The Best Decision I Ever Made

Being an artist in the public eye is difficult. Coming out as an HIV-positive artist in the public eye is even more so, as Billy Newton-Davis can attest. But his decision to disclose was one of the best he ever made.

Billy Newton-Davis may be a 58-year-old man — an incipient geezer — but he has a boy’s smooth skin, a boy’s unpredictable energies and jumpy conversational style and a boy’s simple heart. When first you meet him, you half expect him to suggest a game of tag because… well, just because there’s so much exuberance in him looking for an outlet and there you are and there he is and there’s his dog and, gee, wouldn’t it be fun?! So maybe you think: Here’s one more ditzy entertainer. And maybe you might be tempted not to take him seriously. But maybe you’d better think again. There’s a grown man’s courage in him, and a grown man’s sense of what’s right and what’s wrong, hard won, and he’s the tougher for it.

I watch him perform at the Church Street Fetish Fair in Toronto on August 16. Slim, slight and tightly built, skin the colour of cappuccino foam, he’s not exactly a fetish poster boy (the shaved head and the swirling tattoo on his right shoulder and bicep help, but sartorially he’s standard issue gaybourhood: white tank top, black boots, blue jeans unbuttoned at the top). A four-time Juno award winner who’s performed over a long career with the likes of Gloria Gaynor, Sammy Davis Jr., The Nylons and Celine Dion, he seems at home on a small stage before a small audience, dancing, belting out his most recent Juno winner, “All You Ever Want,” regularly imploring his listeners not to ignore the many community groups asking for donations. “Give from your heart,” he tells us (an injunction he takes seriously — he supports humanitarian causes ranging from awareness of HIV/AIDS to housing for the mentally challenged).

I meet this quadruple threat — singer, dancer, composer, lyricist — a few days later at his home, a midtown apartment on St. Clair Avenue that he shares with his partner of 15 years. (Their relationship is off limits to interviewers, but the dozen perfect roses centred on the coffee table are Billy’s 15th anniversary gift to the man he says “makes every day like an anniversary.”) They clearly love art — there’s not a wall that doesn’t host at least one painting, many of them by friends, and one of which brings Billy, briefly, to tears. It was painted for him by a 17-year-old girl with Down syndrome who had watched him perform at a benefit. It’s a childlike drawing of a dancing girl, and the text encircling it reads: “I would love to be a meringue [sic] dancer on stage.” It hangs in his work room, so it’s always visible to him from his computer desk. Another portrait that touches him deeply is a photograph of his great-great-grandmother, an exceptionally beautiful woman, rather formally dressed and, therefore, he thinks, possibly a house slave. He shares his office with Caruso the canary, and the whole apartment with Lola, a Kerry Blue terrier, a dog his partner rescued, who now sits attentively at our feet as we talk.

William Davis, Jr. was born in Cleveland, Ohio, the son of a factory worker from South Carolina and an entrepreneurial mom from Alabama. (He would add “Newton” when he joined the Screen Actors Guild in Los Angeles — the organization already had a Billy Davis, Jr. on its roster. Newton was a name he’d heard once, and loved.) The family ran a record store when he was growing up, and music informed his life for as far back as he can remember. “I was always singing and dancing,” he says, “and by the time I was five years old I was singing solo at the
Toronto, Toronto

I got the most beautiful notes and letters and cards and I realized if I shared my story, others would benefit, that he felt “it was the most beautiful moment. I decided then, enough with the hiding. And when the program broadcast, suddenly asked him about it. He broke down and cried, but afterwards when she showed him the footage he says Billy let it go on television. In 2000, he’d agreed to an interview with Sylvia Sweeney on a Vision TV show called have a loving heart. Let it go.’ And I let it go.”

It was not all bliss. The business was still remarkably homophobic. (“You could be gay backstage,” he says, “but not on stage.”) Billy turned, through a mentor he’d met at college, to Scientology. It would be part of his life for 13 years. He has mixed feelings about it today. “It got me off drugs,” he says (he had started experimenting in college), “and showed me saner ways of being in the business and gave me some clarity on life issues.” But he felt that they wanted to “audit out” gayness and promiscuity.

He came to Toronto in 1980 with a touring company of Eubie! The papers here singled out his performance for special praise, and a friend told him he could be a hit in this town. His first reaction: “Toronto? Oh, please. I want to live in New York City.” He stayed, though, partly because the Church of Scientology valued his presence as a celebrity in the city. While he initially may not have been enthusiastic about Toronto, Billy grew to love the place (he’s still a landed immigrant but thinks it’s about time he took out citizenship). He found success early, in a show called Toronto, Toronto, and followed it with appearances in Ain’t Misbehavin’ and Shimmytime. By the mid-‘80s he would launch a recording career and win two Junos in 1986 for best R&B/Soul recording and most promising male vocalist.

IN NOVEMBER OF 1986, Billy was suffering from what he thought was a persistent flu and saw his doctor. He was told he was HIV positive. “I felt myself gasping for air,” he says. “I didn’t faint but I came so close. I never dreamed I would get it — I’d been living on health foods and I felt invincible. When I left his office at Bathurst and Dundas, I cried on the street and then called my best friend, went to see her and she hugged me and held me.” He was in a bad relationship at the time, with a married bi guy who would eventually die of AIDS. They were having safe sex, as Billy understood it. When they had a fight, though, he’d go to the baths and he wasn’t always careful. He believes it took just one guy and one moment during one of those visits to contract the virus and change his life forever.

After his diagnosis, Billy felt he had to hide being positive — from fear of jeopardizing the career he’d worked so hard to create. He would live in that limbo for years and credits his time in The Nylons, which he didn’t join until 1991, for “giving me the freedom to be myself. The boys knew my status. One day Micah Barnes said to me — and we were very competitive and both big-headed — he said, ‘Billy, enough is enough. You are an amazing performer and you have a loving heart. Let it go.’ And I let it go.”

Billy let it go on television. In 2000, he’d agreed to an interview with Sylvia Sweeney on a Vision TV show called Centre Stage Chronicles, on the condition that they not discuss his HIV status. In the middle of the interview, she suddenly asked him about it. He broke down and cried, but afterwards when she showed him the footage he says he felt “it was the most beautiful moment. I decided then, enough with the hiding. And when the program broadcast, I got the most beautiful notes and letters and cards and I realized if I shared my story, others would benefit, that
they’d be more aware, more cautious, that if they’re positive, they’d learn that being positive can maybe be a positive experience.”

Has coming out with his positive status had an impact on his career? Not so’s you notice. All You Ever Want won him a Juno for Best Dance Album last year, and these days he’s working on a new dance album. Billy says he doesn’t care about the people who might think ill of him and that he considers himself a lucky guy. He decided not to take AZT when it first became available, relying instead on herbals and Chinese medicine. He’s on antiretroviral therapy now — his partner and his doctor long ago weaned him off herbals (he was losing weight and his CD4+-cell count was plummeting). Three or four years ago he took a drug holiday — “it was fabulous” — but his CD4+ cells dropped and he’s back on his meds.

It’s mid-afternoon now. Lola, asleep at our feet, lost interest in us long ago but Caruso is still up to the occasional attention-getting warble. Billy, sitting beside me on the sofa, is animated and effusive still. He doesn’t seem to tire. I have one more question for him. I want to know the words that have meant the most to him of all the words he’s written and sung over so many years. “No one’s ever asked me that,” he says, and he grows still, and he’s thinking. “It’s from a song I wrote called Decision. It goes, ‘You’re the best decision I ever made.’ I wrote it for my partner, but it covers this decision, too, the decision to tell.”

That’s a man talking, not a boy. A grown man who isn’t ashamed to speak from the heart.

Gerald Hannon dates back to the Jurassic period of gay activism. Although he is the winner of multiple National Magazine Awards, he’s proudest of the 15 years he spent at The Body Politic, the magazine that helped shape the community we know today.

Photograph: John Phillips
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Production of this content has been made possible through a financial contribution from the Public Health Agency of Canada.

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