

Rayford's Recovery and Rebirth

Rayford Griffin's CD, *Rebirth of The Cool* is an inspiring musical journey of survival, perseverance and determination—it is unquestionably an inspired, cathartic “rebirth” of mind, body and spirit. One reviewer interprets the rebirth as the rebirth of the listener, writing that the music “inoculates the spirit with a baptismal sensation, and like Lazarus, we are reborn.” But Rayford Griffin, and those closest to him, know that the real rebirth here is his own physical recovery.

Three and a half years ago, Rayford began a journey to break away from the “sideman” gigs. He was exploring ways to make a name as a solo artist, a leader. Five tracks for his own first recording were already in the can, and a tentative schedule to record the rest was set. No one knew just how tentative that schedule was to become...until tragedy struck.

On a balmy summer night in 2000, Rayford tumbled from his hotel room balcony, breaking his back – and severely bruising his spirit. Awaking in a hospital emergency room with little memory of the accident, he received the news...spinal cord injury, a break near his waist between the L2 and L3 vertebrae, and compression of bone fragments lodged in the nerves.

The doctors called it a recoverable injury, but during those low and painful moments, Griffin had his doubts. “I wanted to turn over and move,” recalls Griffin, “but I couldn't. I felt helpless. It crossed my mind that I might never walk again. I remember breaking down, I was traumatized by the realization of how would I function and what my life would be like following the accident. Hearing a positive message and believing in it (and yourself) are two completely different things.”

Two surgeries were followed by an intensive regimen of physical therapy that was emotionally and physically draining. Rayford remembers, “Within 24 hours after surgery I was in a bed that was raised to a 90-degree angle to position me to sit up fully. I was fitted for a back brace and I was hoisted up to standing position. It took three fittings to get the brace to fit right.”

One, perhaps two weeks later, Rayford was moved to a physical rehab facility, and once there the Physical Therapy intensified. “I learned how to roll over to get in the brace unassisted. The goal at Physical Therapy was to learn how to become self-sufficient...I needed that! I learned how to get in and out of my wheelchair, and roll myself down to rehab for Physical Therapy.”

Rayford says his biggest breakthrough was the day he used a walker in therapy for the first time. “I took my first few steps with a walker and the aid of a Physical Therapist holding a support rope. I walked 30 feet – that was the goal – but it was really hard! First time I stood, I cried because of the pain and the difficulty of something as simple as standing. Physical therapy was very intensive; to avoid any distractions no family members were allowed. My mom phoned every day and my fiancé, Sylvia, was there after every therapy session. I've come to respect what PT brings to the table and would like to find an organization to support and share my experience with others. Basically to show my appreciation.”

The physical demands of being a drummer may well have aided his recovery. “My doctor said I have well-developed back muscles, and the tissue is more dense than most people,” Rayford explains. “Because I'm a drummer, I have to stay in great shape. I'm not a gym rat, I just try to stay in shape.

The “stepped up” rehab process was so intense that Rayford was able to go home to California after two weeks. “I used a wheel chair at the airport, and initially at home when I first arrived, and continued to use it when necessary.” After arriving home, he continued rehabilitation therapy at a facility in Northridge for several more months. “I was glad to be home, but still discouraged somewhat. Would I ever be the old me?”

His fiancé, Sylvia (they married in 2000), stayed by his side. Bass player Stanley Clarke was one of the first to call, and one of the first to make him laugh by repeating the rumor that Griffin had fallen from a twenty-story building and was saved only by landing on his hard head. “Stanley was very concerned about my recovery. He

told me I'd helped so many people; he said 'we need you back' and wanted to know what he could do to help," Rayford recalls.

Another bass player and good friend, Sekou Bunch also called, as well as some of Rayford's drummer friends. "The word spread pretty fast through the musician community," he remembers. Tom Borton a writer/saxophone player who lived down the street would cook a meal once a week for Griffin and Sylvia. Bolstered by the encouragement, love and support of a few close friends and family, Rayford planned his physical and musical comeback. A month after surgery, he began 'playing' on a practice pad while in bed. Painkillers dulled his senses, and maybe his dexterity, but the sound was not as important as taking that first step toward regaining his life. A few months later, real practice began, but he was still using a cane and wearing a back brace for support. His wife reports that when he was still on heavy pain killers, in his sleep his hands would be constantly moving, as if he were at a gig, performing.

After an trying year that included reconstructive surgery, painful recuperation, and exhaustive physical therapy, Rayford was faced with many difficult decisions. Unable to fully use his right leg, and faced with daunting problems and pain, Rayford focused his energy on the performance stage. With the aid of a back brace and a special seat fitted to accompany his drum set, to avoid complications or possible irreversible damage to his spine, Griffin began to practice in earnest. "I started initially with one hour a day, at least a few times a week. They was no rhyme or reason behind the schedule; I just did what felt good. When I felt better in the weeks ahead, I played more." Soon he was racing the clock to complete the recording project abandoned the prior year. It was also time to wield his sticks in public. His first live performance was not planned. "Stanley [Clarke] wanted to help out, so he put together a benefit of sorts. At the benefit, Sekou Bunch, my friend and MC, asked if I wanted to play. In the back of my mind I really didn't want people to count me out, so I played one song with the band. We played a Miles Davis tune, if I remember. I was very apprehensive and nervous about the reaction of the musicians and the audience. I knew I could play, but they didn't."

Rayford had insurance, but he had been out of work for more than six months already and insurance doesn't cover everything. "How was I going to pay the mortgage and other bills that didn't stop coming, just because I was laid up," was one of the pressing questions on Rayford's mind before the benefit. The event raised \$3000 with 250 people attending, and then Baby Face contributed double that amount, giving Rayford a total of \$9000.

Even after the benefit, calls for gigs were non-existent. During his recovery, Rayford began a management relationship. "My manager, Myron Bernard, urged me to finish my CD and to consider doing some shows. People thought I couldn't do it, thought I'd never perform again." So a few months later he did his own show at the Baked Potato in Hollywood, "to prove to them (and myself) that they were all wrong!"

Since then, there has been no turning back. Moving forward with his project was a healing process in itself. "With encouragement of my family and management, I was a getting new beginning in life. A rebirth, if might say. I started my own my record label, RazorEdge Records. This year, we signed with Lightyear Entertainment, which is distributed by WEA, and my CD is in the stores."

Life has changed for Rayford. "Now I'm married, have two kids. Walking and being able to pick up the kids is a very big deal for me...it didn't have to turn out this way, but thankfully I've recovered."

Rayford's ambitious plan – "to make a record with music from the heart that the whole world would embrace" – is back on track. He is, once again, in such demand that the offers to play with groups other than his own are too musically tempting to turn down. And now he's determined to do it all. Plans for his own second CD are in the works, and while management works on a tour for his own group, Rayford can be seen performing with BWB (Rick Braun, Kirk Whalum and Norman Brown), Rick Braun, Jeff Lorber and James Ingram.