



PHOTO BY CARL EINBERGER

Conlee performing with her trademark accordion at the Woodland Park Zoo in 2006.

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I.B.: Cancer, along with other diseases, are experiences that no one can really comprehend until they have crossed that line. How has living on that edge affected your music and your outlook on the world?

J.C.: It's really broadened my outlook on life. There are so many people who have cancer, and I feel like I'm now a comrade with those people.

I also feel like I have the potential to see my demise and the potential of my death. It's something you have to deal with and face. Some people look at you sorrowfully and you have to deal with that. It's such a range of emotions.

Music matters to me dearly, but the success of my band right now and living the rock star life doesn't seem all that important anymore. Goal seeking doesn't seem important. I just want to try to find a way to live comfortably and happily, because that's what I need right now – to be comfortable and not to worry. The more stress I have, the more I worry about everything.

You have to have a support system. In a short amount of time, all of a sudden, I feel like an old lady or something. I'm sore and tired from the medication. I never know what kind of day it's going to be. People look at you different being bald, or you get treated a little different. I feel insecure now going out without taking, like, three prescription drugs with me.

I think people mostly are smiling at you like, "You go girl. I can tell, I know what you are going through." Sometimes people just look afraid, especially if I don't have my prosthetic breasts on. I can feel a little bit like a freak show. It doesn't feel natural to me to feel like that. It's out of my comfort zone.

I.B.: What is most healing for you?

J.C.: Having friends come over and make food for me and then going on walks. Having a support system. It's hard to maintain and keep your energy up. I love to garden and that's been a real focus for me.

I.B.: I've seen you play with both the Decemberists and Casey Neill and the Norway Rats on several occasions. You are always so locked into the flow of the show. It feels like you are hanging on the edge of every note. Does playing live come natural to you or is it a grind?

J.C.: I think what you are tapping into is what it's like being on stage and not spacing out, but instead, focusing on where everyone you're playing with is going. I love being on the edge, where things can fall apart, but they don't. It's a really exciting feeling. I love putting on a show. I love big motions that you can make with your body, or making things dramatic and trying to make it better live than what's on the record.

I.B.: Do you feel like the magic starts from

the moment you walk on stage or does it build?

J.C.: I think when you get on stage is when it starts, but definitely you can get more into the music throughout the show. I hate doing short shows. Everyone in the band may start feeling that magic at a different time. If it's a 40-minute set you are tossed out of that reality.

I.B.: Are the Decemberists on a hiatus right now?

J.C.: We are on a hiatus. For at least two years before we even get a record started. So that means it will be awhile. It's a break, and we all needed it. Colin Meloy wrote and is publishing a book.

I think we are all ready to do our own thing for a while. I'm ready. I didn't prepare for all of this. I would have been more prepared if I had not gotten cancer this year. I'm hoping to start teaching piano in January 2012.

I have musical things happening right now with a band called Black Prairie. We are working on a play and will be playing shows every Wednesday in October at the Laurelthirst.

I'm doing a tour with John Wesley Harding in November, which will really be fun. I am trying also going to get some solo accordion gigs, just to make a little money. I'm also working on a new album with Casey Neill and the Norway Rats. So even though the cancer has slapped me around, I'm not letting it stop me. There's always music.

I have scheduled things all through my treatment. I don't care how bad it is, I'm going to do the Casey Neill record and other projects. It's all mind over matter for me.

I.B.: There seems to be an illusion out there that once you've been in Rolling Stone or Billboard magazine that you have made it. Is it always a grind to make ends meet even after you've "made it" in the industry?

J.C.: You have to play live shows. You get in a magazine, and that's great and that might help sell a couple of records. The record sales don't pay you anything. The record label gives us an advance in the beginning. I mean, it's definitely OK. I'm not complaining, but it's really not that much. You have to sell so many records to recoup what has been spent on advertising and production, etc. So of course it does help when you get press because then you go out on the road, and it drives a larger audience to come and see the shows. And that revenue comes directly to us. Playing live is an essential part of the business.

I.B.: What advice do you have for the new – young or old – people jumping into the music scene?

J.C.: Meet as many people as you can. It is a networking game, and then playing with other people. You have to be good (laugh) of course, and friendly. You have to go out and meet people. You also have to approach music like a business person. The music alone isn't enough if you're trying to make a go of it.

To support Team Jenny go to www.decemberistsshop.com, and go to Team Jenny. All proceeds go to the Susan G. Komen for the Cure (Oregon/SW WA Affiliate).

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