

MUSIC HAS POWER™

A PUBLICATION OF THE INSTITUTE FOR MUSIC AND NEUROLOGIC FUNCTION

Through New Eyes

Music helps an artist overcome sudden disability to create his best work ever

Until 2004, artist Cliff Enright and his long-time mate Virginia lived an almost magical life filled with teaching, music, literature and worldwide travel. But, after being struck suddenly by spinal cord injury and paralysis, Cliff was left to fight his way back to a semblance of his former life. In the time since, thanks to extensive physical, occupational and music therapy, he has made steady progress and has even found a new freedom in his art that he says he had long lacked. Though he still has far to go, both he and his therapists are hopeful for his future. Much of his therapy took place through the Institute for Music and Neurologic Function's music therapy program at Beth Abraham.

Cliff was on a vacation, taking a break from his usual routine of teaching and painting in his studio in Manhattan, and was visiting friends in England when the accident occurred. He was standing outdoors, bending over to pick up something, when he suddenly fell to the ground. The fall left him paralyzed from the neck down.

"At first, I was in acute denial", he says. "Even though I was completely immobile below

the neck, I couldn't face people saying I couldn't eat or walk again." After returning to the U.S. and spending time at the Rusk Institute of Rehabilitation Medicine (NYU), he was transferred to Beth Abraham. "Virginia selected Beth Abraham because she learned that they had a music therapy program, and I'd always loved music. She thought it might help me both physically and in terms of my mood.

"When I first got to Beth Abe, I focused on getting the slightest movement in any part of my body," he says. In addition to extensive physical therapy for his hands, arms, legs and feet, and occupational therapy, he started music therapy with therapist Luci Butler. "We played a lot of jazz, and I tried to keep rhythm, tried to tap it out with a whisk that she put into my hand," he said. "Eventually I began trying tiny kicking movements too."

With care, Cliff continued to make slow but steady improvement. "Working with Luci was a breath of fresh air," he said.

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Artist Cliff Enright with music therapist Luci Butler at Cliff's 2006 exhibit at the Creative Center: Arts in Healthcare in New York.

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“She’s so cheerful and encouraging about using music to develop movement. The music therapy brightened my life.”

Importantly, music not only helped stimulate his physical recovery, it also had enormous emotional benefits as well. “In the early phases of this when I was so frustrated and able to do very little, just listening to incredible music itself was freeing. While I had the jazz or classical music going, I wasn’t concerned with my day-to-day liabilities. I could forget myself and move outside my problems. It was very therapeutic just to feel normal and enjoy myself for a little while every day.”

After several months at Beth Abraham, he transitioned home, and now has a regimen of therapy there and at the Spinal Cord Injury unit at Mount Sinai every week. There is full-time care at home to help him manage daily functions. Luckily, home for him is an airy, open Manhattan studio loft in a building he purchased with a group of fellow artists back when Ed Koch was mayor. There, he and Virginia live in an art-filled, one-story space, with polished wood floors and curry-colored walls. Large, modernist paintings reminiscent of the artist Miró hang on the walls. Some of these are his works from “before.” But many of his post-accident paintings adorn the space as well. “I’m painting better now than ever before,” he says. “I have changed my thinking about my work and people’s reaction to it. I’m painting for myself now, not for others, and I’m doing the best work I’ve ever done.” Cliff has even begun teaching painting again in his loft space, working with a biweekly group that comes to him for instruction.

His new paintings enjoy a rare sense of freedom, color and movement. He works in watercolors because “they glide over the paper,” with a grid sometimes overlaid on the paper to better accommodate his range of motion, which remains limited. “Working through the grid became like viewing a scene through the panes of a window,” he says, and that thought

has taken him further in his art. “I paint every day, and I continue to paint with music on all the time,” he says. “The music takes me places and gives me motivation that I would never have known otherwise.” His recent paintings have been shown at both the Shelby Gallery and The Creative Center: Arts in Healthcare in New York, and at the Johnson & Johnson World Headquarters Gallery in New Jersey.



After working hard for more than two years, Cliff has advanced from being almost completely immobile to having a much greater range of movement, and, thankfully, he continues to advance. He can now brush his beard and teeth, wash his face, hold a fork or spoon and eat food, aim his hand movements better, sit in a regular chair without support, stand in a standing position in a machine, hold a drinking glass and turn pages in a book. Most important, he is able to hold a paintbrush on his own. Every tiny victory has resulted from an exhausting,

repetitive and ultimately rewarding struggle, and every movement has relied on music to help provide the inspiration for continuing. His next challenges are to be able to turn on and off his own lights and reach for a book to get through wakeful nights, transition more easily between bed and chair, and increase his range of motion for painting. One day he’d love to be able to unscrew a paint cap and squeeze a paint tube again too.

“In one year, I completed 60 paintings, enough to mount this show, even with all the therapy I’m doing. The work fills my life, and as long as I keep at it, I think I keep improving.”

Cliff Enright has come from adversity to see his life and his art through new eyes. “The great artist Paul Klee, who also loved music, said that he wanted his drawings to be childlike,” he says. “I think I’ve achieved his dream, in my own way.”