

SANDPOINT

MAGAZINE

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Interview with Songwriter Charley Packard, In the Footsteps of Photographer Dorothea Lange, End of the Coldwater Creek Era, On the Pacific Northwest Trail, Artist Karen Robinson, Ethan's Treehouse, Alpacas, Calendars, Dining, Real Estate ... and a *trainload* more

Charley Packard

Singer/songwriter and minister

By Susan Drinkard

Charley Packard may be the most well-known local on Sandpoint's streets. If he isn't, he is certainly one of our most beloved. He has performed his original songs at every imaginable venue – from the Farmers Market to the Festival at Sandpoint. He is a minister of song and love, having officiated a thousand-plus marriages. Of utmost importance to Packard, however, is helping alcoholics and drug addicts with sobriety.

He has been playing the guitar and singing his bluesy folk songs in the Idaho Panhandle for nearly four decades, either solo or with friends such as fellow local musician Tom Newbill, who has played and recorded with Packard off and on since “the early days” in Southern California. His venues have not always been as small as Eichardt's and Idaho Pour Authority, where he has standing gigs. Packard has been the opening act for Willie Nelson, John Prine, Arlo Guthrie, Jerry Jeff Walker, Clint Black and Asleep at the Wheel when they played Sandpoint.

The largest crowd he played was 40,000 at Red Rocks amphitheater in Colorado, a benefit concert for migrant workers. His album, Charley D. and Milo – with Lon Milo DuQuette – on the Epic Records label, received a great deal of attention, but success did not feel that sweet to Packard. Seven hundred to 1,000 original songs later, he's recorded some of his favorites on his six CDs, which are available at www.charleypackard.com

The oldest of six, Packard was raised in Kansas, Texas and Oklahoma. He was the only white athlete on his high school basketball team, which won state, and he was the star football and baseball player as well. Packard played sports at the University of Kansas, where he earned a degree in anthropology.

Then there were years, decades really, when he was a drug and alcohol enthusiast. Sober for 17 years, Packard has helped many addicts. He holds AA meetings in the jails. “He has become a lighthouse here for people who are afflicted by substances that have the better of them,” said Newbill.

Charley Packard started marrying couples 36 years ago because locals Karen and Ted Bowers asked him to officiate their wedding. Their marriage ended, but ironically, Packard and Karen are together now and share a strong spiritual bond through their studies of the Course in Miracles.

Packard's wife of 40 years, Colleen Harris, passed away in March 2010 from cancer. Now Packard, 72, is experiencing his own cancer challenge. In April he started radiation treat-



Charley Packard has been a familiar face around Sandpoint for decades, whether he's performing music or marrying couples. PHOTO BY DOUG FLUCKIGER

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ments for esophageal tumor shrinkage. Though sick from treatments, he was optimistic about his healing, and he and Karen are planning the house they will have built for winter retreats on their land in Hawaii.

Have you made your living your entire life as a singer and songwriter?

I started singing folk songs professionally at 18, and I have been doing it 54 years.

Who were your musical influences?

Buddy Holly, Bob Dylan, the Beatles, but so many great

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Interview



The Charley Packard Band performing at Eichardt's, a regular Wednesday night gig: from left, Ray Allen, Jesse Harris, Del Goff and Charley Packard. PHOTO BY BONNIE THOMPSON

songs and musicians came out of the '60s. It spawned a lot of creativity. ... There was a lot of self-indulgence, and if you survived it, you were influenced by it spiritually.

Your songs seem to go right to the heart.

I'm a poet first of all. There are only a few words in a song, so to create imagery and get an idea across, each line

has to count. No line should be wasted.

You go by Charley Packard. What happened to Charles Dennis Harris?

My real last name is Harris. I had a group called Charley D. and Milo out in California. We got signed to Epic Records and had a pretty good run – a couple singles had some good airplay. Milo and I parted ways business wise, though he is one of my best friends. Along with all those feelings, I thought, *What the heck, why don't I change my last name just for fun?* Driving around Newport Beach, I went by a 1940s Packard convertible restored in soft yellow. I pulled over and saw on one of those fenders, in beautiful chrome script – Packard – and I thought, *I'm Charley Packard.*

What happened then?

I was ambitious. When I got signed to CBS, put out an album, and went on the road, I had some measure of success, but the reward was not what I thought it would be. Now Charley D. and Milo is a collector's album.

*I don't want a young thing
Who says I'm the first
I'd take one who thinks I'm the last
I don't want a sweet thing
Talkin' about the future
Give me a gal who has got a past
Someone who knows how
Someone who shows how
Give me an old gal
That's been around the block before.
—"Gimme an Ol' Gal" by Charley Packard*

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Your song “Gimme an Ol’ Gal” should have made you Nashville famous. Tell me about the origin of that song.

It’s not a colorful story. In my drinking days I’d come home pretty loaded up and write and write. I’d wake up and remember them vaguely. I’d just make things up. A lot of people around the country do that song, not big names, but people like me. It’s been working for many years and gets so many requests, I can’t help but enjoy it.

In times of your life when you weren’t creating, is that when you were creating hell for yourself?

No, I could write songs and create hell for myself in the same day. I’m an alcohol/drug addict who has not used in 17 years, but I drank a lot and used a lot, and I’m grateful for my recovery.

Did you have a rough childhood?

It was interesting and character building. I had a lot of kind people throughout my life – relatives and strangers.

What is your spiritual heritage?

I was raised a Southern Baptist in the Bible Belt. I have a fondness for the people who raised me in that religion and taught me prayer and mentioned the word “God” all the time. No matter what the theology is, from there you can branch out and explore.

How would you say your beliefs have evolved through the years?

I just believe in Spirit. The foundation of my beliefs is in the Course of Miracles, and I attend the Sunday service at the Gardenia Center. Also, Alcoholics Anonymous is as spiritual an organization as there is.

It seems you are treasured here, a man people know to have a kind and loving essence.

If I do, I’m blessed. People have been very patient with me.

But you have sown some wild oats in the past, eh?

I was a rascal, but I was never mean-spirited. I just partook of everything – to the abuse of most of it.

*I wish I could have been your lover
Wish I could have been your man
But you’ll never, ever hold a lover
With that bottle in your hand.*

– “Bottle in Yer Hand”

Why is that?

Well, there are addictive personalities. In recovery you see that addiction and alcoholism are obsessive-compulsive disorders. You obsess about drink-

ing and once you have a drink, you have a compulsion to drink. Other people can have a couple glasses of wine and stop. People like me can’t. People ask, “Do you want a beer?” I don’t have a beer. I might have a case of beer. I’d be closing down the 219 some 10 hours later. Many years ago I was in a psychiatric hospital in Houston because I had OCD, and this brother, bless his heart, a Southern Baptist preacher, asked, “Charley, why don’t you just stop? Why don’t you just pray about it?” I said to

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At left, Charley Packard recording with Lon Milo DuQuette, circa 1970; above, opening for Willie Nelson at the Festival at Sandpoint, 1994

him, "Do you think I don't pray about it?" Your ego has to almost die to surrender totally. I've seen miracles happen to families and people's lives changed. I am so fond of Alcoholics Anonymous. You stay sober by helping others stay sober.

How did you find Sandpoint?

Dennis and Carol Coats of Sandpoint spawned a migration of their musician friends from Southern California to the Northwest in the 1970s. Colleen and I moved out here for sanity's sake. We didn't want to raise our children there.

Some folks told me that love would never end

I say that working for love sounds crazy

But you lose it when you get lazy, my friends.

— "Workin' for Love"

You have also presided and performed a song at the weddings of many couples. Do you have any idea how many?

I've officiated 1,700 weddings in 36 years – some at City Beach, one on horseback, one couple got married in a tree at Roosevelt Grove (of Ancient Cedars). I've done 'em in blizzard conditions on top of the quad at Schweitzer. I've done so many up there, they put a slab down so people don't have to navigate over rocks. I've married many couples at the lake, at the house, at Ruby Ridge, even in a pickup truck in front of the house. There was a wedding outside Clark Fork where the guests circled up on bikes and carried weapons and fired them frequently. I've done some bikers' funerals, too, at the same location.

Tell me about your family. You have two sons?

No, three sons. Jesse lives in Florida and works for Apple, and James lives in Sandpoint. Mason is a rock-n-roll son who lives in Minnesota. He was conceived a long time ago when I was on the road. I received a birth certificate with my name on it in the mail,

but I couldn't locate him. About nine years ago he tracked me down on the Internet, wrote me a wonderful letter, and so we've become great friends. So I have a whole new son and three new grandchildren in addition to Jesse's three. He gets along great with my other two sons and he even looks more like me than they do.

What was Colleen like?

She was a wonderful human being, wife, mother, a great partner. She hung with me for 40 years.

So how many lives have you lived?

That's a good question. I'm almost 72. ... This will be my fifth. There was my youth, wild college days, my Hollywood career, moving to Idaho and raising my boys, and this one, my last, is with

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Top, Charley Packard with fellow musicians Tom Newbill and Beth Pederson; above, with partner Karen Bowers in Hawaii. COURTESY PHOTOS

Karen. I feel really blessed about that, too. We share our families and bring all our other lives to this, and we don't go backwards too much. We're at an age where there's nothing to argue about, so we've never had one.

Will you continue singing and marrying folks – indefinitely?

As long as I can carry a guitar and carry a tune, I will. 

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