

Country act Chris Gardner adds music to fireworks fun at Cal Expo

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07/03/2014 10:00 AM | Updated: 07/03/2014 5:58 PM

On a recent Friday evening, an enthusiastic country-music fan, cheered on by her older sister, jumped on stage at Cesar Chavez Plaza to snap a selfie with the guitar player for the Chris Gardner Band.

But the real #Polaroidmoment came when Chris Gardner, the group's lead singer, waded into the Concerts in the Park crowd to hold hands and dance with a girl in a pink wheelchair.

It was an earnest gesture, free of contrivance, and part of the reason that the Sacramento-based group has developed such a loyal following.

Sure, fans dig the band's rock-laced country, and respect the fact that it has opened for Nashville heavyweights like Luke Bryan and Billy Currington. But it's the emotional connection the band creates during live shows that sets it apart from other acts.

"For us, it's about the fans and the music, it's not about us," said Gardner, 31, who comes across as quiet and contained during an interview – quite the opposite of the energetic showman he becomes onstage. "We stay loyal to the people who love us."

With a planned 45-minute set at Cal Expo's Fourth of July fireworks show Friday, the band hopes to create kinship with country-music aficionados and explosion lovers alike, playing both original songs and covers including Lee Greenwood's "God Bless the USA."

The fireworks show – billed as the largest in the Sacramento region – is scheduled to start afterward at 9:30 p.m., with plenty of rockets' red glare expected. The show is sponsored, in part, by country music station [KNCI 105.1](#).

Gardner, who also plays rhythm guitar, said this is the first time the band has agreed to play a big July 4 show. For the past six years, the group has had a standing gig at an intimate Independence Day gathering at Stineman's Ranch near Wheatland.

[Chester Stineman](#), a walnut farmer, hosted a July 4 celebration each year for a tight-knit group of friends. Gardner's family is very close with the Stinemans, the musician said, and Gardner's best friend married Stineman's daughter.

"The only time I get nervous is playing for family and friends," Gardner said.

Stineman preferred classic country to the newer stuff, Gardner said, but was nonetheless one of the band's biggest supporters.

"He helped my band out more than anybody," Gardner said.

That included cutting the band a check to fly to Nashville to record its first album.

Last year, Stineman, 67, died from cancer not long before the July 4 party. Playing that show was difficult, Gardner said, and the tradition has since ceased.

In part because of Stineman's support, the band has made big leaps. Their second album, produced by Dolly Parton's producer, Kent Wells, is expected to drop mid-August.

The name of the new album has yet to be set in stone, but will likely be along the lines of "Let's Ride, Boys," Gardner said, adding that it will have more of an upbeat, party vibe than the group's first album, "The Answer."

The six-member band come from eclectic backgrounds, and their ages range from mid-20s to early-60s.

With Aaron Shrively and Nikki Vargas on guitars, Dwight Hogan on bass, Zack Kampf on drums and Shawn Holiday on keyboards, the group has been playing and traveling together for a little more than five years.

"My band is really odd because we don't bicker or fight," Gardner said.

Which is odd, considering the amount of time they spend together. The group notches around 200 gigs a year, said Gardner, who works with his mother in real estate when he's not onstage or attending classes at Sierra College.

"I want to be the first guy in my family to graduate," Gardner said.

But his studies won't stop him from making music. He's been writing songs for 10 years, and singing and guitar-strumming since he was 6 years old.

He used to play with his dad's band, but started his own group after his dad got sick. He passed away when Gardner was 20 years old.

Gardner has been working to entertain – and connect with fans – ever since.

"They spend that day to support us, that's an honor," Gardner said. "We're truly thankful for every show. We put 100 percent in when we're onstage at all times, and they know that when we get off."