

From the Back of the Bus: Dick Gregory and Celebrity in the 1963 Birmingham Campaign
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Comedian Dick Gregory's set in 1962 included a bit about the South that made the audience of the Chicago Playboy Club roar: "*I know a Southerner that owned an amusement park and almost went out of his mind — over where to put us on the merry-go-round.*"¹ This joke was an irreverent and insightful one, like so many in Gregory's comedic repertoire, about the state of race relations in the South and the segregation that permeated the lives of Southern African Americans. Gregory was no ordinary comic, however. Not only was he acutely aware of the color line that existed in both the North and South, he went on to actively work for changes to those systems that provided his so much fuel for his sets. Gregory was not satisfied to only lambast segregation and racism from the stage, but went to the South to lend his assistance to protest movements in Mississippi and, most notably, "Project C" in the 1963 Birmingham Campaign. In this endeavor, Gregory was not alone. Other entertainers, like Al Hibbler and Harry Belafonte, came to the aid of Birmingham's African American community to lend their voices, fame, and notoriety to the cause. These and other notable celebrities, in conjunction with the media, played an integral part in creating awareness for SCLC's 1963 civil rights campaign in Birmingham and influenced, not only domestic and world opinion, but President Kennedy's response in the light of the negative press surrounding the "Children's Crusade".

Richard Claxon Gregory was born in St. Louis, Missouri in 1932 to parents Lucille and Presley Gregory. One of six children, Dick Gregory learned quickly about the problems of being born black and poor in the United States. Even his formative memories made it into his act,

¹ Dick Gregory, *From the Back of the Bus*. (New York: Avon Books, 1962), 115.

“Personally, I like negroes. I like them so much, I even had them for parents.”² His earliest job was shining shoes, and it taught him how the Southern system worked. In one instance, he had his teeth kicked in after touching a white woman’s leg while he shined her shoes.³ In another, he wondered why his customers would rub his head “for good luck” after a shine. When he found out, he quit.⁴ Gregory went on to learn additional “lessons” like these. Gregory, “never learned hate at home, or shame. I had to go to school for that.” This lesson came at the age of seven when a teacher humiliated him in front of his entire class when she declared that a community collection was being taken up, “for you and your kind.”⁵ What Gregory’s mother Lucille *did* teach him at home was “that laughing is a better way out of difficulty than crying. Once a man laughs with you, he can't laugh at you.”⁶

Developed on schoolyard playgrounds, tested as a performer in the Special Services of the Army and refined in small clubs, comedy was Gregory’s ticket out of the slums of St. Louis. It wasn’t an easy road for Gregory who often took other small jobs like washing cars while he performed at night, but a lucky break got him a one-night shot in Chicago’s Playboy Club. Gregory’s act pulled no punches about racism, segregation and race politics, but his disarming style made his audience, “Chicagoans, Northerners and Southerners laugh, clap and beg for more.”⁷ His original one-night stint in Chicago went on to last well over two months. There had been many African American comics before Gregory, but they played to African American audiences at black clubs and theaters. This was different, Gregory was playing to white

² Gregory, *From the Back of the Bus*. 11.

³ “Barbed Humour: Richard Gregory”, *The Economist*, September 9, 2017, 89.

⁴ Gregory, *From the Back of the Bus*. 11.

⁵ Dick Gregory and Robert Lipsyte, *Nigger: An Autobiography by Dick Gregory*, (New York: Washington Square Press, 1964), 29-30.

⁶ “Barbed Humour: Richard Gregory”, *The Economist*, 89.

⁷ Gregory, *From the Back of the Bus*. 14.

audiences and had broken into the mainstream. “Makes you wonder. When I left St. Louis, I was making 5 dollars a night. Now I’m getting \$5,000 a week — for saying the same things out loud I used to say under my breath,” joked Gregory.⁸ Social and racial commentary remained at the heart of his act, remembering from his youth that, “once I got them laughing, I could say anything.”⁹ Within a year he had an article in Time Magazine, *Humor, Integrated*, a comedy album, *Dick Gregory in Living Black and White*, had appeared on the Jack Paar show and had an offer for three years of regular performances at the Playboy Club.¹⁰ Already, then, Gregory was breaking down barriers and many recognized him as the “Jackie Robinson of Comedy”.

As such, Gregory lent his new fame and celebrity to work for the civil rights movement that was taking shape in Mississippi and Alabama in 1963. His first, less comedic, act was in Greenwood, Mississippi in April to support of a voter registration drive in Leflore County. Gregory spoke to a meeting a Centennial Missionary Baptist Church and walked with demonstrators, during a march outside the county courthouse the following day. Police arrested nineteen of the participants, but not Gregory, even as he hurled insult after insult at the police and police commissioner, B.A. Hammond and repeatedly called them “dirty dogs” (*New York Times*, April 4, 1963). Gregory’s participation did not come without consequence, however, and was fired from his regular stint at the Galaxy Supper Club in Queens, New York when he announced that he was sending his salary to Greenwood to aid the voter registration effort (*Pittsburg Courier*, May 4, 1963). Additionally, Gregory sent, via airlift, 16,000 pounds of food and clothing for the relief of thousands of African Americans taken off relief rolls in

⁸ Gregory, *From the Back of the Bus*. 21.

⁹ Gregory, *From the Back of the Bus*. 12.

¹⁰ Gregory, *From the Back of the Bus*. 16.

Greenwood.¹¹ This was only the beginning of Gregory's "new act" in 1963... the next one, as civil rights activist, was far more serious as Gregory planned to go to Birmingham, the most segregated city in the South.

In the spring of 1963, Birmingham, Alabama was a city about to explode into the newspaper headlines of civil rights history, and media coverage was essential. In April, Martin Luther King and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference began the Birmingham Campaign, a combination of boycotts of downtown Birmingham businesses and civil rights demonstrations. While the boycotts were having an impact, the progress was moving at a snail's pace and by May the Birmingham Campaign had stalled out.¹² King realized that the dwindling press coverage was killing the movement, "the press is leaving, we've got to get going," as King's hopes to "fill the jails" with the adults of Birmingham had fallen short.¹³ But the movement would soon be invigorated with a secret weapon: children. Brainchild of the SCLC's James Bevel and Ike Reynolds, this controversial new phase of the movement was known as the "Children's Crusade". As planned, the use of students in this phase of the campaign recaptured the attention of the media as thousands of youths, some as young as six or seven, were arrested. The demonstrations forced America to watch the brutalities inflicted upon the youth that stood up to the authorities that protected the racial hierarchies in Birmingham, the South's crown jewel of industrialism. Newspapers carried reports of the brutalities across the country and, while southern papers were fairly quiet on the subject—burying these reports deep in their editions, northern newspapers put them front page for all to see. The *New York Times* printed headlines

¹¹ *NAACP Monthly Report Mar - 13 May 1963*, May, 1963, A. T. Walden Papers, 1885-1965, Kenan Research Center at the Atlanta History Center.

¹² Glenn T. Eskew, *But for Birmingham: The Local and National Movements in the Civil Rights Struggle*. (North Carolina: North Carolina University Press, 1997), 255.

¹³ Eskew, *But for Birmingham: The Local and National Movements in the Civil Rights Struggle*, 261.

like, “Violence Explodes at Racial Protests in Alabama,” and “Dogs and Hoses Repulse Negroes at Birmingham,” (*New York Times*, May , 1963). The *Pittsburg Courier* ran stories like “Are Ala. Cops Trying to Provoke Violence?” and “‘Indiscriminate’ Use of Dogs, Fire Hoses Questioned” (*Pittsburgh Courier*, May 1963). In addition to the headlines, graphic photos were printed to bring the imagery of police dogs, high pressure fire hoses... the actions of the police and fire departments of Birmingham, which words alone could not capture, into the living rooms and dinner tables of the nation. In this phase of the movement, others came to the aid of the child heroes that awakened many in middle America to the plight of African Americans in the deep south, and come to the aid of Birmingham and lend their voice in the battle for racial equality and social justice.

While credit is due to many, Dick Gregory, comedian and entertainer turned social activist answered the call to action and arrived on May 6, 1963 to march with the African American youth of Birmingham to change the Jim Crow system in which the children lived. “Birmingham is a nice place to demonstrate, but I wouldn’t want to live there,” quipped Gregory (*New York Times*, September 9, 1963). Gregory marched out of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church with nineteen students and this time, unlike Greenwood, he was promptly arrested along with 1,000 other demonstrators that day. When he was asked to disperse with his charges, he responded defiantly, “No. We’ll stay here” (*Minneapolis Star*, May 7, 1963). The story hit the AP and UPI wires and spread all across the country, even ending up in the Alabama Journal. While the headlines differed by region, the story was the same and Gregory’s name led to hundreds of papers picking up the story. Gregory had arrived in Birmingham just three hours earlier and now found himself sitting in a Birmingham jail cell. Once released on bond, Gregory accused his jailers of police brutality, “you leave the world when you go into the Birmingham

jail,” and charged that five police officers used, “billy clubs, hammers and sawed-off pool sticks,” to beat him (*New York Times*, May 10, 1963). Again, the wires lit up and disseminated the story. Even after the ordeal, Gregory’s sense of humor was irrepressible, “the food [in jail] was garbage and that meant it was like home cooking,” (*New York Times*, May 10, 1963). For his defiance, Gregory received a 180 day jail sentence and a one hundred dollar fine. The judge who sentenced him, according to Gregory, had his own brand of ironic wit, “I’m not giving you six months because you’re a Negro. I just hate comics,” (*Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, September 18, 1963).

While he was the only entertainment celebrity to be arrested during the Children’s Crusade, Gregory was not the only celebrity that came to the aid of Birmingham. Others lent their names to the demonstrations and, increased the visibility of the cause through the media. Singer and actor Harry Belafonte arrived in Birmingham to, “back up the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. in his battle against segregation,” (*Pittsburgh Courier*, May 4, 1963). Jazz singer Al Hibbler arrived in Birmingham on May 4 amid criticism from both friend and foe. Hibbler, was, according to his former bandmate Ralph Porter, “not the type to walk the picket line,” and criticized him, “for getting mixed-up in the Birmingham anti-segregation protest,” (*Pittsburgh Courier*, May 4, 1963). Screen and stage were not the only celebrities represented as notable sports figures arrived on the scene to bring attention to the struggles in Birmingham. UPI carried the story and a photo of boxer Floyd Patterson shaking hands with baseball legend and civil rights barrier breaker Jackie Robinson as they announced that they would arrive in Birmingham to support the demonstrations on May 14 (*Pittsburgh Courier*, May 10, 1963). As celebrities descended on Birmingham, so did the media.

Not all of the celebrities that came to the aid of Birmingham did so in person and, while entertainers brought attention to the plight in Birmingham to middle America, some had their sights on a larger target. The May 18 edition of the *Pittsburgh Courier* shouted in its headlines “B’Ham Explodes; JFK must act!”. This was a sentiment that was finding increasing amounts of traction with the press and the public as the crisis in Birmingham grew. As early as May 4, a telegram imploring President Kennedy to act had been sent to the White House. The telegram was signed by “The Arts Group”, the same group of actors and celebrities that had sent a similar note to Kennedy a month earlier after the arrest of Dr. King in Birmingham. Both notes begged for the President to act to stop the injustices in Birmingham. The May 4 telegram, signed by nearly fifty notable actors, actresses, musicians, religious leaders and political activists expressed their deep disappointment with the President over his failure to act and uphold the civil rights of African Americans in the South. It railed against the failure of Kennedy’s administration to protect the children of Birmingham and called his lack of action a “moral collapse.”¹⁴ The scathing telegram, signed by Marlon Brando, Diahann Carroll, Lena Horne, Ossie Davis, Paul Newman, Sidney Poitier, Eli Wallach and Shelley Winters, presented a virtual who’s who in Hollywood. Jackie Robinson, who had been active in the NAACP, sent Kennedy a telegram before his trip to Birmingham with Patterson. It had a similar tone and message that the steps toward racial equality had been, “miserably slow, as is being demonstrated in Birmingham.... moderation and gradualism, as far as civil rights are concerned, are antique words to say the least.” He also included a reminder of the political peril for Kennedy when he suggested, “the civil rights platform — which was a major stepping stone for you in your quest for the

¹⁴ The Arts Group to John F. Kennedy, telegram, May 4, 1963. ST 1 (Alabama): General, 1963:1 January-10 May. John F. Kennedy Presidential Library.

Presidency, has collapsed.”¹⁵ Not all of the communications Kennedy received were so bleak. A telegram arrived to the White House the next day, this one from Gospel singer Mahalia Jackson. Her tone was more sympathetic and optimistic as she told Kennedy that, “all my people who look to you in this crucial hour [in Birmingham].... I can count on you,” with a final reminder that the events in Birmingham reflected on, “the United States and [its] world image.”¹⁶

The message in Jackson’s telegram wasn’t hyperbolic sentiment, indeed the whole world was watching the events unfold in Birmingham. The *New York Times* mentioned that the Soviet Union was using the events in Alabama as a propaganda tool of its Cold War rhetoric, a typical tactic of the USSR, as the *Times* London bureau reported that *Pravda* had called the events in Birmingham, “Monstrous Crimes Among Racists in the United States”s. *L’Unita*, a communist newspaper in Rome, reported that the demonstrations, “showed a revolution was under way in the United States,” (*New York Times*, May 10, 1963). The same edition of the *Times* reported that there were protests in front of the UN Headquarters in New York adding additional bad publicity for the Kennedy administration. Telegrams arrived the White House from the other side of the globe. Members of the Australian Parliament urged the President to, “halt the acts of barbarism against negroes in Birmingham.”¹⁷ Ten thousand carpenters from the Australian Building Workers Union protested “against the jailing [of] children in Alabama.”¹⁸ The publicity of the demonstrations was working and had a global impact. Donald M. Wilson, acting director of the USIA, in a report to Kennedy on May 13, he describes the negative reactions in, not only

¹⁵ Jackie Robinson to John F. Kennedy, telegram, May 7, 1963, ST 1 (Alabama): General, 1963:1 January-10 May. John F. Kennedy Presidential Library.

¹⁶ Mahalia Jackson to John F. Kennedy, telegram, May 8, 1963, ST 1 (Alabama): General, 1963:1 January-10 May. John F. Kennedy Presidential Library.

¹⁷ W.M. Rigby to John F. Kennedy, telegram, May 10, 1963. ST 1 (Alabama): General, 1963:1 January-10 May. John F. Kennedy Presidential Library.

¹⁸ Building Workers Union of Queensland to John F. Kennedy, telegram, May 7, 1963, ST 1 (Alabama): General, 1963:1 January-10 May. John F. Kennedy Presidential Library.

the Soviet Union, but also in Africa, Asia, Western Europe and Latin America. Wilson's report called the events, "a blot on the U.S. image," as various countries condemned the violence as "brigandry and gangsterism" perpetrated by "white racist.... hooliganism"¹⁹

Kennedy had to act. All of the negative press, both domestically and internationally had compelled him to do so. On June 11, 1963 Kennedy delivered his Address to the Nation on Civil Rights. In it he reaffirmed his administration's commitment to civil rights and challenged the country "to live up to its promise," of providing equality and freedom to all citizens of the United States. Kennedy's speech was more than just idealistic rhetoric as he went on to describe the legislation that ultimately became the Civil Rights Act of 1964. He demanded that this country provide equality in education, public accommodations and promised enforcement with the entire legal apparatus and full weight of the executive office.²⁰ The following day, telegrams of support arrived en masse to the White House. Responses came from all over the country; from common citizens to Martin Luther King to praise the President and his message. Actor Tony Randall sent a telegram that simply read, "I love you."²¹ Mahalia Jackson, her faith in the President reaffirmed, sent a follow up to her previous telegram, "your speech made me so proud all over again that I am an American and that you are my President."²²

While several factors led to the resolution of the Birmingham crisis, the importance of media coverage played a crucial role in shaping its outcome. Activist celebrities, through the media, played an integral role in directing the eyes of the country and the world to the events in

¹⁹ Donald M. Wilson to John F. Kennedy, USIA Report, May 13, 1963, ST 1 (Alabama): General, 1963:1 January-10 May. John F. Kennedy Presidential Library.

²⁰ John F. Kennedy, "Report to the American People on Civil Rights" (Speech, CBS News, June 11, 1963).

²¹ Tony Randall to John F. Kennedy, June 12, 1963, telegram, ST 1 (Alabama): General, 1963:1 January-10 May. John F. Kennedy Presidential Library.

²² Mahalia Jackson to John F. Kennedy, telegram, June 13, 1964. ST 1 (Alabama): General, 1963:1 January-10 May. John F. Kennedy Presidential Library.

Birmingham in May of 1963. Dick Gregory and his appearance in Birmingham played a significant role in shaping the national reaction to the “Children’s Crusade” that ultimately led to the commitment of Kennedy and Johnson’s administrations to the pursuit of a rigorous civil rights agenda. Before the spring of 1963, Dick Gregory may have joked, “Let’s see now. They’ve broken the four-minute mile; the sixteen-foot pole vault — how ‘bout clearing the color bar next?”²³ but as a result of his participation in the Birmingham Campaign, Dick Gregory, and other celebrities, gave a leg up to finally clearing “the color bar” of Jim Crow.

²³ Gregory, *From the Back of the Bus*. 90.

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