

Check It Out! Podcast Transcript
Episode #61
“Peek inside the childlike mind of Chris Ballew
and meet Caspar Babypants”
Sno-Isle Libraries, June 1, 2020



Kurt Batdorf:	00:00	Hey there. Welcome to Check It Out! Sno-Isle Libraries podcast for lifelong learners. This is communications specialist Kurt Batdorf. Sno-Isle's Foundation Executive Director, Paul Pitkin, and I, talk with Seattle native and musician Chris Ballew. Stay tuned to hear Chris' story of rock stardom, with the Presidents of the United States of America. And why he walked away to become the beloved Caspar Babypants, with one of his catchy songs to play us out.
Speaker 2:	00:34	Welcome to season three, episode 61 of Check It Out! The Sno-Isle Libraries podcast for lifelong learners with inquiring minds.
Speaker 3:	00:43	The views and opinions expressed on this podcast, may not necessarily reflect the official position of Sno-Isle Libraries.
Kurt Batdorf:	00:51	This is our Check It Out! podcast, Sno-Isle Libraries podcast for lifelong learners. I'm here with Paul Pitkin.
Paul Pitkin:	00:57	Hi Kurt.
Kurt Batdorf:	00:59	Today, we have Chris Ballew with us via Skype. You may know him as Caspar Babypants. So, we're going to talk to Chris about music, and creativity, and performance. Chris, tell us a little bit about yourself.
Chris Ballew:	01:15	Okay. Well, let's see. I was born in Seattle. Well, first the earth was a molten ball of lava. Then it cooled, and continents were formed. Much later than that, I was born. And I grew up in Seattle. I have been playing music since I was four years old. I was a pianist for 10 years, from four to 14. And then, I picked up an electric guitar, and went, "Ooh, that's better." And went to art school to do visual art. But, didn't really figure out how to do that successfully. So, I started doing music, and that turned out to be successful. I was in a rock band called The Presidents of the United States of America in the '90s. We sold five million records all over the world. And then, after a lot of touring, and a

(Continued)

lot of ups and downs, I decided to kind of even things out, and start making [inaudible 00:02:12] for families, about 11 years ago now. So, I've got 16 records out, in 10 or 11 years. And no end in sight as Caspar Babypants. It's kind of the general thing-a-ma-jigger of me.

Kurt Batdorf: 02:34 So, you're from the Presidents ... Not from the Presidents. But, you were kind of the front man for The Presidents of the United States.

Chris Ballew: 02:39 Yes.

Kurt Batdorf: 02:40 And your music was definitely kind of the antithesis of what Seattle's rock sounded like, in the mid '90s. It was goofy, and funny, and catchy. What was kind of your inspiration for getting to that sound?

Chris Ballew: 02:56 Well, that's just the sound I make. I've been making that sound my whole life, really. But, it was, I guess, a matter of good timing, because the music scene at the time was heavy. And not bad, but it just had a very visceral kind of heavy, grungy vibe. I think people were really enjoying it. But, they also wanted just some candy. Just something really fun and bouncy.

Chris Ballew: 03:31 We just kind of filled a need at the right time. But, really, my entire life I've just been making that kind of music. And as Caspar Babypants, people ask me, "How do you make this music for children?" And I really don't make it for children. I make it for myself, number one. And I am just childlike. I live my life like a child. It happens to resonate with kids, but it's really pleasing me. So, I think that's how it kind of works. So, yeah. I was just pleasing myself, and it turned out to please a whole bunch of other people too.

Kurt Batdorf: 04:06 You're definitely catchy, and sort of, they're ear worms, really.

Chris Ballew: 04:12 Yeah, that's my business. That's my business. Getting in your brain, and staying there.

Kurt Batdorf: 04:15 Yeah. So, do you always have a song, sort of rotating, and rattling around in your head, that you're trying to write?

Chris Ballew: 04:24 I guess, to some degree. Yeah. I mean I have thousands, and thousands, of little recordings. Where I'll just sit down at the kitchen table, when I have five minutes, and play something, and sing a little melody. And "Oh yeah, you never know what that might grow into." So, I record it. So, in that sense, I'm

always kind of allowing myself to just make a little mess, and not try to make sense of it. And then, maybe later, I'll figure out what it is, after forgetting about the initial, sort of moment of creation.

- Chris Ballew: 04:53 So, sometimes, yeah. I'm constantly recording little tiny bits. And then, if a song is in the works. I have this new song that I'm very excited about. I don't think it will come out until 2022, however, because I'm three records deep right now. I've got three records almost [inaudible 00:05:10] for the next three years. But, it's called Live Like A Baby. And it's about how I, as an adult, just want to live like a baby.
- Kurt Batdorf: 05:21 Does that mean that your wife feeds you?
- Chris Ballew: 05:23 I don't mean all the downsides of being a baby [crosstalk 00:05:26]. I mean, the freedom, and the way of experiencing the world as a purely energetic playpen. That's kind of my attitude. But, anyway, I'm working on that song. And that song is just jammed in my head right now, because I'm just running it over like, "Okay, are those the right words? Is that what I want to say?" So, when I have something that's sort of in the works, it does dominate my mind for sure.
- Kurt Batdorf: 05:52 When you're noodling over these various germs of ideas for songs, do you work over one at a time? Or do you have multiple germs kind of running in your head all at once?
- Chris Ballew: 06:04 In this day and age, I hesitate to say it. But, I do have multiple germs.
- Kurt Batdorf: 06:08 Yes. But, we're safe because we're doing this by Skype.
- Chris Ballew: 06:12 Yeah. Yeah, exactly. Remote conversations is the way of the future. Yeah. No. I definitely work on multiples at a time. I have this folder on my laptop in my studio, that's just full of songs. When it's time to make a record, I listen to all of them, and I just cherry-pick the most developed, the clearest, the most successful, 20. And make it into an album. I'm always working on a giant amount. And then, as a record comes due, I focus on the ones that just need the extra push, to kind of be perfect.
- Kurt Batdorf: 06:46 Yeah.
- Chris Ballew: 06:46 Yeah.
- Paul Pitkin: 06:47 Can I ask you specific question about your music?

Chris Ballew: 06:49 Yeah.

Paul Pitkin: 06:50 I remember from the Presidents, I think you played bass with two bass strings. Is that right?

Chris Ballew: 06:55 That's right.

Paul Pitkin: 06:56 I was just watching you on video playing a song. I think it was called, A Flea With Dogs.

Chris Ballew: 07:03 My Flea Has Dogs.

Paul Pitkin: 07:05 My Flea Has Dogs. Yes. That's the one I'm thinking about. It looked like you were playing acoustic guitar with three strings. And it creates a really interesting sound. It's unusual, it makes its own sound.

Chris Ballew: 07:20 Yeah, here it is right here. Ready? I like it because it sort of makes me play guitar, more like a bass player. It sounds more rhythmic and chunky. I kind of think about early Johnny Cash when I'm playing a lot.

Paul Pitkin: 07:37 It's super rhythmic. That was the one thing I was getting from it, from that approach. It never gets bogged down.

Chris Ballew: 07:42 Yeah. Yep. I just find that it's just three notes. Root, fifth, root, which is just, if you put your finger straight across the fret board, you're making a chord. So, I definitely, number one, I advocate that people restring their guitars like that, especially when they're learning. Because you can play music immediately, with one finger just going up and down the fret.

Paul Pitkin: 08:02 Yeah. Nothing's going to be wrong.

Chris Ballew: 08:04 Yeah, yeah. I like limitations. I like being hobbled a little bit. So, it scratches that itch. But, it also, sort of makes the songs real clear, like when I play live. There's not a lot of complex harmonics going on, and it's really rhythm driven. That sort of makes it easy for me to play by myself, solo, with a guitar. And have sort of the... I don't know. The rhythmic backbone of the song be forward, instead of the complex chords. And kids respond to that. They respond to the rhythm. And they want to get up, and dance, and move around.

Paul Pitkin: 08:39 Adults do too. It's very effective. And even middle school do too. I've got to give a shout out to the Conner Middle School, for

my wife's, the kids that she sees. Because they're now hooked on Noodles and Butter.

Chris Ballew: 08:52 Oh, okay. Yeah. Now, that's good. That song is not for kids, or about kids. That song's about me. That's the best example of an autobiographical song for children that I have. I love noodles and butter. I could eat it every day.

Paul Pitkin: 09:14 Obviously, you started playing piano. Did you play bass, or guitar first? Or does it matter?

Chris Ballew: 09:19 Guitar, for sure.

Paul Pitkin: 09:20 Because you have a bassy approach to your playing, which is really cool.

Chris Ballew: 09:24 In fact, hold on a second.

Paul Pitkin: 09:26 Okay.

Chris Ballew: 09:27 [inaudible 00:09:27] over here.

Kurt Batdorf: 09:27 Chris is going to grab an instrument of some sort. There we go.

Chris Ballew: 09:30 I actually happened to have the guitar that I learned to play on. An old acoustic guitar, from the early '60s, that my dad had. And it's the guitar where I first put my fingers on the fret, and figured, "Oh, what's this? Oh, that must be a chord." I have it strung as a six string right now. I was using it as a three string. But, I have it as a six string, to sort of go back to my roots.

Paul Pitkin: 09:59 [inaudible 00:09:59].

Chris Ballew: 10:01 So, it was this guitar, that I actually first deviated away from the keyboard toward.

Paul Pitkin: 10:15 That's kind of a transition in itself, going from piano to guitar.

Chris Ballew: 10:18 I'm sorry, what's that?

Paul Pitkin: 10:18 It's kind of a transition in itself, going from piano to guitar. Because I always think... I mean, you're so rhythmic, like I said, in all you're playing. And I don't think of that so much with piano.

Chris Ballew: 10:25 Yeah, yeah. Well, plus I was learning. Well, I grew up learning kind of like a mixture, of Eastern European classical composers and Ragtime. So, Ragtime has syncopations.

Paul Pitkin: 10:36 That's true.

Kurt Batdorf: 10:37 Yeah.

Chris Ballew: 10:39 But, the process of learning how to retune music, just really never gelled. I figured, even at an early age, the long road ahead of me to get fluent, to the point where I could just sit down, and play what was on the page, was going to be too arduous.

Paul Pitkin: 10:57 And you wouldn't be writing any songs.

Chris Ballew: 11:00 Yeah. I'd be playing, quote unquote, "Dead people's music." But, I loved playing Joplin, absolutely loved it. And that informed a lot of some of what I do now too.

Kurt Batdorf: 11:15 So Chris, the Presidents were wildly popular in the 90s. And we interviewed you a few weeks ago, just to talk about your grammy nomination. So, what happened when you decided that you didn't want to be a rockstar anymore?

Chris Ballew: 11:36 I never wanted to be a rockstar actually. Yeah. When the President's started out, we were this goofy little band of dorks, that were trying to rock. And in trying to rock, I think we endeared ourselves to our audience. They were like, "Oh, those poor little guys on stage. Look at them trying to play a Led Zeppelin song."

Kurt Batdorf: 12:00 You're taking the escalator to heaven, not the stairway.

Chris Ballew: 12:03 So, that empathetic relationship, and that kind of off-centered dorkiness, and kind of reaching beyond our capability, kind of appealed to me. Then, when we got signed, and had videos, and we're standing up in front of thousands, and thousands, of people, and executing a rock show. Because you can't really, you can't translate kind of the connection you have to a small group of people in a club, when you're dorks trying to rock to 50,000 people, on a racetrack in Germany. So, it just became a rock band. And frankly, I immediately wanted out. I was like, "This is not nearly as interesting." I mean, the songs were still there. They were still the same songs.

Kurt Batdorf: 12:46 The creativity was still fun.

Chris Ballew: 12:48 Yeah. But, the presentation became way more, kind of, I don't know. Blunt instrument kind of. Not to make too much of a pun [crosstalk 00:13:01] blunt instruments. So, anyway, that became less interesting to me. But, of course, when you're riding a pony that's pooping gold bricks, you don't really want to get off the pony. So, I held onto the pony as long as I could. And then, yeah. We did for years. We broke up for five. And then, we got back together for 13. And then, broke up again. So, yeah. It was a hills and valleys situation. [crosstalk 00:13:25].

Paul Pitkin: 13:26 Oh, I'm sorry. It seems like it would be really... oh, go ahead.

Chris Ballew: 13:29 That's it. Nevermind.

Paul Pitkin: 13:31 I was just going to say, it must be really strange, considering you guys were this three piece band. And like you say, you're playing kind of, this different kind of music. It seems like it really lends itself to a club, as opposed to a stadium. I don't know how you would... did you have to make grand gestures when you were playing in front of 50,000 people?

Chris Ballew: 13:50 Kind of. Yeah. We would maybe do some coordinated kicking moves, or whatever. Kind of, coordinated, matching, brightly colored shirts. And I don't know. And it just becomes... I ended up sort of shouting a lot of the lyrics, and losing my voice. And yeah. And the noise. My ears are kind of shot a little. I don't know. I'm going to be a deaf old man. I was careful. I wore earplugs, and I had in-ear monitors. And I took measures to protect my hearing. But, at a certain point, I was just like, if I need hearing protection to make music, something's wrong with the music I'm making. I need to kind of scale back.

Kurt Batdorf: 14:33 So, now as Caspar Baby pants, you're doing a lot of really small shows. It's just you, and your guitar, and a bunch of kids jumping around, having a blast. I guess, tell us how that works for you now?

Chris Ballew: 14:51 It works great. I love it, because I'm back to being a dorky little guy, trying to rock. Because I'm by myself, I think the empathetic reaction from the crowd is even more intense. If I ask for call and response, I definitely get it. Because I'm this tiny little guy on stage, trying to pull something off. And the crowd's like, "Yes, we want to help." I had a trio for a little while, and that was fun. But, I didn't get nearly the engagement that I get by myself. Plus by myself, I can kind of, I can stop on a dime, and point out something that some kids doing. And then, start up again, without communicating with anybody. I can change the length of a song, if it's not flowing live, or I can stretch it out if it

is. I don't have to sort of check in with anybody. So, it's really fun. It makes booking, and just the nuts and bolts of the whole thing, a lot easier too [inaudible 00:15:47] when it's just me.

- Chris Ballew: 15:49 But yeah. But, I actually am graduating to bigger shows. I'm selling out thousand seat theaters, in Seattle at least. As Caspar Babypants, all by myself, up there on stage. And I'm sort of transitioning away from smaller shows, towards seated theaters now, and kind of playing a little less. The first eight years of playing or so, I racked up a lot of shows. Overall, in 10 years, I've done almost 13,100 shows.
- Kurt Batdorf: 16:16 Oh wow.
- Chris Ballew: 16:17 And most of that was in the middle six years, where I went crazy.
- Paul Pitkin: 16:26 It's interesting, because it seems like you know from what I've looked on video, the kids just totally respond. I think a large part of it, is because obviously your lyrics are really entertaining. But, then, that rhythmic, your rhythmic style of playing. Have you ever played in front of kids, and had them just be, your classic lame audience? I mean, because it seems like they just sort of instinctively just start moving along with you. Have you ever had that not happen?
- Chris Ballew: 16:53 Yeah, yeah. I have. Sometimes if I do a 2:30pm show or something, it's nap time. Or, now I focus on zero to six year olds. And one time, I did a private birthday party, for a little girl who was turning five. But, a lot of her friends were 7,8, 9 years old. And those kids were a nightmare.
- Kurt Batdorf: 17:14 They were a tough crowd.
- Chris Ballew: 17:15 They were literally folding their arms, and you're like [crosstalk 00:17:19]. And just completely tough audience. And I just walked out of there, like, "Man, I am glad I play for the zero to six year olds." Because they're available, they're ready to roll. They're ready to do whatever you want. But, yeah. Every show is different. One of the beautiful things about playing by myself, is that I never make a set list. So, I just sit down in front of the crowd, and I kind of, generally, if I can, I start out with a couple of call and response songs, to kind of get them engaged. And then, move to kind of more higher energy stuff.
- Chris Ballew: 17:47 But, sometimes they just want to do call and response, sometimes in a seated theater. A little more like, kind of,

comedy from my end, is appreciated. And more storytelling, and less, kind of, move your booty, kind of stuff. Every crowd is different. Every show is different, every set list is different, because there is none. And yeah. So, I just respond, and I don't care. If they want to sit around, if they want to lie... I did a library out on the Olympic Peninsula once, where it was literally, it was like eight kids, 10 kids maybe. It was afternoon, and they were all tired. And I just said, "All right, everybody lie down. I'm just going to [inaudible 00:18:22] songs." I got to know all their names. And one kid was kind curating the show. I'd say, "Evan, what do I do next?" "[inaudible 00:18:29] play that one about the thing."

- Paul Pitkin: 18:36 Do you remember what that one about the thing was?
- Chris Ballew: 18:41 I don't. I think it was My Pants Are On Vacation.
- Kurt Batdorf: 18:48 Well, Chris. So, this year, you got a nomination for an Emmy, for best...
- Paul Pitkin: 18:53 Grammy.
- Kurt Batdorf: 18:54 Oh, Grammy, sorry. Yeah. Grammy for Best children's Album. But, you could have gone. And when you and I talked, you said, "Well, I've got fans at the Marysville Opera House." So, tell us why you wanted to play for the kids instead of hobnobbing with the stars.
- Chris Ballew: 19:15 I did explore moving the show, when I first found out about this nomination. But, quickly, I kind of had a gut check. And I realized, it's way more in my wheelhouse to go ahead and go to Marysville, and play at the Marysville Opera House, which is a beautiful, old venue. One of my dream venues. Instead of going to the Staples Center in LA, and all the rigmarole with flying, and where do we stay. And my ticket was free. But, my wife's ticket would have been like 850 bucks. And it's an extra 200 bucks each to go to the after party. And it's an impersonal giant basketball arena. I went to the Grammys in the '90s twice, when it was the Shriners Auditorium, which I think is where the Oscars were held in the '50s, and '60s, and the '70s. And the heyday of that kind of thing. So, it was like, gold, velvet, and gilt framed, kind of accoutrement. Yeah. It was a classic LA theater experience. And so, I feel like I have the Grammy experience checked off. And so, with all that in mind, I just decided to go to Marysville. And it was great. We called it our own Grammy party. And I found out right before I hit the stage, that I did not win. And I felt really good that I'd made the decision.

Paul Pitkin: 20:38 That is a incredible venue, the Marysville Opera House. It must have been really fun to play there.

Chris Ballew: 20:44 Oh, it's super fun. I've done it three times now. That's kind of the style of place I like right now. It's like these, Everett has an old Historic Everett Theater. Chehalis has a theater. Centralia. All these old kind of jewel box theaters, are still kicking around. Olympia has a really great one, the Capitol. So, yeah. Those are my favorites right now.

Paul Pitkin: 21:08 I know there's one that's actually... what was the name? It's opening up in Snohomish. I think they just voted to refurbish it. So, you should check that one out too eventually, because that does seem like a great set up for what you're doing.

Chris Ballew: 21:21 Yeah. It's cool, because the parents are comfortable. They're sitting, it's not too crowded, not too crazy. My smaller shows have gotten a little unsafe, because too many people show up. And so, I kind of want it to be relaxing. I want to be an extension of the whole purpose of this thing, which is to kind of be a relief stress for families. So, I want the live show to kind of do that too, to some degree.

Paul Pitkin: 21:43 And I'm assuming when you're playing, it seems like the parents would have a good time too. I mean, it just seems like they'd really enjoy it.

Chris Ballew: 21:51 Well, kids aren't the greatest at call and response. So, the call and response part is definitely me, and the parents, having a moment. And I've actually started doing shows As Caspar Adultpants.

Kurt Batdorf: 22:02 I was just going to ask you about that.

Chris Ballew: 22:05 So, there's no kids allowed at a Caspar Adultpants show. I did it at the Tractor Tavern. So, it's a bar. Parents come, or even just whoever, if you're Caspar curious, you can come. And then, I do a lot of call and response. I play some songs that are a little too subtle for the typical Caspar show. I have these kind of Ballad-y... I have this one song called Holdfast Baby Barnacle. It's based on a Irish drinking song kind of thing. Hold fast baby. Oh, hold fast tonight. I did that, with big sound, and all these people kind of swaying in the darkness. It was great.

Kurt Batdorf: 22:49 Yeah. I think the three year olds might kind of miss the meaning of that one.

Chris Ballew: 22:53 I don't want to do songs live, that are just for the parents. Because making albums and playing live are totally different. So, I have a lot of songs on my albums, that just don't really translate to live, which is fine. They're more designed for interior experience, and less like a kind of a community experience. But, it was fun to get to play some of those, as well as do the typical call and response stuff where... but, have parents who've had a couple of drinks, sing back to me, which is like [inaudible 00:23:25] little hair I have, backwards.

Kurt Batdorf: 23:29 So, the show [crosstalk 00:23:34]. So, the show at the Tractor, that was your first, kind of your debut as Caspar Adultpants.

Chris Ballew: 23:40 Actually, no. That was my third one.

Kurt Batdorf: 23:42 Oh, okay.

Chris Ballew: 23:43 I've done little short sets here and there, kind of testing the waters. But, kind of casual. This was the first one, where it was advertised as such, and ticketed. And yeah. And opening act, and all that stuff.

Kurt Batdorf: 23:55 Yeah. So, I guess, did you have any expectations going in, on what the adults, what the parents were kind of... what they expected and anticipated?

Chris Ballew: 24:09 No. I was really nervous, because it's a weird mashup of my two selves, right? There's the rock and roll experience which I'm used to, with the lights, and the darkness, and the stage, and the monitors, and the big sound, and it's at a club. And then, there's the Caspar thing, which is a more sit down, communicate with the audience kind of deal. And so, this is like a weird mashup of the two. And it was super nerve-racking before I got on stage. Like, "Is that going to work? Is that not going to work out?" But, I did not estimate how much love was going to be flowing at me, from the audience.

Kurt Batdorf: 24:45 Oh, that's cool.

Chris Ballew: 24:46 It was one of the most palpable expressions of that principle I was talking about before. The empathetic response. The empathy coming from the crowd was just unbelievable.

Kurt Batdorf: 25:01 They're right there with you. Yeah.

Chris Ballew: 25:03 Oh yeah. They wanted me to win.

Kurt Batdorf: 25:06 And they got you over the finish line.

Chris Ballew: 25:08 Yeah, yeah, yeah. So, yeah. I look forward to doing it. I think I'm going to do another one in December, sometime again, at the Tractor. So, we'll see. But, it was actually John Richards from KEXP that came up with the Caspar Adultpants thing. He asked me to play Caspar songs at his birthday party, at Moe, in Seattle. Or Neumos. Sorry, Moe's the old one. And so, he dubbed me Caspar Adultpants, and made me do it. So, I have John to thank for this whole thing. Yeah.

Kurt Batdorf: 25:36 That'll be Chris Ballew phase three.

Chris Ballew: 25:39 Yeah. Well, there is another phase three [crosstalk 00:25:42].

Kurt Batdorf: 25:42 Oh okay.

Chris Ballew: 25:43 Visual artist. I've been doing black and white kind of graphic drawings. And I have a website, chrisballew.org. And I sell them as prints. And I have shows in restaurants and bars around Seattle. And so, I'm kind of doing that. I feel like that might be my actual third act. But, we'll see.

Paul Pitkin: 26:05 Oh, sorry. Can you name a restaurant or two, where your stuff is up?

Chris Ballew: 26:10 Yeah. There's The Rendezvous in Belltown, where I have kind of a ongoing show. They liked the art so much, that they just said we don't want to take it down. So, I just go in and put fresh ones up when they sell. And then, I have a month long show for the month of March at Snapdragon, or the Hastings-Cone gallery, at a restaurant called Snapdragon, on Vashon Island.

Paul Pitkin: 26:33 Oh, cool.

Chris Ballew: 26:34 Yeah.

Kurt Batdorf: 26:34 Okay. And you also draw a lot of the line art, for the videos that go with Caspar Babypants songs.

Chris Ballew: 26:41 Yeah. I do. I do. Yeah. I love doing that stuff. I kind of want, that style of video, my intention is to kind of make it feel a little punk rock. It's just line drawings. Anybody can do it. I'm not a big fan of virtuosity. I kind of like to have [inaudible 00:26:56] an invitation for you to do it too. So, that's kind of my choice with those. And then, sometimes I hire kind of mid-level amateur, not amateur. Well, sometimes I hire amateur animators. And

then, I hire these pro guys in New Zealand who do... The My Flea Has Dogs video, is one of those, where it looks like it could be on Cartoon Network. It's kind of slick. So, I try to do the full range of visual stuff with the videos.

- Kurt Batdorf: 27:26 Yeah. So, Chris, you and your wife Kate Endle, she's an illustrator and graphic artist. And you guys have been sort of taking some of the Caspar Babypants songs, and turning those into children's books.
- Chris Ballew: 27:41 Yes. Yeah.
- Kurt Batdorf: 27:43 What's the creative process with that?
- Chris Ballew: 27:46 That's interesting. It's like, a lot of times it will be me working on a song, that she'll overhear, and say, "Ooh, that would be a good book. Let's spin that off." Because all the songs that are books, are not on albums, because they're kind of long, because I pace them. So, that you can spend a little time on each page. So, they're at the 6,7, 8, 9 minute range. So, they're specifically made for the books. And then, sometimes she'll come up with a title, or a theme. And then, I'll write a song, and we'll kind of work on it. We work on them together, both the visuals for the book, and the songwriting. It's kind of a back and forth. We credit me as the songwriter, her as the writer and illustrator. But, it's kind of a mix really, behind the scenes. So, yeah. We have a couple now that need a home. Oh, actually, we have one on the way. And then, another that needs a home, needs a publisher. So, I think we have five or six now done, and we have a couple more to go. So, yeah. It's really fun.
- Paul Pitkin: 28:43 Did you find a way to, excuse me, to accompany the book with the actual song?
- Chris Ballew: 28:49 You mean like live?
- Paul Pitkin: 28:51 Well, you're talking about how the book is based on a song. Does the book come with a... I don't know. what would be the way to listen to it now.
- Chris Ballew: 28:59 No. We don't do the CD with the book, because it's too much tomorrow's garbage to put in the world. So, we do free downloads of the songs on my website.
- Paul Pitkin: 29:10 Oh, that's awesome.

Chris Ballew: 29:11 Yeah. So, anybody can download the songs. You don't need to buy the books. There's no code or anything like that. You can just have it. So, yeah. So, it's just an easy, one-click download thing, from my website.

Paul Pitkin: 29:22 That must be really cool, for a kid to go through the book, and listen to the music at the same time.

Chris Ballew: 29:27 Yeah, yeah. I hope so. We get really good feedback from those projects that people kind of... because those are not wacky, too high energy. They're kind of more about sitting on the couch, and being together. And kind of having a mellow time, winding down, or a kind of mid-level energy thing. So, yeah. I think it's appreciated, because it's a good opportunity for kids and parents, to kind of just be in the same space, and hang out together.

Kurt Batdorf: 29:57 [crosstalk 00:29:57] Yeah. That's really cool. Well, why don't we take a break here, for our studio audience. And Chris, we'll be right back, with more talks with Chris Ballew.

Advert: 30:12 Is there a preschooler running around in your life? Then check out the Sno-Isle Libraries Countdown to Kindergarten list, of 100 essential picture books. Find this book list, and many more, online at Sno-Isle Libraries.

Speaker 2: 30:27 We love hearing from our listeners and subscribers. Especially if you enjoyed a guest, or have a suggestion for a future topic. Drop us a line at checkitoutpodcast@sno-isle.org. Again, that's checkitoutpodcast@sno-isle.org. And let us know What you're thinking. Don't be surprised if we read your comment, or answer your question, on a future podcast episode.

Kurt Batdorf: 31:02 We're back with Chris Ballew, from former frontman of Presidents of the United States of America. And you also know him as Caspar Babypants.

Chris Ballew: 31:09 Yes, I am.

Paul Pitkin: 31:11 I think a lot of people were curious when the President's got popular. How did you come up with that name? I know it's kind of a dumb question, but it's unusual.

Chris Ballew: 31:20 Well, we had a really hard time naming the band. And we had a plan, whereby every time we got together for a beer before we practiced, each band member had to have five ideas for a name. And you just say your five, no judgment. And we would just wait

for one of those names to be, the spot where everybody goes, "Yeah, okay. That's it." So, that went on, and on, and on, for weeks. And then, I went to a party, where there were some hippies jamming. And I brought my two string guitar and I plugged it in. And kind of took over the jam a little bit. And every time we took a break, I would just sort of, say a band name. Like, "Thank you very much for coming everybody. We're The Electric Blueberries from Outer Space." Or whatever came into my head. And one of them was, "We're The Presidents of the United States of America. And the six hippies that were watching the jam session, all laughed. And I thought, "Well, if it's good enough for six hippies, maybe it'll work for..." So, I went to the next band meeting, pre-practice beer at the Comet Tavern, and said that name is one of my five. And that's where everybody went, "Yep. I think that's just stupid enough to work."

- Paul Pitkin: 32:36 And history was made. It's always the hippies that make that stuff happen, right?
- Chris Ballew: 32:40 Yep. Thank you. And you know what? The guy who invited me to, and hosted the party, now lives in Ohio, near my wife's parents, and my best friend from growing up, who lives in Ohio. His name's Fred Freedom. And I see him now all the time. So, I randomly ran into him on the street, and he invited me to this party, back in the 90s. And so, it's crazy, because now I hang out with him whenever I go to Ohio.
- Paul Pitkin: 33:09 That can't be his real name. Fred Freedom.
- Chris Ballew: 33:11 Well, no. I don't think it's his real name.
- Paul Pitkin: 33:13 It's incredible. I just think.
- Chris Ballew: 33:15 He's little bit of a Furry Freak Brother. So, he's Fred Freedom. Yeah.
- Kurt Batdorf: 33:18 Maybe he's Robert Freedom.
- Chris Ballew: 33:20 I don't know if people know what The Furry Freak Brothers are.
- Paul Pitkin: 33:26 Well, we're not sure either.
- Chris Ballew: 33:28 It's an old comic book.
- Kurt Batdorf: 33:31 Well, Chris, we want you to sort of play us out, with a song of your choice. Either Presidents, or Caspar Babypants. It's been

delightful talking to you, and getting to know you, and getting to know Caspar.

- Chris Ballew: 33:42 Thank you. Yeah.
- Paul Pitkin: 33:44 Yeah. This has been great. What are you going to play for us?
- Chris Ballew: 33:47 I think I'll play Noodles and Butter. Now keep in mind, because of all the virus action, I haven't played a show in like six weeks. So, I'm going to see if I can do this, knock the cobwebs off, and play Noodles and Butter. Let's see if I nail it on the first go.
- Kurt Batdorf: 34:03 All righty. Take it away Chris.
- Chris Ballew: 34:12 Noodles and butter, noodles and butter. You are my favorite treat. Come on. Noodles and butter, there is no other. Nothing else that I want to eat. I don't like chocolate cake like others do, or lemon drops or peppermint chew, or little cakes, or sugar lumps. No, no, no. No candy bars, or whipping cream, no lollipops or tangerines. No root beer floats, or bubblegum. No, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no. I just want noodles and butter, noodles and butter. You are my favorite treat. Noodles and butter, there is no other. Nothing else that I want to eat. I don't like bubblegum, or licorice lips, or anything dipped in whipped cream. None of that seems good to me. No, no, no. No coconut pie, or blueberry tarts, or anything from that pastry cart. The only thing I really want, is noodle-y and buttery as well.
- Chris Ballew: 35:14 All right, this is the part of the song, where I tell the kids, they have to imagine, that the wall behind me, has fallen away, and Def Leppard is there. And all the lights come on, and the fog, and the smoke. And they accompany me for this part of the song. So, you just have to imagine, Def Leppard, full volume, accompanying me for the next part of the song. Ready? Here we go. You can keep your sugar sweets, make yourself a tower of the trashy treats. Noodles and butter. You're the only one, you're the only one, the only one I need. I don't like chocolate cake like others do, or lemon drops or peppermint chew, or little cakes, or sugar lumps. No, no, no. No candy bars, or whipping cream, no lollipops, or tangerines. Root beer floats or bubblegum. No, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no. I just want noodles and butter, noodles and butter. You are my favorite treat. Noodles and butter, there is no other, nothing else that I want to eat. Whoops. That's it.
- Paul Pitkin: 36:30 You got through all the way to the end.

Chris Ballew: 36:33 [inaudible 00:36:33] Oh there, here you go.

Paul Pitkin: 36:38 Words to live by, I have to say.

Kurt Batdorf: 36:39 Yeah. That was awesome, Chris. Thanks so much.

Chris Ballew: 36:43 Thank you, boy. Oh, that was exciting. All right.

Paul Pitkin: 36:46 Thank you very much.

Advert: 36:48 Hey, parents and grandparents. Is there a child in the family who's latched on to a smartphone, or tablet computer? Help them put that screen time to good use, by downloading fun, and educational magazines, from Sno-Isle Libraries. Like Highlights, High Five, and American Girl. Every magazine packed with age appropriate content, like crafts, quizzes, experiments, poems, and wholesome stories. And each issue is free to download with a library card from Sno-Isle Libraries.

Speaker 2: 37:19 If you have a great library experience you'd like to share with us, we would love to know about it. Drop us a line at checkitoutpodcast@sno-isle.org. Again that's checkitoutpodcast, all one word. At sno-isle.org. Who knows, we might even invite you to share your story on a future podcast.

Paul Pitkin: 37:42 Well, that was incredible. Rarely have we had an actual performance on the Check It Out! podcast. So, that's pretty awesome that he's just willing to whip out his guitar and play. Chris is obviously a really great guy. I was just struck by that whole thing about, what an interesting career path. You're a rock star, and then, you say, "I hate this."

Kurt Batdorf: 38:06 Yeah. This isn't what I signed up for.

Paul Pitkin: 38:07 Yeah. And then you become a kids, you play music for kids. But, you can tell there's a Chris-ness that goes through the whole enterprise.

Kurt Batdorf: 38:19 Exactly.

Paul Pitkin: 38:19 I think that consistency, and just his heart seems to be into the whole thing. And that's just a nice thing to see.

Kurt Batdorf: 38:26 Yeah. And Chris, he's not only cool. I mean, he's just a lot of fun. And he's just one of us. He's geeky and dorky, and he embraces it.

Paul Pitkin: 38:36 Yeah, it's great. I mean, totally. How can you hear Noodles And Butter, and not get excited?

Kurt Batdorf: 38:41 Exactly,

Paul Pitkin: 38:43 Or not be in a good mood. I'm in a good now.

Kurt Batdorf: 38:45 I am too. And when I interviewed Chris a couple of months ago, to talk about his Grammy nomination. And why he didn't go to the Grammys, and instead played at the Marysville Opera House. I mentioned Noodles And Butter. And my wife was... she said, "I just can't get that song out of my head." And he just said, "I think that's what I'm going to have for lunch, is just noodles and butter."

Paul Pitkin: 39:07 Well, you don't even really think about it that much. But, noodles and butter is great.

Kurt Batdorf: 39:11 It is my favorite treat.

Paul Pitkin: 39:12 It's a great [crosstalk 00:39:13]. And now the song's stuck in my head. So, I'll probably eat it without even knowing. And I'll wake up in the middle of the night, and sleep walk to the kitchen, and have noodles and butter.

Kurt Batdorf: 39:22 Well, that was our talk with Chris Ballew, formerly the President of the United States of America, and currently Caspar Babypants. Thanks for listening.

Paul Pitkin: 39:32 Thanks.

Speaker 2: 39:33 Self-Help shelf. Coming up next.

Sarri Gilman: 39:44 This is Sarri Gilman, with the self-help shelf for Sno-Isle Libraries. This week, I have a newer book by David Kessler, Finding Meaning: The Sixth Stage of Grief. David is considered one of the world's leading experts on grief. He's written several books on the subject. But, this new book was released in 2019. And this book, Finding Meaning, is my favorite of his books. What makes this book so helpful, is that he's focused on loss of a loved one, that is traumatic. Losing loved ones is a journey through many feelings, and it sort of remakes our lives. Traumatic grief though, has some layers of feelings that can be hard to navigate, because we may not have experienced them before. And traumatic grief is particularly hard to do alone. And this book is truly a helpful companion. It feels like David is in the room with you, reviewing stories of traumatic grief, and how

people have carried those losses. And even reading through the stories is not re-traumatizing. Because his pacing in the book, is done so carefully, and with so much thought, that it makes it readable through the traumatic grief which I know can be very difficult.

Sarri Gilman: 41:13 He has also experienced traumatic loss twice. And he writes about his own traumatic grief very sensitively and respectfully, the same way he writes about other peoples traumatic losses. This book is titled by what David has observed as a stage of grief. And he calls this stage, how we find meaning. This doesn't mean that you have to believe everything happens for a reason. It means that when we lose someone we love, it helps us to find meaning in the life the person lived. What did they get out being here, and what did you get out of knowing him or her? David talks about the feelings that we carry when we're grieving, and it is coupled with a trauma. And I think if you have experienced this kind of loss, you're going to feel understood. You'll realize that you are not alone. And that traumatic grief, really is harder for other people to understand. And this book opens the doorway to honoring your loved one, and creating a different life, that includes them. And using your experience, in some way, to help others.

Sarri Gilman: 42:37 During COVID-19, you may be experiencing much loss and grief. And though this book was written to support people who experienced a death, I think it applies to many losses. Traumatic grief can also come up from other kinds of losses like a divorce where there was abuse, loss of a child to addiction. I think this book is actually going to be very helpful, if you have traumatic grief for other kinds of reasons. And it doesn't have to be a recent loss. Often with traumatic grief, it could take a few years before you may be able to read a book. And I think this book will be helpful, even if your loss was years ago. Even if you had counseling to support you during that time. During COVID-19, other losses that you had previously, may be brought to the surface. And you may be feeling the trauma and grief, all over again, because COVID-19 has brought up a lot of loss and grief. And so, our other losses that were underneath, in earlier time periods, tend to rise up to the surface. And if this is your experience, this book will be very helpful. Finding Meaning by David Kessler, is available digitally, from the Sno-Isle Libraries. Take good care of you. And remember, some books are almost as good as therapy.

Speaker 2: 44:09 If you enjoyed this podcast, please subscribe, so you can receive every episode automatically. And until next time, remember,

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