



Photo by Dave Hensley

Keeping the Beat for a Blacktop Gypsy

By P.A. Geddie

Many people know and love Andie Kay Joyner as the lead singer for the popular band blacktopGYPSY. She hails from Edgewood/Wills Point and her East Texas family shows up often to cheer her on.

Today it is not her powerful, sultry voice however that has her family and fans standing before her — today the crowd is cheering her on as she waits for a new heart.

Joyner has a blood disorder, hemochromatosis, that led to a recent discovery of irreversible damage to her heart.

A transplant is her only hope.

She's 39 years old.

Born on April 29, 1977, that year is most significant to her for something other than her birth.

"It's the year Elvis died," she said recently from her room at the University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center in Dallas. "I was four months old. I was probably crying my little eyes out."

Despite her situation, she's almost always got a good sense of humor and gentle, lighthearted approach to any given day.

When Joyner was born the doctors thought she might have Cystic Fibrosis because her lungs had fluid in them. Her parents spent her first few weeks placing her face down on their laps and patting her little back trying to clear them up.

Turned out she didn't have Cystic Fibrosis. She wonders now if those symptoms then might have led to discovering the hemochromatosis at that early age. But nothing more was said and she grew up without any other apparent health issues.

"I had a fairy tale childhood," Joyner said. "Everything was great. Lots of family. Lots of friends. Every toy you can imagine. A pony. A pool. Family vacations. I was very adventurous. We lived in a magical place. Both of my houses. I was a happy kid."

Her mom and dad divorced when she was four years old.

"I just liked that I was getting more family," she recalls.

She enjoyed school, friends, family, playing an electric organ, trips to the coast, days spent with her grandmother, riding

bicycles, swimming, Angel the border collie and Snowball the cat. And always there was music.

She loved listening to 8-tracks in her dad's Ford truck and singing with her mom in her Oldsmobile and with her stepdad playing guitar.

By the time Joyner was 10 years old she was singing in public. Her first band was with her mother and stepdad — they played bluegrass and country music.

She sang with Stone Mountain Bluegrass and other bands and went to bluegrass festivals. Some of her favorite memories were spending time each summer at an annual bluegrass festival in Canton where she got to hang out with Bill Monroe, Ralph Stanley and the Clinch Mountain Boys, The Osbourne Brothers and many others.

She started singing at the Kaufman County Opry when she was 13.

"Most kids lived for the weekend," she said. "I lived for the Kaufman County Opry on Saturday night."

Joyner became part of the house band at the opry along with Steve Gracy, Milo Deering, Woody Woodruff, Steve Campbell, Charley Close, Chris Ricketts, Buddy Arnold, and Jay New.

A couple of years later, an amazing young fiddle player, Heather Starcher Stalling, showed up at the Kaufman County Opry, and the rest they say, is history.

The pair had beautiful harmonies and over the years started writing songs together as they played with talented bands like Rusty Weir, Jim Lauderdale, Tommy Alverson, Eleven Hundred Springs, Mark David Manders and Max Stalling to name a few. Joyner has harmony singing credits on countless recording sessions across Texas.

As the duo grew more confident year after year, they wanted to do their own thing and blacktopGYPSY was born. They had their first gig February 9, 2006, at Poor David's Pub in Dallas, and also released their first album that year.

A few years earlier, in 1998, at the age of 21, Joyner began having nagging health issues she couldn't ignore and sought medical attention. She was passed from one doctor to another and misdiagnosed for more than five years.

By 2003 Joyner said she was exhausted and had a particularly bad year.

"Johnny Cash died, June died, my grandfather died. I had a breakdown realizing death was real — someone that close is here one day and gone the next. I had a hard time dealing with it. I had a new job that was tough. I still had health issues."

By the end of that year she finally got the right diagnosis — hemochromatosis.

She was told she'd need to have phlebotomies (blood drawn) to remove iron from her system about every two weeks and then eventually she could slow that down to a few times a year. She did that for 12 years, slowing way down the last few years as she thought she was supposed to.

Early this year she began to feel bad and found out she had heart damage.

"I can't believe my heart is damaged this much and I never had any warning," Joyner said.

Unable to work now, her medical bills are growing. A two-stage concert fundraiser is planned for her November 6 in Ben Wheeler. Musicians Max Stalling, Matt Hillyer, and a long list of others are stepping up to help her and the day promises fantastic shows for a good cause as well as live and silent auctions. Go to blacktopgypsy.com for more information about the concert and also a GoFundMe account set up for those that want to contribute but can't be at the event.

Joyner is grateful for all the blessings in her life and optimistic about getting well and getting back on stage.

"I'm not a 'why me' person. I still have all four of my wonderful parents, a brother, sister, a niece that I was blessed to have a hand in raising, life-long friends, a huge music family, and an extraordinary best friend who shares most of my life experiences. I have been in love. I have experienced the pain and heartaches of knowing I needed to end long-term relationships and lived through to write about them. I have a relationship with God and have my eyesight to see His beautiful creations. I've traveled extensively including Graceland three times. I'm proud to call beautiful East Texas my home.

"I plan on continuing this amazing life after I get over this hurdle."

Learn more about hemochromatosis at hemoinfo.org.