

NINA MOINI: This weekend will be the 25th Annual Selby Avenue JazzFest in St. Paul's Rondo neighborhood. What started as a way to bring people together post 9/11 has now grown into a community celebration. Joining me now to preview this year's big festival is Ernest Bisong. He is the Festival Director and also the Artistic Director at Walker West Music Academy, which hosts the festival. Thank you very much for your time this afternoon, Ernest.

ERNEST Thank you for having me.

BISONG:

NINA MOINI: Many people may not that this all started as a way to bring community together after the events of September 11, but to last 25 years, is so amazing. I mean, how do you see this festival has grown in the last 25 years, and what do you think has kept it growing strong?

ERNEST Yeah, absolutely. I mean, just one word comes to mind as you raise this question, and that one word is
BISONG: community. Because as you rightly mentioned, the festival itself started kind of as a block party, with Michael and Stephanie Wright, right outside their Golden Time Cafe restaurant where they were like, You know what? It'd be cool to just start some live music events and have people come out.

And that first event attracted 600 people. And so that's how they knew that they were onto something. But even beyond that, it's literally a lot of work to put on a festival or even any kind of performance, and it's impossible to think that they could do it alone. And the fact that community has stuck with them and helped them plan these events for the past 25 years, it's just a testament to the value of this event.

NINA MOINI: And for folks who have never been and who may be thinking about checking it out, can you tell us a little bit about the festival? What is it like? What can folks experience?

ERNEST Absolutely. So I mean, the festival has a few different layers. I mean, first of all, the music is one of the things
BISONG: people come for. There's world class jazz right in the neighborhood.

You get to experience a full day of world class music without a price tag, really, because all of this is at no cost to people who attend the festival. There's also great food to check out. We have food trucks. We have folks in the village vendor area, where you can go and check out various items that they have for sale. We usually have over 100 vendors coming into the festival.

NINA MOINI: Wow.

ERNEST And that's a pretty big deal. And so also in addition to that, we have the fun zone where we have toys and games
BISONG: for kids to play and interactive activities that they can engage in. So the event itself is a really family friendly one and there's something for everyone.

NINA MOINI: Yeah, it must be highly valued to go on for this long and to continue to grow and have all these vendors. And like you mentioned, world class musicians performing for everybody. We're going to take a listen to just one of the performers this year, David Feeley, of course, a Twin Cities based guitarist. This is his song *Rondo*, which also features Nelson Devereaux and Ellie Buckner. Let's take a listen.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

It's just so beautiful, Ernest. Can you tell us a little bit about David Feeley and just that song paying homage to Rondo?

**ERNEST
BISONG:**

Absolutely. I mean, David is one of those people that I like to refer to as a renaissance man, because he basically does it all. He performs, he writes his own music, he's an educator. He does so much in the community and in the music sphere that it's hard to even sum up all the things that he does.

Specifically with his writing, he blends jazz, and funk, and R&B, and rock. And he literally has done stuff with all headlining people that we know and love in the city from across different genres. On that record that you played, you heard Ellie Buckner on drums, and that's just LA is one of the fantastic musicians also who's graced the stage at Selby Avenue JazzFest.

So we really value community in the work that we do here. So it's a privilege to really have him be a part of the series. And not only that, he's a Rondo neighbor, really, because he lives only a few blocks from where the festival will be happening. So we're absolutely proud to feature him.

NINA MOINI:

Mhm. And also important to mention for folks who aren't familiar with the Rondo neighborhood, this is a historically Black neighborhood of St. Paul that was the government decided to build I-94 right through it and displace a lot of people. So there's been a lot of work, toward growth and a reclamation--

**ERNEST
BISONG:**

Absolutely.

NINA MOINI:

--of that area, but still a very strong culture and through line there as this JazzFest just speaks to that as one of many things. The headliner this year, Stokley, best known as the lead vocalist and drummer of the R&B band Mint Condition, a Minnesota gem. Let's listen to his newest single, *Need Love*.

**STOKLEY
WILLIAMS:**

(SINGING) It seems like ain't nobody nothing no more

It's a fight

Who's got power?

It's back and forth

It ain't right

Unclench your hands, no more war

This is serious, so please start hearing us

Still about them, all the man really wants is to feel alive

I man needs his--

NINA MOINI:

Just beautiful. Stokely, Ernest, I understand, is a former student at Walker West Music Academy, there where you are. And I understand it's going to be more than music, because he's actually going to be holding a master class as part of the festival. Can you tell us a little bit about that sort of interactive aspect of what's going to be going on this weekend and just what it means to the festival?

ERNEST BISONG: Absolutely. And so, like you said, Stokely is a former student here at Walker West. He took lessons in his formative years as he tried to navigate his path in the music world. And we're absolutely proud that he'll be headlining the festival. Not only headlining, but he'll also be giving back to the community in the form of this masterclass. Really, we're calling this 25th anniversary a homecoming because it's a full circle moment to where he gets to then interact with the younger generation, share his story, share his life, share his experience, and all the things that he's learned along the way with the next generation and be able to give them some tips on how they can move forward in their own careers.

NINA MOINI: That's beautiful. We only have a couple minutes left, Ernest, but I want to make sure we talk about the flash mob band situation. I understand it's one of the newer elements of the festival. Tell us how that works and how that's interactive as well.

ERNEST BISONG: Absolutely. And so as we continue to imagine how we can involve community more and more each year, we came up with the idea of the flash mob band. And really, what this is, is at the end of the Selby Avenue Brass Bands performance that starts at 11:00 AM, they'll be doing a parade starting at Victoria and then walking all the way down to the stage at Selby Milton. And by the time they arrive at Selby Milton, there'll be a community of musicians, really, people from the general public who play music.

We put out some music, simple music that they can all just go check out on the website, www.selbyavejazzfest.org. And the music is easy. You can download it and learn it. And really, folks just show up and play with Selby Avenue Brass Band. And last year was the first time that we did this, and the turnout was so cool that we're like, Yeah, we have to keep doing this.

NINA MOINI: Amazing. We only have about a minute left, Ernest, but I want to make sure that you can give people any tips or advice if they're planning to come out. We know the festival is free. What should people if they're heading over, logistically, anything like that?

ERNEST BISONG: Well, absolutely. I mean, there's right now a little bit of construction happening on Gale, but otherwise, you can just go around and access the festival that way. And all the cool things that we know and love about the festival will be happening. So, that's for sure. We'll also be recognizing the founders of the festival, Michael and Stephanie Wright.

Just recognizing them for their contribution to the festival. And at the end of the festival, because the last set is done at 7:30, we have a jam session that's happening here at Walker West, pretty much where it all started. Right? We can say.

NINA MOINI: Cool.

ERNEST BISONG: Yeah. And we'll have a jam session from 8:00 to 10:00 PM. And really, anyone can just show up and come play some music and connect with other musicians.

NINA MOINI: Amazing. Ernest, thank you so much for your time. Wishing you well this weekend. Have a great time. Thank you.

ERNEST BISONG: Absolutely. Thank you for having me. Have a good one.

NINA MOINI: You too. Ernest Bisong is the Festival Director of The Selby Avenue JazzFest, celebrating its 25th year this weekend.