

The Best Medicine

After a devastating diagnosis, **CHARLIE LUSTMAN** found that music was crucial to his recovery. Now he's inspiring others with his autobiographical album, *Made Me Nuclear*.

CHARLIE LUSTMAN remembers well the call that changed his life. The doctor told him he had an extremely rare form of cancer that would require the removal of a significant piece of his jaw as well as a year of chemotherapy. "Even then," the doctor had said, "don't make any long-term plans."

While Lustman, a gifted singer/songwriter, wrestled with his diagnosis — only one in 400 million people suffer from his particular type of adult osteosarcoma annually and survival rates are iffy at best — he experienced a pre-surgery surge of creativity, recording a number of songs in honor of his son, Shaya. "And then I wondered if I'd sing another song again, ever," he says.

The answer was a resounding yes, as evidenced by *Made Me Nuclear* — "the *Sgt. Pepper* Cancer Album," Lustman, 47, jokes — which offers unflinchingly honest, ultimately ebullient songs about the long and winding road from diagnosis to NED (no evidence of disease). Now six years into his recovery, Lustman is on a world tour that is being partially bankrolled by biotech upstart Ziopharm Oncology (dates available at www.mademenuclear.com) and will perform at next month's 17th annual Connective Tissue Oncology Society conference in Prague. He spoke to *American Way* about his passion project.

AMERICAN WAY: How did you handle the news of your cancer diagnosis?

CHARLIE LUSTMAN: Those first few weeks after the diagnosis were high anxiety. Nobody knew if removing my jaw was going to cure me and, if it did, no one could guarantee that I would ever chew, talk or sing again. I was devastated.

AW: You've described this period of time as "high-contrast" living.

CL: Yeah. I sold my business, got a big paycheck and a cancer diagnosis in the same week! But it was during one of my chemo treatments that my wife went into labor and gave birth to our

second child upstairs on the third floor. Talk about contrast.

AW: How did you emotionally survive that very rough period?

CL: It's all in how you look at life. I became really good at "flipping it." Whatever fears, anger, sadness or depression you're feeling, don't suppress it — let it flow. Then when you are tired of feeling that way, flip it: Imagine the polar opposite of what you're feeling. Visualize that, like a movie in your

mind. For a cancer patient, it's vital.

AW: Tell me about the *Made Me Nuclear* album.

CL: Basically, it follows every chapter of my cancer journey, from diagnosis, surgery, treatment, recovery and beyond in order to bring an empathetic, inspirational, motivational, educational and hope-filled musical message to the listener. I started this project from the chemo chair, spent months writing the songs, booked a year in the recording studio, adapted the work for the stage as a theatrical experience and have been touring ever since.

AW: You've performed the album all over the world at theaters, cancer centers, universities, medical conferences and survivor celebrations. Is it hard to relive your story time and again?

CL: It's extremely rewarding to me on so many levels. Every time I share this story, I remind myself how lucky I am to be alive, that I get to spend time with my soul mate and watch my children grow up. That is a true gift, and I am very grateful for this extended opportunity.

AW: What would you like listeners to take from your music?

CL: *Made Me Nuclear* has a universal message. It truly is for everyone going through something challenging, and we all are experiencing that on some level. I realize that it's not about how much time we have on the planet, it's what we do with the time we have. And I am hoping that my work will inspire all of us to do what we love and love what we do.

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