

Putting 'the funk into dsyfunction'

'Come Over' CD release party Sunday benefits efforts to shut down Vermont Yankee

Story by Richie Davis

Verandah Porche and Patty Carpenter became tight as friends 40 years ago, living on neighboring "communes" in Vermont, just a tomato's throw from the Leyden line.

They raised vegetables, raised families, created new families, created music (in Carpenter's case) and wrote poetry (in Verandah's case). And, they shared all that, and everything else that life dealt, even as they moved into different houses around the area — as far away as Greenfield and Marlboro.

Now they're releasing an album together. "Come Over" is such a coming together that it feels a little like the Johnson's Pasture commune that Carpenter moved to in 1970 with her future husband, Scott Shelter. But this is more about community than communes.

Their CD release party Sunday at 3 p.m. down the road from Packer Corners, at another former commune — Tree Frog Farm — will be a benefit for Vermont Citizens Awareness Network, a grassroots group trying to stoop re-licensing of the Vermont Yankee nuclear plant.

The plant, in neighboring Vernon, was being built as the communes were in their heyday.

Before they split up, Carpenter and Shelter had a daughter, Melissa, in 1972. After the split, Carpenter married Chuck Light, who'd become one of the original members of the commune soon after her brother started it. And with Light, she had Travis.

So their group is The Dysfunctional Family Band, with Carpenter and her daughter on vocals, Shelter on sax, clarinet and mandolin, plus Travis — now 20 — on bass. And Shelter's new wife, Jill Gross, does back-up vocals on the band's new second recording and often appears with the group.

"We put the funk in dysfunction," jokes Carpenter. "It's a blessing and a curse. Melissa likes to say she knows so well what riff her dad is going to play, or it's so easy to blend our voices together. She learned to speak from listening to me talk.

Even though she grew up here, she's even got that 'Rahchester A,' which might come through when we're singing."

Carpenter said that with her 39-year-old daughter standing between her two parents and near her halfbrother, there's a psychological dimension as well with all of the interactions at gigs, most of which are in New York.

"I know if Scotty's flirting with the bartender before we go onstage that things are going to be kind of feisty when I say something about it. And, I know the moods of my children very well."

Before Carpenter and Light took an apartment in Brooklyn in the last few years, playing New York gigs at the Rodeo Bar and other venues used to mean cramming into her daughter's apartment — Travis in a closet, Shelter on an air mattress on the floor and Carpenter and Light on a pullout couch. These were truly dysfunctional digs for an oddly extended

family.

Over the hill

Porche founded the much smaller Packer Corners community in 1968. She was a Liberation News Service reporter in Washington, D.C. and was burned out from covering the counterculture and the race riots. She became close with Carpenter through the years and her own two children were friends with Carpenter's two daughters "Patty and I raised our kids together," she says. "They grew up in each other's houses. Patty and I have always been indispensable to each other, so the energy in this CD is what happens when two people who are indispensable to each other and working in complementary arts take time for themselves to create the work that's been composting for all these years."

Porche and Carpenter collaborated on writing songs, with Porche suggesting ideas and writing lyrics and performing some of the spoken pieces.

The title song was originally planned as "Over the Hill," a reference to the two women walking over Belden Hill to get between Packer Corners and the house Patty and Light have owned for the past four years, after their 20 years living in Greenfield —where both kids attended Greenfield Center School and Greenfield High School.

"As the crow flies, it's probably under a mile," says Porche, who is about to turn 65, compared to Carpenter's 57. "'Over the hill' is a reconstruction, a reinterpretation, a revision of the idea, because we're so NOT 'over the hill' in terms of being washed up or anything like that. We keep on getting our next wind."

She's done writing workshops around Vermont, primarily in senior centers, hospitals and schools, in much the same way that Carpenter has sung her blend of jazz, blues and folk music to populations that help them feel young.

Both women say they've long been opposed to nuclear power and they're excited to do a benefit to help efforts to shut down the Vernon plant once its 40-year licensing ends. Opposition to nuclear power, in general, is closely connected to the environmental movement that was at the roots of the Guilford communes.

And yet, unlike the Montague Farm commune of the same era that became central in the 1970s anti-nuclear movement, both women say there was little awareness at Packer Corners, Johnson's Pasture or Tree Frog about what was being built just over the mountain in Guilford.

"I don't think we were aware when we first moved here," Carpenter said. "The hippies came and stayed and became neighbors."

But at that time, things were more polarized, we were living much more isolated lives. We weren't getting the paper every day and we weren't watching television. We were a little out of it on a certain level."

Porche recalls a neighbor telling her newly arrived friends at Packer Corners angrily about the nuke plant that was being built in the next town. But she explains, "We were so new here and so fresh out of a lot of confrontation, and we'd also been taught good advice: to learn the territory and the ways, and to know before we made ourselves known. So, we weren't in a position right then to tell people what to do in their own hometown."

Today, Carpenter adds, "I understand the area needs jobs, but I feel even if you're pro-nuclear, you have to look at this plant and understand this is not a good idea. So, I feel this year is really crucial and I understand enough about politics now that just having my organic garden and sticking my head in my tomatoes isn't going to do it. " As for the music, which the Dysfunctional Jazz Band will perform rain or shine, either on the lawn or under a tent, there will be plenty of time to "dance for change" or just take in the band, with songs from the CD Carpenter and the others hope will really take off.

"My parents have died, my pets are gone, my children are gone and we

have this new CD, and I could actually take this on the road.

That's never been my burning desire, and if I did it, I'd do it very carefully."

Like a close friend who chimes in right on cue, Porche adds with a laugh, "Ooh, that sounds wonderful to me. Patty and I could get in a VW bus. Or, I've always liked the idea of an Airstream ..."

On the Web: www.dfjbmusic.com

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The Dysfunctional Family Band includes Patty Carpenter, right, and her daughter, Melissa, middle, on vocals, Scott Shelter, right, on saxophone clarinet and mandolin, plus Carpenter's son, Travis, on bass. Shelter's new wife, Jill Gross, does back-up vocals on the band's new recording and often appears with the group.

Submitted photo





Friends for 40 years, Verandah Porche, left, and Patty Carpenter collaborated on writing songs for the new CD, "Come Over."

Harry Saxman photo

Show notes

DYSFUNCTIONAL FAMILY JAZZ BAND. CD release concert benefits Vermont Citizens Awareness. Sunday, 3 p.m. Organ Barn at Tree Frog Farm in Guilford, Vt.

\$15 advance; \$20 day of the show. 625-6177.

www.dfjbmusic.com **Directions from Greenfield:** Take the Leyden Road north and stay on the main road (there are two Y's in Leyden, stay to the right on both) for about 10 miles. After you cross into Vermont, take the first left on Packer Corners Road. Go 1.6 miles, which brings you to top of hill (row of eight to 10 mailboxes on left). Continue through intersection and down the other side of the hill for another .2 miles past red house and red buildings on your left.

Immediately after these buildings, take a left onto Kopkind Road (look for sign on tree), stay to the right.

Source:

<http://dfjbmusic.com/cdrelease/directions>