

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Marla Gibbs

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## Overview of the Collection

<b>Repository:</b>	The HistoryMakers® 1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
<b>Creator:</b>	Gibbs, Marla, 1931-
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Marla Gibbs,
<b>Dates:</b>	July 8, 2007
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2007
<b>Physical Description:</b>	6 Betacame SP videocassettes (2:41:50).
<b>Abstract:</b>	Actress Marla Gibbs (1931 - ) was best known for her role as "Florence" on <i>The Jeffersons</i> . She also starred in her own sitcom, <i>227</i> . Gibbs was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on July 8, 2007, in Los Angeles, California. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2007_199
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

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## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Actress Marla Gibbs was born on June 14, 1931 to Douglas Bradley and Ophelia Kemp in Chicago, Illinois. After graduating from Wendell Phillips High School in 1949, Gibbs attended secretarial school and went to work at Service Bindery in Chicago. She then was hired, at Gotham Hotel in Detroit, Michigan, and later worked for Detroit Street Railways (DSR). Gibbs worked for United Airlines as a receptionist. After being transferred to Detroit and later Los Angeles, she took acting classes at the Mafundi Institute and the Watts Writers' Workshop. In the early 1970s, Gibbs was cast in theatrical roles at the Zodiac Theater and small roles in "made for TV" movies. In 1973, Gibbs had a major supporting role in the 1973 movie *Sweet Jesus, Preacher Man*.

Gibbs' big break came in 1975 at the age of forty-four when she was hired for a bit part as a household domestic named "Florence" in the CBS show *The Jeffersons*, a spin-off of *All In The Family*. Her character was a hit, and the writers decided to keep her on full-time. Gibbs quit her job at United Airlines only after the show gained widespread popularity, and she appeared in the television program as one of the main characters for all eleven seasons. *The Jeffersons* was one of the top ten rated television shows for four different years (1975, 1980, 1981 and 1982). Gibbs was nominated for prime-time Emmy Awards four times for Best Supporting Actress in a comedy series, for her role on *The Jeffersons*. After the show ended, Gibbs bought the rights to a play that was produced by her daughter, Angela Gibbs, called *227* and sold the show to NBC, where she played the lead role ("Mary Jenkins") for five successful seasons.

Gibbs owned and operated Marla's Memory Lane, a jazz club and restaurant. Her daughter, Angela, founded the Cross Roads Theater Company in Leimart Park, Los Angeles, and Gibbs owned and operated the Vision Theater Complex. She continues to play guest roles on television and is still involved in the theater. Gibbs has performed dinner theater in Overland Park, Kansas at the New Theatre Company where she was showcased in Neil Simon's play, *Proposals*.

Marla Gibbs was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on July 8, 2007.

# Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Marla Gibbs was conducted by Ron Brewington on July 8, 2007, in Los Angeles, California, and was recorded on 6 Betacame SP videocassettes. Actress Marla Gibbs (1931 - ) was best known for her role as "Florence" on The Jeffersons. She also starred in her own sitcom, 227.

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# Restrictions

## Restrictions on Access

Restrictions may be applied on a case-by-case basis at the discretion of The HistoryMakers®.

## Restrictions on Use

All use of materials and use credits must be pre-approved by The HistoryMakers®. Appropriate credit must be given. Copyright is held by The HistoryMakers®.

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# Related Material

Information about the administrative functions involved in scheduling, researching, and producing the interview, as well as correspondence with the interview subject is stored electronically both on The HistoryMakers® server and in two databases maintained by The HistoryMakers®, though this information is not included in this finding aid.

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# Controlled Access Terms

This interview collection is indexed under the following controlled access subject terms.

## Persons:

Gibbs, Marla, 1931-

Brewington, Ron (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

## Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews  
Gibbs, Marla, 1931---Interviews

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African American actors--Interviews

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# Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

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## The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

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### Occupations:

Actress

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### HistoryMakers® Category:

EntertainmentMakers

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## Administrative Information

### Custodial History

Interview footage was recorded by The HistoryMakers®. All rights to the interview have been transferred to The HistoryMakers® by the interview subject through a signed interview release form. Signed interview release forms have been deposited with Jenner & Block, LLP, Chicago.

### Preferred Citation

The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Marla Gibbs, July 8, 2007. The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection, 1900 S. Michigan Avenue, Chicago, Illinois.

### Processing Information

This interview collection was processed and encoded on 5/30/2023 by The HistoryMakers® staff. The finding aid was created adhering to the following standards: DACS, AACR2, and the Oral History Cataloging Manual (Matters 1995).

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## Other Finding Aid

A Microsoft Access contact database and a FileMaker Pro tracking database, both maintained by The HistoryMakers®, keep track of the administrative functions involved in scheduling, researching, and producing the interview.

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## Detailed Description of the Collection

### Series I: Original Interview Footage

Video Oral History Interview with Marla Gibbs, Section A2007\_199\_001\_001, TRT: 0:28:40 ?

Marla Gibbs was born on June 14, 1931 in Chicago, Illinois to Ophelia Kemp Cady and Douglas Bradley. Her mother moved from her birthplace of Waterproof, Louisiana to Chicago with Gibbs' maternal grandfather, Theodore Kemp, at four years old. She later became a singer and radio host; the owner of a men's haberdashery shop; and a minister at Guiding Light Church. Gibbs' parents divorced when she was young, and her mother married Charles Cady,

whose daughter was actress Susie Garrett. They moved to Detroit, Michigan, where Gibbs' mother organized a numbers operation. Gibbs' father was a self-taught mechanic from Kentucky who owned a car repair shop. He passed away in 1947. Gibbs grew up in her paternal grandmother, Hattie Sims' rooming house in Chicago, and began her education at the Corpus Christi School. During the summer, Gibbs visited her grandfather in Racine, Wisconsin, where she ate grapes and tomatoes from her cousin's garden. She remembers listening to jazz music, and the smell of her mother's perfume.

Gambling--Illinois--Chicago.

African American families--Illinois--Chicago.

African Americans--Recreation--Social aspects.

African American grandmothers--Wisconsin--Racine.

Video Oral History Interview with Marla Gibbs, Section A2007\_199\_001\_002, TRT: 0:30:40 ?

Marla Gibbs attended the Corpus Christi School in Chicago, Illinois, and then St. Elizabeth School, where she studied Latin for two years. After receiving a grade of incomplete on a crucial class assignment, Gibbs decided to leave St. Elizabeth School. She briefly attended Northern High School in Detroit, Michigan while living with her mother, and then returned to Chicago, and graduated from Wendell Phillips High School. She liked to play baseball, and listened to 'The Hermit's Cave' and 'I Love a Mystery' programs on the radio. Gibbs went on to found Crossroads Arts Academy and Theater and the Vision Theatre in Los Angeles, California. She married Jordan Gibbs, Sr., and had three children: actress Angela Elayne Gibbs; real estate investor and inventor Dorian Gibbs; and real estate broker Jordan Gibbs, Jr. She also had a grandson, Amilcar Gibbs, who was a music executive; and two great-grandchildren, Samuel Christian and Aila Gibbs. Gibbs also talks about her spirituality and her introverted personality.

African American mothers--Illinois--Chicago.

African American children--Illinois--Chicago.

African American families--Illinois--Chicago.

African American school children--Illinois.

Video Oral History Interview with Marla Gibbs, Section A2007\_199\_001\_003, TRT: 0:29:40 ?

Marla Gibbs learned shorthand and typing at Cortez W. Peters Business College in Chicago, Illinois. She worked as a receptionist at the Gotham Hotel and the Department of Street Railways in Detroit, Michigan, and then became a reservation agent at United Airlines. She transferred to Los Angeles, California, where she became interested in acting. Gibbs joined the Performing Arts Society of Los Angeles with Ta-Tanisha and Roger E. Mosley; and also joined the Mafundi Institute and Watts Writers Workshop with her daughter, actress Angela Elayne Gibbs. Gibbs acted onstage in 'Native Son' and 'Happy Days are Here Again,' and was selected for a guest role on 'The Jeffersons' television show. She continued to work at United Airlines until the show's creators promoted her from a recurring character to the main cast. Gibbs' first film role was in 'Sweet Jesus, Preacherman.' In 1981, Gibbs bought Los Angeles' Memory Lane jazz club, and renamed it Marla's Memory Lane Supper Club. Stroke.

Employment--Illinois--Chicago.

Mafundi Institute (Watts, Los Angeles, Calif.).

Off-Broadway theater--African Americans.

Situation comedies (Television programs).

Video Oral History Interview with Marla Gibbs, Section A2007\_199\_001\_004, TRT: 0:28:20 ?

Marla Gibbs reopened the Memory Lane jazz club as Marla's Memory Lane Supper Club in Los Angeles, California in 1981. That same year, Gibbs and her daughter, Angela Elayne Gibbs, opened Crossroads Arts Academy and Theater and the Vision Theatre, which offered acting classes for all ages. From 1975 to 1985, Gibbs' starred on 'The Jeffersons,' which was created by Don Nicholl, Michael Ross and Bernie West. She played housekeeper Florence Johnston, whose portrayal was inspired by Gibbs' own aunt and grandmother. The cast included Sherman Hemsley, Isabel Sanford, Roxie Roker, Franklin Cover, Paul Benedict, Ned Wertimer and Berlinda Tolbert. The television show often addressed social issues like discrimination and interracial relationships. During its eighth season, 'The Jeffersons' was the third most watched program on network television, behind 'Dallas' and '20/20.' Gibbs recalls Billy Dee Williams' guest appearance on 'The Jeffersons,' and acting with him later in the movie 'The Visit.'

Race awareness--United States

Method Acting--Drama.

Jeffersons (Television program).

Jazz clubs--California--Los Angeles.

Video Oral History Interview with Marla Gibbs, Section A2007\_199\_001\_005, TRT: 0:29:10 ?

Marla Gibbs attracted international acclaim for her portrayal of Florence Johnston on 'The Jeffersons.' When the show ended in 1985, Gibbs created and starred in the television series '227' from 1985 to 1990. She had previously acted in the play of the same name at Crossroads Arts Academy and Theater in Los Angeles, California. Gibbs and Roy Campanella, II bought the rights to the screenplay from playwright Christine Houston; and, while Gibbs originally planned to adapt the play into a television movie, NBC executive Brandon Tartikoff convinced her to produce it as a television show. Actor Hal Williams returned as Gibbs' onscreen husband, and Regina King played their daughter. The show also featured Jackee Harry, Alaina Reed-Hall and Helen Martin. Gibbs co-wrote an episode about homelessness with Ted Hayes. Gibbs talks about her brain aneurysm; the death of her stepsister, actress Susie Garrett; and her Emmy Award nominations. She also describes how she would like to be remembered.

Jeffersons (Television program).

Emmy Awards.

African Americans in television broadcasting.

Video Oral History Interview with Marla Gibbs, Section A2007\_199\_001\_006, TRT: 0:15:20 ?

Marla Gibbs performed in 'The Vagina Monologues' at the Wilshire Ebell Theatre in Los Angeles, California under director Penny Marshall in 2005. She also acted in 'Proposals' by Neil Simon at New Theatre Restaurant in Overland Park, Kansas, where the cast hosted a lavish birthday celebration for her. She remembers the Heroes and Legends Awards show, which was organized by Janie Bradford; her recovery from surgery after suffering a brain aneurysm; and her future plans to write an autobiography in collaboration with her daughter, Angela Elayne Gibbs.

Stroke.

Ensler, Eve, 1953-Vagina monologues.

African American actors--California--Los Angeles.