

[MUSIC PLAYING]

NINA MOINI: You're listening to Minneapolis musician Ella Buckner's song called *Ooh Wee*. He's one of thousands of musicians that make up Minnesota's deep and wide ranging music scene, from polka halls to hip hop studios, basement punk shows to internationally known classical performers.

Now, an ambitious new project is trying to capture all of it in one place. The nonprofit called the Diverse Emerging Music Organization, or DEMO, for short, has relied on a small staff and many volunteers for years to meet one goal, to collect, digitize, and preserve all music released by Minnesota artists.

The archive is launching online today, and DEMO is throwing a launch party to celebrate tomorrow night. Mitch Thompson is the executive director of DEMO. He's been working hard to collect thousands of pieces of music, and he's here in the studio with me. Thanks so much for being here, Mitch.

MITCH Thank you very much for having me here.

THOMPSON:

NINA MOINI: This is such an amazing idea. It's a huge undertaking.

MITCH It's a huge undertaking.

THOMPSON:

NINA MOINI: I would imagine.

MITCH Yes, I think we hit-- we went very ambitious. We were realizing. Yeah.

THOMPSON:

NINA MOINI: How far back are you stretching when you're wanting to capture literally all of the music recorded by Minnesota artists?

MITCH Well, our goal would be to go back as far as it exists. Right now, our oldest thing is from 1956, but we know there's stuff before that as well. So yeah.

NINA MOINI: How long have you been working on this? Because I'm seeing here you've archived around 2000 recordings.

MITCH The genesis of it started about 2019. COVID didn't help us. We kind of lost some momentum. But yeah, so we've been since 2019 working on the accumulating music and figuring out how to build an archive really.

NINA MOINI: Why was this important for you to do?

MITCH Well, there's music at risk. I mean, a lot of people release things on vinyl or cassettes or even eight track. And that music, once it-- if it's not digitized and it's not preserved or in a different way, it will cease to exist. So that's the stuff that we're mostly concerned about right now is finding that type of stuff. And it's important for people to, for history, or for people to be able to in the future look at the history of music, and we want to document the work that's happened.

NINA MOINI: Yeah. And for people who are like, well, maybe I can just go to Spotify or YouTube, you're wanting to put it in one place. Why is that so significant?

MITCH THOMPSON: Well, I think we're sort of losing-- I love the fact that I can dial up music from around the world. I can be exposed to just about anything. But one of the things that kind of gets lost in that is like, what does it mean to be local at that point?

So we want to harness that localness and plant a flag in that digital algorithmic future. We're all in and say, come look at what Minnesota has done. Look at the great work that we do here, and we can tell the stories about all the stuff about that music through the lens of released recorded music.

NINA MOINI: Yeah, it's such a pride point for the state, too. All of the beautiful artistry and music. Let's take a second to listen to one of the songs of many in the archive. It's called, *What Do They Do in Minnesota?* By the Six Fat Dutchmen.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

So where do you start when you are even going to look for this type of music, Mitch.

MITCH THOMPSON: Sure. So for clarity, we actually were the nonprofit wing of first Avenue. We're not attached anymore, but the founder of our organization, Steve McClellan, basically made first Avenue, first Avenue. And so Steve had a treasure trove of music that he had gotten working at First Avenue of local bands for 30 years. So we started there. So we had that collection.

NINA MOINI: Good start.

MITCH THOMPSON: Yeah. And we've had things like Andrea Swensson, who used to work at the Courant, had all of her music from her. She's a big music collector. She both donated and loaned us music, and Mark Wheat did that. And so record producers and then individuals give us music, and we're looking at the intersections of genre and era, cultural heritage and geography. And so we'll take those four sectors and we'll start, how do you find music within those sectors to end and to bring it in?

And so people can donate music to us, whether it's theirs or somebody else's, particularly if we're working with the artist directly. That's awesome because we can-- it's a clear connection. But yeah, so we'll find it any way we can. So--

NINA MOINI: Yeah.

MITCH THOMPSON: Yeah.

NINA MOINI: I love what you're talking about. It's more of like an academic feel in a way. Like it's just to help people to learn and to dig into all of these different polka and different genres. Why was it important for you to do it that way and to make it educational in a way?

MITCH THOMPSON: Yeah, I think it's important because it will stand as a true archive in the future. I think a lot of people start things and they're very ambitious. And then it's a Wikipedia site or something like that, and those things tend to collapse over time. So we wanted a very academically sound archive that happens to also be incredibly entertaining, and that's where we're going to be able to blend those two realities.

But we will very much stay academically driven. We have a relationship with Hamlin's anthropology Department. We work a little bit with the University of Minnesota performing arts archive, and we want to make sure that we stay rooted in the academic part of it. But that in and of itself isn't-- when people somebody goes to look at Minnesota Music archive.org, you're going to just be entertained.

NINA MOINI: You're like, oh, academia.

MITCH THOMPSON: Yeah, it doesn't feel academic. It's just entertainment. But we want to blend those two ideas.

NINA MOINI: And just the preservation. OK. Let's listen to another song in the archive. This is *Spirit Horses* by Annie Humphrey.

Slavery, grief, confusion, freedom waiting near

The sound of spirit horse hoof beats in the sky

Snow and blood and ashes and dreams too strong to die.

NINA MOINI: Love that one. Tell us more about Annie Humphrey and just the singers and the artists. How they're reacting to this project.

MITCH THOMPSON: Yeah, Annie's great. And one of the things that she represents is that this is really a Minnesota project because she's in Northern Minnesota. She also represents the cultural heritage because she identifies as a Native American artist. And so that's important to us that this is a state initiative. I mean, obviously a lot of music happens in the Twin Cities, and that's the heart of it. But there's so much happening in other places.

NINA MOINI: Totally.

MITCH THOMPSON: And Annie is a great example of an artist that was inspired by, I think we just did a little article on her. She was inspired by U2's Rattle and Hum, that she could make music that's trying to send a message. And so she got set off on that kind of journey, and she's continuing to do that. So yeah.

NINA MOINI: Yeah. And just historically, people's lyrics and music is also such an important part of history and documenting and tracking history.

MITCH THOMPSON: It is. It documents a moment in time. I mean, music-- if you go look at the music that happens throughout your life, it definitely tells the story of where you are in life and the artists that you may be listening to help you tell that story. And they tell their story.

And every recording has a story. Everything that we're archiving. There's an interesting story to each one of them. How did the band come together? How did the music get written? Why was it so leaning towards-- if it was a breakup record or a political commentary about a time. And so, yeah, every recording is a story.

NINA MOINI: Yeah, so tell us how people can access this right now because it just launched, right?

MITCH THOMPSON: Yep, It just launched. So if you go to minnesotamusicarchive.org, you can click on the Search the archive, and you can start searching music. And if you're somebody who knows music, you're going to say there's a lot of stuff missing. And yes, there is. And that's where volunteers and capacity to donate comes in.

We have a lot of work to do and we're just getting started. We look at this as 1.0, which is we launched it, and now we want a community to help us build it, and we don't think we own it. We think everybody in Minnesota owns it. So we're really looking for people to go to that website. And there are tons of ways to get involved and start to look at the archive and help us shape where we go with this next.

NINA MOINI: Yeah, it's a group project everybody. Just lastly, Mitch, what has been the most surprising part of digging through all of this music and taking this project on?

MITCH THOMPSON: The quality of things, that just the depth of work of how hard people put into their projects. Look 99.99% of the stuff that gets released isn't going to be remembered on some grand level. There's going to be the replacements, Husker Du and those kind of things. But the quality of work that's happening underneath all of that is really high. I come across things all the time when I'm like, this is really well done.

NINA MOINI: Yeah.

MITCH THOMPSON: And that has been-- I expected a lot of it to not be great. I don't know. You know what I'm saying? Like--

NINA MOINI: It's cool because it gives you a greater appreciation. So that's a fun surprise.

MITCH THOMPSON: Yeah.

NINA MOINI: Well, Mitch, thank you so much for coming by Minnesota now and sharing about this amazing project. Best of luck with all of this.

MITCH THOMPSON: Yeah, thank you for having me. I really, really appreciate it.

NINA MOINI: Absolutely. That's Mitch Thompson, executive director of the Diverse Emerging Music Organization, or DEMO, talking about the Minnesota Music archive. Their launch party again is tomorrow night at the Hennepin in downtown Minneapolis.