

AUDIO

Ottawa jazz singer Kellylee Evans shares story of long recovery

Juno winner was struck by lightning, then suffered major concussion

By Trevor Pritchard, CBC's All In A Day, [CBC News](#) Posted: Feb 19, 2017 6:00 AM ET Last Updated: Feb 19, 2017 6:00 AM ET



Kellylee Evans, a Juno-winning jazz singer from Ottawa, says her new position as Carleton University's artist-in-residence has raised her hopes that it won't be long before she can take the stage again. (CBC)

These days, Kellylee Evans' life involves bed rest, meditation, and a whole lot of earplugs.

The 42-year-old Ottawa singer had been swiftly ascending to the top of the Canadian jazz scene when her career was derailed by two freak accidents: a lightning strike in 2013 and a concussion in 2015.

But a new position as the artist-in-residence at Carleton University has Evans hoping it won't be long before she returns to the stage.

"You know, I feel like maybe it could be soon ... honestly, when I finally said yes to doing this project with Carleton, I didn't think I could pull it off," she told CBC Ottawa's *All In A Day* last week.

"I feel like at some point, I'm going to have to say yes to something [musically] and try it and see if it works."

Difficult stretch for Juno winner

It's certainly been a tough few years for Evans, who in 2011 took home the Juno Award for Vocal Jazz Album of the Year for *Nina*, an album inspired by the life and musical output of the legendary Nina Simone.



Juno-winning jazz musician Kellylee Evans performs in Blois, France in May 2015. The Ottawa singer has been slowly recovering from a 2015 concussion, two years after being struck by lightning. (Xavier Chauvet)

Two years later, however, Evans was struck by lightning while washing dishes in her Ottawa home during a storm.

She was able to [return to the stage](#) surprisingly quickly, performing a set at the Ottawa Jazz Festival only two weeks after being struck. In 2015 she released the album *Come On*.

But more misfortune befell Evans later that year, when she got out of a hot bath, fainted and suffered a major concussion.

As a result, Evans had to cancel her tour in support of *Come On*.

Now, nearly 18 months later, Evans is still suffering from concussion-related symptoms — including one that, for someone whose life revolves around music, is particularly cruel.

'My body can't handle too much sound'

"My body just kind of goes into its own mini-panic attack. [Noise gets my] heart racing, and it's not because I'm actually frightened of anything. It's just my body can't handle too much sound," Evans told *All In A Day* host Alan Neal.

"There's some things that just haven't gotten better yet. My ability to be in an area with amplified sound has decreased. I can still go and watch movies, but I always have serious earplugs,"

Her body would also "punish" her when she overexerted herself, Evans said. In the first weeks and months after the concussion, that included performing tasks as routine as replying to emails, sending text messages, or just going for a walk.

At times, she went days without being able to take a shower. Her daily routine was so disrupted, Evans said, that at certain moments it was a struggle simply to like herself.

Approached by Carleton

In the spring of 2016, Carleton University approached her with the artist-in-residence offer. At that time, Evans said, she was "100 per cent sure" she couldn't accept it.

"I was like, I can't say yes. And I didn't fully say yes until the end of the year, as much as I wanted to," said Evans.

"I just wanted to have a full month with no symptoms and no flare-ups. And I couldn't get that."

Evans eventually did say yes, however. She's now running her own "interview series" at Carleton, in which she moderates public talks with prominent people in Ottawa's music scene, and hosting workshops for budding musicians.

When her headaches came back in January after her first session at Carleton, Evans — who's in the small minority of people whose concussion symptoms last for months and years — said wondered if she made the right decision.

But the next workshop went much better. And it's clear from Evans' enthusiasm that, even if she can't return to performing anytime soon, her new gig's keeping her content.

"All these people are going to sit down with me and talk. And I'm loving that. It's really fun."