

Remembering... Jeff Healey

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Losing both of his eyes to retinoblastoma, a rare form of eye cancer, at barely 1 year of age, Canadian blues rock and jazz musician/singer/songwriter Norman Jeffrey “Jeff” Healey could have lived a quiet, uneventful and difficult life, but there was too much talent and passion in his body and soul for him to ever let that happen.

He began learning guitar at the early age of 3, quickly adapting to his flat on the lap style of playing, as it was more comfortable to him than the traditional way of holding and playing a guitar, especially with his arms not being long enough at that young an age. He grew to become one of the greatest blues and jazz musicians of his time, garnering praise from the likes of Stevie Ray Vaughan, B. B. King, and Albert Collins.

Healey played with local Toronto bands from the time he was 13. He formed the short-lived band Blues Direction at 17.

The Jeff Healey Band came together in 1985, released a single and gained enough interest to stay busy performing 300 shows a year in Canada. Though they had a great following in Canada, the market for blues rock was not strong enough there to attract interest from record companies. However, once the band made itself known in the United States, they were signed with Arista Records in 1988 and soon after released their first album, *See the Light*.

In this 1989 performance of the title track, you can hear the undeniable influence Jimi Hendrix and Eric Clapton had on Healey.

The [album](#), *See the Light*, went platinum in the U.S. and sold more than 2 million copies worldwide. The single, “Angel Eyes,” reached No. 5 on Billboard’s Hot 100 chart, but would turn out to be the only song of Healey’s to ever reach the Top 40 on the U.S. charts.

The band, at this time, was also busy at work on the soundtrack of the Patrick Swayze cult movie, *Roadhouse*, in which they played the part of the house band at the Double

Deuce. Healey's unique playing style, his gruff and soulful singing voice, and his ability to fuse classic blues, jazz and modern rock, as demonstrated in this 1999 performance of "Hoochie Coochie Man," one of the songs performed for *Roadhouse*, opened up the band to an even wider audience.

The band's second album, *Hell to Pay*, was another million seller, and some would argue their best, but it and following albums never quite reached the level of success of *See the Light*. Guest [performers](#) on the album included George Harrison, Paul Schaeffer, Mark Knopfler and Jeff Lynne. Though an accomplished songwriter himself, Healey's talents afforded him the opportunity to include covers of his influences on his albums. His interpretation of George Harrison's "While My Guitar Gently Weeps," accompanied by Harrison himself on the album, was among his most popular covers and a showcase for Healey's vocal and musical abilities.

The Jeff Healey Band would go on to record three more albums that received praise and accolades in the blues community, but the band was no longer a major record seller. They disbanded in 2002.

Healey opened his own club in Toronto, Healey's, which would later move to a larger venue and become Jeff Healey's Roadhouse.

He turned his attention to another fascination, that of classic jazz and dance music. He began hosting a Canadian radio program, *My Kinda Jazz*, on which he frequently played selections from his vast collection of rare vintage jazz records, around 30,000 of which he had collected since childhood.

In 2003, he started a jazz band, [Jeff Healey and the Jazz Wizards](#). They would go on to produce three albums, with Healey playing trumpet, trombone and guitar and providing vocals.

In December of 2006, Healey was diagnosed with lung cancer. He underwent [surgery](#) in early 2007 to remove cancerous tissue from both lungs. Though the surgery was considered a success, it was short lived. Jeff Healey died of lung cancer on March 2, 2008. He was 41 years old.

Healey's final blues rock studio album, *A Mess of Blues*, was released a month after his death.

Jeff Healey did not let his blindness stop him from pursuing and excelling at any of his life's ambitions and passions. His musical prowess afforded him successful careers in both the blues and jazz arenas and the opportunity to [collaborate](#) with the likes of B.B. King, Stevie Ray Vaughan, George Harrison, Eric Clapton, ZZ Top, Buddy Guy, Albert Collins and others.

He won multiple awards including Toronto Music Awards, the Billboard International Achievement Award, COCA, CASBY, Music Express and Juno awards and was nominated for numerous Juno and Grammy awards. He was a loving husband and father, and was known for his big heart and grand sense of humor.

Jeff Healey was a force of nature - "like a hurricane" - and one not soon to be forgotten.