

Speaker 1:

Welcome to the Eye on the Cure Podcast, the podcast about winning the fight against retinal disease from the Foundation Fighting Blindness.

Ben Shaberman:

Welcome everyone to another episode of the Eye on the Cure Podcast. I am Ben Shaberman from The Foundation Fighting Blindness. I am your host and I am very excited today to have as our guest, Katriona Taylor. And she is a jazz singer in the UK and she also happens to have Stargardt disease, so that's why it's so appropriate to have her on Eye on the Cure. And Katriona recently came out with an album called Blind Passion and it features her own original music as well as covers of music by folks like Duke Ellington, Diane Schuur, Stevie Wonder, and even The Doors, although I would say it's sort of The Doors via Jose Feliciano. And Katrina, you have a wonderful voice, I just want to put that out first. In preparation for this interview, I listened to a lot of your music and usually when I prepare for an interview, I'm reading about research or reading somebody's stories, but it was a lot of fun to just listen to your music quite a bit, quite a bit from Blind Passion. So welcome to the program.

Katriona Taylor:

Thank you. Thanks Ben, that's really kind of you to say. Hi.

Ben Shaberman:

Well, I learned about you through a fundraiser that the Foundation had recently called Hope From Home, it was a virtual fundraiser to raise money for research. And I wanted to let you know, Katriona, that event raised somewhere in the neighborhood of \$450,000, so thanks for helping make that event so successful, you had a great performance.

Katriona Taylor:

I was really excited to be part of that. Yeah, it was a real pleasure.

Ben Shaberman:

Well, again, it was a pleasure to have you and I just wanted to talk a little bit about your voice because in reading reviews and comments by other musicians, you're often referred to as having a sultry voice and a smooth voice. And I will definitely agree with those comments, but I think one of the things that stands out for me is when you sing, it seems so effortless and natural and I think that's beautiful. And for me, the more I listened, the more I wanted to listen, so you sort of drew me in. And one of my favorite songs that you did on Blind Passion, well there were a couple, I loved My Cherie Amour by Stevie Wonder, that's sort of an iconic song from my youth. And then you really did a wonderful rendition of Leon Russell's A Song for You, which really wasn't a huge hit, but I thought you really did a great interpretation of that song. Can you talk about, I guess those two songs and what inspired you to put them on the album and then interpret those?

Katriona Taylor:

Sure. So the album concept was Blind Passion and that was really where I decided that I was going to be much more open and kind of own my story about being partially sighted, visually impaired in a sighted world of artists. It wasn't something that I had always talked about really, but I just felt it was time in my life to start owning that a little more. So I selected some tracks from artists who either wrote the music

themselves or performed the songs. And the songs you mentioned, My Cherie Amour, I did an arrangement of that and slowed it up. And I mean, what a beautiful song. I was actually thinking of my daughter when I chose that one because I have a four year old, well she's nearly four, beautiful daughter. And that was really kind of, I had her in mind. And so I love delivering that song because it always makes me think of her.

And the Leon Russell, that was really the association with Ray Charles. He won a Grammy for his performance of that song, and so that brought Ray Charles into the mix and obviously the artist that I was celebrating on the album are blind or visually impaired themselves. And hey, what better artists than those two?

Ben Shaberman:

Well, thanks for giving me that explanation. I am embarrassed to admit that I didn't realize that was a Ray Charles song, I guess from my era I remember it as a Leon Russell song, but that's an interesting connection. And before we go further, I wanted to let our listeners know that you have sort of a unique spelling for your first name. Katriona is spelled K-A-T-R-I-O-N-A, so there's an O after the I. And I think you mentioned at some point that that's sort of Scottish inspired, that spelling?

Katriona Taylor:

Yes, thank you for telling everyone that, Ben, because otherwise, yeah, it might be a little bit harder to find me online. So it's Katriona with a K and an O in the middle. And that's because in Scotland, my mom is Scottish, and in Scotland you spell it differently with a C, but my dad insisted on a K, so I got the K and the O in my name.

Ben Shaberman:

Well, it's unique and it's beautiful, so wonderful name. I want to get back to the music, but I wanted to give our listeners a little bit of background on your retinal condition. And I read that you were diagnosed with Stargardt disease at the age of seven. And Stargardt disease can have a wide range of severity and seven is pretty early. I'm just curious how that impacted you as a child and growing up to have that early diagnosis and I presume some significant vision loss?

Katriona Taylor:

Yeah, I didn't know any different. I wasn't seeing as well as my brother and sister and my parents started to notice. I also was complaining at school that I couldn't read the board properly, and so we went to try and get a diagnosis and actually the first ophthalmologist we saw, they kind of said, "Oh, she's a hysterical child and she hasn't got any problems." So my parents took me away with this information and as we walked out of the ophthalmologists, my mom pointed out a sign across the road and said, "Can you read that road sign?" And I said, "No, I can't read the road sign." So they kind of watched me for a while and just thought, "No, something's not right." And took me back to see other people until finally we had that diagnosis.

So that part of it in itself was quite a struggle, it not being recognized straight away. And then of course when it was recognized and I was given the diagnosis, I was told in very sort of stern and formal terms that it was going to be a fairly difficult life with no vision, maybe blind by the time I was 21, and that I wouldn't be able to do various things. That was quite challenging to hear even at seven. I mean, I didn't really understand what it meant, but I saw how it impacted on my mother, she was very upset, crying. And yeah, so I mean, the thing about my parents, which I really admire them for, is they gave me quite

tough love in a way. They just let me keep going and they kept me in mainstream schools, I guess in a way I was treated almost like I didn't really have that disability, which whilst it was very challenging, it stood me in relatively good stead in terms of my determination to kind of succeed in life.

Ben Shaberman:

And your father at that time was a really accomplished tennis professional, renowned throughout the world for his tennis skills, Roger Taylor. And what was that like having a tennis pro as the father, which most people don't have?

Katriona Taylor:

Yeah. I mean, that was again, I didn't really know any different, so we traveled a lot when I was young, very young and he was often on tour, but it was very much that we were sort of involved in tennis as youngsters on a tennis court or watching tennis, and that was quite difficult as well without being able to have a full sight and being able to participate properly playing tennis because it was expected of us that we would play. My father got to the semifinals of Wimbledon three times, he was number one in Britain and he also won Brown slam doubles in America. I don't have his record off the top of my head, but he was a very, very serious tennis players. So obviously friends that came to the house, everything was kind of associated with that game.

Ben Shaberman:

Right. And obviously our listeners can Google Roger Taylor and tennis and I think they can get his history. Going back to you at first, the doctors are telling you and your parents that you're hysterical, that's not the best messaging to get when you're having trouble with your vision. But then when they really did figure out that your vision was in fact the issue, obviously you were told life would be a struggle, but ultimately you've accomplished a lot. And I guess earlier in your adult life you were a London City solicitor and solicitor in the UK is the same as a lawyer here in the US, we don't use the term solicitor. Was that a difficult journey to become a solicitor? That's not an easy career path, especially for somebody with vision loss.

Katriona Taylor:

I was guided towards that by this great guy who was actually called Sir John Wall, who was given a knighthood for his work as a high court judge. I was introduced to him early on and I went to work with him and I just saw how amazing he was. He was fully blind. I thought, "Well, yeah, this is achievable." It was hard work, there's a lot of exams and a lot of years of study for becoming a lawyer, but I was always very determined once I decided that I was going to do something. I studied at university for four years and then I went to law school and I was very lucky at law school because that was the first time in my kind of educational life where I guess the educational institutions were quite helpful, they really were much more supportive.

I hadn't really had a lot of support from the schools and from the universities, but at that stage the chair of the university had a daughter himself who was deaf and so he was quite open and helpful. And I got my distinction, which was great, that set me up nicely. And when I was looking for job offers, I was lucky, I got a couple of offers and I was able to start working in the City of London, which is very difficult to get into generally, so I was really pleased.

Ben Shaberman:

Well, that is quite an accomplishment. Now, did you practice a certain type of law or is a city solicitor more of a generalist?

Katriona Taylor:

No, I was a specialist. My specialty was e-commerce law and intellectual property law, so I was looking at copyright ownership, and patents, and branding, and all those kind of things in the context of contracts on e-commerce.

Ben Shaberman:

Well, that's a really important topic these days with the advent of so much technology and electronic content. Did you enjoy that? Was that pretty exciting for you?

Katriona Taylor:

I really did enjoy it and the way that it works in the UK is we have two years of what is called, it used to be called articulated clerks, now it's called a training contract, but it's basically a period where you qualify as a lawyer and it's a really tough period because there's usually a group of young lawyers and they're all competing against each other to try and get a job because there's never as many jobs as there are people competing for them, so that was another period where you had to prove yourself as being good at what you did. And then I was offered a job and I went into that area, intellectual property because I found it really exciting and I worked for a while in that area, but I very quickly kind of realized that the work was going to be relatively repetitive and I got to the stage in my life where I thought, "I've only got one life here and I think I want to be something different." And so I started to work towards becoming a professional singer and I changed my career.

Ben Shaberman:

That's quite a change from solicitor to singer. Now, did you know that you had some vocal talent? You must have realized that early on in your life, I would imagine.

Katriona Taylor:

I had done singing when I was very young and I had done a lot of sport for obvious reasons during my teenage years and stuff like that, I was still quite athletic and trying to do those sports, but I think it was a leap of faith really, that the desire to sing was there. And I guess I went about changing like a lawyer would. I did my research, I did my homework, and then I started working really hard towards training my voice and training my musicianship and learning about instruments. And I always believed that I could song-write and that was really a driving force for me. I wanted to song-write. And fortunately over the years I've discovered that I can do that and I still get a lot of pleasure from it.

Ben Shaberman:

Well, in addition to the covers on Blind Passion, your own songs are quite good. And we're going to take a moment in the podcast to have our listeners listen to one of the songs that you wrote, it's called In the Name of Love. So we're going to listen to a short clip and then at the end of the podcast we're going to play the full song so people can appreciate the complete work. So here is In the Name of Love by Katriona Taylor.

Katriona Taylor:

(Singing).

Ben Shaberman:

So Katriona, what inspired that song? That song for me has a lot of emotion and it's a little dark, there's a little pain there. Are you able to reveal what inspired you to write that?

Katriona Taylor:

So this song is really about the end of a relationship, which we've all experienced. And it's kind of just talking about that proximity between all the good things that come with love, but all the hurts that can come with it too. And yeah, so that's what that song was about. I think when you are songwriting, you have all those facets, you have all those things to draw from, all your happy experiences, sure, but also some of the things that have gone wrong in life.

Ben Shaberman:

Yes, and I felt like the song is very honest and it gets back to some of the comments that I made earlier about your voice. There's an effortlessness to your voice, a natural aspect to your voice that at least for me draws me in. I don't feel like you have any effects or you're trying to do something all that fancy or special. And I feel that that's very effective for interpreting the songs that you interpret and also for the ones you've written like In the Name of Love. So over the years, who have been your biggest musical inspirations?

Katriona Taylor:

Wow. So many. I have very eclectic tastes, I like all kinds of music. The music I perform is mainly jazz, Latin and soul, but even that just covers a huge range of people. I'm very lucky I've actually recently with the album been reviewed and likened to Diana Krall, and Nina Simone, and Charday, and an artist you may not know in the States, but Beverley Craven, and Eva Cassidy. So I think that kind of gives you a range of the kind of people that I find inspirational because each of those artists I'd be very proud to be associated with. Yeah, and I was also lucky enough to work with George Benson and oh wow, he's a great singer, I'm very inspired by him. He's a consummated professional and after decades of working in the music business is still very passionate about what he does and that's inspirational.

Ben Shaberman:

That is really cool. And growing up in the '70s as I did, I heard a lot of George Benson. One of my favorite songs that he does, it's a cover of the Jefferson Airplane song, White Rabbit, and I love his interpretation of that song. I like the Jefferson Airplane version as well, but he really adds a unique twist to it. So what exactly did you do with George Benson? What songs did you tour with him?

Katriona Taylor:

I was invited to go on a European tour with him and I opened the show on that tour, so that was just luck. Sometimes in music there's luck involved and I was very excited at the prospect. I mean, it was amazing for me to have come from lawyer to singer and then to really kind of find my own voice, find my own writing style, and then have that opportunity. So yeah, it was amazing for me.

Ben Shaberman:

That is really cool. Did you have the opportunity to sing and play together?

Katriona Taylor:

I didn't play with him directly, but I saw a lot of those sound checks where the guys are just messing around and they're playing like a Paul Young song and then they're practicing something else. And yeah, even just that experience was amazing.

Ben Shaberman:

I'm sure it was, and obviously that's a very memorable gig. Are there other performances or gigs you have that particularly stick out that are particularly memorable for you?

Katriona Taylor:

I've had probably hundreds, thousands nearly, of gigs. And each one has its own kind of special thing going on. Sometimes I might be performing to some people who are quite influential. I do remember having one show where I knew that David Essex and Jeff Wayne were in the audience. So that was like, "Okay, there's two really serious music people here." That was nice. And also, I mean there's been shows where there's a lot of celebrities in the audience and royalty as well, so it's like you have to be on your top game for those.

Ben Shaberman:

I'm sure, I'm sure there's a little pressure. As someone with vision impairment, is it tough to be on stage and perhaps not be able to see all of the audience or a big chunk of the audience?

Katriona Taylor:

I find myself that when I'm performing, I very much go into a part of myself where although I'm aware of the audience and I'm looking at them and I'm visually impaired so I can see some of the audience, I'm not fully blind, I just find that when you are actually in that zone, you're probably not really thinking about those things, you are just delivering what you have to give to people and hoping that they are receiving it on an emotional level as much as anything because that's part of the job of the singer, isn't it? To take somebody away from their lives, escape, and have an experience that's quite emotional.

Ben Shaberman:

Certainly. And I have to say, I have never seen you perform live and maybe I'll have that honor and privilege someday, especially if I make it over to the UK, I'll look you up, but watching you virtually as I have and having listened to you on my home sound system, I feel like you have such great presence, so your vision loss I don't think really impacts your presence at all, maybe if anything it boosts it. I don't know if that's possible, but I really appreciate the connection you make with the audience, I think it's very strong, at least again for me it has been. So you've just had this album out, Blind Passion, I presume you're still busy promoting that. Are you doing concerts right now?

Katriona Taylor:

Yeah, we're doing concerts in the UK. Yeah, everything is starting to very much reopen. I mean, the music business has been massively impacted by the pandemic and it's still having ramifications here with audience numbers, with places, some places have had to close down because they just couldn't survive the couple of years we've had, festivals have been put on hold and all kinds of things, but things are starting to get back to normal to some extent here. And yes, I've been doing lots of shows recently, so that's been great. I'm actually playing at Ronnie Scott's later this year, so I'm very excited about that.

Ben Shaberman:

That's great. And I'm sorry, who is Ronnie Scott?

Katriona Taylor:

So in the UK, Ronnie Scott's is like the top venue here really, it's a jazz club. And Ronnie Scott was a saxophonist and yeah, he was a guy who opened a club like about 50 years ago and it's just got bigger and bigger over the years.

Ben Shaberman:

Very cool. Well, congratulations. Yeah, things here in the US are starting to open up and a friend and I recently got tickets for one of your UK brethren, Paul McCartney. He's still touring if you can believe that, so we're hopefully going to see him in June, and I too have missed live music quite a bit. So Katriona, this has been wonderful. I'm so pleased we had a chance to hear your story and hear about your music and the journey to becoming a singer. And thank you just for taking time out of your evening to join us.

Katriona Taylor:

Thank you, Ben. Yeah, real pleasure to talk to you.

Ben Shaberman:

Again, a pleasure here. And listeners, don't go away because we are now going to play the full version of Katriona's original song, In the Name of Love. So enjoy and thanks again as always for listening.

Katriona Taylor:

(Singing).

Speaker 1:

This has been Eye on the Cure. To help us win the fight, please donate at foundationfightingblindness.org.