

Jenny Conlee's fight song



PHOTO BY KEN HAWKINS

The Decemberists' member talks frankly about her cancer, and what the road ahead looks like now

BY ISRAEL BAYER
STAFF WRITER

Jenny Conlee is a Portlander through and through. Raised in Stumptown and brought up on classical piano, Conlee developed a love for music at an early age.

Using a variety of musical instruments to improvise the structure of pop and rock songs throughout her career, Conlee has been a staple on the Portland and national music scene, with the accordion, piano, keyboards and as a singer. She played for 10 years with the band Calobo. At the time Conlee thought she would continue with school and eventually settle down to be a music teacher.

That's when she met Colin Meloy, the front man for the Decemberists. "He was interested in doing music," says Conlee. "I said, OK, as long as we don't tour. Two years later we had a record deal, and we were on the road, so that was the end of that."

Since that time she has also joined forces with Casey Neill and the Norway Rats. Between the Decemberists and the Norway Rats she has played on nine studio albums and toured with both groups.

"It is no accident that most of the music she has been involved with has been successful," says

Casey Neill. "She can get inside a piece of music and something unique just starts happening."

She is currently in the studio with Casey Neill and the Norway Rats and playing as a member of the ensemble Black Prairie.

In March, Conlee learned she had breast cancer. Now she is in the fight of her life. In May she had a double-mastectomy, and in June started chemotherapy. Street Roots had a chance to sit down with Conlee at a coffee shop in Southeast Portland to talk about music and her fight against cancer.

Israel Bayer: *It's been a crazy year for you. Can you talk about your experience and your journey with the illness and the process you're going through now?*

Jenny Conlee: Getting a diagnosis with cancer is like getting slapped in the face. What it does is stop your life. When you get the diagnosis, everything you had planned to do is thrown out the window. You feel like everything you have worked for is being taken away. Everything is upside down.

I couldn't go on tour with the band over the summer and that was a big part of my life for me. That's a really sad part for me. Plus, it was a big part of my income. All of that is very difficult. Your comfort zone is gone. You can't sleep the same.

You know your health is being taken away; that next week when you go into your first treatment, you're going to feel like hell. And you're going to feel like hell until you get through this, and you have no idea how long that will be. You have to grieve and still face each day.

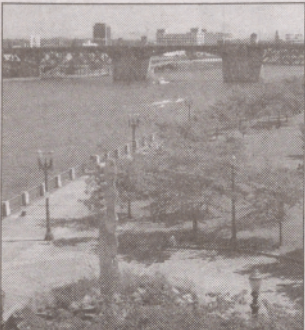
I.B.: *Can you give us a time line of what you have been going through?*

J.C.: I had a mammogram, and they found cancer in both breasts. I had surgical biopsies on both of them, and it came up positive. So I had a double mastectomy, which means they're both gone and no reconstruction. Some people choose to create fake breasts, but it's a complicated surgery and it takes a long time to heal and I wanted to start playing music as soon as I could. So I'm just as flat as the day I was born. Then a month after that I started chemo for six treatments, three weeks between each. I'm told I will not have to do radiation, but that I'll be taking some kind of weird hormonal drugs for up to five years. After all that, it's a matter of crossing our fingers.

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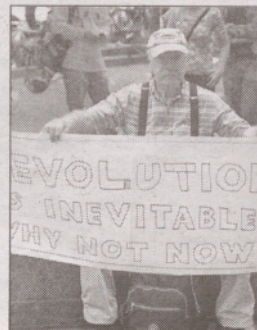
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