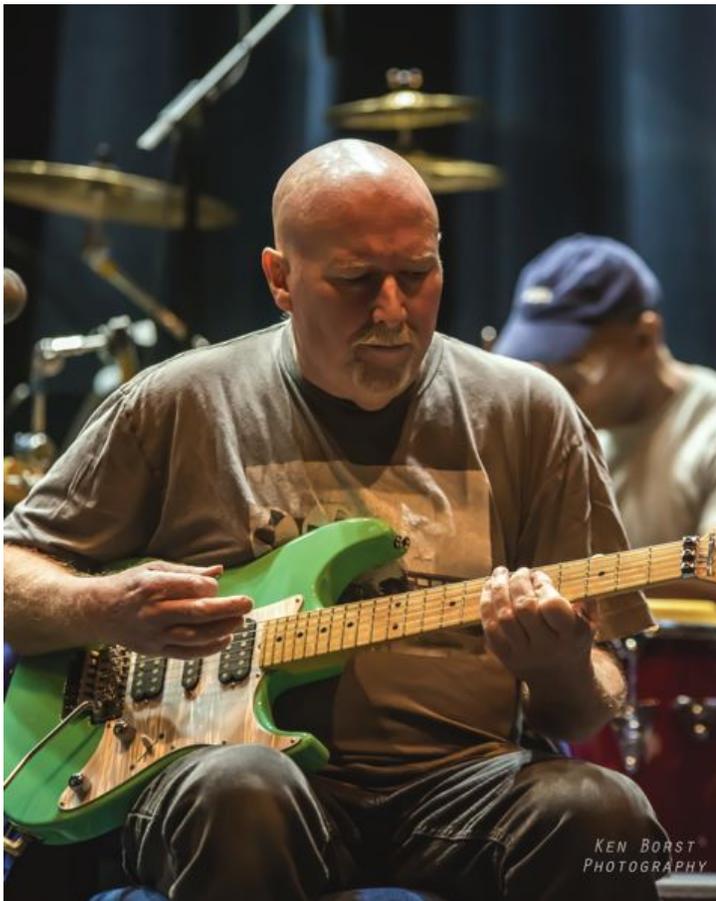


Getting by with a little help from his friends

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Musicians rally around guitar wizard, studio owner Tim Ellis, who's battling cancer



COURTESY: KEN BORST PHOTOGRAPHY - Despite slowed from cancer and treatment, Tim Ellis played guitar at a benefit concert Feb. 15 at Revolution Hall.

A teacher, a sidekick, a confidant, a recording magnate, a leader of the bands — Tim Ellis has always enjoyed helping others, serving as the classic behind-the-scenes player in music.

So, when people and popular musicians gathered for Ellis last week at Revolution Hall for a night of fundraising and support and celebrating his birthday, it tugged at his heartstrings, made him flush with appreciation, and emboldened his strength as he fights aggressive cancer.

“It was overwhelming,” says Ellis, a father of six grown children and beloved husband of Susan. “I’m rarely caught speechless, but I was completely inundated the whole evening. So much outpouring of really wonderful love and affection.”

Friends, such as Everclear’s Art Alexakis, flew in from out of town. They played for his financial benefit, such as Pink Martini. Longtime buddy Craig Carothers sent a heartfelt video from Nashville with a rendition of their favorite song, “Little Hercules.” And rock violinist Aaron Meyer, perhaps the closest person to Ellis in the Portland music scene, almost like a brother, helped orchestrate the evening for the man he calls “the center of the Portland music universe.”

Talking from a hospital bed, a few days after the benefit, in which he played guitar sitting down, Ellis had some news: the cancer had gone from melanoma on his back to tumors on his spine, he would go on immunotherapy treatment after completing two rounds of radiation, but combination medicines would cost tens of thousands of dollars. What would insurance cover? How would experimental drugs work? Meyer says the benefit concert and donations could raise about \$140,000 for Ellis, but unknowns fill the mind of the man going through the ordeal.

“I’ve been a proponent of being a self-provider, I’ve paid my way the whole way,” he says. “The whole medical and insurance thing that is going on in this country is crazy.” But, he doesn’t want surgery or chemotherapy if he has other alternatives.

Ellis, 60, has always found a way to get things done, and, perhaps, beating cancer will just be the next thing. He’s a self-made pillar in the music community, a “dynamo of musical energy,” Carothers says.

“He’s the healthiest, strongest, most determined person I’ve known in my life,” he adds. “I used to say jokingly that he could climb a tree with a piano strapped to his back.

“He’ll get up at 5 o’clock in the morning, play a round of golf, have 10 guitar students in for lessons, do recording sessions all day, play in a band at night, and then grab a cocktail with the boys. The guy is superhuman. I don’t need much sleep, but he can run me into the ground. ... If anybody could absolutely beat the odds and defy what’s supposed to happen, this is the guy.”

Adds Phil Baker, bass player for Pink Martini: “He’s a force of nature. There’s nothing that he can’t do. He makes me look lazy. He’s the most Type A person I’ve ever met.”

Battling cancer is enough of a pain, but not being able to stand up to play guitar is another. And, simply not being able to continue his busy life is what bothers him the most. Meyer says part of the money raised also will allow Ellis to not worry about work.

“His body is being punished right now,” Meyer says. “He needs to focus on healing.”

When the conversation shifts to music and his career, Ellis talks and talks some more, ignoring the fact that it might be tiring him out.

Growing up in Los Angeles, he learned to play guitar at an early age, began teaching at age 15, started playing in bands and toured at 22. Children were born, and his music career took off. Once he and his family moved to Portland, Ellis played in many bands alongside many musicians, and then formed Kung Fu Bakery Recordings after becoming involved with another studio in the late 1980s.

Kung Fu, 2535 S.E. 36th Ave., just off Division Street, would become the place for local musicians to work. Pink Martini made all but one of its albums there. Meyer has recorded there, and Everclear, the Decemberists, The Shins and even Wayne Newton and Steve Martin have done work at the studio.

It’s just a cool, comfortable and convenient place, and it produces great sound, Baker says.

“It’s the finest commercial recording studio the state of Oregon has ever seen,” Meyer says. “People come to him from far away.”

Meyer touts his guitar-playing ability, saying that Ellis could be anyone’s lead guitarist, having grown up in L.A. and influenced by Led Zeppelin. “His technical ability is off the charts,” Meyer says. But Ellis has preferred to be the side player in bands, the session player for musicians, and do much of the other work in music that goes without glory. He’ll make jingles for advertisements. He owns more than 50 instruments.

Each year, Ellis teams with Meyer on a holiday concert series. It was during the 2015 holiday series that Ellis couldn’t shake a cold, and a visit to the doctor uncovered the melanoma. So, the 2015 holidays are bittersweet now, a time for joy and unfortunate revelation.

“Aaron is like my little brother in many ways,” Ellis says. “I have two brothers, but he’s like my third brother. Because we have so many things in common.” They work together, they’ve traveled with family together.

“We’re almost like an aging Jewish couple. ‘Who’s in charge? What’s going on?’ But, it’s one of deep love and respect. And, coming from two different worlds: His father was a fine (violin) player and musician; my father was a football player and sports guy.”

The only thing is, they don’t try to sing together much, Ellis saying it sounds like a combination of the Grateful Dead and Canadian geese.

Ellis has worked with many musicians in one area or another.

“He’s been a vital ingredient in so many bands,” says Baker, who calls Ellis “one of the best” guitar players he has ever heard.

“He’s an astonishing player,” Carothers adds. “He’s been like Portland’s guitar ambassador. He could be touring with anybody. I live in a town of extraordinary guitar players, and he’s as good as they come.”

Ellis has also worked for nearly 20 years as a teacher at Portland Adventist Academy. He currently teaches two guitar classes and a performance and production class. He helped design the school’s studio.

“He loves to teach, and it shows,” says Bob Johnson, a PAA teacher who built the studio. “He has such a wealth of firsthand knowledge with musicians — writing, playing, recording. You can’t argue with anything he says. He plays the guitar like people are fluent in a foreign language.

“I’ve never heard him say an unkind word. He’s a strict teacher, but one of the nicest guys I’ve ever met.”

Ellis has plans, and it involves battling cancer and moving on with his life. He wants to open an Aladdin Theater-type venue on Southeast Foster Avenue, next to his wife’s dance studio. He wants to continue to play gigs, and get back to work at Portland Adventist Academy and Kung Fu.

And, of course, life involves spending time with loved ones.

“In many ways, it’s life-changing. On the other hand, my life has been surrounded with a beautiful family and music and all the friends and cohorts,” he says. “I’m 60 years old, and my whole plan was to put enough stuff in place for Susan and I to spend more time together and visit kids without working 60 hours a week.

“I’m a blessed guy. There’s nothing I would change if I had it to do over again. Except maybe meet my wife sooner.”

Want to help?

For information on how to support Tim Ellis, see the “Friends of Tim Ellis” page on [gofundme.com](#), Aaron Meyer’s page on [Facebook](#), and [aaronmeyer.com](#).



COURTESY: KEN BORST PHOTOGRAPHY - Guitarist Tim Ellis has worked extensively in studio and on stage with rock violinist Aaron Meyer.

