

# Singer is inspired by wild scenery of Eastern Oregon

By JERAD WALKER  
Oregon Public Broadcasting

With only 2,000 residents, Enterprise is the largest town in Wallowa County. It's surrounded by vast cattle ranches and boxed in by the stunning Wallowa Mountains and a foreboding 8,000-foot-deep gorge called Hells Canyon that straddles the Idaho border to the east.

Despite that remoteness, it's also home to a music community that nurtures the work of artists like Margo Cilker, whose debut record "Pohorylle" was released last week.

Cilker's arresting voice is the latest in a line of songwriters inspired by this wild corner of northeast Oregon.



Jerad Walker/Oregon Public Broadcasting

The picturesque but rugged Wallowa Valley in northeast Oregon is one of the most isolated places in the United States.

## Beauty and isolation

When folk musician Janis Carper moved to Enterprise from Seattle nearly 20 years ago, she made seven trips in a pickup truck filled with her family's belongings. And each time she crossed the Minam River on state Route 82, it hit her.

"Well of course I was first awestruck by the nature — the beauty," said Carper, who is the executive director of a regional music nonprofit called the Wallowa Valley Music Alliance.

While the jaw-dropping scenery of Eastern Oregon offers ample artistic inspiration, Carper insists that there is a tradeoff for musicians who settle in this rugged place.

"It is definitely a feeling of geographical isolation. People don't come here on their way to anywhere because you can't really go anywhere from here," she explained before adding "except to Hells Canyon and Snake River — you can just go over the edge!"

Fellow musician and producer Bart Budwig thinks that isolation also has advantages.

"You have to be kind of proactive about community. People are motivated to make things happen because they aren't going to happen on their own," Budwig said.

Budwig speaks from experience. Since 2015, he's mostly lived and worked in the historic OK Theater in downtown Enterprise where he's recorded albums for musicians from all over the country.

## A local sound

In recent years, the OK Theater has also served as a rallying point for a tight knit group of songwriters loosely bonded together by a love of clever lyricism and classic Western music.

"The music coming out of Wallowa County is not frantic," Budwig said. "I feel like it is grounded and rooted and often about coming from personal experience."

Budwig cites fellow musician Cilker and her song "Brother Taxman Preacher" as a shining example of that sound. It's a brutal, but funny, critique of male-dominated rural power structures disguised as a honky-tonk jam. In the song's lyrics, she



Stephen Smith

Margo Cilker pictured in the alley behind the OK Theater in downtown Enterprise.

calls out religious leaders and even her own brother.

"I'm sorry, (but) no one's safe," Cilker said laughing. "You're not safe. My friends aren't safe. You could always end up in a song."

Cilker, who's worked day jobs as a server at local restaurants and most recently on a poultry farm, is fascinated by the people she comes across in every-

day life.

"And that's why I love music and songwriting, it's because it's fun to profile people. I love meeting colorful characters. I could strike up a conversation with the wall."

## 'If you've got to ramble, ram'

Cilker's enthusiasm for documenting the human

condition has earned her supporters from well beyond the shadow of the Wallowa Mountains, including respected Seattle-based musician Sera Cahoone.

"I love her lyrics," said Cahoone. "She's witty. She's just a great songwriter. It was pretty immediate for me. I was like 'Whoa, that is such a tricky lyric that you did there!' So I knew that she had something special going on."

Cahoone produced Cilker's debut record, "Pohorylle." The new album features 11 songs punctuated by barroom piano, pedal steel guitars and bouncing horn arrangements. But surprisingly, Cahoone's favorite song is also one of its simplest — a goosebump-inducing confessional called "Flood Plain."

Cilker wrote the piece about her relationship with husband Forrest Van Tuyl, a musician who works seasonally on horseback as a professional cowboy. It's a stunning performance that showcases her versatility as an observational writer who can also look inward.

"Yeah, that's just a song

about marriage," said Cilker. "It's a song about giving each other space. It's a powerful message of 'things are really hard right now, but I'm not letting go. I'm going to hang on.' I had this image of an elastic — sometimes someone does have to ramble. If you've got to ramble, ram. Go and come back. It's that kind of leniency I would want someone to offer me, too."

Next year is shaping up to be an exciting year for Cilker, who recently signed a record deal with Portland-based label Fluff and Gravy. She and Van Tuyl plan to overwinter on a ranch near the Columbia River Gorge before heading out on tour together. It's a much-needed break from two years of COVID-19 imposed isolation in Enterprise, which is already one of the most secluded places in the country.

But after that extended ramble, Cilker plans to return to the wide-open spaces of the American West.

"I mean, why shouldn't someone live in the middle of nowhere — center of the universe — and make art?"

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