

August, 1992----

We caught Mr. Moore in a most engaging mood. He left this mortal coil in October 19, 2008, moving on from complications of diabetes. He was 81 years old.

Rudy Ray Moore made his career by word of mouth.

The 62-year-old Los Angeles comedian is a legend in the African-American community, but never crossed over, due to his use of explicit language and a fractured flickography that catered to cult audiences.

Moore wrote, produced and starred in black-velvet cinema such as "Disco Godfather," "Petey Wheatstraw" and his signature film, "Dolemite."

An acknowledged influence on the ghetto-guttural riffs of Eddie Murphy and Richard Pryor, Moore is making a rare Chicago appearance in "The Watch It Sucker Comedy Show," an underground X-rated revue, which will roll into the Arie Crown Theatre in Chicago. The revue gets its name from the phrase that co-headliner Lawanda Page used as Aunt Esther on the "Sanford and Son" television series.

Moore has never appeared on a network series. His steamy street talk precludes the possibility of radio airplay. Even the fans who stood in line in 1975 to see "Dolemite" at the Woods Theatre have become more sophisticated.

But what's most uncelebrated about Moore's storied career is his status as the link between the African-American storytelling traditions of toasting and rapping.

In 1970, Moore was managing the Dolphin's of Hollywood Record Store (which later burned down during the Rodney King riots) in south central Los Angeles. Dolphin's was famous for recording 1950s soul and doo-wop acts such as Jesse Belvin and the Gassers, the Hollywood Flames and the Turbans.

A toothless wino named Rico used to walk into the store. Rico would hustle money for a bowl of soup, which was all his soft jaws could handle. In return for the small change, Moore would ask Rico to tell his big stories, which at the time were called toasts.

"Toasts are beer joint and liquor store wise-men humor," Moore said last week in an interview from his home in Los Angeles. (He's driving to the Chicago gig.) "They were the old raps of that period. So Rico came in tellin' this Dolemite story, and people would fall down laughing."

Moore recalled the historic toast in his bawdy and jazzy baritone, although he insisted that the expletives be deleted:

"Some folks say Willie Green was the baddest young man the world ever seen. I want you to get yourself together and get yourself right and let me tell you a story about the bad, bad, bad Dolemite.

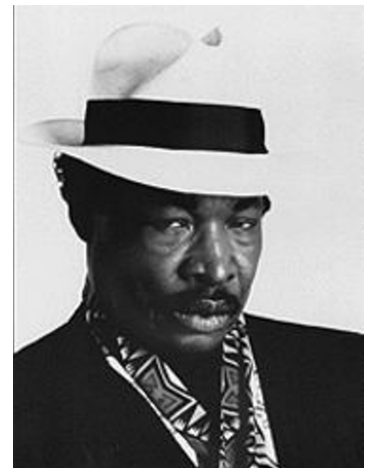
"Dolemite was from San Antone, ramblin' and gamblin' from the day he was born. . . . The day he was born, he slapped his pappy's face and said, 'From now on you hunchback, mule dude, decrepit son of a gun, I'm runnin' this place!'"

There's much more, but you have to buy a ticket.

Moore already had been dabbling in recording when he was at Dolphin's. He immediately cut a "Dolemite" album that was anchored by Rico's story, as well as other toasts and tales. A month later, "Dolemite" was being distributed by Kent Records.

Moore takes the roots of the toast back to the 1940s.

"The beer joint and liquor store wise men came from the supreme ghetto areas," Moore explained. "These men used to sit out front of the liquor store and drink. As a pastime, they would tell these tales: 'Signifyin' Monkey.' 'Shinin' the Great



Titanic.' Each storyteller had a different structure. I took these tales, freshened them up and made them fit our generation.

"Now the modern rapper of today has taken that and put it into more of a hip-hop style with rhythm. But it is the same thing I did years ago. I tell the new rappers, 'When it comes down to rappin', I was through with it before you all learned to do with it.' "

More than one rap artist has acknowledged Moore's trailblazing. Moore rapped on "Big Daddy vs. Dolemite" on Big Daddy Kane's "Taste of Chocolate" album. Eric B and Rakim asked Moore to appear in their video "The Ghetto." And Luther Campbell liberally sampled Moore on 2 Live Crew's infamous "Nasty as They Wanna Be" album.

"Luther Campbell is the only one who has ever paid me for sampling," Moore said. "I approached him. He made a (\$5,000) settlement with us that was comfortable at the time." Moore's next project is "Tell Me a Story," a hot track on the upcoming CD by Eazy-E of N.W.A. Moore also is slated to appear on "The Russell Simmons Def Jam Comedy Show" on HBO.

A few years ago, Moore related how Eddie Murphy grew up reciting Moore's old records. The late Robin ("House Party") Harris followed in Murphy's footsteps.

"Robin watched my concerts in Los Angeles for years," Moore said. "When he got his break, he tried to pay a little back by talking about me in the film ('House Party') and putting voiceovers of me in the film. He was the only comedian who gave me credit for being a front runner."

Moore's "Dolemite" toast blossomed into his first film. Moore plays Dolemite, a nightclub entertainer serving time for possession of stolen furs and narcotics. Rival club owner Willie Green sets up Dolemite. Whorehouse madam Queen Bee (played by New Orleans comedian Lady Reed, a regular in Moore's films) cuts a deal with the law and gets Dolemite out of jail. Supported by a fleet of kung fu-trained hookers, Queen Bee and Dolemite go after the bad, bad Willie Green. ("Dolemite" and Moore's other films are available on Xenon Home Video.)

But one characteristic that has separated Moore from many young African-American comedians and rappers is his offstage image. Moore did not utter one obscenity during a 45-minute interview. He did interrupt a couple of times to attend to some bread he was baking. And after Moore performs in Chicago, he will take his 83-year-old mother to the National Baptist Convention in Atlanta.

"I stand up in the pulpits and rap about turning your back on crack," Moore said. "The church responds well to me. I make jokes in church. In fact, my next record will be the G-rated 'Jokes for Church Folks.' I give my mother credit for being a poet, comedian and a rapper today. When I was a boy, she made me read Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. Easter Sunday, I would do a recital in church. That grew up with me."

Moore was born in Fort Smith, Ark., and migrated to Cleveland with his godmother's son. "Me and him used to pitch bags of peanuts in Arkansas in order to raise enough money for a bus trip to Cleveland," Moore recalled. He followed his friend to Milwaukee for a while, where he danced in nightclubs, before returning to Cleveland. Back in Cleveland, Moore saw a fast and racy nightclub performer named Cal Donia, who made a lasting impact on his style.

"I learned how to be a comedian with a strong wit and excite people without being slow by watching her," Moore said. "I've never been a slow comedian. I am high-energy. I am most notorious on the floor."

Moore began to incorporate Cal Donia's style in his earliest shows while in the Army. (Cal Donia died in May at age 93.)

Moore has no regrets that he was unable to capture the audience of Redd Foxx, the only peer of Moore's who crossed over with white audiences. (At one time, they both recorded for Du-Tone, an African-American comedy label.)

"I just move on," he said. "I do not have time to worry about what didn't happen. I'm just thankful for what did happen."