

# Notes of Inspiration

If you're a music lover, you're sure to be inspired by these stories from people who have refused to allow hearing loss to rob them of their enjoyment of music. With the help of technology, tenacity and a lot of talent they not only appreciate music—they make it!



# From College to Carnegie Hall

BY CHARLES MOKOTOFF

## Unstrung by Hearing Loss

I experienced a sudden onset of hearing loss in both ears at 15 years of age. It left me with severe-to-profound loss, which has not worsened much over the years. I was already playing guitar in some local rock music groups with friends and decided to continue playing despite my hearing loss.

When I got to college, though, I met someone who played classical guitar and I was completely hooked. I was totally awed by it and picked up a classical guitar somewhere and just kept working at it with the help of several very good, understanding teachers.

Besides the beguiling beauty of the guitar music, the other thing that really attracted me to classical guitar was the fact that it is a predominantly solo instrument. I did not have to worry about communicating with other members of a band or ensemble when I played it. I graduated cum laude from Syracuse University with a bachelor's degree in music, concentrating on classical guitar, and then went on to Ithaca College, where I received a master's degree in the same field. I was immediately hired to teach in the music department at Ithaca and began a performance career that lasted about 15 years.

## The Big Time

I made my Carnegie Hall debut in 1987. In addition to performing on the east coast, I also played several concert tours in the Far East, including Singapore, the Philippines and Hong Kong. (Communicating with the many non-native English speakers I encountered was quite a challenge!) Despite the difficulties I overcame, I decided to stop playing in 1992. I felt I had gone as far as I could go, and I wondered what it would be like to live where I didn't feel my hearing loss would be seen as something peculiar. Along the way, I worked in the information technology field, married a woman who was deaf, had two beautiful children, later divorced and began anew.

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## A 20th Birthday Shout Out to AAMHL

Some HLAA members who have a special appreciation for music are also members of the Association of Adult Musicians with Hearing Loss (AAMHL), a nonprofit organization created by Wendy Cheng, an accomplished musician with hearing loss who was featured in the winter 2021 issue of *Hearing Life*.

By the time I picked up my guitar again in 2006 after that long hiatus, I was wearing digital hearing aids; the sound of the guitar was different than I recalled from my old days with analog hearing aids. It took a few years to adjust but fortunately, I found many friends who joined me on that journey and had made similar adjustments themselves. I'm grateful for their friendship and glad I found my way back to my music. **HL**

*Charles Mokotoff holds bachelor's and master's degrees in guitar performance from Syracuse University and Ithaca College, respectively. He has served on the faculties of numerous colleges and universities in New York and the New England area as a lecturer in classical guitar and lute. From the mid-1990s through his recent retirement from the National Institutes of Health, he was an information technology specialist focusing on web development, intranet technologies and system security. Currently, he makes his home in Bethesda, Maryland, and spends most of his time practicing, recording, and performing classical guitar. He is also an adjunct professor in the IT department at Gallaudet University in Washington, DC, where he teaches classes on IT ethics, social media and technical writing. Charles was the cover feature of the January/February 2010 issue of Hearing Loss Magazine.*



# Bionic Woman

BY BLUE O'CONNELL

## Cochlear Implantation to the Rescue

Many years ago, a musician friend invited me over to hear his new piano composition. After waiting for what seemed a long time, I finally asked, "When are you going to play me your new song?" He was stunned and replied, "I just did—didn't you hear it?" I didn't.

That was how I learned that I had severe hearing loss. I was 25 years old, and doctors believed I was born with some hearing loss that was further complicated by a case of mononucleosis in my early 20s. For years I was able to hear well enough with hearing aids but at the age of 50, I was advised to consider a cochlear implant (CI).

## Reestablishing My Connection to Music

I have learned a lot from my journey with hearing loss and music. Regaining music perception took months of persistence, concentration and patience. I worked with a music teacher who drilled me with pitch perception, interval recognition and sight singing exercises. Musical intervals are analogous to the alphabet in language. When doing speech recognition exercises, we first focus on one-syllable words, graduate to small phrases and then move on to sentences and stories.

My music rehab followed this same logic. Initially I focused on intervals or the distance between two notes, and then I graduated to melodies and finally to complete songs. I worked with a music teacher who used her piano to play common intervals found in many melodies. For example, an octave can be found in the first two notes in "Over the Rainbow" and a perfect fourth in the first two notes of "Here Comes the Bride." By isolating these pitches, just as I isolated the alphabet in words, I was able to regain the perception of these sounds.

Much of our work in CI rehab involves something called "neuroplasticity," which is a process in which the brain reestablishes connections we had before the onset of hearing loss. My 30-plus years of musical training, beginning with percussion in a high school band and later classical guitar, prepared me well for my CI auditory rehab, as it was similar to what I needed to succeed at being a good CI user.

## Music Practitioner, Singer/Songwriter and Author

I also gained inclusion into a caring community of others like me who have hearing loss. Long considered an "invisible" disability, hearing loss can be quite isolating. It is a wonderful experience to go from feeling left out to being



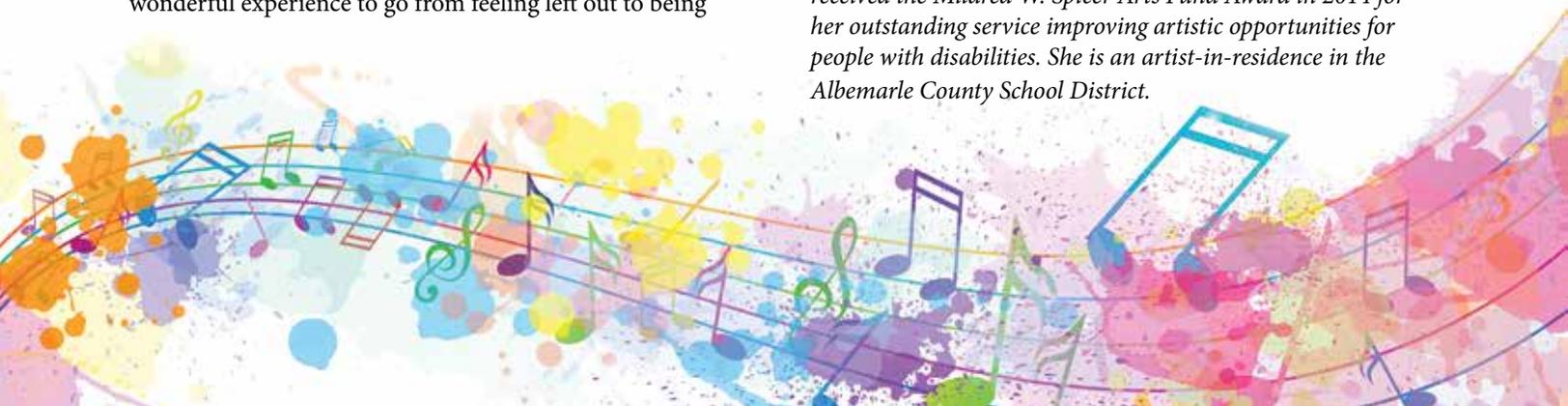
welcomed into a supportive fellowship of others who walk the same path.

Since my implantation in 2009, I contributed to CI university research studies around the U.S., participated as a panelist in the Symposium for Music and Cochlear Implants in Montreal in 2016, and was a two-time finalist in the Beats of Cochlea Music Festival in Warsaw. How my life has been greatly enriched since becoming a bionic woman!

Two years after implantation I left my office job of 14 years and became a professional musician. I am a certified music practitioner, playing therapeutic music on my guitar for hospital patients, people with disabilities and nursing home residents. I am also a singer/songwriter and released my first CD, *Choose the Sky*, in 2011. The recording took five years to complete because I took a break during my CI surgery and rehab.

In 2020, I released an e-book, *Seven Songs of Solace*, for solo guitar, and I donated the proceeds to Doctors Without Borders (Medicins Sans Frontieres) and the Association of Adult Musicians with Hearing Loss (AAMHL). Learn more at [blueoconnell.com](http://blueoconnell.com). **HL**

*Blue O'Connell is a certified music practitioner, singer/songwriter, guitarist and public speaker. She grew up in inner city Chicago, where she cultivated a passion for the arts at an early age. Since relocating to Charlottesville, Virginia, in 1989, she has been active in the local music scene, serving as a radio announcer at WTJU for 20 years and performing locally. Blue received the Mildred W. Spicer Arts Fund Award in 2014 for her outstanding service improving artistic opportunities for people with disabilities. She is an artist-in-residence in the Albemarle County School District.*



# A Song in My Heart

BY ANGELA P. HILL

## My Passion for Music

Imagine a little, six-year-old girl with her mother, walking out of a hearing aid dispenser's office after receiving her first hearing aid. As her mother turns on the radio in the car, the little girl instantly hears music and immediately begins to be-bop (dance) to it. That little girl was me.

In the early 1970s, I embarked upon my journey into the world of mainstream public school education in Norfolk, Virginia, where I had a speech therapist from elementary school to high school. Other than having hearing loss, I was a typical child no different from other kids. Yet, what shaped me personally as an individual was my passion for music.

In my early years, I had moderate-to-severe hearing loss that didn't really create an obstacle to my love and appreciation for music. Not long after receiving my first hearing aid, and later a second one for the opposite ear, I began taking piano lessons. I loved the piano, and I took lessons from two dynamic piano teachers. I also took organ lessons. In middle school and high school, I sang in the school chorus and girls' ensemble, and I was even given the opportunity to audition and then be selected for the All-City Chorus. Music was my heart. Yet, I had no idea at that time that the type of hearing loss I had was progressive, and it was not until spring of 2019 that I learned it is actually part of a syndrome.

## Discovering a Talent for Teaching

By the time I was in high school, I was determined to major in music education in college, and it was also in high school that my beloved piano teacher—the late, great Mrs. Ianthia Virginia Uzzle—saw my potential to be a piano teacher. She positively affected my life in a



way that I still feel now. I did, in fact, teach piano for a number of years even as my hearing loss progressively, insidiously worsened. I was unaware of just how stealthy the loss was until it was so obvious I couldn't deny it. By the close of my senior year, just before I was to start college, I begin to suspect that something was terribly wrong with my hearing. Yet, I felt it could be fixed with stronger hearing aids. For four years, I persevered and eventually graduated from college, cum laude, with a degree in Public School Music. I even did my student teaching at three public schools. Yet music, over time, was sounding more and more distorted.

## Hitting a Sour Note

By 1988, I was also suffering from recruitment, or discomfort with sound volume, and tinnitus. Eventually, my progressive hearing loss got to the point that I could no longer teach piano, even though I had previously had as many as 21 piano students at the height of my teaching career. Sadly, I was forced to close my music school.

As a result, frustration, depression and even flagging self-worth dominated my life in the early 1990s. Music no longer sounded pleasant, aside from the occasional deep bass my hearing aids managed to decipher on certain songs.

## Tuning In With Technology

I began to research cochlear implants (CIs) to see if they might help me, and it was my good fortune to meet Wendy Cheng, the founder of the Association of Adult Musicians with Hearing Loss (AAMHL), who schooled me at greater depth about CIs. When my right ear was implanted in July 2012, and my left ear in December 2015, hope returned! My implants were an absolute game changer, and my life was transformed by the great blessing made possible by this astounding technological development. After a 20-year hiatus, I was finally able to return to my first love: playing the piano. And... drumroll... I can even sing again! **HL**

*Angela P. Hill continues to enjoy the gift of hearing through her cochlear implants. These days you can find her playing her grand piano, which she named Hope, catching up on all the years she could not play. Angela belongs to several disability-related organizations in the Hampton Roads region of the state of Virginia. She is married to her wonderful husband, Alex, a retired airman who served in Desert Storm. She can be reached at alex0027@cox.net.*

# A Little Help from My Friends

BY DAWN MOLLENKOPF

I was born with bilateral, moderate-to-moderately-severe hearing loss caused by Branchio-oto-renal syndrome. My hearing loss did not become progressive until I reached my 30s, and at the moment, it has progressed from severely profound to profound.

However, as a child, I was always drawn to music and made my debut early one morning when I was four by turning on my mother's electronic keyboard to full volume, putting my ear directly to the keys and picking out the tune "Mary Had A Little Lamb." I started piano lessons at age eight and violin at age 13, continuing with both instruments throughout my college years and performing in an orchestra.

## A Music Major With a Minor Obstacle

I experimented with majoring in music in college, with the piano as my major instrument but my piano teacher at the time was strongly unsupportive. He believed that my hearing loss would prevent me from performing "naturally" and thought I should accept this limitation. Frustrated, I switched majors and kept up with music on my own for a while, performing the first movement of the Grieg Piano Concerto in A Minor at my grandmother's nursing home. Shortly thereafter, life events took me in a different direction, and I discontinued both instruments.

Up to that point, I had not really done anything vocally except sing with friends in small groups or perform in choirs. My primary challenge was that I could hear myself but could not hear anyone else or any accompaniment, so I tended to under-sing, which affected my voice tone. However, I moved to a new town to start my doctoral degree and joined a tiny synagogue that was desperate for a musician. Because their music was performed a capella, or without accompaniment, I was in control and could easily sing solo. Within a few years, I became the lay musician people relied on when they could not get a cantor or rabbi.

## Singing the Praises of Supportive Friends

By this time, my hearing loss had progressed to the point that I could no longer hear myself effectively, and I was concerned that I would not be able to continue to perform. I consulted my audiologist, who told me that hearing aids were for speech only, and I couldn't



expect any support for music. Frustrated, I did a web search and discovered others like me who became colleagues and friends. In the summer of 2019, I performed the national anthem at the HLAA annual convention. I also gave my first, full-voice recital soon after, singing in four languages, and I am now preparing for a future full recital that will take place in a couple of years. I believe the encouragement, camaraderie and support that I have found with all my friends at HLAA and the Association of Adult Musicians with Hearing Loss (AAMHL) have been invaluable in my musical journey. I'm living proof that a loss of hearing does not have to be a loss of music. **HL**

*Dawn Mollenkopf, Ph.D., is an associate professor in Early Childhood Teacher Education at the University of Nebraska at Kearney and continues to take voice lessons with her teacher, Andy White. She recently performed in AAMHL's winter and Beethoven concerts and is currently working on a music set by the composer Hugo Wolf for a future recital. When not studying music, she enjoys gardening, cooking and decorating cookies.*



# "Broadway's Beethoven" Faces the Music

BY JAY ALAN ZIMMERMAN

## My World Came Crashing Down

Hearing loss is always scary and traumatic—I'm also a composer who became deaf, which made it life-altering. My onset of deafness coincided with the tragic events of September 11, when the Twin Towers' collapse forced my family and me out of our apartment just 1,000 feet from the south tower. It took more than a decade before epidemiological studies by the World Trade Center Health Registry confirmed that my exposure to the sudden collapse of the towers and the toxic dust clouds surrounding them caused my deafness, at least in part.

But soon after the tragedy, we moved to Virginia to recover, and all I knew was that my hearing was radically worse, my New York home and neighborhood were decimated, my composing career was in jeopardy and the thing I loved most of all... music... was vanishing.

## When the Dust Settled, I Found a New Groove

I think it was during a moment of desperate web searching that I stumbled across the announcement of a concert performance by musicians with hearing loss. I can remember sitting in some sort of small office or conference space, watching Wendy Cheng perform and feeling scared—and probably even arrogantly self-pitying—as a professional musician from New York whose life had come to this. Plus, I couldn't even hear the music.

However, Wendy inspired and encouraged me, so I joined the Association of Adult Musicians with Hearing Loss (AAMHL), and then came the opportunities. I found the courage and experience I needed to relearn how to compose music and to come out as a composer who is deaf. I started creating the songs and scenes that were destined to become my *Incredibly Deaf Musical*, an off-Broadway production.

Finding community in AAMHL helped me become honest and authentic about my hearing loss, as well as resilient, and it also helped me not only jumpstart my current career in musical theater, speaking and consulting, but also—and more meaningfully—become an inspiration and example for others who struggle with hearing issues. The hearing loss community has brought me so much support, so many new friendships and limitless opportunities to learn and grow during the past 20 years. It's definitely helped me become the better, happier version of myself that I am today.

## On With the Show

As musicians, it's our job to give the audience a great experience as well as enable listeners to have fun. It's not necessarily to create the most amazing music ever heard. When performing, I use all of my abilities to support perception and enjoyment of music: feeling vibrations through my fingers, strengthening and triggering auditory memories to hear music in my mind and closely watching the actions of music-making in the bodies of singers and instrumentalists in order to get a sense of dynamics and emotional intent before any sound is even produced. That way, I don't have to rely on my ears except when absolutely necessary because over-amplification makes my hearing worse and possibly damages what little hearing I have left. But the biggest secret is that I prepare for failure by hiding visual cues in the performance, so that we can all stay together in important moments and finish the piece at the same time—even if everything else falls apart. No matter what happens, I smile and nod as if it were my best performance ever, so the audience believes me. And I always take a bow. **HL**

*Jay Alan Zimmerman is a composer, author, speaker and visual music innovator. A partial list of his many works includes: Seeing Music visualizers (Google Creative Labs); Score of Roboticus with EMMI musical robots (Spotify); SETS MUSIC for the Deaf curriculum (Teachers College); BRAIN. STORM. film (YouTube.com/Prospect Theater Co.); Incredibly Deaf Musical (Marjorie S. Deane Little Theater, Duke on 42nd Street); A Royal Soap Opera, The Clurman (Prospect Theatre Lab); Smokin' (Duplex); and My Café Cinderella (Arts & Artists). Every year he debuts a new holiday song at Lincoln Center for his Naughty & Nice Holiday Songbook, available on Amazon.*



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# Feeling My Way With Music

BY EMMA FAYE RUDKIN

In ninth grade, I signed up for piano lessons. I wasn't looking for a music teacher who taught people who are deaf; I was just looking for a really good piano teacher. A lot of people asked, "How did you find a teacher who knew how to teach children with hearing loss?" Many parents of children who are deaf or hard of hearing are very hesitant to permit their own children to take music lessons or tackle a difficult hobby. Sometimes children with hearing loss need the opportunity to try—and even fail—because they might actually be able to learn music if their parents are not holding them back. Kids need to experience trial and error; it is a necessary part of life. They may surprise their parents with their ability to adapt or learn a skill.

## Feeling Those Good Vibrations

It is proven that missing one sense makes all the others more acute. I believe my deafness enabled me to develop the sense of feeling the vibrations of music and visually learn how hard or soft or long to hold the piano keys for notes. I simply used sight, rather than sound. I could memorize a musical piece based on feeling it—not by hearing it. I would often practice around 10 p.m. at night, much to the annoyance of my family members who can hear, I am sure. I would purposefully take off my hearing aids and learn a piece by feeling, laying my head against the upright piano and closing my eyes. I felt great joy in feeling the vibrations with the tips of my fingers, then with my arms and throughout my chest. The melody danced inside my being.

Even as I sang along to the radio in the car, I pulled up the mid and bass frequencies as far as they could go. If the car shook from the vibrations, that was perfect! It was right where I wanted it to be. I learned to sing by singing in the corner of my bathroom; it had cold tile floors, and the echo was incredible. I could correct notes and learn sounds. I kept my boom box in the corner of the bathroom so I could repeat the notes. I continued practicing what I was feeling and, although I am profoundly deaf, I learned not only how to sing but also play four instruments: the piano, guitar, ukulele and kick drum.

As a freshman in college, I set my sights on being Miss America, but instead became Miss San Antonio in 2015 and 2017—the first Miss San Antonio who was deaf and the only one to win twice since 1923. I broke a lot of barriers for hearing loss, as I placed in the top five in the Miss Texas competition in 2017. I chose playing guitar and singing as my talent, and at the last minute I added a box drum with a pedal attachment.

## Working to Aid the Silent

Along the way, I also founded a nonprofit organization known as Aid the Silent, whose mission is to be a source of support that helps and provides financial assistance to economically disadvantaged children and teens who are deaf or hard of hearing. Our organization offers access to training in American Sign Language (ASL), speech and hearing aids and/or assistive communication technology that enables these youth to develop the crucial communication skills that will enrich the quality of their lives.

## Raising Awareness With Music, TV and Film

My team at Aid the Silent and I also host the annual Good Vibrations Music Fest, an accessible, all-day musical festival that brings the deaf and hard of hearing community together with the hearing world in a way never seen before. Our festival enhances music for festivalgoers with hours of musical performances that encompass live captioning, ASL interpretation, t-coils, vibrating backpacks, a sound wave wall and an LED dance floor that syncs with the music.

Musician Ryan Proudfoot and I recently co-wrote and produced the soundtrack for the documentary *Love Hears*.

Currently, my black Labrador retriever, Hank, and I appear on the PBS TV series, *Hank and Emma Faye*, produced by KLRN in San Antonio, Texas. The series focuses on inclusion, kindness and loving one's neighbor. I was also featured in the IMAX movie, *Into America's Wild*. I have also filmed the pilot for an ABC series, *Ordinary to Extraordinary*.

Music still refreshes my soul and brings me joy. My hope for you is that you feel the music, too. **HL**

*Emma Faye Rudkin became profoundly deaf at the age of three and has spent her life turning her disability into an extraordinary ability. Visit Emma Faye Rudkin and Aid the Silent at [aidthesilent.com](http://aidthesilent.com). Emma was the cover feature for the November/December 2016 issue of Hearing Loss Magazine.*



# Living the Reimagined Dream

BY RICHARD REED

I've been a late-deafened musician for three decades. Actually, I'm a late-deafened, hearing-restored musician now. There's a big difference. I wince when I hear that candidates for cochlear implant (CI) surgery wait an average of six or seven years before moving forward because that was what I did, too. I got stuck in severe-to-profound procrastination and waited too many long, quiet years before scheduling CI surgery. (I get it: we move forward when we're ready—sure.) All these years later, I can laugh about the many discombobulated situations hearing loss helped create. But I don't like thinking of all the lost conversations I "coulda, shoulda, woulda" had, not to mention all the music I missed in the mist.

## CI Surgery Rocked My World

I dreamt about music while deaf, playing in my imagination with pals, strangers and famous acquaintances to adoring, ethereal crowds. After getting a CI and after working hard at speech and harder still at music rehabilitation, I've been living the dream again, in ironic, beautiful and goofy ways. I'm getting too old to schlep heavy gear into low places full of high people three or four nights a week (and twice on Saturdays), but it keeps me young at heart.

## My CI Turned the Tide

Less than an hour from almost anywhere in the state, on the shore in Rhode Island, the Ocean Mist is not so much on the beach as literally in it. At high tide, waves crash beneath its weathered deck overlooking Block Island. It's scary and gorgeous. The Mist is one of the last great east coast beach bars, and I played there every Saturday afternoon for six years. Our band would play from 3:30 p.m. to 6:30 p.m., allowing just enough time to play elsewhere that night. It was a dream gig. Drummer Mike Warner assembled each week's band: usually Dean Cassell or my brother Tom on bass, me on keys and a wildly rotating cast of uber-talented guests on guitars, vocals and/or horns. Every Saturday, we performed a completely different mix of classic and obscure rock 'n' roll, blues and R&B tunes. It became a point of pride that we could rip through so many songs we'd never rehearsed. It certainly kept me on my hearing-restored toes.

## From Dream Gig to COVID Nightmare

After COVID-19 hit, every live gig on planet Earth was canceled. Now my musician pals get together every few weeks on Zoom to virtually hang out, catch up and share memories, song and employment ideas and bleak humor.

It feels like the break between sets, but without the best part—the music. I also play music every day at home. And I've given my stage gear the kind of inside-out, deep cleaning that's happened only once before, after an all-too-real nightmare gig involving a drunken sailor spilling shots of Southern Comfort into my digital piano. Why couldn't it have been vodka? (He and his four friends were big fans and a lot bigger than I. Still, I like to think it was my innate pacifism that kept the fool from being pummeled by a mic stand.) I stay busy tweaking and retweaking my keyboard settings, learning new sounds, and I take part in virtual CI music research. I learn new songs and relearn old ones, and hope things change soon.

The state motto of Rhode Island is "Hope." It's nice and succinct, as well as hard to misinterpret. The Ocean Mist is once again booking bands (albeit in tentative pencil), hoping something can happen sometime in summer 2021. We may play indoors to a smaller, vaccinated, masked crowd while projecting performances to an outdoor Jumbotron ("Hello, neighbors!"). When the pandemic first hit, I wondered if people would ever again go out to see and hear live music in crowded rooms. A full year later everyone I know is aching to get out. I only hope they'll be patient enough to wait until it's safe.

So here's hoping we can go to the beach next summer—or the one after. Maybe we'll meet in the Ocean Mist some sunburnt Saturday. I probably won't buy you a drink. But if you write a reasonable request on a cocktail napkin, our never-the-same-twice band, the Ocean Mistics, might try playing it whether we know it or not. Until we meet again on some enchanted evening or afternoon (or, ugh, online), here's hoping we all stay well, living our reimagined dreams. **HL**

*Prior to becoming late-deafened, Richard Reed played piano and organ with such notables as Junior Walker & the All Stars, Otis Rush, Hubert Sumlin, Roomful of Blues, Mark Cutler and many other artists. Richard's hearing was successfully restored by CI surgery in 2002—along with his musical career.*



# My Musical Journey

BY STU NUNNERY

## A Detour on My Road to Success

My musical journey has been quite a trip: it began at the age of four when I began playing piano by ear. Later, I followed a path to a career as a professional musician, composer, singer and recording artist. In 1973, I released my first LP with two songs which made the Top 100 on the U.S. charts and a #1 hit in Brazil. By the end of the decade, I was also writing and performing jingles for national advertising campaigns and composed a still popular parade theme for Disney: *I'm Walkin' Right Down the Middle of Main Street USA*. I was 29.

Over the next 18 months, I endured bilateral sensorineural hearing loss that prevented me from performing live, as well as recording music—and silenced me musically for the next 40 years. My left ear was gone, and the hearing in my right ear hung by a thread. For the next several decades I used a single hearing aid and endured punishing tinnitus and fractious pitch distortion. Imagine hitting middle C on the keyboard and hearing strange sounds, tones, overrings—everything but Middle C.

## Perfect Pitch Took a Lot of Practice

In 2015, desperate to make music again, I began a years-long journey without knowing what to do or where to turn. Relative to pitch distortion, I had learned that the speech setting on my hearing aid gave me musical notes that were a half to a full tone sharp. I decided to move into a later model, digital hearing aid with music settings and an omnidirectional microphone with the processing from the speech setting rolled off. It gave me a flatter and truer tonal response.

Next, I began working with a hearing specialist, Geoff Plant, who helped improve my speech comprehension through focused listening exercises. I found that the more my speech comprehension improved, the better my musical hearing became. Geoff also stressed the importance of accessing the music inside me to employ muscle memory, as well as my talents for trying to reconstruct an internal musical baseline.

## New Tools and Old Tricks

I resumed vocal lessons, but after several sessions, my coach suggested that I should adjust my quest and begin speaking my lyrics instead of singing them, as I still could not reach or hold my pitch. I would not accept that.

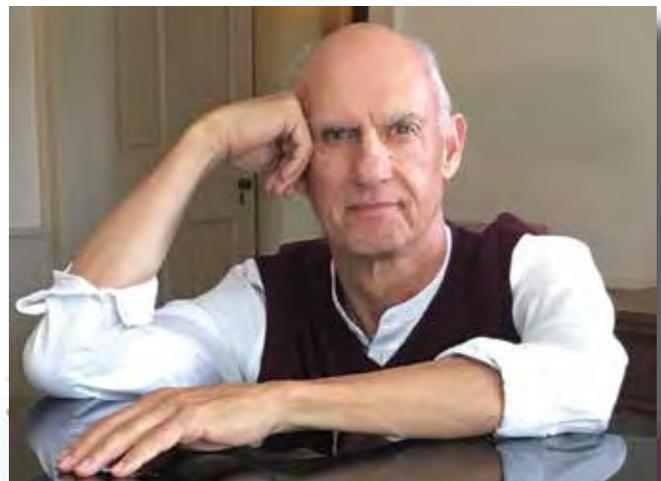
We did, however, revise some tricks from my earlier days: I would play the melody to a song I wanted to sing in my right hand on the piano, and use that to guide my voice.

Eager to perform, though hardly ready, I launched a few live performances as works in progress. Given my past successes, they could only be called embarrassing. Dazzling piano work, off-key singing. But I knew that I was improving.

By 2017, I had a plan, a strategy, new tools and old tricks to help me connect the dots to my musical self. Slowly—painstakingly slowly—it was working. At the end of that year, I performed a successful, 12-song concert for fans of my earlier music and in 2018 I stepped into the recording studio for the first time in 40 years. I brought along a set of special ear monitors with an analog hearing aid in my right (“good”) ear, and a microphone in my left ear to pick up additional room and vocal sounds. The results were unexceptional, but the way forward was clear.

Today, I play and sing my own songs and lyrics, as well as other songs that I enjoy, and record my music with relative ease. I hear pure tones again—Middle C is now middle C. I vocalize daily, and I listen to every genre of music and continue to strengthen those parts of me that are helping me make music again. **HL**

*Stu Nunnery is a professional writer, musician, composer, actor and activist. A graduate of Princeton University, Stu has studied piano, voice, acting, improvisation and public speaking. Recently, Stu completed a screenplay, Good Enough, about his musical journey. He is a member of the Association of Adult Musicians with Hearing Loss (AAMHL) and expresses his activism as a Phonak “hEARo” and “HearStrong Champion.” Visit the HLAA website at [hearingloss.org](http://hearingloss.org) to replay the Good Enough webinar with Stu and his wife, Laurel Jonason.*



# The Sounds of Music

BY SHERRY ANNE

**S**woosh... swoosh... I hear it: it is the sound of the pearl waves as they crash into the shoreline and then recede. It is majestic. How have I not heard this sound before? I can't help but wonder how many other sounds I've missed before receiving my first set of digital hearing aids. I would soon find out.

Chirp, chirp... tweet tweet... shrieeek!

"What is that awful noise?" I said to my friend, who was out taking a walk with me.

"You mean the birds?" she asked, quizzically.

"Birds? Those are birds?" I exclaimed.

"Yes," she said.

"Well, they sound miserable," I said.

## A Burning Desire for Music

And with that, we both laughed. Then it hit me: I just heard birds! Birds, whose voices are among the highest frequency sounds, and I heard them!

High-frequency loss is my greatest trouble. My hearing ranges from normal in the low tones to severe loss in the high tones. (I still remember the first time I heard paper crackle in the fireplace after receiving my very first pair of analog hearing aids; I was so amazed that I kept crumpling up paper and throwing it in the fire!)

There is one sound, however, that I have always heard, and that is music. I have gravitated toward the sounds of music for as long as I can remember. It excites my soul and motivates me. Take note, I do not hear music as others do. I do not hear individual parts or instruments, but rather a giant symphonic cacophony! I know that sounds like an oxymoron but it adequately describes my hearing loss. I don't recognize all that I am hearing—just that I am hearing sound, and it moves me.

## Singing My Little Heart Out

I have wanted to sing, and express myself through song, since I was a little girl. I would sing into my hairbrush for an audience of one—my reflection in the mirror. My cats usually left the room, along with the dog. There was a problem, but I didn't know about it yet.

My parents were on the brink of divorce at the time I started kindergarten. I entered school and performed very poorly; my earliest report cards bore largely unsatisfactory marks. I was reprimanded for not listening and punished regularly. With my home life in disarray, I was quickly branded a problem child, rather than a child with a problem. That is, until I had my first school physical.

The nurse notified my mother immediately, and I began a series of doctor's appointments and tests. The first doctor labeled me a "spoiled brat" and declared that I was "defiant" and only listened when I wanted to. The next doctor discovered my secret, unknown even to me: I was a lipreader. That was how I'd managed to get by for the first five years of my life.

## From ABCs and Degrees to CDs and DVDs

From there, my life took a drastic turn. I was fitted for my first hearing aid, and my grades improved. I was fitted for a second hearing aid, and my grades shot through the roof. That success, coupled with seven years of speech therapy, fueled my desire to engage in all of the usual activities of school life: drama club, all-county choir, band and sports.

I graduated in the Top Ten of my class of 500 students and pursued a doctorate degree in chiropractic, but I never forgot my love of music. I continued to sing and make music, throughout all of my academic pursuits. In 2019, I retired from my "day job" and now earn a living doing what truly resonates with me: singing gospel music and sharing inspirational messages of hope and joy. To me, life doesn't "sound" any better than that! **HL**

*Sherry Anne is frequently featured as a keynote speaker at various events. She has appeared in films and on television. Her songs have charted nationally on the Top 80 Singing News Chart, and her first DVD, Sherry Anne LIVE!, reached #5 on the Billboard Music Video charts. She is the author of two children's books and currently has seven full length CDs, including a children's CD. Visit her website at [sherryanne.com](http://sherryanne.com).*

