

Output of Makers Quest turning up on air, online

By Mike Janssen

The offspring of a CPB-funded initiative for multimedia producers led public radio listeners on a cross-country journey this summer: to a Tennessee Main Street, an Alabama rabbit restaurant, a Seattle street corner and through New Orleans' aural hustle and bustle.

Listeners were invited to expand their travels by venturing online to explore the websites joined to these documentaries.

There, they could add landmarks to interactive maps, interact with the creators on Facebook, and contribute their own photos and ideas for stories.

These projects were the spawn of Makers Quest 2.0, a CPB-funded, \$500,000 initiative, organized by the Association of Independents in Radio (AIR), to support multimedia works with radio components. For public radio, CPB sought examples of digital innovations that stations and other producers could borrow. For the selected producers, this Quest presented a rare chance to develop creative projects with a large measure of freedom and support from colleagues.

Unlike CPB's Public Radio Talent Quest, which prospected for new hosts (update, next page), Makers Quest went looking for producers. CPB execs with a panel of producers selected eight production teams from hundreds of nominees. The teams

explored topics including health, politics, memory, poetry, economics and technology. Some examples:

- Open Sound New Orleans encouraged residents of the Big Easy to record sounds around the city and put them on an interactive map at opensoundneworleans.com.

- Beyond the Odds (www.beyondtheodds.org) documented the spread of HIV and AIDS among young people through audio, video and online discussions.

- The Corner (www.23rdandunion.com)



What is Main Street nowadays? With CPB aid, producers set off in a Subaru to find out. (Photo: Jesse Shapins.)

org) chronicled the gentrification of a black neighborhood in Seattle with stories, audio, videos and photos, some contributed by neighborhood residents.

A full list is at www.mq2.org/2009projects.

The Quest officially ended Aug. 31, but offshoots of the eight projects will continue to sprout on air and online in coming months. CPB and AIR expect to launch another round of the initiative soon.

The project comes along at a fortuitous time for independent producers feeling the loss of two indie-friendly radio shows, *Day to Day* and *Weekend America*. CPB also cut funding to Hearing Voices, an indie collective that produces specials and plants pieces on existing shows.

Those three shops had been dispersing some \$700,000 in acquisition dollars annually, says Sue Schardt, executive director of AIR. Other buyers of indie work also have shrunken acquisition budgets, Schardt says. Makers Quest marked the first time in 20 years that CPB has dedicated a pool of funds solely to independent producers, an event that happened to coincide with AIR's 20th anniversary, she says.

"We have here what I view as the beginning of a much larger opportunity—to re-establish and redefine a vital creative culture in public radio and public media, driven by producers," Schardt says.

CPB execs hope all pubcasters will be able to reap benefits from the Quest's experimentation with online and mobile platforms. Bruce Theriault, senior v.p. of radio, points out that mobile devices and accompanying applications are more popular among the minority audiences that pubcasters increasingly are courting.

"If we're going to reach people, we have to think about every platform and being on those platforms," Theriault says. "We just have to keep experimenting and plugging away until it's not so exceptional but is part of what we do on a daily basis."

Lessons for NPR, stations

When CPB announced the Makers Quest in September, producers could not apply directly but instead had to be nominated. AIR and CPB received 314 nominations suggesting a total of 234 individuals. A "talent committee" of eight of the nominees' professional peers then winnowed the group to 30. CPB selected the final eight recipients.

Independent producers sometimes enjoy many months to complete their works, but the Makers started their projects in April and

rushed to finish them in just five months. The tight schedule was deliberate, Schardt says. “We wanted to have them work in the environment we exist in—fast and immediate.”

AIR eased the workload, however, by pairing each production team with an “incubator”—a network or station that could guarantee producers broadcast and online exposure.

Several Makers Quest stories aired on NPR’s *Weekend Edition*, which has been wooing online audiences with multiplatform series, behind-the-scenes online videos and blog posts authored by hosts Scott Simon and Liane Hansen. Simon has amassed almost a million followers on Twitter, making him the most popular NPR personality on the microblogging service. NPR’s participation in Makers Quest built on these efforts, says Davar Iran Ardalan, supervising senior editor for *Weekend Edition*.

“We’re trying to see what lessons we can learn for public radio through this experience,” says Ardalan, who served on the Makers Quest talent committee. Open Sound New Orleans, for example, provides a model that any public radio station can borrow to create its own interactive audio maps. “We can dissect it and see how much money, effort and editing it took,” Ardalan says.

AIR and CPB are talking about continuing the Quest, possibly as soon as next month. A second round might focus on specific categories such as games, music, journalism or iPhone applications, Schardt says.

Among those 10,000 Main Streets

The Makers Quest projects covered a variety of subjects but shared a reliance on web components such as maps, social networking and user-generated content. Three of the eight projects feature interactive maps on their websites. Many used Facebook and Twitter to promote themselves and create online communities.

Independent producer Lu Olkowski says she found it “amazingly easy” to create a Facebook community. Olkowski lacked the money for a fancy website, so she built a Facebook home for her project, In Verse. It drew 2,000 fans, and Olkowski’s posts regularly attracted upwards of 30 comments. To her surprise, she didn’t know most of her fans.

Born of a partnership with the *Virginia Quarterly Review*, In Verse enlisted poets to serve as documentarians reporting on lives of the working poor. Olkowski traveled to Troy, N.Y., with poet Susan Somers-Willett and photographer Brenda Ann Kenneally and to Gulfport, Miss., with poet Natasha Trethewey and photographer Joshua Cogan.

Stories from In Verse (tinyurl.com/InVersePoetry) will air on *Studio 360* this month, and poems and photos will appear on the *Review*’s website and in the journal in October. Olkowski also developed an iPhone application to present the poems and photos in a form she describes as more e-book than slideshow. The application awaits addition to the Apple store of iPhone apps.

Another project likely to continue is Mapping Main Street (www.mappingmainstreet.org), whose creators set out to document as many Main Streets in the United States as possible. It was a tall order: Their research turned up 10,466 Main Streets.

Independent producers Kara Oehler and Ann Heppermann cre-



Kara Oehler talks with Felicia Alaers of Lewistown, Mont., about the local rite of tubing down Spring Creek—under Main Street. (Image courtesy of Ian Gray.)

ated Mapping Main Street out of frustration with politicians who spoke of “Wall Street vs. Main Street” as if the latter were a monolith.

“The idea was if we could try and document these Main Streets, we could get these amazing snapshots of the country at this moment,” Oehler says.

In May they piled into a 1996 Subaru station wagon with media artist Jesse Shapins and economist James Burns. Some Main Streets they found were just a few blocks in the middle of a field. Others had old-time charm or had become routes for Mexicans traveling to U.S. jobs.

A trip to Chattanooga, Tenn., turned up frank talk and strong feelings about that city’s Main Street, now a runway for prostitutes. “When you see them get busted, you know you’re doing something good for the neighborhood,” says a resident battling the trend. The resulting Chattanooga story ended up on *Weekend Edition*.

User-generated content was central to Mapping Main Street. Producers created a Flickr group where contributors from all 50 states have posted pictures of Main Streets. Mapping Main Street also found followers through Twitter and Facebook.

The online strategies explored by Makers Quest projects suggest a “new paradigm” for the presentation of indies’ radio and multimedia work, Oehler says. But she laments one drawback.

“We’ve always joked about how Facebook was kind of the water cooler for independent producers,” she says. “Now it feels a lot more like work.” ■