



A Groundbreaker and a Legend

ACTRESS MARLA GIBBS RECEIVES
THE PRESS CLUB'S
LIFETIME ACHIEVEMENT AWARD

BY ALEX BEN
BLOCK

In early 1974, Marla Gibbs was working in a United Airlines call center, but her real passion was acting. She had appeared in low-budget movies, taken acting classes and done local theater. Yet the big roles she desired eluded her.

That winter she had gone on auditions for "The Jeffersons." The Norman Lear production was a twist on a top hit of the era, "All In The Family," though this bigot was a nouveau riche African American. Gibbs got nowhere.

Gibbs had recently gotten a New York-based agent, Ernestine McClendon. She was a former actress, comic and activist who represented top African-American performers, including Morgan Freeman.

"She was upset because none of her actors, who were all Black actors, really got work," recalls Gibbs. "We go in, she said, and it's like a revolving door. They're in and they're out. Nobody takes time with them."

So McClendon wrote an open letter complaining about discrimination to *The Hollywood Reporter*, which published it.

After that, recalls Gibbs, "Everybody started seeing us. When I went into Norman Lear's office this time, they talked to me and I did an interview. And the casting person liked everything I did. She took me over to the producers. I did the same thing I did in her office and they liked it. So by the time I got home, I had the job."

Gibbs was cast as the Jeffersons' maid, Florence Johnston. She appeared in the first episode, delivering asides and retorts, mostly to the stuffed-shirt lead, George Jefferson, played by Sherman Hemsley.

Gibbs was a guest player at first. She appeared in the fifth episode and the eighth, before becoming a regular. In her second season, at the insistence of a show producer, she finally quit her job with United Airlines.

She and the show were a hit, running for 11 seasons through 253 episodes, and in TV syndication forever.

"Marla brought to life one of the funniest characters in television history with her portrayal of Florence Johnston on 'The Jeffersons,'" says Los Angeles Press Club President Lisa Richwine. "Her work still makes people laugh decades later. That's a true mark of a legend."

It's a fitting description, as tonight the Press Club is honoring Gibbs with the Legend Award for Lifetime Achievement and Contributions to Society.

Although "Good Times" and "Sanford and Son" were already on TV with Black casts, "The Jeffersons" was the first show to deal with many complex social, political and racial issues, including inter-racial marriage, the KKK, alcoholism, gun control and adult literacy.

"We were the first progressive Black cast," says Gibbs.

Her role was to not be rich. "I was the one that



Clockwise from above: The cast from "The Jeffersons"; Marla Gibbs has been on many covers of *Jet* magazine; she appeared in "Hot in Cleveland"; daughter, Angela, has followed in her steps as an actor, writer and director.

Marla Gibbs with sons, Dorian, Joey, and daughter, Angela.



worked for other people. They told me what to do," says Gibbs. "So the masses recognized who I was."

Playing Florence Johnston launched Gibbs into the role of a much-loved star who has kept working for almost half a century. While raising three children, running a jazz club, a theater and a restaurant, she has remained in demand

as an actress even in her 91st year. She recently appeared on a soap opera and is booked for another role on "Grey's Anatomy."

It was after "The Jeffersons" was abruptly cancelled (and a spinoff fizzled) that Gibbs found her second hit sitcom. Her daughter Angela persuaded her to star in a play called "227" at her Gibbs Crossroads Theater in Los Angeles, where



Clockwise from above: Gibbs appeared in the 1993 movie *Meter Man*; a woman of many talents, she sang with the Joe Williams Big Band; moved her Crossroads Arts Academy into the former Leimert Park Theatre in Los Angeles, renaming it Vision Theatre; Gibbs sang the theme song to the series "227", shown above right with Hal Williams, her show husband. Gibbs also owned a jazz club in South Central LA called Marla's Memory Lane for several years until it closed in 1999.

she served as artistic director. The play followed the lives of a group of black women in an apartment building in 1950s Chicago.

Lear came to the final performance, leading to an NBC series reset in contemporary L.A. Gibbs starred as outspoken housewife Mary Jenkins, who had a tart tongue and loved to gossip.

The show almost never got on air. Gibbs had things she wanted, including a character to play her husband, and she did not want to own the 227 building, feeling the landlord would detract from her every-person image.

When she was told the network saw things differently, Gibbs walked.

"Well, let me stop talking to them because they're ridiculous," Gibbs recalls thinking. "So I had a meeting with them and Norman, and when I told Norman how I felt, he said, 'It's clear I should have had you at that meeting.'"

Gibbs also wanted to be a producer but Lear said actors couldn't produce because the time involved and work demands were different. Instead, Gibbs became an uncredited executive producer, casting her protégé Regina King and discovering Jackée Harry. She also punched up jokes and even helped edit the show.

The recipe worked, as "227" lasted five seasons and continues in reruns.

Gibbs celebrated Lear on his 100th birthday TV special, and he repays the compliment. "Marla Gibbs, the performer and friend, has so delighted and informed me over the years," he says. "I am convinced she has added time to my life."

What is the secret of Gibbs' success? She says whether it is acting in comedy or drama, it is always about finding the truth of the story or the scene.

"If it's about somebody, you can't know the truth 'cause you don't know them and you don't know their truth," says Gibbs. "Most of the time it's not about a real person. So you have to bring the truth of that character. It's whether or not you can feel the character, what the character portrays. That's the truth."

Her philosophy and dedication to her craft has earned Gibbs numerous honors, including seven NAACP Image Awards, five Emmy nominations and a Golden Globe nomination. Now she is adding the Legend Award.

"Every award is appreciated," says Gibbs. "People don't have to give an award, but the work is its own reward. The award is not as important as the work. But I appreciate the award because it means people are saying, 'We like what you do,' and you can always appreciate that."

Gibbs will soon share her life and philosophy in her autobiography. She will simultaneously release a CD of her performing jazz songs. She plans to tour and sing at each performance.

What does she want as her legacy? She says she hopes to be remembered as, "A person who loved and recognized that we were all one, and loved everybody and acted like they loved everybody."



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