

Cancer Survivor Finds New Dream in Music

Leukemia ends career with Dallas Mavericks

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Deborah Ferguson, NBCDFW.com

[Ray Johnston](#) straps on the guitar, starts to play and a crooked smile quickly emerges as he gets in the groove. Johnston lives in the moment, something the 31-year-old realized he had to do when he saw a dream slip away.

"I got to live it for a whopping three months," Johnston said. "I think I set the Guinness Book of World Records for shortest [NBA](#) career for three months, but it's better than no months. It was great while it lasted."

Johnston grew up Alabama with dreams of playing pro basketball. After college, he got a job as loan officer in Dallas but kept playing basketball anywhere and everywhere he could. He scored an unbelievable goal in 2004 at the age of 24. The [Dallas Mavericks](#) had an open try out, and [Mark Cuban](#) put him on the team's summer league.

"It was great 'cuz I thought I earned it", Johnston said. "I wasn't really surprised when they told me I made the team, and that doesn't come from a cocky standpoint. I felt preparation met opportunity, and I felt very relaxed. I really went into the tryout with the attitude: 'Okay, these guys are making millions. I'm in the loan business. If I can get a couple of loans, and I don't make the team, that's great.'"

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Life was great until a diagnosis of leukemia ripped it apart three months later in August 2004.

"Yeah, that was tough, going from achieving a dream to I was actually in a coma for two months 'cuz the disease was in my body and I didn't know it," Johnston said.

The last six years put Johnston on a roller coaster of remission and relapse. The latest news came a couple of weeks ago after Johnston was prescribed a drug called Tamibarotene.

"That drug, they started giving me in December when I had about 30 tumors across my body, really small ones. It didn't come back in the bone marrow which is odd. Every month we'd do a scan and see that the disease was significantly knocked down to where about three weeks ago, I took my latest PET scan and all the tests that go with that. And we saw that the leukemia was gone," Johnston said. "I'm in complete remission. However, that's happened 4 or 5 times before, so we're gonna continue on the chemo."

And Johnston continues to show you can live through struggle. He threw himself into his second passion, the guitar, which he taught himself to play back in high school. [The Ray Johnston band](#) is his new dream.

"This is my replacement for being a point guard in basketball. There was a big void in my life when I woke up and realized I couldn't play pick up anymore," Johnston said.

"I decided to pull the trigger on a full band about nine months ago when the doctor told me that my chances to live past 33 have decreased. But I did look him in the eye, and said to Dr. Collins, 'In [Ray Ray](#) odds, you think I'm gonna be here, right?' He said yes, I don't know how but you will.' But anyway I kind of pulled the trigger on this ultimate dream of having a band that's good."

Johnston spent his savings on a tour bus, and the band hit the road to promote the new CD "Sweet Tooth." Johnson wrote eight of the ten songs. [The new HDNet 10-part series "Road Diaries" chronicles the band's journey to make it in the music business.](#) It's the second time for owner Mark Cuban to take a chance on Johnston.

"My goal for Mark is for him to look me in the eye and say, 'You did a heck of a job promoting it. Great job. I'm proud of you.' I kind of live for those 'I'm proud of you.' When my dad tells me that, my mom tells me that, it gives me goose bumps, I think it should as a son."

Johnston credits family and faith as the solid foundation that keeps him positive.

"Proverbs 17:22 captures it perfectly. It says, 'A cheerful heart is good medicine to the soul, a down cast spirit dries up the bones,'" said Johnston.

Johnson's lyrics often reflect the Bible and he jokes, "I don't know who to pay royalties to yet, guess I'll find that out one day."

He also writes about texting, cougars and first dates.

"People that don't know music will still like it (the CD) because it's got hooks to the songs, to sing along. People that like humor, I talk about cougars. I talk about text messaging, about me getting rejected by flirting, so kinda something for everybody. Touches on compassionate end, humor end, authentic end," he said. "This is an authentic band that loves playing as much as the crowd enjoys watching them playing."

It's also a band that serves a higher purpose. It partners with [the Dallas-based Ryan Gibson Foundation to support leukemia](#)

[research](#). A grant awarded some time ago ultimately led to the drug that put Johnston in remission last month.

Johnston wants people to know, too, his band is authentic. The musicians are accomplished with awards attached to their resumes.

"[The Ray Johnston Band](#) and story or no story, is a legit, very good band," Johnston said. "I think it just happens naturally that they (crowds) see the passion from our band on stage and it's authentic. I love that word - authentic."

Johnston, though, is the heart and soul, the inspiration for many.

"Any deposit to the bank is nothing compared to emails from cancer patients or people battling their walk with the Lord when they write to you that you have been a difference in their life, to help spur them on, that's pretty big," Johnston said.


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