

MOMS MABLEY DISCUSSION PROMPTS

Description:

The following discussion prompts/questions are for use in Small group discussion. This document contains suggested prompts with background information/answers for the facilitator. These questions are not required, more so, they are provided as a resource should the discussion facilitator need suggestions.

Prompts/Questions:

1. **In her final decade of work, Moms Mabley finally reached a national white audience via the Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour and then the Ed Sullivan TV shows. How well did her comedy intended for a black audience come across to a national white audience?**

Background for Facilitator: *In order to reach a white audience, Moms' performances on the Smothers Brothers and Ed Sullivan shows were a throwback to her decades-earlier performances of general story-telling humor. She did slip in a race-related bit about the first Negro astronaut, but it did not address antagonism between the races. Her stories about her airplane trip and about encountering a street mugger on that show were also race-independent, so she carefully tailored her TV material to be acceptable to white audiences. Both the Smothers Brothers and Ed Sullivan audiences loved it.*



2. **In the 60's and 70's Moms material turned from homespun everyday humor to humor related to civil rights and race relations. To an all-black audience her commentary on race relations was implicit. How did that change over time?**

Background for Facilitator: *The times changed, but there was also constancy in Moms' material leading up to the 60's. The key in her first five decades was that she was performing for a completely black audience. So, she could take up the difficulties of being black in America in a way that was completely understood by her audience. When the civil rights movement flowered in the late 50's and 60's her material was more directly in support of the movement rather than trying to be about daily life in a universal fashion. Her last movie, "Amazing Grace" in 1974, was all about mobilizing the black vote to affect local politics and root out corruption.*

3. **Moms' performing career spanned the eras from the 1910's to the 1970's. How did the context of the times affect her material?**

Background for Facilitator: *Until the 60s, Moms operated within the safety of an all-black audience. When she brought up race relations issues, she did not need to hit them hard because her audience already knew about the intensity of the experience from their own lives. Even during the civil rights movement her humor was gentle and supportive, such as her song in praise of Martin Luther King Jr. to the tune of the "Battle Hymn of the Republic".*

4. **Moms was a very different person onstage than she was offstage. How did the real Moms differ from the one onstage?**

Background for Facilitator: *Moms was one-of-a-kind, the first woman standup comedian to play the Apollo, the first black woman standup comedian, and the first outed lesbian standup comedian. One could call Jackie Mabley the offstage real person, while “Moms” Mabley was definitely a character invention of the real Jackie Mabley. The character of “Moms Mabley” was homespun, intended to be a representative of everyone’s mom in the black community. Her semi-stuttering attack when she introduced a new topic to the audience was intended to enhance the character’s homespun quality. The real Jackie Mabley did not stutter offstage. Moms Mabley onstage was interested in men—especially young men, and definitely not old men—and had a lot of banter with Cab Calloway in that direction. The offstage Jackie Mabley was interested in the women, and she dressed like a man. The original Loretta Mary Aiken had been briefly and very unsuccessfully married to an older man very early in her life. From the late 20’s onward, the offstage Jackie Mabley was intelligent, strong, and very independent.*