

“The guitar is more enjoyable now, because I’m so appreciative that I’m here and that I’m able to play.”

PETE HUTTLINGER



Pete Huttlinger, the virtuoso guitarist who is returning to the stage after a stroke and heart failure, plays at his West Nashville home earlier this month. SAMUEL M. SIMPKINS / THE TENNESSEAN

NO LONGER SO GRAVE

2011 did its best to kill him, but guitarist Pete Huttlinger
is pickin’ his way back into shape.

By PETER COOPER

Checking in with guitarist [Pete Huttlinger](#), who spent much of 2011 trying not to check out.

“Yeah, I almost bought the farm,” says the guitarist [Vince Gill](#) calls “wickedly gifted.”

Huttlinger is sitting at Fido coffee shop with a new and steadfast pal, an experimental, battery-operated, surgically implanted (he prefers the term “hard-wired”) pump that sends blood to his aorta. Over his shoulder is a carrying case that holds the pump’s controller.

“I do everything with this on,” he says. “I shower with it, sleep with it and play the guitar with it.”

That sounds like a hassle, but Huttlinger smilingly calls it “a minor inconvenience.” It’s much better than what he dealt with last year, which involved severe heart failure, four months in hospitals, morphine drips (OK, so it wasn’t all bad), kidney and liver distress and a terrifying Life Flight from Nashville to Houston. All of this came just as Huttlinger was beginning to feel better and get back to work after a major stroke in 2010.

The best part of the year, other than the final ticking second of Dec. 31, came in July, when Gill and a slew of other talented friends ([John Oates](#), [John Jorgenson](#) and many more) played a Nashville benefit for Huttlinger, raising money and spirits at a touch-and-go time. Huttlinger made it out for that show, though he’s foggy about the details.

“At that point, I wasn’t really all here,” he says. “I was down to 120 pounds, still pretty sick, and I had to leave the next day to fly back to the hospital in Houston for another month.”

Back then, no one knew what was going to happen with Pete Huttlinger. “When” was “if.” Certainly” was “hopefully.”

“The doctors would come into the room, scratch their chin, look at me, scratch their chin, grab the IV bag, scratch their chin and walk out. These were great doctors, and I’ve got great family and great friends, and a lot of prayers were coming my way, but...”

But it really doesn’t matter now. “If” is “when” again, and one of the most promising whens is Feb. 4, when Huttlinger will play World Music Nashville at what will be his first headlining show since the whole world changed. He’s toured the world with John Denver, he’s won the National Fingerpick Guitar Championship and he’s played Carnegie Hall and [Eric Clapton](#)’s Crossroads festival and hundreds of other major stages, but it’s looking like the biggest gig of his life-to-date will be at a 125-seat venue in Bellevue.

“I’m playing about three hours a day, re-learning the guitar,” he says. “I don’t have the fluidity I had, but that will come. I used to play as fast as I wanted for as long as I wanted without thinking about it. Now I’m having to pick and choose notes a little differently, and I’m concentrating more on tone than I ever have before. The guitar is more enjoyable now, because I’m so appreciative that I’m here and that I’m able to play.”

His next goal: half-marathon

Evidence of his progress may be heard on “Inisheer,” the only song on new album *The Black Swan* that was recorded after the stroke and the heart failure and the pump. It’s a lovely and plaintive instrumental, played on Huttlinger’s Collings acoustic. (The Collings company is now selling a limited-edition, Pete Huttlinger Signature model guitar, with proceeds going to Huttlinger’s medical fund to help defray enormous medical costs.)

Another big “if” in Huttlinger’s life has been removed. Doctors tell him he is no longer a candidate for a heart transplant, which Huttlinger sees as a positive: Patients on the transplant list can’t play out-of-town shows, and at this point, Huttlinger is pretty weary of procedures and hospital beds and the like.

Patients on the transplant list also are unlikely to be doing what Huttlinger will be doing April 28, which is walking the Music City Half Marathon. His doctors from Vanderbilt are going to walk with him, as are other friends and supporters.

“I’m already up to four miles,” he says. “Goals have always driven me, and walking the half marathon is a goal. So many people have gone to bat for me, and my doctors have been incredible, and the way I can give back to them is to stay healthy, to have more heartbeats and a longer life. I’m excited about the future. I know where I’ve been and what I’ve done, but who knows what tomorrow’s going to bring?”

I’ll venture a guess. For Huttlinger and his minor inconvenience, tomorrow is a work day. The guy has a gig in less than two weeks, and he figures he’ll get to World Music the same way he got to Carnegie Hall: Practice, practice, practice.