And I'm guilty. And I'm gonna get guiltier, just as soon as I make me some more guilt.[369]"

On *Moms Mabley at the Playboy Club* (1961) she engaged in trickster rhetoric and feigned ignorance when she told her audience, "that's one thing I like about George, he don't take my money. No he don't, honey!" After a beat she added, "George don't take my money. He borrows it."[370] The theme of Mabley using her money and success to attract young men showed up in multiple performances. Another example was on the 1962 album *Moms Mabley at Geneva Conference* when she shared, "I went over to the mint to pick up a couple bales of money because I was going to foreign countries…all them young men you know? Money, old men, young men, old women, you know how it goes.[371]" She played with the audience expectations and insisted on equal treatment with wealthy older men when assuming her audience would "know how it goes," as if this arrangement was a common occurrence.

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[368] Moms Mabley, *Moms Mabley at the Playboy Club,* Chess LP1460, 1961.

[369] Moms Mabley, "Children," *The Funny Sides of Moms Mabley,* Chess LP1482, 1964.

[370] Moms Mabley, *Moms Mabley at the Playboy Club,* Chess LP1460, 1961.

[371] Moms Mabley, *Moms Mabley at the Geneva Conference,* Chess LP1463, 1962.

She presented herself as sexually desirable onstage and would accuse younger men in the audience of being interested in her. On *Moms Mabley at the Playboy Club* (1961) she asked one audience member, "What you peepin at son?"–implying that he was trying to steal a glimpse up her dress. She then remarked to the audience "They don't care how old you is, they'll peep one time, you know?" In this instance she acknowledged her age, but implied she was desirable nonetheless.[372] On *Moms Mabley at Geneva Conference* (1962) she engaged in flirtatious banter with the master of ceremonies introducing her. She told him she loved him "in a sensible way" and acknowledged her age while asserting her own desires when she told him, "You gonna get a young woman, I'm gonna get a younger man." She then engaged in sexual innuendo and talked suggestively about how she liked the way the drummer beat his drum, commenting when he played the drum, "My toes start to getting stiff, I can't stop. I can dream, can't I?"[373]

She cited her role model and inspiration for the Moms persona in reference to her sexuality and refusal to accept old age when she shared the story of her great-grandmother Harriet Smith, who lived to be 118 years old. Mabley recounted asking Smith how old a woman is before she is no longer interested in having a boyfriend. Smith replied, "I don't know. Ask someone older than me."[374] Since this great-grandmother was Mabley's role model and "hipped her," she was connecting this assertion to her personal

[372] Moms Mabley, *Moms Mabley at the Playboy Club*, Chess LP1460, 1961.

[373] Moms Mabley, *Moms Mabley at the Geneva Conference*, Chess LP1463, 1962.

[374] Moms Mabley, "Backhanded in Church," *The Funny Sides of Moms Mabley*, Chess LP1482, 1964.

experience and using it to justify her relentless pursuit of young men. This story also connected to her often repeated line "A woman is a woman as long as she lives, a man is a man as long as he can."[375]

Disdain for Old Men

She complemented her professions of love for younger men with expressions of disgust for older men. A frequent target was her old husband, who may have been based on her real life experience of being forced to marry an older man when she was a teenager. Her criticisms of her husband are an example of how she flipped the script on women being ridiculed and rejected for their age and physical condition. With these insults she was reversing the popular trope of male comics insulting and complaining about their wives. This trope was exemplified as early as the vaudeville era of comedy, with the famous joke, "Who was that lady I saw you with last night? "She ain't no lady; she's my wife."[376] Many of Henny Youngman's trademark one-liners were about his disdain for his wife, such as "Take my wife, please" and "I take my wife everywhere, but she always finds her way home."[377] Milton Berle's popular jokes included, "A good wife forgives her husband when she's wrong;" and "Nobody can cook like my wife, although they came pretty close in a prisoner-of-war camp!"[378] Woody Allen joked about his ex-

[375] M. Cordell Thompson, "Moms Mabley Raps About Old Women, Young Love," *Jet*, January 3, 1974.

[376] Lawrence J. Epstein, *The Haunted Smile: The Story of Jewish Comedians in America* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2001), 34.

[377] Mervyn Rotstein, "Henny Youngman, King of the One-Liners, Is Dead at 91 After 6 Decades of Laughter," *The New York Times*, February 25, 1998, Section B, Page 9.

[378] Aubrey J .Sher, *The Stand-Up Comedy Festival: Send in the Clowns* (Xlibris, 2013), 56; Milton Berle, *Milton Berle's Private Joke File* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 1989), 601.

wife during his early stand-up career, "The Museum of Natural History took her shoe and based on the measurements, they reconstructed a dinosaur."[379] Rodney Dangerfield quipped, "My wife ran after the garbage truck this morning. Too bad they waved her off."[380] Don Rickles joked about his wife's appearance in the exchange: "Is that your wife sir? What was it, a train?"[381]

Mabley would use innuendo to criticize her old husband, such as in *Moms Mabley at the Playboy Club* (1961) when she revealed, "I ain't gonna stay with that old man. Found out he couldn't.[382]" She was even more explicit about his sexual inadequacy in *Funniest Woman in the World* (1961) when she confided that being married to him was "like pushing a car up a hill with a rope."[383] She joked about her husband's impotence again in *The Youngest Teenager* (1969) when she revealed to her audience that he ordered a case of Pepsi. To learn what he was using the soda for, she spied on him and found him filling a bathtub with Pepsi and immersing himself in it, saying "come aliiiiive."[384]

Mabley's discussions of her old husband were also significant because they provided opportunities for her to express her agency by rejecting him and threatening to

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[379] Gerald Nachman, *Seriously Funny: The Rebel Comedians of the 1950s and 1960s* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2003), 531.

[380] Epstein, *The Haunted Smile*, 221

[381] Walter C. Miller, dir., *Comic Relief V* (1992)

[382] Moms Mabley, *Moms Mabley at the Playboy Club*, Chess LP1460, 1961.

[383] Moms Mabley, *Funniest Woman in the Word*, Chess LP91556, 1961.

[384] Moms Mabley, *The Youngest Teenager*, Mercury SR 61229, 1969.

leave or pursue other men. In *I Got Something to Tell You!* (1963) she spoke at length, insulting and complaining about her husband. She told her audience that she tried to poison him, but "rat poison agreed with him." She also asserted her sexual agency as a form of self-preservation on *Moms the Word* (1964) when she sang a parody of the popular song "Can't Help Lovin' Dat Man," from the classic musical *Show Boat* (1927). She changed the lyrics and sang: "Fish got to swim, birds got to fly…taking him back again…'loving that man of mine'…I know I'm not lazy, I might be a little bit slow, but when he talk about going upside my head, damn he got to go…leaving that man of mine."[385] She pursued young men and rejected older men, but she also set clear boundaries in her act and refused to accept any abuse.

Proclaiming her love for young men, rejecting her old husband, and asserting her sexuality in general were all significant parts of Moms Mabley's commentary on gender politics and feminism. This emphasis held power considering her past, and the experiences of black women in general. Katelyn Hall Wood asserts that her comments about "the good old days" "demonstrates how Mabley's work was often grounded in…socially defiant 'common sense feminism.' Mabley resists simple nostalgia and is instead frank about a childhood entrenched in patriarchy and violence."[386] Mabley frequently criticized the ideas about the "good old days," lamenting that in the past, parents made decisions about who one could marry and asserted that "the best time is now, when you can go out with who you want, love who you want and marry who you

[385] Moms Mabley, *Moms the Wor*d, Mercury MG20907, 1964.

[386] Wood, "Laughter in the Archives," 64.

want."[387] This statement was significant because her step-father may have tried to force her into marrying an older man. Even if this was not her personal experience, it was a true experience for many young women in the past.

Album Covers

Some of Mabley's album covers were also important for portraying her messages that combatted ageism and asserted female sexuality. For example, the cover for *Young Men, Si, Old Men No!* (1962) features a photograph of her sitting on a bench next to a young man with his arm around her. She is looking askance at an older man walking with a cane. The image on the cover visually supports her frequent schtick about courting younger men and her distaste for older men. That the young man welcomes her affections with his arm around her connects to her assertion of young men finding her desirable. As Katelyn Hale Wood asserts, Mabley was mocking heterosexual male desire, staging a "refusal to play the game."[388]The asexual nature of her physical presentation was juxtaposed with frequent assertions of her sexuality. She articulated sexual agency and demanded equal acceptance in romantic pairings. This was especially ironic considering that, in her personal life Moms Mabley was not even heterosexual, and her relationships with women were well-known and usually accepted by her friends and colleagues.[389]

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[387] Moms Mabley, "Backhanded in Church," *The Funny Sides of Moms Mabley,* Chess LP1482, 1964; "Moms Mabley: She Finally Makes the Movies," *Ebony,* April 1974, 88.

[388] Wood, "Laughter in the Archives," 94.

[389] Mabley would probably be referred to as ether gay, lesbian, or queer in a contemporary context. However, there is no evidence that she identified by these terms during her lifetime. See Whoopi Goldberg, *Whoopi Goldberg Presents Moms Mabley.* 2013. HBO Documentary Films; Lou Chibbaro, Jr. "Moms Mabley was 'out' as lesbian to friends, entertainers," *South Florida Gay News,* October 16, 2014.

Another example of Mabley's album cover art portraying a message was her 1969 album *The Oldest Teenager,* which humorously attacks ageism. She is pictured standing in front of a mirror. The real image features Mabley embodying her typical stage persona, with a frumpy house dress, floppy hat, slippers, and checkered socks. In the reflection is Mabley's face on the body of a young woman wearing Mabley's house dress altered into a low cut, cleavage-baring top and an exposed midriff, paired with a short mini skirt. The real image of Mabley features a speech bubble asking, "What generation gap?" She is embodying the trickster to mock ageism and poke fun at herself, portraying herself with a younger body. Her question about the generation gap challenges the notion that she is separated from her younger audiences or her young, male suitors by age. The album cover is intended to be comical, but reflects the reality that Mabley was over 70 at the time. As the "oldest teenager," Mabley acknowledges her age, but also aligns herself with her young audiences and young suitors. She also used her album covers to amplify her political commentary and stance on civil rights, as discussed in chapter five.

Chapter Five: The Artist-Activist

Moms Mabley's crossover success of the 1960s and early 1970s enabled her to reach broad audiences when she used comedy as a form of social protest. Just as Mabley's life and work serves as a lens to view the Great Migration, New Negro movement and Harlem Renaissance, and other periods in African American and U.S. cultural history, her comedy provides a key to understanding the civil rights era and how people experienced it. She reflected on the experiences of everyday people, especially African American women who were underrepresented in all areas of American life.

Critiquing Jim Crow

Moms Mabley had been using the stage as a platform to criticize racism since 1923, but her comments reached wider audiences during the Civil Rights Movement. She highlighted the absurdity of Jim Crow and brought the racial issues to the attention of her audiences. Mabley used the comedy stage to publicly belittle legal segregation and racial inequality. Historian Lawrence Levine referred to Mabley's comedic style as "the humor of exposure and absurdity."[390] In *Moms Mabley at the Playboy Club* (1961) she described running a red light in South Carolina. When she was pulled over, she told the police officer, "I saw all the white folks driving on the green light; I thought the red light must have been for us.[391]" Mabley demonstrated the illogic of segregation by exposing it. She

[390] Lawrence Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought From Slavery to Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 364.

[391] Moms Mabley, *Moms Mabley at the Playboy Club*, Chess LP1460, 1961.

performed this joke before integrated audiences, suggesting legalized separation was irrational and absurd.[392]

Moms Mabley also addressed the issue of voting in the South on her 1961 album, *Moms Mabley at the U.N.* She declared and sang:

> ""Let me tell you what happened to Moms week before last.
> I was way down in deepest Georgia right here at election time. A whole row of folks with me at the end of the line...Don't you know they got mad at me when I said I was sent there by the NAACP. Every time I got to front of line I got pushed back in the rear. From the mean look on they face I said damn, what am I doing here?
> [singing]
> I said "Please Martin Luther King. I don't want to vote, ooh-ooh."
> I said "Please Reverend King, please don't make me vote wooo-ooh.
> I had a dream last night I asked for my equal rights.
> Somebody said Moms your next, and there I stood with a rope around my neck.
> "Please Congressman Powell, I . . . don't let me vote. Woo-ooh."
> I said "Listen Reverend Adam Clayton Powell. Damn if I'm gonna vote woo-ooo."[393]
> They arms reached out for me. They must want me desperately.
> But if I can just break free, they seen the last of me,
> In Georgiaaaa, Georgiaaaaa no peace will I find till I catch a plane . . . and Georgia out of my
> mind.
> Ray Charles can have it you hear me? Oh yaaaaa.[394]

With this song and declaration, Mabley expressed the fear and frustration of southern blacks attempting to vote, as well as the feelings of those who were discouraged from trying. For African Americans in the South in the 1960s, attempting to vote resulted

[392] Sarah Michelle Wolk, "Moms Mabley and the Civil Rights Movement" (M.A. thesis, California State University, San Marcos, 2012), 59.

[393] Reverend Adam Clayton Powell Jr. was a politician, civil rights activist, and pastor. He represented Harlem in the United States House of Representatives from 1945 to 1971. He was also pastor of the prominent Black church, the Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem.

[394] Moms Mabley, *Moms Mabley at the U.N.*, Chess LP1452, 1961.

in intimidation, violence, or even death. Her song and commentary raised awareness about the issue for her diverse audiences and drew attention to the violence and terror African Americans faced in the South when attempting to exercise their rights. It is possible that joking about the challenges black voters faced could be cathartic for Mabley and her African American audience.

Moms Mabley was also using the double-voice device in this scenario. She seemed to be willing to give up on voting by moving to the back of the line in the fictional scene. In doing so, she may have been pandering to the expectations and desires of some white audiences. However, the joke was layered and held her message of protest, because she was also arguing that she should be able to vote in the South. She sang part of the joke to the tune of a traditional work song, or "field holler," which has historically been a tool of black resistance and protest.[395] Singing in this style further strengthened the message of protest Mabley was conveying. By using the double-voice device, Moms Mabley was able to reference the terror African Americans faced in the South around the issue of voting, but did so without being overly explicit.[396]

"The Kids are Marching On"

As discussed in chapter four, a popular trope in her comedy was her love for younger men. However, her appreciation for youth went deeper than jokes about romantic pairings and encompassed her views on social justice. She was invested in the civil rights campaigns and believed in the significant role young people played for social

[395] Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*, 246-247.

[396] Wolk, "Moms Mabley and the Civil Rights Movement, 67-68.

progress. She sang about young people marching for civil rights on *Out on a Limb* (1964) to the tune of "Glory Hallelujah," with the lyrics: "I am here to tell the story of the right religious man, who went down to face the Ku Klux with the Bible in his hand. He sent to fight for civil rights that spread throughout the land, and the kids go marching on. Glory, glory, Martin Luther, thank the lord for Martin Luther. Things are better than they used to, since the kids are marching on."[397]

This song acknowledges the important role of young people in the Civil Rights Movement, and how they were the driving force in the movement. She saw the potential in young people's leadership and vision for the future, which she also demonstrated when she mentioned the cabinet officials she would appoint if she were president discussed in *Her Young Thing* (1969). She declared, "I want young men, strong, and bold. Cuz when it comes to taking care of business, I don't want nothing old."[398]

The Space Race

One of the major international issues of the 1960s centered on the "space race"– the efforts of the United States and the Soviet Union to advance space travel. Beyond the desire to explore new frontiers and expand scientific knowledge, it was a competition with the Soviets who were also investing in space exploration and making strides at a comparable rate, thus contributing another important element in the Cold War. However, many were critical of the United States' investment in space exploration when there were so many issues the government needed to address at home. Mabley enunciated this view

[397] Moms Mabley, *Out on a Limb,* Mercury SR60889, 1964.

[398] Moms Mabley, *Her Young Thing,* Mercury SR61205, 1969.

in the album *Funniest Woman in the World* (1961) when she talked about an earlier fictional encounter she had on the White House lawn with Dwight Eisenhower, black congressman Adam Clayton Powell, Arkansas Governor Orval Faubus, and black musicians Bo Diddley and Big Maybelle. She mentioned that she was criticizing the president and NASA for spending so much money, one billion dollars a week, "trying to get a bum in the air." She asked Eisenhower, "Man, what's happening? What you trying to do?" When he told Mabley that the goal was to land an astronaut on the moon, she exclaimed, "but you messed things up down here, now you going on the moon to get in his business?!" She then asked the audience, "Vote for me to be president, I can't make it no worse."[399]

Mabley was doing several things in this sketch. First, she was criticizing the American government's investment in space exploration. For many Americans, the billions of dollars that were poured into the space program were considered misguided since so many still lived in poverty in the United States. This was especially problematic when the country was plagued by racism and even NASA discriminated against African Americans.[400] The space program was emblematic of the severe class and racial inequality in the United States, which was critiqued by poet and songwriter Gil Scott Heron in the 1970 song "Whitey on the Moon." The lyrics contrast the poor living conditions for many African Americans with huge expenditures for the space program:

A rat done bit my sister Nell.

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[399] Moms Mabley, *Funniest Woman in the Word*, Chess LP91556, 1961.

[400] Margot Lee Shetterly, *Hidden Figures: The American Dream and the Untold Story of the Black Women Mathematicians Who Helped Win the Space Race* (New York: William Morrow, 2016).

(with Whitey on the moon)
Her face an' arm began to swell.
(but Whitey's on the moon)
Was all that money I made las' year
(for Whitey on the moon?)
How come there ain't no money here?
(Hm! Whitey's on the moon).

In addition to questioning the government's investment in the space program when there were problems plaguing American citizens, Mabley was also blaming the government (namely, Dwight D. Eisenhower) for failing to attack these problems and implying that there could be similar issues on the moon.

The fictional group she assembled on the White House lawn was significant as well. While her description of the group provoked laughter, it was also meant to encourage her audience to question the state of current affairs. Since African Americans Bo Diddley, Big Maybelle, and Moms Mabley were marginalized in American society, creating a scenario where these figures were standing together on the White House lawn, came across as comical. Since this arrangement was so unlikely at the time, this meant it was nonthreatening to white audiences. However, Mabley layered her message of resistance and protest beneath this humorous, fictional scene.[401]

Moms Mabley's critique of the space program continued in the album *Now Hear This* (1965) when she shared this story with her audience.

> The men came back the other day, the astronauts. Them riding up Broadway with all that [ticker] tape and people flyin' at em, you know…So I was standing there and watching the expression on some colored men's face. I split, went straight to the airport, got me a plane and went to Washington. Walked up to the White House lawn…I said 'Hey Lyndon! Lyndon! Son, Lyndon! Come here boy. (laughter, applause) I say 'Get something colored up in the air quick. Quick son

[401] Wolk, "Moms Mabley and the Civil Rights Movement, 91.

> hurry up and do it, I'm telling ya, before Martin Luther King digs it, and he be marching on your lawn. He said 'Moms I'm so glad you told me. I don't know what to do. What would I do without ya? I hadn't thought about that.'[402]

Mabley directly addressed the racial exclusion in the space program and connected it to civil rights activism, predicting that if the space program was not integrated, it would be another area for protest. She spoke to the president as if she was his superior, calling him by his first name as well as "boy" and "son," and he is made to appear inept and dependent on Mabley for advice.

Role Reversals

By addressing President Eisenhower disparagingly in *Funniest Woman in the World (*1961), she was also enacting a role reversal. She also did this in *Moms Mabley at the U.N.* (1961) when she referred to First Lady Mamie Eisenhower as "Mame," while the First Lady addressed her as "Mrs. Mabley." In addition to engaging in a role reversal and challenging the powerful, Mabley portrayed herself as an insider who was on first name basis with the First Lady. She did something similar when she referred to Lyndon B. Johnson by his first name and as "son" and "boy" in *Now Hear This* (1965). African Americans have historically been addressed informally by racist whites, with grown men often being referred to as "boy." By addressing the white presidents as "boy" or "son," she was reversing the position of authority.

Similarly, Mabley talked about going to the White House when Lyndon B. Johnson was president. She told the First Lady, Lady Bird Johnson, don't bother to open the back door. Mabley explained, "I told her it wasn't like that." Mabley then recalled

[402] Moms Mabley, *Now Hear This*, Mercury MG21012, 1965.

Caroline Kennedy, daughter of President John F. Kennedy, always opening the front door for her.[403] Mabley was rejecting the treatment of African Americans in the Jim Crow South, where they were often forced to enter buildings through the back entrance. This fictional incident was significant because Mabley was resisting a racist tradition, further emphasizing her rejection of the South and its Jim Crow practices. Alluding to better treatment from Caroline Kennedy also reminded audiences of her affinity for John F. Kennedy. She attributed at least some of the black civil rights advances to him, and noted in an interview that "she credit[ed] the civil rights movement and 'Mr. Kennedy speaking out' for the break she and other Negro comics…have gotten."[404] However, even John F. Kennedy was not immune to her criticism. In an earlier fictional exchange in *Moms Mabley Breaks It Up* (1962), Kennedy claimed she had not paid her income tax. She retorted, "You pay your debts and I'll pay mine, brother," and when he asked what debt she was referring to, she said "the Civil Rights Bill." He responded that he thought Eisenhower "paid that," dismissing his own responsibility. After he continued with "you owe Uncle Sam," Mabley, embodying the trickster, responded, "I don't have no uncle named Sam. My uncle's named Luis."[405]

Many of Moms Mabley's jokes relied on the technique of role reversal for comedic effect. She used this technique to make a spectacle of situations she aimed to criticize. For example, she mocked George Wallace, the segregationist Alabama governor

[403] Moms Mabley, *Moms the Word*. Mercury MG20907, 1964.

[404] Murry Frymer, "After 50 Years, the Big Time's Found Her," *Newsday*, April 6, 1967.

[405] Moms Mabley, *Moms Mabley Breaks it Up.* Chess LP1472, 1962.

who notoriously attempted to stop black students from enrolling at University of Alabama.[406] She made Wallace the target in one of her jokes about being president, and she told the audience, "You know the first thing I would do if I was president? I would give a certain southern governor a job as Ambassador to the Congo and let him go crazy looking for a men's restroom with WHITE on it."[407] The audience likely knew the joke was about Wallace, who promised in his inaugural speech "segregation now, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever."[408] The idea of him in such a situation was certainly a comical one for Mabley's audiences. The scenario reversed the circumstances for African Americans, including leaders and diplomats, in the Jim Crow South.[409]

Rejecting the South

Moms Mabley's commentary on racism and Jim Crow in the South was often framed as her personal rejection of the region, as with *Moms Mabley at the Playboy Club* (1961) when she talked about being asked to go to New Orleans. She retorted, "It'll be Old Orleans before I get down there. The Greyhound ain't gonna take me down there and the bloodhounds running me back, I'll tell you that!"[410] She was criticizing New Orleans for its racism and referencing the longstanding history of slaveholders and police using

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[406] George C. Wallace, "Governor George C. Wallace's School House Door Speech," Alabama Department of Archives and History, 1963, http://www.archives.state.al.us/govs_list/schooldoor.html.

[407] Moms Mabley, *I Got Something to Tell You!*, Chess LP 1479, 1963.

[408] George C. Wallace, "The 1963 Inaugural Address of Governor George C. Wallace," Alabama Department of Archives & History, 1963, http://www.archives.alabama.gov/govs_list/inauguralspeech.html.

[409] Wolk, "Moms Mabley and the Civil Rights Movement," 62-63.

[410] Moms Mabley, *Moms Mabley at the Playboy Club*, Chess LP1460, 1961.

dogs to intimidate and attack African Americans. Mabley was also asserting her agency by refusing to travel to a place where she felt unsafe. She took on a different tone in *Young Men, Si, Old Men No!* (1963) when she sang in a mock operatic voice, proclaiming "I ain't gonna set in the back of no bus, and I'm going to the white folks school. I'm gonna praise the Lord in the white folks church, and I'm gonna swim in the white folks pool." Her voice built in assertiveness, to the point where she was practically yelling as she approached the end of the song,

> I'm gonna vote and vote for whoever I please, and I thumb my nose at the Klan. And I double dare 'em to come out from behind them sheets and face me like a man. They don't scare me with they bum threats. I'll say what I want to say and there ain't a damn thing they can do about it.

She pauses for a beat, changing her tone to a mischievous stage whisper to conclude, "cuz I ain't going down there no way."[411] This song was consistent with her theme of rejecting the South by asserting that she would not go there. She evoked the trickster who defied Jim Crow practices and the intimidation of the Ku Klux Klan, but left it to others to engage in protest.

She again rejected the South on *Moms Wows* (1964) when she asserted that "it ain't no disgrace to come from the South, it's a disgrace to go back down there."[412] She was from North Carolina, but she made the conscious decision to reject the South and its racist norms after she left as a teen. She expected others to do the same, implying that staying in the South meant acceptance of its racist practices.

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[411] Moms Mabley, *Young Men Si, Old Men No!*, Chess LP1477, 1963.

[412] Moms Mabley, *Moms Wows*, Chess LP1486, 1964.

The Cold War

Mabley's rejection of the South overlapped with her commentary on the Cold War. She viewed the South as a foreign country and drew parallels between the South and communist nations, emphasizing how the civil rights struggle became a battleground during the Cold War. In fighting for democracy around the world and attempting to prevent the spread of communism, the United States had to reckon with its own racial issues and human rights abuses. Historian Mary Dudziak argued that, "in spite of the repression of the Cold War era, civil rights reform was *in part* a product of the Cold War."[413] The Cold War had a positive impact on civil rights progress in the United States because discrimination against African Americans threatened America's credibility as a nation built on democracy and equality, an image that was crucial in the fight against the communist threat and the growing power of the Soviet Union. Dudziak points out that "the need to address international criticism gave the federal government an incentive to promote social change at home."[414]

Mabley referred to the South as being behind the "scorched curtain," or the "impossible curtain," playing on the idea that the communist countries were behind the "Iron Curtain."[415] One example of this was on *Moms Mabley at the Geneva Conference* (1962) when she related her fictional experience of encountering Nikita Khrushchev at that international meeting. She addressed him as "Khrushch" and in response to him

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[413] Mary Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 12.

[414] Ibid.

[415] Moms Mabley, *Moms Mabley at the White House Conference*, Mercury MG21090, 1966.

criticizing the United States, she challenged him to a fight. When he responded to her challenge by pointing out how many men the U.S.S.R. has in space, she said "We ain't gonna fight up there; we gonna fight down here! Alabama, Mississippi, any other foreign country you wanna fight in, we'll fight you!"[416] In this exchange she rejected the South and regarded it as a "foreign country," while establishing herself as a loyal American willing to fight for her country against the Cold War enemy. The cover art of *Moms Mabley at the Geneva Conference* (1962) establishes Mabley in a role of political authority. She is pictured sitting at a table between Fidel Castro and Nikita Khrushchev with her hand in a fist and a threatening, aggressive look on her face. The image is stylized to look like the front page of a newspaper, with the album title as the headline. With this image she placed herself at the center of an important geopolitical meeting, challenging the status quo.

By signaling her aggression toward the leaders of communist countries, Khrushchev of the U.S.S.R., and Castro of Cuba, Mabley was establishing herself as a loyal American, one who opposed communism. This was a significant stance during the Cold War, especially when many African Americans who advocated for civil rights, such as Paul Robeson and leaders of the NAACP, were accused of being communists. By emphasizing her anticommunist stance in her standup material and in the album cover imagery, Mabley was emphasizing her position as a true, loyal American. This not only distanced her from the communist accusations thrown at civil rights leaders, but also challenged the racist and sexist views that historically excluded African Americans and

[416] Moms Mabley, *Moms Mabley at the Geneva Conference*, Chess LP1463, 1962.

women from full citizenship. Establishing herself as a loyal American and insisting on her citizenship rights was a way to claim the governmental protections historically denied to African Americans and women.[417]

On the 1963 album I *Got Somethin' to Tell You!*, Mabley again inserted herself in a geopolitical situation of them time– the Congo Crisis, which was a civil war and a proxy conflict in the Cold War, with the United States and the U.S.S.R. supported opposing sides. In the sketch she confronts Moise Tshombe, who was the leader of Katanga, the secessionist province in the Congo:

> [singing]We went over to the Congo. I met Tshombe and I said to him, "We were sent here to the Congo to try to talk to you.
> You got everybody worried, what the hell you trying to do?
> We got to get home, because we got trouble there too. So let's get through with you."
> And Tshombe said to me, "Bengon bango bango, what's the matter with the Congo?" "That's what I want to know...brothers fighting each other...
> Straighten up and fly right cuz you know you ain't prepared to fight. Now if you wanna do right, cool down pop or we'll blow your top.
> And another thing: Someday, someday, yes you're gonna be sorry, Of what you do, and what you say . . .You're a smart guy and I can't see why
> that you'd let Khrushchev sell you a lie . . ."

Mabley portrayed herself as a diplomat representing the United States, attempting to convince Tshombe to ally with the United States. She included a play on the lyrics of the popular 1947 song "Civilization," also known as "Bongo, Bongo, Bongo (I Don't Want to Leave the Congo)." The song is a satire about an African native who is visited by missionaries and given the opportunity to join their way of life, but rejects them and instead chooses to stay in the Congo. By connecting Tshombe with the song, Mabley was

[417] Wolk, "Moms Mabley and the Civil Rights Movement, 111.

criticizing him for rejecting an alliance with the United States. In addition to her criticisms of Khrushchev and the U.S.S.R., this commentary was meant to assert her role as a loyal American. At the same time, her exchange with Tshombe reinforces her criticisms of American politics and race relations because in the end she told him that she needed to get back to address the racial problems there.

Moms Mabley at the White House

Moms Mabley was invited to "White House Conference to Fulfill These Rights," in 1966, by President Lyndon B. Johnson. The conference was intended to address discrimination against African Americans and build on the momentum of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. The conference discussions focused on the administration of justice, economic security, education, and housing.[418] The conference was first announced by Johnson the year before when he gave an address at Howard University, telling the audience "I intend to call a White House Conference of scholars, and experts and outstanding Negro leaders-men of both races—and officials of government at every level."[419] All of the major civil rights groups at the time were represented at the conference, except for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), that boycotted the conference.[420] The conference proceedings resulted in a report that called for "legislation to ban racial discrimination in housing and the

[418] Yuill, Kevin L., "The 1966 White House Conference on Civil Rights," *The Historical Journal* 41, no. 1 (March 1998): 259-82.

[419] Major Robinson, "Leaders of All Types at White House Conference," *The Pittsburgh Courier*, June 18, 1966.

[420] Nick Kotz, *Judgement Days: Lyndon Baines Johnson, Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Laws That Changed America* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2005)

administration of criminal justice, and...suggested increased federal spending to improve the quality of housing and education."[421]

Mabley later commented about the experience, “I’ve never been so proud in my life.”[422] She carried the invitation around with her afterward, complete with Martin Luther King Jr.’s autograph on the envelope. This event inspired her album, *Moms Mabley at the White House Conference* (1966). The cover art features a color painting of Mabley wearing a fur coat over her signature house dress and slippers. She has a young man on her arm and she grins at the group greeting her, which includes President Lyndon Johnson, First Lady Ladybird Johnson, and Senator Robert F. Kennedy. The album cover makes it appear as if she was a single guest of honor, greeted as a person with high rank or prestige. The fur coat, a status symbol, and the young man on her arm also allude to her being powerful. As she joked on various albums, money and status helps an older woman garner the affections of a younger man.

In reality, Mabley was one of over 2,400 people “called by President Johnson in an effort to eradicate racial discrimination from every phase of American life.”[423] In keeping with her concern about youth and her religious leanings, she commented in the committee sessions at the conference that the Bible needs to be returned to the classroom.

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[421] Steven F. Lawson, *Civil Rights Crossroads: Nation, Community, and the Black Freedom Struggle* (Lexington, Kentucky: The University Press of Kentucky, 2003)

[422] “Moms Mabley Going to the White House,” *New York Amsterdam News,* May 28, 1966, 1.

[423] Major Robinson, “Leaders of All Types at White House Conference,” *The Pittsburgh Courier,* June 18, 1966.

"I was taught from childhood that all words of wisdom spring from the Bible. It's about time that we instill these thoughts in the minds of today's kids," she declared.[424]

Mabley used her fictional and real forays into foreign relations and American politics to suggest her role as a loyal American, inserting herself into the political dialogue. She became an artist-activist using the stage to criticize and draw attention to racial issues. She would also use the stage to support civil rights causes, even if she was rarely seen on the front lines. As comedy writers Darryl and Tuezdae Littleton note,

Moms was political onstage, but was confronted by the Negro press about her lack of personal commitment. She stepped it up. Martin Luther King, Jr. [was] joined by many celebrities on his marches, including Dick Gregory, Charlton Heston, and a fully invested Moms. Few take notice of her presence because she doesn't wear her famous stage attire; she walks along the freedom marchers dressed in regular street clothes and without the Moms Mabley persona."[425] She was a member of the N.A.A.C.P., but this is one of the few references to Mabley's civil rights activism offstage. Regardless of how much she was actually involved in marches and other forms of protest, she was known instead for speaking about politics and civil rights from the stage.

The Artist-Activist

Mabley supported the Civil Rights Movement with her performances. She was part of the slate of performers for a benefit show at the Apollo in 1962, along with jazz

[424] Major Robinson, "Leaders of All Types at White House Conference," *The Pittsburgh Courier*, June 18, 1966.

[425] Darryl Littleton and Tuezdae Littleton, *Comediennes: Laugh Be a Lady* (Milwaukee, WI: Applause Theatre & Cinema Books, 2012), 39.

and pop artists Solly Rollins and Thelonious Monk, to raise money for the Southern Students Freedom Fund, which provided support for students who were expelled from school or sent to jail in the South for their civil rights activism.[426] The following year Mabley lent her talents to another Apollo benefit show, whose goal was to raise $65,000 for the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, organized by A. Phillip Randolph and other civil rights leaders. She performed along with a large group of artists, including Sidney Poitier, Paul Newman, Joanne Woodward, Ossie Davis, Tony Bennett, Ruby Dee, Quincy Jones, and Little Stevie Wonder.[427] The benefit raised "transportation funds to Washington for jobless black and white workers" who wanted to attend the march.[428] In the album *Now Hear This* (1965) she told her audience she'd been in jail for civil rights activism. While this was likely not true, she went on to say that she was raising money for the Selma to Montgomery March. She explained that she could not march, but that she was selling pictures in the lobby of the theater and would send the proceeds directly to Martin Luther King, Jr. for the march. She was supporting the cause with her talents, and making it publicly known as part of her comedy routine. By this time Mabley was signed to Mercury Records and she had a large and diverse following thanks to appearances on television as well as the success of her previous albums. On August 24, 1969, Mabley performed at a benefit show for the New York Urban League, an important civil rights organization. The performance took place on New York City's Randall's

[426] "Top Jazzmen to Play N.Y. Civil Rights Benefit," *Variety,* August 8, 1962.

[427] "Film Lures Due at Apollo in Harlem at 'Emancipation' Benefit on Aug. 23," *Variety* August 14, 1963.

[428] "Funds From Benefit Will Send Jobless to D.C.," *New York Amsterdam News;* August 3, 1963.

Island and was part of the Schaefer New York Jazz Festival.[429] Mabley also performed at a show at Atlanta's Metropolitan Auditorium honoring the memory of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in 1972. The proceeds from this concert went to the King Center for Social Change in Atlanta.[430]

In the album *Her Young Thing* (1969) Mabley asserted that she went to a march after people asked her to join, explaining "man they caught me in them marches. Come tell me to go in one of them marches down in Washington…I told 'em I couldn't walk, that I couldn't make it. I can't stand it when my children beg me and I went on like a fool." She then painted a humorous portrait of her feet hurting at the march, leading her to ask civil rights leader Ralph Abernathy for a ride on his mule. She left the march eventually, telling the audience "honest to goodness I was willing, but my feet were killing me and my feet is boss…I can't make them marches anymore…but you best believe I was praying they get what they marching for…I hope they'll overcome someday."[431] Mabley was strategically placing herself in relation to the civil rights campaigns and acknowledging her participation. She showed respect for the movement without making a political statement about her support, or about where the movement stood in 1969.

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[429] *Jet Magazine,* August 7, 1969, 60.

[430] "Stars Perform at MLK Concert," *The Pittsburgh Courier,* February 5, 1972, 14.

[431] Moms Mabley, *Her Young Thing*, Mercury SR61205, 1969.

A Changing Movement

At this point in her career Moms Mabley had reached mainstream audiences with numerous television appearances, multiple best-selling albums, and a recording contract with Mercury Records. She was at a point in her career where it could have been risky for her to be too outspoken about civil rights because of her popularity with mainstream audiences. Moreover, the movement had become more radical and polarized by the late 1960s, following Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination. Nonetheless, she had been vocal about racial issues for years, so it would follow that her "children," or audiences, would encourage her to take part in civil rights activities. Whether or not the story about her hurting feet was true is not as important as the fact that she was indicating her support for the movement. She did this using mother wit–her homespun, practical, and common sense brand of humor.

Mabley used her authoritative, matriarchal position to chastise those she viewed as detrimental to the civil rights cause, especially in the latter half of the 1960s. On *Moms Mabley at the White House* (1966) she expressed her frustration with the Watts uprising of 1965 and used a scolding tone to say they were "just as harmful as the Ku Klux Klan…instead of civil rights children they just simple-minded looters and using the least excuse for their own selfish use."[432] She echoed these comments in response to the violence that broke out after Martin Luther King, Jr.'s assassination in 1968, saying "they're the craziest people in the world. God created all men equal. Ain't that

[432] Moms Mabley, *Moms Mabley at the White House Conference*, Mercury MG21090, 1966.

enough?"[433] By comparing urban rioters to the Ku Klux Klan, Mabley revealed her social and political conservatism. Her comments were rooted in her stance on civil rights activism, particularly her rejection of white or black violence. She aligned with Martin Luther King, Jr. and his commitment to nonviolent protest. Mabley denounced violence and other types of disturbances, likely because she felt this behavior detracted from the civil rights advances being made through nonviolent campaigns and federal and state legislation.[434]

Moms Mabley struck a balance between using the stage to address issues facing African Americans, while simultaneously reserving a space for herself outside the limits. Her relationship with racial issues was complicated. She rejected racial categorization for herself, saying in a 1961 *Jet Magazine* interview, "I don't have no race. My grandfather was Irish and my great-grandmother was a full-blooded Indian–so what does that make me–a liar?"[435] However, she did identify as "black" in many of her jokes, and acknowledged that her audiences saw her as African American. In an interview on the set of the film *Amazing Grace*, Mabley was asked what role black women should play in American society. She responded, "not only black women, but white women and black women, and all women. I'm color blind. I don't know the difference. You are all human

[433] "Moms Mabley: She Finally Makes the Movies," *Ebony*, April 1974, 91.

[434] Wolk, "Moms Mabley and the Civil Rights Movement," 75.

[435] *Jet*, June 8 1961, 60.

beings and you are my children."[436] This rhetoric was expressed in her performances, juxtaposed against her consistent critiques of racism and sexism.

Moms Mabley on Television

Moms Mabley broke through with television audiences in the 1960s with regular guest spots on the leading talk and variety shows of the time, including *The Mike Douglass Show, The Merv Griffin Show, The Flip Wilson Show, The Pearl Bailey Show, Laugh In, The Tonight Show With Johnny Carson, The Bill Cosby Show,* and *The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour*. She would subtly change her routines for television audiences, sometimes toning down her material and tempering her commentary, but she still maintained her integrity and stayed true to her comic approach and technique.[437] She turned down a television appearance because the host, who she refrained from naming, told her "Moms, we'd love to have you on the show, but we never know what you're gonna say." For Mabley, this was dismissive of her talent and professional instincts. She recalled, "I wasn't particular on being on it, because I don't like for no one to underrate my intelligence…I know what to say and *when* to say it and where to say it. You don't entertain the audience the same way. You got to know how to switch your material, and professional instinct teaches me when to switch my material."[438] She also declined a spot

[436] Whoopi Goldberg, *Whoopi Goldberg Presents Moms Mabley*. 2013. HBO Documentary Films.

[437] "Moms Mabley-Biography (For 'Amazing Grace')," *United Artists Corporation* (New York: An Entertainment Service Transamerica Corporation), 2.

[438] Studs Terkel, *The Spectator: Talk About Movies and Plays With the People Who Make Them* (New York: The New Press, 1999), 280.

on *The Ed Sullivan Show*, explaining "Mr. Sullivan didn't want to give me but four minutes. Honey, it takes Moms four minutes just to get on the stage."[439]

The highlight of her television career came in 1967, when she was part of the ensemble cast of *A Time For Laughter*, an all-black special program produced by Harry Belafonte and later nominated for an Emmy. She played the maid to a suburban black couple who act as if they are white, and her witty asides and subtle mocking of the couple steal the scene. She again charmed national television audiences in 1973 when she was a presenter at the Grammy Awards, flirting with and kissing singer and movie star Kris Kristofferson and removing her dentures onstage. She carried her trickster role into this new platform by ad-libbing, mispronouncing nominees names, and reading cue cards out of order.

Amazing Grace

Mabley starred in the film *Amazing Grace* in which she played the title role of Grace Teasdale Grimes, a spunky older lady who cleans up city politics in Baltimore. She intervenes in the mayoral election and "almost single-handedly masterminds the successful campaign of a black candidate."[440] While she was playing a fictional character, the writing and her portrayal of Grimes drew on Mabley's established role as a community elder and matriarch. Just as she had been doing from the stage, her records, and television appearances, Mabley embodied the role of Grace Teasdale Grimes, advising politicians and inspiring and motivating her community.

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[439] "Moms Mabley," *Current Biography, NY Newsday*, January 1975, 28.

[440] Vincent Canby, "Moms Mabley in Amazing Grace," *The New York Times*, November 2, 1974.

This film was promoted as a starring vehicle for Moms Mabley. "In the promotional materials for *Amazing Grace*, the film both draws from blaxploitation's iconography and ironically comments on it.[441]" The poster for the film features an animated scene with Mabley standing in a Rolls Royce parading down the street with a joyful group of people surrounding the car, celebrating the star. The tag line is featured above Mabley and reads: "Who's comin' to put an end to dirty tricks, crooked politicians and lyin' mayors! Who? America's most glamorous, sexiest female superstar! 'Moms' Mabley. It's about time!"[442]

Mabley, a diabetic and a smoker who had struggled with health issues over the years, suffered a heart attack during the filming of *Amazing Grace* and had to have a pacemaker installed. After a brief break to recover, she returned to set and completed the film. She also worked hard to promote *Amazing Grace* upon its release. She recorded a "sermon" about the film, produced by United Artists, and five hundred copies were circulated among community and educational groups. She also did a promotional tour in support of the film, including stops in Las Vegas, Atlanta, Memphis, and Pittsburgh.[443] The strong work ethic she developed during her days on the T.O.B.A. continued to characterize the septuagenarian after more than sixty years as a performer. When a reporter asked her if she'd retire after the release of *Amazing Grace*, she replied "Moms

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[441] Allyson Nadia Field, "Stomping on Stepin Fetchit: Historicizing 'Blackness' in African American Film Culture of the 1970s," *Beyond Blaxploitation,* eds. Novotny Lawrence and Gerald R. Butters, Jr. (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2016), 166.

[442] United Artists Promotional Poster for *Amazing Grace,* 1974.

[443] "Moms Mabley at Vegas Premiere," *New York Amsterdam News,* September 7, 1974.

will never retire. As long as I live I will never be too old to make people happy during these trying times. With all this confusion in the world and wars, people are too upset. When you can make people happy in these days, you are doing great. Moms is going to stay in show business."[444]

Amazing Grace received mixed reviews and some criticism for being politically conservative in the era of Black Power and blaxploitation films, which were usually radical and anti-establishment. Some critics claimed the film was "a star vehicle incommensurate with Moms Mabley's talent" and that "Moms Mabley deserves better than this silly situation-comedy type movie which squanders her distinct personality."[445] According to film scholar Allyson Nadia Field in the article "Stomping on Stepin Fetchit: Historicizing 'Blackness' in African American Film Culture of the 1970s," positive press coverage "positioned it in the context of blaxploitation but also made its relation to black film history explicit. In reporting on the completion of the film's shooting, *Chicago Defender* went so far as to suggest that *Amazing Grace* was a powerful corrective to the damage perpetrated by the proliferation of black action films."[446] The film was a box office success and thrust Moms Mabley further into the spotlight. As Marc Jacobson wrote in *New York Magazine,* "Some people say 'It's about time.' But Moms says, 'I try

[444] Earl Calloway, "Moms Makes Mirth in New Film," *New Pittsburgh Courier*; June 8, 1974.

[445] Donald J. Mayerson, "Miss for Moms," *Cue*, November 4-10, 1974.

[446] Field, "Stomping on Stepin Fetchit," 167.

not to be bitter. I would have liked to have gotten my chance earlier, but that's the way things were in those days…better times are coming."[447]

A Long Road to Mainstream Success

In his book *On The Real Side: A History of African American Comedy from Slavery to Chris Rock*, Mel Watkins asserts that Mabley's type of humor limited her opportunities early in her career. He argues that it was hard for her to get mainstream film roles because her humor was "aggressively irreverent" before this type of African-American comedy was acceptable. "Her brand of humor was therefore probably too risky, perhaps even risqué, for Hollywood's early sound films."[448] She was not booked in integrated comedy clubs in the 1950s for this reason.[449] The *Chicago Defender* provided one specific example of Mabley's style of humor being rejected, when the audience at Atlantic City's Club Harlem complained that she did not "jibe" well with the "classy show."[450] Mabley also received criticism from the opposite end of the political spectrum. According to Elsie A. Williams in *The Humor of Jackie "Moms" Mabley: An African American Comedic Tradition*, "in the revolutionary sixties, Mabley's egalitarian and fraternal philosophy netted the accusation from some African Americans that 'Moms was an Uncle Tom,' a throwback to the accommodationst era."[451]

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[447] Mark Jacobson, "Amazing Moms," *New York Magazine*, October 14, 1974, 49.

[448] Watkins, *On the Real Side*, 225.

[449] Ibid., 493.

[450] *Chicago Defender*, August 10, 1946.

[451] Williams, *The Humor of Jackie 'Moms' Mabley*, 129.

Despite these criticisms, Mabley achieved mainstream success in the 1960s and 1970s with numerous stints as a comedy club performer and headliner, even performing at such venerated venues as New York's Carnegie Hall and Washington D.C's Kennedy Center.[452] She released over twenty albums with Chess and Mercury records between 1961 and 1972. Her discography includes an emotional tribute, "Abraham, Martin, and John," "a song that made her a top choice of disc jockeys in all the major cities" and made her the oldest person ever to have a top 40 hit on the U.S. charts.[453] Moms Mabley was an influential artist-activist of the 1960s and 1970s, impacting the Women's Liberation Movement and the Civil Rights Movement. Her crossover success helped her reach wider audiences with her approachable humor and persona. This enabled her to raise people's consciousness about issues of race, politics, gender, and sexuality. She used humor to expose racism and Jim Crow practices for their absurdity, and to challenge sexism and ageism directed at women. Her life and humor provide a lens for viewing black popular entertainment from the 1910s to the 1950s and the social movements of the 1960s and 1970s. Her critical commentary served as a form of social protest. She also influenced her contemporaries, and many comediennes and black women performers who came after her including Whoopi Goldberg, Clarice Taylor, Wanda Sykes, and others.

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[452] Fred Kirby, "Moms Mabley, Masekela Share Carnegie Hall Bill," *Billboard*, June 29, 1968.

[453] "Black America's 'First Lady of Laughter.'" *The Ebony Success Library*, Volume II. F*amous Blacks Give Secrets of Success.* (Chicago: Johnson Publishing Company, Inc., 1973), 160; Darryl Littleton and Tuezday Littleton, *Comediennes: Laugh Be a Lady* (Milwaukee, WI: Applause Theatre & Cinema Books, 2012), 42.

Conclusion: The Final Bow

In May 1975 Moms Mabley had just returned home from a one-week engagement reopening the historic Howard Theater in Washington, D.C. At the age of 78 she was still working regularly with no signs of slowing down. She had plans for future projects, and noted in a interview with Stepin Fetchit that she would be in another movie, called *The Snatch*.[454] According to her son Charles, "She unpacked and repacked. She was scheduled to leave on Sunday for a two-week engagement at Mr. Kelly's in Chicago…" After suffering a heart attack the year before, she was advised by doctors to make lifestyle changes. "She had been told not to smoke, but with none of her keepers around, she rolled a joint, sat back, and got high. The smoking caused her to cough. She broke a blood vessel in her throat and began to hemmorage."[455] She was later discovered by her housekeeper and rushed to White Plains Hospital, where she stayed for several weeks. She spent time resisting her confinement and trying to leave the hospital, and entertaining her nurses, treating the hospital room as her stage.[456] Regrettably, she passed away on May 23, 1975.

Her funeral was held at Harlem's Abyssinian Baptist Church, and was attended by entertainers Slappy White, Dick Gregory, Charles Mingus, Peg Leg Bates, and Honi Cole while hundreds of mourners poured into the street. Her home theater featured a marquee

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[454] "Stepin Fetchit, Moms Mabley Relive 'Glory Days' in Atlanta Interviews," *Box Office*, September 9, 1974.

[455] "Charles's Memories," Interview with Charles Aiken, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, 41-44.

[456] Ibid.

that read "The Apollo Mourns Moms Mabley." As her son Charles recalled, "Moms Mabley's funeral was far from mournful. It was Mother: wild, crazy, and with a touch of humor."[457] According to a report from the *New York Amsterdam News,* the pastor noted in his eulogy "a merry heart doth good like a medicine," and then went on to tell some of her jokes, including "the only thing an old man can do for me is to get on a bicycle and bring me a message from a young man," which was greeted by "unrestrained laughter" from the mourners. Dick Gregory took the opportunity to highlight her talent and the marginalization she faced as a Black woman in the entertainment industry when he quipped in his eulogy, "Had she been white, she would have been known fifty years ago."[458]

Her family details were unclear, but most accounts report that she had three daughters and one adopted son. She had either five or six grandchildren.[459] After years of hard work as an entertainer, she enjoyed success later in life, and according to a report from *New York Amsterdam News* she had left an estate that was valued at more than $500,000.[460] She was religious and would attend church regularly or watch sermons on television. She was a member of Harlem's famous Abyssinian Baptist Church for over

[457] "Charles's Memories," 45.

[458] Willie L. Hamilton, "Harlemites Applaud 'Moms' For Last Time," *N.Y. Amsterdam News* Jun 4, 1975; "Billy Rowe's Notebook," *New York Amsterdam News,* June 11, 1975.

[459] Hamilton, "Harlemites Applaud 'Moms' For Last Time," Jun 4, 1975; Geoffrey F. Brown, "Moms Mabley Didn't Die, She Just Chuckled Away," *Jet,* June 12, 1975, 59-60; "Moms Mabley," *Variety,* May 28, 1975, 98.

[460] *New York New Amsterdam News* August 13, 1975.

twenty five years. Whenever she was in town, she would attend the church and sometimes recite her favorite scriptures from the podium.[461]

Remembering Moms

Jackie "Moms" Mabley was remembered by friends in the entertainment industry as kind, giving, and of course, sharp and funny. Some noted how she was a quiet woman who changed diapers for the Apollo owner's sons backstage. According to her cousin Billy Walker, "Off-stage she was shy. She wasn't a hard person at all. But if you didn't know her, she seemed reserved." He also added that she was quick-witted and naturally funny, and her relatives had to be quick to keep up with her. Similarly, Bill Dillard, a jazzman who played the T.O.B.A. with Mabley recalled, "None of the other performers had a bad word for Moms. If you said something to her, she'd snap back, right there with you, enjoying it. She was fun." She was an avid reader who regularly watched the news, keeping up with the current events that informed her acts. She was also fiercely competitive, and was known to cheat at cards and checkers, pastimes that she engaged in during the many hours she spent backstage as a lifelong entertainer. Her close family friend Francine Everett recalled "Moms and I and her daughter Bonnie would play 500 and Moms would *always* cheat. It was obvious, too–her hands going all over. Bonnie and I would just look at each other and laugh. But that was Moms. She had to win."[462] This

[461] Hamilton, "Harlemites Applaud 'Moms' For Last Time," Jun 4, 1975.

[462] David Hinckley, "The Other MM: Moms Mabley Was a Tiffany Talent in a Goodwill Dress," *Extra,* February 18, 1987.

penchant for cheating at card games was also mentioned in the recollections of her son, Charles.

Entertainer Jim Singleton observed, “I can’t count the years that I have known Jackie Mabley. She was a wonderful woman who did many things for people a lot of us never heard about. When she did those things, she never looked for publicity because she did them from her heart.”[463] Performer Winston ‘Skylight’ Craig recalled, “I worked with Jackie in Atlantic City at the Club Harlem, years ago. I found her to be most delightful and a pleasant person to work with. She was plain spoken and didn’t have a phony bone in her body. I will miss her dearly.”[464]

Mabley didn’t just leave a mark on her fellow performers with her kindness and humor, she also influenced their work. Comedians would attend her shows and take notes, often stealing her material. As she put it, “Everyone doing comedy, except Jack Benny, has at one time or other stolen material from Moms. It’s okay, though. Moms just goes to God for more.”[465] In another interview she noted that Redd Foxx was another entertainer who did not steal material from her, remarking about her old friend that “he’s a born comedian.”[466]

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[463] Jim Singleton quoted in Hamilton, “Harlemites Applaud ‘Moms’ For Last Time,” Jun 4, 1975.

[464] Winston ‘Skylight’ Craig quoted in Hamilton, “Harlemites Applaud ‘Moms’ For Last Time,” Jun 4, 1975.

[465] “Moms Mabley Goes to the ‘Top’ Writer for Inspiration and Material,” *United Artists Corporation,* (New York: An Entertainment Service Transamerica Corporation), 2; C. Gerald Fraser, “Moms Mabley, 78, Comedienne of TV, Stage and Radio, Dead,” *The New York Times*, May 25, 1975.

[466] “Moms Mabley Dead at 77,” *L.A. Herald-Examiner,* May 24, 1975

Portrayals of Moms Mabley

Moms Mabley had a significant impact on her contemporaries and performers who came to prominence after her. She was the first African-American woman doing stand-up, and she was groundbreaking in the tone and content of her material. She used the Moms persona as a mask that allowed her to speak out against segregation and racism, to critique political leaders, and to subvert stereotypes and gender expectations. Her material was relatable to everyone, and a diverse cohort of comedians, including Eddie Murphy, Bernie Mac, and Kathy Griffin, claim her as an influence. However, the most obvious lineage of her career extends to black female comics and performers. According to Katelyn Hale Wood in the article "Laughter in the Archives: Jackie 'Moms' Mabley and the Haunted Diva," "Mabley's work as a stand-up comic solidifies important precedents for Black female comics in contemporary U.S performance."[467] She was a pioneering force and she paved a way for Black women to claim space on a public stage, create their own personas, subvert stereotypes, and assert their sexuality.

There is a direct line that connects Moms Mabley to Whoopi Goldberg, weaving through their personal and professional lives and through their performance techniques and personas. Whoopi Goldberg has been aware of this throughout her career, paying homage to her mentor and predecessor in the 1984 stage show *Moms* and in the 2013 documentary *Whoopi Goldberg Presents Moms Mabley.* The 1984 performance was a one-woman show where she portrayed Mabley. Goldberg was not yet well-known, and

[467] Katelyn Hale Wood, "Laughter in the Archives: Jackie 'Moms' Mabley and the Haunted Diva," *QED: A Journal in GLBTQ Worldmaking,* vol. 1, No. 3 (Fall 2014), 87.

the play was an "unauthorized recreation" in collaboration with fellow performer Ellen Sebastian. The show earned rave reviews and won a Bay Area Theatre Award, bringing Goldberg to national attention. In a prophetic statement, Mel Gussow of the *New York Times* called Whoopi Goldberg "a cross between Lily Tomlin and Richard Pryor–people will try to compare comics to the inimitable Whoopi Goldberg."[468] Goldberg did multiple runs of *Moms.*

Almost thirty years after introducing Mabley to a new audience in her one-woman show, Goldberg again resurrected the memory of Mabley with her 2013 documentary *Whoopi Goldberg Presents Moms Mabley.* The documentary provides a platform for Goldberg to speak about the significance of Moms Mabley's contributions, while inviting scholars and other performers to reflect on Mabley's influence. Goldberg commented in the film that "Moms opened a door for women to stand up and be funny. To talk about things as they saw them. And she encourage people to be thoughtful. The fabric that she knit from '29 to '75 is a long, big piece of fabric in the middle of the American *thing*…Because she was the first. She did it first."[469] While she is speaking about Moms Mabley's impact on women in comedy more generally, viewers are sure to recognize that Goldberg was specifically referring to herself. Theater director Ellen Sebastian Chang's comments were especially poignant when she declared that Mabley "made me feel so possible. That I didn't have to be glamorous. That I didn't even have to dress well and I

[468] *Moms: Whoopi Goldberg as Moms Mabley.* Theater Poster. Oakland Museum of California, 1984.

[469] Ibid.

could capture the worlds' imagination."[470] Harry Belafonte places Mabley's comedy within African-American humor more broadly with his hopeful directive: "May it never leave us our capacity to laugh at our plight and do it with dignity, and Moms was that all the way."[471]

Whoopi Goldberg Presents Moms Mabley emphasizes the contributions Moms Mabley made to comedy and African-American performance art, arguing that she was a groundbreaking entertainer.[472] Whoopi Goldberg's primary goal in making the film is to remind people about Mabley and her contributions to the craft. She told a reporter at the documentary's Tribeca Film Festival premiere, "I needed to refresh people about who she was before I did a one-woman show…I was going to do Moms again for the stage…until I got to the point where I realized most people wouldn't know who she was now. And I thought if I could reintroduce her to people maybe that would facilitate me getting on stage to do it."[473] The documentary was created to bring Moms Mabley back into public awareness for a new generation, and to inspire people so they would want more Moms material.

Also in an effort to preserve Mabley's contributions in the memory of the next generation, cultural historian Delilah Jackson did a 1985 tribute show to Moms Mabley at

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[470] Ibid. Chang is the Consulting Producer for the documentary, and also produced the play *Moms: Whoopi Goldberg as Moms Mabley (1984)* under the name Ellen Sebastian.

[471] Whoopi Goldberg, *Whoopi Goldberg Presents Moms Mabley*. 2013. HBO Documentary Films.

[472] Ibid.

[473] Paula Schwartz, "She Was Clearly Out and Didn't Give a Sh*t," *Roger Friedman's Showbiz 411,* April 22, 2013.

the Jazz Culture Studio in New York. She commented that "many of the young people had never heard of her."[474] Ellen Sebastian did her own Moms Mabley show in 1986 after working with Goldberg two years prior. "Post-Modern Moms" featured Sebastian portraying Mabley both onstage and off. The premise of the show was that Mabley had returned from the dead and was embodying actress Ellen Sebastian's body. The show features some standup and Mabley commenting on how things had changed in the eleven years since she had passed. Prior to the show's opening, she "'interacted' with San Franciscans both famous and homeless" and led demonstrations in character as Mabley. These events were documented by a crew of photographers, and the recordings were used as part of Sebastian's stage show.[475]

In 1987 Clarice Taylor, who was best known as portraying Dr. Huxtable's mother in *The Cosby Show*, starred as Moms Mabley in a *Moms: A Praise Play for a Black Comedienne* written by Alice Childress. Childress was a prolific playwright whose plays explored themes of Black self-determination and representation of Black women.[476] The show was well-received by the press.[477] The collaboration was less successful, however. Alice Childress and Clarice Taylor entered into a copyright dispute over the rights to the

[474] David Hinckley, "The Other MM: Moms Mabley Was a Tiffany Talent in a Goodwill Dress," *Extra,* February 18, 1987.

[475] Steven Winn, "On the S.F. Campaign Trail With Moms," *San Francisco Chronicle,* May 9, 1986.

[476] Olga Dugan, "Alice Childress as Theorist and Playwright," *The Journal of African American History,* vol. 87 (Winter 2002), 146-159.

[477] Dennis Hevesi, "Clarice Taylor Dies at 93; TV's Cosby Called Her Mom," *The New York Times,* June 3, 2011, Sec. B, Pg. 10.

play in 1987.[478] According to published reports, Clarice Taylor commissioned Alice Childress to write the original play in which Taylor starred. Childress sued her the following year for copyright infringement because Taylor "continu[ued] to star in a play entitled 'Moms,' uncredited as to authorship."[479] According to Clarice Taylor, she had conducted research on Moms Mabley for years and asked her friend, Alice Childress, to help her shape it into a play. In response to accusations of plagiarism, Taylor asserted that "most of it is pure Mabley: 'Moms wrote it, really.'"[480] After four years of litigation, Alice Childress was awarded $30,000 in damages by the court.[481]

The fact that Childress and Taylor entered into a legal dispute over the rights to the Moms Mabley play is not only attributed to copyright and questions of plagiarism. It is also a testament to how important Moms Mabley's legacy was to these women, and other black female performers. The stakes were high in preserving her memory and sharing her story and humor with future generations. After the initial run written by Alice Childress, Clarice Taylor went on to do another version of a Moms Mabley one-woman show. This script was written by Ben Caldwell, and the performance at Washington D.C.'s Warner Theatre was produced by the Bethune Museum and Archives.[482] In addition to extensive research with newspaper and magazine clippings about Mabley and

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[478] "Author of 'Moms' Sues Actress Over Copyright," *The New York Times,* October 22, 1987; Bert Andrews, "Whose Play is it Anyway?" *Newsweek,* August 31, 1987.

[479] "Author of 'Moms' Sues Actress Over Copyright," *The New York Times,* October 22, 1987.

[480] Andrews, "Whose Play is it Anyway?" 67.

[481] "Alice Childress Papers," Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture,11.

[482] Courland Milloy, "The Life and Times of Moms Mabley," *The Washington Post,* April 17, 1988; Simeon Booker, "Ticker Tape U.S.A.," *Jet Magazine,* May 9, 1988, 8.

listening to her recordings, Clarice Taylor also interviewed several of Mabley's family members and associates. In interviews she emphasized the importance of bringing Mabley to the stage so new generations would remember her, a sentiment echoed by Whoopi Goldberg.[483] Taylor continued to portray Moms Mabley onstage in various American locations and overseas until at least 2005, when she starred in a New York production of "An Evening of Jackie 'Moms' Mabley and Her Ladies," which in addition to discussing Mabley's life, also featured portrayals of Billie Holiday, Dinah Washington, Ma Rainey, and Mahalia Jackson.[484]

Other actresses were also portraying Mabley onstage during this time. Janet Page presented a one-one tribute show in 1992. She had previously only performed for church audiences, but she made her stand-up comedy debut in New Rochelle in front of an audience that included members of Moms Mabley's family. Mabley's brother, Eddie Parton, was interviewed after the performance and noted "she really did a good job impersonating Moms." A positive review in *New York Amsterdam News* noted how accurate her portrayal was, making audience members feel as if they were actually watching Mabley perform.[485] Linda Boston, jazz vocalist and actress, starred in "Moms Mabley: The Naked Truth" from 1999 until 2001, when the show was brought back for a revival due to audience demand and rave reviews. Boston was recognized for her role by

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[483] "Moms Mabley Revisited," *Ebony Magazine,* February 1988, 124-130. Alice Richardson, "Memories of 'Moms' Mabley: Funniest Woman in the World," *New York Amsterdam News*, Sep 5, 1987, 26.

[484] Linda Armstrong, "Veteran Actress Performs Play on Life of Late Great Female Comedian," *The New York Amsterdam News,* March 17-March 23, 2005, 25.

[485] Harcourt Tynes, "Moms Mabley Tribute at New Rochelle's Palace," *New York Amsterdam News,* April 11, 1992.

the *Detroit Free Press.* The show included Mabley's comedy and details from her personal life. According to the website for Buku Productions, the production company that co-produced the show with the Detroit Repertory Theatre, "Moms's first cousin and 25 other members of the family attended a Detroit Rep performance of 'The Naked Truth' and, thank goodness, they absolutely loved it!"[486]

Cabaret performer Charisma Wooten wrote, directed, and starred in a one-woman show titled *A Night With Jackie Moms Mabley* from around 2016 through 2020.[487] The show included jokes from Mabley's stand-up as well as some songs. According to one review, she portrayed Mabley several times a year at Germano's Piattini in Baltimore. The reviewer noted, "Wooten expertly enlivened the body language of Mabley, including her shuffling walk and bent shoulders, complete with her droopy hat and granny-dress. Wooten even had Mabley's voice down…"[488] In January 2020 she brought the show to the Kennedy Center stage, at which point the production was listed as a Helen Hayes nominated play for the Charles MacArthur Award for Outstanding New Play.

Moms Mabley was (re)introduced to television audiences in 2019, when Wanda Sykes portrayed the comedienne in an episode of the hit series *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel.* The episode features her performing at the Apollo, and the scene was filmed at the theater. Her appearance on the episode is brief, but impactful. Sykes was

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[486] "Moms Mabley: The Naked Truth," *Buku Productions, https://www.bukuprod.org/moms-mabley-the-naked-truth*

[487] The show had scheduled dates in 2020 that at the time of this writing have been postponed due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

[488] William Powell, "Review: 'A Night With Jackie Moms Mabley' at Germano's Piattini," *DC Metro Theater Arts,* March 19, 2017.

nominated for an Emmy award for her guest appearance, and commented on her Twitter account, "Can't believe I got to play Moms Mabley! She's the reason why I'm a comic."[489] In an interview she shared that she watched Mabley on television when she was young, noting "she definitely was influential and just stood out for me. And I'm 100 percent sure that if it hadn't been for her, I wouldn't be a standup comic. I wouldn't be doing this." "…I've always wanted to do something about Moms…it's always been my dream to either play her or do something to get her story out there because she deserves it. She deserves more recognition than what she's getting when we talk about comedy, especially American comedy and African-American comics. So to be able to play her and to be on the Apollo stage doing…it was just a dream. I was living a dream."[490]

It is appropriate that Wanda Sykes would portray Moms Mabley on a hit television show in 2019, introducing her predecessor to new audiences. Like Whoopi Goldberg, there is a very clear line that connects Moms Mabley to Wanda Sykes. Bambi Haggins observed, "the comedic lineage of Wanda Sykes can undoubtedly be traced back to Moms Mabley…both comics critique the politics and mores of their day from a commonsense perspective, both are known for their sexual candor, and both speak to and across cultural and racial boundaries."[491]

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[489] Wanda Sykes, Twitter Post, July 28, 2020, 9:30am, https://twitter.com/iamwandasykes/status/1288149819379384320

[490] Kevin Jacobson and Susan Wloszczyna, "Wanda Sykes ('The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel') on 'Living a Dream' Playing Moms Mabley," *Gold Derby,* July 20, 2020, https://www.goldderby.com/article/2020/wanda-sykes-the-marvelous-mrs-maisel-video-interview-transcript/.

[491] Bambi Haggins, "Moms Mabley and Wanda Sykes: 'I'ma Be Me'" in *Hysterical: Women in American Comedy* eds. Linda Mizejewski and Victoria Sturtevant, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2017), 207.

Mabley's Impact

The thing that Wanda Sykes, Charisma Wooten, Linda Boston, Janet Page, Clarice Taylor, Ellen Sebastian, Delilah Jackson, and Whoopi Goldberg all have in common is that Mabley impacted them in such a way that they were all driven to portray her onstage or onscreen. Their motivations varied from wanting to remind audiences of Mabley's work or wanting to embody the artist themselves. Mabley left her mark on each of these black women performers. This impact goes beyond those who portray Moms Mabley, as she carved a space for black women to assert themselves as performers, claim space, and engage audiences while making them laugh and question the world around them.

To again borrow Haggins's words, "the woman I had thought of as just as funny old lady had played a significant role in setting the trajectory for stand-up comedy as sociopolitical discourse–a lineage that has not been acknowledged nearly enough."[492] "By following the trajectory of Mabley's career, you can trace the development of black comedy from the waning days of the minstrel show to the civil rights era and beyond."[493] Studying Jackie "Moms" Mabley's life and work allows us to answer important questions about African American history and American cultural history. Her biography aligns with major historical moments and periods–the vaudeville theater, the T.O.B.A., the Great Migration, the New Negro Movement, and the Civil Rights Movement. She was intentional about her work, and what looked like an homely grandmother figure bumbling

[492] Haggins, "I'ma Be Me," 209.

[493] Ibid., 213.

onstage without a plan was actually a strategic attack on racism, sexism, and ageism. Moms Mabley's comedy should be considered a form of social protest, and she raised the consciousness of the American public through her performances. While doing so, she also broke barriers and inspired future comedians and other performers to push boundaries even further and continue to use their art and talent to challenge the status quo. Her work was significant because she exposed multiracial audiences to the forms and traditions of African American humor, while raising the awareness of her audiences about certain issues facing women and African Americans.

Moms Mabley's intersectional identity provides a lens to better understand issues of race, gender, and sexuality and how they have worked together historically. This sets her apart from her contemporaries because using an intersectional lens provides a clearer understanding of race and gender issues and the profound connections between them. According to cultural theorist Elsie A. Williams, "the length of Mabley's career…makes Mabley's comedic repertoire a valuable index of African American values and to the group's relationship with the larger culture as well. Through humor, Mabley was able to resolve, uniquely, many of the tensions associated with 'being an American with a complex fate.'"[494] It is the combination of Mabley's identity and the content of her comedy that makes her a valuable index for the experiences of African Americans, especially black women, in early to mid twentieth century America.

[494] Williams, *The Humor of Jackie "Moms" Mabley,* 136.

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