

MPR News | Minnesota Now Minnesota Now - New documentary explores history of Minneapolis West Bank's influential, funky music scene 01KQASEK08X90YZSVMKXZ0E5BM

NINA MOINI: Did you know that Minneapolis West Bank neighborhood, also known as Cedar Riverside, was once the center of a booming music scene? Starting in the 1960s, folk, blues, rock, and international musicians flooded into the neighborhood. Well, there's a new documentary about the musical history of the area. Kevin Dragseth is the director of the New Twin Cities PBS documentary called *Wild West Bank Sound*, and he joins me on the line. Thanks for being with us, Kevin.

KEVIN My pleasure. Thanks for having me.

DRAGSETH:

NINA MOINI: Congratulations on this work coming out. What made you want to make a documentary about the history of the music scene, this particular scene of the West Bank in Minneapolis?

KEVIN It is such a wonderful, unknown story or little known story if you weren't from the West Bank or weren't paying attention in the right decades.

DRAGSETH:

NINA MOINI: Yeah.

KEVIN There's an incredible author named Cyn Collins who wrote a book-- I think it's almost 20 years ago now called *West Bank Boogie*. And that really served-- we didn't adapt the book, but that really served as guidance for us of who were the players? How did this scene form? How did it become such an interesting, diverse cultural landscape?

DRAGSETH:

NINA MOINI: And I know you did a whole documentary, but if you could just summarize, why was the West Bank such a fertile place for the music scene to grow the way it did?

KEVIN Yeah. It's kind of a funny accident of history. It was the place that all the Scandinavians landed 100 years before, end of the 19th century, and some college students in the late '50s, early '60s started coming across the river basically because there was discrimination against some of the Black members of those friend groups and said, well, let's find a different bar. And so they wandered over across the river and found this pretty sleepy but thriving immigrant community and slowly took it over the course of a couple of decades. And instead of replacing people, it kind of just added. And so there was this real layering of cultures and experiences and music and arts.

DRAGSETH:

NINA MOINI: Oh, that's when the best stuff happens.

KEVIN That's right.

DRAGSETH:

NINA MOINI: Let's take a listen here to some of the music that's come out of the West Bank. Here's one. Let's play it, and then you can tell us about it afterward if you want. Here we go.

["LININ' TRACK" PLAYING] Oh boys, is you right

Done got right

All I hate 'bout linin' track

These ol' bars 'bout to break my back

Oh boys, can't you line 'em, Jack-a Jack-a

Oh boys, can't you line 'em Jack-a Jack-a

Oh boys, can't you line 'em Jack-a Jack-a

See Eloise go linin' train

Down in the hollow below the field

NINA MOINI: "Linin' Track," tell us about this song and what it represents to the West Bank music scene.

KEVIN DRAGSETH: Yeah. The first big kind of explosion of music from the West Bank was three guys-- Spider John Koerner, Snaker Dave Ray, and Tony Little Sun Glover. They all had fun, colorful nicknames-- who just kind of found each other in the early '60s and really fell in love with basically American Black music coming out of work songs and field hollers. And we're the first white practitioners of authentic blues.

And, by all accounts, earned the trust of the musicians who were the original developers of that music and represented it well. And that created a kind of interest in white audiences in a style of music that wasn't really available to them. And so they formed this really interesting and fraught, I guess, spot in history of introducing white audiences to basically American, Black music that was not widely available.

NINA MOINI: That's fascinating. So there are some really famous names that took inspiration from the West Bank and spent their fair share of time there. One of them is Bonnie Raitt, whose first album was made in collaboration with some of the people from the music scene in the West Bank. Let's take a listen to this.

[BONNIE RAITT, "FINEST LOVIN MAN"] --hear me complaining

I'll take him like he is 'cause you know I can't change him

I'll love him best I can, he's the finest lovin' man around

Oh yeah yeah

NINA MOINI: "Finest Lovin' Man," Bonnie Raitt. I hear a lot of inspiration there. How did Bonnie Raitt get into the West Bank scene?

KEVIN DRAGSETH: It's another wonderful accident of history. She was freshly on the scene. This is the early '70s. And out east on the folk circuit, gets connected with the same guy, Spider John Koerner. And he tells her about the scene on the West Bank, tells her about Dave Ray's recording studio that was lashed together from whatever he could get a hold of. And interested her in coming out and recording her first album here in the Twin Cities.

And Willie Murphy, who's another famous name from the West Bank, served as the producer. And they created this pretty remarkable first record that really launched her career and has made her kind of-- has always had a permanent place in her heart. She spoke to Spider John on the phone I think almost every week until he died, and so it's maintained a spot for her in her story.

NINA MOINI: I know you mentioned Willie Murphy. Should we listen to a Willie Murphy's song here about the West Bank? It's called fairy tale. Let's take a listen.

[WILLIE MURPHY, "FAIRY TALE"] The child that I once knew to be

You say it's no good looking back this way

But you know it's you too, not just me

I want to live in a fairy tale

I want to feel--

NINA MOINI: Tell us a little more about Willie Murphy and why he was so important to the West Bank scene.

KEVIN DRAGSETH: Yeah. Willie Murphy is a Minneapolis local. And I think these days, we probably would call him neurodivergent. He was kept to himself and really a genius, really into film and literature and all kinds-- had many interests. But really a musical genius and really brought people to his songwriting. Apparently quite a prolific and amazing songwriter who, by all accounts, is a very curmudgeonly person, sometimes hard to get along with creatively. But just an unbelievable songwriter.

And so this song, it was, by my understanding, kind of his ode to the West Bank, his signature song about the West Bank. The utopia, a gritty utopia that was created there, and wishing you could stay in that special place. And so when he died a few years back, 2019, I think, the former members of his band played that song at his Memorial, which sounds like a beautiful way to honor his legacy.

NINA MOINI: Absolutely. What about the artists who are still with us or the people that you interviewed for the documentary, the people who are able to now look back and reflect, how do they reflect on the West Bank music scene and how it's still really relevant today?

KEVIN DRAGSETH: Yeah, it's an interesting challenge because so many of those-- the venues have shuttered. Palmer's just closed last fall, and all the-- The 400, the Five Corners, The Viking, The Triangle, all the big ones that are the primary places where that stuff happened have all closed. However, I think the consensus was that the West Bank lives on in the businesses that are still there, but also this creative spirit that doesn't really have geography tie. It can just be wherever.

And so Charlie Parr, who's an inheritor, maybe, of Spider John's tradition, is playing that music all over the place. He's representing the West Bank, but it doesn't always have to happen on the West Bank. And I think that was the beautiful lesson, is that the West Bank is maybe in our hearts. Sounds a little corny, but I think there's some truth to that.

NINA MOINI: Yeah, absolutely. So what are you hoping that people take away who maybe didn't anything about this before from the documentary?

KEVIN DRAGSETH: Yeah. What's fun for me is I've been a musician all my life, and I've played some of the bars on the West Bank in my day and didn't realize how special that place was or those places. But I also wanted to make this film so that anybody from anywhere, somebody from East Grand Forks who had never been to the West Bank, could still feel like they were along for the ride and could see that this was a special place. And maybe every town has some little corner where the fun weirdos hang out and do the really creative work.

So I was hoping people could get sucked in to the journey, the evolution. Also, there's a theme of migration. Again, it was European Scandinavian immigrants first, then it was hippies and young people moving in, and then there's a theme we didn't really get into yet of people from the African diaspora moving in. So there's a whole arrival of people bringing Caribbean music that made West Bank this Caribbean hotbed, which was a head scratcher until you looked at, again, this theme of migration. And now there's a different group of people living there and occupying those spaces and using them to live full and vital lives.

NINA MOINI: I wish we had more time, Kevin. Because, like you say, there's just so much to talk about in the West Bank and the Cedar-Riverside area. But I'm so glad that you made this wonderful piece of art, and now people can learn all about it. Thank you so much for coming by and telling us about it.

KEVIN My pleasure. Thank you.

DRAGSETH:

NINA MOINI: That was Kevin Dragseth. He's the director of the New Twin Cities PBS documentary Wild West Bank Sound.