

Mabley, Jackie (Moms) ^[1]

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by James D. Gillespie

1898–23 May 1975

(1898–23 May 1975), comedienne and actress, was born Loretta Mary Aiken in Brevard, the daughter of "Uncle" Jim and Mary Aiken. Known as an "overbearing, dogmatic, infuriating and sweet" black comedienne, she entertained American audiences from the 1920s into the 1970s. At age fourteen, on the advice of her great-grandmother Harriet Smith (who was part Cherokee Indian and reportedly lived to be 118), Loretta Aiken left Brevard after being raped and becoming pregnant. She went to Cleveland, Ohio, where her mother lived, to find the "big world out there," and Bonnie Bell Drew offered her a job with a vaudeville group. Since Loretta was boarding with a clergyman and his wife, she felt that she could not tell them that she was going into show business, so she threw her bag over the back fence where Bonnie Drew was waiting with her car. After arriving in Pittsburgh, Pa., Loretta Aiken made her debut in the play, *The Rich Aunt from Utah*. She was very successful in her role—she "didn't make a mistake or nothing"—and continued her career after the birth of her child.

Loretta Aiken soon changed her name because her brother thought that a female in the theater would disgrace the Aiken family name. She chose Jackie Mabley in honor of Jack Mabley, a young Canadian to whom she was then engaged. However, he would not live in the United States and she would not live in Canada, so they never married. Apparently she was so "unselfish with her time and sympathy for fellow performers who need a great deal of mothering that she was nicknamed 'Moms.'" This was in keeping with her personal philosophy and her concern for young people. "I'm just a Mom," she once said. "A child is born, and it ain't no good, no where, no how without a Mom. I'm that Mom."

Moms became associated with the Theatre Owners Booking Association or TOBA—which was sometimes said to also stand for "Tough on Black Actors." This agency booked performances from New York to Florida and from Chicago to New Orleans. Her weekly starting pay was twelve dollars, and her later recollections were none too pleasant as she realized how she and her friends were treated.

The black comedy team of Butterbeans and Suzie saw her act and told her she was too good to be working for such low pay. They persuaded her to join another acting association, and by 1923 Moms was playing in Harlem's best playhouses such as Connie's Inn and the Cotton Club. Her comedy routines quickly became a hit on the black concert circuit, and on one occasion she noted that every comedian except Jack Benny came to see her perform and to steal her material. In the 1960s she came to be accepted by white audiences and made club concert and television appearances on the programs of such celebrities as the Smothers Brothers, Bill Cosby, Mike Douglas, and Flip Wilson. It was Harry Belafonte who first put Moms on television in 1967, when he aired an all-black comedy show.

During her career Moms had several small parts in movies, including *Boarding House Blues* and *Emperor Jones*. She appeared on Broadway as well in *Swinging the Dream* and *Blackbirds*. She also recorded two comedy albums, *Moms Mabley at the U.N.* and *Moms Mabley at the Geneva Convention*. In 1975 she had the lead in the film *Amazing Grace*, her first starring role in the cinema. While making the film she suffered a heart attack, and the filming had to be postponed until she had a pacemaker implanted. She said she wanted to make another movie based on a true story "that I saw live," but within a few months she died at age seventy-eight.

In the latter part of her life, Moms Mabley lived in Westchester County, north of New York City, and it was reported that she was survived by three children as well as others whom she had "adopted." She also was deeply involved in politics, especially as a member of the NAACP. She was a guest at the [White House Conference to Fulfill These Rights](#)^[2] (1966), and she used politics as a major component of her comedy routine.

Moms always remained close to North Carolina, frequently visiting family and friends in the Brevard area. She often commented: "I love North Carolina. I love the people." Once when she returned to Brevard, she tearfully observed: "Lord, what a wonderful place God picked out for me to be born in."

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