

Despite long battle with cancer, Jeff Healey's death still shocking, bandmate

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TORONTO -- Acclaimed jazz and rock guitarist Jeff Healey was remembered Sunday as a musician of rare ability who had a wicked sense of humour and a generous nature as fans and bandmates mourned his death at age 41, following a battle with cancer.

Bandmates of Canadian rock and jazz legend Jeff Healey were among those shocked by the news of his death Sunday.

Healey died Sunday evening in a Toronto hospital surrounded by family and a bandmate, Colin Bray.

Bray, the bass player with Jeff Healey's jazz Wizards and the frontman's long-time friend, said he and many others expected the guitarist to rally from this latest illness.

"I don't think any of us thought this was going to happen," Bray said in a telephone interview. "We just thought he was going to bounce back as he always does."

Healey had battled with cancer since the age of one when a rare form of retinal cancer known as Retinoblastoma claimed his eyesight.

Bray said Healey had been hospitalized for a week and that his advanced lung cancer made his final hours difficult.

Healey had undergone numerous operations in recent years to remove tumours from his lungs and leg.

Bray and fellow bandmate Gary Scriven remembered their frontman as not only a world-class musician but an incredibly strong person with the capacity to motivate those he worked with.

Scriven called Healey inspirational and praised the boundless enthusiasm that allowed him to continue performing live only four weeks before his death.

"He drew his strength from somewhere, I don't know where, but it spread among the band and flowed into the audience," Scriven said.

Healey rose to stardom as the leader of the Jeff Healey Band, a rock-oriented trio that garnered a Juno award, international acclaim and platinum record sales with the 1988 album "See the Light."

But Bray and Scriven said Healey's true love was jazz, the genre that dominated his last three albums with the Jazz Wizards.

Healey's guitar prowess was characterized by a unique playing-style that saw him lay the instrument across his lap.

It led him to share stages with such rock luminaries as George Harrison, Stevie Ray Vaughan and B.B. King, but Bray said jazz allowed him to exercise his other instrumental talents such as trumpet and drums.

Healey's love of jazz also led him to host radio shows on the CBC and a local Toronto station where he spun long-forgotten numbers from his personal collection of over 30,000 vinyl records.

But Bray said his "best friend" saw himself first and foremost as an entertainer and said Healey seemed to derive therapeutic benefits from playing live shows.

Recalling Healey's weakened condition at his final performance on Feb. 2 in Sarnia, Ont., Bray said Healey seemed to draw strength as the set progressed.

"At the end of it, I can't believe how much better he looked. It was like blood to him."

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When I saw that this movie had Chris Rock and Ben Stiller in it - and it was created by the creators of Shrek, I was so there. I would've gone even if I didn't have children. I felt it would be that good. So, the day arrives. The movie premieres; and, my kids and I are at the theater. The film starts.

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Filmmaking - What To Do Until The Money Arrives by Angela Taylor If you are not busy making your movie, you should get busy making your movie. "How can I start," you whine, "when I don't have any financing?" I know it seems you can't roll film or tape until you have some money, but your lack of funding isn't permanent, is it? You will have money at some future time, won't you? You must have faith that things will get better, or they won't.

Healey's death came weeks before the release of his first rock album in eight years.

"Mess of Blues" is slated for a North American release on April 22.

Healey is backed on the album by the resident band at Jeff Healey's Roadhouse, the blues club he founded and named after a 1989 Patrick Swayze movie in which he appeared.

The album features two live tracks recorded in the last few months of his life.

The Grammy-nominated musician is survived by his wife Christie and two children; daughter Rachel, 13 and son Derek, 3.

Funeral and memorial arrangements have not yet been announced.

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About the Author

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