

# Grace Griffith, in Fine Voice and Spirit as Disease Takes Its Toll

By RICHARD HARRINGTON  
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A week ago, singer Grace Griffith appeared at the 2006 World Parkinson Congress held at the Washington Convention Center. As she has done for more than 20 years, Griffith sang about love and determination, hope and compassion in a crystal-clear voice that's been compared to Judy Collins, Sandy Denny and her friend and admirer, the late Eva Cassidy.

It was Griffith who brought Cassidy to the attention of Blix Street Records just before Cassidy's death from cancer in 1996, paving the way for the Maryland singer's posthumous success. In 1998, Griffith was diagnosed with early onset Parkinson's disease, and over the past few years it has taken its toll on the singer's body, but not on her singing voice or spirit.

For more than two decades, Griffith was a physical therapist by day and a singer by night, though the advance of Parkinson's eventually forced her to

give up work and to cut back on performing. Yet, there she was, singing to several hundred people at a program on "Music and

See GRIFFITH, D5, Col. 1

Parkinson's," talking about being a musician and living with the disease, and offering songs from a gorgeous new album whose release this week is being celebrated with concerts tonight and tomorrow.

There were tears in the eyes of many in the audience when Griffith, backed by a prerecorded tape, poignantly sang the album's title cut, Iris DeMent's "My Life."

"My life, it don't count for nothing / When I look at this world, I feel so small. / My life, it's only a season, a passing September that no one will recall. / But I gave joy to my mother and I made my lover smile. / And I can give comfort to my friends when they're hurting, / and I can make it seem better for a while."

One of the songs on the new album, "Passing Thoughts," is a poem written by Griffith's older brother Fred Sisson, diagnosed with Parkinson's six years before her, and set to music by Carey Creed. Griffith plans to include his song in her concerts — tonight at Christ Church Hall in Chaptico in Southern Maryland and tomorrow at St. Mark Presbyterian Church in Rockville. She will be joined by many of the stellar local musicians who perform on the new recording, including guitarist Al Petteway, pianist Lenny Williams, bassist Chris Biondo, Cathy Fink and Marcy Marxer. Marxer, Biondo and Williams co-produced "My Life."

The occasion is particularly poignant because these performances may be Griffith's last for some time — and possibly forever. At the end of March, Griffith will undergo a radical surgery that could help her regain some of her lost abilities and quell some of the often painful and disabling symptoms of Parkinson's. But, she says, "one of the less uncommon, adverse things that can happen ... is an alteration of the voice and loss of power. That is, hopefully, usually temporary."

Sometimes, singing or talking, Griffith has to cope with bradyphrenia, or slow thinking, that can be a side effect of her medications. At the congress, it happened on the up-tempo "I Can't Dance."

"Something slower paced, I have more time to fish around in my mind and find the next word," says Griffith later that day, explaining it was a song she hadn't performed much. "I did a risky thing and left my cue sheet on the podium — I don't know what possessed me to go down off the stage," she laughs.

Maybe it's Griffith's insistence on encouraging people, especially her Parkinson's peers, to "look suffering square in the eye" and live life with passion. Elsewhere, songs such as Jane Siberry's "Calling All Angels" and Tish Hinojosa's "Love Is on Our Side" set the tone for an album whose central theme is the healing power of love, hope and inspiration amid the ebb and flow of life.

"Sometimes, life teaches you what's big stuff and what's small stuff. For me, small stuff is embarrassment, pride or self-consciousness about my situation; big stuff is



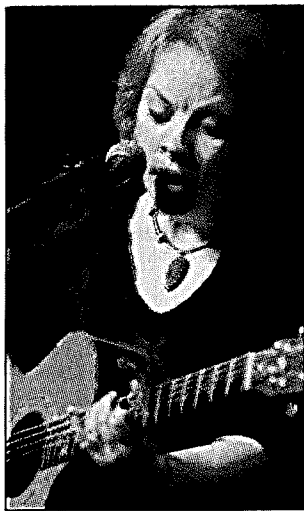
BLIX STREET RECORDS

**Singers Grace Griffith, left, and the late Eva Cassidy. "She was clearly such a bright spirit. . . . I felt such kinship with her; I felt we could have been sisters," Griffith says of Cassidy.**

using it to help people or to comfort somebody that's going through something.

"There's a selfish aspect to it, too," she acknowledges. "In a way, I'm singing to myself. I need reassurance that love is on our side, that people are going to connect with you, that people who are angels are going to be there. I need to know that, so the lyrics are an affirmation of what the neurologists are saying in a more scientific way — that when you say something, you reinforce it into your mind."

Parkinson's is a brain disorder



BY RAFAEL CRISOSTOMO FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

**"It's amazing to me that I can still sing without squawking all the time," says Grace Griffith, who has Parkinson's disease.**

that produces tremors, slowness of movement, rigidity and difficulty with balance. There is no cure.

Over the past few years, "my symptoms have progressed quite a bit, particularly in the duration and frequency," Griffith explains. She says her voice is "whispery . . . but my singing voice seems to be spared so far, and I'm thankful for that."

Griffith grew up on a small farm in Southern Maryland, one of 10 children, all of whom loved to sing. Looking for a stable career, and wanting to keep her music an art rather than a job, Griffith got a degree as a physical therapist from the University of Maryland in 1978. A decade later, she began splitting her energies, becoming lead vocalist for a local Irish band, the Hags, and working in various other duos and ensembles before landing a solo contract with Blix Street in 1996.

Not surprisingly, all those years working as a physical therapist affected how Griffith dealt with her own diagnosis. "The thing that struck me in retrospect is how courageous those people were, because I found myself more prone to 'whys.' 'Why can't I do this? Look at my

hands; why won't my hands do this?' For the most part, those people I was dealing with over the years were not complaining; they were just: Okay, what do we do now? I felt in a way like I owed those people to live up to the things I used to say to them."

She notes that Parkinson's is a disease "that's very characterized by isolation. People don't participate in conversations because of vocal volume and they may be discounted as intelligent sentient beings because of the way they appear. . . . You have trouble with suddenly getting herky-jerky out in a crowd, or freezing."

Stamina and endurance can be a challenge for people with Parkinson's, and "My Life" took a year and a half to record at Williams-Biondo Studio in Kensington. Williams and Biondo were closely associated with Eva Cassidy, who was one of Griffith's biggest fans.

"I didn't know Eva very long — I connected with her in July of the year she died in November. She was clearly such a bright spirit, and I felt such kinship with her; I felt we could have been sisters. When I used to

see her in the audience, I used to wonder what the hell she was coming to see me for? And I realized it was the singing from the heart."

Griffith has had to cut back her appearances, perhaps a couple major concerts each year, and smaller performances a couple times a month. "I have to have an understudy," she points out, "though so far I haven't actually had to fink out on any concert."

The upcoming concerts will feature nine people onstage. "Fortunately, the music, the singing, it's just there," Griffith says. "I don't practice. It's amazing to me that I can still sing without squawking all the time, but so far I can."

Sadly, when it comes time to perform her brother's poem, "Passing Thoughts," Griffith will probably let Carey Creed handle the vocals. Her brother died Thursday of cancer. You can understand why Griffith includes his song on her album. This is the way it ends: "Accept the hand of fate — don't deny the random chance / Sing life's joy and beauty, make your fate a joyous dance."



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