

Billy McLaughlin: Playing his Hand

By Dee Dean

The East County Herald

His story will inspire you, His music will move you. His motivation and dedication will amaze you.

Billy McLaughlin has been changing people's idea of what an acoustic guitar can sound like since the 1980's.

He is recognized as an innovative performer and composer who embraces the advantages of acoustic guitar amplification, unorthodox techniques and altered tunings while celebrating a gift for melody. His vision of an acoustic guitar that sounds as big as a grand piano but which plays fluidly like a violin has carried him around the world, to Billboard's Top-Ten Chart and most recently through a devastating medical disorder called focal dystonia. McLaughlin is in the early stages of what might be described as "one of the great musical comeback stories of all time."

Focal dystonia of the hand is a condition characterized by a loss in motor control of one or more fingers. A single muscle or group of muscles is involved: muscles in the hand and forearm tense and tighten, with the result of making the hand (or part of it) curl. It occurs mostly in men between the ages of 20 to 50 years. Onset is generally gradually progressive. Rarely, there is a precipitating factor, such as a relative death and a major or minor traumatic event. Sometimes there is a painful episode or a trauma. Regardless of the pain, not uncommonly, the patient keeps working. Eventually the pain resolves, but the problem persists

Musicians who have inten-

sively practiced their instruments over a number of years are a group most affected by this condition. The reason is that focal dystonia can be caused by the repetitive movement of the fingers over a significant period of time.

The disorder can easily be misdiagnosed as simple overuse or stress of the hand. Although it may not be obvious at first sight of the symptoms, the level at which the problem is caused is not the hand, but the brain.

For McLaughlin, the condition struck his left hand. He was humiliated when he would mess up notes and tried to hide what was going on. It took three years for a diagnosis of the neuromuscular disorder called focal dystonia to be reached. During his denial stage, he would fiercely practice six to seven hours a day for nine months in an effort to

"It's strange how the worst thing that happened to me can also be the best thing."

- Billy McLaughlin

work it out. He soon realized his efforts were counterproductive and resigned himself to no longer performing, but focusing on his song-writing, which was less demanding for his hands.

Missing the live performances and the interaction with his audiences, McLaughlin soon made a realization.

"I decided to pull the disorder closer and examine it, rather than run away from it," he told *The Herald* in an exclusive interview.

Through his love for music, addiction to his audience and the profound fulfillment he received from performing, and by drawing upon every resource of faith, prayer, and determination, McLaughlin began his unlikely journey to

adapt to his physical ailment and taught himself to play in his signature style, left-handed. Warned by doctors of a higher likelihood for developing focal dystonia in his remaining good hand, McLaughlin chose to press on towards his ambitious goal.

He now uses his left hand on the fretboard and has become an even better solo acoustic guitarist than even he ever thought possible.

Since being stricken with focal dystonia, McLaughlin has become even more motivated to achieve his dreams. "I wouldn't change a thing, it has enriched my life," he said.

He leads a dystonia support group in Minnesota, he received the 2010 Leadership Award from the Dsytonia Medical Research Foundation and is an ambassador for public awareness.

McLaughlin's vision now is to organize a multi-foundation of several neurological disorders including dystonia, Multiple Sclerosis, Parkinson's Disease, ALS and others and develop Brain Aid - a huge musical concert, like Farm-Aid and others - to raise awareness for these neurological disorders and help fund cures.

With all of his achievements, drive and motivation there is no doubt Billy McLaughlin will accomplish his dreams.

See Billy McLaughlin perform live:

Thursday, March 13 at 7 p.m.
Part of the Performing Arts at the Neurosciences Institute Series • The Neurosciences Institute Auditorium

• 10640 John Jay Hopkins Drive, San Diego, CA 92121

Tickets are \$25 and \$45 and available at www.tickets4billy.com