

By Greg Heberlein
MountainEars member

SEATTLE – He's a former University of Oregon track athlete, an alum of both Microsoft and Corbis, a Montanan and a published novelist.

He's also the guy who's been given the keys to the Disney musical kingdom. For much of the past two years, Jasen Emmons has been the Experience Music Project archivist in charge of one of EMP's most anticipated shows – "Disney, The Music behind the Magic."

Emmons is convinced the spectacular, year-long array of both visual and audio presentations will persuade all ages that the success of so many of Walt Disney's endeavors was founded on a strong musical base.

"I think everyone who visits the exhibit – whether that person is 5 or 85 – is going to love discovering the innovative way that Disney has used music," Emmons said.

EMP contacted Walt Disney Records in 2004, Emmons said, to see if EMP could mount a retrospective to honor Records' 50th anniversary in 2006.

"Walt Disney Records suggested that we broaden the scope and explore the critical role that music played since the first Mickey Mouse cartoon, 'Steamboat Willie,' debuted in 1928," Emmons said.

"Turns out it was a great idea."

The exhibit opens at EMP, on the grounds of the Seattle Center in downtown Seattle, in November. A three-day series of events, mostly open to all, gets under way Friday, Nov. 3. Numerous special guests are expected to participate. Additional details will appear on EMP's Web site.

Emmons grew up in Great Falls, Mont., finished high school in 1981, matriculated and ran track at the University of Oregon, and held multimedia positions at Microsoft and Corbis. Degrees included a master of fine arts from the University of Washington. That spawned his 1996 novel, "Cowboy Angst," which debuted to generally favorable reviews.

By 1999, EMP snagged him as a producer.

"In 2004, I curated my first exhibit, "Beatlemania: America Meets the Beatles, 1964," Emmons said. Not long after came the coveted curator's role for the Bob Dylan exhibit.

"I'm a longtime Dylan fan and he's has such an enormous impact and influence on popular music that I felt really lucky to be able to work on the project," said Emmons, now in his mid-40s.

At about the same time, the early work on the Disney exhibit began to develop. A graduate-school intern, Diana Mankowski, was enlisted to gather project material. Good choice, since her undergraduate thesis was on the Mickey Mouse Club.

As story lines developed, Emmons began to arrange interviews. He crisscrossed the country to get Disney legends on tape. Among those Emmons chatted with are voice of Mickey Mouse Wayne Allwine, Imagineer extraordinaire Tony Baxter, composers Alan Menken and Rich Sherman, Records executive Randy Thornton, Disney archivist Robert Tieman, Disney all-around artist Stacia Martin and Disney voice star Ginny Tyler.

Many more were interviewed or will be by November. That list includes John Lassiter, the prime creative force behind the Pixar series of movies.

Emmons feels a little like a Nobel scientist who just discovered a new element.

"It's such a rich story," Emmons said, "that I was amazed no one else had thought about doing an exhibit about it."

Amazed, a word that just might describe the public's reaction beginning in November.