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The HistoryMakers present: Eartha Kitt

Ostracized at an early age because of her mixed-race heritage, Eartha Kitt was given away by her mother at age 8 and sent from the South Carolina cotton fields to live with an aunt in Harlem. In New York her distinct individuality and flair for show business manifested itself, and on a friend's dare, the shy teen auditioned for the famed Katherine Dunham Dance Troupe. Performing in *Blue Holiday*, *Bal Negre*, and *Casbah* allowed Kitt to travel the world, prompting her to leave the Dunham Dance Troupe to pursue a solo career. In Paris, Kitt played Helen of Troy in Orson Welles' production of *Faust*.

In 1967, Miss Kitt made an indelible mark on pop culture as the infamous Catwoman in the television series, *Batman*. The previous year, she was nominated for an Emmy for her role in the series, *I Spy*.

Recently, her distinctive voice has enthralled an entirely new generation of fans, first as a sexy cosmetics mogul to Eddie Murphy in 1992's *Boomerang* and then for younger fans as Yzma, the villain, in Disney's animated feature, *The Emperor's New Groove*, and its sequel, when it became a Saturday morning animated series, she won an Emmy.

On January 17 2007, Ms. Kitt turned 80 years old and marked the occasion with a celebratory concert at Carnegie Hall.

Moderator Gwen Hill has worked for the *Washington Post* and as *White House* correspondent for the *New York Times*. In 1999, she became moderator of PBS' *Washington Week in Review*, as well as a correspondent for *The News Hour with Jim Lehrer*. She became the first African American woman to moderate a vice-presidential debate in October 2004.

Tickets are \$500 each at 312.674.1900.

The HistoryMakers preserve tales of triumph

By Suzanne Hanney & Mary Faith Hilboldt

The HistoryMakers can't let another Johnnie Cochran die before they get his or her story.

You may know *The HistoryMakers* as the annual PBS celebrity television show that brought you interviews with famous African-Americans such as Harry Belafonte, B.B. King, Ossie Davis and Ruby Dee, Russell Simmons, Colin Powell, Della Reese and Diahann Carroll. But that's just the public face of the nation's largest collection effort of African-American video oral histories.

The annual celebrity event (see sidebar) is a fundraiser for *The HistoryMakers'* work to educate both white and black America on the breadth and depth of the latter's role in American history as told by the first person. Yes, there are entertainers and sports stars, but also doctors, politicians, businessmen - anyone who has played a role in a movement led by African-Americans.

Julieanna L. Richardson, founder and executive director, says *The HistoryMakers'* role is not only to keep their stories from being lost, but to highlight their achievements in the face of adversity.

Richardson started the organization in 1999 after a degree from Harvard Law School, a career at Jenner & Block and then time as cable administrator for the City of Chicago Office of Cable Communications, where she established its regulatory body.

"I didn't know what I wanted to do," she said of the crossroad in her career. "I was concerned also about the images I would see. That's still the case, you turn on the TV, see how people are portrayed.

'It's hard for people to have a real frank discussion of race, mainly because slavery remains a taboo subject, shrouded in guilt and shame; while white people don't want to feel guilty, black people don't want to be ashamed.'

I don't see a diverse America, yet I would talk with friends and see interesting stories of people. For example, a friend teaches at Harvard Law School. His uncle and his father went to Harvard law and were math whizzes. One uncle was the first black to get a PhD in math from the University of Chicago. These stories were outside of typical sports, entertainment, music, and downtrodden people -

stories that I felt were way more prevalent out there than meets the eye. The world is bombarded with negative images of black people."

These thoughts brought her back to her undergraduate days as a theater major at Brandeis University, when she did independent research on the Harlem Renaissance - specifically Leigh Whipper and Butterfly McQueen. Whipper was the first black member of Actor's Equity and founder of the Negro Actors Guild. McQueen had earned \$5,000 a week playing a slave in the movie, *Gone With The Wind*. Both of them were living in impoverished conditions when Richardson interviewed them.

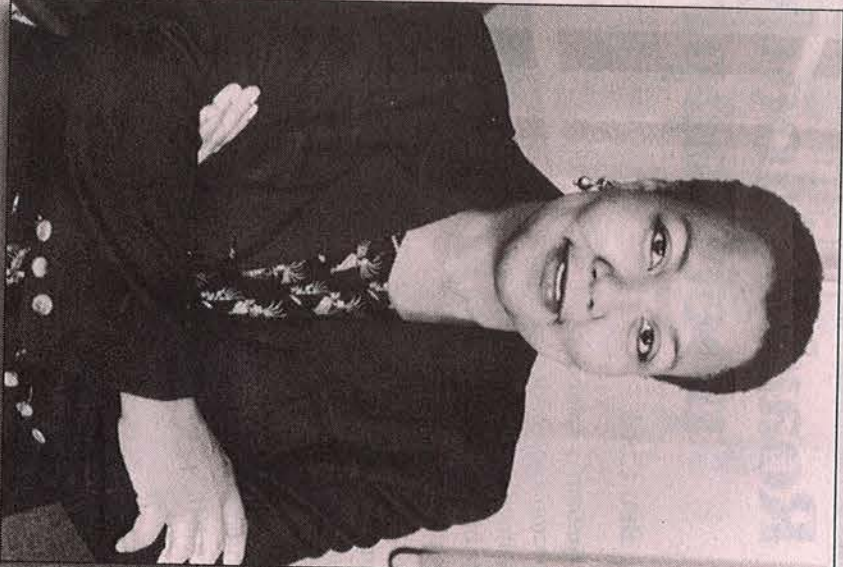
"I think those stories stayed with me in a very profound way," Richardson said. Her theater background led her to ponder where people came from and their influences. "I also wanted to leave a legacy."

Not since the WPA movement of the 1930s captured 2,300 slave histories has there been any comparable attempt at black oral histories. While those were hand-recorded, the HistoryMakers does extensive preliminary research and the interviews are captured by a two-person crew - a reporter and technician - and can be accessed online, through the Illinois State Library and a speakers bureau. It has gathered 2,000 histories in 80 American cities and towns, including Richardson's own father, who was one of the top 100 golf instructors in the U.S.

"I always say you should treat interviewee as if don't know them. I heard stories I had not heard before and [have not heard] afterward. That's the difference between journalism and oral history: it tends to be a more leisurely exploration."

The HistoryMakers did a six-hour interview with magazine and cosmetics magnate John Johnson, but she didn't get to interview defense attorney Johnnie Cochran.

"We were trying to, but he was sick at the time and we didn't know it," she said. Further underscoring the urgency is



Julieanna L. Richardson, founder and executive director of The HistoryMakers

that the slave histories were recorded in the 19th century, but not the 20th.

"It's really needed in the context of where [Democratic presidential candidate] Barack [Obama] is going. This country has yet to get over its slave heritage. It's hard for people to have a real frank discussion of race, mainly because slavery remains a taboo subject, shrouded in guilt and shame; while white people don't want to feel guilty, black people don't want to be ashamed. Both have acted in unintended complicity to cover up this wonderful history."

Yet both races have much to gain from proper appreciation of history, she says. "For blacks - everyone has to have a past. They have to come from something. We are the only community that reinvents ourselves every generation. This country can't be whole unless it acknowledges all its parts. For white people, there is the larger vision."

The name - and the possibilities - for the organization came after Richardson attended the National Bar Association convention and heard a panel of people that included the Rev. Billy Kyles, who marched with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. "People know about Dr. King, but not about [history-making] people who played an important part."

Chicago has been *The HistoryMakers'* incubator.

"This is where we started," Richardson said. Its offices at 1900 S. Michigan Avenue are in the earliest black community. It started right after slavery when it elected the first black state legislator, John W.E. Thomas, who ran against Robert Todd Lincoln, (Abraham Lincoln's son). Thomas passed some of the nation's first civil rights legislation in 1879, she said.

"If it weren't for Illinois' Senate President Emil Jones, we wouldn't be around. He was able to get funding in the early years - \$1 million over three years," Richardson said. John Rogers of Arel Capital added \$250,000. Other contributions have come from the Knight Foundation, Walgreens, Discover, Commonwealth Edison, Northern Trust, and Bank of America. The HistoryMakers has also partnered with the Chicago History Museum and its upcoming Chicago fashion exhibit.

"We consider ourselves a world-class city, why not have a world-class archive in a town where the black experience has been very much a part of the overall experience?" Richardson said.

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