

Rebuilding My Musical Self

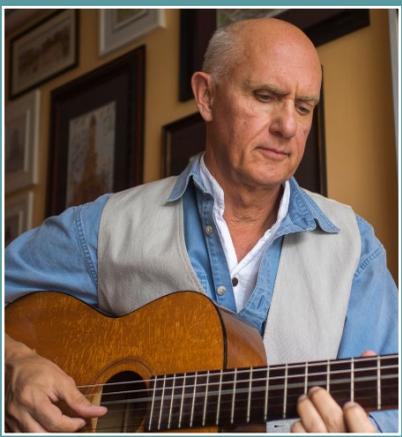
A 35-year hiatus from music due to bilateral hearing loss, and a happy ending due to dedication

By **STU NUNNERY**

As a professional singer/musician/performer, my efforts to rebuild my musical self after a bilateral hearing loss some 40+ years ago have been especially daunting. It has been one thing to play an instrument again; it has been quite another to play an instrument and sing along. Not only is my sensory focus split, but for many years severe tinnitus on the left side, recurring tinnitus on the right, pitch distortion, and the resulting cacophony, curbed even the *desire* to further my musical activities.

Nevertheless, I had always hoped for a happy ending to my musical despair—some miracle tech or medical breakthrough, perhaps. If not, then...

Stu Nunnery is a writer, composer, singer, recording artist, and hearing activist. In 1973, Nunnery released a self-titled LP on Evolution Records that bore two songs that reached the Top-100 on the US Pop Charts while another became a #1 record in Brazil. He enjoyed a prolific career, writing and singing national advertising campaigns and composed the parade theme "I'm Walkin' Right Down the Middle of Main Street USA" which remains one of Disney's signature musical performance pieces. Between 1978 and 1980, Stu suffered bilateral hearing loss and a partial loss of sight that would end his music career for more than 35 years. In 2013, he began a years-long strategy to resume his music career through technology, auditory training, and vocal coaching.



How Would I Get There?

1) Passion and resolve. Working in my favor is that I love nothing more than being able to sit at the piano, sing, and perform. For a time, it was also a highly lucrative form of work that ended precipitously. I am willing to do whatever it takes to get back—in whatever ways I can.

2) Motivation. Since 1974, I have been newly rediscovered. I enjoy a large international fan base and decades of attention that continues to this day. I am very eager to connect with my fans again.

3) A catalog. I have dozens of songs—some recorded and never released, others waiting to be recorded, and still others newly written. I don't want them to die on the vine.

With this background, I needed a strategy. Here's mine:

Keeping Up with Hearing Technology

Things started to turn in 2009 when I received my first digital hearing aid. Today, in my right and functioning ear only, I wear a hearing aid with two music programs that provide a less-processed and flatter sound in both uni-directional and omni-directional settings.

Getting Auditory Training

In 2013, I was referred to Geoff Plant, an auditory trainer near Boston, Mass. His focused listening techniques enhance my speech comprehension, strengthen my musical hearing, and clear up some of the clutter I experience when listening to or making music.

Listening

After decades away from it, I listen to and enjoy music again. I hear music well that I remember from before 1982, but cannot hear precise melody lines for newer music. Nevertheless, over time I noticed with increasing clarity all kinds of music by allowing it to play without judgement and just letting it transport me. I can now hear the pull of a bow on a violin, an entire orchestra or band playing together, and can pick out instruments and individual notes on a piano or classical guitar—even if the exact melody remains vague.

Getting Vocal Coaching

For me, hearing music is as much visceral and emotional as it is an aural and neurologic activity. Vocal coaching has helped get music back into my body. It reminds me that pitch can be felt as well as heard. Proper breathing technique improves my vocal stamina for sustaining a note, and with it, pitch.

Performing Live

In 2015, with new hearing aid technology, auditory training, vocal work, and a wing and a prayer, I got up on a stage for the first time in 35 years at a friendly house concert. It was an unmitigated disaster—but informative. Hitting a C2 to get me lined up vocally, I did not realize that what I "heard" was a half to a full tone sharp. I spent the entire "concert" singing off key. I repeated that mistake a week later. But a musical friend began working with me to help me find the correct hearing aid settings and where on the keyboard I could find my pitch sweet spot: an octave or two above C2. By spring of 2016, I declared myself "safe for listening in a live venue."

Focusing on Pitch

With my hearing losses, holding pitch will always be my challenge. While it continues to improve, it is always a matter of several things—from the settings I use on my hearing aid, the song that I am singing, the key that I am singing in, the level of my tinnitus at any moment, the acoustics and background noise in a venue, to the temperature and humidity in a recording studio. Each outing presents a different set of challenges which I try to manage in several ways: I rehearse with a singer with very good hearing and pitch. When performing live, I play parts of the melody line I am singing with my right hand to provide a pitch guide for my vocals. In the studio, I lay down a straight melody line on the piano as a guide to sing with.

Recording

As the saying goes, "the tracks don't lie." It's a hard lesson to learn, but you can get away with things live that you cannot in the studio. In 2015, one of my audiologists, Brian Fligor,

fitted me with customized ear monitors from Sensaphonics for use in the studio and for live performances. The monitors include an analog hearing aid for my right ear and a CROS for the left ear. I'm also experimenting with wearing my hearing aid during sessions and singing to a click track.

Telling my Audiences the Truth

As I work out the technical aspects, nothing has helped me get over my anxieties better than being straight with my audiences. Today, hearing loss in musicians is out of the closet, so I find audiences much more understanding—intrigued in fact—and it gives me room to do my thing without being overly self-conscious. I refer to my live performances as “works in progress,” and if something goes awry, “It’s all part of the show, folks.”

Teaching Others

I promote my own and have been hired to run other workshops about music and hearing loss. I am able to inspire others and it has given me the freedom to be wholly transparent about

my own challenges. I get to perform in a live venue and then use my own challenges as demo points in my presentations.

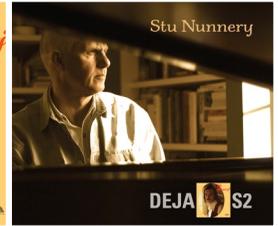
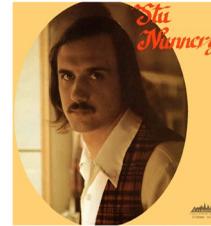
The Happy Ending

In a perfect case of good timing, I have that happy ending to report. In June of this year, I succeeded in completing two new original recordings that I was unable to complete in 2017. They will soon be my first releases in more than 40 years. A miracle, yes, in many ways. But more importantly, it was 5 years of hard work and discovery along with breakthroughs on the neurological and technical sides. And let me not forget the countless people who stepped into my journey to guide me.

Whatever It Takes

Returning to music after hearing loss? Try these suggestions.

- Don't let “the perfect” be the enemy of the good. Rebuilding your musical self is complex and hard work—and very rewarding. Be easy on yourself and enjoy



Left: Stu Nunnery's 1973 self-titled LP. Right: his recent CD which can be purchased at <http://store.cdbaby.com/cd/stununnery3> and on Apple iTunes.

the journey, a step at a time.

- Listen to a recording of yourself.
- Test new technologies and apps as they arrive on the market.
- Check out auditory training for what it can add to your toolbox.
- Listen—*just listen*—to music in every genre, every day, and be amazed at what you might discover about your hearing.
- Work with a vocal coach and learn what you can about music from the inside out.
- Get out and perform and don't look back.
- Get comfortable with your truth and use it to teach and inspire others.