

River of Song

Series looks at music on Mississippi

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By the waters of the Mighty Mississippi the music of a nation has flowered and thrived.

And from the gospel of the South to the rock 'n' roll of Minneapolis, the people along the Great River have woven this music into the fabric of their communities.

This month, the Nebraska ETV Network and other public television stations celebrate the proliferation of music along the Mississippi and in the Midwest.

"The Mississippi: River of Song" is a four-part documentary that began Jan. 6 and will be broadcast over the next three Wednesday nights.

Tonight, NETV presents the second installment of the series, "Midwestern Crossroads."

The series follows the Mississippi river from northern Minnesota to Delacroix Island in Louisiana. The musicians included represent everything from contemporary pop and rock to blues, gospel and American Indian music.

Narrated by independent folk-rock musician Ani DiFranco, tonight's segment celebrates the vitality and history of the music that has sprung up in the Midwest — an area in which musical contributions are often marginalized and overlooked.

"People on the coast seem to think that there is not much but wheat fields and corn fields and more wheat fields in the Midwest," said John Junkerman, producer and director of the series.

But one need only look at Midwestern musicians to realize the impact of the region, he said. Artists such as Bob Dylan, Tina Turner, B.B. King, and The Artist Formerly Known as Prince are not accidents, he said.

"All of those people came out of very specific contexts," Junkerman said.

The series explores the impact of these contexts on the musicians and their communities.

As filming progressed, Junkerman said, the crew discovered the loyalty artists often felt to their home.

"Somebody might have a gig and not make much money but be there for 20 years and make enough money to stick with it," Junkerman said.

Communities generally returned this fidelity by incorporating music into their day-to-day lives. They used music as a way to socialize and share their stories, holding festivals and congregating in clubs to swap music with their friends.

Deborah Reinhardt, an associate professor of music education at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, has discovered the same community impact in her research.

Reinhardt has been studying the variety of music in Nebraska, traveling across the state making recordings of local musicians.

From religion to work to pleasure, Reinhardt said music provides a hub for people to revolve around.

Junkerman said these factors have led to robust local music scenes in the Midwest.

"There seems to be a revival in a way. A lot of this music is being sustained in a bigger way than it had been in the past," he said.

Junkerman attributed this rejuvenation to the growth of summer music festivals, citing the bluegrass festivals in Illinois, Iowa and Missouri as examples.

"They have scores of people coming to these campgrounds swapping music and stories. It's a very democratic environment, and everybody gets a chance to sing a song. These people come back every summer to the same place and play their music with old friends," he said.

The final focus of the series is the diversity of music in the Midwest.



INDEPENDENT FOLK-ROCK musician Ani DiFranco narrates the documentary focusing on the contemporary music of the Mississippi River Valley. PHOTO COURTESY OF JACKSON HILL

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producer & director,
"The Mississippi, River of Song"**

Reinhardt attributes the variety to the different cultural influences present in the region.

"Forty to 50 years ago, there was little television and a little less access to popular music as a whole. With this isolation came a blending of styles," she said.

"The same is true in Nebraska. In these communities, I know it's a blend of music I'm hearing. It's not pure Czech, and it's not pure German. There's been a natural kind of a tendency to blend and to work with other music."

To accommodate the variety of music, the documentary is divided into four parts, which began on the first Wednesday of the month.

Part one, "Americans Old and New," covered music along the Mississippi from Northern Minnesota to Iowa. Beginning with the music of American Indians and ending with folk and polka, this segment emphasized the fusion of past and present at the headwaters of the Mississippi.

"Midwestern Crossroads," the second segment in the series, addresses the impact of river trade and commerce and emphasizes the importance of rock and soul.

Parts three and four air Jan. 20 and 27 at 9 p.m. Part three picks up the strand of the story in La Center, Ky. and continues to Jackson, Miss. Titled "Southern Fusion," this section pays special attention to the music of Memphis, Tenn., as well as gospel and blues.

The final part of the series, "Louisiana, Where Music is King," covers the last stretch of America's largest river from Natchez, Miss., to Delacroix Island, La. Set in the bayous of Louisiana, the final segment revels in the various cultural influences of the area, from French to Caribbean to Spanish.

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A culmination of five years of research and planning, the series includes a total of 50 acts and more than 500 musicians from all 10 states along the Mississippi.

And although the series can teach an audience a lot about music along the Mississippi, Junkerman said it was not created to convey a message.

"(The messages) were only things that we discover along the course of documenting this music," he said.