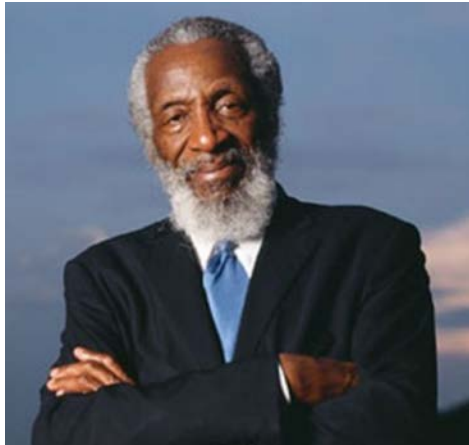


# In Memoriam: Dick Gregory



Richard Claxton Gregory [Dick Gregory] (1932-2017) was an African-American comedian, civil rights activist, social critic, writer, entrepreneur, conspiracy theorist, and occasional actor. During the turbulent 1960s, he became a pioneer in stand-up comedy for his "no-holds-barred" sets, in which he mocked bigotry and racism. He performed primarily to Black audiences at segregated clubs until 1961, when he became the first Black comedian to successfully cross over to White audiences, appearing on television and putting out comedy record albums. He was at the forefront of political activism in the 1960s, when he protested the Vietnam War and racial injustice. His participation in the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s is

well documented, as are his personal relationships with such luminaries as Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, Muhammad Ali, President John F. Kennedy, and Robert Kennedy, as well as legions of politicians, performers, and activists. He was arrested multiple times and went on many hunger strikes. An advocate of nonviolence, Gregory uses fasting, prayer, and other peaceful means to make his point. He is acclaimed for his mobilizations for social change, his Bahamian diet, his comedy career, and his anti-drug activities. Gregory and his wife, Lillian Smith, have been married for 50 years and are the parents of 10 children.

He is author of *Defining Moments in Black History: Reading Between the Lies* (2017), a collection of thoughtful, provocative essays, the author charts the complex and often obscured history of the African American experience, and in an unapologetically candid voice, he moves from African ancestry and surviving the Middle Passage to the creation of the Jheri Curl, the enjoyment of bacon and everything pig, the headline-making shootings of Black men, and the Black Lives Matter movement; and retrospectively: *From the Back of the Bus* (1962); *Nigger: An Autobiography* [written with Robert Lipsyte and E.P. Dutton] (1964); *What's Happening?* (1965); *Write Me In!* (1968), *The Shadow that Scares Me* [editor James R. McGraw] (1968); *No More Lies: The Myth and the Reality of American History* (1971); *Dick Gregory's Political Primer* (1972); *Dick Gregory's Natural Diet for Folks Who Eat: Cookin' With Mother Nature* (1973); *Dick Gregory's Bible Tales, With Commentary* [with editor James R. McGraw] (1974); *Up From Nigger* [with James R. McGraw] (1976); *Code Name "Zorro": The Murder of Martin Luther King, Jr.* [with Mark Lane] (1977); *Callus on My Soul: A Memoir* [with Shelia P. Moses] (2000); *African American Humor: The Best Black Comedy from Slavery to Today* [with Mel Watkins] (2002); and *Murder in Memphis: The FBI and the Assassination of Martin Luther King* [with Mark Lane] (2015).

He received an honorary doctoral degree in 1970 from Malcolm X College in Chicago, Illinois, in 1987 he was awarded an honorary Doctor of Humane Letters from Southern Illinois University at Carbondale, awarded based on his unique contribution to human well-being and his accomplishments that resulted in a marked benefit to society (he attended Southern Illinois University, 1951-1953, 1955-1956), in 1988 he received an honorary Doctor of Humanities from Howard University, and later, he was awarded honorary doctorates from other colleges and universities.

In regards to his passing, Congresswoman Maxine Waters (CA-43), Ranking Member of the House Financial Services Committee, released the following statement upon the passing of Dick Gregory, she said:

“Today, I join the world in mourning the passing of my dear friend, Dick Gregory, whom I truly admired and loved. I consider Dick to be one of the most brilliant and transformative comedians the world has ever seen. Dick was unafraid to confront racism and bigotry in his performances which helped to shine a light on the injustices African Americans faced in this country, particularly in the Jim Crow South, and he is revered for breaking down barriers that prevented African American comedians from entertaining all white audiences, paving the way for African American comics today.

“Beyond his genius on stage, Dick was a champion for equality, often risking his own career, health, freedom, and, at times, his life in order to fight injustice and oppression. He was a prominent figure during the Civil Rights Movement, who despite his own fame, would cancel shows and risk millions of dollars to join marches, sit-ins, and other peaceful demonstrations across the country with other leaders like Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Whitney M. Young, Jr., and Rev. Jesse Jackson. However, Dick’s activism was not limited to the Civil Rights era; he was a lifelong activist, who also fought against apartheid in South Africa, the Vietnam War, police brutality, misogyny, and abuses against Native Americans. Furthermore, his intellectual curiosity inspired him to write numerous books and to vigorously research health and nutrition, which he and I spent countless hours discussing.

“Most importantly, however, I knew Dick to be a family man who was a devoted husband to his wife of more than fifty years, Mrs. Lillian Gregory, and a loving father to his surviving 10 children whom he encouraged and supported in their individual lives and careers.

“Dick will forever be remembered by fans all over the world for his talent, intellect, and unwavering commitment to justice. However, to me he was more than a world renown comedian and activist – he was my brother. I am so grateful for all of the precious memories that we have shared over the past years, especially a few months ago when I joined him in our hometown of St. Louis, Missouri, where at 84 years of age, he captivated a packed audience with his one of a kind wit, charm, and humor. Dick will certainly be missed, and my thoughts and prayers are with his family and loved ones during this rough time.”