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ERNIE THACKER

By Aaron Keith Harris

In April 2006, Ernie Thacker was doing what any other bluegrass professional would be doing—spending time with his family at his home in the hills near Haysi in southwestern Virginia, gearing up for the festival season, and finishing up an album to follow up “The Chill Of Lonesome,” his stellar 2002 album for Doobie Shea Records. He had already filled one of the most hallowed roles in bluegrass as Ralph Stanley’s lead singer. He had also been nominated for a Grammy award along with the other artists on “The Stanley Tradition: Tribute To A Bluegrass Legacy.” And with his band, Route 23, he had used his rich, strong voice to establish himself as a truly distinctive vocalist admired by everyone in the business.

“As a singer, I just think that he’s real,” said Robert Hale of Wildfire. “Other than being technically a good singer, he’s real and he’s authentic. There’s nothing fake about him. He sings with emotion. All the things that a good singer has, he’s got them.”

“I think the thing about Ernie that people just normally respond to is just the sense of straightforwardness and the sense of heart,” said Ernie’s brother, Matt Thacker, bassist for Route 23. “I’ve played with him 11 years and there’s still times that his voice just amazes me.”

A few short months later, Ernie would be thankful just to be on stage at the county fair singing one song. “I was so emotional, I couldn’t sing,” said Ernie. “I kept crying the whole time I was on stage, because, like a month before that, I didn’t know if I was going to make it or not.” Whether by miracle or will or both, Ernie had not only survived a brush with death closer than seems possible, but he’d also come through the ordeal with a positive outlook even more remarkable.

“My accident was real, real severe,” said Ernie in the winter after the crash that led to his paralysis from the waist down, a condition that required that he spend all but a few minutes of every day at home, in bed, equipped with a sand-filled mattress that continually shifts positions and a wound VAC, both to prevent and heal bed sores. “I’m really kind of getting aggravated,” remembered Ernie. “I’m wanting out. I want to get back on the road.”

Though Ernie had logged countless miles on the roads as a musician, the near-fatal accident happened on April 18, 2006, not far from his house, on a road he’d driven countless times. Ernie and Route 23 had just played their first date on a festival schedule that was expected to provide most of their income for the year. He decided to hop in his silver 2005

Ford minivan for a quick trip up the winding road to Matt’s place.

“I was going to my brother’s house. You pass it actually coming down [Virginia State Route] 83. I was looking for a CD, had some CDs out on the dashboard,” said Ernie. “Well, when I went around a curve, the CDs flew to the other side and hit the floor, so I was reaching over trying to pick up all the CDs, and that’s the last thing I remember. They said they’re pretty sure I had a flat tire. The passenger front tire went and shot over the guardrail on the right hand side and when I tried to correct it, I shot straight across the road and went over in a big holler about forty feet deep and hit a tree. It threw me out of the van and I actually had a clothes rack that was in the van stuck ten inches into my back like a big stick. The guy that stopped, he seen my headlights down there. The first car that he flagged over had three nurses in it and they worked on me until the ambulance got there and they Medflighted me to Bristol.”

Doctors and nurses were amazed that someone in Ernie’s condition even made it through the curvy ambulance ride and bumpy helicopter flight more than 75 miles over the southwest Virginia hills to Bristol Regional Medical Center. The

heart doctor said he'd never had a survivor with a ruptured aorta like Ernie's. All of Ernie's ribs were broken, as well as both collarbones. The right elbow, that had powered his strong guitar and mandolin playing, was broken. His spleen was removed and his kidneys failed, requiring three weeks of dialysis to get them working again.

After someone heard the report come across the scanner that night of a crashed silver minivan, Matt was able to find out from authorities only that it was Ernie and he was being taken to Bristol. "It was the longest, most grueling night of my life," said Matt. "They were doing surgery and would come out and say he was doing good, and next time they would say he was losing blood. It really was touch and go on whether he was going to make it."

"I thought he was going to die," said Dorothy Thacker, Ernie's wife of 16 years. She stood by with friends and family through the 14 hours of surgery, during which doctors used fifty units of blood to replace what Ernie was losing. The blood loss was so great that doctors had to clamp off the blood flow to his legs, keeping enough blood in his heart to stay alive, but this resulted in severe damage to the nerves in his lower back, leaving Ernie unable to move a muscle below his waist.

"For about three weeks it was a 50/50 chance," said Ernie. "And I believe with all my heart that prayers is what brung me through it. I was on so many prayer lists, you just wouldn't believe. Words can't even describe how good people have been to me as far as prayers and sending me cards and having benefit shows."

Doctors kept Ernie in an induced coma for about six weeks, simply because the broken bones and swollen tissue created too much pain for a conscious man to bear. "They told me that I swelled up to triple my size," said Ernie. "So I had friends come to see me, then walk out thinking they had the wrong room. They saw the name on the door, but they didn't recognize me. The first thing I remember, waking up, they had a feeding tube run down my nose, and the first thing I done was jerk that feeding tube out, and it was long and I just kept jerking it out."

When Ernie finally regained consciousness, he couldn't talk for quite a while because of the damage done by tubes in his nose and throat, and he

couldn't write with his injured right arm. But, he gained enough strength to write with his left hand for the first time in his life. The first thing he asked was for someone to call and cancel his gigs, not knowing that the bluegrass world had already rallied to his aid. For 102 more days, Ernie stayed in the ICU under a haze of pain medication.

Even though Ernie had no head injuries, doctors feared the blood loss may have caused some brain damage, but there was none. "No more than I had before the accident," Ernie chuckled. In fact, by the time Ernie left Bristol, his survival had doctors and nurses calling him the "miracle patient." He then started five weeks of physical rehabilitation in Norton, Va. "They helped me learn my balance, how to sit up in the bed," said Ernie. "When I went there, you could just touch me, if I was sitting up in the bed, and I'd flop over like a fish. You don't realize how much balance you lose when you lose your legs."

Long before Ernie was allowed to go home, he realized how much his family, friends, fans, and colleagues loved him and helped him, something he continually mentions months later. In particular, he's thankful to Dorothy. During a 140-day stretch in the hospital, she went home just one night. "She spent every day with me. She was there, and if it wasn't for her, I don't think I could have made it," said Ernie. "I think I would have went stir crazy. Dorothy, a certified nurse's assistant, used her expertise to make sure Ernie got the right care."

While Dorothy was still watching over Ernie in a coma, bands and artists such as Wildfire, Alan Bibey, Marty Raybon, Sammy Shelor, Alan Mills, and Don Rigsby spread the word about Ernie's condition and started raising money. Wildfire helped organize a benefit show at the Haysi, Va., football stadium, then made it standard practice to collect donations for Ernie at every show they played. Melvin Goins personally passed the hat. Ernie's aunt set up the Ernie Thacker Fund at The New People's Bank in Grundy, Va., and contributions were coming in from all over the world. All of them still check in with Ernie to see if he needs anything, sometimes coming by just to pay a visit. "As far as doing what we can to help, it just seemed like the normal thing to do," said Robert Hale. "I know he would have done it for me."

"My family and I would have never made it," said Ernie about all the help. "I probably would have lost everything I had."

Ernie became known to the bluegrass music family, now so concerned for him, at age 16, when he landed the much-coveted slot singing next to Ralph Stanley as a Clinch Mountain Boy. But, before he got to southwest Virginia, Ernie grew up in Elyria, Ohio, born on June 14, 1971, to Edsel and Donna Thacker. Edsel was from Pikeville, Ky., and Donna was from Haysi. Bluegrass was played in their

house, in jam sessions, and on cassettes by Bill Monroe, Jimmy Martin, the Stanley Brothers, and Ralph Stanley's later work.

Every summer, Ernie would head to Virginia to spend time with his grandparents and, at age 15, he moved there to go to school. He had already played in a couple of bands in Elyria, but he was obsessed with the Stanley sound and wanted to be close to the source. Grandfather Ernest Perrigan knew Ralph Stanley and knew that he often hung out at a car lot called Turner Chevrolet. "There

was a preacher that worked down there at the car lot and he wrote a lot of songs for Ralph. Franklin Byers is his name," said Ernie. "Well, every time Ralph would be down there, Frank would sneak off and call my grandpa, for him to bring me down there. So, I'd always be down there with a guitar in his face, or a mandolin. I tell people that the reason he hired me is so he could have some peace when he went down there at the car lot."

Ernie traveled for several months as a mandolin player, left the band for about a year, came back, and eventually replaced Sammy Adkins on guitar and as lead singer. "I have to give Stanley credit for a lot of my singing," said Ernie. "He taught me how to sing with feeling and how to sing from the heart. I remember what he told me one time: 'Just remember, when you're on stage singing to people, if you can't feel it in your heart, then people out there listening to you, they're not gonna feel it in their heart.'"

After about six years and seven CDs with Stanley, Ernie left in 1994 to form the Thacker-Blankenship band along with Junior Blankenship, a friendship and musical partnership that thrives today, even though the band folded ten years ago. Blankenship still lives close enough to take Ernie along on a ride from time to time. "I'd seen a lot come and go, and I got to watch Ernie mature into a great singer," said Blankenship, who had been with Stanley around 14 years before Ernie joined. "We're both pretty outgoing and we became friends, and now we're more like brothers than we are friends."

In 1997, Ernie took a factory job back in Elyria and planned to "give up bluegrass completely" in favor of a steadier income. But, Dan Tyminski called asking Ernie to lend his voice to the Doobie Shea label's "The Stanley Tradition." "And that's all it took," said Ernie. "I went down there and done them songs. Then I came back home and, within a month, we moved back home and that's where Route 23 started, with help from my younger brother Matt."

"By the time we came back to Virginia in '96, we were playing together all the time," said Matt. "Nobody had to really talk about it or make a decision on whether we were going to have a band." For a while, the band didn't have a name, but a regular gig at the Golden Pine in Pound, Va., soon provided one. "We were doing pretty good on tips there and people started asking what the band was called," said Matt. "And

from where we played in the bar, we could look out of this big picture window and there was a big Route 23 sign right out there.”

Ernie and Route 23 recorded “Backbone Job” in 2000 for Crosscut Records and, in 2002, Ernie recorded “The Chill Of Lonesome” for Doobie Shea, which included an all-star lineup of guest artists. That same year, Ernie sang the “National Anthem” at the NASCAR Busch race in Daytona in front of 130,000 spectators and more than a million TV viewers. At the time of Ernie’s crash, Route 23 (with Matt on bass, Dick Roach on banjo, and Brandon Shuping on mandolin) had recorded most of the CD that was to become “The Hangman.” Matt, Dick, and Brandon have stuck by him, and Ernie feels the pull to sing bluegrass even more now than he did when trying to catch Ralph Stanley’s attention.

“At the time when I realized I was paralyzed, I lost a lot of heart in music. At that time, I just lost so much heart, I didn’t think that I’d ever be back on the road again,” recalls Ernie. “But, as time went on and I started coming to myself more and more each day, I realized its just going to take a lot of work, and I can do it.”

Much of that work includes learning how to move in different ways, how to shift positions when sitting, in order to promote circulation, and rebuilding the upper body strength that he must now depend on totally. To do this, he throws the football around with his children, lifts weights, and stretches.

Ernie’s wide support base has not left him. He now has a new Martin guitar and case to replace the guitar lost in the accident, and a new van and a new trailer. The van cost \$7,000, with donations from fans and colleagues covering \$4,000 of that. A fan from Georgia, Veniece Kennedy, bought him a Blueridge guitar, another fan from Florida sent him a quarter-sized Taylor guitar that wouldn’t hurt his arm and chest if he played it while in the bed. All told, Ernie received more than five-hundred cards and letters. “Bluegrass is not a big industry, but the thing of it is, everybody just came to my aid and I didn’t realize how many friends I had—I honestly didn’t—true friends,” said Ernie. “Words can’t describe how appreciative I am of all the musicians and the fans, too.”

Ernie suffered a setback in mid-2007 because of a miscommunication from

doctors. After he had surgical skin grafts to repair damage done by bed sores, he was sent home, but hospital staff neglected to mention that he was to stay in bed for a couple of weeks or risk tearing the grafts. He ended up ripping three of the grafts, necessitating another round of surgeries and several more weeks of bed rest.

There's also the tremendous financial challenge. "I didn't have any insurance when I wrecked, but somehow when I was in a coma, the doctors got me on Medicaid," Ernie said. That has helped with some of the bills, but many were not

covered. "I'm gonna be in debt the rest of my life honestly, but I'm glad to be here, to be in debt."

Incredibly, Ernie has the strength to look at the future with eager optimism. "I'm just now getting back to my old self. I've been playing the fire out of this guitar. I got my calluses back, and I can't wait to get up out of this bed and have the first rehearsal." He has two cuts on Volume 90 of the "Prime Cuts Of Bluegrass" series—"Detroit City Chill" and "The Hangman" (the title cut for the CD scheduled for release on Pinecastle Records mid-2008).

The first date on Ernie Thacker and Route 23's festival schedule this year is the Suwanee Springfest in Live Oak, Fla., March 27-30, followed by the Central Virginia Family Bluegrass Festival May 15-17, Ralph Stanley's Hills of Home Festival May 23-26, and Bean Blossom June 14-21.

Ernie's very proud that his sister D.D. Turner-Thacker, 24, will join Route 23 to play fiddle and sing harmony. "We're going to be doing a lot of rehearsal between now and that first date, because I wanna come out on that first show and let

everybody know that Big E's back. I might be in a chair, but I'm back."

Matt Thacker is happier than anyone to see Ernie persevere. "Ernie's always had the greatest willpower of anybody I've ever known and that hasn't changed. He's still got that amazing will, and he wants to come back."

Through all the pain and all of the hard work ahead, Ernie remains upbeat. He is always grateful and he tells everyone just how grateful he is. "I'm really proud. I've got two wonderful kids. They really helped me throughout the accident. It was pretty rough on them, but, after I got home, they helped me a lot," said Ernie. His son, Ernest Keith, was 14 in January and daughter, Whitley Nichole, turned 15 the same month. (A look at their names reveals Ernie's singing hero.) And, he continually expresses his love for Dorthy, grateful that his crisis has brought them closer together when it might have driven another couple apart.

"So many times I feel so unworthy, I really do, because I know there's other people in the same shape that I'm in, and they're not lucky enough to know so many people and have so many fans like I do," said Ernie. He also talks about a growing faith, that he believes protected him and is helping him understand what happened and how to make something—perhaps many things—good come from it.

"God saved my life. I don't have my legs, but how could I complain about not having my legs when every day I have is because of a medical miracle. I've come to the point where I just have to deal with it. If [my legs] come back, it'll be wonderful. If they don't, I'll just deal with it the best way I know how. I'm just glad to be here," said Ernie. "God left me my hands, he left me my voice, and I believe with all my heart that he left me here for a reason. There's a purpose for why he let me live. Music, bluegrass music, gets in your blood. Once you do it and you get it in your blood, it's just something that you can't help. I mean, it's like right now, all I think about is going back on the road."

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