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## ARCHIVES

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# Intermountain Song Trails project documents history in the West

As humans move throughout history, the music and memories they carry travel with them. This is a phenomenon Utah State University's oral history archivist Joe Kinzer and folklorist Derek Piotr are attempting to immortalize through their new community-based oral history project: the Intermountain Song Trails initiative.

"We've been singing and making music since humanity began, so it's kind of part of our DNA," Kinzer said. "Just go to a movie and take away the soundtrack and you'll notice."

This project asks community members in the Intermountain West to share memories of songs they heard from childhood or family life. These song recordings will then be archived on a publicly accessible map, allowing anyone to view and listen to the ways music has evolved throughout the region.

"We're really open to any kind of music and movement and labor and memory of the West," Kinzer said. "It can be really broad, and we're letting it organically evolve based on who we talk to."

Some examples of songs they're looking for include lullabies, cowboy songs, church songs, songs associated with migration routes like the Mormon and Oregon Trails, protest songs or even pop songs.

Kinzer and Piotr came together to collaborate on this project through a shared love of music, remembrance and archival work. While comparing music recordings that have been archived in the USU Fife Folklore Archives and Piotr's own Fieldwork Archive, they came up with an idea for how to get the community more involved.

"I really like this idea of activating archival materials, which is basically using them as memory anchors for oral history projects and engaging the community with archives," Kinzer said. "Not just extracting things and hoarding them away never to be seen."

A cornerstone of Piotr's fieldwork archive is the focus on the human voice, and all 1,700 recordings within it were filmed and sung by the participants who remember them.

"I really value unaccompanied singing, particularly if the person isn't a singer," Piotr said. "I think there's something really vulnerable about permanently putting a song down on tape when they're not used to singing."

This is what the project aims to accomplish as well: encouraging participants to sing or hum fragments of songs they remember.

"Even if you think it's a tiny, insignificant song, we want to know about it," Piotr said. "It will start to flesh out how people in the Intermountain West grew up, what they had access to, maybe what their religious life was like, what their schooling was like, where they went to camp, etc."

The main focus of the project is to look at the memories, stories and personal meanings participants associate with the music they remember.

“We’re looking at memory – what does it trigger for you, what’s the meaning behind it, who sang it and how does that reflect meaning in your life or connect you to place,” Kinzer said. “We’re going back to the roots but also transforming it to engage contemporary memory in the community.”

While anyone who lives or has lived in the region is welcome to submit a recording, the core oral history project is focused around collecting at least 20 interviews from various different prominent groups significant to the area.

“One of the communities we’re looking at is descendants of Chinese railroad workers, which is missing from our archives,” Kinzer said. “We’d also appreciate Indigenous input, as these groups could provide the foundation of music and movement in the region before settler colonialism.”

According to Kinzer, many of the recordings they have already received have been surprisingly but beautifully ordinary.

“It’s the everyday songs that people remember the best, like ‘She’s Coming ‘Round the Mountain,’” Kinzer said. “They’re songs everyone knows, but they have a specific meaning for that person.”

The overall focus of the project is on the songs and their attached memories, and both Kinzer and Piotr stressed they are not judging musical skill.

“Just the act of someone, flesh and bone, using their voice and recording an old song really stands the test of time, especially in the face of deep fake voices and AI,” Piotr said. “It’s the impulse of ‘I want to share, I want to remember and I want to be human.’”

This project was funded in part by the Utah Humanities Council and the Merrill-Cazier Library. The duo hopes to make access to the full archive of recordings available by the fall.

“It’s not just nostalgia. It’s about understanding how people make meaning,” Kinzer said. “It shows the complexity of many stories, not just one.”



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