

Dystonia Medical Research Foundation

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Living with Dystonia: BILLY MCLAUGHLIN "One of the greatest musical-comeback stories of all time."

Billy McLaughlin, 45, is a guitarist and composer. For 20 years, he astounded audiences around the world with his complex and rhythmic music.

But almost a decade ago, Billy lost his career and the ability to create the music he loved.

In 1997, Billy began to really struggle with playing solo guitar. His fret hand was giving him constant problems. Over the next two years it became clear something much worse was threatening his career.

"Something had crept in....into my hand, my wrist, my arm....an unwanted guest that wouldn't leave," recalls Billy. "I had no name for this visitor who caused my fingers to suddenly curl, caused the music to veer out of control as audiences cringed, caused my solo career to slowly...grind to a halt."

In 2001, Billy was diagnosed with focal dystonia. It is limited to one area of his body – his left forearm, hand, and fingers. Doctors warned that Billy that he was a higher risk of developing additional dystonia or that it might not spread at all.

Facing a musician's worst nightmare, Billy was devastated. "I had never heard of focal dystonia or that such a condition existed," says Billy "I had attended a major university school of music for a performance degree and never heard a word about this career ending malady. I never saw it mentioned in a guitar magazine or music education publication."

Soon after his diagnosis, Billy started treatments, including extended carpal release therapy, acupuncture, massage and biofeedback. He also experimented with botulinum toxin injections, which can provide temporary relief for some focal dystonia-affected individuals.

Choosing to go against doctors' recommendations to quit music and look for other work, Billy focused on his songwriting and returned to his ensemble which was less demanding for his hands. By 2002, it was clear that focal dystonia had ended Billy's career as a virtuoso guitarist.

Over the next few years, Billy tried to continue to keep music in his life. He directed music programs for churches and youth groups; he managed other artists. But he longed to make the music that defined him and made him whole.

"I got to the point where I said 'I can't live anymore without my music,'" says Billy.

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Billy has launched a comeback. Drawing upon every resource of faith, prayer, and determination, in 2003 he secretly began the unlikely journey of teaching himself to play in his signature style, left-handed. He started by converting his guitars into left-handed instruments. From then on, he took a little step each day, training his hands and conditioning his muscles to produce melodies once again.

Remembering doctors warnings of a higher likelihood for developing focal dystonia in his remaining good hand, Billy chose to press on towards an ambitious goal he had yet to achieve – to perform and record a new project with a string orchestra.

In January of 2007, Billy published a limited release of *Into the Light*, a concert recording of compositions for acoustic guitar with string orchestra. This collaboration with Grammy nominated arranger, Eugenio Toussaint, is Billy's first as a left-handed guitarist. *Into the Light* will be released nationally this fall accompanied by a companion concert DVD.

Since his diagnosis, Billy has become a leader in raising awareness of dystonia and a close partner of the Dystonia Medical Research Foundation. In August of 2007, Billy performed and facilitated a special session for young attendees at the Foundation's 4th Children & Family Dystonia Symposium.

"No one should miss out on playing music, or painting, or walking upright and straight, or living a normal life because I didn't do enough while I had a chance to help," says Billy.