Times of the Sign

In a blog post titled "Synthetic Division: The Times of the Sign (1992–2022)," POZ contributing writer Shawn Decker explains why he's closing a beloved chapter in his life. Below is an edited excerpt.

August 5, 2022 By Shawn Decker

This is the closing of a door on one of my longest continuous journeys, the story of what I've called myself musically—Synthetic Division—which runs from 1992 until 2022.

My love of music, the onset of puberty and being diagnosed with HIV all landed around the same time for me. My original "HIV meds" were the alternative-nation therapy of listening to my favorite bands—Depeche Mode and The Cure among the most recognizable. In 1990, I got to meet Depeche Mode through the Make-A-Wish Foundation. Standing in the presence of what I deemed to be all-powerful wizards left quite an impression.

As far as songwriting magic goes, over time, I got more comfortable around my own synthesizers. I started meeting and becoming friends with musicians, wizards conjuring their own gems, using a combination of raw emotion and intricate technique. I played my first live show as Synthetic Division in 1994. I wasn't singing yet—I just hammered folks with some experimental looping.

My life took a long-distance jumper's Olympic medal–winning effort when, two years later, I opened up about HIV. It took off in a way that I'd only dreamed about happening with my music, which, of course, was far from ready for the magazine cover and appearances on MTV HIV educational programming that my advocacy had landed me.

As a result of the response to how I chose to tell my story, music took a backseat. I threw myself into writing, a love I never knew I had until I disclosed my status publicly. Blogging, making other friends online who were living with the virus and speaking up about my experiences living with HIV was where it was at, baby!

When I circled back to my synths, things were a little bit different. My instrumental electronic jams were more cohesive, less experimental. There was an ease to songwriting that hadn't been there before, even though things were still a bit choppy. And soon enough, I wasn't as fearful of the mic. I just dialed up that reverb, and I was good to go.

With my new attitude about HIV, I wasn't afraid to let some of that enter the safe space that was my music. When my wife, Gwenn, and I first met, I actually sang one of my new songs for her in

my music room. Awkward, yes. But I was being brave once again.

Even though Synthetic Division officially started with the naming of the band in 1992, things really got cooking in 1999. I was ready to pursue music for real, figuring that if I could tell my life story in front of people, then I could sing my stupid songs in front of them too.

But 1999 is when my health started to really fail. The alternative music therapy and my newfound confidence in my music were no longer a match for HIV. I started on HIV meds.

Over the years, my performances and songs got better, even though a majority of my time was spent zipping around the country with Gwenn educating about HIV. My health had improved so quickly and dramatically that it afforded me the energy and desire to get out there as much as possible.

I've played sporadically through the years, but recently, I had a sold-out show. After my set, I felt like I'd stunk up the joint. Intellectually, I knew that was false. I just didn't feel good about it. I tried to book another show with my '80s cover band, Film on Girls, and I felt overwhelmed. It was time.

I just want to say thank you to everyone who has been a part of this aspect of my journey. There are more adventures ahead, more songs to write, more life to suss out if I am lucky. Thirty years of Synthetic Division has been a joy.

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