

# The Cerebellum Blues

Did my brain injury make me a better songwriter?

BY JEFF SHATTUCK

**Y**ou've heard this story before: someone gets bonked on the head and wakes up profoundly changed. For me, the change had to do with songwriting. Here's how it all went down.

Sometime after midnight, in early 2006, I fell and suffered a traumatic brain injury. Though I fancied myself a frustrated rock musician, there was nothing rock-n-roll about the fall: I wasn't drunk or trashing a hotel room. I simply passed out in the bathroom. When I regained consciousness, I started throwing up and was convinced I had food poisoning. But my girlfriend at the time (whom I've since married!) asked me a few questions, and because my answers made less sense than usual, she called 911.

The docs never figured out why I fainted. But during my six-day hospital stay, I learned that I had fractured my skull in two places and that a small bone fragment had poked its way into the left side of my cerebellum. Doctors described the injury as a subdural hematoma, which is a fancy way of saying "blood on the brain." This was very bad news, because blood is toxic to the brain. The very stuff so essential to life also kills brain cells.

As I got better, I noticed those missing brain cells in a big way. I had nausea, trouble walking, and constant migraines. After a few months of recovery I felt well enough to pick up my guitar again, and when I did, I was struck by how good it felt.

Then came the songs.

Now, my fall did not precipitate a love of songwriting, which began when I was a teen. But through the years, the process was hard. I was not prolific.

After my brain injury, I wrote well over 30 songs in less than 12 months. What was going on inside my head? Here's my theory.

The cerebellum is an old part of the brain, so old it's called the "reptilian" brain. Located in the back of the head near the base of the skull, the cerebellum is responsible for a lot of fundamental stuff—such as integrating sensory information and motor control—but nothing cognitive. Still, the cerebellum communicates

with parts of the brain that are responsible for cognition and plays an important role in the processing of language and music.

When I clobbered my cerebellum, I believe that I altered the way it functions and communicates with other parts of the brain. Why should this matter?

According to the book *This Is Your Brain On Music*, by neuroscientist Daniel Levitin, Ph.D., the "lower" brain digs music in a big way. It distinguishes consonance and dissonance before the cortex weighs in, and its largest clump, the cerebellum, "is involved closely with timing." This is crucial to music. The cerebellum is also closely connected to the parts of the brain responsible for emotion—namely the amygdala, which remembers emotional

events, and the frontal lobe, which is involved in planning and impulse control. When a piece of bone poked its way into my brain, it breached my command center for timing, emotion, harmony, planning, and impulse control (think controlled rage for punk rock).

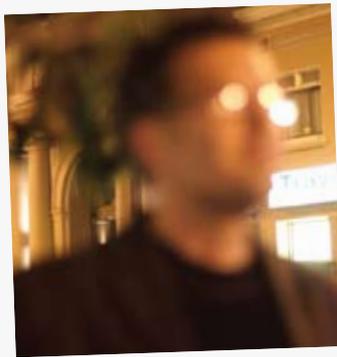
But wait—there's more.

Neuroscientist Jill Bolte Taylor's recent book, *My Stroke of Insight*, recounts her experience during and after a stroke, which took place on the rational left side of her brain. As

a result, Taylor says, she became more reliant on her creative and intuitive right brain. My own injury was on the left side, which might mean that my "get-your-freak-on" right side has been better able to assert itself of late.

Unfortunately, and despite cool machines (such as fMRI gizmos), the brain remains a mystery wrapped in an enigma wrapped in a skull. I may never know exactly how my fall changed my gray matter. But the evidence for some sort of dramatic rewiring is strong: over 30 new songs and counting.

For me, those 30 songs are proof enough to answer the question in my title with a resounding Yes. NN



*Jeff Shattuck is a former adman who suffered a brain injury in 2006 and woke up wanting to do nothing but write songs. You can follow his recovery progress and songwriting efforts at [cerebellumblues.com](http://cerebellumblues.com).*