

# **Stroke of Luck: Robert Swain and the Band at His Side**

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by Shelby C. Berry

Only days after a stroke that could have taken his life, bluegrass musician Robert Swain was back on stage, in his element. Through his season of difficulty and years of him offering support and strength for stroke victims, Robert is now a symbol of hope.

Since the day he was born, Robert overcame challenges long before singing his first note. His parents abandoned him in New York City when he was one month old, and he was adopted by a Quaker farm family in New Jersey. Robert later attended Guilford College, a small Quaker school in Greensboro, North Carolina. It was there, in North Carolina, he first heard the music of the mountains.



In the 1970s, Robert moved to Washington D.C. to earn his law degree and serve a brief stint in the White House. Although this job isn't what stuck, the city of historic monuments and memorials, eclectic neighborhoods and restaurants, and local flavor did. D.C. is one of the last places you'd expect to see a bluegrass band, but on the streets near the city, King Street in Alexandria, Virginia to be exact, Robert's band was created.

Legend has it, Robert and his four-piece band, King Street

Bluegrass, debuted in 2008 on the bricks between an ice cream shop and an Italian restaurant playing bluegrass and Americana tunes.

*“Our band was named for King Street in old Alexandria where we started,” said Nancy Lisi. “My father had a realty office across the street from the legendary Tiffany Tavern. Many bluegrass acts played there, and we loved being in the regular rotation.”*



The current lineup of King Street Bluegrass isn't quite the same as it was 12 years ago. Today, the band is Donnie Faulkner on lead vocals, Roger Hart on harmonica and vocals, Nancy Lisi on upright bass and vocals, John Ace, on fiddle, Rob Waller on banjo and lead guitar, and Robert Swain on baritone vocals. Their music varies from traditional bluegrass, gospel, and country to bluesy flavored tunes.

*“A lot of early bluegrassers moved from the mountains to the D.C. area, so we fit right in here,” said Nancy. “Around D.C., old-time and bluegrass music is having a resurgence, even now, with many people learning to play and enjoying the camaraderie and togetherness of this music.”*

By 2014, King Street Bluegrass was making a serious name for themselves, playing at prestigious events like the Washington Folk Festival and their favorite, Tiffany Tavern – a serious stomping ground for bluegrass fans at the time.

But by Thanksgiving weekend of that same year, things changed in a major way, not only for Robert Swain but the entire King Street Bluegrass band. It began when the band returned home from their largest gig, the Roscommon Circle Festival in Ireland. Robert had taken his dog for a walk and by the time he got home, he was unable to talk.

In hindsight, the incident had all the warning signs for a stroke: difficulty speaking, facial irregularities, and even arm weakness. After a brief visit to Inova Mount Vernon Hospital,

Robert’s son Matt, a Navy physician at the time, helped coordinate a hospital switch to Alexandra Hospital where Robert underwent five-hour brain surgery to remove multiple blood clots. Robert had collapsed on the floor and had been discovered by his hospital roommate. “Matt made sure he was transferred to a stroke-approved hospital, and the surgeon was flown in. By then, [Robert] was non-responsive and could only blink his eyes to consent to the operation,” said Nancy.

According to his doctor, this surgery would be for comfort only. Robert’s bandmates would not accept that.

“Roger went right up to the doctor and said, ‘You do what you have to do, Doc. You don’t know who this is!’ And we had to pull him away from the young surgeon,” said Nancy.

<https://youtu.be/stQTsGv1-Jo>

Hours later, the doctor told Robert's bandmates that the surgery was much more successful than they had expected. Robert had survived the worst. After a few days in the ICU, Robert's bandmates asked him if he wanted to continue the band since he was the lead singer and a founding member, and his answer touched the heart.

*"I need something to come back to," Robert said.*

As word spread, Robert received help from all over when he returned home, especially from local friend Donnie Faulkner who booked King Street Bluegrass regularly. Donnie came in to help assemble the hospital bed Donna Fletcher bought for Robert and walked out a new band member.

"Robert never even quit. We did one gig without him while he was in the hospital, and he sang with us at a private chili cookout right after his release," said Nancy. "He could barely speak, but we got him to sing Baritone. He loved it."

Although he was back doing what he loved most, Robert still had a long road to recovery. After his therapy ended, he sought other when

support at the Stroke Comeback Center, a non-profit providing long-term programs for survivors.

King Street Bluegrass has always been known for their philanthropy. After the care Robert received from the Stroke Comeback Center, the band focused their energy on stroke awareness and the Center.

"We were just in amazement at how much singing baritone in the band helped Robert to regain his speech, and the timbre of his voice returned," said Nancy. "When he started to sing leads, we became very excited and decided to put out an album and

have him sing lead on it!”

The band’s latest album release, *Stroke of Luck*, includes songs with guest artists on a few select tracks. The February release had King Street Bluegrass busy with shows and events for the year, including the Glen Echo Summer Concert Series in July. However, with the circumstances of COVID-19, many events were canceled.

*“Glen Echo, like many other festivals and venues, have canceled their series,” said Nancy. “They requested the performers to do a virtual concert.” Half the proceeds of ticket sales will go to Glen Echo to benefit the beautiful carousel that was vandalized. “We hope they will get some donations to help cover their losses, both from not having the events and for the carousel repair.”*

he band has several private shows, weddings, and other outdoor events on the books for 2020, and they urge fans to watch their website for added events.

Although world issues have put many things on standstill, King Street Bluegrass pushes forward with a positive perspective. They are releasing their unofficial album, *Live at Mister Henry’s*, a physical album that was only given out at gigs and which sold out long ago.

“Music brings the world together!” Nancy said. “There’s no time now for quarreling, only for giving!”