



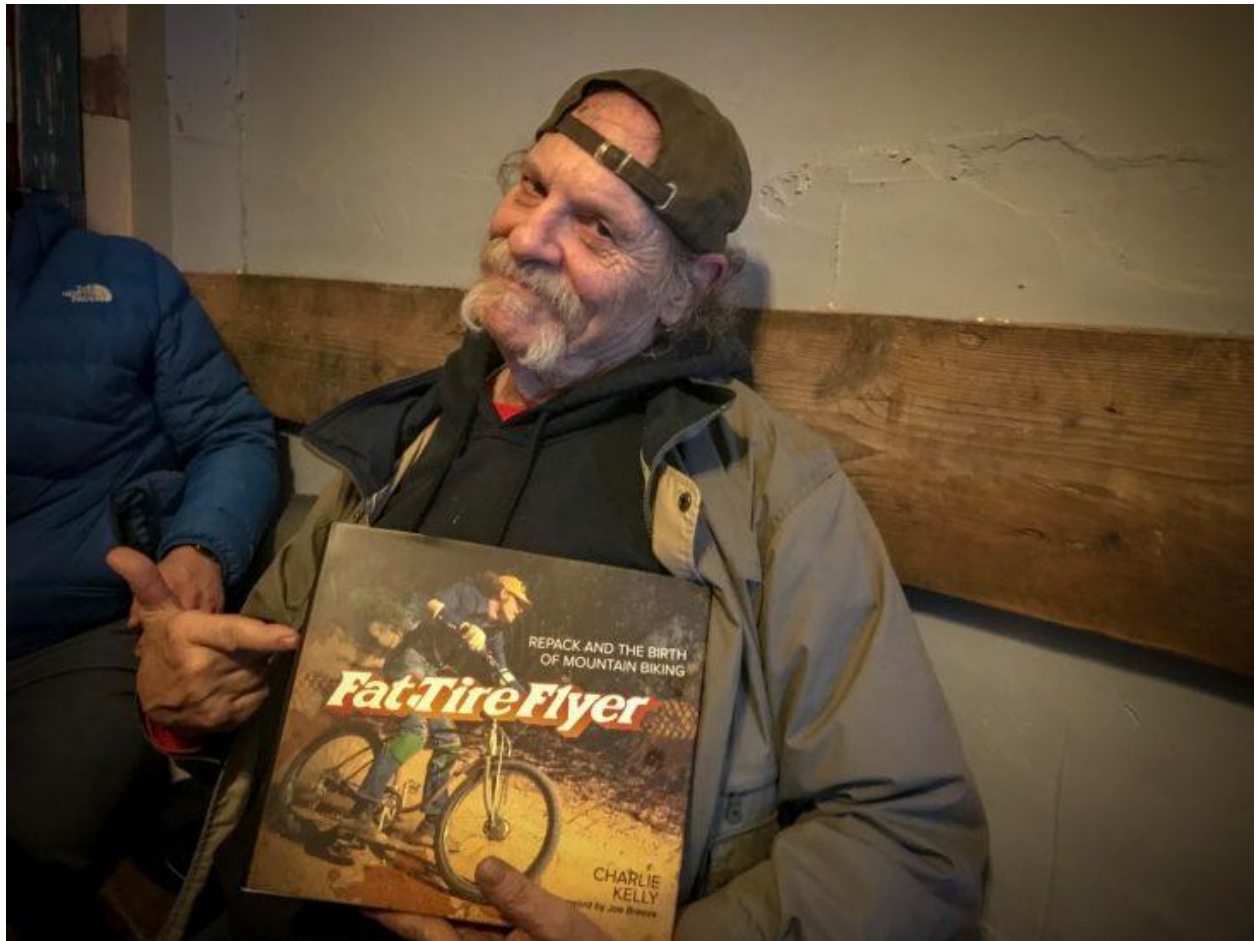
A Day With Charlie Kelly, Godfather of Mountain Biking

by [Hannah Dobson](#) November 5, 2018 8:22 pm6

The railing moves, or maybe the pavement is narrower than last time I passed. My bar clips the safety barrier and I'm catapulted off the bike and onto the grassy bank on the other side. I lie, laughing and staring up at the moons. It's the perfect end to a day I could never have imagined happening: a day where I got to hang out with Charlie Kelly, co-inventor of mountain biking, and publisher of the first ever mountain bike magazine. Even without a number of hours in a bar, I'd be feeling a bit giddy.

Happy birthday mountain biking.

When I meet Charlie, it's 42 years almost to the day since he put on what is widely considered to be the first ever mountain bike race. That makes Charlie pretty old, even compared to me, but that hasn't stopped him undertaking a whistlestop tour of the UK to promote his book, and to help raise funds to archive and preserve his lifetime's worth of mountain bike printed material and memorabilia. The book – Fat Tire Flyer: Repack and the Birth of Mountain Biking – uses just a tiny portion of his collected material to tell the story of how he and friends Joe Breeze, Gary Fisher and Tom Ritchey would bring a different sort of bicycle to the world. The talk that Charlie is giving on his tour also seems to use just a tiny portion of the stories he has from a life that would be full if it were divided between half a dozen people. As we hang out during the day I hear a mix of tales I've heard versions of before, and others that are certainly new to me.



Charlie with his book, which you should really get hold of.



Fans and nerds will appreciate the chance to get their copy signed.

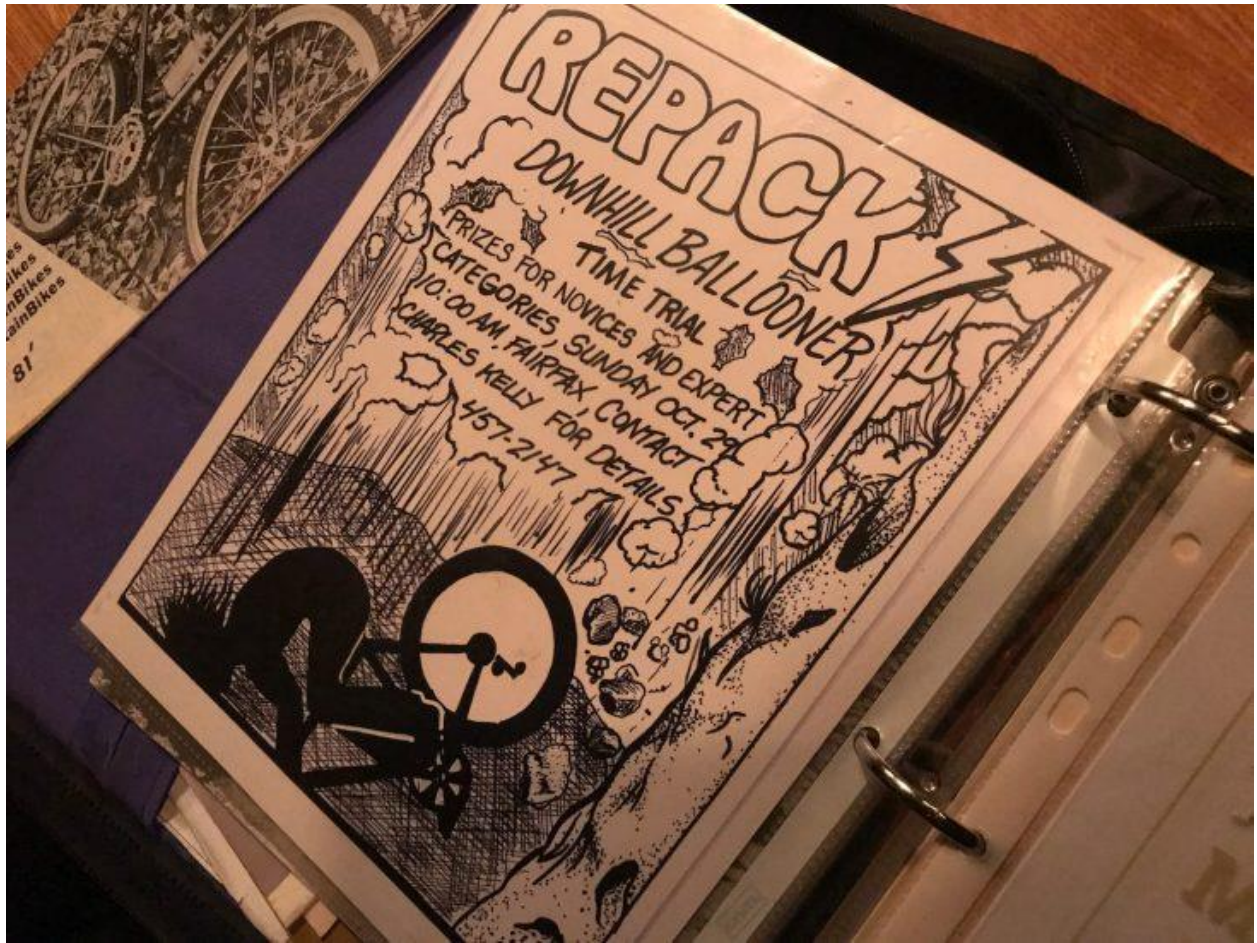
If you're a certain sort of rider – the sort that goes a bit funny over bikes generally, or finds it hard to resist stroking certain perfect curves in steel tubed frames, or finds it just a little bit difficult to truly feel profound love for a modern carbon fibre full suspension bike – then you'll already know who Charlie Kelly is. If you're not a nerd, and perhaps just enjoy riding trails without thinking about history, or you're too young to know that history isn't all boring, then you might not know his name. Between the book, the tour, and media interviews over the years (I'm in that nerd camp), I feel like I'm already pretty well filled in on the story of the [Repack races](#) and the subsequent birth of the first purpose built mountain bike. I want to know about the bits in between, and the man who helped spawn an industry, but has spent most of his life on the edge of it – a life riding bikes, but not working with them.

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Hippie Heydays.

Let's take that inevitable step back in time, to when Charlie and his friends were riding bikes – quite nice road bikes in many instances – and racing round the roads of Marin County. Bike enthusiasts with other interests – there's a lot of musical overlap, and Charlie's tales are smattered with guest appearances from the likes of the Grateful Dead, and the band he has roadied for across a number of decades, Sons of Champlin – it sounds like a hippie golden age. Of course, being a hippie in the USA wasn't without its challenges – being drafted into the U.S. Army not being especially compatible with the pursuit of love and peace. While many of Charlie's musician buddies were deemed unfit for service, all the skateboarding and cycling clearly left him too fit and healthy to be written off. College studies would have postponed a drafting, but he admits he didn't have the aptitude for that. However, when the draft caught up with him after flunking college, he did have the smarts required to do well in the army tests – enough to land him a role in a hospital laboratory in Arizona. By the time the army was done with him, his college friends were finding it was their turn to serve, and Charlie was free to hang out with all the Marin County hippies.

Perhaps it was all this open minded activity and free thinking that led Charlie and his friends to look away from the tarred roads and think 'why don't we ride over there?'. Maybe it was the temptation to get out into the wild and look at the flowers or dance in the desert. Charlie certainly doesn't think they were the first to go riding their bikes off road, but he does think they were the first to race them downhill.



The Repack race posters are worth a look.

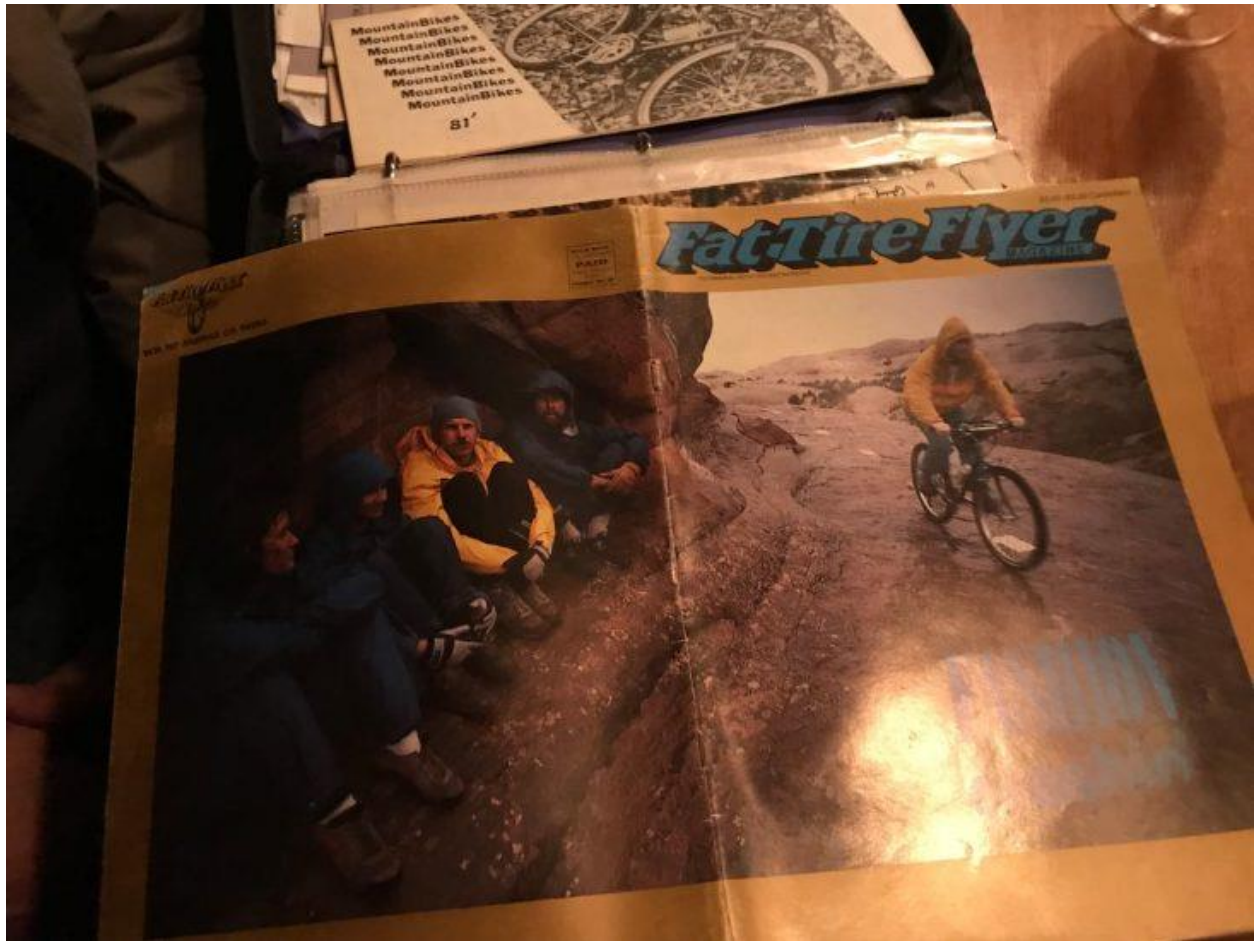
In some respects the Repack course couldn't be more different to modern downhill courses – no drops, no jumps, and the only boulders marked the start and the finish (and a few obstacles on bends to be avoided). But the focus employed in being as fast as possible was no different. What started as a one off race between friends to see who was the fastest (rather than just who was happiest to elbow their friends out the way), became an obsession. Corners were studied (and, like today's trails, named – often after those that misjudged them), lines practiced, the perfect angles remembered – just like with today's top racers. When you're riding faster than you can see, you need to remember what's coming, especially when you're aboard a bike which is as likely to fall apart as it is stop under braking.

Just as today's racers push for technological improvements to shave moments off their times, so did those competitive hippies of yesteryear. Drum brakes on old Schwinn town bikes (selected for their balloon tyres) were swapped for more powerful brakes swiped from tandems. Frames were bent and tweaked in order to accommodate these brakes, and bent and replaced every few months as they succumbed to rigours never envisaged by their designers. Between these downhill and off-road adventures, Charlie and friends were still racing round on their rather nice road bikes. How about it, they wondered, if there was a frame with the tyre capacity of a Schwinn, but a frame a little more like their nice road bikes? Something a bit more robust, but refined for purpose?

Maybe it was the age of invention, or the product of growing up when anything seemed possible and men went to the moon, or just one of the many confluences of fortune that seem to pepper Charlie's life, but he and his friends Joe Breeze and Gary Fisher had between them the skills to make a bike. Or at least, they did with a bit of help from Joe's dad. The Breezer was born, followed closely by the more refined designs of frame building prodigy [Tom Ritchey](#). With that the – originally single – word 'mountainbike' was born. Charlie is careful not to claim credit for this history. He was there, and part of it – building the wheels and running the races – but he says repeatedly that it was a collective effort, a convergence of skills and interests, and people being in the right place at the right time. They weren't setting out to spawn an industry – they just wanted to ride bikes in new places at new speeds.



Hannah, getting a bit excited over issue 01 of the first ever mountain bike magazine.



A wraparound cover – Charlie was free to be as creative as he wanted.

Paper Trail Blazing.

As the popularity of this new activity grew, the Repack race grew beyond what the site and Charlie could comfortably handle. As friends were joined by new faces from other counties, a degree of organisation was required. Formalities like insurance were needed, and groups to help provide a voice for the proponents of this new sport were formed. Stepping away from the Repack race, but into this new world order, Charlie accidentally started the world's first mountain bike magazine, Fat Tire Flyer. As he puts it 'put Issue 01 on the cover, and people expect there to be an issue 02'. Originally meant to be a newsletter for a group of riders, the 'Marin County Wilderness Wheelers', the club never met again, but Charlie continued to produce the magazine, taking it from

a hand typed pamphlet to a colour printed wraparound covered magazine not dissimilar in appearance to early editions of Singletrack. I think it's clear where Mark and Chipps got a little of their inspiration when they got started.

Charlie describes his years producing Fat Tire Flyer as the most creative thing he ever did, and it's clear that while he might have lacked the aptitude for college, he didn't lack the brains. He'd already had a number of articles published before he started the 'newsletter' and much of what you read in early copies was written by Charlie – under a selection of pseudonyms. He admits that his writing skills were better than those of many of his fellow riders, and it's a rare example of where he is happy to own his historical role and put himself centre stage. We exchange experiences of how surprisingly hard it is to find the perfect mix of rider and story teller, and he says he knows plenty of great riders who are incapable of converting the experience of riding into words. Charlie is, of course, a born story teller – just try getting him to stop talking. It's perhaps no surprise then that he was much more interested in publishing stories of the bike riding experience than product reviews and developments. I'm interested to hear that he generally only included products in Fat Tire Flyer where they were intrinsically interesting to him, or where he felt he had to in order to please advertisers, instead trying to maintain the timeless relevance of accounts of riding and the emotions evoked – coffee table book aspirations in lo-fi form. Again, this rings true with what Singletrack aims for – though with the aid of modern design technology and really nice paper.



Charlie's 'Gary Fisher' pose.

This focus of interest in the experience rather than technology is reflected in Charlie's answers to almost anything about bikes or the industry. While he really likes disc brakes – because he likes being able to stop – he's happy to ride whatever bike his friends give him. He makes no bones about the fact he doesn't know how to maintain a modern mountain bike, and he's grateful that his friends and local bike shop keep him rolling. That's not to say he's anti-progress; he's more than happy to hop aboard a Specialized Levo Kenevo for a quick spin round the Calder Valley. 'This ride wouldn't of happened without it' he says, 'at home I ride with people my age, so it's not a problem, but I can see there'll be a day where one of these is in my future. Maybe I'll write to Mike [Sinyard] and say thank you'.

There's a bit of history there too. Charlie says he's had 30-odd years to get over the release of the original Stumpjumper, which happened not so

long after Specialized bought a bunch of Charlie and Co's frames...but on balance he concedes that a production mountain bike has been a good thing for the world. He's not bitter, and Specialized gave him his first ever full suspension bike. Mostly though, he rides bikes made by his friends Joe Breeze, Gary Fisher and Tom Ritchey – all of whom stayed on in the bike industry. After the early days however, Charlie looked elsewhere for an income, and found it as a piano mover.

Rockin' and Rollin' With It.

It might not sound very rock and roll compared to the heady days of hurtling down the Repack route, bumping into the Grateful Dead, and inventing a whole new outdoor pursuit, but it's one that Charlie says he enjoyed – indeed, he only sold the business at age 68 to focus on his book. 'You get to travel across the country in a truck with your friends, and then you do something that takes just a few minutes and people think is amazing'. When you put it like that, you can see the appeal – and it's perhaps not all that different from the life of a pro downhill racer.



I asked Charlie to look like a moody rock star. He obliged. Simon Gallup has competition.

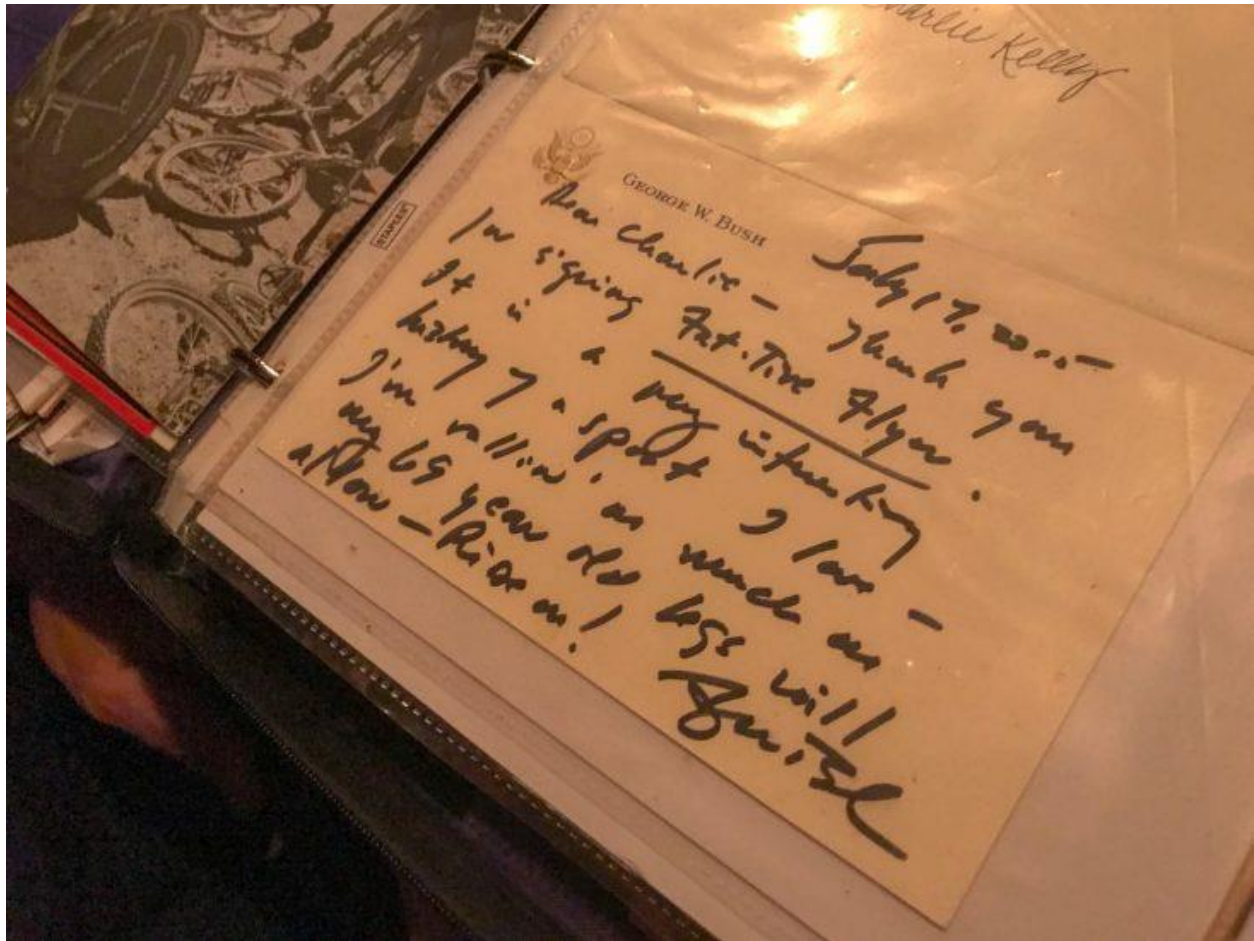


Being on the road, Charlie had not played a guitar for 3 weeks, so we gave him our office one to strum on.

For all that us certain sort of riders revere Charlie as being a godfather of mountain biking, he is humble about his role and seems to feel that he's lucky to have had the life he's had, rather than that he might have been especially instrumental in shaping it. He mentions his wife, Mary, often during the course of our day together, including the fact that this tour is one of the longest times he's been away from her. He's the proud father of a daughter who's got great grades all the way through school, and shows no sign of joining the bike industry. Normal, everyday, family stuff, hiding a lifetime of unexpected adventures.

I suspect he has a nose for fun however – his association with Charlie the Bikemonger no doubt adding a touch of unpredictability and entertainment to his tour of the UK. If you want a quiet, dull life (or even to know what might be happening in the next five minutes), you don't hang out with the Bikemonger, and I'm sure it's no accident that

Charlie K models Charlie B's BumButter promotional t-shirt at every opportunity. Perhaps another reason that he's had so many adventures is that he's so easy to get along with. He barely voices an opinion during our whole day together – what comes, comes. Enjoy the ride and see where it takes you (Albeit fairly carefully if that happens to be down a hill in the dark on an unfamiliar trail – it does occur to me at this point in the day that he is in his seventies and perhaps I ought not to be responsible for breaking the godfather of mountain biking). He'll tell stories for days, but ask him what he thinks about something bike related and you'll be hard pushed to get him to step off the fence. He's keen to show and tell though, and unloads a pile of CDs (yes, actual, physical compact discs) out of his backpack to show me his current favourite musician, Grace VanderWaal. He also takes out a folder containing a selection of papers from his vast archive, which he casually hands round in the pub. I can't help feel that I ought to be wearing cotton gloves and reverently laying these items out in the safety of a temperature controlled museum room, not holding them slightly drunkenly just above a puddle of beer spills.



A letter from George Bush – yes, that George Bush – who as it happens is a keen mountain biker. Charlie’s collection is full of these kinds of surprises.

Keeping The Past Alive.

By the time I’ve sobered up, admired the bruise on my ankle, remembered why my shoulder hurts, and come to writing up my day, I’ll feel a momentary pang of regret at being a bit too rock and roll. I’ve a whole day of oral history to try and recall, illustrated by snippets of memorabilia that are probably museum worthy, certainly archive worthy. But hell, you’ve got to go where things take you, and my day was fun, imbued with a touch of that hippie magic and early days Repack enthusiasm. Perhaps most heartening was the sense that this industry, the unplanned offspring of those early riders – once you look

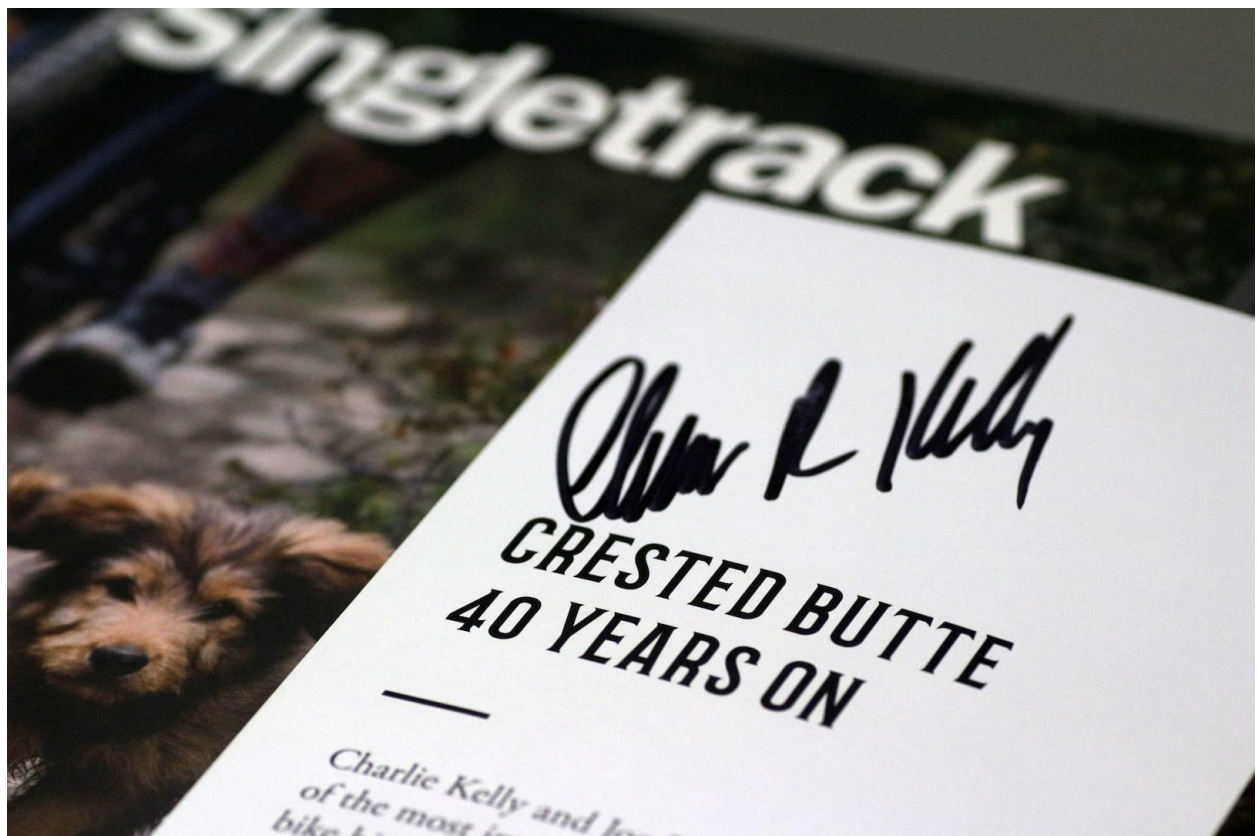
beyond the technological advances, the niches, the divergence of specialities – still carries with it that early spirit of the common joys to be found in the ride experience and in being part of the bike community.

My slightly fuzzy recollections are well worth the lack of professional note taking or serious journalism. I'll keep my hazy, dizzy, slightly crazy experience any day. It's a privilege to have had it. and it can't be packaged, reproduced, digitised, or archived. But much of Charlie's collection can – and he hopes it will be. Whether you're a nerd like me who can't quite resist stroking certain welds, or you just want to ride trails, there's a huge chunk of mountain bike history there. Perhaps knowing about it might just add to your appreciation of your next ride.

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- You can find out more about Charlie's collection and his plans to preserve it for all here:
 - <http://mountainbikelegacy.com/>
 - You can help contribute to the cost of storing and digitising the collection here:
 - <https://www.gofundme.com/mountain-bike-legacy-project>
 - Fat Tire Flyer (published on paper even nicer than Singletrack!) is published by Velopress and can be bought on Amazon – or go along to one of Charlie's talks if you want to get a copy signed.
 - <https://www.velopress.com/>
 - https://www.amazon.co.uk/Fat-Tire-Flyer-Repack-Mountain/dp/1937715167/ref=asap_bc?ie=UTF8
 - [Issue 121 of Singletrack](#) contains a feature by Charlie on his return to Crested Butte, 40 years after the first ride there.
 - See Fat Tire Flyer UK & Europe for merchandise and events:
 -

<https://www.facebook.com/FatTireFlyerUKEU/>

Subscriber Exclusive Signed Issue



While he was here we got Charlie to sign copies of his article in issue 121, 'Crested Butte 40 Years On'.