

Emerson Comedy Archives Oral History Project

DICK GREGORY

Interviewed October 15, 2005

By Bill Dana and Jenni Matz

In Washington D.C.

Biographical Information:

"Dick" Richard Claxton Gregory (Born, October 12, 1932, St. Louis, Mo.), African American comedian and civil rights activist whose social satire changed the way white Americans perceived African American comedians since he first performed in public.

Dick Gregory entered the national comedy scene in 1961 when Chicago's Playboy Club (as a direct request from publisher Hugh Hefner) booked him as a replacement for white comedian, "Professor" Irwin Corey. Until then Gregory had worked mostly at small clubs with predominantly black audiences (he met his wife, Lillian Smith, at one such club). Such clubs paid comedians an average of five dollars per night; thus Gregory also held a day job as a postal employee. His tenure as a replacement for Corey was so successful — at one performance he won over an audience that included southern white convention goers — that the Playboy Club offered him a contract extension from several weeks to three years. By 1962 Gregory had become a nationally known headline performer, selling out nightclubs, making numerous national television appearances, and recording popular comedy albums.

Gregory began performing comedy in the mid-1950s while serving in the army. Drafted in 1954 while attending Southern Illinois University at Carbondale on a track scholarship, Gregory briefly returned to the university after his discharge in 1956, but left without a degree because he felt that the university "didn't want me to study, they wanted me to run." In the hopes of performing comedy professionally, he moved to Chicago, where he became part of a new generation of black comedians that included Nipsey Russell, Bill Cosby, and Godfrey Cambridge. These comedians broke with the minstrel tradition, which presented stereotypical black characters. Gregory, whose style was detached, ironic, and satirical, came to be called the "Black Mort Sahl" after the popular white social satirist. Friends of Gregory have always referred to Mort Sahl as the "White Dick Gregory." Gregory drew on current events, especially the racial issues, for much of his material: "Segregation is not all bad. Have you ever heard of a collision where the people in the back of the bus got hurt? "

From an early age, Gregory demonstrated a strong sense of social justice. While a student at Sumner High School in St. Louis he led a March protesting Segregated schools. Later, inspired by the work of leaders such as Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., and organizations such as the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), Gregory took part in the Civil Rights Movement and used his celebrity status to draw attention to such issues as segregation and disfranchisement. When local Mississippi governments stopped distributing Federal food surpluses to poor blacks in areas where SNCC was encouraging voter registration, Gregory chartered a plane to bring in several tons of food. He participated in SNCC's voter registration drives and in sit-ins to protest segregation, most notably at a

restaurant franchise in downtown Atlanta, Georgia. Only later did Gregory disclose that he held stock in the chain.

Gregory's autobiography, Nigger, was published in 1963 prior to The assassination of President Kennedy, and became the number one best-selling book in America. Over the decades it has sold in excess of seven million copies. His choice for the title was explained in the forward, where Dick Gregory wrote a note to his mother. "Whenever you hear the word 'Nigger'," he said, "you'll know their advertising my book."

Through the 1960s, Gregory spent more time on social issues and less time on performing. He participated in marches and parades to support a range of causes, including opposition to the Vietnam War, world hunger, and drug abuse. In addition, Gregory fasted in protest more than 60 times, once in Iran, where he fasted and prayed in an effort to urge the Ayatollah Khomeini to release American embassy staff who had been taken hostage. The Iranian refusal to release the hostages did not decrease the depth of Gregory's commitment; he weighed only 97 lbs when he left Iran.

Gregory demonstrated his commitment to confronting the entrenched political powers by opposing Richard J. Daley in Chicago's 1966 mayoral election. He ran for president in 1968 as a write-in candidate for the Freedom and Peace Party, a splinter group of the Peace and Freedom Party and received 1.5 million votes. Democratic candidate Hubert Humphrey lost the election to Republican Richard Nixon by 510,000 votes, and many believe Humphrey would have won had Gregory not run. After the assassinations of King, President John F. Kennedy, and Robert Kennedy, Gregory became increasingly convinced of the existence of political conspiracies. Gregory wrote books such as Code Name Zorro: The Murder of Martin Luther King Jr. (1971) with Mark Lane, world famous author, attorney and documentary filmmaker...

In 1973, the year he released his comedy album Caught in the Act, Gregory moved with his family to Plymouth, Massachusetts, where he developed an interest in vegetarianism and became a nutritional consultant. In 1984 he founded Health Enterprises, Inc., a company that distributed weight loss products. In 1987 Gregory introduced the Slim-Safe Bahamian Diet, a powdered diet mix, which was immensely profitable. Economic losses caused in part by conflicts with his business partners led to his eviction from his home in 1992. Gregory remained active, however, and in 1996 returned to the stage in his critically acclaimed one-man show, *Dick Gregory Live!* The reviews of Gregory's show compared him to the greatest stand-ups in the history of Broadway.

In 2001, Gregory announced to the world that he had been diagnosed with a rare form of Cancer. He refused traditional medical treatment – chemotherapy –and with the assistance of some of the finest minds in alternative medicine, put together a regimen of a variety of diet, vitamins, exercise, and modern devices not even known to the public, which ultimately resulted in his reversing the trend of the Cancer to the point where today he is nearly 85% free of it, and getting better every day..."

- Excerpted from http://www.dickgregory.com/about_dick_gregory.html

Narrator (Interviewee) - Dick Gregory (hereafter referred to as GREGORY)

Interviewers - Jenni Matz and Bill Dana (hereafter referred to as MATZ and DANA)

GREGORY: ... So America have changed, and comedy reflects that. Although we don't want to believe that, but comedy reflects that.

01:09;16

DANA: {interrupting} That's what we wanted to find out. How you've -- you personally try to affect change. Black man on the stage and white people in an -- an audience.

GREGORY:

I never -- I never... That's an insult. We will find a cure for cancer and it won't be through comedy. You go down through the history. Every vicious tyrant that was brought to you, it wasn't through comedy. See, we as comics want to overrate this bullshit. You know, we have limits. I thought the same thing. Laughter is the best, bullshit, man. When JFK was shot in Dallas, comedy wouldn't have helped us. It was three days of music. Three days of music. Every station, every network you turned on it was music. Huh! Little mothers don't sing

lullaby comedy to their little children. Rock-a-bye baby in the -- it's music. It's always been music. And then after I can get your head back through music, then I can make you funny. You can tell jokes about JFK being shot in Dallas that if you tried to do it that night on TV or radio, you'd have been put off and put in jail. And so it's never... When I went out and marched, I didn't go out to get laughs. And when I walked up on that -- see, I didn't go up there to turn nobody around.

01:13;08

DANA: But there you go, and I have to... I have to confront you because I've been in the audience way back. **Hungry i..**

GREGORY: Yeah.

DANA: **Enrico Banducci** and saw you walk out on the stage, sit down and cross you legs.

GREGORY: Yeah.

DANA: Take out your little cigarette in front of a bunch of uptight people who were not uptight twenty seconds beyond that.

GREGORY: Yes.

DANA: All right. You -- you were the catalyst.

01:13;34

GREGORY: Well, I'm not saying I wasn't. But I didn't go there for that. I didn't go there for that. I mean -- and you can't tell me what I went there for. I wanted to be one of the fine comics. When I got in show -- I didn't know a black comic couldn't work a white nightclub because America didn't permit a black person to stand flatfooted and talk to white folks. You could sing, you could dance, you could sweat. You could stop in between it and tell jokes. Uh, you -- you could tell **Pearl Bailey** how -- how bad her feet hurt her. That was accepted. But just to stand flatfooted and talk, you couldn't do that. Now, I got caught because I had nobody in my family that had been in show business, so I didn't know. And nobody ever told me. And so one day, when I was getting good... I mean, you don't start off as a good comic. There's a thing called timing, and you don't buy that. You don't get that just because your dad or your momma was a comic or cause you was the life of the party. Humor...

01:14;38

DANA: No, you -- you were -- you were using the -- your cigarette for that.

GREGORY: Yeah, but I didn't mean to. I just like to some and drink. I -- I smoke. I did the same thing when I was off

stage until I stopped smoking cigarettes and then I almost
blew my act because --

DANA: [laughs]

GREGORY: No, no, let me tell you. When somebody yelled out and I did that, I wasn't aware that that split tenth billion of a second gave me enough time to switch gears in my brain and eat them up alive. I didn't realize when I was sitting there in between your laughter and my doing that, it gave me a break so I didn't have to wait for you to stop. I wasn't aware of that until I stopped smoking. Of how important that was with the -- with the timing. I walked up there and what you saw is what you got. I never cussed, I never used profanity. And my second language is profanity. Never on stage. Uh-- If I didn't walk in with a woman, I never walk out with her. That was -- that was the law I had because that stage was my steel mill. That stage was my coal mine and you don't go to work in a coal mine to hit on a woman. You don't go to work in a steel mill to hit on a woman, and I used that as nothing but a job. It might be glamorous and this and that. And I never wore the same clothes on the stage out in the street. And I'm talking about -- man, when I was suffering, I was making five dollars a night working. Three nights a week and I go on credit and get my suits. I had three shows and

I never wore the same suit that wasn't pressed. And then that next night I'd run down and get them cleaned and pressed and bring them back in. And that was the respect I had.

01:16;22

01:17;53

The biggest break I ever had is I was at this all Negro -- probably the best, biggest Negro nightclub in the world. It's in Chicago, **Robert's Show Club**. Brand new. Had a Las Vegas stage. And it brought in *Count Basie*, *Joe Williams*, *Sarah Vaughn*, *Sammy Davis*. Well, and that first show, you couldn't get in there for the white folks. And **Hugh Hefner** was sitting on the front row. So they told me that week I wouldn't be able to work it because they got this big comic coming in from New York named **Nipsy Russell**. And so I sad, "You paying me \$25 a night, I work three nights a week. Then when the big show come, you don't need me? Well, you get him to stay here to work all your shows. I quit." And I didn't have no job or no money. So they said, "Wait, wait, wait. Wait a minute, wait a minute, wait a minute. Let's do this. How much you MCing?" And I've MCd, and I've never MCd-- I mean, I've turned down big money that

people come. I've never MC'd since then. And an old black dude told me something. He said, "If you got two hours out there on that stage, that's your stage, son. Or if you got fifteen minutes. You can do the same thing in fifteen minutes you do in two hours when you have to... Or you can do the same thing in two seconds that you do." And I heard him. And I walked out there and Hugh Hefner was sitting. And just this little MC, he heard something. And **Irwin Corey** came into the club. He refused to work seven days and I got the call. And I went down and I never spent much time downtown Chicago. They were paying me \$50. And I didn't know white folks, you know, sent the money to your agent. So I came down there with twenty-five cents to get on the bus, and got off at the wrong stop. And I had -- had to go on stage at 8:00 o'clock and I'm praying and running. It's -- it's a blizzard. And I ask people where's the **Playboy club** and they said down... So then about eight blocks away I could see the sign and I'm running. I don't know now that this room had been sold out to a group of Southern white frozen food convention. And they decided -- Hefner and them decided, I don't need to work. They was going to pay me. So if I'd have got there a half hour early or hadn't gotten off at the wrong stop, *Victor Lownes* who ran it, he'd say, "You don't have to go

on." So I said, "OK." I didn't. I got there at exactly 8 o'clock and I got my clothes over my arm. I don't even have time to change clothes. I ran up the steps and this white guy's standing there trying to stop me. And I didn't know who Victor Lowmes was. And I just pushed him out of the way. I asked a guy downstairs, "Where's the Carousel rooms?" Second floor, so now I ran up. Jumped up on stage. "Hey, I'm Dick Gregory," at 8:00 o'clock sharp, and at 12:00 o'clock I still talking. And Hefner came over at 12:30. And so that's been the story of my life. I had no business on that stage. And so I'm at *Robert's Show Club* sitting at the bar. That's the black club. And Billy Epstein is sitting next to me, drunk, cussing out **Jack Paar**. Now, I've looked at Jack Paar every night for five years. And when he go off I sit in the mirror til 5 o'clock morning going through my act. *What am I doing when I get on the Jack Paar show.* And had it not been for Billy Epstein, I wouldn't be here now. Because when he cussed Jack Paar, I almost grabbed him because Jack Paar was my man. "This here, man, Jack Paar, he ain't never let a nigger sit on the couch." I said, "What?" "You heard me, nigger. He ain't never let a nigger sit on the couch." And I didn't know that. I look at him every night, man, and never new. And if you were a Negro, all you could do

is your act and leave. Now, that was my man. *Robert's Show club* was at 63rd and Cottage. I lived at 95th Street. I walked all the way home that night crying. And I never told my wife. Never told. So at the Playboy club, everybody -- that was the hottest club in the world because it was the only one in the world. And because of that book people were coming in from all over the world. And that was -- wasn't nothing like having a Playboy key.

01:23;11

And so the -- the *Time* magazine science editor from Cape Canaveral, Florida was in town. Wanted to go to the Playboy club, and some kind of wait. They had gave out all the comps they had. And so a guy said, "I got a letter from a Negro comic over there. He wanted somebody to come and interview him." And he says, "So why don't you go over there on the pretense to interview Dick Gregory, and you get in." And so two pages in *Time* magazine. Not by an entertainment writer, but a science editor that just wanted to get in the Playboy club. Now, *Time* comes out on Sunday in New York, and **Jack Paar** read it and went out of his mind. And so my wife picked it up the phone and she just held it in her hand, and said, "It's here- What you say was going to happen" She didn't know. So I get on the phone. "Dick Gregory, Mr. So and So. I'm Jack Paar's

producer. What a fantastic article in *Time* magazine. Mr. Paar would like you on the show tonight." I said, "I don't -- I don't want to work the show." "Dick, I know you think this is a prank." "No, I believe you. I don't want to work the show." "Why?" "Because the Negroes never sit down on the couch." And I hung up and started crying. That's the first time my wife knew that I would not work a Jack Paar show. And so while I'm trying to explain it to her through my tears, the phone rang again and now it's Jack Paar. "Dick Gregory, Mr. Paar. How come you don't want to work my show?" "Because the Negroes never sit on the couch." "Yes, they have." You know, the stuff is so messed up, he probably wasn't even aware of it. Well, so I went in and I sit on the couch. And I did not know if you didn't sit on the couch you didn't become a family. Once I sit on the couch that first time, my salary jumped from two hundred fifty dollars a week to five thousand dollars a night. That's how powerful Jack Paar was. If you sit on the couch you became a family member. And NBC got so many calls that night the circuits blew out.

01:25;38

... And when you first start, you're not working at the big club, you're working in bars and stuff. Mission Walker, Indiana, try that one as a Negro. Mission Walker, Indiana, huh, in 1961. Please. So I go there. But before, if you are a nightclub owner, or a tavern owner, these are your customers. I don't... I have never came there and bought nothing for you. I'm taking something from you. I'm taking a salary from you. So one of your customers call me a nigger, you lose. And if a fight starts between him and... So I had to be ready, so I had my wife call me dirty names, so...

02:02;02

DANA: Hmmm.

GREGORY: To get the answer. But she's too kind and sweet, and she just could never mean enough. So one day I come in and I attacked her verbally. And she turned around with that little sweet kindness. *That's* what I'm looking for. I didn't even realize it wasn't the word, it was a facial expression. So it happened in Mission Walker, Indiana. "And what's that nigger doing on stage?" And everybody -- I can't make you laugh if you upset over what some redneck done said. So I said, "Shh- Did you all hear? He just called me Roy Roger's horse. He called me Trigger." And they laugh, haha. Now, you know he called me a nigger, but

my contract reads every time I hear that word I get fifty dollars more. So in unison-- let's all go together..." You past it and then you, you know... That part was the only thing I prepared for.

02:03;14

And then one day in the black nightclub, there's some drunken hecklers. And they really bothered me. So one Saturday I came in. Saturday afternoon. Private show club, seat fifteen hundred people -- tables. And I came in and worked my act to an empty room. And I left there saying, "God, a room full of drunks that's heckling is better than empty tables." And I learned to have a profound respect for that audience because they the ones that kick you in, and you just have to learn to get around the heckling or a waiter or waitress drop a tray. That's your job to do. It's interesting as an entertainer, particularly a comic. People come out to see you. They don't come to see you die. They pull in -- they come by you -- boy, I mean you got to be real bad to bum because they come in there. You represent them, man. They -- they didn't come in in their work clothes. They went home, took a bath, showered, and got dressed to come out and entertain their self. And you part of that entertainment. See, most Americans don't know how to enjoy yourself on the way to

the party. You got husband and wife be in the car,
boyfriend and girlfriend be in the car don't talk to each
other 'til they get to the party and they all smiles. My
philosophy was you can't have fun on your way to the party
you shouldn't go.

02:05;04

02:10;38

I got out of show business because my wife and I made a
deal. We would never make a decision with the civil rights
movement based on how will this affect my career. But a
decision would be made on how could my career affect the
movement. But I had a problem with you bring me into your
club and you advertise 'five weeks' and I'm in jail. That
wasn't fair to you. And that was the problem that I had.
That's why in 1973 I got out of show business.

02:15;32

And let me just say this. Ten billion years from now --
ten million years from now, if there's anyone on this
planet, Dick Gregory will survive the history but not as a
comic. They wouldn't even waste their time with that. I
remember when I was a little boy, four years old. I

couldn't read, I couldn't write. I didn't know what a map was. I didn't know Saint Louis, Missouri was in the same state with Kansas City. But I knew where Jerusalem was because of a man named Jesus. One day when America cease existing, they will always know where America was because they'll have to tell you where **King** and this great movement came from. That's what I thank comedy for; introducing me to this piece over here which changed my life. I'm respected all over the world today now because I can't go to Paris and make people laugh and speak French. I can go to Paris and get proper respect from the human rights people around the world because of not being funny, not being the first Negro to work a white night club. But the human rights part and that's what the movement did for me.

02:16:50

GREGORY: Hey man, somebody walk in your house - I mean, if you believe in killing, and somebody walk in your house and going to kill your wife and family, you ain't telling no jokes, man. Jokes is when you comfortable.

02:17:56

DANA: Yeah.

GREGORY: You know, jokes is -- something comes over you when you walk out on that stage if your momma died or you got

problems. Once you walk out there something happens. Tooth hurt, sore throat. You can walk out there and something happens. Something comes over you and you don't even feel nothing until you get back off stage and then your knee go back to -- to hurting again. Well, I think we all have this power. But in the human body, we tap into it more in show business because it gives us this -- this job gives us this extra bonus. But you see -- you see emergency people do it. You see a mother whose car fell over on the baby, she lift it up and pull the baby out. If you told her to go pick that car up, she couldn't, you know. And so, no, I had no idea what he {Martin Luther King, Jr.} was going to say to me when he hugged me and told me, "They're going to kill me." I didn't know what to say. I said -- I didn't know. I said, "Hey, Doc, they're going to kill us all. Better you than me."

02:18;59

DANA: [laughs]

GREGORY: And when I stepped back I saw this look on his face. And somebody captured the picture. And you see this watery -- in his eyes. But that picture will be worth millions one day. And let me tell you something. World works like comedy. When there's a tragedy, now you can't walk up on stage today and do an hours worth of jokes about what

happened in New Orleans. They'll come a time you can. There'll come a time that'll be so... Well, let me tell you what time. You and I were standing outside the Ford Theater when Lincoln was shot. When they bring the body out, blood splash on your shirt and my shirt. I go wash my shirt. You kept your shirt. And now, 2005, your children's children's children's children have that shirt. Who knew back then they'd have DNA, that they could prove that was Abraham Lincoln's blood. Man, there ain't a Rembrandt that would be worth what that shirt is. That's what time'll do. That's what time... It's incredible what time will do. You just -- it heals everything. And *then* you can come in with comedy or come in with -- with a song. Now, you can do stuff with music and get away with it. You know. If -- one day just go get *Strangers in the night*, you know. And just listen to the words. {singing} *Strangers in the night, duh-dah-duh-dah-duh, da-da-da-duh.* It's about two people sitting in a bar and they don't know each other. And they glance and the eyes catch. And they end up in bed. When that song was written women couldn't go to bars. That's a gay song. So you can hide a whole lots of stuff. I mean, when I was a little boy we go to the circus. Dah-dah-duh-dah. Duh-dah-dah. [laughter] But it's the whole time, time, time. There will come a day

in America that no black or decent person will sing certain things.

02:21;38

03:12;43

MATZ: Your ability to go out and do four hours which I've heard about you've done --

GREGORY: Yeah.

MATZ: -- where does the material come from?

GREGORY: Well, you -- you create it as you work. I mean, you -- you, you, you... it's Just life. You know, just... And just growing up. Just growing up. The stuff you heard the old folks say. You see, I didn't have the privilege of seeing white comics. I'm born and raised in Saint Louis. And there were no black night clubs. So if you lived in Chicago, or New York, Detroit, where they had black nightclubs, there was no television when I was born. So when I look back now and realize, you know where I got my... it's from the black preacher. You can't find no more humor.. I mean, here's -- here's... Here's a minister that have a different sermon every Sunday for fifty-two weeks. Have no writers. And funny. Phew. And I realized that's... I'm going to have to sit back because, I mean, I can't justify where it came from. And then also adding up

since I started making money to get writers. I mean before I hit big to bring in writers. And -- and, and when I came through people, you know, thought that you was a brilliant comic if you didn't need writers. I said, well, I'm used to justify mine. Henry Ford don't make his own cars. That's the mark of success when you don't have to do your... What my genius was, I paid twenty-five thousand dollars for a piece. One of the biggest, wealthiest people in Hollywood is **Ed. Weinberger**, and he worked for me. I mean, well, he wasn't even funny. He write this whole funny -- he was writing Jewish stuff. But we hung out. We... I mean, I had a black guy named **Jim Sanders**. They lived with me until we came to Chicago. I put them in a hotel. And we go out on a job, I get a suite, they get a suite. I get a Lincoln, they get a Lincoln. And when I went south to go to jail they was there with me. And so my writers was never permitted to bring me any new stuff until thirty minutes before I was getting ready to go on. I didn't want to make stuff work just because I paid. If it's funny, Jesus. And Bob Auburn told me once, "You know, you're wasting money.. seven nights a row, you don't use of none of my..." "I use everything you give me. I just put it in because I don't memorize it and it comes out Dick Gregory. It don't come out white Bob Auburn. You know.

And so that -- that's... And so a lot of comics have failed because they think because they paid for a piece they have to use it. It's a tax-write off, so what you worried about? Just write off. And that's the way I've always felt about serious research. I used to tell Ali, man, you know, "you make enough money, get some money to get the *New York Times* book review and have him read all the books and give you a synopsis". You on TV? Just don't go on just being a boxer, you know. You brilliant. I know your head, I know (___??). And this is, you know, this is America. Be that.

03:16;26

MATZ: Use the soapbox.

GREGORY: Yeah, you know.

MATZ: You've -- you said your uncle's funny, guy in the street's funny. What's the difference between being funny and being a comedian?

GREGORY: Timing. Timing. The best laugh you ever had in your life didn't come from a professional comedian, it came from friends and relatives. A professional comedian is nothing but timing. And I tell these youngsters now if you going to -- you got to work! You know, forget the money! Fine. When I was coming up, I'd stand on the corner. I knew where the people who worked for the welfare office in

Chicago. I knew what time they took their lunch. I'd be right there waiting for them. "Hey, man, let me tell you something funny." At night time I'd be at the bar putting my little group together. "Man, let me tell you something about a..." In the black nightclub I learned something. They make me do it any but in the black nightclub where I came up I didn't break in new material until the first and fifteenth because that was payday and I noticed they laughed better on the first. I never broke in no new stuff in between that.

03:17;32

DANA: That's great.

03:40;30

MATZ: Looking back now in hindsight, is there any advice you would offer to someone entering comedy now that you wish you had when you were starting?

GREGORY: No. The -- the comedy is -- you -- Here's what I tell everybody in -- in comedy. I say go to an old bookstore and get you all the old books. Milton Berle's ten thousand blah, blah, blah, and then read them.

MATZ: Comedy books.

GREGORY: **Comedy books.** Because, you see, if he was just starting comedy today, you know, then you go and you get the books and you see New Year's Eve jokes, New Year's jokes, Christmas jokes, and you just switch them and make them up to the date. And then once you got this --see once you walked out there and you know, you might not even need it. Because you can cook. Long as I know I got something to fall back on. I got... Once you become a millionaire don't nobody want you to pay. They grab the tab. Once you become rich and famous you can't buy nothing. Well, it's the same thing in your head as a comic. Once you walk out there you got... And I can tell a Christmas joke in August. Depends on how you frame it. You know, how you frame it. And then your head opens up like -- joke I use-- ground hog. I say, "Can't believe these white folks is this clever." I say, "Ground hog's February second. And on February second, if the groundhog sees his shadow, six more weeks of winter." I say, "Now spring don't come until March the twenty-first. That is six weeks. Hmm? So I'm saying but you free then to invent -- to -- to create... Say if the ground hog sees your shadow six more weeks of winter. So then I switch it and say that was -- I was in New York on February second and I was doing this radio show and this white dude said, I mean, it's great -- because

today's groundhog day. "What do you think will happen if the groundhog sees his shadow?" So you back up. I don't play that mess. And he turned on em. "What do you mean, you all American? Unpatriotic? I say, "No, no, no. I'm sorry. I didn't know you were going to take it that way, ask me again." He said, "Today's groundhog day boy. What do you think will happen if the groundhog sees his shadow?" I said, "Six more weeks of winter, sir." I said, "But Since we were going to play it. Let's play it. Suppose the groundhog come out today and don't see his shadow, but see five black dudes. What does that mean, white boy?" He got nervous. Said, "I don't know. Six more weeks of basketball, chump."

03:43;14

[loud laughter]

GREGORY: So you just -- you just add and you bring it up. Then old books... When we went in -- we went into a drug culture so you switch the alcohol. You got to be careful with those books because the woman always got the buyt, cuz it's sexist- in and the whole thing. But that's where you -- that's what I would tell him. Bill Cosby would tell you that I always -- he gives me credit for him being - because I said "Until you become a household word, you're just playing. Whatever you do, work to be a household

word. And so comedy today is not likeable. I mean, you got comedy stores. So you got folks that are so funny today that we don't even know about because they're not on TV. Richard Pryor probably destroyed more comics than anybody in the history of the planet because of profanity. And if you take all of Richard Pryor's comedy and clip out all his profanity they're just as funny because he never used profanity as a punch line. The young punkster came through. That's all they heard. You see, when I listened to Richard Pryor, I heard his genius. When I listened to Redd Fox, I heard the profanity. So I couldn't bring a Red Fox record out until all the good Christians had left. But you could bring a Richard Pryor album, with all the children-- Because of his genius, except there's one thing wrong with that. There is no genius to a little child. All they heard was the profanity. So when they grow u they wanted to emulate Richard Pryor. So everybody other word was a cussword. That's Richard. You trace that back to his genius. And -- and so... but there's comics out there because of comedy stores. I mean, it's just splitting. I mean, I came through. You might be lucky to work Second City. But there's so many comics. And then the whole south thing. Remember, after I hit big I still couldn't play the south. But today you ... Mississippi, comedy

clubs, Alabama comedy clubs, women, you know, Indians, gays. The whole thing has often -- and that's a good thing. To see a country that's able to laugh at itself. That's a very good thing.

03:45:52

03:46:10

MATZ: The importance of developing a technique.

GREGORY: No, it feels on you. That that's what's different.

You can come on out and do your whole act just about being tired. And your sister can come out and your bother can come out. And do a whole act just about being energetic. Energetic. One of the funniest things I ever seen in my life. I came in caught searching, and the amateur hour was on at Apollo. And very seldom you see a white -- so I didn't catch his act. And he was walking onstage and he came back. Now remember, all black audience. And he said "I want to say thanks to all of my black brothers out there for coming in the white community, taking them ugly white bitches off our hand". And they went out of their mind. Sisters was laughing so hard. Their wigs was coming off. [laughter] And so -- and so I didn't see his act.

But I imagine the technique was -- you can do it either real slow or real fast. You can come out and be -- sound

like you're real brilliant or real stupid. That's the technique that you -- that separates you. And you can do somebody else's joke. Your technique don't sound like it's -- you can do old jokes. Old standard jokes that's been out there. Look at the preacher. You know. You got different preacher -- and they're working out the same Bible. You can't find technique show any better than ministry. The same Bible. Ten Commandments never change. The King James never change. And yet there's -- that work out the same mouth. But then you have leeway because once you master that, you got leeway to take it to a -- you know, I look at -- somebody said that if I was going to get the electric chair what would I have for my last supper. I said "I wouldn't have a last supper, that first one didn't come out too well."

03:48;12

DANA: [laughter]

GREGORY: Please. You know. And -- and so no. Technique is brilliant. It's a good question. You develop your own technique. That's you. That fits you. And that could be anything from sitting on a park bench with a newspaper. Or sitting with a baby carriage talking about -- to a baby that's not even there. Or just talking about how bad your luck is or how good your luck is. No. Technique is what

makes all the -- that separates you from -- like Bill Cosby. The greatest storyteller. Not one-liners. And that he knows how to breathe. And he can keep you all the way through twelve minutes to get to that. And use his face. You look at Red Skelton. Jesus. What he could do just face. Pantomime and the whole -- the whole bit was just outrageously funny. And so yeah. Right now if you went into a comedy club. And I went with you and I had to tell them something, I'd say two things. Three things. First, go get them old and then develop your own. But just see that. And then technique. And then remember you make your living off your brain. You have to rest it. That's very important. If you make your living dancing then you got to take care of your feet. Footbaths. You make your living off of this. That brain. You can't spend all your nights at parties. And drinking and having fun. Because it'll show up at the -- at the end. Why you think all these old songwriters and singers can't get a hit? They tired. You got hung up in the bullshit of celebrity status. And they go to bed four o'clock in the morning. After been partying all night. See, you can take this, take care of your body. Because you going to make more money on one engagement than most folks in America -- not in the Third World -- make in a lifetime. In a year. And

there should be a respect for that. But we don't. It's just another party. And then they go by the wayside and then they -- you know you get hooked up in -- in alcohol and in drinking and what have you. But no. Technique is -- because the youngsters are brighter today than ever before. Because the television. See we have totally underestimated the power of television. When I was a little boy born in Nineteen Thirty-two when did I see a dead person? Where would I see one? At a funeral? How old are you when your mother, father take you to a funeral? A plane crash in Afghanistan today them bodies is in your living room tonight. And so the whole mindset done changed on young folks. And us old folks don't know it. You can tell old folks -- I tell black folks, I say you know you think the more you suffer the more you going sit in the right hand of God. Y'all in for a big rude -- God and poverty do not peacefully coexist. You want to find out what God ain't, go through the community and find out what poverty is. And God ain't there. That's a game we play. *I don't know what's wrong with these young ones today but we was their age, we didn't have to lock no doors. You didn't have nothing.*

DANA: [laughter]

GREGORY: You serious? I mean this whole -- you look at the whole -- and you can just switch -- it's so much. And it's different types of humor. You know I mean this here Shelly Berman do coffee, milk and tea. Just for a hit. I couldn't go in a black nightclub and do that. Because ninety-nine point nine point nine percent of black folk never been on airplane. But I could switch that to a Greyhound. And be hilarious. Just hilarious. And now you tell me everybody's on a plane. See plane was crashing and -- and they had to -- got rid of the cargo, we had to get rid of the weight, and we going take people alphabetically so me and this black guy sitting there. Say African Americans. And he got ready to move. "Sh. That ain't us." Black. "Sh. Don't move, don't move." Colored. "Sh. Say when we going to go? We Zulus."

[laughter]

03:53;20

GREGORY: You know. So the whole thing. And you know don't be afraid of people. Because when you're there you're by yourself. Not a singer. Not music. Not -- you out there all by yourself. And do it. Be prepared. Don't go up tired. Because the people coming to see you tired? Worked all week and they come there and give you that money. They ain't asking you for nothing. You don't even have to make

them laugh. They'd like it, but if you don't they not going ask for their money back. And so if I was with young comics today I would just say learn to have a profound respect for that audience. Profound respect. That's -- that's your whole piece. Not your mama. Not your daddy. Your brother and sister. These are people who don't know you, that's coming in and when they leave their arthritis don't hurt. Hm? Their headache's gone. That's what -- what you can do, with that.

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End of Excerpt from Interview - DICK GREGORY