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On gratitude, pop music, and making the best of a bad situation

Musician Huey Lewis discusses the illness that threatens to end his singing career, the necessary elements for crafting the perfect pop song, and staying grateful no matter what.

Obviously, your new record has a very complicated backstory. How does it feel to be out supporting this new music while still in the thick of dealing with your Ménière's disease diagnosis and treatment?

It's strange to be honest. The fact that I can't sing right now is strange. I mean, it's very weird! All this stuff was all recorded before my hearing went to crap, which was a year and nine months ago. But I'm actually having a pretty good day today to be honest.

My hearing fluctuates like crazy. On a scale from one to 10, I'm a six right now, which is as good as I've been in almost two years. I've been a six now for six weeks. I should knock on wood and almost whisper that, because that's the longest period by a mile that I've been good. When my hearing turns crap I'm not very good. I have earpieces in right now connected via Bluetooth with my phone and my television, so I can do that stuff. I can hear you. I can hear speech and the hearing aids do help, but I don't know if I can hear music yet. I'm going to try again soon to work with the band. I've tried twice before and it didn't work out so good. But the trouble is when I feel better and I'm hearing slightly better, I'd call the rehearsal. And then by the time the rehearsal came along, my hearing had gone to crap. So it is weird doing publicity for a record that you can't support playing live yet, but I'm hoping to improve.

I didn't realize that you've been dealing with hearing issues, in some capacity, for many years now.

I lost hearing in my right ear around 35 years ago. My father was a radiologist and he knew this great ENT guy who looked at my ear and said, "Well, get used to it." I said, "What? I'm a musician and a singer, what am I supposed to do?" And he says, "Well, Jimi Hendrix only had one ear, Brian Wilson had one good ear, and I myself am in a barbershop quartet and I only have one good ear. You only need one." I just said, "Ok, thanks," and then I lived on that one ear for around 30 more years... and then the other one went

out. And that's when all the trouble really started.

Ménière's disease is very mysterious. Is there anything you can do to help it?

Nobody knows anything other than that it's an inner ear disorder. I have literally read testimonials from at least 300 people who "have" Ménière's, some who say they have been cured or, say, they've gone to Germany to have their blood circulated or they relied on certain kinds of cranial massage or they took a specific supplement or had acupuncture, and then they were cured.

Every single story is different. I've been to every Ear Institute, the Mayo Clinic, and UCSF. Talked on the phone with Mass General and Harvard Medical School. These are half of the greatest otolaryngologists in America and even they don't really know. I've been told that the proper diagnosis for what I have is "we don't know." Ménière's, as Dr. Stephen Rausch at Mass General Eye and Ear says, is a debris box that they throw you when you have fullness in your ears, vertigo, hearing loss usually in one ear, and tinnitus. That's all that we know. But the interesting thing is it can change and often does, but what causes that change can be attributed to pretty much anything.

Because nobody knows anything, the landscape is rife with all kinds of easy solutions, you know what I mean? And stuff that verges on the snake oil. And then sometimes it does get better, so people credit whatever their last treatment was. So, I don't know. I've looked for triggers. I've changed my diet. I have a low-salt, all-organic diet. Bought in on all the holistic stuff. Did supplements where I took 16 pills in the morning and 20 at night. I've been to acupuncture, I've been to the chiropractor. No chocolate, no caffeine. And nothing works. And then all of a sudden it just kind of started to get better on its own. A little bit. I'm very cautious because it's only been a few weeks, but, I'm a little better.

That uncertainty must be maddening. If someone says, "Well, it's just never going to get better and it is what it is." Then perhaps you just sort of resign yourself to that reality, whatever that means for you. That's one thing. But when there's this sort of ambiguous possibility that it could come back and you don't know how or when, that makes wrapping your brain around it so much more complicated.

Possibility is better than no possibility. It's a better thing to think of it that way. But, when this first happened to me, I was essentially suicidal for about two months. I literally contemplated my demise. My kids would call me on the phone and I couldn't hear them. I could barely hear people on the telephone. It was really tough. But, you can personally get used to anything, it turns out. And obviously there's lots of people lots worse off than I am. Even with this hearing issue, I'm an incredibly lucky guy. It's important to realize that. That's the most important thing. You really have to be grateful for everything you have.

I came of age listening to your records. They feel like this inextricable part of the landscape of my life. It wasn't until I went back and really did some research that I understood how many records you have sold. It's really staggering!

That's the function of radio, right? Think about that. In the mid-'80s, there was no internet. All there was for most people was top 40 radio. The format was called CHR—contemporary hit radio—that was the only format that mattered. At any given time there were around 28 songs that were in heavy rotation and the top five songs were getting played 10 to 12 times a day. We were all competing for that narrow space. When I say all, I mean all genres. You're going to hear Huey Lewis and the News. You heard Garth Brooks. You also heard the Commodores. So all of that stuff was competing for that one space. But when you had a hit, oh god, every station in America was playing your song. That's when a hit was really a hit. We produced the *Sports* record ourselves because we knew we needed a hit.

The hardest thing for our band was my sort of gruff baritone voice, which wasn't heretofore radio friendly. So we wanted to make those commercial decisions ourselves. So really the thing we're all proudest of is maybe that we produced all our music ourselves. We wanted to make those decisions. And we aimed every song at radio, because we needed a hit. I don't look backwards much, but now that I can't do anything else, I have gone back and looked at things again. I realize now that *Sports* is really a record of its time. It's a collection of singles made for the radio. I think we sold over 10 million copies of that record. In those days, we were told that statistically it meant that one out of every 25 people in America owned a copy of it.

That kind of success is hard to fathom, but you seem to have weathered it a lot better than many of your peers.

Well, I think that's probably true. And the reason is because we weren't spring chickens when it happened. I'd been playing in bands for years at that point. I turned 30 years old with \$300 to my name. I got a record deal in 1980 and "Do You Believe in Love?" became a hit in 1982.

So, we were older than a lot of the people around us. And the other thing, we preceded MTV by a couple years. It was still an audio thing for us. We were on the radio before we were on TV. We weren't hip. Had we started later on, maybe I'd be tattooed head to foot, but that didn't matter for us. Then MTV came along, and we quickly learned that we were still better off doing things ourselves. When we signed, we made a couple of videos on our own with a woman called Kim Dempster at Videowest in San Francisco and a video camera, which was brand new. Nobody had ever seen a video camera before. It was video tape, where you could actually shoot it and then watch it right away! Oh my god. We had fun doing our videos. We did them in funny locations and outdoors and just had a ball with it.

Once things took off for us, suddenly the label brought in someone to make this big expensive video for us and we were just horrified and embarrassed by the result. After that, I just thought to myself, "Well, anybody can really do this." We'd already been producing our records, so we decided to do our own videos from then on. We decided we would just avoid the story of the song. The song zigs and the video zags instead. We'd do them outdoors in San Francisco and let the seagulls be the production. Let the seagulls choose the scenery. We had fun with it. We laughed our asses off, man. I always figured that's the way to go—have a good time. And understand that sometimes you are the person who actually knows best. Nobody understands how you should look and sound better than you.

Thanks to changes in technology, so much about how records are made is different now, but do you find that the way you guys write songs—or the way you think about albums—has changed a lot over the years?

I mean, I suppose the technology really has changed, but it hasn't changed much for us. We only do the thing one way. The song is the thing. You have to have a song. And the song has to be about something. And so therefore, you need to have the idea for that. That has to come to you from somewhere. That is a gift—the idea. And when you have the idea for a song, then you can begin to just let the idea tell you how the song is going to be.

The song is the hardest part, especially when you've already written a few, right? I mean, you write a few—now what? You don't want to repeat yourself. And by the way, you're trying to write a rock-and-roll song, which is a bit of a haiku. I mean, you really are trying to reinvent the wheel, if you will. You know what I mean? That's what you try to do, anyway. A great pop song is a song that sounds at once original and like every other song you ever heard. And so, that's what you try, that's the game. That's the mission. And it's got to be true. When the guy says, "I'm going to Kansas city. We've got some crazy little women there and I'm going to get me one." We've got to believe he's going to Kansas city and he knows about the crazy little women and he wants to get with one. And then it works. You know? And all of those things are hard. It's hard to get that into a song.

So, it took us years and years with this record. I mean, this record has seven songs on it and it's taken us about 15 years for those seven songs. I mean, we're not a prolific bunch anyway, but it's hard to get that song. My theory was as long as we were good and playing well, which we were, I figured we could stay away forever and it wouldn't matter. As long as when we came back, we were good. And then this happened with my hearing. So we said, "Okay, let's just release this stuff."

Obviously times change and tastes change and the landscape of how people buy and consume music continues to radically change, but there is a certain timelessness when it comes to a well-written pop song. That's why your records continue to live on in the popular consciousness—they hang on the strength of being packed with these really great pop songs.

That's really kind, thank you. That's very well said. And, I'm going to agree with you. [Laughs] I didn't really figure that out until someone turned our music into a musical. It's called *The Heart of Rock and Roll* and the musical director, Brian Usifer, is just wonderfully talented and an amazing guy. They had to make me a producer, obviously, but I was there mainly just to make sure that the music didn't end up

sounding terrible, or weird, or embarrassing or something. You know what I mean? First of all, Brian did an amazing job in giving each song a unique setting, things that were way different than I'd ever imagined. When you see the show it's all Huey Lewis and the News songs—like 23 of them or something—but it presents them in such a different context. That's when you realize that they are some pretty good songs, because they can still work in all of these different ways. They exist on their own, apart from a record, apart from me singing them—just as songs.

Hearing your story, I couldn't help but think about the recent Linda Ronstadt documentary, in which she talks about what it was like to lose her ability to sing. To be able to hear the music in your head but not be able to vocalize it, for a singer, must just be one of the hardest things imaginable. I think of people who continue to write music, even after they lose their hearing..

That happened to me, that same thing. I wrote this new song for the musical called "Be Someone," basically just in my head. I described it, one six minor, one six minor, and sang the melody. I could still get the melody. I wrote the song—the bones of the song, at least—while not being able to hear pitch. I heard it in my head.

Obviously that is not ideal, but if for some reason you weren't able to sing—or if the live performance part of things was no longer an option—do you feel like you could still continue to create? That you would still continue to conceptualize music and make music in some way even if you couldn't necessarily sing it?

Yeah, I think so. I actually think I can probably sing in the studio because I can manage the levels there. I can sing to my computer right here. That's what I do to keep my chops up a little bit, I've tracked with my own vocal. And I can play them and sing to them. I can do that and I can find pitch there, but it's very compressed. The sound is not that loud. It's very compressed coming out of a small speaker, very easily handled by my hearing. If it gets really loud and the low end starts to rumble, oh shit, it becomes a cacophony for me. But yes, there are other ways to be creative as well. There are silver linings to all of these things, obviously.

I haven't been able to work for two years, but because of that I've done a lot of things that I never would have been able to do, including really engaging in this musical, which we've been working on for eight years now. I've been reading a lot more and I've been actually appreciating our good fortune—our legacy and our fans. Up until two years ago, we were doing at least 75 shows a year and then trying to record a little bit when we had time. And we all have lives as well, so there's not very much time. You're constantly thinking about new projects and new stuff. For two years I haven't been able to do that.

I've got time now to read more fan mail and letters from people. The empathy and the outpouring of love is just so gratifying. For so long I was too busy to really notice it, but when you have more time you can really pay attention to that stuff. So that part is good.

You mentioned earlier that you're not typically one to look back, but a lot of people might not realize just how crazy and interesting your story actually is. Would you ever write a book?

I've been approached several times. But I'd have to actually write it myself... and then I'd have to write it, you know? You've got to find your voice with that kind of writing and it's a lot of work. I've actually written some things and I also have some other ideas for more thespian pursuits and I've written some stuff for that. Would I write a book? I mean, I think I might. But, right now I'm just trying to figure out if I can sing again. I'm in the middle of this story, as it were. But yeah, I've had an interesting life. It's true.

Suggested Huey Lewis:

Huey Lewis and the News (1980)
Picture This (1982)
Sports (1983)
Fore! (1986)
Small World (1988)
Hard at Play (1991)
Four Chords & Several Years Ago (1994)

Plan B (2001)

Soulsville (2010)

Weather (2020)

Name

Huey Lewis

Vocation

Musician, Actor, Writer

Fact

Deanne Fitzmaurice

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