

Girl Interrupted

Walter Coker



After surviving cancer and battling depression, St. Augustine singer/songwriter Anastasia resets for the future. By Danny Kelly

The night sweats were getting bad. For more than a year, Anastasia Spiecker had been waking from deep sleep, pajamas drenched. Her skin itched terribly, and her chest hurt so much that sometimes she couldn't lie on her side.

The symptoms, though bothersome, seemed disconnected, and not clearly related to any illness. Besides, Spiecker was 24, active and outwardly healthy — she rarely even caught colds. Even her doctors didn't grasp what was happening. One suggested she might be having some sort of immune system

reaction, or perhaps bad allergies. She was prescribed meds for the itching, but the symptoms came back as soon as the meds ran out. "I even thought I might have parasites," Spiecker recalls. "I wasn't sure if I was suffering some sort of karmic consequence, or whether it was in my head."

It wasn't either of those things, but Spiecker didn't find that out until she left her hometown behind, and traveled to Phoenix, Ariz. She made the trip to see the premiere of "Human Like You," a film for which she had written the

soundtrack. Her music, often moody and gorgeously solemn, is an ideal backdrop for any film about loss, and this movie, about bipolar disorder, was particularly close to her heart. But the night after the premiere, she woke at four in the morning, soaked in sweat, heart pounding. "It was at that moment I felt that something was seriously wrong," she says.

In the morning, she asked the people she was staying with to take her to a local clinic. As she got ready, the Natalie Merchant song "My Skin" came on her iPod. "I remember

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hearing the line about the ‘fine, binding tendrils that strangle the heart,’ she recalls, “and having this eerie feeling.”

Then she left for the clinic, somehow already sensing that her life was about to change.

Sorry, I can't hear that well. I'm making salmon.”

The two things don't have anything to do with each other, but they sound reassuringly normal. These days, I mostly exchange e-mails with Anastasia. The big house on the hill where she lives in Tallahassee doesn't get good cell phone reception, but tonight she's agreed to answer a few questions despite the interruptions.

Spiecker is in Tallahassee working on her master's degree in music therapy at FSU. More than a year after that frightening night in Arizona, the environment in which Spiecker finds herself is an unusual one for someone like her. The college town, full of tailgating, hazing and full-fledged debauchery isn't a place I'd ever picture this child of nature to reside. I imagine her on a mountaintop somewhere in the Andes, in some sort of moon-trance, not down the street from a frat house.

Now 26, Spiecker is a survivor of Hodgkin's lymphoma. (NSHL, or nodular sclerosing Hodgkin's lymphoma, is the particular subtype of Hodgkin's that Anastasia had — the most common, and also most prevalent in adolescents and young women.) The fact that she had it, that anyone gets it, is disconcerting. The fact that she is in Tallahassee preparing salmon is reassuring. She is back in school, back to writing and back to her music — the focus of her life since she broke onto the local music scene.

Spiecker has been playing guitar and singing since she was a child; she's been performing live since she was 13. Her style is quiet and persuasive, with an unfailingly clear voice that delivers each note like a small, perfectly wrapped package. (To view videos of her performing, go to folioweekly.com.) She's

released two albums of original music, and was a popular performer on the live music circuit when she was a college student in St. Augustine.

But Spiecker is also too creative for her own good at times. The canvas sometimes isn't big enough. She's battled depression and struggled to maintain her artistic focus. For several years, she was convinced she had bipolar disorder, a potentially disabling mental illness that's characterized by wild mood swings and depression. She's seen psychiatrists and psychologists regularly since the age of 16, and bipolar has been mentioned as a possible explanation for her depressive moods. Spiecker now believes that her brain's fragile chemistry may have simply been muddled by alcohol or mind-altering chemicals, but suffice it to say, it's been a challenging couple of years.

“Anastasia has been a very deep thinker since she was a little girl,” explains her mother, Debbi Spiecker. “She is extremely sensitive to other people's pain. When other teenagers might have been worrying about normal teenage issues, Anastasia was agonizing over prejudice, famine, war.”

Debbi Spiecker knew early on her daughter might have been too perceptive for her own good. “She grew up way faster than I would have preferred,” she says, “but I don't believe I could have stopped it. Her mind was light-years ahead of most people when she entered this earth, and there was no slowing her down.”



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When the teenaged Anastasia began performing, her set list skewed toward popular singer/songwriter tunes by the likes of Jeff Buckley and Elliott Smith. But many of her own songs were about Jesus. That changed as she grew older, and her artistic focus shifted to songs about love and loss. But illness reawakened her spiritual side, and many of her songs of hurting have been replaced by songs of optimism.

"As a songwriter, I am not really compelled to write about stuff that would bring me down anymore," says Spiecker. "It's important for me to put my energy toward life-supporting things right now and not get stuck in an oppressive thought or feeling pattern."

That wasn't always the case. She recalls the sense of displacement she felt after her visit to the Arizona clinic. The doctor there recognized immediately that something was wrong. "The doctor came in after the X-ray and said, 'This does not look like the chest X-ray of a healthy young person,'" Spiecker recalls. An hour and a CAT scan later, the doctor returned and somberly delivered the news. "There is a large tumor near your left lung," Anastasia recalls her saying. "It's taking up nearly three-fourths of the lung space."

"Holy shit," Spiecker responded, and began to cry. She asked how big it was. The doctor answered, "It's really big."

Spiecker was shocked, but also discomfited by the news. "I don't even *like* life that much!" she half-joked with the people she was staying with in Arizona. "Now I am supposed to *fight* for it?"

In fact, the diagnosis did change her. Before her cancer, Spiecker was like many tortured artists, troubled and unsettled and, in some ways, too highly attuned to her own pain. Music was her outlet, and although the songs were often harrowing and overly sentimental, they were damned good. But when the diagnosis came, her music, school — her entire life — was put on hold. Spiecker spent the next year getting biopsies, enduring chemo treatments and PET scans, as well as undergoing proton therapy.

"I definitely went through a sort of cleanse or renewal," says Spiecker. "It was a very sobering experience. I saw the compassion and

goodness in people. The doctors, the nurses, friends, every one of us was basically doing the best we could."

Dr. Brad Hoppe, a radiation oncologist at the University of Florida Proton Therapy Institute and Spiecker's physician, says her attitude helped carry her through a scary and very difficult process. "She is a very artistic person," he says. "She always has a cheerful disposition."

She wasn't always cheerful, of course. A blog that Spiecker started just a week after the tumor was discovered (anastasiascancerexperience.blogspot.com) reveals some dark moments. "I am *****ing pissed!*" she wrote in one entry. "My needs are relatively simple. But, God, I feel so insatiably hungry and so *****ing lonely*. Why is this *****ing **** happening??*"

Her blog, like her music, is almost painfully honest. Though she was one of the artists featured on Planet Radio's showcase of local talent, "Native Noise" Spiecker was a curiosity on the male-dominated local music scene, and sounded strange alongside hard rock Bizkiters and punk bands. Her popularity grew with her exposure, however, and the list of local acts that wanted to work with a young, pretty girl with a golden voice started to swell. She performed everything from piano in the lobby of the elegant Casa Monica Hotel to opening gigs for the likes of John Mayer and Huey Lewis & the News. And her songwriting was prolific; the bulk of her original work was composed when she was between the ages of 13 and 17.

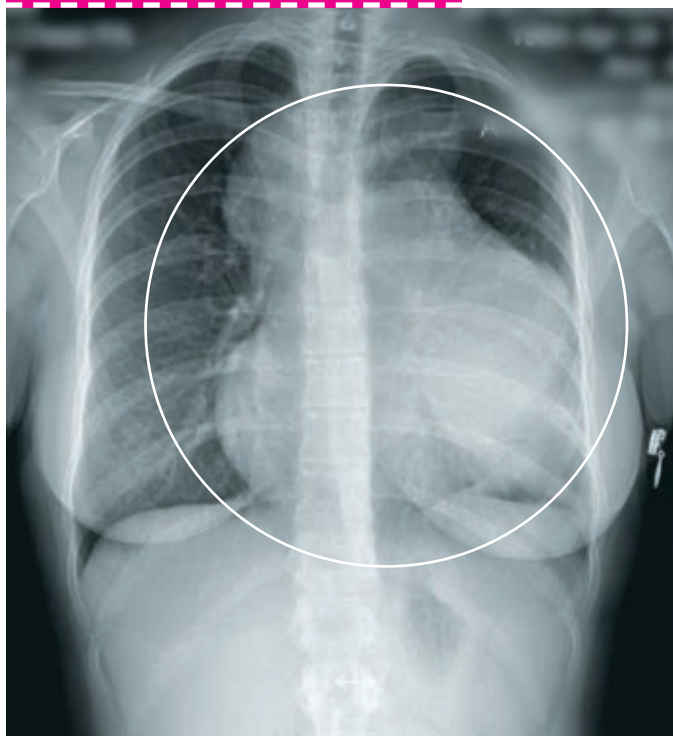
"It happened very naturally," explains Spiecker. "There was not a lot of effort involved."

Ryan Turk, a member of local band Rice and proprietor of ALR Warehouse Recording Studios in Jacksonville, has worked around Anastasia long enough to understand her strong points. "Her skill is her songwriting," he says. "She is able to make her songs come from different viewpoints, there is a lot of her own personal life in there as well. I think she is one of the best songwriters in Florida."

Early public exposure helped Spiecker overcome her natural shyness. There's nothing like performing in front of a happy hour bar crowd for shedding the timidity of adolescence. "My songwriting really helped me to come out of my shell and it has led me to a lot of new friendships," she says.

But as her gigs began to multiply, Spiecker began to develop difficulties dealing with everyday life. "I have always been a super-sensitive person," she concedes. "When I was young, my parents didn't have to do anything more than clap loudly if I was doing something wrong, and I would start crying." She is also deeply invested in the things she encounters, both globally and on an everyday scale, and while that makes her music delightfully bittersweet, it sometimes makes life discouraging. "I get sad about the suffering and pain in the world," she says. "The harshness of this life does get to me ... survival still seems like a kind of violent thing to me. You know, eat or be eaten and all that."

In recent years, Spiecker's sometimes turbulent personal life seemed overwhelming. She openly discussed her mental illness, including on local radio programs, and at one



This X-ray, taken in Arizona on Feb. 1, 2009, showed for the first time the extent of Spiecker's tumor. The growth had pushed her heart toward the center of her chest, displaced the left lung toward the back of her ribs and begun to intrude upon the right side of her chest. "This thing is a monster," wrote Spiecker on her blog.

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point calling herself “a poster child for bipolar.” Last August, she blogged, “Cancer and even death are not my greatest fears. ... I fear the emptiness and hunger that haunts my soul like a phantom. Or, like a cancer, which not even chemotherapy can put into remission. You get the picture. It comes and goes. I don’t want my life to be destroyed by it.”

Sometimes her depression overwhelmed her, as in this post/poem from last fall:

swollen
swelling
dripping
stupid fat face
stupid girl

But for every fearful or negative blog entry, Spiecker countered with one overflowing with optimism and gratitude.

“This cancer stuff is causing me to appreciate/savor/experience each day and each person in my life (including my very own self) on a deeper level than I perhaps ever have. I know it’s not going to be a bowl full of roses and some of the days ahead of me may very well suck big time, but I am strengthened in my spirit knowing that I am not alone and that, by the grace of God and the fire in my soul, I am one tough cookie!”

Ryan Turk, who collaborated with Spiecker on projects several years ago, says, “If she was ever depressed, you would never know. She is such a happy person to be around.”

Such contradictions doubtless contributed to Spiecker’s convictions about bipolar disorder. She certainly carries several competing personalities around with her. She still feels caught between them sometimes, but credits her recent illness with streamlining, and simplifying,



Anastasia sports one of the colorful wigs she wore during her chemotherapy.

her thought process. She’s no longer trapped in a teenager’s world. Her focus is razor-sharp. And while her anxieties still creep up now and again, she has found a mantra as a result of this horrific ordeal. “I like to think of the strength of the people that have already come and gone and done beautiful things,” she explains. “I try to put my attention somewhere [besides] my worries or fears.” She meditates in the morning, often prays at night and is resolutely determined to focus on the positive.

“It is amazing what human beings can do,” she says. “There are so many people that make the world a better place every day. Remembering that keeps me going.” □

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