

Vanderbilt-Ingram Cancer Center

ABOUT VICC

- ▶ Contact Us
- ▶ Maps & Directions
- ▶ Make a Gift
- ▶ News Room

PATIENTS & FAMILIES

- ▶ Cancer Information
- ▶ Make an Appointment
- ▶ Clinical Trials
- ▶ Find a Doctor

CANCER PROFESSIONALS

- ▶ Refer a Patient
- ▶ Research & Science
- ▶ SPORES
- ▶ VICCAN
- ▶ Meharry Partnership

IN THE COMMUNITY

- ▶ Events Calendar
- ▶ Momentum

INTRANET



The Night the Music Stopped

by Heather L. Hall

If you've ever had the chance to hear B.B. King live on stage, you might've also heard the guitar player David MacKenzie. The 57 year-old's skilled hands have strummed the strings and led him to the top of the blues and jazz circuit from Chicago to Los Angeles and finally here to Nashville.

MacKenzie has played live with some of the greats- King, Muddy Waters, Leon Redbone, and Buddy Guy to name a few. His song, "Let Me Drive," on comedian Jeff Foxworthy's platinum-selling album "Crank it Up," helped him earn enough money for a down payment on his home.

Music also led MacKenzie to find his other love in life. He met Adie Grey, when the singer-songwriter answered his newspaper ad looking for a singer. Twenty-one years later, the pair is still making music together.

But the music stopped one night on a stage in St. Louis, when MacKenzie's left hand became cramped and stiff. "I couldn't play. I had to get my friends up there to help me through it. It was the worst I've played in over 40 years, and I could barely get through it."

He went home and began making appointments to see specialists- a chiropractor, neurologist, a hand specialist. Two months went by with no answer. "It was strange, I started feeling run-down and was less and less able to play guitar. My left hand was taking longer and longer to warm-up. I thought it was arthritis, old age."

It was cancer.

MacKenzie had something called a Pancoast Tumor. It's a rare type of lung cancer that affects the top area of the lungs. The tumor had invaded a complex group of nerves called the brachial plexus, which is made up of nerves from the lower four nerves in the neck area and the first

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David MacKenzie

MacKenzie will release a DVD in May featuring some of his live performances. You can find out more about his music and Grey's online at:

www.heybabymusic.com.

MacKenzie and Grey co-wrote a song on one of Grey's albums last year, perhaps before ever knowing what would later be some of their darkest days. The song offers a message for facing life's tough times:

*Mr. Armstrong sang a song, a long, long time ago,
All we need to know, how to find a rainbow,
At the darkest hour, in the middle of the night, I know Mr. Armstrong got it right.*

*Skies of blue sometimes turn to skies of gray,
When they do and the rain won't go away,
I'll just say to myself, it's still a wonderful world*

thoracic or chest nerve. These delicate nerves, in part, control the hand movements and were impacting MacKenzie's left hand, which typically handles intricate chord changes when playing guitar.

MacKenzie first received the diagnosis at another hospital, and was told surgery to remove the tumor was not an option. "It was a scary time," said his wife. "We were hearing stuff like amputation." MacKenzie said there were times when he wasn't sure he'd make it. "I had a couple of moments where I thought I could die from this," revealed MacKenzie. He began looking for second and third opinions, and his search led him to Vanderbilt where a team of physicians would ultimately save his life, and possibly the use of his left hand.

"It is a relatively rare and delicate surgery," said David Johnson, M.D., who specializes in lung cancer and is director of Hematology/Oncology at Vanderbilt-Ingram Cancer Center. "He has already lost partial use of his hand and it was highly likely we would have to sacrifice part of the nerve complex and as a result he would have a clawed hand," said Johnson.

MacKenzie knew what he was up against, having been told only about 40 percent of people with this kind of cancer survive, so playing again wasn't his first concern. "Everything after alive is bonus points. I learned what it is like to be genuinely afraid," said MacKenzie. "If I can get this left hand to work then I'll do what I can. Whatever happens with my left hand, it's not going to stop me from liking music. I get to stay a fan, even if I don't get to play."

Treatment would require a team approach and attacking the tumor with chemotherapy, radiation and surgery. MacKenzie had already received several rounds of chemotherapy and radiation before coming to Vanderbilt, so he was ready for the next step.

Matthew Ninan, M.D., assistant professor of Thoracic Surgery, and Kyle Weaver, M.D., assistant professor of Neurosurgery, both members of Vanderbilt-Ingram, would be tasked with trying to remove the tumor and save MacKenzie's nerves, and his life. Their teamwork would be crucial. "We could get rid of his cancer, but if we left his hand paralyzed it was possible he would never be able to pick up the instrument again," said Ninan. Grey said it was Weaver's approach that helped to ease their concerns. "He saw this as a challenge. He said, 'I think I might be able to help you.' He gave us hope," said Grey.

So, Ninan worked closely with Weaver in the operating room. "The tumor was pulling on his nerves," said Weaver. "His nerves were not anatomically where we thought they would be when we looked for them. They had been pulled down from the tumor, most likely when it shrunk after the radiation," he added.

Weaver said once the nerves were located and the tumor could be removed, the nerves shift back into place. "It didn't appear that they had been badly damaged during the course of the operation and it seemed reasonable he would come out of the surgery at least as well as he went in," said Weaver.

The surgery was successful and Ninan was able to remove the entire tumor and considers MacKenzie cancer free. "Most medical centers in this area are

wonderful world.

*It may be all my dreams will
not come true,
I may see all my best laid plans
fall through,
I keep telling myself, it's still a
wonderful world.*

*Winter somehow gives us
spring,
Any day now roses will bloom,
robins will sing,*

*Skies of blue sometimes turn to
skies of gray,
When they do I'll just shake my
head and say,
Mr. Armstrong was right, it's
still a wonderful world.*

unable to coordinate the necessary teamwork to treat such complex cancers. A multidisciplinary effort really helps these patients. He was the epitome of that," said Ninan. Weaver agreed. "It means a lot for a patient, because there are a group of physicians who are comfortable working together and have a collaborative spirit," said Weaver. "I certainly think something like this can only be done in a large institution like this."

Johnson still recommended chemotherapy after surgery. He said patients with Pancoast Tumors are typically given a 50 to 60 percent survival rate for the first five years after diagnosis. "This is one of the big problems. Do you want to err on the side of conservatism? But with cancer, you want to err on the side of the patient," said Johnson. MacKenzie didn't like the idea of feeling sick from more chemotherapy, but he didn't hesitate to go along with Johnson's plan. "I just decided it was a really worthwhile bargain. Get sick now as opposed to taking a risk with your life."

Johnson said using the triple combination of therapy, most patients will survive. "He is not out of the woods by any stretch. His neurological deficit is severe, but with a lot of therapy it is possible he could recover use of his hands to play again. I hope so," added Johnson.

MacKenzie is undergoing intensive hand therapy and already notices improvements. "It feels more controllable from the therapy. I tried picking up a ukulele," he said. MacKenzie has also tried picking up a guitar, but he's not able to play yet. "I got some sounds out with it on my lap," he said. But he's still healing from surgery and dealing with the last rounds of post-surgical treatment. He doesn't expect to know the full picture of what cancer has done to his hand for months, possibly longer. "They've said that the nerves heal up at the rate of about a centimeter a month. So, the soonest I will know is the end of the year."

Johnson said it couldn't have turned out any better. "He had the best possible outcome given the set of circumstances he was given." Ninan said he too is hopeful the team effort paid off and time will heal the nerves, allowing MacKenzie to get back to making music. "He will always have some disability in that hand, but I think he will be able to play his guitar. His wife and he have shown remarkable courage in fighting this disease," said Ninan.

MacKenzie said he couldn't have gone through this journey without his wife by his side. "If I was on my own, I'd have been dead." Grey said her husband's struggles are their struggles. "It's my day to day life. It's my business, my love, my everything. Are we going to grow old together? I live minute by minute, day to day," she said.

For now, Grey and MacKenzie are enjoying a little down time, writing some songs together and taking time to heal. Grey, who plays mountain dulcimer, is doing the strumming for now. Whatever the road ahead holds, the duo said they'll face it. MacKenzie said he will always have both of the loves of his life. "If it doesn't come back I can play some lap guitar or piano. What I do is not who I am. At the end of the day, I feel lucky."