Filk Travels to Des Moines

00:05
HOST: I'm Lily Wasserman, Accessibility Editor with Urban Plains, the Drake University School of Journalism and Mass Communications Capstone Project. We are a multimedia publication that is redefining the story of the Midwest. Check out our website for more, but for now, welcome to my audio story about filk. A musical genre defies the idea of genre itself. As the community ages, will you join the circle? Sutton's Law says that filk is what happens in a filk circle, a gathering of players known as filkers. Anyone who identifies as a filker, chooses a topic, chooses a sound, and refuses a label is in that moment creating filk.

01:00
HOST: It is boundaryless like a circle that constantly expands, free of sharp edges. In an age of generative AI taking creative roles and people bowling alone, communities like this provide spaces for creation without definition. The song you are hearing now is Circus of Dreams by Des Moines filk musicians Eric Coleman and Lizzie Crowe, who formed the band Cheshire Moon.

01:30
HOST: Inspired by the Erin Morgenstern novel The Night Circus, the work is an example of filk, that community-based genre of music that, while sometimes inspired by fandom material, science fiction, and fantasy, can technically be anything, as long as the creator identifies the work as filk. In June, filk players will converge upon Des Moines with their piccolos, xylophones, and more, ready to create music from sunrise to sunset. Coleman and Crowe, who played the song you heard there, are two prominent filk players in the Des Moines area who are organizing the relaxacon Filk Combobulated in June.

02:21
HOST: As experts in the field, they have unique definitions of the genre. Filk, say them, is defined more by a player's choosing to take on the label than any strict guidelines. Some songs, like Rocketman by Elton John or many Weird Al Yankovic songs, are not filk because the artists do not define them as filk. But there's a catch. If a player plays it in a filk circle, it is, for that moment, found filk. Filk also does not have one sound. Players dip into any genre they want to create in, from blues to jazz to French 1970s hip-hop. Out of the circles, filk songs live on bandcamp and personal websites, played for the love of creativity. Yet, filk began with folk circles, specifically, an error.

03:05
COLEMAN: The filk community is both, you know, kind of diffuse and very tight all at the same time. Like I said, it's been around, the name filk came about in the middle 50s. It was a typo. Somebody meant to type folk circle. And I hit the E instead because it's right next to the O. And the musicians claimed it as their own, says this is what we do, we do filk.

03:36
HOST: The community aspect of filk brought the two together. Coleman began his filk career playing comedic singer-songwriter songs with audience interaction. To play in circles, he attended conventions. Crowe happened to attend one of those conventions where she played her first filk in a circle.

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COLEMAN: And as I say, I was walking down the hall minding my own business, and I see three friends of mine walking toward me and someone that I didn't know, and but my thought is, okay, they have an amazing voice, and oh, she's cute, okay, and lots of cute women, you know.

04:07
CROWE: And I thought, who is this? He's adorable and funny.

COLEMAN: I also thought that she was way, way too young for me. It turned out that she was only way too young for me, not way, way too young for me.

4:20
CROWE: Yeah, about that.

COLEMAN: And so we ran into each other through the course of the weekend, and each became a little more interested. And we saw each other at WindyCon in November, five months later, and I heard her sing.

[BACKGROUND MUSIC]

04:53
CROWE: He was talking about Sutton's Law, about, you know, what happens in a filk circle is for that moment filk. The first song I ever actually sang was the ending theme from Final Fantasy IX. I thought I offended him. I thought he was upset with me. He was so intense when he looked at me. I am intense. And it was just like, he literally had to chase me down the hall to stop me from bolting because I was just like, oh crap, what have I done? Because that was the first time I'd ever sung in a filk circle. I didn't know. I thought he was upset.

5:40
COLEMAN: I blew the audience away. She was wonderful.

HOST: At the time, Eric was looking for a singer for songs of his that didn't work solo.

6:05
HOST: At a convention month later, Crowe was looking for somebody to share a room with. A month later, the two met at a different festival, where they wrote their first filk song together, “Widow's Garden.” Over time, the two fell in love with both each other and their shared music.

Their compositions grew in fame, and the two won Pegasus Awards, the music awards of the filk community, for their composing. They began becoming more active in the filk community, to their dismay.

7:38
COLEMAN: We've lost our minds completely.

CROWE: Oh, we promised each other that we were done running conventions because he and I have both served on convention committees for years. I've been a board member a couple of times. I don't know if you have, but I didn't think so. But we had given up on con running. And then, in 2021, the World Science Fiction Convention was in Chicago. And a friend of ours named Will Frank, he's in New York, offered up Eric as the sacrificial lamb to run the music track at the Worldcon.

8:19
COLEMAN: I sent him an email, going, “dude, I thought we were friends, man.” I thought we were cool. Why are you doing this to me? Because I can't say no to this

CROWE: And that was why, because he knew. And so we had to come to an accord in order for that to happen, in order for him to say yes to that. That was going to be it.

8:50
HOST: Their Pegasus Award-winning song, Snow White Red Road, is a retelling of the story of Snow White. Like Widow's Garden, it includes fantasy elements, though it has a different sound. Coleman and Crowe have since collaborated on many works, including those inspired by mythology, tarot, and other folktales. Their biggest collaboration, though, has yet to happen, Filk Combobulated.

While on the road, the idea came to Crowe that the Red Road should lead filkers to their own convention in Des Moines. The name, Filk Combobulated, comes from how they felt coming up with the idea, completely discombobulated. Yet the two have found support in filkers from neighboring states. Other conventions have happened in midwestern cities and have influenced the culture of filk there. Coleman and Crowe believe that filk culture is representative of midwestern culture in the Midwest.

There are groups of filkers in many midwestern cities, including groups in Milwaukee, St. Louis, Minneapolis, and more.

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CROWE: We are polite midwesterners that say “ope,” and so we try to allow for the openness of circles, you know, drop in as you like, pop out as you like, you know, no pressure.

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HOST: Every area has a feel, Coleman and Crowe say, from the polite filk circles of Toronto to the Midwest inviting atmosphere.

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CROWE: One of the things we work really, really hard not to do is gatekeep. People want in? Come on in. Have a seat. Well, you know, enjoy it. Enjoy. Share if you like. No pressure. But come on in. The door is always open, and there's always somebody there to say hi.

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COLEMAN: And that's, you know, goes back to Sutton's law of filk is what happens in a filk circle. Whatever you sing in a filk circle for that moment, it's filk. Doesn't matter if it's, you know, some popular song, if it's some rock song, if it's musicals, if it's whatever, you are now part of the filk community.

No, it's a, you know, one of the things I said is that, is that really the, the only prerequisite of being a member of the filk community is wanting to be a member. Yep. You know, that's it. That's all that we look for, is you want to get involved in this? Come hang out with us. And, and, and most people get it. Every once in a while, you will get someone who just doesn't get it.

12:29
CROWE: And occasionally you'll get someone who's fussy. And that happens no matter what you do. And the funny thing is that a lot of, a couple of those people who started out fussy smoothed out just because it's like, okay, that's fine. We'll take a minute, get some water, have fun. And we just, we didn't reject them simply because they were fussy or uptight.

It was just a matter of, okay, that's their way. And they were allowed to chill out, and they did. And now they are, you know, pillars of this community. Just because they were nervous and they didn't know what was up. And we didn't, we worked really hard not to judge. We were really hard not to gatekeep. And you know, filk room’s always open.

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HOST: While there are not necessarily many prominent filk players in Des Moines, the ones that are there are influential. There are also a lot of conventions that, while not purely surrounding filk, involve it. DemiCon is an annual convention for science fiction, fantasy, and gaming in Des Moines. It features a filk circle, but it is not filk-focused like Filk Combobulated will be. Filk Combobulated will be in the same hotel as Coleman and Crowe are used to working with them.

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CROWE: We were driving, and we were driving to my mother's, actually, in Indianapolis. So eight hours in the car. And we were just chatting. And I don't even remember how this came up in the conversation. But it's like, you know what we should do? We should start a filkcon of our own. Because DuckCon's not running anymore. And that had a little teeny filkcon in the middle of it. It was DuckCon was in Chicago. A lot of things happen in Chicago.

14:02
COLEMAN: That's where we met, back then.

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CROWE: Yeah. But it's like, we should do that. That'd be fun. To which he said, but what would we call it? And I said, filk combobulation. Okay. And we kept talking about it. We kept discussing it. Because every once in a while, over the next couple of weeks, it's like, well, you know. What hotel will we have it in? We have it in the same hotel as DemiCon. They're used to us. We know the space really well. We know the hotel really well.

14:31
HOST: The convention is a relaxed con that will take place from June 26th to 28th. It will feature a few concerts, but will focus on filk circles.

Their seed money is coming from GoFundMe. People can donate to receive badges for the convention. The two have a spreadsheet for donors and are working on creating a website dedicated to the con. Both have experienced the con bureaucracy, as Lizzie has experienced from her career as a systems analyst.

A relaxed con is different from a full-fledged con, and it is mostly based on filk circles. Filk circles bring together different players to play what music they want when it is their turn. For Coleman and Crowe, these are easier to organize and support financially than a full-on con. Eric Coleman describes filk circles as crazy.

15:11
CROWE: But we kept talking about it. We kept talking about it. I said, Okay, but what would we do? How would we fund this? And we were just kicking it around and kicking it around. And finally, he put it out to the community: Hey, we have this wild idea. What would people think about the potential of there being a mid-year relaxed con in the Midwest again? To which the community, pretty much as a collective, said, yes, please. And it's like, oh, well, this has got to happen now. And it was our idea. It was mine.

16:06
COLEMAN: Filkcombobulated.org, it's out there.

CROWE: Filkcombobulation is the 501(c)(3) oversight body, and filkcombobulated is the actual convention that's a subsidiary of it. It's insane.

16:24
COLEMAN: We've been working on that. He's been working on the website. I've been working on all the other stuff in it. And we go back and forth. And I mean, right now, we've got things about as far as we can get them. Yeah, we need to get registration software done.

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HOST: The convention will attract filkers from both the Midwest and outside states. Beth Kinderman is a filk player excited to come to Des Moines for the convention. She's coming from the neighboring state of Minnesota.

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KINDERMAN: You know, I'm just really excited about there being a filk convention that's a little bit closer to Minneapolis. You know, the other ones are in Columbus, Ohio. That's actually where I am right now. We're joining Ohio Valley Filk Festival, which is another big filk convention. But there really isn't one that's any closer to me than that.

So I'm looking forward to there being a new event that's a little bit less lengthy in terms of travel. And that will maybe draw some folks from a different area of the country. And, you know, just really introducing people from this region who might otherwise not have made it to a convention like that.

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HOST: One artist featured, Brian Baker from Des Moines, will not only play in filk circles, but in a performance as the con's guest of honor. Baker is looking forward to the relaxing and the circle itself.

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BAKER: You know, the concerts are great too. But the real fun is sitting around in a circle with people and just doing what people want to do and playing off each other. I always have a good time with it. And getting to see a bunch of folks, I'm really hoping that some people kind of come in from the region.

There's a really good filk community in Chicago. There's a good filk community up in Minneapolis. We have kind of a small filk community here in Des Moines. But, I mean, it's Des Moines. But for DemiCon, a lot of times we kind of draw from Chicago and Minneapolis for a lot of folks. I'm hoping with this being a filk-owned, well, a filk-owned relaxing con, it will maybe bring in some people from just a little bit wider area.

18:53
HOST: Nobody knows what will happen in filk circles, but Baker has plenty of songs to play. In his new album, Baker has works inspired by TV shows Supernatural and another inspired by a high school Dungeons and Dragons session. The song features wish-granting birds and a wish granted that backfired upon the party. Filk circles like this bring the Midwest City pockets together, say Coleman and Crowe. Des Moines is centrally located, being on I-80 with access to an airport and the somewhat close Osceola train station.

20:00
COLEMAN: And has for years and years.

CROWE: In each of these cities, you'll find filk circles that pop up every couple of months just in somebody's living room, or like down here. And it's just community coming together and just sharing music. And it's sharing life, and it's fun.

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COLEMAN: We like doing that. But the core of the community is the community. It is, it is, it is, it is. I, you know, we've been referred to as big-name filkers here and there. I'm like, no, we're just part of the community. And, you know, what this person is who sings a couple songs every year at a filk con is just as valid as we are and is just as important of a member of the community. And some people don't see it that way. I'm just like, no, no, there aren't any stars here. There shouldn't be any stars here. It is, you know, yeah, there are people who like to get up on stage. And there's people who would never, I would never do that. And it's all part of it. And that's what makes it so much fun. That's what makes it so, so, so interesting, that it is, you know, it is community first and foremost.

21:18
HOST: Yet, while the Des Moines Con is being created, other cons are disappearing. Duck Con, Concord, and other conventions have stopped occurring. When cons disappear, those filk circles no longer happen. As filkers age, there's the risk of their music being lost too. Many filk circles or filk pieces were recorded on tapes or older methods and were in storage for long periods of time.

Materials like tapes can warp over time. At Bowling Green State University, the Jennifer Donaldson Milewski Collection of Filk Research Materials collects various pieces to preserve them. Coleman also runs a podcast, Filkcast, to discuss, digitize, and preserve filk pieces that would otherwise have been lost.

22:15
COLEMAN: There are efforts to make sure that all this stuff doesn't die, you know, that it's still out there, that it's still, you know, available at least on some level.

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HOST: People need the arts to understand each other, to hear a new part of the human story, someone else's experiences and views. Efforts like this preserve a part of human creation, part of the story that humanity is telling. In a world where so much of that story, from music to advertising, is monetized or being done solo, filk is unique in that it is made of love.

It defies category or boundary in an age of difference. It begins with community, an idea that reshapes the idea of music and connections from it. So, when the Relaxicon comes to Des Moines, will you join the circle? I'm Lily Wasserman with Urban Plains. Thank you for listening.