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## Spoletto's 'Tell Your Story' project connects festival musicians with community

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Viola Chan and Christina McNeil collaborated on Spoletto Festival's "Tell Your Story" project. They got together in C on Thursday, May 1 , 2022. Grace Beahm Alford/Sta

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Spoletto Festival USA is matching three musicians with three members of the Johns Island community for an experimental outreach project that festival leaders hope can set a precedent for long-term engagement.

It's the first time Spoleto has pursued a community-based musical collaboration, and it's providing a model for aural storytelling and a mechanism for professional artists to lift up voices that otherwise would go unheard by regular audiences.

“We wanted a way for the musicians who visit Charleston every year, and for people who love the festival, to create relationships and use music to build collaborations,” said Renate Rohlring, a festival pianist and music therapist who's helping to spearhead the project.

The initiative is informed partly by ethnomusicological practice and partly by oral history practice, with a big dose of creative music-making tossed in for good measure.

Rohlring said the small team wants to mine the memories of local residents to learn about their histories and create an innovative document for posterity.

How does it work? Three orchestra players — violinist Aurora Mendez, bassoonist Joy Guidry and flutist Viola Chan — teamed up with three Johns Island residents identified by Our Lady of Mercy Community Outreach.

Antwoine Curtis Geddis, owner of Dj Sporty Entertainment and Dj Sporty Mobile Sugar Shack, shared aspects of his life experiences with Mendez. Jacqueline Grimball Jefferson, a nature-loving woman of the Sea Islands, met with Guidry. Christina Hunter McNeil, a storyteller and singer, talked with Chan.

The conversations were recorded.

A couple of the musicians also captured various sounds of the area. The end result's less performance and more a transformative process, Rohlring said.

The musicians then pieced together a “sonic memoir.”





## Arts

### In his first Spoleto Festival USA, a new general director starts connecting threads

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By Maura Hogan [mhogan@postandcourier.com](mailto:mhogan@postandcourier.com)

McNeil, 64, said she was happy to participate and share stories that might help keep her heritage alive. It is something she had promised her mother she would do. Born and raised on Johns Island, McNeil had a career as a nurse's aide until she was forced to stop because of physical disabilities resulting from a childhood auto accident.

She told Chan about that accident, how it took the legs of her sister and forced McNeil into a body cast for a year. She told the flutist about her rural upbringing and how it lacked electricity and plumbing.



And she spoke about growing up in the church and about her love of gospel music, her experiences singing in choirs and the pride she has in her daughter Leandrea, who just graduated from college.

Spoletto Festival's Tell Your Story project has provided her a welcomed new chance to share anecdotes about her upbringing, culture and life experiences.

"I'm excited about it," McNeil said. "I told my mama I will carry it on, if I have to do it myself."

Chan said she decided to fill her sonic memoir with lots of McNeil's own voice. She's added in a bit of her flute and some jazz saxophone to create a fluid and free aural impression.

"I'm just helping along the storytelling," she said.

Chan welcomed the chance to amplify underrepresented voices, she said, adding that, as an Asian American, she was able to relate to feelings of marginalization expressed by McNeil.

She knows what it's like to be unseen, Chan said.

Or, conversely, what it's like to be noticed as someone who stands out, who is different. In the streets of Charleston, she often will feel the eyes of passersby gazing at her, she said.



Rohlfing said the results of the project will find their way into a digital map on the Spoleto website, which also will feature musical excerpts and portions of the raw interviews. A private event will be held for participants.

She said the pandemic contributed to a growing feeling among professional musicians that heightening the relevance of the arts requires community investment and relationship-building.

“This idea that community engagement is just performing for members of the community is totally archaic, because people need experiences,” she said.

Spoleto Festival likely will develop and expand the Tell Your Story Project in coming years, increasing the number of pairings, extending the work across the calendar, engaging musicians who are based in Charleston and not necessarily affiliated with the festival, and partnering with additional community outreach organizations.

Little by little, the sonic memoirs will multiply, and a new kind of oral history project will take root.

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Adam Parker has covered many beats and topics for The Post and Courier, including race and history, religion, and the arts. He is the author of “Outside Agitator: The Civil Rights Struggle of Cleveland Sellers Jr.,” published by Hub City Press.

