

Up From Nigger

By Dick Gregory.
With James R. McGraw.
256 pp. New York:
Stein and Day. \$10.

By ANDREW C. J. BERGMAN

Over the last 15 years, as he has shuttled between the two worlds of nightclub comedy and social protest, Dick Gregory has put together an often exhilarating, sometimes exemplary, occasionally baffling, and almost always hectic public performance. He told part of the story in "Nigger," where he sketched his climb to stardom from a St. Louis ghetto and his active duty in the civil rights battles of the early 1960's. Now, in this slight and self-admiring memoir, he brings us up to date, devoting himself mostly to a desultory mix of public events and encounters, from J.F.K.'s assassination, which he was convinced was a Government conspiracy, to meeting Haile Selassie, who he decided was a "chump." So much of the book consists of his comedy routines, speeches, telegrams, press statements, political programs, and pages of praises received and sedulously reproduced, that it resembles a scrapbook more than an autobiography.

During the early years of this period, there were civil rights marches and benefits, a food lift and boycotts and club dates all over the map. Gregory traveled a metronome between his comedy and causes that at its most extreme (and expensive) found him flying every day for one month between the Hungry i in San Francisco

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views he was about to disclose. Gregory also reveals a perversely egocentric perception of recent history as in his claim that L.B.J. resumed bombing of Hanoi in 1966 just to keep him from visiting North Vietnam "because he knew the North Vietnamese were too humane to allow me to take such a risk" and he "just could not stand to have an American Black in Vietnam who wasn't fighting."

Nor is Gregory always an accurate reporter. For example, he remonstrates that "no Black mourners were listed" by The New York Times in their account of Martin Luther King's funeral. In fact, over 20 were mentioned when I stopped counting, including Thurgood Marshall, Edward Brooke, Roy Wilkins and Ralph Bunche.

Gregory does provide some absorbing background to the civil rights struggle, however, and he is perceptive about racism, especially about the self-hatred it produces in its victims and the way it can shape their goals. His humor occasionally strays into the account with good results, and his salvos are often on target. At their best, his nightclub routines (collaborations between Gregory and a team of comedy writers) are certainly funny. But the hundreds of exclamation points only punctuate the missing, completing punch of the performer, and their prominent place in a volume of autobiography is problematical. There are several good anecdotes—far better than the brushes with stars that Gregory so conscientiously records. I liked an encounter with his 8-year-old son, who is uncomfortably discovering his differences from his white

schoolmates in Massachusetts; when asked if he knew where black people came from the boy replied, "Chicago." This seems out of another memoir, the story beneath the public surface that Gregory chose mostly to ignore. "Up From Nigger" draws on the jokes and elaborates on the acts, but it adds up to a good deal less than either. ■