

Medical Stick: John Edmonds and Jason Brock
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People play music for different reasons. We all know why 13 year-old boys pick up guitars. Some adults have always wanted to make music and finally find the time. I've even heard of the odd Stick player trying to sound like a guy named Tony Levin.

No matter what the reason, most folks who decided to play the guitar, the piano, bass or drums have a choice. What happens when you lose that choice? What if you are a musician or you hear music in your head but the ability to play, to access that music gets taken away from you? What do you do then?

Everyone, all players, face adversity. We all have burdens to overcome while accessing our art. Sometimes, just picking up our Sticks seems to take momentous effort. But the two players featured in this Talking Sticks have faced far greater adversity than most.

Jason Brock of North Bay, Ontario almost lost the use of his right hand. In a terrible workplace accident, Jason's right wrist was crushed. After a year of therapies, his wrist was surgically fused together.

John Edmonds developed tendonitis so bad that he feared losing his job as an editor for an Anchorage, Alaska newspaper, never mind ever playing music again.

Both Jason and John came to The Stick after their injuries and found physical healing using Emmett's two-handed tapping technique on *the* instrument uniquely created to facilitate that technique. They also found mental/emotional healing through the music they accessed through The Stick.

Please note, this is not intended as an endorsement or suggested rehabilitation program for serious arm/wrist/hand injuries. As they say before those T.V. exercise programs "Consult your physician before starting any exercise program."

These are merely two exceptionally inspirational stories that I really, really enjoyed putting together and want to thank both Jason and John for sharing with me.

Part 1: Jason Brock

Jim Reilly: Tell me about your injury.

Jason Brock: Basically it was a work injury that resulted in damaged ligaments in the right wrist. I was working as a baker. Someone else had walked away from their job and I ran over to their pan-line that had backed up with red-hot pans from the oven. Trying to save the oven, I pulled the hot pan out, which sent all the rest of the pans with all the weight of the line into my one wrist.

I had about a year of physiotherapy before they pressured me to get surgery that would fuse my wrist either completely or 80 to 90 per cent. They wouldn't know how much until they operated.

JR: What was the state of your wrist after the injury? What were you able to do?

JB: Basically nothing at all. I lost all my hobbies: music, some physical things like biking, everything like that was just gone. I couldn't do any of it anymore. It really affected everything I did.

Shortly after that, I developed severe tendonitis in my left arm from overcompensating. So basically both arms were in constant pain.

JR: And you were a bass player before the accident, right?

JB: Yes, but it was really just a hobby. I never really put too much heart into it but it was something I really enjoyed. Just before the accident I played six-string bass, a lot of crafty bass lines. I did a lot of slapping, strumming on the bass with the right hand.

Of course the accident stopped all that.

Pervious, I had heard of The Stick, being a Peter Gabriel/King Crimson fan and being a bass player. In 1994, I actually had a pamphlet sent up from Stick Enterprises describing The Stick. I kept that for a long time but it wasn't until after the injury that I really started remembering what it said in the pamphlet.

Also, when I moved to Calgary in 1993, I looked around to see who would be the best bass teacher in town and that was when I heard about Roli Mack. He played Stick and that got me very excited. I took lessons from him and he let me fool around on his Stick. It really excited me but it was just out of my reach at the time.

JR: So now you've got yourself with a wrist that doesn't work and you're going through rehab for a year. You get your wrist fused together...

JB: I had it 85 per cent fused. I went into the surgery thinking it was going to be 100 and that's what made me say forget everything else, I'm getting The Stick...

JR: Why?

JB: The way my wrist was going to be fused, the fact that I had so much pain in that arm and everything the doctors told me that surgeries aren't a cure. In my case there has actually been more pain since the surgery. I got my Stick two weeks before my surgery and that's what really kept me going. Even in the worst case scenario I could still play with one hand.

JR: At least you could get the left hand going?

JB: Yes, tendonitis or no tendonitis. Some days my left arm was just as bad as my right arm but I couldn't 'see' the pain. In my right arm I knew what the problem was. But, since I started playing The Stick I don't have tendonitis in my left arm anymore. Usually people get tendonitis from playing an instrument, I actually lost it.

JR: After the surgery, if I remember correctly, your physiotherapist prescribed The Stick as exercise?

JB: Yes. Basically people in my condition—when the pins are in there and holding the bone in place—tend not to move their fingers. Where I was really inspired to, even with the pins in my arm. They took the pins out about five-and-a-half months later and that's when I really went to town with it.

I was able to practice right from the day I came home from the hospital. I even did a little practicing the day after the surgery. It was really the first thing I did when I got home.

JR: How did playing The Stick change things? You started out playing bass for fun, now what?

JB: Basically it changed my life. It changed my musical direction, my career direction.

JR: It's funny, it seems that by limiting the use of your hand, you've expanded your musical abilities.

JB: Exactly. The thing is, even when I did start playing The Stick with the pain in my right hand and in my wrist, it took off quicker than my left hand. I still feel it's a better hand than my left. My wrist feels better after an hour practicing than it did before. I can move my wrist 15 degrees and moving it any of those 15 degrees hurts. Other than playing Stick, everything I do with that wrist hurts: moving my fingers, gripping, touch.

JR: Is playing The Stick facilitating the healing? Do you have more motion, a stronger hand than you would with out it?

JB: I assume so because I never let up. It inspired me to go at my physio as hard as I could and get my reach back in my fingers. The muscles in the top of my hand now are stronger than my physiotherapist's. I still can't spread my fingers as much as I could and I never will. I can spread my right-hand fingers about 60 per cent as far as my left.

Being in chronic pain, I tended to get frustrated just from being in pain all the time. When I would get home exhausted, all I had to do was play my Stick for ten or fifteen minutes and my mind focused again. I can't say how much that helped me.

Right after the surgery, having The Stick there to progress on *something* in my life again helped a great deal with depression. For over a year, there was nothing, nothing was

healing, then all of a sudden I had this instrument and each day I was a bit better at it. It was such a great feeling.

JR: What is it about The Stick? Is it the way you physically play it? Is it the lighter touch?

JB: Everything, it's all that. I think it's the closeness, it's right next to my body. So many people on Stickwire mention that it's a beast or a different kind of animal. I think of it as an animal that would call other animals to it, something really natural and beautiful.

For me, with the damaged nerves, I tend to hold my hand in a position that doesn't hurt the nerves. That's *the* position my hand sits when I play The Stick. So it's right out in front of my, I'm holding it close to my body. It's a lot like your cradling The Stick. It's all in your body and how you play it.

The day after the Kamloops seminar I went home and did an nine hour stretch of playing straight, just practicing with stretch breaks in between and that didn't send my arm through the roof or anything. It was all concentrating on technique and the gentle touch, playing The Stick precisely.

JR: Your doctors were very supportive or your music weren't they?

JB: The doctor, the nurse and my physiotherapist helped me so much. They supported my music. Enough so that they'd either come over to my house or get me to bring my Stick in, it was really cool. I guess it showed them that I wasn't one of those people who would end up on a pension for the rest of their life. So many people just want to give up and they saw that that really keep me going. To me, it's given me a new life. A life that I wouldn't trade for anything.

My physiotherapist came over to watch me play the Stick, see how I held it and he was really surprised. As was my vocational psychologist, he also came over and checked it out. I even showed it to my nerve doctor and he agreed that playing The Stick wasn't going to harm me, it was just going to help.

JR: Would you have done all this without the accident, I guess that's the real question here? Without the accident what would you be doing now?

JB: I don't even want to know. I'm so thankful to Emmett for having this vision.

JR: And following through on it. I think that's what really sets Emmett apart. Lots of people have visions or moments of insight but few follow through on it. Emmett did that. And so did you, you followed through on it.

JB: Well it was really do or die. I could play The Stick or I could play something that wasn't really exciting, that wouldn't inspire me. Or not play at all.

JR: You're pursuing music therapy as a career. What else are you doing with your Stick now?

JB: I'm very close to finishing a solo demo CD. I'm working in a group with a violin player, an acoustic guitar player and a drummer. I'm hoping to form my own group and do modern classical, Celtic-type stuff.

Being medically how I've been, being in chronic pain and in less than two years to go from not really playing an instrument that well to being ready to release my demo CD says a lot about The Stick.

Part 2 John Edmonds

Jim Reilly: Tell me your story.

John Edmonds: I played guitar for many years many years before stopping, maybe about 20 years, I really got discouraged about music in general. Not so much the music but the music industry and all that goes along with it that doesn't always involve a lot of music. I really just dropped out of the whole thing altogether and went into something else, which is what I'm doing now. I'm working as a news editor in Anchorage.

Around 2000 I started noticing pain, discomfort, tingling, all sorts of strange and unfamiliar sensations down in my forearms, wrists and hands. I went in for an assessment from a physical-therapist and was diagnosed with severe tendonitis. Later I had some nerve conductive tests and they turned up some mild carpal-tunnel syndrome in the right wrist.

My main concern at the outset was whether I was going to be able to keep working. But in the back of my mind I always knew there was music in me that somehow was going to find a way to get out. I was comfortable leaving it on the back burner for a time because I was otherwise occupied with a new career but the injuries prompted me to go back to music earlier than I thought I would, mainly to see if I could still do it.

JR: Did you go back to the guitar originally?

JE: I did. I went back to the guitar at first. That was my 'toe in the water.' That was me asking myself whether I could still do anything instrumentally. It was exciting at first because I was able to play for short periods. I even bought some new gear and started really enjoying my sound again but the more I played or tried to play, the more my hand bothered me.

At the point I figured if I was serious about coming back to music, I was going to have to find a different voice.

JR: How obvious was it that that voice was The Stick? Did you try other things on your way to it?

JE: I didn't go any other route but I also didn't go straight to The Stick right away. I did really almost nothing for about a year, besides worry. As soon as I thought of The Stick, the seed was planted. After that the idea began to haunt me. It took me a while to take the leap of actually ordering one. Up here there aren't any other Stick players that I know of and I couldn't just pop into a store and try one, so it took me some time to commit the investment both in money and time.

The more I thought about it the more I allowed the idea of The Stick to *haunt* me, the clearer it became that that was going to be it. I remember in the five months I was waiting for the instrument to arrive there were moments when I could almost feel the instrument in my hands, feel the strings under my fingers. It was almost as if I already knew how to play it and I already knew it was going to work.

When it arrived it was a magical moment but it was expected.

JR: How did you physically take to the instrument right off the bat?

JE: In the left hand, everything fell into place almost immediately. I was able, within hours, to produce sounds that I had been imagining for months. Everything felt the way I imagined it would be. It sounded a lot like I imagined it would.

The right hand was a little slower in coming and it still is. Even though I'm right handed my left hand has always been stronger for playing.

JR: What about the tendonitis? Has that been an issue?

JE: So far it hasn't. I continue to work as an editor, I'm still on a keyboard at a computer all the time. I have some bad days with that, nothing serious but I so far have not had any trouble playing The Stick. I should say though that I've never been one to play a lot. At least not for long stretches. Part of that is just laziness and part is a maybe a lack of attention span but I've never been a big practicer. But I imagine that if I were I still wouldn't have any trouble. As far as the tendonitis and other issues I had with my hands, when I started playing it has not been a problem.

JR: Why? Is it the way the instrument physically lays in front of you, the touch of the strings against the frets? Is there anything you can think of as to why that's the case when you play The Stick and it wasn't the case with your guitar.

JE: I think you touched on the two main things. The position that I hold the instrument in allows my hands to fall so naturally. The main thing about the guitar that bothered my left wrist primarily was the contortion that's required of that wrist to bend underneath the neck to bring the fingers over the strings. That angle would cause problems. The other problem was the weight of the instrument itself, which the strap transmitted directly into

my shoulder and lower neck. That constrained blood flow and everything down into my left arm and hand.

The Stick doesn't have any of that. The weight of it is on the belt, the shoulder strap isn't really suspending a lot of weight. The slight angle of The Stick from about waist level up past the shoulder allows me to keep both of my wrist fairly straight and in a fairly natural position.

I learned a little bit about the most natural position for hands and arms. Part of my rehabilitation involved physical therapy and part of it involved yoga. Both of those taught me ways to use my hands in less stressful and less strenuous angles. I have a special keyboard at work that is quite dramatically pitch so that my hands are typing almost sideways, each side of the keyboard is pitch about 45 degrees. It allows me to type without pronating.

My current keyboard and The Stick allow me to keep my hands in much more natural positions.

The other thing you touched on, which is also true, is that the lighter touch of The Stick simply reduces the amount of energy I need to put in to get a really great sound. On guitar you have to squeeze it hard in one hand and pluck forcefully with the other. Between those two efforts it takes a lot more energy than The Stick.

JR: Would you have come to The Stick without the tendonitis?

JE: That's something I'll probably never know. The Stick has always fascinated me. If something else had come along to bring it back into my awareness I might have done it, who knows. I like to think that the tendonitis and other related problems were my 'kick in the pants.' It's as if I was supposed to encounter The Stick at some point and some force out there realized that stubborn as I am, I'm not going to pick it up on my own without some good reason.

JR: Tell me about your new recording.

JE: I just sent it off for mastering. Right now the master and the artwork are in Vancouver and I expect I'll actually get the shipment in the next two or three weeks.

The music is a return to my first love, which is instrumental/progressive/rock/jazz, odd time signatures, that's the main thing. The style, I call 'Deep Space Ice Groove.' It plays on a couple of concepts. One is the spacey sound I was always able to get with my guitar with distortion and phasers and flangers, a little bit of delay and echo here and there. I've had no trouble getting that on The Stick.

JR: Jason found it very healing to just to play the instrument. Have you found a similar thing with your tendonitis? Has playing The Stick gotten the blood to the muscles that it needed to get to and aided in your rehabilitation?

JE: Absolutely. For me there have been two levels of healing: spiritual and physical. The Stick has helped with both. The ergonomics we discussed earlier obviously have helped heal my tendons and nerves.

I once had a discussion with a friend of mine about the name of The Stick. He said that the name is just so plain, there has got to be a better name for that instrument. I didn't think too much about it at the time but now I'm think something like '*Lightening Rod For Inspiration.*'

It feels, when I'm holding it or playing it, that things come out of me through The Stick that I didn't know were there. It's like standing out in a golf course in the middle of a storm holding this thing up. Some of that might be me just rediscovering music but there really is something special about The Stick. As you can hear I having trouble putting it definitively into words but it's there and I feel it and I'm just going with it for now.

This of course is theoretical, it's only what I can feel, I can't prove it. But I really do feel just the physical sensation of playing The Stick is healing spiritually because it has given me a voice that I thought I was going to lose. That's something that's hard to put into words, which is why I made the CD.

JR: And the CD answers those questions?

JE: It does for me. What the rest of the world hears, who knows. This is a little bit of a gamble for me. I don't expect to get rich making odd time...

JR: Good, cause you're not gonna! (Laughs)

JE: That's o.k. though because it's not about that. It's really about something else. I feel like I've just begun.

I don't call myself a Stick player. I think of myself as a guy who bought a Stick last year and realized I could do something with it and this is what I've done. We'll see where I go from here.