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Good Weekend

‘Terrified’: John Farnham bares all about his surgery, dark thoughts – and voice

Addiction, oral cancer, facial disfigurement, the loss of his great friend Glenn Wheatley ... the musical legend has been through a lot in recent times.

By John Farnham

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Farnham in full voice at One Electric Day on Cockatoo Island, Sydney, in 2019. “The good news is my vocal cords haven’t been affected by the radiation treatment I’ve had – yet,” he says now. WIREIMAGE

This story is part of the October 19 edition of Good Weekend. [See all 13 stories.](#)

Lately people don’t recognise me much because I don’t have the mullet, or even much hair, and the facial surgery [from an operation in 2022 for oral cancer] and the disfigurement throw people, too. But after my 1986 album, *Whispering Jack*, and the subsequent albums and projects, my wife, Jill, and I couldn’t go anywhere because it’d be mayhem. Even if Jill was

out somewhere by herself and used her credit card, it was like, “Oh, any relation to ... ?” It became really difficult to go to public places. I am using the word “difficult” but I’m so thankful for what happened and grateful that so many people cared about me and liked my work. But sometimes the attention was hard. Especially when we were out as a family.

When my sons Robert and James were young kids, they didn’t understand it. And as they got older, my fame could be a problem. For them. One time Rob got into trouble for something at school and when the teacher caught him he said, “I don’t like your father’s music.” It was ridiculous, it’s not Rob’s fault I’m his father and his teacher’s taste in music had nothing to do with him. I went and had a word with the teacher. I said, “You just teach. I don’t care whether you like my music or not, but you don’t take it out on my son.”

I am really proud of my sons. It can’t have been easy having a dad in the limelight and often away touring or performing. Jilly was always there for them and I was there when I could be. I always wanted to be, and it’s all worked out in the long run.

I was diagnosed with cancer in August 2022. I had this thing that was on the inside of my cheek and Jill pushed me to get it checked out. It was a tumour and it was cancerous. Cancer doesn’t discriminate, but as soon as I was told the results, I couldn’t help thinking it was my own fault. I smoked very heavily all my life and then, when I quit cigarettes, I took up cigars. If I was awake, I had a cigar or cigarette in my mouth 99 per cent of the time. People told me to give up but I didn’t listen. I started smoking when I was about 14, much to my parents’ disgust. They were very heavy smokers but they didn’t want me to smoke. After Dad caught me a couple of times, I smoked in secret.

A smoking addiction makes you antsy. The only way I can describe it is, it’s like if you’re a bit thirsty and you’re told you’re not allowed to have a drink, you instantly want one even more than you did before. If I ran out of cigarettes, I immediately wanted one. I had pneumonia when I was a kid and I’ve still got residual lung damage from that. Then, after years of smoking, I developed emphysema. That exacerbated my breathing problems, which is not great for a singer. If you can’t breathe, you can’t sing. Actually, if you can’t breathe, you can’t do anything because then you’re dead, aren’t you?

Finally, that breathlessness caught up with me and I decided that I was going to do something about my addiction. I went cold turkey and stopped smoking completely.

I didn’t smoke for 10 years. Before that, my dad and I would often have a cigar together at Christmas. We stopped doing that. Then, one Christmas, my boys mentioned that Grandad and I used to have a cigar together and they wanted to do that with me. So I went and bought a box of Cuban cigars. It would have been cheaper to buy a car, or maybe half a car, but on Christmas Day I busted out these cigars for me, Robert and James. I cut and lit them and we all had a puff. My boys smoked about an inch of these five-inch cigars before they put them down and then out. I kept going and then the next day I looked at this box of Cuban cigars and said to myself, “Well, I’m not going to throw them out!” That impulse kick-started a renewed smoking habit. It was such a crazy waste of money and there I was, smoking again.

Now I know everyone is vaping, but they are just as bad, apparently. Crazy. I tried chewing tobacco once. We were in Texas at a horse show and I was riding a horse in the competition. One of the blokes came up and said, “Hey John, you want to try some tabacky?” I declined, but he still gave me a wad of the stuff, so I tried it. It was disgusting. Awful. Whichever way you are getting that nicotine hit, just don’t.

But smoking wasn't my only vice. I've always enjoyed a few drinks after a concert and it was never a problem until work slowed down during the COVID-19 lockdowns. I guess I got bored. I'd be sitting in my chair watching TV, drinking every night and, little by little, it crept up. I was drinking two bottles a night, then there were nights I noticed I drank three bottles.

I've always been one to stick my fingers in my ears and go *la, la, la, la*. Early in my career I let things slide that I should have addressed, I know that. You'd think I should be able to cope more than I can because I'm 75 years old, I've lived a life and have experience to draw on, but I still try and avoid the tough things.

The excessive drinking allowed me to shut things out. We were living in an uncertain time, live music was on hold, so smoking and drinking were welcome distractions. Then, on February 1, 2022, my friend and long-time manager Glenn Wheatley died. The man was like a brother to me. COVID scared the shit out of me; I think it scared the shit out of everyone, but watching it take my friend was terrifying.

I don't think I've really processed the loss of Glenn. Even now, it doesn't seem real. I still find it very hard to talk about because I can't find the words to sum up all that man meant to me and the way our families were joined. Glenn, his wife Gaynor, their children Tim, Samantha and Kara, are family to me, Jilly, Robert and James. It was devastating to me, to Jilly and to my boys, and I just wanted it not to be true.

The months after Glenn died were tough. Then in August that same year, Jill hassled me to go to the doctor. I had that lump in my mouth that didn't go away. I thought it was an ulcer but Jilly wanted it checked out. And we all know I listen to Jill and do what my wife asks. I was referred to a maxillofacial surgeon, she took a biopsy and it came back positive. The lump in my mouth was a tumour, the tumour was cancerous and they wanted to operate immediately. So they did. The operation lasted 12 hours. I was told later that someone from the medical team called Jillian a couple of times while I was in theatre – apparently I was very close to dying.

Spoiler: As we all know, I survived the surgery.

I woke up in the ICU with the most intense feelings of paranoia. I had no idea where I was and I was - convinced I had been kidnapped. I was so drugged up on whatever they were giving me that I couldn't get



Jill and John Farnham celebrate their 45th wedding anniversary in 2018 with sons James (top right) and Rob.



out of the bed, even though I tried. I had a catheter in, so they strapped me down but being restricted and drugged terrified me even more. Eventually Jill, Robert and James came in and seeing them put me at ease. They assured me that I was OK but, oh geez, the feeling was awful and even talking about it now gives me a bad feeling. I don't think I've ever been so scared in my life.

John Farnham in Africa with Glenn Wheatley, his long-time manager and friend who died in 2022 after contracting COVID. TESSA EFFENDI

It was up to me to pull my socks up a little bit. I said to myself, 'Cancer got me but it hasn't killed me.'

Then, the week after the surgery, I started to have some dark thoughts. I've never felt so low in all my life. The thoughts were so dark, I don't want to share them on this page. But they were very bleak and I wasn't sure how to get beyond them. The cancer diagnosis had gutted me. I was lucky, I had the best possible doctors, they were amazing, but the surgery left me with a fair amount of facial disfigurement and pain. All that had built up to a point where the thoughts nearly got the better of me.

I was in ICU and then I was moved into a general ward, and I was going to spend some time in a rehabilitation hospital after that. It was intense and gruelling. Then one morning I was being taken to have scans and all sorts of tests. I looked across and an ambulance had just arrived at the hospital. This young girl came out of the back of this ambulance; she would have only been about 12 or 13 years old. She was completely bald, and when I saw her she was slumped in a wheelchair, eyes down, head down, hunched over. There were tubes coming out of her all over the place, and two defeated-looking people were standing next to her; I assumed they were her mum and dad. I watched this young girl, who had her whole life in front of her, yet she looked so sick and frail. She had a whole life to live and there I was, a man who had lived a good life, feeling sorry for myself.

Seeing that girl also made me realise that I'd frightened myself with those dark thoughts. I had to do something about them. It was up to me to pull my socks up a little bit. I said to myself, "Cancer got me but it hasn't killed me."

I also realised I needed to talk openly with my doctors about my fears, so I told them about the thoughts I was having. They were great and said, "You're going to be OK. Let's move on, onward and upward." They were fantastic and helped me deal with my fears and the emotional impact of it all. And Jilly was there. She was never going to let me go. With help, it only took about a week for me to overcome those thoughts. I'd never felt that way before, I'd never had those thoughts, and talking about them was the only thing that made me feel better.

It didn't take long for them to fade away. So if anyone does feel like that, if you're having dark thoughts, go and talk to someone. Get it out, confront it, get help to deal with them. I was down, very down, but now, most times, I'm fine and I feel a lot of gratitude. The truth is, there's always some poor bugger worse off, and you have to remember that and find a way to get through the bad times.

Getting rid of that tumour and having all that - treatment saved my life, there's no doubt about that. But one of the things that contributed to my dark thoughts was thinking I'd never be able to sing again in public. Now, almost two years later, I am still not sure that I ever will.

My facial disfigurement from the surgery means I can't open my mouth wide enough for a strip of spaghetti, let alone to sing a top C. At this stage I can't get the movement to make the sounds I want to make, and that's where the vibrations and my voice come from. It's still a very disconcerting thing. And trying hurts.

The good news is my vocal cords haven't been affected by the radiation treatment I've had. Yet. Apparently the effects can continue after you finish receiving the dosage; it just keeps going and going and going, which is a good thing when you are trying to hold the cancer back. But the doctors have checked my voice box a couple of times now and so far there haven't been any adverse effects, so I'm glad about that.

I still sing at home, though. I can barely open my mouth but I still wail in the shower. I love to make noises with my throat. Since I was a kid I've loved to whistle, I've loved to sing. I was given a gift and to be able to get out there and affect people in some way was a special thing. I would like to continue doing that. So, though I am not putting all my hopes into it, we'll see. I still haven't got my bottom teeth, they are putting them back in soon, I hope, then maybe. Who knows? I will give it a crack when I can. I'll go into the studio, Chong [Lim, my musical director and keyboard player] and Dougie [Brady, my long-time sound engineer] will be there, and we'll see if I can sing in tune.

After all that I have been through recently, maybe I am learning what is good for me (sometimes the doctors don't agree on that). I'm proud to say I haven't had a glass of wine for three years. Not one. I do have a couple of beers at night and I don't mind the occasional bourbon on ice. That's a treat.

So I am doing what I am told, most of the time. And I am still here. Here to love my wife. Hug my sons. Watch my boys and their partners build their own lives. I was able to be there when Rob got married earlier this year. And we were all together holidaying recently. I am here for all of it. I am so grateful.

I've been asked to sit down and write my story many times over the years and I've never wanted to do it. I've actually dreaded it. I didn't expect people to be interested in me or my life. I've been around forever - most of my music audience now are 40 or 50 years younger than me. I didn't want my story to be boring or show I'm not the brightest penny in the till, but to be honest it hasn't been as bad as I thought it would be.

Yes, going through this process has been challenging at times; I have all these wonderful memories, but I have a lot of painful memories as well. Talking about losing people I love is



John Farnham (second from right) at his son Rob's wedding in June, having survived cancer surgery. FACEBOOK

hard. Talking about some of the choices I made was difficult. I wanted to be honest, but I didn't want to bash people, either. I'd rather say nothing if I can't be positive. But here it is, in my own words.

This is an edited extract from *The Voice Inside* by John Farnham with Poppy Stockell (Hachette, \$50), out October 30. Preorders: [hachette.com.au](https://www.hachette.com.au). The audiobook edition is narrated by John Farnham and Jill Farnham.

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