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Singer with cancer works to get health-care benefits for fellow musicians

By Tim Finn

The epiphany followed a downpour of bad news.

In December 2007, Abigail Henderson and her husband, Chris Meck, returned from a tour of Europe with their band, [The Gaslights](#). All was not well. Henderson was suffering from a severe cold and an ear infection that would need medical attention. Meck's favorite guitar was stolen from their van. The band's drummer quit. Then her father died.

That's when Henderson, 30, decided it was time to take stock of her life and to stop working without a safety net. Like so many local musicians, Henderson works part time at a restaurant and isn't eligible for benefits.

"If I worked full time, I'd have to work weekends," she said. "I can't do that and be in a band."

By spring she'd taken her own advice and enrolled in a catastrophic health-insurance plan.

"I got it in case I got in a car wreck or hit by a bus," she said. "Then -- ha ha ha! -- I got cancer."

The cancer emerged as a minor skin eruption.

"It looked like I had a detergent rash on my left breast," she said. "I thought it was nothing."

But the rash was persistent, so in July she made an appointment to see a doctor. The exam was hardly routine; it included a biopsy and a skin punch. But Henderson wasn't too alarmed.

"The rash didn't seem like anything too weird," Henderson said. "But I felt like [the doctor] knew something was wrong. She gave me a prescription for Xanax before I left. When she called the next day, the first thing she said was, 'Are you sitting down?' "

The diagnosis: Stage 3 inflammatory breast cancer.

"It's much more insidious than the other kind," Henderson said. "It nestles in the breast in sheets, and it's harder to detect. There are no lumps."

The following week she started chemo, and, like so many cancer patients, her life was forever cleaved into stages: the before and the after.

The irony in this story was staged more than a year ago.

At the Crossroads Music Festival in September 2007, Henderson and her friend and fellow musician Amy Farrand set up a booth in the mulch behind Grinders and asked other local musicians and fans to stop by, sign a mailing list and take a survey.

They called their group the Kansas City Music Coalition. One of its missions was to lay the groundwork for some kind of musicians' health-care collective and get the ball rolling on a sensible, affordable option for people who devote so much time and money and energy to enriching the local music scene. Give them choices other than sharing one another's medications or using free clinics as their sole health-care provider or ignoring symptoms until they are dire or fatal.

"Amy and I had talked about the 'What if?' You know, what if something terrible happened," Henderson said. "We'd been doing benefits forever, and the Kirk thing really touched our community."

"Kirk" is Kirk Rundstrom of Split Lip Rayfield, who died in February 2007 after a yearlong battle against cancer. His death and battle with a catastrophic illness epitomized what has become routine behavior among musicians without insurance: They can't afford the preventive health care, so they wait until it's too late.

"You go into a clinic," Farrand said, "and it's like going to an amusement park: You must be this tall or this old to ride this ride. If you don't prove you have the coverage, you won't get treatment."

Work, music and other obligations delayed progress on the coalition project. Since Henderson's diagnosis, they have recommitted themselves to the issue. Their group is now called the [Midwest Music Foundation](#). She and Meck have been talking to a local filmmaker about launching a TV show about the Kansas City music scene, something similar to "Austin City Limits."

Meck mentions cities where music is integral to tourism such as Austin and New Orleans. There, he said, musicians can get exams and preventive treatment for a nominal fee.

"It's like a big health-care fund for musicians," he said. "They work with the teaching hospitals to provide care." "We have such a limited support network in this town," Henderson said. "Theater is very well supported, and the visual artists have the Charlotte Street Forum. We just don't have anything like that."

The blog is called "[Hope Is Her Middle Name](#)." It provides relief and connection and lets Abigail Hope Henderson write monologues to friends and relatives or strangers with cancer who might need some comfort. It lets her vent, too:

"I haven't really thought about cancer lately. It comes in flashes now, which means one of two things; I've learned to reckon with it or I have a wicked case of denial. I can't help but think about it when the damned bills come."

It has also delivered moments of hope:

"The good DOCTOR, who I will now be referring to as CAPTAIN, said the tumor was 2 centimeters smaller ... (maybe more but he is a conservative fellow and I appreciate the effort to not overstate)."

The chemo does what it does: attacks the disease and the rest of the body with toxins and poisons. Henderson's regimen: every third Wednesday. Each session lasts about five hours, including an hour for blood work and other preliminary procedures.

"I'm tolerating it OK," she said. "It's funny. The day of chemo and the day after, I feel strong enough to fight a lion. But on Friday or Saturday, someone could tell me the Earth is flat and I wouldn't have the strength to argue."

When the chemo is over, she'll undergo a mastectomy, then reconstructive surgery. She wants to take a test that will tell her whether she is genetically predisposed to inflammatory breast cancer, which could mean it is likely to appear in her right breast. If that's the case, she said, she would opt for having both breasts removed. At this point, however, she does not know whether her insurance covers the test.

"I don't want to go through this again," she said. "I don't care about my (breasts) at this point. They're just going to start sagging anyway."

The response from her friends and fellow musicians has been profound. This weekend, four benefits have been scheduled. In local music circles Henderson is as respected as she is loved by her colleagues, many of whom are close friends.

"I met Abigail before she really started writing music," local songwriter Howard Iceberg said. "At one of my shows several years ago, she told me she'd written a few songs and wanted me to listen to them. She'd recorded them on a cassette. I'd get that from people from time to time, and I thought, 'OK, sure.' We went out to the car and listened, and I was impressed. I thought, 'There's really something going on here.' "

"She has always been a really good lyricist and songwriter," said her friend Tony Ladesich, a freelance filmmaker and local musician. "But as a singer, she needed to learn how to use that big sledgehammer of a voice. And she has. On that last Gaslights record, she really showed she understands what a voice like hers can do. She has figured out how to control it. Her voice now is incredible."

About two dozen bands and performers will participate in four benefits. Almost 100 friends and businesses have donated items for auctions and raffles. The outpouring doesn't surprise those within the music community.

"I don't want to get too hippie here, but we are like a tribe of creative people, and this is what we do," said Ladesich, one of the principal organizers of the benefits. "Everyone I asked to help said, 'Absolutely. Just tell me where and when.' "

Henderson is a longtime, card-carrying member of that tribe and one of its more devout supporters and spokeswomen. In her discussions about health care and insurance, however, Henderson has heard the disclaimers: Being a musician isn't a job. Get some real work, with benefits.

"I say, 'Well, then, who would you dance to at your reunions or weddings if it wasn't for riffraff like us?' " she said. "What it comes down to are people being denied health care based on their economic position. I'm sick of it. I don't want to do more benefits for people."

On her blog, she is more poetic:

"The people making music night after night in bars across the country, across this city, are worthy of respect and security. If they are out there, night after night, year after year, with little return on their investment of time, they did not choose it, it chose them. There is nothing romantic or glamorous about sleeping in the van, living with your bandmates, eating beans and rice, or working three part-time jobs to support your full-time job. Their work is worth preserving and they are worth protecting. If no one else will do it, damn it, I will."

But first things first. Right now there's a personal battle to win, a fight that goes beyond the disease and includes the politics and bureaucracy that come with the treatment

"[Forget] cancer," she said. "I'll fight it all day. Go ahead and shoot poisons into my body. I can take that. The idea that I can't afford the help I need is what keeps me up at night."

#### [APOCALYPSE MEOW:](#)

--The first of the three remaining benefits for Abigail Henderson starts at 4 p.m. today at RecordBar, 1020 Westport Road.

--A listening party is scheduled for "Titan: It's All Pop!" an anthology of music from the former Kansas City record label Titan Records. Some of the proceeds from CD sales will go to Apocalypse Meow.

--The other benefits start at 5 p.m. today at Davey's Uptown Rambler's Club, 3402 Main St., and 3 p.m. Sunday at RecordBar. For band lineups and other information, visit [www.apocalypsemeow.net](http://www.apocalypsemeow.net).