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A Vision of the Future

By [DIGBR](#)By **Cody Worsham**

Dr. Jesse Allison is downright giddy as he strides the halls of the 94,000 square foot LSU Digital Media Center.

"I love this," he says through a smile and under his breath. As he points out massive servers, tiny microphones, and complex art installments, it's obvious he means it.

It's not just the present that's perked Dr. Allison's mood, though coming to work every day in a building full of 4K projection screens and innovative instruments would put a smile on any professor's face – particularly one whose specialty is the intersection of art and technology.

What's really tickling Dr. Allison today is, well, tomorrow.

Dr. Allison is spearheading the 2014 Red Stick FutureFest, a year-end expo of the best work done in and beyond the Cultural Computing branch of LSU's Center for Computation and Technology. It is equal parts beta test, showcase, and collaboration of all things digital in Baton Rouge, a free event open to the public to take place Friday, May 9 from 2-5 p.m. at the Digital Media Center.

It's the evolution of the former Red Stick International Animation Festival, an event created by Dr. Stephen David Beck and Dr. Stacy Simmons that LSU hosted from 2005 to 2013. When Dr. Simmons left for another job in California and Dr. Beck was promoted to the director of LSU's School of Music, the festival needed new life.

"We found ourselves without anyone to spend the time needed to invest in the festival," Dr. Beck said. "We knew it was really important and an important part of what [CCT] did and the cultural computing group did, so we wanted to rethink and re-envision what the festival could be."

It was the perfect opportunity for Dr. Allison, who accepted the position as Cultural Computing's assistant professor for experimental music & digital media four years ago after establishing the Institute for Digital Intermedia Arts at Ball State University. He was instantly attracted to what LSU and Baton Rouge had to offer, with the state's tax emergent digital media sector, a product of tax credits and top talent.

"When this job opened up, you could see where it was housed was a really exciting area," he said. "I knew we could not only get into the artistic side of things, but also tap into scientific resources to make those ideas happen. My job is a 50/50 split between doing music – composition and performances – and doing research and development and collaborations."

To render that job description into a physical installment, look no further than "Humming Mississippi," Dr. Allison's collaboration with LSU School of Art and Design's Dr. Derick Ostrenko. It's a sonic and physical representation of the Mississippi River, a beautiful display of carefully carved wooden panels connected to precise electronic wiring that takes live data from the river based on six variables and produces "a live mix of what's going on with the river and what's going on with the panels themselves."

In other words, it's the Mississippi River like you've never seen it – or heard it – hanging from the ceiling.

"Humming Mississippi" is just one of the many marvels of student-faculty collaboration set for display Friday. The center will also show off its 3D modeling and laser cutting work, interbuilding communication portals, laptop orchestra, open-sourced poetry paring, and other various futuristic conceptions too complex for the printed page.

"Future Fest is going to be all the stuff that happens here at cultural computing," Dr. Allison said. "We're using this event to advertise what's going on here. What's really happened with digital media is with the tax incentives and investments in universities, there's a ton of stuff happening, and you get to see little snippets of it, but there's no great forum or place to have everything come out and showcase. What we're hoping to do is to get this event to be that."

It's fittingly housed in the Digital Media Center, a \$29.3 million investment that appears to be worth every penny – and then some. It hosts game-making icon Electronic Arts on the top floor, and beneath merges a massive web of interdisciplinary studies that brings together art and technology in unprecedented ways.

"The center itself has been pivotal in making all these connections," Dr. Allison said. "Now that we've moved in the building, you can already see it's going to explode. The facilities are all finally together. We have fabrication facilities, and production facilities and theaters – places we can finally do all these things without being spread across campus."

In return, the campus is attracting major international attention. Baton Rouge will host the New Interfaces for Musical Expression (NIME) conference in 2015, following in the footsteps of Seoul and London. Not only is FutureFest a year-end Cultural Computing showcase, but it's also a forerunner to what Dr. Allison hopes to be an even larger exposition – The Red Stick Festival – to run alongside NIME in 2015.

"We want to roll the Red Stick Festival back out at the same time and have the festival lead into the events that are happening with NIME," he said. "It just makes a lot of sense that we can launch it. It's us saying, 'This is some of the cool stuff we're doing. Do you do something similar? If so, let's get involved. Let's do something together.'"

The possibilities for the 2015 festival are endless. Dr. Allison runs off ideas ranging from robotics competitions and maker fairs to projection mapping on buildings and electronic concerts at local bars. For now, however, the future can wait – at least until Friday.

"We have so many ideas," he said, "but we want to get all that focused over this event. We want to show what goes on, and then get people inspired to do more."

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