

# APOLLO EDUCATION



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**APOLLO THEATER  
WALK OF FAME LEGEND**

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**JACKIE "MOMS" MABLEY**

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# JACKIE "MOMS" MABLEY

MABLEY'S  
**PIONEERING  
STYLE OF  
SITUATION  
COMEDY** HAS  
BEEN ADAPTED  
THROUGH THE YEARS TO  
BECOME WHAT WE KNOW  
ON TELEVISION TODAY AS A  
**'TV SITCOM'!**



**“H**e was so ugly. He had a job at a doctor’s office, standing beside the door making people sick!”

The audience erupted in laughter. On stage at the Apollo Theater, stood a grandmother-like figure dressed in oversized shoes, a flowery housedress with clashing colored tights, and a floppy cap atop her head. Her voice stuttered a bit as she addressed those in attendance as “my children.” The year was 1968, nearly 30 years after Jackie “Moms” Mabley performed at The Apollo for the first time.

Mabley had been a fixture in New York City nightclubs since moving to Harlem in 1921. Starting out as a singer and dancer, she turned to writing comedy at the encouragement of a husband-and-wife comedy act named Butterbeans and Susie. Little did Butterbeans and Susie know at the time, that their encouragement would inspire Mabley to become not only a pioneering **comedienne** in the entertainment industry, but also one of the most influential **stand-up comedians** of all time.

Born Loretta Mary Aiken on March 19, 1894 in Brevard, North Carolina, both of Aiken’s parents passed away by the time she was 14 years old. Overcome with grief, young Loretta ran away from home and joined a traveling **minstrel show**. Performing on the **T.O.B.A. Circuit** night after night, she became fascinated with the singing, dancing, and acting traditions of **Black Vaudeville** performers. There was one Black Vaudeville tradition that fascinated her most of all: comedy.

Mabley developed her own comedic style that interweaved jokes and storytelling. Telling humorous stories of situations familiar to her audience’s lives, she helped pioneer a comedic style called

## WORDS TO KNOW

**Comedienne** – A female comic.

**Situation Comedy** – A comedian (or group of comedians) relating familiar situations to audiences in a humorous way.

**Stand-Up Comedy** – A solo comedian telling humorous jokes within the framework of a story.

**Minstrel Show** – A stage show featuring singing, dancing, and comedy, performed entirely by white actors, crudely imitating African Americans and African American culture.

**Black Vaudeville** – Stage shows featuring African American actors performing their own unique style of singing, dancing, and comedy.

**T.O.B.A Circuit** – Standing for Theater Owners Booking Association, a network of theaters owned entirely by white owners, often referred to by African American performers as “Tough On Black Actors.”



**situation comedy.** Mabley was also one of the first entertainers in America to perform **stand-up comedy**, another comedic style of storytelling that became popular in the U.S. in the 1950s, and still remains popular today.

Mabley's pioneering style of situation comedy has been adapted through the years to become what we know on television today as a "TV Sitcom"!

While audiences flocked to see Mabley's stand-up performances, particularly at The Apollo, she became even more widely recognized with her appearances in movies, on television, and recording her own music and comedy albums.

Though recognized as the "funniest woman in the world," Mabley used her popularity to express serious concerns about social injustice and racial inequality in America. Her 1969 cover of "[Abraham, Martin, and John](#)" for example, acknowledged the tragic loss of Civil Rights leaders Martin Luther King Jr. and John F. Kennedy, both assassinated in the 1960s. Five years later, her starring role in the movie "[Amazing Grace](#)" brought issues of race and politics to the forefront of popular culture.

Since she first performed at The Apollo in 1939, the theater became Mabley's home away from home. Whether cooking for fellow performers backstage, playing cards with stagehands in between shows, or mentoring young entertainers, it's no wonder she was lovingly referred to as, "Moms." One of the first and most influential stand-up comedians in America, and a trailblazing figure for women and African Americans in the entertainment industry, Jackie "Moms" Mabley passed away on May 23, 1975 at the age of 81.

She was inducted into the Apollo Theater Walk of Fame in 2015.



## DID YOU KNOW?

### Seriously Funny

The roots of comedy date back nearly 2,500 years to Ancient Greece. As is true for comedians today, the ancient Greeks poked fun at serious matters such as politics, in order to expose social injustice in their communities. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, comedians like Moms Mabley used their positions as popular entertainers to voice messages of social and political protest as well. Doing so, comedians helped increase awareness for the [U.S. Civil Rights Movement](#) which contributed to African American communities overcoming a turbulent period in American history.

### T.O.B.A. Circuit

Following the U.S. Civil War, African American minstrel performers began incorporating their own original artistry into a performance style known as **Black Vaudeville**. Popular with African American audiences, Black Vaudeville performers toured the **T.O.B.A. Circuit**, which stretched throughout the U.S. Eastern Seaboard and into the Midwest. Standing for Theater Owners Booking Association, which was operated entirely by white owners, the T.O.B.A. Circuit was often referred to by African American performers as: "Tough On Black Actors."

### The Original Queen Of Comedy

Being one of the first stand-up comedians in America, Moms Mabley helped pave the way for future African American comedians to develop their craft and careers. Here are just a few of the comedians who followed in Moms' footsteps, all of whom like Moms, found a home for their comedy at The Apollo: **RED FOX**, **NIPSY RUSSELL**, **DICK GREGORY**, **RICHARD PRYOR**, **FLIP WILSON**, **EDDIE MURPHY**, **ARSENIO HALL**, **STEVE HARVEY**, **WHOOPI GOLDBERG**, **CHRIS ROCK**, **DAVE CHAPPELLE**, **KEVIN HART**.



## DO NOW: MOMS MABLEY MAD LIB

*Directions: Following the word prompts, plug your words into the story below and read in full. By plugging in different words, see how many different variations of the story you can come up with!*

Once upon a time in a land called [place] \_\_\_\_\_, Moms Mabley was [continuing action] \_\_\_\_\_ to her sold-out stand-up performance at the [proper noun] \_\_\_\_\_ Theater, when out of nowhere a [adjective] \_\_\_\_\_ [kind of monster] \_\_\_\_\_ jumped in front of Moms and tried to scare her. It was the neighborhood [same monster] \_\_\_\_\_ bully!

Unfortunate for the [same monster] \_\_\_\_\_, Moms had been picked on before and knew exactly how to stop bullies from picking on others: with comedy.

The [adjective] \_\_\_\_\_ [same monster] \_\_\_\_\_ puffed out its chest as [adjective] \_\_\_\_\_ slime oozed from its [body part] \_\_\_\_\_. Moms looked the [same monster] \_\_\_\_\_ square in its [adjective] \_\_\_\_\_ eyes and said, "Child, you're so ugly it hurts my feelings."

The [same monster] \_\_\_\_\_ was shocked that Moms wasn't scared! It stood up on its [adjective] \_\_\_\_\_ legs, swung its [adjective] \_\_\_\_\_ arms, and let out a piercing [loud sound] \_\_\_\_\_. Moms looked at the [same monster] \_\_\_\_\_ bully and said, "Say child, did you get that number?" "What number?" the [same monster] \_\_\_\_\_ replied. "The number of that truck that run over your face!" Moms chuckled in response.

The bully's attempt to scare Moms was no match for Moms' humor! Learning its lesson in humility, the [adjective] \_\_\_\_\_ [same monster] \_\_\_\_\_ [past tense verb] \_\_\_\_\_ away, never to pick on another soul again.

*Have you ever been picked on? Bullies often pick on others due to their own insecurities and challenges they face in life. Comedy offers a way to counter such negative feelings in a positive and peaceful way. So the next time you feel negative feelings coming on in yourself, or face negative feelings coming from someone else, try to ease that tension with a joke. Who knows what positive outcomes might come of it!*

## CREDITS

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