



Dick Gregory

Richard (Claxton) Gregory was born October 12, 1932 in St. Louis, Mo. Reared in poverty, Gregory began working at an early age to help support his family. He was involved in sports and social causes in high school, and he entered Southern Illinois University on an athletic scholarship in 1951, excelling as a middle-distance runner. He was named the university's outstanding student athlete in

1953, the same year he left college to join the U.S. Army, where he hosted and performed comedy routines in military shows.

Dick Gregory began his professional career in 1958 as a master of ceremonies at several Chicago nightclubs. Gregory achieved national recognition following his debut at the Playboy Club in Chicago in 1961. The one-nighter turned into a six-week stint that earned him a profile in Time magazine and a television appearance on the Tonight Show of the time, The Jack Paar Show. In his numerous subsequent television, nightclub, and concert routines, he targeted poverty, segregation, and racial discrimination. Here was a 28-year-old black man blasting the injustice and hypocrisies of segregation in front of white audiences- and leaving them in stitches. He gained fame as a comedian for his satirical views on American racial attitudes. For example, on suicides:

"An example of black people's progress in America is that what we used to call Negro History Week is now called Black History Month. Of course, wouldn't you know that when they got around to giving us a month, it would be the month of February, with all them days missing? And when you think about the month of February, I think about the fact that most Black folks I know not only don't like February, they don't even understand it."

"whites kill themselves by jumping from a tall building, blacks kill themselves by jumping from a low basement"

In addition, wrote several books of racial humor, first, "Gregory has added a new dimension to the world of comedy," wrote Playboy Club owner Hugh Hefner in the introduction to Gregory's book **From the Back of the Bus** (1962). "He is a black funnyman who does not get his laughs by fearing ghosts in B movies, rattling 'dem bones' or other such demeaning antics. He is another much-needed spokesman for his people, one who can reach the ear of the world that makes it listen."



Secondly, Dick Gregory shocked the country by titling his second book, an auto-biography, **NIGGER!** (1964). He described his humble beginnings, and the racism he experienced at Southern Illinois University in the 1950s. Concerning his presidential campaign, he also wrote **Write Me In** (1968). There was also **No More Lies: The Myth and the Reality of American History** (1971).

Active in the Civil Rights Movement, Dick Gregory was arrested for Civil disorder during a 1963 civil rights demonstration in Birmingham Alabama. Gregory was an outspoken critic of American involvement in the Vietnam War. In 1968, he believed that the Federal Bureau of Investigation played a role in the assassination of civil rights leader Martin Luther King, Jr. Gregory's personal study into the matter resulted in his book *Code Name "Zorro"* (1978). A congressional investigation disagreed with his theory.

In the early 1970s Gregory abandoned comedy to focus on his political interests, which widened from race relations to include such issues as violence, world hunger, capital punishment, drug abuse, and poor health care. He generated particular attention for his more than a hundred hunger fasts. At this time he became a vegetarian, a marathon runner, and an expert on nutrition. In the 1980's, he began a soon successful business venture with his nutritional product, the "Bahamian Diet," around which he built Dick Gregory Health Enterprises, Inc. Through his company, he targeted the lower life expectancy of black Americans, which he attributed to poor nutrition and drug and alcohol abuse.