

Cover




Photo: Leigh Righdon

JIM BYRNES

More Than Meets the Eye

BY JOHN THOMSON



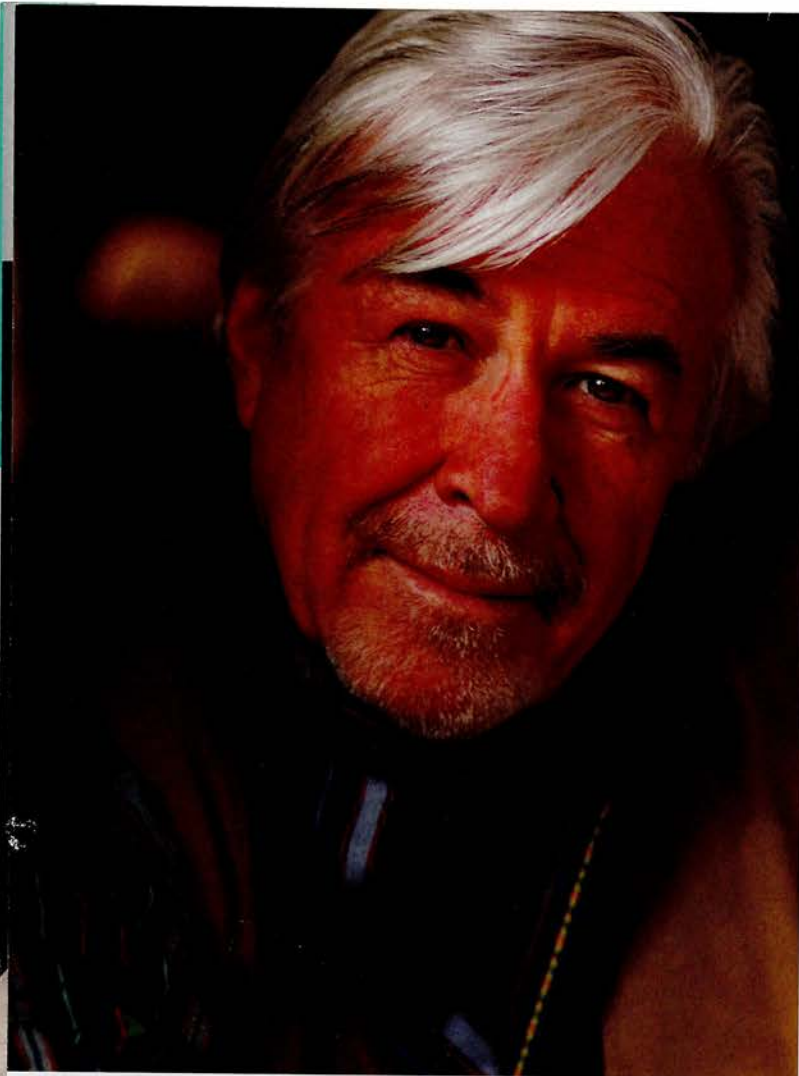
As a child, his favourite performer was Jimmy Durante. “There was something poignant about his character. He was downtrodden but he always found a way to make things good,” says actor, singer and composer Jim Byrnes. “You could sense there was a lot more with the guy than met the eye.”

There’s more to Jim Byrnes than meets the eye, too. At five years of age, he contracted double pneumonia and was not expected to live.

“They had to cut open my lungs and drain them of fluid,” he says. “I’ve still got a big, huge hole in my back from that. They prayed the last rites over me and all that stuff.”

Calamity struck again in 1972 when, as a young man, he lost both legs in a car accident. Yet like Durante, he found a way to make things good, drawing upon an inner resolve to rebuild his career and, because of lessons learned from his own misfortune, helping others with similar setbacks.

“I just try to keep positive,” he says when asked about what kept him going.



The Early Years

Jim attributes his plucky, life-affirming attitude to his Catholic parents and a warm and stable upbringing in St. Louis, Missouri. Religion factored in his home life; his cousin was a nun, but music figured prominently, too.

“My mom always tried to have a smile on her face and a song in her heart. The song in the heart is a big part,” he adds. “The first thing I remember doing in my life was walking around in a circle and singing Wabash Cannonball. It was on the radio.”

Jim grew up steeped in the music of the era and the region. As a child, he sang in the church choir “because I had good pitch and a good ear,” but when he reached St. Louis University High School, he found another calling.

“I fell in love with being on stage,” he says.

“He walked into that audition and your eye just went right to him,” says his former theatre teacher Joe Schulte. A revered instructor at St. Louis High, Schulte was a virtual star maker. A list of his graduates reads like a Who’s Who in the TV, theatre and movie worlds. Schulte remembers his young charge fondly.

“He had a certain charisma on stage, even at that time, and it was phenomenal to watch him work. There are technical things you have to learn, but you also have to find the spirit of the character and he usually always found the spirit of the character immediately.”

Shakespeare, musical theatre, you name it; Jim did it all during his four-year stint at high school. That’s not to say he didn’t goof off, at times, like the time he was cast in a school play and missed his cue. The show carried on and when Schulte asked the cast afterwards, ‘Where was Jim?’ they said ‘Oh, he was behind the stage into himself, playing the guitar and singing.’ “He was the kind of kid who would love to sit on a street corner and play his guitar,” says Schulte. “He was on a mellow path,” he laughs.

Mellow, but inquisitive and restless, too. After graduation, Jim signed up for the theatre program at Boston University but returned to St. Louis a year later. He didn’t stay. Like many other kids during the turbulent sixties, he hit the road to find himself.

“It was a vision quest; I was just looking for something that fulfilled me more,” he says. “I had had it with school.”

In 1969, he was drafted and sent to Vietnam. When a fellow recruit who was in the bunk next to him was killed, Jim momentarily snapped and went AWOL once back in the States. He fled to Canada, but turned himself in shortly afterwards.

“There was a deal where they didn’t quite know what to do with me and sent me home. They eventually sent me a general discharge,” he says of his 11-month army career.

Once again, he left the US for Canada, working at a series of odd jobs to support himself. Between working as a fisherman in Ucluelet and a shepherd outside Victoria – yes, a shepherd – he eked out a marginal living, not at all what his parents expected of their well-bred son.

“They thought, man, where have we gone wrong with this guy? I did great in school and all that stuff and it wasn’t like in my whole life I had been a mess or anything,” he says. But clearly his parents were disappointed and he was letting them down.

Then, in February 1972, while he was pushing a pickup truck to get it started, another vehicle struck him from behind, shattering both his legs – and his dreams. The accident compounded his parents’ anxiety.

Transformation

“After the accident, I really couldn’t get arrested as an actor,” Jim continues, “but I was able to take the musical thing, which was something that was always a part of me, and go into a bar somewhere and talk the guy into letting me set up in the corner. I’d sit in the corner and bang away on the guitar. Later that night, the guy would say, ‘we sold a lot of beer tonight,’ so I got a job. People thought, well, you’re not going to be able to do that; you’re going to have to get some kind of a regular job. So I said, ‘I’ve got this thing in my heart. This is what I want to do and this is who I’m going to be.’”

Persistence paid off. A series of casual gigs escalated into regular engagements and Jim was starting to make a name for himself. He continued crossing the border until a momentous decision returned him to Canada.

“I was working in a record store in Kansas City in ’77 and, one morning, I woke up and said, ‘what the hell am I doing here? I want to go back to Vancouver.’ I started making friends in Vancouver and playing gigs and it sort of felt this was really starting to feel like home.”

His new found friends hosted a benefit for him at Vancouver's Commodore ballroom five years later. It had been 10 years since the accident and his original prosthetics were falling apart.

"They were like walking on stilts with hinges. I needed an upgrade," he says. The benefit allowed him to buy a new set of artificial legs, an experience that touched him deeply. "Vancouver's been very good to me and I wanted to be good back."

"I am so impressed with Jim's warmth and joie de vivre," says society maven Jacqui Cohen. Cohen is the host and founder of the Face the World Foundation, a Vancouver charity that raises money for the less fortunate. Cohen holds an annual gala in her sumptuous home, at \$2,500 a ticket, (donations also welcomed), and is notable for the celebrities that have popped in for nibbles, such as Tom Jones, Josh Groban and Goldie Hawn. And Jim Byrnes. Cohen met Jim at a downtown bar 21 years ago and, impressed with his empathy and street cred, invited him to join her charity board soon afterwards.

"His compassion for the less fortunate is huge," says Cohen. Face The World raises over one million dollars a year (\$1.5M in 2015) and Cohen says Jim is a "very integral part of disbursing the monies."

Jim is also on the board of Odd Squad Productions, a Vancouver Police Department initiative that pushes an anti-gang agenda, and Variety the Children's Charity, which raises money for special needs children.

"He believes in Variety's mission," says Peter Chipman,



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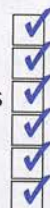


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Snapshot

with Jim Byrnes

If you were to meet yourself at age 20, what advice would you give yourself?

"Keep your chin up. I've had a tough break and heart-ache, but it's all balanced out. You can't live with regret, you have to live with what you've got and say tomorrow's another day, and I'll try to do better next time."

Who or what has influenced you the most? And why?

"My teacher, Joe Schulte. And my Dad. He's been gone 12 years now, but he's with me every day. There were a lot of years where I know I disappointed him, but I'm trying to make it up to him now. I realize so much more now what I put them through."

What does courage mean to you?

"Courage is realizing how afraid you are. Everybody else is afraid, too, but you gotta carry on. Courage is accepting fear in yourself and carrying on in the face of it."

What does success mean to you?

"Success is being able to maintain a career. I've been doing this professionally for 50 years and, one way or another, I've managed to do it. That's success to me. You know, you get to a certain age and they always ask 'when are you going to retire?' And I have to say to them 'that's not going to happen.' I don't want to retire because I'm having too good a time."



Director of Legacy Giving at Variety's Vancouver chapter. Jim has performed on the annual telethon since 1978. He also flies down to Missouri every year to raise money for the St. Louis chapter.

"I know what it's like to be down and out and I want to help people realize there are possibilities," he says. "In times of trouble, I try to help them. You get it back."

Home Sweet Home

At 67, Jim has built an impressive resume: 65 television series as an actor (three as the lead); 20 TV movies; and nine albums. He continues to tour extensively, although he admits going on the road can be hard.

"Driving around in the wintertime can be pretty scary, so I try to avoid that," he says. Married since 1983 and a father of three, Jim credits his home life with keeping him grounded.

"My wife, Robyn, works regular hours and if I'm not working or touring, I like to be here and cook a proper meal. I find a certain meditative quality in cutting vegetables," he laughs. "You turn off the external and you just concentrate on the simple tasks and it sets your mind free."

He also finds solace in meditation and breathing exercises. And, of course, playing his guitar. "When I sit down with my guitar, I find a certain peace in that."

He considers family his greatest achievement. "Seeing your kids grow up and be successful in what they do and be happy and healthy, that's a tremendous achievement," he says. Overcoming his disability? Yes, that's an achievement, too, although he credits others with helping him through the rough patches. "So much has been support from other people. It's not just all me."

Jim is currently writing songs and planning to record a new album in Nashville next spring. He says he's not content to bash something off to fill airtime; he wants every recording to be special. "I want it to mean something and have a concept to it," he says.

His new album is likely to be a fusion of styles, including, but not necessarily exclusively devoted to the blues. And that's the rub. If there was ever a misconception about who Jim Byrnes is and what he does, this is it.

"My stuff is based in blues. I came out of that, but I love all kinds of music," he says. He refuses to be pigeonholed as just a blues singer. "It always starts off with the blues," he says, "but there's so many other things I want to say. As for retirement; 'there will be a day when I think I really can't deliver,' he admits "but that day is far from now." When asked what advice he can pass on, he has a simple reply.

"As we go along, just don't take anything for granted. Make every day a special day and realize how lucky we are. People often say to me, 'it's good to see you' and I say 'it's good to be seen.' In Ireland, they say it's better to be seen than viewed."

Spoken like a person with a twinkle in his eye and a song in his heart. Durante would be proud. *SL*

For the link to listen to Jim Byrnes' "My Walking Stick" or to listen to the full interview, check out the podcast at www.seniorlivingmag.com/articles/jim-byrnes

Snapshot Q & A