

Live it Up

COMEDIAN TIG NOTARO TURNED THE WORST YEAR OF HER LIFE INTO HER WATERSHED MOMENT

By Lisa Butterworth

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“**LOVE SILLINESS,**” comedian Tig Notaro tells me, which is something fans of the 41-year-old stand-up are well aware of. Until recently, her best-known jokes included one about a bumblebee passing her on the freeway and a bit in which she dragged a stool around, eliciting laughs from the absurd noises it made. But everything changed last April when a tickle in Notaro’s throat turned out to be pneumonia, which led to a serious bacterial infection. After leaving the hospital, Notaro suffered the unexpected loss of her mom and also went through a breakup. She was then diagnosed with cancer in both breasts. Notaro’s take on this horrifying chain of events was recorded in a now-famous set she performed in August at the Largo, a club in L.A., during which she worked through her past few months in the best way she knew how: with comedy. The story of her remarkable show spread wildly across the Interwebs, and Louis C.K., who was there that night, persuaded her to release the recording. The result, *Live*, shot to number one on iTunes’ U.S. comedy album chart when it was released in October by Secretly Canadian and remains a bestseller. By the time we catch up on the phone, Notaro’s living in New York, working on Amy Schumer’s new Comedy Central sketch show (premiering this spring). She has also fully recovered from a double mastectomy and been declared cancer-free. In other words, things are finally very good.

Do you still feel the elation of getting a clean bill of health, or have the daily stresses of life slipped back in?

No, I definitely still feel like I’m flying through life. There’s sadness with the loss of my mother—it was devastating—but in general, just being alive and knowing that my mother would think I was cool, it all still feels really great.

Your mom was a big influence in your life. What was your relationship like?

My mother and I were close, but we also had rocky times because she was the cool, crazy mother, and as a kid, you want your mother to just relax and be boring. She was an artist; she was freethinking; she liked to stay out all night. She was wild. So I certainly loved my mother, and she inspired me, and she was so funny and truly gorgeous, but I felt like I was her parent a lot.

You used to be a pretty private person. If you had known how far and wide your story was going to spread after your set at Largo, do you think you still would have been able to go out and do that material?

That’s a good question. I think, *Of course I would do it*; I was compelled. I would have to have probably been physically removed from the stage. But if somebody had said, “By the way, when you go out and say, ‘Hi, hi, I have cancer, how are you?’ that’s going to change

everything,” I would have been like, *There’s no way.*

After your set, did you feel a sense of relief, having worked through it onstage?

Yeah, and I also had a sense of relief onstage because the audience was so kind—I had the support of that room 100 percent. So even when people weren’t laughing, what I could see in the faces and what I could feel in the room, I was just like, *Oh, this is such a relief.* And when a guy [in the audience] yelled out, “This is fucking amazing!” I almost started crying, and I had to pull myself together.

How has your comedy changed since this experience?

I’m certainly not going to become some ranty, dark, tortured comedian—it’s not in me. But I might be a little more open with certain situations or feelings.

Dealing with the demise of a relationship is awful, but it turned out to be one of the less terrible things you endured.

My breakup ended up becoming so minimal because I was crying every day about my mother, and I was in physical pain and diagnosed with cancer. And in fact what saved me was running into this woman who I’d always had a thing for, right when my relationship ended. It was unreal. I’m not a religious or spiritual person, but it was one of those things where the heavens opened up and she was just handed to me. Everything horrible was the worst possible thing, and everything great has been the best possible thing in my life.

I’m so happy for you, and for us, since we get to experience your comedy for many years to come.

Well, I hope that’s the case. Unless I take some turn in my career unrelated to my health.

Do you worry people will be like, “Wow, she really peaked with that cancer bit, didn’t she?”

Yeah: “Now her jugs are gone—apparently her punch lines were in there.” ■

