

## PG MUSICIAN INTERVIEW

### *The Funeral Potatoes*

This month, we connect with The Funeral Potatoes - a local folk music group based in Pleasant Grove.

For the past 22 years, Funeral Potatoes have been captivating the Pleasant Grove community with uplifting music, with lush harmonies and thought-provoking stories. We sit down with The Funeral Potatoes to learn more about the long history of their group, and why they consider themselves “comfort music.”

### Let's introduce the members of The Funeral Potatoes

**Doug Thompson** - I am the original founder of The Funeral Potatoes. I was born in Boise, Idaho, but I have also lived in California, Montana, Washington, and now Utah. I have lived in Pleasant Grove for many years now, and I love being here. I play acoustic guitar, mandolin, banjo and harmonica with our group. I enjoy rock hunting (fossils), love hiking and the mountains. And I love the “G”.

**Leslie Stinson** - I was born in Rexburg, Idaho. I moved to Provo to attend BYU, and I later settled in Pleasant Grove, where I've stayed for the past 14 years. I absolutely love the people here. I enjoy that the community still feels like a “small town” - you run into friends regularly, and there are many unique events in the community. I also teach guitar lessons in the community and have over 30 students. I play acoustic guitar and sing with our group.

**KaLee Mortensen** - I was born in Texas, but I have lived in Utah all my life. I went to Pleasant Grove High School, and afterward I studied at Snow and UVU where I completed my degree in Art Education. Today, I am a 7th and 8th grade teacher at Centennial Middle School in Provo, teaching painting, 3D art (i.e. sculptures, etc.), and Honors Art. I've been a teacher for the past 7 years, and I love it! I am also working at US and ART here in Pleasant Grove. I play acoustic guitar and I sing with the group.

**Jordyn Arnoldsen** - I am originally from Vernal, Utah, but I currently live in Logan. I enjoy watercolor painting, and I am love to knit. I'm quite a natural! I play percussion with the group - the cajon, tambourine, shakers... anything that creates the percussive beat.



*Band Members (left to right): Leslie Stinson, Doug Thompson, Mandy Hofheins, Jordyn Arnoldsen, KaLee Mortensen, Rachel Elder*

**Rachel Elder** - I was born and raised here in Pleasant Grove, and I have all my family nearby. I really love the people here in Pleasant Grove and I choose to stay as it's such a beautiful place. One of my favorite annual events is Strawberry Days. I also love to travel. My favorite vacation was either Thailand or Switzerland, both of which were stunning. I play the ukulele and sing with the group.

**Mandy Hofheins** - I was born in American Fork, but I also have lived in Pleasant Grove all my life. I don't know anything else! I am currently in college working towards a music degree. I have played the cello for the past 16 years, which is the instrument that I play with the group today.

## The Funeral Potatoes is an interesting name. Where does it come from?

**[Doug]** Let's start with the definition.

Funeral Potatoes: Popular "comfort food" casserole originating in the Intermountain region of the U.S. (a.k.a. Mormon funeral potatoes) consisting of hash browns, cheese, creamed soup, onions, sour cream topped with crushed cornflakes or potato chips.

Years ago, I was invited to put together a music group as a part of an LDS Pioneer Handcart Trek experience. I formed an old-time fiddle music group, and The Funeral Potatoes took off from there.

We had an amazing experience with the youth as a part of the handcart trek experience. Over the years, members of our group have come and gone, we've been through incredible life experiences (two past members of our group met through The Funeral Potatoes and got married!) and our music has evolved in different directions. But the core of who we are has stayed true - we want to provide "comfort music" that listeners can connect with and enjoy.

## What are your earliest memories of music?

**[KaLee]** I started playing piano at 5 years old. I remember in our old house, we had a baby grand piano in our living room with ugly tree wallpaper surrounding it. I would sit at that piano bench and practice for hours. I loved Edvard Grieg at the time, a Norwegian music composer, and I played a lot of classical music. My teacher would hold recitals at Bert Murdock Music in Orem where I learned to perform the music I had been practicing. It was tough getting through the songs, but I really enjoyed the overall experience. I still play the piano today, but not as much as I used to. I do still love playing at Christmas time with family and friends around.

**[Doug]** When I was young, my siblings would listen to The Everly Brothers. I got to know their music fairly well growing up. But music began to appeal to me even stronger when I was 14 years old; The Beatles launched on the music scene. They were new, and there was an energy that I hadn't experienced before. It was a crazy time! Girls would put on records during lunch and would scream and go crazy.

I was inspired by the Beatles and I began learning to play the guitar because of them. I played a variety of music at that time, and I was interested in writing my own music as well. In high school I would form bands so that we could play for the school dances, and we'd always break up before the dance. Believe it or not, I never got to play for any of the dances!

**[Leslie]** My mom would play piano when I was young and I would dance around the room. She played guitar too. We were a musical family and enjoyed singing and dancing along with the music in our home. We also participated in LDS road shows at our church (we made up songs around the "Paint Your Wagon" theme), and we enjoyed being a part of that experience. From an early age, music has been a big part of my life.

## If you could go to a music concert for any artist or band (dead or alive), who would it be?

**[Jordyn]** My first choice would be Mumford and Sons. I love their style - especially their drums. Their music is punchy and their melodies are so catchy. I would love to see them.

**[Rachel]** I would go see Beyonce. I love all shades of Beyonce! I love her music and style. I feel that she's a very talented, powerhouse performer, and I'd love to see her live.

**[Mandy]** I was raised with Jazz and Classical music in my home (and I'm working on expanding my music genre experiences now!). If I could see anyone live, I'd go to a Steven Isserlis concert. He's an amazing cellist (with crazy hair!) from the UK. His concert would be so inspiring.

## What hobbies or interests do you have outside of music?

**[KaLee]** I love to hike and travel. I also have a Corgi dog named Molly that I enjoy hanging out with. Oh, and I love ice cream! My favorite flavor is either Häagen-Dazs Dulce de Leche, or Ben & Jerry's Tonight Dough.

**[Rachel]** I love photography, hiking, and traveling. I am also a big foodie - I love experiencing new food options. I was in South Carolina recently and had amazing BBQ from a local restaurant called The Tattooed Moose. So good!

**[Mandy]** Sounds like we are all into hiking and the outdoors! I love hiking and backpacking. I actually have a goal to go backpacking every weekend throughout this summer, and I just kicked off my first weekend trip - I'm so excited for the coming weeks with my backpack in hand! I'm into social work as well (wilderness therapy - counselor with others in need). I like ultimate frisbee.



## How would you describe your music style?

**[Leslie]** I feel like our music genre somewhere between indie folk and bluegrass. If you like folk music, you'll love The Funeral Potatoes. We also cover more modern popular music, but we really make it our own.

**[Doug]** I agree with what Leslie shared. We've said it already - The Funeral Potatoes is "comfort music" - it's fun, light and relaxing. But we also bring an energy to our music that people really enjoy. The vocal harmonies that these ladies bring to the music is second to none. There is so much talent and creativity, and we really enjoy being a part of the folk music community.

## What does your creative process look like for your original songs?

**[Doug]** I write a lot of our music, although other group members contribute to a great extent. On our debut album, Rachel wrote one of the songs that we released. My personal writing style usually begins with writing the vocal melody line first. Later, the lyrics fill into the melody lines, and we build out the full instrumentation from there. Often times, the final lyrics for a song are very different than what I thought they'd be. I'll sometimes go a long time without any ideas, and out of nowhere a new idea will pop into my head. Writing music is such an interesting experience.

**[Rachel]** Every song has its own personality. Doug does a great job of pulling the feelings out and helping the audience to connect on many different levels.

**[Doug]** I would say that our creativity for songwriting is a group effort. We all play a significant part. Jordyn comes up with amazing percussion lines that never would have crossed my mind. Mandy breaks out amazing improvisation on the cello, adding some intense instrumental harmonies. Everyone contributes in their own ways to build the final song result. And it's often breathtaking.

## Which of your songs is your absolute favorite?

**[KaLee]** "Losers". There's a really good story behind this song. I absolutely love it.

**[Jordyn]** My favorite song is "Cobra in the Carport". It has a darker feel with more texture than some of our other songs. It's a sad feeling song, but it really does connect with your inner feelings. I also love the nostalgia that it brings out, which makes you think about what we experience as kids. I also get to rock out a bit more with this song's percussion over others!

**[Mandy]** "The Last Song" is my favorite. It has a really pretty instrumental segment that I can connect with.

**[Doug]** I honestly love all the songs on our latest album. They are very different from one another, but they all come together very well. It's really well done.

## Do you have any new music releases?

**[Doug]** We've been doing music for a long time, but our first official album came out on February 18th this year. We are so proud of the accomplishment! The album is titled "Songs in Mountain Standard Time". Our music is now available on all music streaming platforms, on iTunes and other platforms for purchase, and we just printed physical discs for purchase at our coming events.

## What's next for you with your music?

**[Leslie]** We are playing on **Sunday, July 16th at the Pleasant Grove Concerts in the Park**. We are so excited to be back this year!

We also have a goal to hike up the back side of Timpanogos Mountain on the Timpooneke Trail with instruments in hand and play music together in the meadow or the mountain saddle that overlooks Utah Valley. It would be an amazing experience!

**[Doug]** Those are some great next steps for us as a group. Unfortunately, we have some band members that will be traveling to further their education. KaLee is heading to Scotland and Mandy is

going to Israel. We are really going to miss them! But we've loved having them as a part of the group, and we'll have to see the direction that the group takes from there.

### **What advice would you give to anyone in our community that is interested in songwriting or making music?**

**[Rachel]** I sang in choir all my life, and after high school it all seemed to end. I didn't know where to pick up from there. Later on, I was invited to sing at an event, and it opened my eyes to new opportunities in music. For a period of time, I felt lost and didn't realize what I was missing. It's important to give yourself opportunities, especially if you are passionate about music. My advice would be to put yourself out there and get involved in music, even if it's uncomfortable at first.

**[Leslie]** I can relate to what Rachel shared. I played the guitar a lot when I was younger, and it was something that I really enjoyed. As I got older, I got married, eventually had children and was focused on my family. Life got busy, as it does for many of us. Before I knew it, I hadn't played music for a long period of time. Ever since I was invited to be a part of Funeral Potatoes, my eyes have been opened again to the joy of music. I feel like I've reconnected to something I valued in my life that was lost.

Timing is important, but you can always find ways to make time for something that you love. There are so many opportunities to be involved in music in our local community. My recommendation would be to go to local events, get to know other musicians in the area, and get involved wherever you can. You never know what new opportunities will come from making connections and building experiences.

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