



We use our music to express ourselves, our lives, the religions of our parents, and the culture of our countries.

Vinh, 18 years old, Canadian Vietnamese hip hop artist from *Roots to Rap With: A Music Video*



ROOTS TO RAP WITH: **04** **EXPRESSING IDENTITY THROUGH MUSIC**

THE TRANSFORMATIVE POWER OF MUSIC

Music has the remarkable ability to transcend social, cultural, and linguistic barriers. Have you ever used music to communicate a part of yourself? Have you ever heard a song that helped you understand an experience outside of your own? How are artists using music to communicate and explore culture and identity? How do musicians use the power of their voices to share their refugee and newcomer experiences? How can music foster a sense of belonging and be used to negotiate multiple cultural identities?

Music is a language that we all share. One song can reach people of different beliefs, cultures, and backgrounds. Making music or listening to music can help us get through tough times, and can help us to uncover something that we might not have otherwise seen.



ROOTS TO RAP WITH: EXPLORING THE LIFE STORIES METHOD THROUGH MUSIC

Gracia Dyer Jalea

OVERVIEW

Over the course of three years, Mapping Memories collaborated with the Côte-des-Neiges youth centre on a series of art and music-based participatory media projects. We explored the ways art has been used by young people to both discover and express their cultural heritage and identity. Our work with the centre began with an eight-week Life Stories workshop that used video, still images, and peer interviewing as its main artistic forms.

Following this, we worked with a young, culturally diverse music collective called NoBadSound and helped the group create a music video called *Roots to Rap With*. This video was largely inspired by a series of life story interviews we conducted with Montreal-based artists, who originally came to the city as either immigrants or refugees. Several of these artists have been mentors at the youth centre. Their interviews were used to create *Making a Difference*, a video series that focused on the role that music and mentorship have played in the artists' lives.



The Côte-des-Neiges youth centre (Maison des Jeunes) is one of Montreal's most vibrant youth centres, located in a neighbourhood that is recognized for its cultural diversity. Welcoming teens between the ages of 12 and 18, the centre provides youth with various arts-based activities. In 2007, the centre opened NoBadSound Studio to offer aspiring young musicians a venue

to develop their musical talents and to express themselves artistically. The studio includes a small recording space, a rehearsal space, and a performance venue. It offers neighbourhood youth a wide variety of music-based workshops, including beat boxing, rapping, lyrical composition, voice lessons, music production, DJing, and performance skills.

GOALS

The objective of the Mapping Memories Project was to work alongside youth to help them express their experiences as newcomers to Canada. With the Refugee Youth working group of the Montreal Life Stories Project, we wanted to add a youth perspective to the collection of testimonies of Montrealers displaced by war, genocide, and other human rights violations. Despite their age, we knew that the youth involved with this project had a lot to share with the larger community. Our main challenge, however, was how to approach a “Life Story” with individuals whose lives were just beginning. We wanted to make the process more engaging than a straightforward interview. We decided instead to offer a digital media workshop on peer interviewing, and, in doing so, began to explore alternative forms of life stories.

When we began our workshops at the centre, we were interested in uncovering the circumstances that brought individuals to Montreal, finding out how these young people related to their countries of origin, and looking at the ways in which they had managed to adjust to their new lives in Canada.

What challenges did they face when they first arrived? Had they maintained ties with their former homelands, and if so, how? How had their country of origin informed their identity? How were they negotiating the cultures of their families and homelands with the culture that they were now being exposed to in Canada?

AN IDEAL PARTNER

We found an ideal partner in the Côte-des-Neiges youth centre, located in one of Montreal’s most culturally diverse neighborhoods. The centre, situated in the neighborhood’s core, has functioned as a magnet for Côte-des-Neiges youth, offering workshops in art, music, and dance. Although other centres in the city have been struggling to attract youth, this place is vibrant, alive, and full of young people.

The success of the centre is due, in large part, to a dedicated team of young volunteers and staff members, many of whom have lived in the area and consider the centre a second home. At the head of this team is Robints Paul, the centre’s director since 2005. Robints is a role model and a mentor to the neighborhood youth. One young teenager, Tristan, who had recently arrived from St. Lucia, explained that his relationship with Robints was like that of an older brother.

Robints’ success as a director is also the result of his open approach to collaborate with projects like Mapping Memories. The centre, which operates on a modest budget, is constantly in search of projects that offer neighbourhood youth the chance to explore alternative forms of self-expression that they might not otherwise find at school.

***I BELONG* WORKSHOP: PHOTOGRAPHS AND SELF-REPRESENTATION**

The *I Belong* workshop was our first project at the centre and involved a core group of six participants. It enabled our team, Colleen French of the Canadian Council for Refugees along with Liz Miller and Gracia Dyer Jalea of Mapping Memories, to better understand the rhythms and philosophy of the centre.

For the first session, we prepared an exercise on perception and personal biases. We began with a PowerPoint presentation with portraits of youth. The idea was to imagine the personality and personal story behind each portrait. Next to the portraits were leading questions, such as: What kind of music does this person listen to? Where was this person born? How many siblings does he or she have?

Afterwards we explained that all of the photos were of youth with refugee experiences. We asked participants to think about how they had arrived at their conclusions, discussing how a photograph can be interpreted in many ways. By exploring together the difference between *reading* a photograph and *reading into* a photograph, we were able to talk about biases and perceptions. The perception exercise was a fun way to introduce the concept of stereotypes as well as the challenges of self-representation.

We then asked the group to think about how they might represent themselves through still photos. We shared examples of photo essays such as *Passage to Canada* (www.passagestocanada.com), a project featuring innovative photo essays of newcomers to Montreal. Following a presentation on photo composition, participants worked in small groups



*Perception
PowerPoint*



Jean Charles, a 16-year-old Haitian Canadian, left his family behind and moved to Montreal with his older brother. Since his arrival, he has been an active member of the Côte-des-Neiges youth centre. He resides over the centre's Youth Committee.

PHOTOVOICE

The I Belong workshop used the PhotoVoice methodology, which incorporates text and photographs. PhotoVoice is an international organization that has led participatory action photography projects around the world. PhotoVoice projects use photography as an advocacy tool to help individuals voice their personal experiences of oppression and lobby for social reform.

For more information, see www.photovoice.org

Bylow is an aspiring DJ from St. Lucia. Since coming to Montreal, he has taken an interest in community radio and regularly DJs for the Côte-des-Neiges youth centre.

to practice using the cameras. Accompanied by a facilitator, the youth took photographs of their neighborhood. On other occasions, they took self-portraits and photos of objects that defined them.

We reviewed the photographs together and discussed what made some of them especially strong. Participants wrote a caption for each photograph, in their handwriting on an index card that revealed something about themselves. The cards were scanned into Photoshop and used to create digital montages, combining text and photographs. By the end of the workshop, each participant had created an 11"x13" photomontage and these were mounted on the walls of the centre.



PEER INTERVIEWS

Following the still camera exercises, we worked with the group on peer interviews. We introduced the basics of interviewing, including how to keep questions 'open-ended.' For example, instead of asking, "How old were you when you came to Montreal?" they might ask, "What were your first impressions when you arrived?" Additional open-ended questions included: Why are you here? What do you think of Canadians? What does home mean to you? The participants took turns asking and answering questions.

The peer interview process worked best when it involved video cameras and microphones. Learning media production skills motivated them to share their life stories with each other. Using the equipment also offered participants a meaningful way to be involved, as they had to stay focused on their roles as sound recorder, sound monitor, interviewee, interviewer, director, or cinematographer.



CONFRONTING STEREOTYPES ABOUT REFUGEES

by Colleen French

Our workshop was largely about building trust, busting myths, and breaking down barriers to understanding one another. It was important to have common points of reference when we talked about what it meant to be uprooted from your home and begin a new life in Montreal. The members of the group came to Montreal for different reasons: some were sponsored by their parents who already lived in Canada, others came to Canada as refugee claimants. Because the Mapping Memories project mandate was to gather the stories of 'refugee youth,' we raised the concept of 'being a refugee' early on in the sessions. The initial reactions of group members were to say things like 'refugees are people who don't have enough food,' 'refugees are poor,' or, referring to another member of the group, 'He isn't a refugee!' We felt the need to clear up some misunderstandings.

The legal definition used to determine who is a refugee and what it means to have refugee status in Canada is complex and abstract. The "What is a Refugee?" PowerPoint presentation and workshop defined 'refugee' interactively through pictures, which helped clarify it for the group. For some members in the group who arrived in Montreal as refugee claimants, it was a shock to learn that the government might refuse their refugee claim. Even if they believed their stories met the legal definition of needing 'refugee protection,' the government might not agree. Beyond definitions, our message to the group was that no matter the outcome of the government decision, their stories were valid and we respected them for sharing. All of the participants had experiences that needed to be heard, and we were there to help them raise their voices.

The "What is a Refugee?" PowerPoint presentation can be found at ccrweb.ca.



INTERVIEWS WITH MENTORS

To further develop their interviewing skills, we interviewed Ayanda Dubé (see Chapter 1), who had arrived in Montreal as an unaccompanied minor and then made a film about his life story. Ayanda, an active volunteer with the Canadian Council for Refugees, shared his experiences with the group and discussed the process of making his film.

Having a chance to practice interviewing skills with someone from outside of the group was important for the youth, and through their questions, we learned more about the concerns of the group's members. For example, one young participant who had come to Montreal with his brother asked Ayanda, "If you are no longer living in Zimbabwe, and you are not a resident of Canada, then *what are you* in this country?" Through this experience, the youth were able to connect to Ayanda as a role model. They saw him as a reflection of themselves, and in asking him questions, they were able to confront their own concerns about their identities and their connections to this new country.

Toward the end of the eight-week workshop, a radio journalist from the CBC contacted us to do a story on the project. We hoped that this experience would provide yet another chance to practice interviewing. The reporter showed the group how to use the radio equipment and offered participants a chance to reflect on the most valuable aspects of the workshop. The radio interview also offered a unique opportunity for group members to share their opinions with a national audience.



LIFE STORIES THROUGH MUSIC

Over the course of the *I Belong* workshop, we had the chance to observe the important role that Robints and his team played in the lives of the young people at the centre. Inspired by his leadership, we interviewed him for the Montreal Life Stories Project. Robints is also a well-known Haitian hip-hop artist. Using his stage name, Vox Sambou, Robints performs with a local Montreal group, Nomadic Massive. This hip-hop group, formed by young men and women from varying cultural backgrounds (South America, the Caribbean, and Northern Africa), use their native tongues to powerfully convey the immigrant and refugee experience. Through their music, the group has traveled the world, performing and advocating for social justice. Robints' interest in music and the arts, and his career as a hip-hop MC, has inspired the youth at the centre to explore the role that music could play in their lives. He uses his personal experiences to relate to the young people. His willingness to be open has resulted in relationships founded on trust, mutual understanding, and respect.

Over the course of the following two years, we conducted six additional interviews with musicians for the Life Stories Project, most of whom were members of Nomadic Massive. The musicians, many of whom had come to Montreal as immigrants and refugees, were also active leaders in their communities, and worked as teachers, journalists, and organizers. In addition, several helped out with activities at the youth centre, and acted as role models and mentors to the youth. Three of these interviews were edited into short films.

WHAT IS ORAL HISTORY? WHAT IS A LIFE STORY?

Steve High, Co-Director, Centre for Oral History and Digital Storytelling

Oral history is a method of understanding the past through oral accounts, such as an interview or conversation. It is the study of the past as it is remembered in the present.

What is remembered and **why** is vitally important in oral history. Meaning and memory can be found in the words spoken, as well as in the voice or gestures of the individual. People's relationship to their own stories, where they linger and what they skip over, helps us understand the logic of what we are hearing.

The life story approach is a practice within oral history. This approach finds meaning in the **context** of a life lived. It also puts memory front and centre, which in the case of human rights and genocide, is a rare practice. More typically, interviews are conducted only for information and very little space is given to the larger story. Holocaust survivors, for example, are asked to cover the what, when, who, and where of their experiences. Their recorded interviews typically begin and end in the violence perpetrated and because of this tendency, we learn very little about the impact of that experience, how violence ripples through people's lives, families, and communities. A life story interview includes the 'before' and the 'after,' telling us more about what was lost and how an event shaped people's subsequent lives – the silences, absences, memories, and activism.

Within the Life Stories of Montreal project, interviewees are invited to become co-producers in their own stories, and are asked to participate in all stages of production by helping to develop questions, review transcripts, and assist with any post-production. Each interviewee maintains joint ownership over his or her own story, an opportunity that is rarely afforded to an interview subject in mainstream media.

ROBINTS PAUL AKA VOX SAMBOU, Haiti



Video Interview
with Robints

Born and raised in Limbe, a town in Northern Haiti, Robints left the country with his four brothers in the early 1990s, when Haiti was going through a period of intense political turmoil. Through the assistance of his brother, a priest who had been studying in Montreal at the time, Robints immigrated to Canada at the age of 19. He studied in Winnipeg before moving to Montreal. He founded the hip-hop group Nomadic Massive along with his current bandmates, and as Vox Sambou, he uses his music as a vehicle for self-expression and to build social and political awareness.



You really have to listen a lot and get to know the youth. You cannot be afraid to share your personal experiences with them. They're adolescents, and like so many people their age, they are looking for their own identity. Most of the youth that I work with have just arrived to Montreal. So on top of searching for themselves, they are also looking to adjust and find their own identity within the context of their new environment.

Robints Paul

Robints encourages the youth at the Côte-des-Neiges centre to use the arts as a way to express, discover, and remember who they are as individuals. For him, music is a means to build self-confidence and awareness; and it allows him to express his pride for his country, heritage, language, and culture by singing in Creole, French, and English. In addition to his promising music career, Robints has been the Director of the Maison des Jeunes Côte-des-Neiges since 2005.

www.nomadicmassive.com

LYRICS FROM VOX SAMBOU'S SONG, "ARTICLE 14"

(These excerpted lyrics have been translated by Vox Sambou from Creole)

*We say enough is enough, let's put our strengths together to rise up
Determined this has to change, the soil is toxic, a cause of many genocides
Look at the children, their skin is like plastic
Their cases are critical, politicians without conscience
Corrupted assassins, it's a satanic movement
Where is Jean Dominique, Patrice Lumumba
Your souls will stay alive like Che Guevara's
Like Mandela, we must fight for justice
Until we gain victory
We know our rights
Let me breathe and stop the oppression
Our grandfathers sacrificed their lives for our existence
You kidnapped our women in factories, as they stayed silent
You think it makes sense for them to be swimming in suffering
The slave's son never has any rights
They are not equal in the eyes of the law
With no representative, they are imprisoned in the dark
It's time for revolution, this is our mission
So many executions we have no protection
A lot of men had sold out and lost their reason
It's a destructive system of hanging and destroying us with poison
They harassed us so much they make us hate one another
For their own interest, we risk our lives in boats
If we arrived alive, they treated us like objects
But we have the blood of the cocoa warriors
One day we will gain victory.*

ROOTS TO RAP WITH: A MUSIC VIDEO



Stills from **Roots to Rap With** video

We were inspired by our interviews with the Nomadic Massive group and wanted to work with the centre again. We learned that the band members were mentoring a new group at the NoBadSound Studio and had helped them to produce a CD. Robints approached us to work on a music video with this newly formed hip-hop group, made up of teens between the ages of 16 and 18, who sang about the struggles that they faced, in Tagalog, French, English, and Spanish. The group had also performed live at a Nomadic Massive performance, where they shared the stage with their mentors.

Unlike the *I Belong* workshop, the *Roots to Rap With* project came from a clear mandate from Robints. Now we had an opportunity to collaborate with an emerging musical group that had a vested interest and specific goal in mind. We arranged a time to meet the group at the NoBadSound Studio to discuss their vision for the music video project. Together with the youth and their mentors, we began to brainstorm. Our suggestion was to produce a short documentary on how their experiences and cultures had influenced their music. We explained that it would be similar to the interviews that we had conducted with their mentors from Nomadic Massive.

After some lively and informative discussions, we decided that we would inter-cut scenes of the music video with parts of their interviews in a format similar to that of popular music broadcasters, MuchMusic and MTV. The youth were very happy about this opportunity and were

encouraged by the fact that their mentors had completed a similar project with Mapping Memories. The presence of their mentors at the meeting was reassuring and helped us to come up with a shared vision.

MAPPING LOCATIONS FOR THE MUSIC VIDEO

The first step was to map out the visual elements of the video, including where the video would be shot and what clothes the performers would wear. We asked participants to consider the significance of each visual element and to make their selections based on locations and clothes that held meaning for them.

These details would function as visual signifiers to allow the audience to learn more about them as individuals. It was clear from our first meeting that the Côte-des-Neiges neighbourhood was significant to them and

represented a place of belonging. For this reason, the group decided to shoot the majority of the video in and around popular landmarks and meaningful places in Côte-des-Neiges, such as the NoBadSound Studio, St. Joseph's Oratory, and the local shopping mall.

INTERVIEWS

Once the visual elements of the video had been decided upon, we discussed the questions that we would ask each interviewee. We devised a list of ten standard questions, adapted from the artist series, and shared them prior of each interview. The questions were posed in both French and English, and we encouraged them to answer in the language that felt most comfortable for them. We also did warm-up questions with each participant. Each interview lasted thirty minutes.

QUESTIONS FROM THE ROOTS TO RAP WITH PROJECT

- » *Start off by introducing yourself: state your name, your age, where you're from.*
- » *Do you connect with your parents' culture? If so, why? If not, why not?*
- » *How do your dreams differ from those of your parents?*
- » *What does Côte-de-Neiges mean to you? What makes Côte-de-Neiges feel like home?*
- » *You are a culturally diverse group, similar to those who live in the Côte-de-Neiges area. How does NoBadSound and your music reflect the neighbourhood and the communities that live in Côte-de-Neiges?*
- » *What are some of the issues that youth in Côte-de-Neiges face and do you sing about these in your music? What is important to youth in Côte-de-Neiges?*
- » *What are stereotypes that people have of hip-hop and youth in Côte-de-Neiges?*
- » *Does your music define who you are? And if so, what does your music say about you?*
- » *Why is music such an important part of your life? Why were you drawn to it?*
- » *What advice would you give other youth in your community?*

FILMING AND EDITING

To make the film we allocated two on-location camera days. One day was dedicated to interviewing and another day to shooting the music video. Throughout the production process, the youth were very supportive of one another. When they were not in front of the camera themselves, they observed their peers from behind the camera. They listened and learned from each other about their influences, family histories, cultures, dreams, and hopes for the future. In doing so, they not only learned new things about each other, but also had a chance to reflect on their own lived experiences.

Following the interviews, we invited the group to Concordia University Television (CUTV), a community television station, to review the footage we had shot over the two days. We chose to edit at CUTV to introduce the youth to a community resource that they might take advantage of at a later date and because the studio offered a window into the university community. Over the course of an evening, each individual was asked to review their own interview and to evaluate and rate sections of it on a scale of one to five. A rating of one meant the material should not

be seen by an outside audience. A rating of five meant that they would like it to be in the final video.

We also asked them to write comments to explain their rating decisions and their impressions. This reflective exercise was no easy task. On the one hand, a first viewing of an interview is always awkward. Few of us have a chance to see ourselves so closely, and what we view is often at odds with how we perceive ourselves. While reviewing the interview footage, we made sure to give the participants a chance to react to seeing themselves on film. All the members of the group were critical while watching themselves on camera. Our role as facilitators was to help them get past the first stage of self-consciousness and, with patience and encouragement, help them to see themselves with new eyes, as leaders in their community.

During a second editing session, the youth made it known that they were very pleased with the results of the interviews, but less interested in the tedious editing process. Taking our cue from them, we completed the editing process, based on the decisions that they had made during the CUTV editing session.



IMPACT

Roots to Rap With, which combined interview segments and the group's lively performance, was a finalist in Radio-Canada's Roots Competition (www.roots.rcinet.ca). It was enthusiastically received at festivals including Montreal's Vue D'Afrique and Toronto's Regent Park Film Festival. The organizers of the Regent Park festival invited the youth to Toronto for the opening night, to perform and speak on a panel about their experiences producing the film. They were also invited to speak at the 2010 Hip-Hop Symposium at McGill University. Whether standing at the podium of a university lecture hall or performing on a stage in Toronto in front of hundreds of people, the NoBadSound crew was beginning to see the impact of their music on a range of diverse audiences.

Through the *I Belong* and the *Roots to Rap With* projects, youth were given the opportunity to explore how to use their voices and talents both as tools for self discovery and as a means to inspire others. As facilitators, we were inspired by the work they produced and how they presented it with pride and conviction. We learned, as Robint's advised, to listen to them and to adapt our agenda to accommodate their needs and interests, while also exposing them to a world outside of their own.



Stills from *Roots to Rap With* video

You cannot just ignore your identity. For me, you need this connection from where you come from in order for you to grow and evolve.

Vox Sambou

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YASSIN ALSALMAN AKA THE NARCICYST, IRAQ



I found my own way of protesting, which is on the stage. In the beginning my music was very politically driven, but I always wrote two verses: one from my Eastern upbringing and one from my Western upbringing [...]. I have tried to reconcile these two worlds that I grew up in through my music. Within me, I think I've finally found a place that is accepting of both.

Yassin Alsalman



Video Interview
with Yassin

Since the age of five, Yassin has crossed borders, shuffled citizenships and learned to live in a variety of places as an Iraqi Canadian. He was born in the United Arab Emirates, moved to Montreal with his family in 1987, and by the age of 13, he returned to Dubai to attend high school. He later came back to Montreal to attend Concordia University, where he studied Political Science and Communication Studies.

Performing under the name "The Narcicyst," he writes provocative lyrics that capture the immigrant experience. Through music, art, and education, he has succeeded in becoming an influential voice in the Montreal community and is a mentor for young people who wish to follow in his footsteps.

www.iraqisthebomb.com

DEEQA IBRAHIM AKA EMPRESS DEEQA, SOMALIA



It was music that took me away from my family, and it was music that helped them find me again. I love reggae. It gives hope to people like me. Every time I was feeling down, I used to put on Gregory Isaacs and Night Nurse, the whole CD, and I used to feel better. You see, some people see a therapist. Me, my therapy was to put some reggae on and listen.

”

Deeqa Ibrahim

Deeqa displayed musical talent at a very young age, and she even sang for the President of her country, Somalia. Accompanied by her teacher and fellow choir members, Deeqa left home to go on a musical tour that she expected would only last a few days. While she was on tour, a civil war broke out in Somalia. As a result, Deeqa was unable to return home to Mogadishu. She, along with her teacher and fellow companions, were forced to flee to Kenya. After living in a refugee camp for some time, and with the assistance of volunteers, she was sent to Saskatoon, where she would spend the rest of her adolescent years learning English and completing a degree in education. After twenty years of separation, Deeqa was finally reunited with her family after her nephew saw a video of her on YouTube, during a performance at Montreal's *Nuit D'Afrique* festival. Deeqa currently lives in Montreal where she is an active reggae musician.



Video Interview
with Deeqa

www.myspace.com/empressdeeqa

RELATED ACTIVITIES

Tool box:

Perception
PowerPoint,
projector, laptop.

Level of difficulty:

Beginner

Time:

20 - 60 min.

PERCEPTION EXERCISE

This activity will challenge participants to identify and confront their own personal biases. Participants are asked to form groups of two. Each group receives a photograph of an individual and a list of questions.

These questions can include:

- » What is this person's name?
- » How old is this person?
- » What languages does he or she speak?
- » Where was this person born?
- » What is his or her favourite music?
- » What is his or her favourite food?
- » What is his or her favourite subject in school?



Perception
PowerPoint

Each group will guess the answers to each question, and present their answers to the larger group. Once they have finished, the facilitator will reveal the true identity of the subject in the photograph (included in the Perception PowerPoint). If the majority of participants don't know each other, they can use the same questions to guess each other's identity before moving on to the Perception Exercise.

LIFE STORY PLAYLIST

Vox Sambou uses music to share his life experiences. If you were to tell the story of your life through music, what songs would you choose? On a blank piece of paper, list songs that mean something to you or that represent turning points – moments of big change in your life. List at least five to ten songs that you would feature on your life story playlist. Turn the paper over and write a response to two of the following questions, or draw an image to represent your answer. Share your reflections with the group.

- » Why is this song important?
- » Where was I and how old was I when I first heard this song?
- » Is there a specific memory connected to the song?
- » Does this song remind me of someone important to me?
- » What does this song say about me as a person?
- » How did the song influence a personal change?

MUSIC VIDEO EXERCISE

The NoBadSound collective communicate their stories, ideas, and values through their music. If you were to share a personal story through a music video, what would it be about and where would you shoot it? Consider all of the following questions.

LOCATIONS:

- » What are five significant locations for me? Why?
- » What do these locations say about me and my life?
- » What are my favorite memories of these places?

CLOTHES:

- » What clothes would I wear in the video?
- » What do these clothes say about who I am as a person, and about my personal history and ancestry?

CAST:

- » Who should I include in my video?
- » What is my relation to these individuals and why are they important to me?
- » What role have they played in my personal history or how have they contributed to my life? What lessons have they taught me?

For each category explain your decisions. What do you hope these visual elements will communicate to your viewing audience about your life? Following this exercise, create a storyboard of your music video and share it with the others in your group.

HOW TO CONDUCT A LIFE STORY INTERVIEW

These tips were developed by the Life Stories Project and can be adapted to fit the age group or project you are working with.

Tool box:

Sound recorder or video camera with tripod, charged batteries, headphones, consent form.

RESEARCH AND PRE-PRODUCTION

Research Questions: Why are you doing this interview? What kind of advanced research will you do? Are there specific themes you want to address that will guide your interview? Why do you think the subject has agreed to the interview? Are the expectations on both sides clear? Preparing for an interview may also involve a pre-visit and preliminary research related to the subject.

Audience/Outreach: Prior to conducting a life stories interview, you and the interviewee should consider your audiences. Who would you like your work to reach and why? Who can benefit from your story?

Interview Questions: Formulate a short list of questions that will guide your interview. Ten questions are sufficient for a one-hour interview.

Location: In collaboration with your interview subject, choose a location for the interview. What does the location of the interview say about the interviewee?

Recording Technology: Choose a recording technology that you are familiar with. Practice using the technology prior to the interview and make sure the batteries are charged. If you are video recording, recruit someone to manage the camera, so that you can focus on the interviewee. Prior to the interview, ensure that the interviewee is comfortable with the recording technology you plan to use.

CONSENT



Sample
Consent Form

Once the interview has been organized, review the consent form with the interviewee and discuss any concerns or questions that he or she may have. The consent form is an agreement of trust. It outlines: the relationship between the interviewer and interviewee, the places and venues where the interview may be seen and distributed, how the interview will be used, and what benefits and risks this use might present for the interviewee.

When reviewing the consent form with the interviewee, ask him or her to consider the audience that will be viewing the interview. How might this audience impact what the interviewee decides to share or keep private? Once this question has been considered, the interviewee and the interviewer both sign the agreement. The interviewer and the interviewee should each keep a copy of the consent form. It is an agreement of trust and a practical way to exchange contact information. We have a sample consent form on our website.



PRODUCTION: THE INTERVIEW

If you are bringing a technical crew (e.g. videographer, sound recorder), make sure you schedule enough time to set up. Do not rush the interview and allow the interviewee time to answer the questions.

POST PRODUCTION

Blog: Write a short reflection 24 hours following the interview to record your impressions of the interview. We have included a sample in this chapter.



Blog Examples

Transcription: Transcribe the interview and review the transcript. Make a copy of the transcript, so you will have one to archive and one to turn into your 'paper edit.' On the copy, highlight the most interesting parts of the interview with your target audience or final goal in mind. This is useful later in the editing process.

Shared Ownership: Send a copy of the interview and the transcription to the interviewee. Once he or she has reviewed the material, provide the interviewee with an opportunity to comment, delete, and/or add any additional content.

Rough Cut: Using your 'paper edit,' create a rough cut (draft) of the interview. Ask the interviewee to review the revised material, allowing them to delete and/or add additional content. Include interviewees in the post-production process as much as possible, but keep in mind they may feel awkward at first *seeing* or *hearing* themselves. They might also have time constraints.

Final Cut and Outreach: Following the editing process, prepare a final version of the interview for distribution. Give the interviewee copies of his or her interview.

TECHNICAL TIP SHEET FOR VIDEO INTERVIEWS

PREPARING FOR AN INTERVIEW

- » Always check your equipment beforehand and bring extra batteries and tapes or disks.
- » Find a well-lit location without sound distractions (usually natural light is better but outdoors or a busy café is often too noisy).
- » Unplug any machines that may vibrate or hum in the background (refrigerators, computers, air conditioners). Shut windows to avoid cars or sirens, turn off cell phones, and disconnect the phone.

SETTING UP AN INTERVIEW

- » It is best to use a **tripod** to record your interview.
- » Always wear **headphones** to check audio levels and make sure you are actually recording sound.
- » Use a lavalier (tie clip) microphone to achieve the best audio. Make sure that the microphone is well placed and will not be disturbed by jewelry or gestures.
- » Set the camera at eye level and position the interviewer so that the eye line between interviewee and interviewer is close to the camera. You want your interviewee to be looking close to, but not directly into the camera.
- » Remember good composition rules including the rule of thirds, talking space and head space (refer to PowerPoint on Composition). Whenever possible don't position someone right up against a wall.
- » Before recording make sure there are no distracting shadows and that the face is in focus.



PowerPoint on
Composition

CONDUCTING AN INTERVIEW

- » Ask open questions that do not require a yes or no response. For example: "Can you tell me about...?"
- » Explain to your interviewee how to incorporate your questions into their answers and that this is important for the editing process. For example: Question— How long were you involved with the group? Answer— I was involved with the group for over five years.
- » Be careful not to ask leading questions like "Wouldn't you say that the media had a role in the crisis?" It's better to ask, "What are your thoughts about the role of the media at that time?"

- » Always keep silent during the interview. Avoid using sounds such as, “Aha” or “I see”. Use a visual response such as a nod or a smile instead.
- » Allow spaces between questions and answers. Pauses permit individuals to reflect.
- » Ask follow up questions. Use your outline questions as a guide but be open to explore new but relevant topics that your interviewee might introduce.
- » Do not be afraid to stop the interview if you are experiencing technical problems or if there is distracting noise in the background. You may only have one chance to film an interview so make sure that everything you need is recorded properly.
- » Always ask your interviewee at the end if there is anything else that they would like to say, or that you haven’t addressed.

Interview tips were adapted from Witness resources (www.witness.org)



DEVELOPING INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

We shaped our questions around questions that had been created by the Montreal Life Stories Project (www.storytelling.concordia.ca), and adapted them to include the role that music played within the lives of these young musicians. We were also interested in the mentorship role that these musicians had assumed in the lives of the young people they worked with. Below are examples of questions we asked during our interview with Robints:

Short Biographical Information:

Introduce yourself: name, art form, community involvement, and country of origin.

Early Life – Influences/Family:

- » Where did you grow up?
- » What was home life like before moving to Montreal?
- » What did you want to be when you grew up?
- » How did you first come to Montreal?
- » What were your first impressions of Montreal?
- » What were some of the challenges that you faced when you first arrived?

Personal Career:

- » Do you bring your own story and personal experiences into your music?
- » Tell us about the first time you bridged your music with community issues
- » In what ways did your music change once you began to address social concerns?
- » What advice would you give a young person who wishes to do the same?
- » How has your community responded to your music?
- » What challenges have you faced as an artist?

Working with Youth:

- » How did you come to work with youth?
- » What do the youth get from the music and arts programming you do?

Future Directions:

- » What do you hope to accomplish with your music in the future?
- » Would you like to add anything else before we end this interview?

BLOG EXAMPLE

From Mogadishu to Montreal: How music took Empress Deeqa from her family, and how music helped her find them again

Gracia Dyer Jalea

After not seeing each other for months, I was pleased to bump into Deeqa, a long time acquaintance and notable local reggae singer. During that brief encounter, she mentioned how she had just found her family after having been separated from them for almost 20 years! Deeqa was Somali, and I wondered whether she had been separated from her family during the civil war of the 1990s. Two weeks later, we sat down to talk about her amazing life story, from growing up in the beautiful seaside city of Mogadishu to her harrowing journey as an unaccompanied minor to Canada.

Deeqa, who displayed musical talent at a very young age, and who at one time even sang for the President of her country, was invited by her music teacher to go on a musical tour with her fellow choir members. Deeqa left home to go on a trip that she expected would only last a few days. While away, the civil war in Somalia broke out, and she was unable to return home to Mogadishu due to a block in the road. She, her teacher, and her fellow companions were forced to flee by boat to Kenya, where members of Doctors Without Borders received them. After living in a refugee camp for some time, Deeqa was sent to Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, where she would spend the rest of her adolescent years learning English and successfully completing a degree in education. Since leaving Somalia, Deeqa has tried desperately to make a home for herself in Canada.

Although she has now lived in Canada for most of her life, her heart and soul remain very much connected to her homeland. This connection has been strengthened in the past few months by the extraordinary events that have reconnected her with her family in Mogadishu. Since leaving Somalia in the early 1990s, the whereabouts of her family were unknown to her, until early in 2010, when she received a phone call from her nephew in England, who had seen a video of her singing on YouTube.

Through this strange twist of fate, Deeqa explained that: "It was music that took me away from my family, and it was music that helped them find me again." Music has played an important role in Deeqa's life. While here in Canada, away from her family, her friends, and her homeland, music gave her hope when she felt defeated. It allowed her to stay positive through periods of loneliness. Through music, she found a way to stay connected to her cultural roots, while also allowing her to make strong friendships here in Canada.

Although it is clear that Deeqa has been deeply and emotionally affected by the challenges that she has had to face as a young refugee, she has worked hard to make the most of every opportunity, and continues to hope for a better future for both her and her family. It is her strength and willingness to remain positive that I found truly inspirational. In the coming months, she hopes for the first time to finally return to Africa to see her family, after what has truly been a long journey away from home.

Interviewer: Gracia Dyer Jalea

Videographer: Liz Miller

Wednesday, April 14, 2010

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

- » What are the interests and passions of the group you are working with?
- » How can the interests of interviewees and participants be incorporated into the content and method for your project?
- » What active roles can participants play in each stage of production?
- » How can your project contribute to the ongoing goals of your partner organization?
- » Who is your ideal audience? For whom are you creating these media products and why?

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