All That Jazz

This Is Your Life meets Name That Tune

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There's always mood music playing inside Jimmy "Jazz" Jordan Smith's head. "I like to sing 'We'll Be Together Again' in the context of living with HIV and not knowing how long I'll last," Smith says. "Of course, if I was to fall apart, I'd just as soon go gently into the night listening to Billie Holiday's 'Travelin' Light.'"

Music seems to follow Smith wherever he goes: When he joined the Navy at 18, he was based in Rhode Island-just in time for the first year of the now-legendary Newport Jazz Festival. Eventually, Smith's jazz habit-and his burgeoning homosexuality-led the Chicago native to New York City. "I remember hanging out in Central Park trying to get picked up," he says. "I met my first lover there. I was singing, 'Lazy Afternoon' just for myself, and he came over."

Working as a secretary to support himself, Smith explored his own dream of singing, taking the stage at Greenwich Village jazz clubs, where he still performs. And he keeps up with the ever-changing sound of pop music. "Now I'm into techno music," he says. "I go to raves and dance until seven in the morning."

How old is this in-the-groove music lover? "Let's say I'm 47-plus," Smith says. "And my voice is sounding better than ever. I'm finding a deeper sense of self." Indeed, many of his memories are connected to songs, like the set of "Here's That Rainy Day" and "Almost Like Being in Love" he sang during a jam session at the prestigious Blue Note, while legendary singer Sarah Vaughan cheered from the bar. "One of the joys of my life is having known Sarah, Carmen McCrae, Nina Simone and other great musicians," he says.

Diagnosed in 1985-he recalls his powerful performance of Leon Russell's "This Song's for You" soon after he tested positive-Smith has so far refused medications, CD4 counts and viral load tests in favor of vitamins, herbs and his own form of music therapy that reflects his wildly eclectic taste. Hanging in his apartment-among music memorabilia that include the first dollar he ever made for his singing-is a quote by Buffy Saint-Marie: "Music has been my playmate, my lover and my crying towel."

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