

## 'GBO helps give a listen to black oral histories

### RADIO DIAL

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WBGO (88.3 FM) is getting a little bit of programming and preserving a lot of Newark history through its partnership with StoryCorps Griot in what's described as the largest black oral-history project since the Depression.

StoryCorps Griot is a year-long effort that's collecting thousands of oral histories from African-Americans in at least nine U.S. cities. Newark is the second stop, after Atlanta, and from there it will move to Hartford, Detroit, Chicago, Oakland, Clarksdale, Miss., Memphis, and Selma and Montgomery, Ala.

StoryCorps Griot spun off from the original StoryCorps, a nonprofit operation developed by David Isay, whose work has been heard on radio for years in the award-winning "Sound Portraits" series.

"StoryCorps was originally conceived as a 10-year project," says Isay, but it has been so successful in cities like New York - where a recording booth has been set up in Grand Central Station - that it now may be more open-ended.

The collected stories will go to the Smithsonian to be archived as part of American history. The StoryCorps Griot recordings will go to the Smithsonian's planned National Museum of African American History and Culture, which is projected to open around 2015.

The last major African-American oral-history project, notes Isay, was the Federal Writers Project during the Depression. Some 2,300 former slaves told their stories at that time. What StoryCorps Griot is collecting, he says, is in a sense the sequel.

"We're recording people who grew up in the civil rights era," he says. "They were part of the generation that moved out of segregation. It's vital that these stories not be lost."

The Griot booth is set up in Military Park in Newark, and recording sessions are scheduled in advance. Each session lasts 40 minutes, with the storyteller being questioned by someone he or she feels comfortable with, often a son or daughter. A facilitator from StoryCorps is on hand for logistical or other assistance.

Anyone interested in participating can call 1-800-850-4406. The booth will remain in Newark through next week, and StoryCorps workers have also taken recording equipment to people's homes in the city.

WBGO got involved as part of its community programs.

"Newark has immense history," says general manager Cephas Bowles. "It has been a center of jazz and gospel music for decades, an industrial powerhouse and a mecca for literature and the artists."

Yet it has also lived in the shadow of New York, a point stressed by both Bowles and Isay in explaining why this project went to Newark.

Bowles calls Newark "one of the country's oldest and least understood urban environments."

Excerpts from some of the StoryCorps Griot recordings can be heard Friday nights at 7:30 on the WBGO Journal and on [www.wbgo.org](http://www.wbgo.org)