



Nicholas Brothers' Home Movies
Fayard Nicholas Family Home Movie Collection

Fayard and Harold Nicholas, Ulysses and Viola Nicholas, Lorenzo Hill

16mm, 1934–1950

Preserved by the Academy Film Archive

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Essay by Tony Nicholas and Luisa F. Ribeiro

In 1934, just a decade after 16mm film cameras became available to the public, Ulysses and Viola Nicholas bought a camera to record family life with their children Fayard, Dorothy and Harold. The result was almost two decades of remarkable home movies that combine the personal history of an African American family in addition to a rare inside look at black musical entertainment around the world during a particularly tumultuous and creatively vibrant era.

By the early 1930s, jazz tap dancers Fayard and Harold, as the Nicholas Brothers, were well on their way to stardom via their unique signature style of athletic or “flash” dancing with appearances in the Samuel Goldwyn musical-comedy “Kid Millions” starring Eddie Cantor, in a musical film short with Eubie Blake and his band and at Harlem’s legendary Cotton Club backed by Cab Calloway’s orchestra and the Jimmy Lunceford band. In 1934, Fayard would turn 20, Harold 13. They had been dancing professionally for half a dozen years.

Fayard and Harold came to dance naturally, inspired by Ulysses and Viola’s careers as musicians in vaudeville orchestras, Viola a skilled pianist, and Ulysses a

spirited drummer. The brothers never took formal dance classes or entered dance contests. Ulysses instead encouraged Fayard's natural acrobatic skills and his knack for picking up dance routines, which he then taught to Harold and their sister Dorothy. Fayard's delight in performing initiated an early teaming with Dorothy and Harold in an act billed as the "Nicholas Kids." Regrettably, the home movies contain no footage of Dorothy dancing professionally, although she can be seen "hoofing" informally with her brothers. After Dorothy chose school over performing, the "Nicholas Kids" eventually gave way to the "Nicholas Brothers."

Much of the home movie footage was shot by long-time friend Lorenzo Hill who traveled with the Nicholas family, frequently doubling as chauffeur and valet. Fayard and Harold occasionally took up the camera as well. Some of the most poignant early material features the last images of Ulysses, before he died suddenly in 1935, after enjoying a family vacation at the Chicago World's Fair, Yosemite and in the Redwood Forest.

Despite the loss of their father, the Nicholas Brothers's career flourished with appearances in Paramount's "The Big Broadcast of 1936" and two Vitaphone musical shorts. They then joined Josephine Baker, Fanny Brice and Bob Hope in the "Ziegfeld Follies."



From the Collection of the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture

Soon after, producer Lew Leslie, the first white major impresario to present African Americans on Broadway, signed the Nicholas Brothers for his London production of the all-black revue, "Blackbirds of 1936." Delightful home movie material includes the family with fellow "Blackbirds" co-stars, ballroom dance specialists Anise Boyer and Alan Dixon, billed as Anise and Aland. The pair accompanied the Nicholas family on the cruise liner *Berengaria* to the United Kingdom, playing shuffleboard, dancing, and mugging for the camera. "Blackbirds of 1936" ran from July through November 1936. Riveting footage shot from the theatre wings during the show highlights the brothers and long forgotten black musical and comedy acts such as Lavidia Carter, Lucille Watson, Gordon and Rogers, Emmett Wallace and Maude Russell, Tim Moore and others. Harold features in a lively tap solo with the Blackbirds Beauty Chorus. In addition to this rare footage, the family also filmed portions of other revues capturing an unexpected glimpse of movie star Lupe Velez on stage in "Transatlantic Rhythm."

Hot off their European success, Fayard and Harold returned home to appear in the new Richard Rodgers and Lorenz Hart Broadway musical, "Babes in Arms," choreographed by George Balanchine. Footage shot from the wings and the first rows capture explosively frenetic performances by Ray Heatherton, Duke McHale, the Nicholas Brothers with singer Mitzi Green performing (albeit silently in the footage) "My Funny Valentine" and "Where or When."

Another gem in the collection is a tribute to Nicholas family friend Bill "Bojangles" Robinson at the Cotton Club with appearances by Ethel Waters, Duke Ellington, W.C Handy, Eleanor Powell and the Nicholas Brothers. While in Harlem, the family continued their habit of filming theatre marquees which glittered with the most prestigious names in 1930's music and dance. Plenty of family footage is interspersed throughout the collection with Harold and Fayard clowning with family members and friends or casually doing acrobatics on a city sidewalk. The brothers counted several celebrities among their acquaintances, and informal moments were captured with Fred Astaire on the RKO backlot, dancer-singer Joan MacCracken (who surged to Broadway stardom in "Oklahoma!"), boxer Joe Louis and the young Dorothy Dandridge, who in 1942 would marry Harold Nicholas.

Dorothy Dandridge, her sister Vivian, and their friend Etta Jones (who performed professionally together as the Dandridge Sisters) appear in one of the three amateur narrative films made by the brothers. Fayard and Harold's fondness for westerns shapes another of their amateur narratives, a sort of "Eastern-Western." "Mutiny

on Sugar Hill” replete with title cards and heightened dramatics was written by Harold, co-starred Fayard, several friends, and filmed by Lorenzo Hill.

Although the Nicholas Brothers signed with Twentieth Century Fox in 1940, the racial constraints of the era meant that they never played fully developed characters or engaged with (white) stars. They appeared only in dance numbers, performing with their signature dynamism, grace and joy — particularly in “The Jumpin’ Jive” in 1943’s “Stormy Weather.”



The Nicholas Brothers in "Stormy Weather" (1943)

They continued live performances, appearing in footage with Lionel Hampton, and with Fox’s sassy new import, Carmen Miranda. In the summer before America entered the war, the Nicholas Brothers joined efforts to entertain U.S. troops. At Camp Hunter Liggett’s Fort Lewis, they performed with Jack Benny, George Burns, Eddie Rochester, Claudette Colbert, Marlene Dietrich, Joan Blondell, Dick Powell, Ray Bolger and the Ritz Brothers. Footage of this all-star event also includes shots of an enthusiastic audience of G.I.’s.

Fox managed to postpone military draft for the brothers, but in 1943, Fayard was inducted into the army, while Harold failed to meet the height requirement. After Fayard received his good conduct discharge, shown in some of the collection’s color footage, the brothers resumed their partnership.

The post-war period brought changes to Hollywood and a shift in popular tastes. When Fox declined to renew their contract, the Nicholas Brothers toured Latin America, Europe, the Middle East and North Africa. The relaxed racial attitudes

and respect for their talent is evident in footage of the Nicholas Brothers performing and vacationing across France and Italy. Fayard traveled with his wife Geraldine “Geri” Pate and their son Tony, seen in the home movies showing off his own dance moves at the age of five.

Regrettably, the home movie collection stops in the early 1950s, without footage of numerous shows across Europe both together and individually. Fayard returned to the States while Harold resided in France for many years, adding to his reputation by singing and acting. The brothers were reunited as a dance team on several U.S. television shows in the 1960s and in occasional live performances and films. They also taught dance and choreography with Fayard winning a Tony Award for choreography for the Broadway musical, “Black and Blue.” Rediscovered by the public in the 1980s, the Nicholas Brothers were showered with acclaim and numerous awards culminating in recognition by the Kennedy Center Honors in 1991.

The views expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the Library of Congress.

Tony Nicholas is the son of Fayard Nicholas. Luisa F. Ribeiro is a cataloger at the Academy Film Archive.