

Oliver Schroer: Gracefully taking leave of life

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SPECIAL TO THE STAR

NOTE: Oliver Schroer passed away since the Saturday's Living section went to print. The musician succumbed to his illness on July 3, 2008.

Musician Oliver Schroer drapes his 6-foot, 6-inch body across his single bed in the leukemia ward of the Princess Margaret Cancer Hospital in Toronto. He's surrounded by computers, CDs, speakers, cards and photos, and a laden IV pole. Hanging off it, like giant opaque leaves on a shiny silver tree, are bags of platelets, Demerol and fluids.

Schroer's bushy goatee, lost to chemo, has grown back, but not the hair on his head. He wears red, sexy-nerd glasses and striped pyjamas. His muscle mass has atrophied owing to steroids, so he looks even more lanky in this tiny room that he gratefully calls home.

"With my platelet numbers, I'm effectively a hemophiliac. If I left here and banged my head, I could develop a brain bleed. So, I'm happy to be here."

The words "happy" and "here" don't usually go with Princess Margaret Hospital. But Schroer is not a usual man.

He moves the laptop on which he's mixing a new CD off of a chair so I can sit by his bed. And then this enigmatic, stricken musician talks matter-of-factly about his terminal illness and his view of the "waterfall we're all facing" – death.

"We're all dying, you know," he says, his smile unnervingly calm.

Schroer may not fear dying; but he dreads living without being productive. "That will be a different learning exercise. If I can't think straight or do stuff...we will see."

I ask him what he thinks will happen when he dies. He answers without hesitation.

"At the moment we pass through that portal, things rearrange themselves so thoroughly (that) it cannot make any sense to us now. I have the feeling that, at the moment that I slip across, it will make ultimate sense. And I'm not going to look back."

The night before I met him in his hospital home, he was on a day pass, celebrating his 52nd birthday at a friend's house. At his birthday two years ago, he was riding a career and creative comet.

He had just released his CD, *Camino*, to critical and audience raves. *Camino* was recorded over two months in 2004 as he and two friends walked the Camino de

Santiago, an ancient trail that wanders across France and Spain. Schroer stopped in churches along the way to play his violin.

In January 2007, he was invited to the massive Celtic Connections Festival in Glasgow, playing music from the *Camino* CD. "I had been feeling a little weird, but I chalked it up to the late nights and doing what you do in Scotland: drinking."

Still, by the time Schroer flew back home to Vancouver, he had become obsessed with getting blood work done. He figured he could get to the blood lab early on the morning of his arrival home. He was the first in line. "My doctor called me back at 10 p.m. that night," he says. "You want doctors to be prompt, but not that prompt."

He was told he had a precursor to leukemia. In shock, he read his blood numbers aloud to the woman he was living with at the time, who happened to be a leukemia nurse. She burst into tears.

Although he says that the diagnosis left him, in the words of the Scots, "gobsmacked," it also made a lot of sense to him. In the previous six months, he caught himself saying things like, "I've had a big life. I'm okay to go now." And then he'd think, "Wow that was a bad thought...."

He comments now: "So, without thinking it was my fault, it did feel like my whole mindset about life could not help but have contributed to where I was at."

He decided to make some changes. He moved to Toronto, where he has a vast circle of supportive friends. And he immediately started recording a new album, the heart-stirring *Hymns and Hers*.

"My music became more a spiritual thing – coming from outside myself . I became a channel for something much bigger. That has extended to interpersonal relationships."

Schroer started a blog to help himself and his community navigate his illness. When he sent out his first blog, 250 emails came back.

"I did invite it. But that's a lot of emails."

In November, after being sent into remission with two rounds of chemotherapy and radiation, he was slated to have a bone-marrow transplant – purportedly his best shot at beating the leukemia. An unknown donor was found and tested, but the process took longer than anyone anticipated.

His transplant was scheduled for Nov. 2. On Nov. 1, the doctors discovered that his leukemia was back. The bone-marrow transplant was cancelled.

So, his doctors went directly into what Schroer calls "the Mack Truck of chemo." The suffering was intense but, through it all, he kept thinking, "Well, this has got to do it now."

The result at the end was almost worse than hearing that it didn't work. The word was: "Inconclusive." And, finally, his oncologist said, "We have nothing to give you."

Schroer found himself angry, frustrated that his bone-marrow transplant had been delayed so long that they'd missed their window by one day. The thought that it could have saved him plagued him.

Then a favourite nurse confided, "I am so happy you didn't do it." A transplant "mows you down," he recalls her saying. "You'd be flat on your back and suffering massively. You wouldn't have gotten to do your concert or your work. And it likely wouldn't have worked anyway."

Gone was the "if only." Blessed with a purity of purpose untainted by regret, Schroer has concentrated on finishing his most-loved projects, solidifying his teaching and mentoring legacy and performing "my last concert on Earth."

The concert happened on June 5, to a standing-room-only audience of 800.

"It was perfect," Schroer says with a sigh. "There was nothing I could have wished for differently. For the audience, it felt spiritual and very emotional."

After all, it was goodbye.

One of the best by-products of the evening, he says, was people's connection with each other and their willingness to not shy away from his dance with death. *He* clearly doesn't.

"I could desperately fight death, but it's not going to change anything. I have a strong sense of acceptance – in the sense of not cursing God or scouring the Internet for an herbal solution – and, at the same time, trying for more time."

His acceptance of his imminent death comes from how he has lived.

"As an artist, I found my own unique voice and have been able to publicly express that voice. I've gotten to collaborate with different wonderful musicians. What more does an artist want?"

"I'm one of the burning-bright guys who fire it all up and then go down in flames."

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