

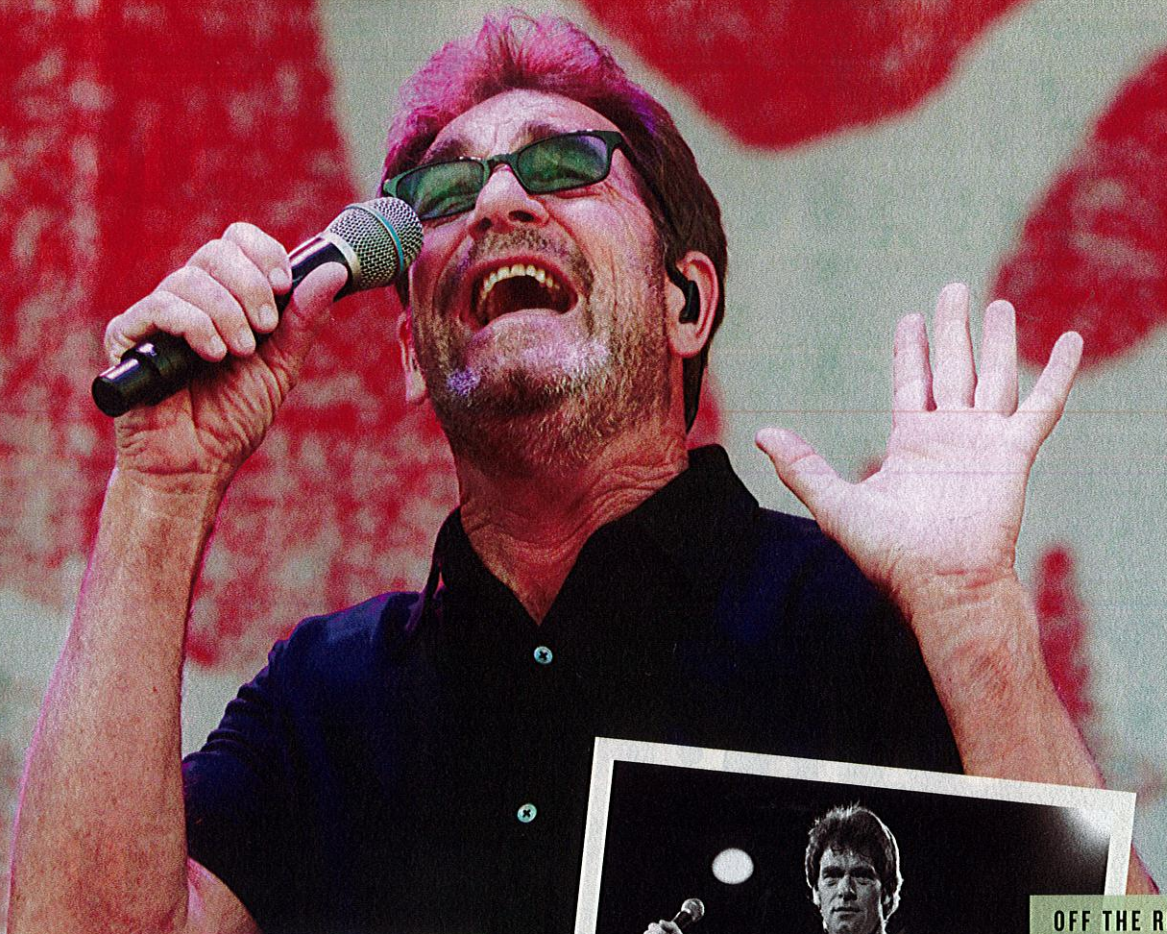
# Huey Lewis's Health Battle

# LOSING THE SOUND OF MUSIC

THE '80S ROCK ICON  
OPENS UP ABOUT  
THE DISEASE THAT'S  
STOLEN HIS ABILITY TO  
HEAR—AND PERFORM  
*By JORDAN RUNTAGH*

On Jan. 27, 2018, Huey Lewis was backstage, gearing up to sing his '80s hits like "The Power of Love" and "Hip to Be Square" to a packed crowd in Dallas. Then he heard a sudden, ear-splitting sound—and it wouldn't stop. "It was like a jet engine or something," he recalls. No one else in his band, the News, heard a thing. "That's when I knew something was wrong." He went on-stage minutes later, but making music



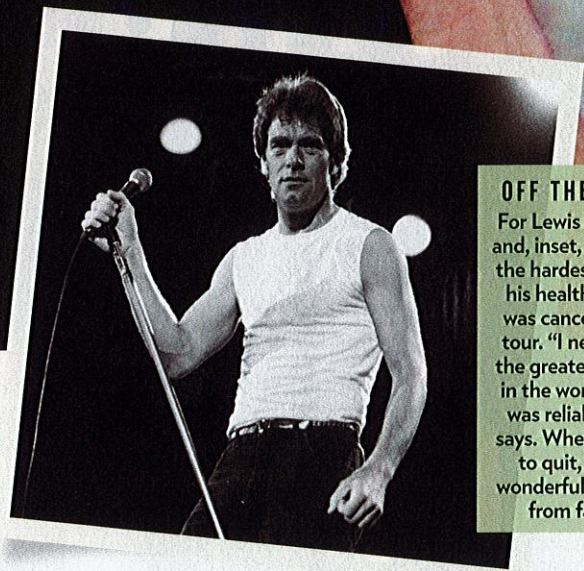


was impossible. "I couldn't sing or find pitch," he says. "It was the worst hour and a half of my life."

Shortly after, Lewis was diagnosed with Ménière's disease, a chronic inner-ear disorder that causes vertigo and hearing loss and affects roughly 615,000 people in the United States. When the 69-year-old rocker sits down for an interview months later, it's hard to notice anything amiss. "My hearing fluctuates," he says. There are weeklong stretches when he's nearly deaf and "can't even hear the phone ring," he explains. Other days, like this one, are a little better. "With my hearing aids, I can hear speech fine. Music is not so easy."

For a man who stumbled into his dream career, the condition is a devastating blow. Born Hugh Anthony Cregg III, Lewis was raised in Northern California by his doctor father and artist mother. As a teen, he attended a New Jersey prep school and pursued his first love: baseball. He was good enough to earn a college scholarship, but his father encouraged him to travel. He hitchhiked across Europe, making it to Spain before he lost his passport and resorted to busking to support himself. Sympathetic locals staged a concert to help him earn money, and the roar of the crowd was intoxicating: "That was the moment I said, 'This is fun. I want to do this.'"

For the next 10 years he played in a string of bands that failed to break through. "I turned 30



#### OFF THE ROAD

For Lewis (in 2016 and, inset, in 1984), the hardest part of his health ordeal was canceling his tour. "I never was the greatest singer in the world, but I was reliable," he says. When he had to quit, "I got wonderful support from fans."

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years old with \$300 to my name," he says. Then he formed Huey Lewis & the News, which broke big with its multiplatinum third album, 1983's *Sports*, featuring hits like "I Want a New Drug" and "If This Is It." Two years later "The Power of Love," on the *Back to the Future* soundtrack, topped the pop charts. "There's nothing like that rocket-ship ride from nothing to No. 1," he recalls.

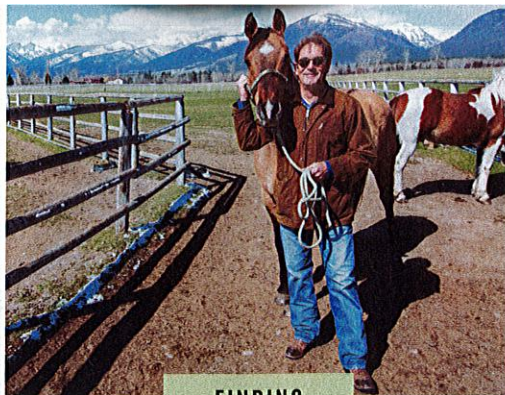
After decades of success Lewis thought the music might never stop. But the 2018 incident forced him to cancel his tour. Since then he's been searching for a way to restore his hearing: acupuncture, diets, essential oils. "Nothing works," he says. (Though incurable, Ménière's, whose cause is unknown, can go into remission years after diagnosis.) At first Lewis sank into a deep depression. "I laid in bed. I had terrible thoughts. I contemplated my



COUNTERCLOCKWISE FROM BOTTOM RIGHT: TAWN BANNERSTOCK; TOM ROBERTSON; ED KASHI/REDAUX; MOVIES/REX/SHUTTERSTOCK

own demise. Then I talked to my kids [Kelly, 37, and Austin, 35, with ex-wife Sidney Conroy], and that helped." His family's love lifted his spirits. "It turns out you can get used to pretty much anything," he says. But he's unable to enjoy his greatest passion and share the gift that made him a star. "Normally music is fun," he says. "You get in the middle of a song, and it just sings itself. You ride that wave. Now I have to struggle just to hear pitch."

Today Lewis spends most of his time at his Montana ranch. "I love the outdoors. I exercise, stay healthy, eat well," he says. He keeps busy on creative projects. This month he'll release *Weather*, the first new album of original Huey Lewis & the News material in 19 years. They were in the midst of recording the retro-tinged blues-rock



### FINDING SOLACE

Lewis first bought land in Montana after vacationing there with his family in the late '80s. Now he considers it his primary home and sanctuary. "I fish, I ride my horse. Outdoor stuff."

tracks when Lewis lost his hearing. "I waited, trying to see if I was going to be able to sing again, and I haven't been able to," he says. "So we thought we'd share with the fans." He's also working on bringing a musical of his hits, *The Heart of Rock and Roll*, to Broadway.

The work keeps him upbeat, but fluctuations in his hearing can be agonizing. In October 2018 he was in Scotland for a Pro-Am golf tournament when he realized he could hear the band warming up for a post-match concert. "I thought, 'Oh my gosh, I can kind of hear pitch!'" He joined the group for a spirited version of "Hip to Be Square." Then, two days later, "my hearing went to crap," he says. "Couldn't hear anything for two weeks."

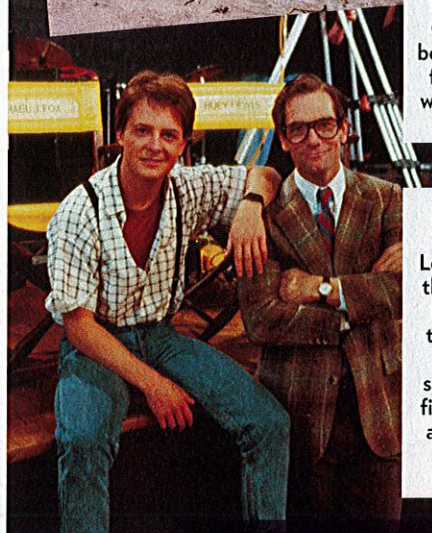
Still, the support of his family and fans keeps him hopeful. "You can't stress over this," he says. "I just hope my body can find a way to defeat this thing." ●

## Rockin' Times



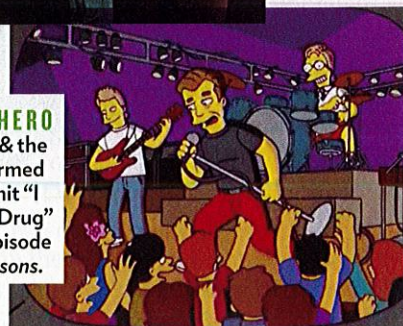
### VIDEO STARS

Filmed in Santa Cruz, Calif., the beachy 1984 video for "If This Is It" was a mainstay on early MTV.



### BIG-SCREEN FAME

Lewis contributed the hit song "The Power of Love" to the 1985 *Back to the Future* soundtrack—and filmed a cameo as a cranky teacher opposite star Michael J. Fox.



### CARTOON HERO

Huey Lewis & the News performed their 1984 hit "I Want a New Drug" on a 2005 episode of *The Simpsons*.



Lewis (on Jan. 9) at the 2am Club in Mill Valley, Calif., where he and the News shot the cover for the hit album *Sports*. Their new album *Weather* (inset), out Feb. 14, is also named for a newspaper section.