

THE GENIUS FACTOR — TALENT AND TOURETTE SYNDROME

There is no scientific evidence linking Tourette Syndrome to extraordinary talent, but with so many exceptional artists in the TSA family it is very tempting to draw a connection between this complex neurological disorder and the equally mysterious characteristic of talent.

We have featured many gifted individuals in this newsletter—actors, singers, dancers, writers and musicians working in a variety of fields from Paige Vickery (Summer of 2004) a classical musician and conductor to Kellie Haines (Winter of 2003) a ventriloquist who performed at the most recent TSA conference—to the delight of children of all ages.

For this article, we spoke to a group of performers about the impact of TS on their work. Is TS an inspiration? An obstacle? Or both? Does TS inhibit or enhance the connection with an audience? Do tics interfere with a successful career in the competitive world of entertainment? We've let the artists speak for themselves.

Scott Anderson (AKA Twitch), found refuge in music.

"I think that initially music was an escape for me. I would listen to it literally every spare second that I had. Although I didn't actually begin playing guitar and writing until I was around 20, nothing had a stronger impact on me than music. When I do perform, all of my tics subside completely, and so I think that the desire to perform may also be, in part, due to the 'release' it seems to provide, and the calming effect that it has. Also, there is no doubt that the opportunity to write and express myself is also very beneficial."

As a child, Kellie Haines found comfort in the puppets that would become essential to her career as an adult.

"My TS has been a motivating force in my world of ventriloquism and puppetry. When I was struggling at a young age with sad and confusing feelings inside, I would find comfort in talking to my stuffed animals and puppets."

Jazz musician Michael Wolff thinks the impulsivity associated with TS dovetails nicely with the improvisational nature of jazz. He finds that he is easily bored and can't imagine working in a conventional office setting for long.

"When I approach music it is with a beginner's mind. Like I've never done it before and it's new each time. Otherwise I'd get bored. I'm also always trying new things—exploring singing, traveling, enjoying new things. Music is a great field for a person with TS. You don't have to be a buttoned-down, regular person. The hardest thing for me would be to be in an office. The closest thing I had to a 'straight job' was the Arsenio Hall Show for five and a half years. I loved it, but I like variety. It's hard to say if that's connected to TS."

Several of the musicians interviewed for this story noted the advantages of being obsessive in a field which demands concentrated effort and sometimes single-minded dedication. Jeff Brown notes:

"I hold myself to a higher standard than I probably would if I didn't have TS. One thing TS probably does help with is my singing and performances. I find myself concentrating a lot on my pitch, sound and stage presence, and being more critical of myself than others are of me. This may be a result of a TS related compulsion I have for perfection in my performance. If it is, it is a good thing for the purpose of my becoming a better performer."

Rick Fowler finds that:

"The obsessive-compulsive elements of TS have always driven me to try to become a better musician. However, I am also easily and constantly frustrated with my lack of improvement.

It is a cycle that never ends. While tics are disruptive, the obsessions may have a good side; I often have a drumbeat going in my head in the background. This relentless mental groove acts like a training mechanism and has helped me to develop a good sense of meter."

TS tics can stymie many kinds of ambitions. People who cope with funny looks from office colleagues, fellow patrons at stores and seatmates on airplanes, are very curious about how performers handle tics on stage. Many performers report that tics all but disappear during a show. This may be related to the phenomenon that many people with TS experience while singing, playing a video game or even swimming. The interesting combination of concentrated effort and a sense of rhythm seem to ease tic symptoms for the duration of the activity.

This may seem counterintuitive for those of us who are deathly afraid of public speaking, singing a solo in the school chorus or being singled out to make a toast at a special occasion. But performers find freedom on stage—freedom from tics, twitches and stutters. Perhaps there is a sense of control that comes from knowing one's lines? Or maybe performers are genuinely happier in the spotlight that most people find terrifying.

"On stage I was accepted, and my tics and my bad thoughts went away," Kellie Haines recalls.

Jeff Brown finds that his generally mild TS symptoms are "... not as visible when I'm singing in front of people."

continued on page 8

