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# Listening Backward: Sonic Intimacies and Cross-Racial, Queer Resonance

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### Article abstract

Documenting my encounters as a white queer scholar with the sonic archive of the late black American lesbian comic Jackie “Moms” Mabley, this paper explores the cross-racial/sexual politics of sonic historiography. Through what I term listening backward, I examine how sound procures queer sonic intimacies between critic and subject: the repetitive listening, soundwaves directly travelling from one voice to one person, and most pertinently, the historical and sociocultural contexts that make consumption of such exchange possible and/or fraught. This listening practice centres on relational and resonant modes of archiving through sound and asks: (1) How can exploring methods of sonic documentation align performance studies’ commitment to archiving the affective? (2) What might attention to not only the product of such documentation but also its performative processes offer about how the sonic can deepen modes of performance historiography and the racial/sexual politics of listening? (3) What practices of listening can centre queer intimacies and temporalities in the archive?

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### Listening Backward: Sonic Intimacies and Cross-Racial, Queer Resonance

Katelyn Hale Wood

A record scratches, skips, and then, needle in groove, begins to spin. The graveling, resonant, aging voice of the late Black American comic Jackie Mabley moves through time and space into my scholarly, queer, white ears. Mabley, an out butch lesbian, was famous for playing her stand-up comedy character, “Moms,” a hip grandmother who spoke cultural truths about sexuality, race, patriarchy, and civil rights-era politics. When I hear her—blues rhythm, blunt force, low chuckles into the microphone—I cannot help but be transported. Her audiences’ raucous applause and many forms of laughter also echo in my ears. I laugh too, even in the isolation of research or during a public presentation. In a library, on a busy street, in front of a classroom teaching her performances, I am supposed to remain quiet, unassuming, professional. But Mabley’s voice entering my ears cracks up the supposed decorum of the scholar.<sup>1</sup> The contagious sounds of laughter from her audiences (live and mediated) prove the reverberating and corporeal exchange of joke-telling and vocal response. In listening, we must be embodied. In laughter, we are embodied. Mabley’s voice *sticks*, resounding in her listeners’ minds/bodies/spirits. Tavia Nyong’o describes this very experience in his analysis of Little Richard’s Black queer ecstatic recordings: “Sound escapes as it reverberates and echoes, a singular voice that is out of body and out of time, that is present even when it is not audible” (2014, 176). The reverberating power of Mabley’s voice, her resonance beyond my initial archival encounters, has sparked a method of listening that moves toward a deeper kind of documentation, engaging the cross-racial and queer affective qualities of the sonic archive.

This paper explores the cross-racial/sexual politics of sonic historiography and listening practices steeped in relational and resonant modes of archiving. Through a method I term *listening backward*, I examine how sound procures queer sonic intimacies between critic and subject: the repetitive listening, soundwaves directly travelling from one voice to one person, and most pertinently, the historical and sociocultural contexts that make consumption of such exchange possible and/or fraught. I also use the term *sonic intimacies* in this essay to connote an embodied and affective connection that arises from encounters across soundwaves, an intimacy predicted not on physical proximity or objectification but on commitment to articulating the dynamics of how bodies (even those, especially those, not in physical contact) interact and relate.

In the pages that follow, I document how I listen backward to Mabley’s sonic archive, specifically her comedic material that points to and laughs at gay male sexuality and queer gender performativity, or what I call her “fairy repertoire.” Mabley’s career spanned sixty years: from minstrel shows in the early 1900s to Chitlin’ Circuit routines across the eastern, southern and midwestern US, to sold-out performances at the Apollo in the 1960s. Mabley’s archive is mostly limited to recordings available on LPs, some of which have been uploaded to digital streaming services such as Spotify. Since her

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death in 1975, sound has been the largest evidence of Mabley's extraordinary body of work, and thus, her legacy. Mabley's "fairy" jokes are scattered across her comedy records, but many of them appear on her 1961 album *Moms Mabley at the Playboy Club*. They are the only public acknowledgement of homosexuality I have found in Mabley's performance archive. Each joke in Mabley's fairy repertoire follows a pattern: Mabley often cues to her audience that she is going to tell a "fairy story" and performs a bit in which an effeminate man or group of men has an encounter with a straight male or heteronormative community. In the clever punchline—a pun or innuendo around queer sexuality—the fairy reveals himself as an imposter and/or renders the unassuming straight audience surprised. For example, a quick joke on *Moms Mabley at the Playboy Club* goes, "A man was walking down 42<sup>nd</sup> street and said to another man, 'Excuse me can you tell me where the 42<sup>nd</sup> street ferry is?'" Mabley switches her low voice to a snobbish impersonation of an effeminate male: "*Speaking, darling.*" In Mabley's vocal virtuosity (playing both the fairy and the other characters in her scenes through vocal impersonation), the sonic illuminates queer existence.

And the listener? I am a queer, white woman deeply invested in anti-racist scholarship and pedagogy. Mabley has been a focal point of my research on Black feminist comedic performance since 2012. I have listened to her recordings over and over again, a compulsive return to a sparse archive. Three generations separated from her, I return because I find Mabley to be a searing truth-teller and an exceptional comic. I also return to her sonic archive to find historical kinship with queer people who have come before me. In these ways, Mabley has my deep admiration. My previous and forthcoming writings about her contextualize Mabley within histories of Black feminist and Black queer performance and stand-up comedy.<sup>2</sup> Turning inward and toward historiographical reflection and critique, this essay is more concerned with the sonic dance between Mabley and myself.

Performance studies has long been concerned with expanding and creatively re-conceptualizing archival processes through affective and performative modes of documentation (See Sedgwick 2002; Cvetkovich 2003; Taylor 2003; Alexander 2005; Scott 2010; Jones 2015; Dickinson 2015). This turn implores scholars to go beyond the material and recognize the intimacy of archival encounters. A melding of the material archive and its repertoire/ephemeral/feeling asks us to "place our living bodies in the stream of performance tradition" (Bernstein 2009, 90). By homing in on my specific relationship to the sonic archive of Jackie "Moms" Mabley, I ask broad-reaching questions about cross-racial and queer sonic encounters across time and space. Namely, how can exploring methods of sonic documentation align performance studies' commitment to archiving the affective? What might attention to not only the product of such documentation but also its performative processes offer us about how the sonic can deepen modes of performance historiography and the racial/sexual the politics of listening? What practices of listening can centre queer intimacies and temporalities in the archive? More simply, I seek to understand what the reverberating potencies of sound can do to expand our understanding of history, identity, and community.

### **Listening Backward and Sonic Intimacies**

This essay follows the efforts of scholars who have positioned sound beyond a static object of analysis and toward a dynamic means of knowledge production that exposes structures of power, affect and embodiment, and queer temporalities.<sup>3</sup> In listening backward to Mabley's archive, I position the sonic as a modality of queer time travel, in which historical subject and listening ear intimately meet. Listening backward is a method of archiving that is multidirectional, attempting not just to understand the historical sound in the record, but also how listening itself is contingent and

contextual. I approach listening as an ethical act, repetitively engaging in Mabley's archive and my archival practices as a white, queer critic. Re-routing what Stoeberl calls "sonic color lines" away from white aural superiority complexes that erase difference or colonize racialized sonic experiences, listening backward is at once deeply personal and broadly political (2016).

Blending a "backward" queer historiography and a listening practice steeped in the vibrational/relational, I chart a practice of sonic historiography not bound to objective discovery or static affirmation. I borrow from Heather Love's arguments in *Feeling Backward* that "the critical compulsion to fix—at least imaginatively—the problems of queer life has made it difficult to fully engage" in the complexities of historical subjects and queer identities (2007, 3). I focus on Mabley's sonic archive not to "discover" or "uncover" a particular pattern in her work as either solely progressive or not and/or enjoyable to my ears or not. Simplifying queer archival subjects often means giving in to pressures or compulsions of linear progress narratives about gay and lesbian lives or a desire to find subversion of power structures, where such subversion may not exist. Listening backward is thus a practice through which I simultaneously assume Mabley's agency as a Black queer subject and acknowledge that her work may not be inherently dissident.

In such sonic archiving of Mabley's performances, I underscore the dynamic, embodied, and tense connections between subject and critic. I explore what happens when the recorded voice enters the ears of the listener: the relational experiences within the sonic archive. Nina Sun Eidsheim's (2015) call for a turn toward vibrational practice in analyzing music helps me situate the relational, and thus intimate, practices in sonic archiving. Eidsheim frames sound as a vibrational paradigm in which intermaterial flow and ever-changing relations between listener and performer should centre sonic documentation. I use the term *sonic* not as a synonym of sound in the ways Eidsheim refers (a static, objective mode), but rather as an experiential term—audible waves that reverberate and resonate between subject and listener. Listening backward refuses positivist documentation and supposes an active, subjective critic.

In this essay, the listening subject is constituted through 1) the embodied sonic, archival encounter and 2) sonically occupying space as the outsider—both outside the live event and, in my case, outside of the cultural, racial, and temporal target audience Mabley sought to reach. In archiving the sonic, reverberation, or the act of being driven back, reflected, echoing, or absorbing, is inescapable. Kheshti describes in *Modernity's Ear* (2015) that what often stands in for "discovery" to the white listener is a reifying of colonizing practices that objectify, exoticize, and appropriate the voice of the "Other." The act of recording, according to Kheshti, was a mode of capture, an attempt by white audiences to consume a supposed authentic racialized voice.<sup>4</sup> However, as Bronfman reminds historians, the recorded archive is a "product of negotiated encounters rather than transparent windows into culture" (2016, 228). Listening and the pleasure that ensues from it is never apolitical but often bound to structures of power and histories of colonial invasion. In other words, the listener is not and cannot be passive in the racial dynamics that make up a sonic exchange.

I attempt not to rectify or erase historical legacies of love and theft but to pay close attention to how these histories inform and reverberate throughout my sonic encounters with Mabley's archive. But is ethical listening that also engages ideas of pleasure and desire possible? In a turn to cross-racial and queer sonic intimacy, I refuse the "easy listening" that Josh Kun names as a mode or consequence of the passive white music critic (2005) and instead pay attention to the "complex material history present in bodies, vocal timbres, and listening practices" that influence how listener and subject intimately relate (Eidsheim 2015, 27). To take on the critical framework of listening backward, I

position myself as implicated in the sonic experience of a white stranger. I refuse to ignore my white identity even as I feel a queer kinship with Mabley. Through listening backward, sonic intimacies do not imply closeness in sameness, but rather intimacy through deep attention to how power circulates in the archival and the archiving.<sup>5</sup> In other words, listening backward may not bring subject and critic closer together in a homogeneous sense, but this analytic turn is meant to complicate both Mabley's archive and my relationship to it. Because intimacy is about resting in the unknown, getting close without getting invasive, a practice of ethical performance historiography in which the subject of study is not objectified, not mapped onto the desires of the living, nor placed onto a pedestal. In sum, listening backward is a practice and a process that asks us not to arrive, but to explore and deeply engage, re-routing criticism from objective analysis and a singular conclusion toward multi-directional possibility.

## Speaking, Darling

Jackie Mabley performed as her comedic persona “Moms” for nearly six decades and was a groundbreaking pioneer of stand-up comedy. She began her career as the first woman to perform a solo comedy routine on the Chitlin’ Circuit and eventually became one of the most popular Black performers of the mid-twentieth century. Mabley had more sold-out performances at the Apollo Theatre in Harlem than any other woman of her generation by the time she began recording her stand-up onto comedy albums in the 1960s. In the final years of her career, Mabley made her first television appearances on late night talk shows and variety programs such as *The Merv Griffin Show* and *The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour*. The year before her passing in 1975, she starred in the film *Amazing Grace* as the movie’s title character.<sup>6</sup>

Offstage, Mabley wore tailored suits and gender-neutral clothing, yet “Moms” wore floral housedresses and slippers. Creating a distinct separation between her own butch lesbian identity and her performances, Mabley’s “Moms” persona was preoccupied with heterosexual desire and/or gendered power play. Mabley’s sexually explicit bits were often about Moms seeking pleasure from young men, and her famous “old man” routines rendered the aging male body abject through brilliant turns of phrase à la playing the dozens and operatic parodies.<sup>7</sup> Mabley’s performances of intergenerational sexual prowess can and have been read as a kind of queer performance practice, but explicit references to homosexuality are sparse in Mabley’s sonic archive. However, *Moms Mabley at the Playboy Club* holds her most concentrated collection of fairy jokes. In my own desire to link Mabley’s performance practices to her lesbian identity, I became particularly drawn to this album and Mabley’s multiple references to queerness. It is worth noting that jokes about homosexuality in Mabley’s work were always about the male fairy, a mainstay butt of the joke in twentieth-century comedic performance. In Mabley’s comedic material, the lesbian remains nearly invisible and inaudible. However, as I examine later in the chapter, Mabley’s voice was undeniably butch—low and hoarse with much power behind it. Mabley thus melds multiple queer subjectivities into her fairy repertoire and sonic archive.

Half of the *Playboy* album’s tracks come from a set Mabley performed at Philadelphia’s Uptown Theater in 1961. My favourite joke in Mabley’s fairy repertoire comes from the track “Love/I Need the Money” and features a supposedly rich man who makes his way to a church service and donates a large amount of money to the congregation. Mabley tells the story like this:

One day, a little a fairy walks into the back of a church and sits down in the back and when they passed the plate around, he put a hundred-dollar bill in it. . . . So the preacher walked over and says, “Oh we thank you so much for that hundred-dollar bill that you put in the plate and to show you our appreciation, the choir wants to give you any *hymn* that you want.” The little fairy said, “I want him, and him, and him, and *you!*” [emphasis mine]

In a 2014 article, I wrote the following response to this joke, arguing it representative of Mabley’s subversive queer humour: “Moms performs a queer character who lives without fear of discipline from the state or homophobic communities . . . reclaiming queer sexuality, visibility, and strength through ordinary affects and erotic expression” (Wood 2014, 97). As I listen backward at the recording and re-read my analysis of Mabley’s fairy joke, my arguments become unstable. Concentrating primarily on the text of the joke, I emphasized my desire to prove “Mabley as a kind of queer ally who embraces and produces non-heteronormative performances of pleasure and joyful dissent,” using vocalized performances to show the fairy getting the “last laugh” amidst a potentially inhospitable environment (97). Yet, I did not initially attend to what Mabley’s voice *does* in performances of queer gender/sexuality and how vibrational exchange between myself and the recording fosters an in-depth and complicated reading of the performance.

In listening backward, the joke is neither queer reclamation nor fully problematic. The grain of Mabley’s voice reveals more. The grain of the voice, the “body inside the voice,” or “the materiality of the body speaking,” as Barthes would describe it, “displaces the fringe of contact between music and language” (1981, 181–82). Certainly, as Mabley plays him, the “fairy” in the back of the church asserts presence and confidence through turn of phrase, sexual innuendo, and playfulness. And Mabley as Moms could detract from her own queerness by spotlighting the young queer male. But what of the sonic encounter? Between me as listener and Mabley as performer? Between Mabley and the live audience? When I listen backward, I hear a more dynamic relationship among Mabley, the audience, and the fictional queer character, one in which the fairy is the object of ridicule *and* possesses witty panache (as well as the financial capital to back up such).

First, Mabley’s manipulation of her voice reveals the instability of the fairy jokes. Her voice shifts and re-shapes, circumventing decided criticism that would label her work as inherently subversive, simplistic, or even as a mode of detracting from her queerness. The preacher’s voice, similar to Mabley’s, elongates on the line, “the choir wants to give you any hymn you want,” hinting at the upcoming pun. Mabley drops to her low, scratchy tone stating, “the little fairy says.” Mabley’s booming voice then becomes tinny when she takes on the role of the fairy. The lead-up to the punchline is obvious. In a switch, Mabley sounds narrow and whining. “I want him, and him, and him, and *you!*” With each “him,” the fairy voice becomes more pointed, even predatory. When Moms gets to the punchline, “you!” the fairy shouts loudly, boldly. My encounter with the sonic archive, once so sure of Mabley’s subversive and campy portrayal of the gay male trickster, no longer fits with the queer optimism I clung to for so long. Simple subversion is not what I hear on this recording. Mabley’s disembodied vocal impression of the fairy resonates with me as a caricature of the predatory, sneaky homosexual. Mabley’s fairy character is clever yet laughable. My desire in the archive was to map onto Mabley’s work a direct line between the existence of progressive queer politics amidst hostile, homophobic environments and resistant queer performance practices of today. I wanted to rest easy in a linear genealogy that showed Mabley as a pioneer of out and proud queer performances. But the queer, disembodied voice does not follow a straight line. Instead,

Mabley's fairy character, even as he gets the last laugh, falls into the trope of the infantile, threatening, and disruptive queer presence.

The sonic triangulation among Mabley, the Uptown Theater audience, and me also de-stabilizes my initial reading of this performance. When listening backward, I cannot ignore the vocal presence of the audience and the historical contexts that surround their important role in Mabley's performance practices. Located in the predominately African American North Philadelphia neighbourhood, Uptown was a hub for Black artists and entertainers and an important stop on the Black vaudeville circuit.<sup>8</sup> No doubt Mabley had a home in Uptown, and the audience for this recording certainly celebrated her presence. The 2,146-seat theatre echoes with each of Mabley's punchlines. Laughter abounds on these tracks: chuckles, whoops, belly laughs, screeches. The recording quality gives a particularly reverberating force to listeners, both live and mediated. The recording is slightly granular, yet Mabley's voice in the microphone thunders from the acoustics of the ornate theatre. Mabley's audience affirms her presence and talent and obviously delights in her familiar routines, presumably from Mabley's touring of the Theater Owners Booking Association (T.O.B.A.) and Chitlin' circuits, as well as her albums, which, by 1961, were gaining popularity in US households for evening listening parties (Kantor and Maslon 2008, 229).

I hear the audience's laughter as a reflection of Mabley's impeccable comedic timing and highly skilled performances. Mabley's ability to control an audience through her rhythm seeped in sonic prowess is especially evident in this joke. By the time the fairy gets to the second "him" they are laughing heartily. The final punchline, "you!" is even more of a surprise. She is in complete rhythmic control, so just as the audience thinks the joke's over, "*you!*" brings them back into uproarious focus. Her voice rises to a crescendo, the "you" sounding more like "yew." Mabley's voice echoes in the theatre as does her audience's positive response. I hear the rhythmic clapping, laughter exploding from the collective with a few high-pitched cackles that last longer and prove louder than the group. There is a sonic and energetic dynamism in their call and response; Mabley's fairy voice provokes those in the theatre to both fall under the spell of her comedic prowess and engage in the long-standing cultural practice of laughter directed at a queer and/or gender nonconforming Other.

I too fall under Mabley's comedic spell; I have laughed more times than I can remember at this joke. In listening backward, though, I attempt to get held up in the details of such sonic exchange. Here, laughter becomes part of the multidirectional repertoire of queer and cross-racial sonic experience. In my laughter, I initially seem to become folded in with the "them" of the recorded, presumably mostly Black audience. Laughter requires direction and recognition. A group often bonds in laughter at the expense of the Other.<sup>9</sup> Beyond Mabley's cues to her punchline, the audience in the recording signals my own laughter. It is a contagious, embodied bonding across space and time. Like them, I laugh in confirmation of Mabley's artistry, but not necessarily *at* the fairy. To be temporally in sync with the audience on the recording does not mean we are directing our laughter (a sonic/embodied response) in symmetry. Here, I take on Kun's challenge to the cross-racial listener to "register our experience of ourselves by confronting ourselves as strangers in the sounds we make our own" (2005, 14). Mabley performs for her live audience; I am foremost an outsider in relationship to Mabley and the recorded listeners, occupying an "*other* space-time," as Kheshti defines the experience of listening (2011, 331). In listening backward, my laughter may not be in groove with theirs. Is their laughter at the fairy? At Mabley's clever wordplay? At Mabley's facial expressions to which I am not privy? At the preacher character getting played by a sexual deviant? Is my laughter a queer recognition? Or is it attempting to be on the "inside" of Black enjoyment not made for me? I am listening *in* on the joke, not co-creating an experience.

## Sonic Returns

Listening backward also considers missed content in the archive. Re-listening, a repetitive return to Mabley's performance at Uptown, requires me to confront what I have actively or accidentally ignored in her performances. For example, while I have played the *Playboy Club* album, again and again, a recent listen when preparing this article proved a difficult one. Mabley does not introduce her fairy routine with the "hymn joke" as I had initially remembered. Instead, she tells another story that I had, even after years of researching Mabley, forgotten. In the re-listening, I pause, avoiding the impulse to transcribe right away. I lean forward, wondering what I am hearing. Two minutes into the album, Mabley begins, "Moms wanted to tell you a fairy story." Her voice fakes a saccharine sweet: I imagine her eyelashes batting, satirical in her whimsy. Mabley's delight is obvious, and the audience's is too, as evidenced by their laughter. I, however, tense. Something in her tone, mocking and a little cruel, makes me cringe. My shoulders shrug closer to my ears, and I do not smile as I usually do when listening to Mabley. I wince, somehow knowing what is coming despite the fact that I did not initially recall this bit.

Mabley continues, "A fairy was, had one of them little cars. I call them a bug, one of them little jag wags. Had one of them little jag wags, you know." I know why "jag wag" works so well in this joke, even before she gets to the punchline. She elongates *jag* and *wag*, the vowel hanging in the air, the guttural short "g" sound both punctuating and lasting along with the "a." The audience chuckles lightly in some sort of recognition. Perhaps they are already picturing the fairy, small and slim, with a snooty stature. Or they, like me, know what synonym for "fairy" rhymes with "jag wag." Mabley's tone relaxes back to her low register: "So he was riding down the highway. And run right into a great big truck." She shouts, "Bam! The truck driver jumped out of the truck and the little faggot jumped out of the truck."

I had never noticed Mabley using "faggot" before. I am not ahistorical in my listening. I understand that word as acceptable on the live comedic stage in the 1960s as opposed to the hypermediated world of twenty-first-century comedy. I wonder, as Marlon Ross observes in his examination of Amiri Baraka's use of the word "fag," if Mabley played with such an insult to redirect the "internalization of the constant surveillance . . . by conformist straight society" (2012, 304). Mabley might have used "faggot" as a homage to the dirty dozens and queer camp aesthetics, which Ross describes as a "playful game of the sexual aggressions directed at [queer communities] amidst an ugly reality of relentless stereotyping and other forms of conformist verbal violence dictated by U.S. socio-sexual norms" (304). Ross argues that both "the sexualized verbal battles of camp and the dozens engage their participants in acts of community-formation and identity-sustenance by resourcefully using the scraps most at their disposal: the things others say hatefully about them" (303).

At first, however, Mabley's voice seems more resentful than campy or playful. This tone remains as she dips into her fairy impersonation. She clicks her tongue and continues, "He said, 'Now look what you have done.'" This impersonation, different from the church-going fairy, is characterized by a nasal voice with a thick lisp, heavy on the "s" sound and overly articulate. She manipulates her voice to a higher register, whispery and a bit quieter. She pauses after a drawn out "done," giving the audience time to react. They do so heartily. In unison, their laughter creates a singular, long laugh—almost an exaggerated sigh. One person, captured on the recording, falls out of sync with her fellow audience members. She (I, maybe mistakenly, assume gender because of the pitch of the person's



voice) howls for a second longer, a singular voice, in extra excitement about Mabley's bit. Mabley continues, her fairy voice becoming more exaggerated: "You done tore my car out the pavement." Her rhythm is slow, each word enunciated for effect. Mabley pauses again, letting the audience revel in her comedic timing. She adds, more emphatic, "You big brute, you. I should strike you *three successful times*." Here, Mabley's voice does not only seem to be pointing fun at the man's effeminate nature, but also his put-on upper-classness and martyrdom. She has the audience hanging on each punchline. The echoes of their laughter boom through the theatre, the grainy quality of the recording resonating into my headphones.

Mabley's voice drops, and she switches to the driver: "The truck driver says, 'Why you, you . . .'" Mabley trips up, blubbering and stuttering, characterizing the truck driver as both holding back a range of insults and unable to actually speak to the fairy. The joke, of course, is that the truck driver is rendered speechless by the overtly forward queen. The audience howls at this as well. As the truck driver, who sounds just like Mabley's "Moms" voice, blurts out to the fairy, "Do you know what you can do for me?" In her transition back to the fairy voice, she delivers the final punchline: "The little faggot says, 'Now you wanna settle outta court?'" The laughter of the audience in the theatre booms. "The little faggot." Again, I wince.

However, as the audience's laughter in the recording resonates, my disdain for the joke begins to wane. I am reminded by Alexandra Vasquez to return to the details of sonic performance. Listening backward, like Vasquez's practice of "listening in detail" to Cuban music, offers an experience rather than a "fixed theoretical formula." Getting held up in the details slows down temporal pressures of exacting and correct critique, and instead asks us to engage in "stories bigger than ourselves" (Vasquez 2013, 38). The details of Mabley's vocal performance take me out of my initial discomfort and foreground a more nuanced reading of the bit.

First, I notice a sonic slippage and conflation between Mabley and the fairy as she tells this joke. Listening backward, I hear the ways Mabley slides, with much virtuoso, in and out of myriad sonic performances of gender and sexuality. I hear Mabley's clear, direct, and harsh words, but I also become tuned in to how Mabley sonically dances among three characters at once: the frisky, truth-telling grandmother (a queer character in her own right), the hypermasculine truck driver, and the fairy, all of which are variations of Mabley's decidedly butch vocality. Her comedic prowess was often in timing and clever punchlines, but also in her ability, even as she aged, to manipulate her voice—playing with gender and sexuality through her vocal range. Mabley's voice stretches across identity and refuses stability. Her switches among characters are not seamless and crisp. Rather, her voices blend, especially between Mabley and her fairy characters. When she sets up the final punchline, "The little faggot says," her voice slips into her caricature. By the time she is speaking as the fairy, her voice has already become him. Thus, she does not simply vocally mock the fairy through performance. The fairy is not the object of Mabley's joke; the fairy becomes blended into her own comedic persona.

Even as they attack the queer subject, these vocal impersonations highlight the queerness of Mabley's performance practices. Mabley vocally slides into that position of the wiser, sharper queer, as well as the hypermasculine truck driver. I hear Mabley's delight not only in laughing at the fairy but becoming him. Occupying the sonic space of the effeminate man perhaps grants her freedom to be both inside and outside the realm of queer subject. Mabley takes on the "faggot" as the most boisterous figure in the LGBT community. The faggot is unwilling to concede to normalized racial, gendered, and classed performances of white, heteronormative masculinity. The faggot's

nonconformity and self-confidence leaves bystanders (like the bumbling truck driver) tongue-tied and/or dumbfounded.

I also hear Mabley's butch voice, rough and deep, become more apparent next to her performance of the sharp whining fairy. The effeminate vocal performance of the fairy beside the tough truck driver shows off Mabley's impressive range too. In a tradition of Black feminist and Black queer performance strategies, Mabley "takes as a given the portrayal of multiple subjectivities and emphasis on the body itself as a proverbial canvas" (McMillan 2015, 206). Here, the vocal body is Mabley's primary canvas that moves into others' ears, demonstrating the sonic as a powerful mechanism by which to shape-shift. It is the queer tongue—that is, Mabley's—that creates a resonating archive of sexual deviance and fluid gender performativity.

## You'll Get Yours

The second half of *Moms Mabley at the Playboy Club* shifts to the recording of Mabley's 1961 performance at the Playboy Club in Chicago. The venue would eventually become a global franchise that saw its demise in the 1980s, but the first opened in Chicago in 1960. It was one of the few commercially popular nightclubs of its kind that allowed both racially integrated audiences and Black entertainers. Given its location on Chicago's Magnificent Mile, a section of downtown with upscale hotels and dining, the Playboy Club attracted wealthy businessmen and tourists wanting to be served by women in the infamous bunny costumes. While Mabley performed in a wide array of venues (including a yearly stand-up routine at Sing Sing Prison), the ethos of the Playboy Club was vastly dissimilar to many of the other theatres at which Mabley appeared. The recording is quieter, the audience seemingly more intimate. Mabley does not yell loudly into the microphone to reach her audience in the back of the auditorium, but speaks in such a way to signal close proximity to those consuming her performance.

For this audience, Mabley performs a fairy joke with a softer, more reserved quality than the other side of the album. Within the previously examined repertoire of jokes aimed at or about fairy men, Mabley is a nonpresent narrator. She does not place herself inside the story or even as an observer. However, on the last track of the *Playboy Club* recording, Mabley sings a short acapella serenade in which Moms recalls an encounter with a young queer boy. Covering Nat King Cole's 1948 single "Nature Boy," Moms narrates, through song, a singular encounter with a young, effeminate man.<sup>10</sup> Unlike the swelling strings and melodic flute of "Nature Boy," Mabley begins "Fairy Boy" with a pause. The audience is silent for a beat. She begins verbatim of Cole's version: "There was a boy."<sup>11</sup> Her pace quickens, keeping in a monotone melody: "A very strange enchanted boy." Then, Mabley's twist begins. Instead of the nature boy, who "traveled over land and sea," Mabley makes her voice soft and melodic, a bit higher in pitch as she sings, "They say he didn't look like Pa, more like Ma." Her voice drops again, "Strange as it may seem." She trails off slowly, quietly.

At this point, the club is still silent. The tone of the song is set as a bit sombre and sweet, but more haunting than Cole's crooning version. Moms drops in volume and sings, "He looked as though ...?" There is a slight pause, and Mabley's voice goes deeper and continues, "He could whip Archie Moore." Here, her voice cracks. On "Archie Moore," Moms (or Mabley?) breaks into chuckle. A low, mumbling laugh that makes her have to catch herself. The audience joins in. She regains composure, takes a breath, and in a deeper timbre, grandly arrives at the first punchline in a satirical vibrato: "But a powder puff was he." Moms continues, moving her pitch back up to a sweet

softness, almost like a Billie Holiday impression: “And so one day/a swish of perfume came my way/and as he strolled down Sunset Strip/hands on hip, this I said to him . . .” Her enunciation becomes somewhat staccato, mirroring the rhythmic hip switches of the boy’s walk. Another deep breath and Mabley stays quiet and controlled, almost dropping to a whisper: “The dearest thing/you’ll ever learn my friend/is that you’ll get yours.” Another breath and Moms’ voice goes up in pitch as she repeats, “You’ll get yours . . .” She drops back down in the melody and finishes in a sweet tone, “in the end.” Moms elongates “end” as if finishing a lullaby. The audience quietly laughs at the turn of phrase and claps.

Within the frame of sonic intimacy, I hear this moment in Mabley’s performance as one in which she chooses to encounter queerness, not through stereotypical vocality as she does in her other fairy jokes, but through a simultaneously mothering and haunting tune. For example, this song is the only fairy joke in which Moms is present in the scene and confronts/speaks to the queer subject. The original song was meant to tribute *lebensreform*, a return to nature and the simple life, and helped Cole cross over into mainstream, white audiences (Clayton 2012, 136). Cole’s version depicted “Nature Boy” as “shy and sad of eye.” His soft crooning paints the picture of a nymph-like young man, presumably white. But Mabley is enchanted by the incongruity of the effeminate, yet hypermasculine in appearance, fairy. Archie Moore was a pinnacle depiction of Black masculinity and athleticism, so the boy’s incompatible physical prowess melded with his effeminate movements. Yet, Mabley positions Moms as still able to recognize and acknowledge queerness, intimately encountered amidst a bustling Sunset Strip.

The closing lines of Cole’s “Nature Boy” end in sweet finality. Cole sentimentally sings how the nature boy told him, “The greatest thing/you’ll ever learn/is just to love/and be loved in return.” Moms, however, drops her voice, almost to a whisper, but her gravelly tone will not allow too much softness. The “dearest thing/you’ll ever learn, my friend,” Moms quietly sings, “Is that you’ll get yours/you’ll get yours/in the end.” The prophetic ending of the song reverses, so that Moms is the one imparting wisdom on the fairy boy. Of course, “the dearest thing,” sung softly and as if pointed directly in the ear of the boy, is a hint at anal sex. In telling the boy he’ll “get yours/in the end,” a queer colloquialism for receiving pleasure, Mabley reminds the queer subject of the worthwhile nature of being perceived as “strange.” While the words are not of love, the first “you’ll get yours” is high, a bit melodic, imitating Cole’s serenade, the promise of sexual pleasure is stated with much affection. And yet, her voice drops the second time she sings “you’ll get yours” to a slow and low tone, providing the queer subject with a warning. She repeats again, dropping in volume, “you’ll get yours in the end.” When sung in the minor notes Mabley adopts, this last line is also a reminder of *both* the ever-present threat of queer violence and the promise of queer pleasure. Mabley’s crafting of a sonically intimate encounter between Moms and a young queer male thus refuses simple subversion or objectification. Instead, the song highlights the ways in which sonic intimacy always haunts instead of resolves.

In the recording of Mabley at the Playboy Club, the interplay between Mabley, the audience, and I is also significant for the purposes of this essay. Much of Mabley’s success came from performing for predominantly Black audiences at theatres like the Apollo in Harlem, Chicago’s Regal Theater, and the Howard Theater in Washington, D.C. Mabley’s crossover success with white audiences grew with the advent of late-night television and wide distribution of her comedy albums later in the 1960s. As with many of Mabley’s other albums, *Playboy* was distributed by Chess Records, the premier independent record label of its time. The racial politics of Chess were reflective of other labels such as Atlantic Records insofar as white producers and executives profited from

“discovering” Black entertainers and bringing them to white audiences (Absher 2014, 90). Despite marketing itself as a racially progressive space, the Playboy Club was white and male-dominated. On this 1961 album, recorded one year after the opening of the Playboy Club, Mabley surely performed for white audiences who paid a fine coin to participate in rituals of misogyny and white voyeuristic spectatorship of the racialized Other.

Mabley controls her sonic performance to keep such audiences waiting to be titillated at a distance. Notably, she omits the typical impersonation of the fairy, so the voice of the queer subject cannot be the clear punchline. Being the narrator of the song, she creates a barrier between the “strange, enchanted boy” and the audience as heterosexual and white objectifying outsider. In this joke, Mabley also holds back her infamous booming voice. She does not allow the audience at the Playboy Club to take one last laugh at the fairy through a guided rise in volume or pace (like the “Hymn” joke). Her quiet voice detaches from a potentially voyeuristic audience. And while they may laugh at “in the end,” they stay relatively quiet, even sombre. All they are left to do is respond, not in laughter, but customary polite applause. Perhaps they wanted something more explicit, more explosive, but Mabley keeps the live audience at bay. In my headphones, though, her quiet voice feels like a gentle message to the powderpuff on Sunset Strip. I find myself smiling at this bit, the voice of Mabley directly in my ear, turning me into a strange, enchanted queer listener.

### **Performance Studies and Sonic Archives**

Mabley’s resonating archive offers an intimate engagement with performance historiography that moves past the material and linear toward affective, queer documentation. I understand Mabley’s recorded voice and my sonic encounters with her as a “productive act across multiple orders” (Swithinbank 2018, 143). That is, listening backward aims to deconstruct categories of author and subject and refuses to assume a direct (straight) line toward a positivist past. This practice employs the sonic as a pathway toward more expansive ways to understand the archive and archival processes and intimate engagements with history. Listening backward explores that which binds queer subject and listener without ignoring the complicated dynamics of cross-racial encounters across time and space. This work embraces the co-creative forces of the archive and the repertoire and attempts to exemplify how performance and sound studies can generate performance historiographies rooted in sonic experience and cross-cultural, multidimensional knowledge production.

Listening backward also reflects Dwight Conquergood’s call to “rethink” ethnography through methods of listening, imploring performance scholars to consider themselves deeply within process documentation. For Conquergood, listening rather than writing, knowing, or determining became an apt way to negotiate power dynamics, cultural differences, and the fluid negotiations between subject and researcher. Listening “privilege[s] temporal process, proximity, and incorporation. Listening is an interiorizing experience, a gathering together, a drawing in, whereas observation sizes up exteriors [creating] copresence even as it decenters the categories of knower and known” (Conquergood 1991, 183). Listening is a practice of opening up rather than foreclosing the temporal and relational possibilities of the sonic.

Listening backward uses the multidirectionality of the sonic—that which resonates and reverberates—as a mode of performance analysis rich in process and possibility, not simply product and arrival. Like Daphne Brooks’s writing on Nina Simone that calls to re-sound the Black female voices buried at the bottom of the archive, I frame Mabley’s vocal performances as exemplary of the

ways Black/queer sonic archives can exist on “another frequency from hegemonic order” (Brooks 2014, 208). The vocal virtuosity in Mabley’s fairy repertoire demands that we listen differently. Listening backward, as I hear it, is a mode of queer worldmaking across time and space. Breaking up the dichotomy of past/present, the sonic reveals how performance can become a “critical intervention into the very concept of history, of historical being” (Crawley 2016, 8). Imbued in listening backward, then, is an embrace of queer temporalities or a rejection of the linear, the static, the rhythms that ask us to adhere to hegemonic notions of scholarly objectivity and/or progress via the passage of time.

My sonic relationship to Mabley’s archive reveals a queer kinship, one in which the fairy navigates treacherous situations with unparalleled wit. I listen to Mabley embody the fairy with, at times, meanness *and* with reverence to their ability to have the last word (Mabley, after all, wrote the punchlines). And yet, I am listening *in* on Mabley’s work. Appreciative from across time. These soundwaves travel to me, but I am not the first to hear them and their power. I write of Mabley’s sonic archive not because I know, but because I wish to document all that is unknown and complicated. Humbled by her artistry and comedic genius, enlivened by evidence of queer history, I listen backward to hear the resonating force of intimate connection across soundwaves. Headphones on, the record scratches, skips, and, needle in groove, begins to spin again.

## Notes

1. As I wrote this sentence, I also heard in my head Omi Osun Joni L. Jones say, “In the academy, we like to pretend we don’t have bodies, but we do!” (2013).
2. For more of my writing that has historicized Mabley’s career, see Wood (2014) and (2018) and *Cracking Up: Black Feminist Comedy in the Twentieth and Twenty-first Century United States* (forthcoming, 2021).
3. Daphne Brooks and Roshanak Kheshti have called sound a “social force” that requires a move to think” beyond sound as an object and to think of sound instead as an analytic or a hermeneutical tool for understanding inequality, racism, gender formation, desire, pleasure” (Brooks and Kheshti 2011, 330).
4. See Kheshti’s *Modernity’s Ear* (2015), particularly the book’s first chapter, “The Female Sound Collector and her Talking Machine,” in which Kheshti historicizes white women’s role in ethnomusicology, and how the white woman became the “world music culture industry’s ideal listener” (18).
5. This queer “bind,” as Elizabeth Freeman would describe it, is innate to queer histories: our shared and varied pasts can bind us in camaraderie, *as well as* put us in a (problematic) bind (2010, 62).
6. See Jackie “Moms” Mabley, *The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour*, Season 2, Episode 108, October 22, 1967; *The Merv Griffin Show*, Season 7, Episode 1, August 18, 1969; and *Amazing Grace*, directed by Stan Lathan, (Los Angeles: MGM, 1974).
7. More of Mabley’s comedic stylings that include her “old man” jokes, diva comedy, and civil rights rhetoric can be found on the following albums: *Moms Mabley Live at the U.N.*, Chess Records, LP, 1960; *Moms Wows: Recorded Live at The Playboy Club*, Chess Records, LP, 1961; *Best of Moms and Pigmeat Markham*, Vol. 1, Chess Records, LP, 1961; *Moms Mabley at Geneva Conference*, Chess Records, LP, 1963; *The Funny Sides of Moms Mabley*, Jewel Records, LP, 1964; *Moms Mabley Breaks it Up*, Chess Records, LP, 1968; *Live at Sing Sing*, Mercury Records, LP, 1970.
8. For more on the history of the Uptown Theater and current revitalization efforts, see <https://why.org/articles/why-marquee-lights-are-back-on-at-n-phillys-uptown-theater/>.
9. Freud’s 1960 book, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, marked a precedent in humour theory as it solidified notions that successful comedy requires aggression against another for the pleasure of the voyeur.

According to Freud's psychoanalytic approach to humour, the subject (joke-teller) expresses aggression toward an object under the guise of laughter. The "successful" joke form follows a simple formulation: the teller attacks an object for his and the listener's pleasure. The traditional joke form is centred on the punchline. The "set up" becomes subsidiary to the momentary release of laughter. Freud expands upon this idea by explaining that a comic's success is dependent upon an "economy of release." The mental pleasure of the listener (voyeur) is wrapped up in the *amount* of laughter directed *at* the marginalized other, or more colloquially, the "butt of the joke." For Freud, we move toward comedy solely to obtain pleasurable release.

10. Nat King Cole's recording of "Nature Boy" helped him succeed in securing both Black and white audiences throughout his career. It was a number one hit on the Billboard charts (the only solo Black performer to do so that year) and established Cole's style as "crooner." For more on Nat King Cole and "Nature Boy," see Gabbard (1996).

11. See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Iq0XJCJ1Srw>.

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