Look Who's Talking

Berkley Hudson

Shortly after I was born, Aunt Laura came to live with us. She was, in reality, my great-aunt. Daddy's Aunt Laura Henry. She had lived, unmarried, with her sister-in-law, my Grandmother Henry, until Grandmother died the same year I was born. … Aunt Laura was the oldest living thing I had ever seen. She wore long dresses which came down to the floor, bonnets on her head, whether indoors or out, and thick rimless glasses which turned into mirrors when she looked at us. ...Her skin, the few places we could see it, was the color and texture of wadded-up grocery bags. I often thought that if all the wrinkles could be stretched out of her skin, it would be big enough to hold a person at least twice her size.

So goes the start of "Listening for the Crack of Dawn," which Donald Davis is telling in a lakeside lodge full of producers, directors, writers, actors and entertainment lawyers who have traveled to Santa Barbara County for a retreat. An Amblin vice president is there; so are a vice president of Oliver Stone's company and a Paramount Pictures story editor.

The idea behind the retreat—called "Hollywood Goes Back to Story"—is to remind these executives that good movie-making comes down to good storytelling. And Davis, a former Methodist minister and among the most popular figures on today's storytelling circuit, is their guide. While flames dance in a rock fireplace and mist from Zaca Lake shrouds nearby sawtoothed mountains, Davis asks them to tell tales about a bygone pet or something they did one night in high school but never told their parents about. For three days, he has them in stitches and in tears.

"They all talked about how a story was an idea you came up with, that you invent," Davis recalls. "But a story is something you find. After I got them telling their own stories—stories that had never been told before in the whole world—they realized that stories are already there, are something you discover. Somehow they'd lost that experience."

After the retreat, a producer telephoned Davis to express interest in buying the rights to a Davis story. "We can electrify this, do special effects, make something really good," the producer insisted. "Storytelling is primitive." Later, another executive implored Davis to fly cross-country to help with a rapid rewrite of a screenplay. Then Davis, along with "Seinfeld" sidekick Jason Alexander, appeared at a fund-raiser to benefit the Hollywood Literary Retreat. If you'd told Davis in the 1960s that one day Hollywood would be calling, he's said your mind was playing tricks on you. Three decades ago, storytelling in America had all but died, except in laces like Appalachia. The modern age, it seemed, had killed it—first with radio and movies and finally with television, air conditioning, freeways and shopping malls. There was no time to spin meandering yards that pass down everything anyone ever needed to know about living; and no one was at home to listen, even if there was someone who could tell.

This all changed in 1973 when Jimmy Neil Smith, a high school journalism teacher from Jonesborough, Tenn., tuned his car radio to a country-music station and heard Mississippi fertilizer salesman Jerry Clower tell a raccoon-hunting story. Smith got the chamber-of-commerce idea to hold a festival. It'd be fun, he thought, and might boost the coffers of his hometown. For the first National Storytelling Festival, Smith invited Clower and a half-dozen other storytellers. Hundreds congregated at the school gym and outside the courthouse to listen to stories told from atop hay wagons.

Twenty-four years later, storytelling is experiencing a full-blown revival. Venues from Vegas to Vienna host storytellers. They've shown up at New York's Tully Hall, President Clinton's inaugural, L.A.'s House of Blues, the Atlanta Olympics and on "Rabbit Ears" radio and KCET'S "Storytime." This year will see 100 U.S. festivals with such names as the Bankoh Talking Island Festival in Hawaii, the Ghost Story Gala in Illinois and Corn Island in Kentucky. And there's an international circuit, from Austria (*Die Lange Nacht Der Marchenerzähler*/The Long Night of the Storytellers) to Indonesia (The Jakarta International Storytelling Festival).

Three publishing houses that specialize in storytelling churn out an estimated $6-$7 million a year in recordings and books; millions more are generated in performances. Physicians, lawyers, the women who run with the wolves and the men who drum with the myths—all tell stories. One hundred or so storytellers—an elite group—crisscross the United States, making as

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much as $5,000 an appearance, some earning $75,000 to $100,000 a year or more.

Storytellers consulted on "Pocahontas"; some perform for inspiration of industry animators. And it's not just Hollywood cashing in. Stories are being spun into attractions for resorts, white-water rafting trips and theme parks. From McDonald's to Mott's, companies are recruiting storytellers. Not surprisingly, that poses a dilemma. Storytellers stand at a crossroads that none could have foreseen five years ago, much less 30: Will storytelling become another commodity to be mass-marketed, even in high-quality style, like Starbucks or Ben & Jerry's? Does it have a choice? Will this splinter the movement? Will it damage the qualities that made it special?

"It's tempting when people say: 'We would like these stories,'" says National Public Radio commentator and storyteller Bill Harley, who in 1989 was offered a chance to record stories for McDonald's Happy meals. "You spend the money they'd give you 40 or 50 times over: new house, new car. But they're interested in their product, not storytelling. The devil doesn't come asking you to sell your soul. He comes offering a wider audience."

Jay O'Callahan, with annual earnings above $100,000 and one of the hottest storytellers, acknowledges that money and fame can corrupt. But O'Callahan, who has led a Hollywood Literary Retreat, says the potential for stories to change people's lives is exponential if the world is your audience. What if, he asks, another million people could hear the stories his fans love: "The Herring Shed," "Edna Robinson" or "Father Joe"? "If those stories and characters could live in another way, say in movies, then great," he says. "If people hear them on the radio, that's great."

This folk art-versus-commerce argument is similar to what the blues and folk revivals faced in the 1950s and 1960s. Robert Cantwell, who teachers American Studies at the University of North Carolina, details that debate in his book, "When We Were Good": "I wouldn't be too alarmed with what's happening in storytelling. The form resists some kinds of commodification. I don't think you are going to see storytellers on prime time. Anyway, I'm not sure we have a mass market any longer. Now we have finely adjusted, niche marketing. So it's possible to circulate the stories—whether on CDs, cassettes or videos—to the communities that have a particular interest in story telling. Commercialization could expand and enrich the tradition."

Already, the revival has transformed August House publishers in Little Rock, Ark. Seven years ago, owner Ted Parkhurst went to the Jonesborough festival for the first time. Bewitched, he shifted his business to storytelling books and recordings. Business doubled in five years and could triple in the next five. "I am absolutely unconflicted about the social value of storytelling," Parkhurst says. "The story material that comes from a Donald Davis is head and shoulders above most of what passes for literature in today's culture."

For Davis, the answer to questions about commercialization lies in his 1940s North Carolina boyhood. On porches with his Blue Ridge kinfolk and neighbors, he would snap beans, shuck corn or just talk. There was no TV, no electricity. "We'd sit on the porch. The sun would go down. Gradually people would be talking in total pitch dark." Someone would tell about trading a pig or how a neighbor girl was pregnant but nobody knew who the daddy was. Stories weren't sold. They were swapped. "My ancestors produced what they needed or could trade. They never thought to raise a crop to market it. That was a foreign idea. Just like I've never thought to sell a story."

Commercially driven projects rattle Davis. "You know: 'Here's a CD on how to yank stories out of Grandma.' I like to make money as much as anybody. The question is: Are you willing to sell your children? My stories are as close to me as children." So when the Hollywood producers called Davis after the Hollywood Literary Retreat, he said thanks, but no thanks. But it didn't mean the door was permanently shut.

Most Octobers for the last 12 years, I've traveled to Jonesborough for the National Storytelling Festival. My wife, storyteller Milbre Burch, performs throughout the country and sometimes in Jonesborough. Year to year, the atmosphere changes little: Hay bales, cornstalks and pumpkins decorate brick walkways of the hilly, historic town. Eight to nine thousand people gather in canvas tents to hear several dozen storytellers representing cultures from around the world.

One significant shift occurred, though, several years ago when the festival's sponsor, the National Storytelling Assn., announced plans to construct a multimillion-dollar center with a series of buildings and outdoor and indoor venues. The ensuing debate still reverberates. With $7.4 million raised, the project has grown to $10 million.

This summer, the association, headed by festival founder Smith, plans to move its offices into the Chester Inn, a 1797 clapboard structure where President Andrew Jackson held parties. For the project, Ralph Appelbaum, whose firm helped to create exhibits at Monticello, and Stephen Briganti, who oversaw fund-raising for the Statue of Liberty-Ellis Island reconstruction, joined forces. During its restoration, the inn has served as a festival gathering place. Such was

the case two Octobers ago.

It's Friday of that festival weekend, and Secret Service agents are scouting rooftops of Main Street's row buildings. Vice President Al Gore and his wife, Tipper, are to arrive to declare Jonesborough "the epicenter of storytelling." Sounds of applause and a *djembe* drum filter from tents. Outside, surrounded by crowds, Smith chews the fat, while inside, people sip cider, watch videos of past festivals and study easel-mounted project plans.

Smith points his thumb and forefinger like a gun, then shoots it playfully while calling out to county commissioner W.C. Rowe. Smith, 50, favors bolo ties and black blazers; his beard and thinning hair are gray. Many anxieties about the revival and center are projected onto him. A home-grown good-ole boy, he is generally well-liked among storytellers. When he's criticized, it's not for motives, rather for a willingness to court any company coming down the road. Smith has tried to woo 20th Century Fox and Disney (Michael Eisner and the late Frank Wells were enchanted by their festival visit). Briefly, Mott's and IBM were benefactors. Smith says he aggressively, but carefully, seeks corporate support: "If we cozy up to the wrong corporate partner, the outcome could be undesirable."

Rowe praises Smith's vision: "People'll come from everywhere to visit. This is the biggest thing for us. In the '60s, this town was dead. Now 75,000 tourists a year pump $5 million into the economy. The center could double that.

Someone beckons Smith to a telephone. In his soft drawl, he tells a radio interviewer the center "will be a beacon for storytelling. Programs will be beamed from Jonesborough to communities large and small. It's the marriage of the oldest art form with the most modern of technologies. We'll be using video conferencing, satellite technology and the Internet."

Michael Parent, a frequent festival performer, says the debate about the center embodies larger questions. Although he applauds Smith and the festival, Parent wonders: "If this is an edifice complex—and if the mission is to get as many people to Jonesborough as possible—maybe they ought to have storytelling rides, like a Disney World. If Jonesborough is the shrine of the storytelling movement, and there are some ways in which that's a good thing, then I don't think the shrine needs stained-glass windows."

Storyteller Susan Klein, in a thick Martha's Vineyard accent, puts it succinctly: "You know: Graceland, Opryland, Gatlinburg, Jonesborough."

On festival Sunday, two movie men leave "Sacred Storytelling," drunk on stories. Gustave "Gus" Reininger, a tanned, talkative teddy bear of a man, has lured his L.A. fly-fishing buddy, Fred Milstein. This is Reininger's second festival. The two have been friends since before Reininger wrote for "Miami Vice." (Later, Reininger co-created and wrote "Crime Story" for NBC. Milstein has run the William Morris Agency's motion picture division in New York and headed production for both Cineplex Odeon and Miramax.)

Staying up late on Friday, listening to Donald Davis, Reininger had laughed so hard it seemed his tortoise-shell glasses would fly off with his head. The next morning, the two men squeezed in with hundreds of others at the Presbyterian Church's pancake breakfast. They went to a bluegrass-infused fund-raising party for the storytelling center and chatted with WordPerfect founder Alan Ashton and his wife, Karen, who started Utah's Timpanogos Festival. They heard Johnny Moses interweave English with seven Native American dialects into bawdy tales and listened to mountain man Ray Hicks tell stories that to Milstein seemed incomprehensible but amazing.

Today, Reininger is moved to tears by Jay O'Callahan's tale of an uncle who saved hundreds of lives after an attack on a World War II aircraft carrier. Milstein cries when Carmen Deedy's story of her parents fleeing Cuba reminds him of how his parents survived concentration camps. Reininger hears a Deedy story that'd fit into his Showtime script. Now, walking to see Smith, Reininger asks: "Is it sacrilege to wonder what Carmen Deedy would look like through a camera?"

At the Chester Inn, Smith, Reininger and Milstein settle into conversation; Smith asks for help in developing storytelling public-service spots. Reininger goes into a rapid-fire monologue that an actor could read. Milstein names Academy Award-winners who might help. Perhaps, Smith says, there could be a storytelling party in Los Angeles, in a Jonesborough-style tent similar to what Smith arranged in Washington for the Gores. That could lead, Smith says, to a National Storytelling Festival/West. But as Reininger and Milstein leave, they make no promises. Smith, for his part, surmises: "Maybe I need to start subscribing to Variety?"

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Sixty-five miles east of Jonesborough, down a gravel road near Banner Elk, N.C., Ray Hicks and his wife, Rosa, live in a tumble-down house that's the closest thing to storytelling's Mecca. At 74, Hicks is the last of his kind—a storyteller linked to when there really were kings and queens, paupers and princes. He has an Elizabethan hillbilly accent that Davy Crockett could have understood. But today's Southerners have to work to understand his words, let along the meanings of stories that would take Carl Jung to explicate.

"They been trying to find out where my words

come from," he says. "Asked me: 'Did any of the other children, my mother and dad talk like that?' I said: 'No, I was the odd one, speaking different words.' But when I studied it out, my grandfather Andy, he kept the old speech from England. Grandpa Andy didn't tell no stories. He played music. God, he could make a fretless banjo talk. Grandpa Ben, he let me hoe with him, digging Irish potatoes. He'd tell me stories and songs."

Hicks is a slender man, 6-foot-7, with a long neck, a big nose and ears, a high forehead and false teeth—"a Ray Bolger in overalls," in the words of one writer. When Hicks talks, his body rocks back and forth. His face is a bewitching landscape of expressions: bug-eyed and squint-eyed, dead serious and deadpan.

He knows scores of what folklorists call "Jack Stories," as in Jack in the Beanstalk: lucky Jack, sly Jack, stupid Jack, adventuresome Jack—stories that stretch back to medieval Europe. "Jack was one that didn't keep no money or nothing up ahead," he explains. "He just lived for the day, not for tomorrow. I'm Jack, really." Or, as Hicks says, anybody is Jack if you find yourself in tricky situations.

Under his command, stories expand and contract like an Irish button accordion. One day, he can tell "Jack and the Heifer Hide" and it will last 15 minutes. On another, he can go an hour and a half, making looping tangents that take the story so far into the world of Jack that a listener can become befuddled or entranced—or both. When Hicks tells his stories, he almost goes into a trance. For those minutes, or house, the story is his only context. Otherwise, he is oblivious. As he says, he's Jack.

In 1983, the National Endowment for the Arts declared Hicks a national treasure. It's typical of Hicks that when he received the letter informing him of the award, he threw it away. He eventually agreed to attend the awards ceremony in Washington along with his cousin Stanley, a master dulcimer maker, who also won an award. Later, Hicks relished telling how his cousin was still stuck in a hotel revolving door.

There's no risk of Hicks going Hollywood. Although he performs every year at Jonesborough, he turns down most invitations, whether from Scotland or California. He has declined to appear on "The Tonight Show" and on the "Today" show with monologuist Spalding Gray.

Land-rich with 50 acres on Beech Mountain, Hicks and his family are pocket poor. One of the Hicks' five children, Ted, who's 43 and works construction, still lives with his parents in their unpainted two-story house with a rusty tin room. Hicks' great-grandfather, grandfather, and father built the house of hemlock around 1912. At an elevation of 4,200 feet, the house and two-seat outhouse provide a rooftop view of the Blue Ridge Mountains. A washing machine, tires and scrap wood line the road above the house. The porch spills over with firewood, kitchen chairs, five-gallon plastic buckets and a working refrigerator. Aside from milk in plastic jugs and a television in Ted's room, the 1990s are not present. No plumbing. No fax. In fact, no telephone at all. Ray and Rosa don't watch television, read newspapers or listen to radio.

On a Monday, after performing at Jonesborough, Hicks strips bark off a cherry tree, crumples pieces into a tiny wad and exchanges that for a tobacco plug. He picked up a sore throat at the festival, he says, and the bark will help.

He likes to hold court in the house's main room, which is dark and dominated by twin beds and a pot-bellied stove. To maximize heat, car radiator parts and cans of water are attached to the stove's piping.

In the kitchen, he and Rosa sit to lunch at a Formica table. At 65, Rosa is Ray's physical opposite. With her brunet braid falling down her back, she's two heads shorter. "We raise a lot of our food," Rosa says. "Ya'll want a 'tater?" Reaching for a glass, Ray accidentally knocks it to the floor and breaks it. "You oughtn't give a glass," he chides. "I'm used to my cup."

Both laughingly tell a story about a cousin who, after a glass was broken in a kitchen, would eat no bread baked there for three days. "I told him a little glass is good for ye," Ray says.

"Well, they's one man that eats bicycles, cars and modeycycles. He said you needed iron in ye body."

After lunch, they bring out record albums by Ray's brother-in-law, the late Frank Proffitt, whose version of "Tom Dula" was the basis for the Kingston Trio's 1958 hit "Tom Dooley" (which sold 4 million copies). Rose fetches the phonograph to play a scratchy recording with a banjo introduction. Ray throws back his head and sings. So does Rose: "You spend all my money…You run me crazy, woman." In the early 1960s, Proffitt encouraged Hicks to let folklorists record his stories. They gave Hicks $125 for the first 500 records sold. "They thought mine wouldn't sell too good. And so I was a-working on the mountain, farming up here and didn't have a dime. I got a letter with another $125 check and [they] said: 'Ray, your'n sold better than a lot of others.'"

Hicks had been shy about telling stories to anybody but family and neighbors. In 1943, folklorist Richard Chase wrote "The Jack Tales," which he had gathered from Ray and Rosa's kinfolk. Chase put his own copyright on all the stories, a fact that did not go unnoticed ("I knowed the stories at eight or nine years, before you copyrighted that book," Hicks later told Chase.) After Houghton Mifflin published the book, a local schoolteacher invited Hicks to tell stories to her class. "I wanted to do it and get me a little pay," Hicks

says. "I was was a-livin' so hard then. She paid $3 from her own purse and a gave me the $3 book."

Nowadays, he says, he's as sharp as he needs to be about money and stories, though he expresses uncertainty about the finances of his two recordings. No matter, Hicks says he's got plenty of work. He "cures" warts through the mail or in person, and sells whatnots he makes from rhododendrons and arrowheads he makes from rocks. He earns $50 an hour for performing at nearby schools. Rosa accompanies him, teaching what she has learned from years of gathering angelica, ginseng and sassafras, and selling bags of herbs, dried apples and homemade cookies.

On a walk after lunch, Hicks crosses his potato and cabbage field where wind rustles sunflower skeletons. His two dogs snuffle for rabbits. He steps into woods filled with peepers and then strides over a creek, muddying his shoes. A red tree frog hops across glossy, green leaves of galax that form a blanket inches above the forest floor.

For years, he and his family have pulled evergreen galax and sold it for floral displays. Its white flowers look like stars—hence the name from the Greek *galaxias*, meaning galaxy. "The old name of it—they call 'em colt foot. Shaped like a horse colt's foot." One by one, Hicks pulls a bunch of 25 leaves, attached to single stems. His long fingers wrap one stem into a knot around the others to fashion a bundle. Then he walks along, finding burgundy mushrooms as broad as a bobcat's back and chunks of iridescent moss. These, too, can be sold to florists.

He spits a stream of tobacco juice into the galax: "I'll not be here much longer," he says, "I won't reach 80." His sons, Ted and Leonard, know the stories, but "they shy." Leonard, who tells stories to his co-workers at a local pantyhose factory, could take over. Regardless, Hicks says, "one of 'em need to take my place, keeping it a-goin' in the generations, 'cause I's soon goin' be gone."

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You can find galax in Orlando. You see it in airport gift shops and hotel lobbies. From a distance, it looks as lush as Beech Mountain galax. However, one touch lets you in on the deception: It's no more true to life than the oversized animal characters roaming theme parks. It symbolizes what writer James Agee referred to as "fakelore," something in abundance in this Florida hothouse of modified authenticity.

Today, though, the discerning resort-goer who appreciates real galax can have a different Orlando experience. Welcome to "the other Disney," as staffers call the Disney Institute, which opened last year. Brainchild of Michael Eisner, it's Club Med, Disney-style.

Ten years ago Eisner went to the Chautauqua Institution in upstate New York. Developed by 19th Century Methodists, Chautauqua evolved into a cultural festival of music, dance and readings. After his trip, Eisner wrote to then-Disney president Frank Wells, saying Chautauqua "is the most beautiful Disney kind of environment I've ever seen."

Now, at the institute, pastel-painted structures replicate a New England village. Guests stay in condominium-style housing. Disney has enlisted the likes of broadcaster Walter Cronkite and director/producer Tim Burton to meet guests who can sample from among 40 hands-on programs: gourmet cooking to storytelling.

Storytelling's inclusion might suggest that Disney is exploiting a trend. Not so, says David Novak, who until last October was the institute's storyteller in residence. Lean, sandy-haired and energetic, Novak is as comfortable with telling a fractured "Little Red Riding Hood" as he is with the myth of the Minotaur. Among the most inventive figures of the revival, Novak is back home in San Diego. His one-year tenure at Disney, he says, was "an opportunity to explore storytelling from the point of view of a major entertainment company."

But in the institute's first year, storytelling didn't attract s many people as, say, golf or rock climbing. As a result, the institute scaled back its storytelling offerings. Novak, who once hosted Eisner in storytelling class and conducted workshops with other Disney executives, says the institute lacks boldness in promoting storytelling. "I don't think Disney gets what storytelling can do for it. The company's not seeing storytelling for more than just product."

Having a brother who long worked for Disney, Novak understands the culture. Yet it baffles him, too. In a Disney elevator, a fellow employee noticed Novak's rumpled shirt and suggested that he might want to borrow her iron. Amazed that a stranger would comment on his shirt, he told her this tale:

"A wise fool, invited to a party at a wealthy man's house, comes straight from gardening to the party. His disheveled appearance causes him to go unrecognized by his host. So, he's thrown off the premises. Returning to the party dressed formally, he is recognized as an honored guest. Seated at the head table, he astonishes everyone by stuffing food into his pockets, down his shirt and into his sleeves. His appalled host asks what he's doing. The wise fool says: 'You threw me out when I came in work clothes but welcomed me when I was dressed like you. Obviously you invited my clothes, not me. I wanted them to enjoy the feast.'"

Novak infused this kind of playfulness into his institute work, connecting with what he describes as Disney's long-standing storytelling tradition. For example, in a program called "As Walt Would Tell It,"

Novak explained to students how Disney developed his company by telling stories, not just in creating films or amusement parks, but during daily work life. Novak showed clips to institute participants, who then retold the stories—stories originally from oral tradition. Novak acknowledges that this may disturb purists. After all, in Hans Christian Andersen's "Little Mermaid," the prince doesn't marry the Little Mermaid, as in the Disney version. In fact, she dies.

Bill Harley is one good storyteller who sees no good from Disney's marriage with folk art. "Mickey Mouse has a great tradition of ripping off stories. Now the only common cultural denominator is Disney. They are the one story, the stories and songs and characters everybody knows."

It's true that when corporations as big as Disney get involved, Jay O'Callahan says, "it's a fine edge to walk. But we can't be afraid of the world if we want it to hear these stories. It's fun to see these characters dance into the world." Despite his ambivalence, Novak remains involved with Disney. Earlier this year he told stories to inspire theme park developers with Disney Imagineering in Glendale. In April, he, along with storytellers Susan Klein and J.S. Reneaux, performed at the institute. And he hopes that a union of corporate muscle and folk culture can enhance both.

"People talk about the day that Bob Dylan went electric," Novak says. "Storytelling is approaching the same day. And it'll affect people in the same ways when storytelling goes electric."

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One autumn afternoon in 1990, Gus Reininger felt terrible. Recently, his 3-year-old daughter, Anthea, had died from a reaction to a pertussis vaccine. During her illness, Reininger calmed her by driving along Pacific Coast Highway. On this day, feeling inconsolable, he took that drive alone. He turned on the radio and on "All Things Considered" heard a Southern drawl. The voice transported Reininger back through his life: Hollywood, Wall Street, University of Chicago studies and a 1950s boyhood in rural Kentucky.

The drawl belonged to Donald Davis, who was telling "LS/MFT," a story of five small-town boys who pool their resources to get a Columbia RX-5 Coaster Bike. In the process they confront Terrell Tubbs, a great-big middle-aged retarded neighbor whom they considered a mystery and terror.

If Reininger's daughter, prone to seizures due to the vaccine, had lived, she too might have perplexed neighborhood children. Davis' own story moved Reininger so much that he pulled off the road in tears. When he listened to the story, Reininger says, it was "the first time I'd felt whole again since she died."

For weeks, working as a writer-producer for Columbia Pictures Television, Reininger tried to find Davis. Months later, at a Malibu party, a man with a drawl started telling stories. It was Davis, all elbows, knees, bow tie and beard. The two discovered they had things in common and soon became friends. David started calling Reininger to ask advice about people who wanted to adapt his stories. Reininger would ask, "Why would you want to make a movie out of something as precious as this?"

On cassettes in his car, at home and at festivals and parties, Reininger listened to the tales his daughter led him to. "I didn't want to mess with Donald's world," Reininger says. "But finally, I said: 'Let's do something.'" After working for three years, they've written a script combining three Davis stories. "The challenge," Reininger says, "is what's the analogue in filmed entertainment, if any, to that experience with live storytelling."

For Davis, the film venture is a chance to promote *story*. When he says the word *story*, it's as if he speaks of a pantheon of gods. Ever the preacher, he says: "It's not that storytelling is reaching this commercial pitch. The growth is barely starting. It's the infusion of story into society. It's headed toward a recovery of our language. Our ability to look at one another and engage in conversation is the unique thing about being human. It's our ability to move pictures from one person's head to another's, with story."