

Who's this Mo Gilligan guy, then?

It's a good question, a fair question – and, if you have read anything about me in a newspaper or online over the last two years or so, you probably think you know the answer. There has been a history of me and my life put out there, and it runs roughly like this:

Young Black comedian. Grew up in south London.

Worked in Levi's. Did the 'Coupla Cans' video online.

Drake shouted him out and made him famous. Did some live comedy and went on television. The end.

Well, that's a great story for a Hollywood film, but the truth is that it hasn't really been like that. Or, rather, it hasn't been *quite* like that. There has been a whole lot more going on in my life than just that.

Life is all about moments. Or Mo-ments! Mo-ments when ... things happen. But things don't just happen of their own accord. You have to work hard at them. You have to grind away in order to become successful. Well, this book is the story of my grind.

Or rather, again, it's more than that. It's the story of the grind *before* the grind.

That Moment When ... is the story of how Mosiah Gilligan turned into Mo the Comedian, then turned into Mo Gilligan. It's about the me that existed before I started doing comedy, as well as after. And it's about the different sides of me that people probably don't know about.

Let me try to put it in food terms ...

My true story has got lost in media coverage, a bit like the dumpling in a bowl of the soup you get from a Caribbean take-away. You know the feeling when you're poking around in the Styrofoam cup looking for it? You're like, *Woah! Where's the dumpling gone?*

Well, this book is like finding that last dumpling in the oxtail soup when you think they've all gone.

That Moment When ... pulls out those hidden dumplings from my life. It fills in the story that people think they know. It says, 'Yeah, I worked in retail, and what's wrong with that? There are thousands of people doing that every day – big shout out to them!'

Because I *was* working in retail, yeah, but I was also hustling like mad to get my comedy career started. I was telling jokes at weddings, running my own comedy night, and travelling up and down the country to perform at shows when I couldn't even afford my train fare home.

This is the story of where I came from, how I began, the good gigs that I played – and the ones that didn't go so well. The things I did right and the mistakes I made. It's about the

Mo-ments that got me from where I started to where I am now: from being that young Black kid on a south London council estate to going viral with ‘Coupla Cans’, fronting *The Lateish Show*, joining *The Masked Singer* and, as I write this, having just sold out my first show at the O2.

Rah! How did all *that* happen to this Mo Gilligan fella? Well, this book explains it all ... and it starts in a time where the most important things in my life, after my family, were my friends and an adventure playground.

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THAT MOMENT WHEN ...

*Life Is All About
Playing Out*



When you're a kid, your world is small and you know it off by heart. Life is defined by those small moments you share with your mates on the block, on the estate and down the road. You're a little community and your friends are the only guys that matter. It's a time of freedom.

I sometimes think we spend our adulthoods trying to get that freedom back. It was so pure and good-spirited. When you're a kid, school might be shit, yeah, but everything else is fun. Playing is everything, fun is the only thing that matters ... and the most fun of all is *playing out*.

Playing out is what you live for as a kid. As an adult, you live for going to festivals and on holidays, or going raving with your mates. But when you're a kid, the summer holidays are the best thing because you get to play out for six weeks. *Everybody – playing out for six weeks! Man, it felt like it went on forever! It felt like six months! It was just the best time.*

The crucial thing you needed to play out was a bike. We thought about bikes like kids think about consoles today. Nobody really had consoles as they were so expensive. It was all about having a bike. If you got a bike, it wouldn't be a new one. It would

have been passed down to you by a brother or cousin. Off you'd go, to the park and down to the woods. Sometimes, you didn't even know where you were going. You and your mates would cycle for hours. You'd get lost and take ages to find your way home. Sometimes, your parents wouldn't even notice you'd gone. Other times, they'd be worried sick: 'Where the hell have you been?'

And then you'd be in trouble. Big time.

We'd cycle to Dulwich Park, which wasn't all that far, and have a mad-fun day. We'd have no money at all: or, if we were lucky, someone might have 50p and we'd spend it on ice poles or onion rings. The taste of the summer, man!

If your bike ever broke, you had to figure out how to fix it yourself. *Shit, how could we be fixing bikes? We were just little kids!*

If you wanted to play out on your bike, you'd have to make sure everyone else had their bike as well. *Who wants to ride on their own?* We had skateboards, as well, but not cool skateboards – they were just like wide, flat, round planks of wood on wheels.

I grew up in Denmark Hill, south London. It was our playground. We'd go to the top of one of the hills around our estate and skateboard back down. Cars would be coming around the corner and we would be zooming straight towards them at 20mph. Our only brakes were our feet.

Thinking back, I can't believe how dangerous it was!

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My mum raised me and my two older sisters. They were eight years and seven years older than me, so when I was six, they were

already teenagers. It made them seem ancient: *Woah! My sisters are so OLD!*

The cool thing about having older sisters was that they were connected to pop culture and music. It was through them that I knew about the likes of Usher, Mary J. Blige and Jodeci because they had big posters of them in their rooms. It was also because of them that I was introduced to R&B, hip-hop and old-school garage, which I heard booming through the walls separating our bedrooms.

Because my sisters were so much older, I was definitely the baby of the family. I still am, really. Even today, I will go to my mum's house and my sisters will be there. As soon as I walk in the door, Mum will say:

'Ah, Mo! Would you like something to eat?'

And my sisters will say, 'What?! We've been here for two hours now and you haven't even offered us a drink!'

But, as a kid, having older sisters was cool. Maybe they can't protect you from playground bullies like older brothers can, but I learnt stuff from them. It was down to them that I knew anything about grooming growing up. I saw them getting into make-up and would watch them creaming their skin or putting stuff in their hair: *Oh, OK, you put that in your hair and that's what it does to it!*

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My parents separated when I was very young, which meant I spent a lot of weekends at my dad's house in Brixton. I also spent those weekends with my other sister on my dad's side of the family.

Dad was a Rastafarian from St. Lucia, over six foot tall, with long dreads that he used to tie up underneath his hat. Most of the time he'd dress in full-on camouflage: military gear with the combat boots and everything. He'd wear it with his Haile Selassie medals, singing songs as he walked down Brixton High Street.

My dad would take me and my half-sister to Notting Hill Carnival. We'd hold each other's hands and walk and walk for hours. Today, I know that Notting Hill Carnival is pretty cool, but when you are seven or eight ... *man, it was boring ...*

Watching older people having fun! Who cares about that?

Dad was vegan, like a lot of Rastas. I remember being with him one time and asking, 'Dad, can I have some jerk chicken?' He was like, 'No, Mo, you're not eating chicken! I'll get you a vegetable patty ...'

My dad would get me stuff, though – sweets, or shoes, or even just posters that were for sale on the floor outside Brixton Tube station. Rap gods like 2Pac, Arsenal posters, stuff like that. He didn't live with us – but he was very much part of my life.

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When you went to play out, the first thing you did was knock for your friends. You'd go round all your friends' houses, one by one, to ask their mums if they could come out. I used to always do them in exactly the same order.

First, we'd go to my best friend Adam's house. Adam *always* came out. Then we'd go call for Little Michael. He wasn't always allowed out. It would be about fifty-fifty. Little Michael lived in

the same block as Greg and Luke, two brothers that also played out with us. Greg was two or three years older than us and, because of that, I always believed every single word he said. It's funny, at that age, you believe everything that older kids tell you. Age gaps are a big thing when you're a kid.

Another boy who was a bit older – maybe he was eleven when I was nine – was a kid called James who lived with his dad, granddad and a little bulldog. He was one of the lucky guys who had a console: a PlayStation. Man, I loved playing *Tekken*!

James was a proper pyromaniac. He loved setting fire to stuff. He even smoked, at the age of only eleven. He was the original fire starter.

James had an edge and kids love that. James was tight with a boy who lived down the road called Danny. If James was bad, Danny was *bad* bad. He would set more fires than James!

I wasn't bad, or *bad* bad, like that. I spent most of my time with Adam and Little Michael. Michael was – guess what? – little, but not tiny. We only called him that to differentiate him from another kid called Michael who lived in the next block.

That Michael was proper crazy. He was the kid that would run around on top of walls and do backflips. We would all have our mouths hanging open watching him, and urging him on:

'Wow! Do that again!'

Michael thought he was a super Saiyan! He would tell us, 'You lot try and fight me, right? I won't fight back!'

'Eh?' we would ask him. 'What?'

'Hit me! I won't hit you back!'

Brother, we were throwing everything at this guy! But nothing landed. He dodged everything like a little Black Bruce Lee.

There were these low garages on our estate, and we would all be jumping off the roofs and fly-kicking Michael on the way down! He would go flying to avoid every blow ... then bounce straight back up again.

‘Go on! Fight me again!’

It was so mad. Maybe he *was* a super Saiyan, in the body of a ten-year-old south London boy.

Michael loved kung fu but he was also a proper geek. When we were play fighting, he would do this weird, scary thing where he’d suddenly say:

‘Oh! I’m malfunctioning!’

‘What?’

And then he would pretend to turn into RoboCop, ‘Oh, I’m malfunctioning!’ Then he’d start doing all these backflips.

We only ever play-fought with Michael. You wouldn’t want to get into a real fight with him: he might have been a geek, but he could still hold his own – that, and he owned his own pair of nunchakus.

Even Michael’s mum was cool. Sometimes she’d give us bread. Random, right? She’d just hand us slices of warm bread in tissue like we were a gang of Victorian street urchins.

For me, Michael was one of the coolest kids on the estate, because he showed us that it was OK to be yourself. You didn’t have to follow the crowd and you didn’t have to be a James or Danny by setting fire to stuff. It was alright to be different.

I don't know where he is now, but knowing Michael he probably invested early in Bitcoin, or is out there working on his flux capacitor. I hope he's doing well for himself.

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If I was lucky, my sisters might take me to the pictures on a Saturday. They took me and Adam to see *Space Jam* when I was eight. That movie was a big deal at the time – *Looney Tunes* had a moment in the 1990s when everyone was wearing Iceberg tops with the characters on them. People were even naming their tags after them.

We went to Peckham Cinema where they had a special deal with McDonald's over the road, which meant that after the movie we could go and have a Big Mac and fries for £1.99 or something.

That's a seriously cool day when you're eight years old.

I couldn't always play out at weekends, though, because if I wasn't at my dad's eating tofu, then I'd be with my mum going shopping at the markets. We'd go to *all* the markets. Brixton Market, Vauxhall Market, sometimes we'd even go to Wembley Market.

First, she'd go to the butcher and then she'd go to the fishmonger. But she wasn't just going in to get these things, she was *haggling*.

'How much is that fish?' she'd ask. 'Five pounds? But you did it for me for four pounds last week! Can you descale it, cut the head and tail off, weigh it again and do it for four pounds?'

Those markets were mad. There would be flies sitting all over the meat and fish. There would *literally* be a fly sitting on a fish's eyeball.

We'd walk around the markets where I'd see slaughtered chickens hanging from hooks above our heads and goat heads sitting on tables, looking like a scene from *Saw*. There would be weird fish you'd never seen before, like parrot fish, and I'd think, *Who the hell will buy that?* But people did.

As we walked around the market, inevitably my mum would bump into one of her friends and start talking to them. I hated that because they could go on for *hours*! We'd be there in the middle of the market with her tartan trolley on wheels and a blue carrier bag full of meat while Mum was talking away like there was no tomorrow.

Meanwhile, I'd be looking over my shoulder, praying I wouldn't be spotted by any of my classmates. That was the worst – when you ran into a kid from school who was basically doing what you were doing.

He's got a bag of meat, I've got a bag of meat. He's got a tartan trolley, I've got a tartan trolley.

We'd both keep it moving, and never mention it when we'd see each other at school. But even worse than those times was being seen by a group of the 'cool' kids from school, on their way to go swimming or to spend their pocket money at JD Sports or Woolworths. *They* didn't have to go to the market with their mums.

The only thing I liked about going to the market was leaving the market, because that's when Mum would turn to me, hold out her hand and say, 'Here you are, here's a pound – you can buy yourself something.'

Rab! A pound!

Then I was faced with a choice. Do I go to the stall of warm doughnuts that I'd been smelling all day? Or do I go to the pound shop?

Who am I kidding? It was *always* the pound shop.

For us working-class kids, going to the pound shop was like going to Argos, except everything cost a pound. You could buy anything in the pound shop. A pillow, a toy gun that shot out bubbles, even a Swiss army knife. All for a pound!

Believe it or not, the best thing you could get from the pound shop was a poster. There were always posters of Bob Marley, or just a random ganja leaf. I got a *South Park* one and an Arsenal poster in there.

A few years later I went to HMV and realised that all the things in the pound shop were unofficial knock-offs. Clearly some guy with access to posters and a laminating machine was ripping us all off with his 10p prints. But I didn't care. I had a room that looked like something out of *Friday* or *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*.

The toys were all knock-offs as well. They were just cheap remixes of name brands. They didn't have Lego at the pound shop – they had something called 'Cube Blocks'. Instead of Scalextric, you had 'Electric Cars'. They even had a fake Action Man called 'Action Guy'. I would buy them, but they'd never last. They weren't great but hats off to the pound shop for allowing me to get the toys that I wanted but couldn't afford at the time.

I'd always hope we'd get a taxi home from the market – that was the dream, sitting in the back, listening to the dispatcher send minicabs all over south London. But we hardly ever did. The bus

was only 30p for a child and 70p for an adult, so I could see why Mum would always make us take it.

We'd see it at the stop, about to pull away, and Mum would tell me to run ahead of her so we could catch it.

Mum! I'm pushing this tartan trolley and carrying this big blue bag of meat – and now you want me to run for a bus??

We'd get back to the estate and all my friends would be playing out. They'd see me coming, and they'd all shout over:

'Mo! Mo! Are you coming out?'

'Can I play out, Mum?' I'd ask.

She would never say yes right away. It was always, 'Maybe – when you have helped me at home.'

I'd have to help her unpack the food and put it all away. 'OK, *now* can I go out, Mum?' But she'd always be finding more things for me to do, like taking out the bins. She'd be scouting around for more jobs for me.

It used to piss me off! But I'd do it all. Anything for a chance to play out.

Some Saturdays, by the time I got out, I'd only have an hour or so before it was time to go back in. The White kids would say, 'I have to go home for my tea' and run off. *Tea*. That was what they called it.

The White kids ate the same tea every day, but it looked like fun: pizza and chips; pizza and beans. But not just any beans, beans with the little sausages in it! Those things were special treats for us. Nearly every night, we had chicken and rice, mutton and rice, rice and beans, or, if Mum was skint, corned beef and rice.

Some weekends, Adam would come over to my house, or I'd go over to his. Adam's home was my home, and my home was his. My mum would look after Adam, and Adam's mum would look after me.

When Adam came over, my mum would feed him the same meals we had every other night of the week. He'd be *lapping* up a plate of curried chicken and rice. 'This is lovely! What is it?' he'd say. Meanwhile for me it would be the third night that week I'd had that exact same meal. Whatever Mum cooked on a Sunday night, she made it last, freezing it in empty ice cream containers and pulling it out when she needed to give us an easy dinner.

Don't get me wrong, Mum's food was delicious. But as kids we never got a choice in what we ate. Takeaways were a rare and special treat; I guess that's what our cooking was to Adam – something different. But in our household, it was just the most cost-effective way to feed three kids.

In reality, we weren't poor. But we weren't rich either. The beautiful thing about my mum is that she always put us first. She always made sure we had food in the cupboard and a roof over our heads. But I knew back then there was a real shame in being poor, at least among us kids. You'd never admit it.

I'd say in school that my mum shopped in Sainsbury's but, really, we were shopping in Kwik Save. Or Somerfield. Or Netto, in Peckham. Ah, man, Netto in Peckham! It was a bit like a Lidl really: cheap and cheerful. The good thing about it was it had no security, so you could open packs of sweets and eat them. All the shoppers would be walking around Netto eating all the food.

It was more fun to go to Adam's house at the weekends. We only had a maisonette but Adam had a *house*, with a *garden*, which was cool. His mum used to work on weekends, so often we would be there with just his dad.

Adam's dad was so chilled! A proper geezer! He'd sit there watching the football results coming in on Teletext every Saturday afternoon, a packet of peanuts in one hand and an ice-cold beer in the other.

At Adam's we could do whatever we wanted. We'd be tearing around the house, or jumping up and down on Adam's mum and dad's bed. Or we'd take his dog for a walk in the woods nearby. We'd go off and have an adventure, build dens to hang out in, and come back and play *Crash Bandicoot* late into the night. Nothing was against the rules, so long as we didn't disrupt the football results. I used to *love* going round to Adam's house.

Going to Adam's was great but when I was at primary school, I went to a few other kids' houses to play and that was a real eye-opener for me. At the primary school I went to there were three types of kids. You had kids from working-class backgrounds, kids from middle-class backgrounds, and you had some kids that were just downright posh.

My classmates lived in a mixture of areas: Peckham, East Dulwich, Brixton. Some of them lived in big townhouses over in Camberwell. There's one road there called Grove Vale Road, which was made up of huge Edwardian townhouses. Nowadays, the majority of them have been turned into flats.

One of my friends, called Benjamin, lived on that road. I remember one time I went round to his, and his mum said she could drop me back at home after.

My head was in a whirl. *They've got a car? As well?! Woah!*

Benjamin had one *big* house. He had *all* the toys. Just loads of fun shit that he didn't even play with. His place looked like a miniature Hamleys. He had the genuine Batman toys and the *real* Action Man. I *loved* Action Man. Secretly, I wanted to slyly nick a couple of toys from Benjamin's. But I knew I never could or Mum would buss my arse.

I didn't know that I didn't have much as a kid till I started going to middle-class kids' houses and kept on seeing Action Man. They'd have big Lego constructions as well. No cheap Cube Blocks from the pound shop for these guys! When she could afford it, my mum would buy me little bits of proper Lego, like a fire engine, but these kids had the fire station!

'Whoa! You've got the fire station!' I'd gasp. 'The whole fire station!'

And these kids didn't even play with their toys. I'd be at their house playing with them, all excited, and they'd say:

'No, come outside, Mo! Come on!'

'I ain't going outside. Are you mad? You've got Scalextric!' I would only ever see these toys in the Littlewoods catalogue.

And my friend would be like, 'Yeah, I play with it now and then. But come out! Let's play with worms.'

'Worms?! I don't wanna play with worms! You've got a Super Nintendo! I wanna play *Mortal Kombat*!'