Still Singing

Veteran bluesman Curtis Salgado was told his liver cancer would kill him in six months. That was 14 years ago.

June 15, 2020 By Chris Azzopardi

By the time Curtis Salgado was wailing a four-letter expletive on his friend's floor, he knew his health had taken a hit. For years, he'd had hepatitis C, which had led to early-stage cirrhosis and, now, gallstones. It was 2006—before his first terminal cancer diagnosis and his quadruple bypass.

Salgado, who is a self-employed musician, had no health insurance. He wound up in the hospital for nearly a week but feared receiving a bill he couldn't afford. So he ignored the signs that his health was suffering and left, hoping for the best because "that's the kind of knucklehead I am," he says.

Then the doctor called. A biopsy had detected a cancerous tumor the size of a clementine (5.5 centimeters, about 2.2 inches) on his liver. Even as he was on the phone, his overburdened body collapsed to the floor as he yowled the f-word. "From that point on," he says, "it was a roller coaster ride."

In the years since, the soul singer-songwriter has had many reasons to sing the blues.

The good news? He's still singing the blues.

"I Told Myself I'd Never Get Cancer"

Salgado's liver cancer diagnosis didn't come out of nowhere—not when he considers his history. The 66-year-old musician was in his early 20s when he became the leader of the blues band The Nighthawks and, a few years later, co-leader of the Robert Cray Band. Drugs were everywhere. "I did it all," he says. "I shot up drugs, I smoked drugs, drank a lot, partied. Then I just went, 'I've had enough.'"

He saw the devastating effects lung cancer had on his mother, a chain-smoker—it killed her. "It wasn't pretty, and I told myself I'd never get cancer," he says. Shaken by her death, he was galvanized to take better care of himself.

So at 35, Salgado entered a treatment facility and beat his addictions. He started working out, lost weight, focused on music again, played bigger venues and in 1991 released his first solo album, Curtis Salgado & the Stilettos.

But the damage to his body, particularly to his liver, had been done. Just before the album's release, he learned he had hepatitis C. He skipped most of the treatments, which at the time were costly, caused flu-like symptoms and were not very effective. (He was eventually treated and cured with new medications in 2016.)

By 2006, liver damage from hepatitis C had led to liver cancer. Radiation shrank the tumor somewhat, but his doctor told him that if he didn't get a liver transplant soon, the cancer would be terminal, and he'd have only six months to live. "All you can do is just think about it, and just one day at a time," he says about the grim prognosis. "You're just thinking, How am I gonna get out of this? I was on a journey that was just—you had 10 different paths in front of you, and, basically, you picked the wrong one, and it could be you're doomed."

The tumor was so large that all but one transplant center refused him treatment. But after six months, he underwent successful liver transplant surgery at the Nebraska Medical Center in Omaha. He still lacked health insurance, but a benefit concert in Salgado's hometown of Portland, Oregon, paid for the transplant. While he recovered in the hospital, Bonnie Raitt, with whom he had toured, covered his rent. Once he returned home, he took it easy for a year. Everything considered, he calls it "a wonderful miracle."

Three weeks later, however, a biopsy of his old diseased liver detected a microscopic invasion of a small blood vessel. Eight months later, the cancer had metastasized. (If it had been found before the transplant, he wouldn't have qualified for a new liver.) In early 2008, a routine checkup turned up a marble-sized cancerous mass on the lower left lobe of his left lung. He had no symptoms.

Surgery removed the tumor, but in 2012, it came back in the same spot; this time, his surgeon removed the entire lower lobe of his left lung.

Then came the heart attack. It was spring 2017. His band was leaving Vermont for a gig in upstate New York. As he loaded gear onto the tour van, he felt uncharacteristically winded; a dull ache radiated through his shoulder blades. Shortly thereafter, his mouth filled with saliva. "I didn't even know it was a heart attack," he says.

Next stop: a quadruple bypass. Back home in Portland, he took heart health classes at the local hospital, started eating smaller, healthier meals, walked more, went to physical therapy and ran on a treadmill to James Brown music.

Three months after undergoing the bypass, Salgado returned to the stage on July 4, 2017, performing at the Waterfront Blues Festival in Portland. Remarkably, his voice was unaffected, still high and loud and hard.

A Blues Brotherhood

Salgado and his mother, an amateur pianist who played for the family, made his first guitar together. He was 11. It was a cardboard toy modeled after a Fender Stratocaster. The next year, he got a real guitar. He played it at talent festivals near his childhood home in Eugene, Oregon.

“Life and music, for me, go hand in hand,” says Salgado. “It’s the thing that powers me, the thing that excites me.”

As a kid, he devoured his parent’s jazz records, including Count Basie and Fats Waller; later, his two older siblings introduced him to the music of ’60s blues icons Skip James and Paul Butterfield. Salgado started playing gigs in high school and a few years later played bars in Eugene with The Nighthawks.

He became co-leader of the Robert Cray Band. One day, in 1977, John Belushi, in town to film Animal House, came to see Salgado play. Salgado had never heard of him, but they bonded over the blues—Belushi mentioned that Ray Charles, one of Salgado’s heroes, was an upcoming guest on Saturday Night Live—and became fast friends. Salgado would later inspire Belushi’s role in the 1980 film The Blues Brothers. “Curtis opened the door to a new and more exciting area of music for me,” wrote Belushi in a letter of recommendation for his mentor. He dedicated his Blues Brothers album to Salgado.

From 1984 through 1986, Salgado fronted Roomful of Blues, and in 1991, he released the first of 10 solo albums. In 2013, at that year’s Blues Music Awards, he received the coveted B.B. King Entertainer of the Year award.

Pick Yourself Up, and Move Down the Line

“How do I take all this stuff?” he says reflecting on being surrounded by death—many of his friends have died—and having his own brushes with it. “It is what it is. You pick yourself up, and you move down the line. Life is finite.” Salgado contemplates death with pathos and wry humor on his intimate and improvisational acoustic soul-blues-Americana 2018 album, Rough Cut, a collaboration with guitarist Alan Hager. While it ruminates on the inevitabilities of aging, he says, “it’s not songs for old people.” It includes “Hell in a Handbasket,” a song he wrote while recovering from his second lung cancer surgery in 2012. The lyrics go: “Now I’ve been told by some, for all the sins I’ve done, any chance of seeing Heaven, they say it’s next to none. I supposed that’s true, if you take into consideration, everything I’ve done, I never did in moderation.” Says Salgado, with a chuckle, “it’s a fun little death ditty.” On another, “So Near to Nowhere,” he sings: “In a fever dream, drippin’ boulders of sweat, I’m asking God why I ain’t dead yet. He says, ‘I warned you boy, but you never listen, the Devil don’t want the competition.’”

That time after his second surgery was marked by prolific songwriting, and some of the songs he wrote then ended up on his new album, Damage Control, which will be released as soon as the pandemic allows. The personal and self-reflective album is about overcoming adversity, and Salgado cowrote 12 of its 13 songs—the most he’s ever written for a release.

How’s his health these days? “You can say I’m doing great. I’m doing fine.” These days, “fine” includes taking an immunosuppressant medication so that his body won’t reject his liver transplant. That makes him susceptible to pesky colds and other infections, including COVID-19. He went into quarantine in March; he definitely falls into an at-risk group for the virus.

As for cancer, he’s in remission and goes for checkups every four to six months. “After cancer,” he says, “life turns into a whole other thing.” He now focuses on what’s worth his time and energy. That includes dancing with his life partner of seven years, Suzanne, an artist—sometimes to R&B grooves, other times Louisiana zydeco. One way he stays active is by blowing into his harmonica and performing onstage, a workout on its own. “It’s something to sing 30 songs every night,” he says.

During the worst of it, Salgado drew strength from the words of Suzanne Lindley, a colon cancer survivor he met in Chicago while speaking about his harrowing experiences at the 2008 symposium for the liver cancer support group Say YES to HOPE. He hopes others find the same encouragement that helped him keep fighting even when the odds were stacked against him. “You don’t die of cancer,” she told him. “You live with cancer.”

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