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Gathering history via spoken word Mobile studio records blacks' oral narratives

By Cecily Burt, Staff Writer

OAKLAND — Ishmael Reed, David Hilliard and Lothario Lotho, old friends with decades of tales among them, united ancient custom with modern technology Thursday to hand down their stories to future generations. For 40 minutes, the men engaged in a genial, probing and wide-ranging conversation about their life experiences in Oakland, their activism and their ideas for putting young men to work and uplifting the African-American spirit — topics they've undoubtedly spoken of many times before.

But this time they held that conversation in a tiny booth inside a mobile recording studio in a streamlined silver trailer parked in Frank Ogawa Plaza in downtown Oakland.

The **StoryCorps Griot** project is spending a year traveling the country to collect at least 1,750 interviews from African Americans in nine cities. The interviews will be preserved for posterity in the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington, D.C., and the American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress. The initiative is funded by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, and radio station KALW is helping coordinate the effort in Oakland.

The term Griot stems from the West African tradition of storytelling, of passing important information regarding births, deaths and other events from one generation to the next.

The African-American tradition of handing down important customs, legacies, events through stories and music also played an integral role in this country when slaves were forbidden to learn to read and write, said Reed, 69, a noted author, poet, playwright and teacher.

"The oral tradition among African-Americans was all they had because literacy was forbidden," Reed said.

The Griot initiative is the largest effort to record oral histories of the African-American experience since the 1930s, when the Works Progress Administration's Federal Writers Project interviewed 2,300 former slaves.

The organizers hope to collect stories from ordinary residents; early settlers on the railroad; those who moved west before and during the war to work in the shipyards; and those who were part of civil rights struggles epitomized during the heyday of the Black Panther Party and Free Speech Movement.

The West Coast, and Oakland in particular, was a mecca for jazz and blues during the mid-20th century, with clubs drawing well-known entertainers from throughout the country. Most of the clubs are gone, but the memories remain, ready to be recorded and stored for future generations.

Reed, who hails from Chattanooga, Tenn., said the West is a treasure-trove of African-American history.

"African-American history in the West is rare, uncharted territory," he said. "When I was growing up in the East, I didn't know there were black cowboys and black towns."

There have been other efforts to collect oral histories of prominent pioneering African Americans in the Bay Area and California. The African American Museum and Library in Oakland holds several collections, as does the Bancroft Museum at the University of California, Berkeley, which gathered histories from people who lived in Oakland following World War II.

"This is a 21st-century update of their stories, where we as African Americans are now," said Jennifer Carr, senior coordinator for StoryCorps Griot. "We are trying to collect a snapshot of African-American life in all its regional diversity and put it in one big pot, a big gumbo pot."

"Every city is different, has its own culture," she added. "In Oakland there was a big migration from the south. In Detroit and Newark, there was a big period of industrialization that has declined. We want to talk to people about their experiences through all that, their daily lives, how they survived."

Facilitators help the interviewees prepare for their session and will offer

a list of questions that might be helpful to jog memories or get the conversation going. But people are free to talk about whatever they like.

Hilliard, 65, one of the earliest members of the Black Panther Party for Self Defense, warmed up as he told his friends Reed and Lotho how he was invited by friend Huey Newton to join the notorious organization, which was founded down the street from his house in North Oakland.

"(Huey) said he was starting a new organization for self defense and he wanted people around him that he could trust," Hilliard said, recalling his anger and frustration of recorded incidents of police brutality across the country in the 1960s. "I didn't know what to do with my frustration, so when Huey called, I was ready to join."

Lotho, 60, an activist, businessman, entrepreneur and former owner of Bluesville, said during the wide-ranging conversation that he landed in Oakland from Missouri (although he called in "misery").

"I came out here for the Gold Rush and when we got out here all the gold was gone," he said.

But the possibilities he recognized through the activism of the Black Panther Party were infectious, Lotho said, so much so that he decided to run for mayor of Oakland in 1972.

"I was interviewed, and during the interview they asked why I was running when I had no chance to win," Lotho recalled. "I said, 'Of course I have no chance, but there's the Democratic party and the Republican party.... I'm running on the No Chance party, mind if I take a chance?'"

The **StoryCorps Griot** booth will be at Frank Ogawa Plaza for six weeks. To schedule a 40-minute recording session, call (800) 850-4406, or visit <http://www.storycorpsgriot.net>. A \$10

contribution is requested for a CD copy of the recorded interview.

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