Tainted Goods: Mood Changes and Music Making

September 5, 2016 By Shawn Decker

I've written quite a bit about how music has helped me out with HIV, from the early years of my diagnosis at age 11 to today. From listening to my favorites to writing my own songs, music has always offered some solace. As a teenager, listening to Depeche Mode was an escape- their music touched me and allowed an emotional release because talking about HIV just wasn't on the table...

At age 20, I turned the corner and opened up about my status. At that time, I'd been working on music, but I was too shy to sing- nervous about how my voice would be interpreted and unskilled in how to approach vocal melodies. After I had a couple of years of writing my blog and speaking about HIV under my belt, I had a revelation: if I can do that, something I never thought I would, then I can sing my stupid songs for people.

It didn't take long for the issues surrounding my medical reality to creep into my music. My first (admitted) release in 1999, Tainted Goods, featured cover art by Barton Benes, whom I had met through Sean Strub and my writings for POZ. The art was a squirt gun shooting Barton's own HIV positive blood- I couldn't think of a better visual representation for my musical debut than that. To me, it just represented the innocence of my childhood before HIV- a squirt gun battle in the middle of a hot Virginia summer abruptly ended by a failed pop quiz in the 6th grade. (My HIV test, necessitated by signs of a weakened immune system and my reliance on blood products as someone with hemophilia.)

What's funny is that I hunkered down to finish up work on Tainted Goods and, after three years of writing about HIV, I was ready to really focus on my music and "give HIV a break". I'd just moved to Charlottesville, was 23, and finally felt confident in my musical abilities.

Well, before I could even crack the plastic wrapping on my Tainted Good CD, I started to get sick. The next four months was a downward spiral and, with my back against the wall and 38 t-cells to my name, I had to start on HIV meds for the first time. So much for taking a break from HIV to focus on music.

Still, with encouragement from friends, I played my first show about a month after starting HIV meds. With a queasy stomach- equally parts performing nerves and the adverse side effects of Viracept- I took the stage. And music was once again a great distraction from the very real concerns of how HIV had affected my health, and how close my own fear of medications had

allowed me to walk to the edge.

Fast forward many years, and I’m happy with the music I’ve written, the shows I’ve played and the vulnerability I’ve allowed myself to embrace when deciding to confront difficult feelings head-on in song. In the last few years, I’ve acknowledged changes in my mood and my family’s own history of mental health issues and have done my best to deal with the ups and downs that matter just as much as those old t-cell count results in the early 1990s.

What I’ve figured out since that first release in 1999 is that there is never a good time to “take a break from HIV”. And it’s just as important for my mental health to keep creating music; the same vital importance I placed on listening to music in the years after my diagnosis when a locked bedroom door and a set of headphones were my only recourse in dealing with HIV is how I feel about continuing to create and grow as a songwriter.

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