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Charlie Burton: Good, Evil & Garage Sales By Stew Magnuson



Andres Hoy/Daily Nebraskan

Garage sales and Charlie Burton — two of Lincoln's finest institutions. But weekend rummage sales and Lincoln's greatest rock 'n' roller have more in common than institution status: Burton has written two of the all-time great garage sale songs, "Garage Sale" and "One Man's Trash."

Charlie and I set out on a glorious Saturday afternoon to search for the cardboard signs pointing the way to garages full of bric-a-brac and hopefully, old records — our mutual passion.

Burton is more than a long-time Lincoln rocker and songwriter. He is, above all, an entertainer. It's impossible not to have a great time when Charlie and his band, the Hiccups are on stage. At the Zoo bar, while Charlie plays some of his classics, "Breath For Me Presley," "Rock 'n' Roll Behavior" or "Bum Ticker," he shakes his black, curly hair around, kicking up a leg when drummer Dave Robel hits a choice beat and yelps "OW! OW!" when the song comes to a close.

During the slow songs, Charlie jumps off the stage and rolls around on the beer-sticky floor, fake-bawling his eyes out at the foot of some embarrassed patron's table while people on their way to the bathroom are forced to step over him. When Charlie cries, everyone laughs. The man is just plain silly, and his shows are just plain entertaining.

"I see a sign on a pole/and I lose all my self control/You never know just what you'll find/Have you got your's/Now, I got mine."

Finding the first sale wasn't difficult. On a table in someone's backyard, we find a stack of old 45s. Charlie, wearing purple prescription glasses, inspects the pile. He picks out "Oh Julie," by Dale Warden on Dot Records.

"We just don't have the college market," he replies, picking up an old gas station ashtray. "Artistically, we've fallen between the cracks. We're too hippy for the punks, and too punk for the hippies. Charlie buys the Dale Ward single and the ashtray. I make off with two singles and a Mrs. Potatohead to keep my Mr. Potatohead at home happy.

"I found my baby at a garage sale/I found my baby at a garage sale/I bought her mama's decoupage pail/I found my baby at a garage sale."

Since last year's release of The Hiccups' latest LP, "I Heard That," much has happened to Charlie and the band. The album sold "adequately," and got him "adequate" recognition. It was reviewed in The Village Voice and Musician Magazine, and will be released in Europe on a French label, GMG.

"That's enough to give us the will to live," he says as we drive up to the next sale. The Hiccups also have a new bassist, Dave Boye, replacing Tommy Reardon, who left the band to live in Seattle.

Charlie has also gone through a "D-I-V-O-R-C-E" he says, spelling it out in the George Jones/Tammy Wynette tradition. He didn't want it discussed in print though. To help pay the bills, he found a part-time job in a local music store.

We look through a pile of books at a porch sale.

"What would be a fitting punishment for those who leave their old garage sale signs up for weeks, making people look for a sale that ended weeks ago?"

"Certainly, there is no punishment too harsh for such offenders," Charlie says.

"Among the clothes and K-

tel Discs/Our eyes they met, amidst the misc./You could sense ELECTRIC SHOCKS/That started all the as-is clocks."

Charlie and I hit a few more sales, most of them bad; just old pots and pans and ugly clothes. Eventually, around 21st and Garfield Streets, we find a yard sale — not a garage sale mind you — where Charlie finds some interesting books, "How To Be Jewish" and "A Honeymooner's Companion." I contemplate buying an electric brick, which would be a weird find, but sort of a gift-store contrived-sort-of-weird, not true weird, like Mrs. Potatohead.

"What's your best garage sale finds, Charlie?"

"A 1959 Champ amp with a tweed cover in mint condition, and a three-part Gene Vincent Rocks and the Blue Caps Roll EP for a penny apiece."

Last spring, Charlie cut his knee on a piece of broken glass while playing at the Zoo Bar.

"I slipped, I stumbled, I fell," he says, quoting an Elvis song as we search the near-south neighborhoods for more sales. He spent ten days in the hospital and underwent three "painful" operations after the knee became infected.

"But I was on Demerol, and that was Elvis' favorite drug."

"Where were you when Elvis died?" I ask.

"I was working in the family Harpsicord business when a band member (Butch Beerman, former guitarist) called and told me. I didn't really believe him 'til I turned on the radio and every station was playing "Love Me Tender."

"Now we're married and have a home/We have garage sales all our own/Lovely to look at, delightful to hold/But don't you break it, or else it's sold!"

We hit a real dry period as far as old records go. We do find some stacks of discs, but they're inevitably of the Bee Gees, Foreigner, Shawn Cassidy variety. At one sale along a busy street, we start rummaging through two boxes of books. One box is full of children's books, old Dennis the Menace and Archie Comics, the other box has exclusively sordid pornography, old copies of Forum Magazine and X-rated paperbacks. I look up at the middle age couple sitting on the porch; they didn't look the type. Charlie and I later wonder aloud about these weekend merchants of porn.

"It must be quite an internal battle for them. Good versus evil. It's something I've been thinking a lot about lately," Charlie says.

"Are you worried your music is turning children to Satan?"

"Naw."

Just down the block from the box of porn, we look at some bric-a-brac laying on the lawn, stretched out on a blanket.

"Will there ever be a time when you'll quit? You've been at this a long time."

"No," he says. "It seems like you're either Bruce in this business or you're starving. I guess I still believe in myself."

"Do you mind if I ask your age?"

"No. I'll be 36 next week. I'm a year younger than Bruce, and you know, I always will be. I'm the same age as John Cougar Mellenwhat-ever . . . But wealth, fame, is this what's really important to me? Yeah, it is."

We drive out to far-south Lincoln looking for an advertised sale promising "old music records." We go so far south, the inhabitants have a southern drawl. But we can't find the sale.

"What about rumors that Peter Buck, REM's guitarist, is interested

in producing your next album?"

"He had expressed interest about a year ago, but whether he would still be interested is another thing."

Charlie weighs the pros and cons of having a celebrity produce his next album, which could go into works this November. The attention his album would get would be great, he admits, but he'd almost rather have a person buy his album for his music instead.

"But as long as they buy it, what the hell?"

We give up on the mythical far south multi-family garage sale and decide to call it quits. We must pass a hundred garage sale signs on our way back.

"Last year in an interview, you said you were in a transition period. How are things different?"

"Well, I have a broken marriage, I'm financially strapped and I had to get a part-time job, but I'm happy . . . Through it all my art survives."

"Do you think artists have to suffer to create good art?"

"They shouldn't have to, but it seems to help me. It (suffering) doesn't make me write more, but I guess the depth of experience makes it better."

At Charlie's house, we say goodbye. Charlie walks through his unmowed lawn and steps into the door of his one-story white home, which desperately needs painting. The day's final tally, Charlie: one 45, an ashtray and two books. Stew: one Mrs. Potatohead, a pair of checked vans, and two 45s.

"One man's trash is another man's treasure/One man's pain is another man's pleasure/Those records are worth lots of cash/And they're mine, cause one man's trash, is another man's treasure/Oh yes it is."