

Remembering Dick Gregory

By Pau Krassner

I first met Dick Gregory when he asked me to interview him for *The Realist* in New York. I saw him again when I was in Chicago. He was performing at the Playboy Club and invited me to his show. Two years previously, Negro comedians performed only in Negro nightclubs, and Gregory was no exception.

But one evening the regular white comic at the Playboy Club got sick, and Gregory took his place. It made *Time* magazine, and he was invited to perform on the *Tonight Show*, but he declined unless, after doing his stand-up act, he would be asked to sit down and talk with Jack Paar. The gamble worked, and Gregory became an instant celebrity, breaking through the color barrier with humor.

Eventually we became friends and fellow demonstrators. Now he was performing at the Playboy Club, not as a substitute comic but as a star attraction. They had to supply me with a jacket, and a tie that was decorated all over with bunny symbols. Gregory was already on stage.

“How could Columbus discover America,” he was asking the audience, “when the Indians were already *here*?”

In his dressing room between shows, Gregory took out his wallet and showed me a tattered copy of his favorite poem, "If," by Rudyard Kipling. I laughed and he looked offended, until I explained that I was laughing because it was also *my* favorite poem, and "the unforgiving minute" was my favorite poetic phrase.

Gregory visited me on the lower east side of New York. The entire side of one building on that block featured a fading advertisement for a cleanser personified by the Gold Dust Twins, a pair of little Negro boys. It had originally been painted right on the bricks.

When he saw it, he said, "They ought to take that whole wall and preserve it in a museum somewhere."

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On a work-vacation in the Florida Keys with Abbie and Anita Hoffman in December in 1967. I followed a neighborhood crow down the road, then continued walking to town by myself to use the telephone. First I called Gregory, since it was his city Chicago that we were planning to invade the presidential convention in the 1968 summer. He told me that he had decided to run for president, and he wanted to know if I thought Bob Dylan would make a good vice president.

"Oh, sure, but to tell you the truth, I don't think Dylan would ever get

involved in electoral politics.”

Gregory would end up with assassination researcher Mark Lane as his running mate. Next, I called Jerry Rubin in New York to arrange for a meeting when we returned.

At our counter-convention we all attended an Unbirthday Party for President Lyndon Johnson at the Coliseum, with Ed Sanders, leader of the Fugs, serving as emcee. The atmosphere was highly emotional. Dick Gregory recited the Preamble to the Declaration of Independence with incredible fervor. Fists were being upraised in the audience as he spoke, and I thrust my own fist into the air for the first time.

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When my marriage broke up in 1971 I moved to San Francisco and I had my own talk program. Gregory announced on my show that, until the war in Vietnam was over, he was going to stop eating solid foods. I in turn announced that, until the war was over, I was going to eat all of Dick Gregory's meals. Actually, my only *real* discipline was being silent one day a week.

When my young daughter Holly came out to stay with me that summer, she decided to join me on my silent day. We communicated with handwritten notes. Holly wrote, *Does laughter count?* Since we were

making up the rules as we went along, I answered, *Yes, but no tickling*. Naturally she tried to make me laugh, but I held it in – and got a rush.

All the energy that normally gets dissipated into the air with laughter seemed to surge through my body instead. I decided to stop laughing altogether, just to see what would happen. The more I didn't laugh, the more I found funny. And, paying closer attention to others, I refined my appreciation of laughter as another whole language that could often be more revealing than words. Sometimes I would get a twinge of guilt if I nearly slipped and laughed, and I remembered what I had always known, that children must be *taught* to be serious. When I mentioned my laugh-fast to Dick Gregory, still on his food-fast, it didn't sound so far-fetched to him.

That's two things people do out of insecurity,” he said. “Eating and laughing.”

“Well, what would happen to us if everyone in our audiences realized that?”

“Brother, we'd go out of business.”

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I was invited to a Christmas party in 1977 by *Hustler* publisher Larry Flynt. Gregory was at the party, and Flynt asked each of us to perform, but first he would take the microphone himself. To my surprise-shock that he

wanted me to publish his magazine beside *The Realist* while he traveled around the country to spread his (temporary) born-again Christianity.

On Thanksgiving Day, Gregory had been arrested in front of the White House for protesting the lack of human rights in South Africa. Larry Flynt had a premonition that there would be an assassination attempt on Gregory. Flynt contacted him a couple of weeks later, and they became friends. Gregory was now staying at Flynt's mansion in Columbus, helping him change to a vegetarian diet. Flynt had already taken off forty pounds. On the day before the Christmas party, Gregory was in the middle of giving himself an enema when Flynt walked in.

According to Gregory, "Larry said, 'Let me tell you about this fantastic guy I've got comin' out, and I don't know what I'm gonna do yet but I just wanna talk with him.' And I said, 'Well, who is it?' He said, 'Paul Krassner.' And I just fell out, and said, 'Are you serious? He's one of the hippest minds in the whole world.' Then he came back and said, 'How long you been knowin' him?' and I told him, 'All through the sixties,' you know. And I said it was a fantastic idea."

For the New Year Flynt flew Gregory and me to the Bahamas. Gregory was in the kitchen, diligently preparing a health drink for Flynt – this must have been the birth of his Bahamian Diet powder – and he was also

feeding unfiltered conspiracy theories to his eager student.

At midnight, we all went out on the dock and stood in a misty drizzle as Gregory uttered truly eloquent prayers for each of us. When he finished, Flynt's wife Althea whined, like Lucy in the *Peanuts* strip, "My hair's getting all wet." It was her way of saying "Amen."

On New Year's Day, we were sitting in the sand, just relaxing. Flynt had bought a paperback novel by Gore Vidal in the hotel store, but first he was reading the Sunday *New York Times* and worrying about the implications of juries with only six members. A moment later he was rubbing suntan lotion on my back.

"I'll bet Hugh Hefner never did this for you," he said.

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Larry Flynt had been traveling around a lot, but he happened to be back in L.A. at the same time that my friend LSD guru Ram Dass was visiting, so I had the unique pleasure of introducing them. Larry, Althea, Ram Dass and I went to a health-food restaurant, where we discovered that we shared something in common: we were all practicing celibacy – Larry at the suggestion of Dick Gregory, Althea by extension, Ram Dass for spiritual purposes, and me just for the sheer perversity of it.

When Larry got shot down south by a racist nut because *Hustler* had a

black naked model, Althea had transformed the Coca-Cola Suite at Emory University Hospital into her office, where she was now studying the slides of the irreverent “Jesus and the Adulteress” feature. Dick Gregory was there, and he said, “This scares *me*.” He was concerned about reaction in the Bible Belt, notwithstanding the fact that *Hustler's* research department had already made certain that the text followed the Bible.

And now Althea was checking for any sexism that might have slipped past the male editors’ limited consciousness. The spread was already in page forms, but not yet collated into the magazine, and there was still a gnawing dilemma about whether or not to publish it.

The marketing people were aghast at the possibility that wholesalers would refuse to distribute an issue of the magazine with such a blatantly blasphemous feature. Althea and I voted to publish. Gregory and editor Bruce David voted not to publish. “I’m against it,” he said, “because we’re this is an issue that just simply will not be distributed.”

Faced with this crucial decision, Althea made her choice on the basis of pure whimsicality. She noticed a pair of pigeons on the window ledge. One of them was waddling toward the other. “All right,” she said, “if that dove walks over and pecks the *other* dove, then we *will* publish this.” The pigeon continued strutting along the window ledge, but it stopped short and

didn't peck the other pigeon, so publication of "Jesus and the Adulteress" was postponed indefinitely.

Of course Dick Gregory continued to spread his diligent activism until he died. He was a loss to me, and to this country and around the world, but his powerful inspiration remains.