

On the brink of death, but still performing

Wilko Johnson's not the first to play on when dying, says **Simon Hardeman**

When – let's not tempt fate by saying "if" – R'n'B guitar hero and inspirational performer Wilko Johnson takes the stage for his farewell mini-tour at the beginning of March, he will be the latest artist to have taken a terminal diagnosis as a prescription to carry on doing what he does best.

Johnson has pancreatic cancer, the same disease that laid low the man who made the Cincinnati Pops Orchestra famous, Erich Kunzel. The celebrated conductor knew he was dying and yet also kept going. "He was crying," said principal horn Elizabeth Freimuth of the final concert in 2009. He died a month later.

The man who wrote "Werewolves of London", US singer-songwriter Warren Zevon, was diagnosed with inoperable cancer in 2002. He refused treatment he felt pointless, as Johnson has, and not only began recording his final album, *The Wind*, with guests including Bruce Springsteen and Tom Petty, but also featured in a documentary for VH-1 and a David Letterman show special devoted to him, where he sang, and offered the advice, "enjoy every sandwich".

Jazz great Stan Getz knew he had liver cancer in 1987, and carried on performing and recording when the end was clear, almost to his death in 1991. His last renderings of Billy Strayhorn's "Blood Count" are hugely poignant for both their playing and because it was a tune that Strayhorn had finished while in hospital in 1967 in the last stages of his own cancer.

As well as playing live, Johnson has said he wants to record again.

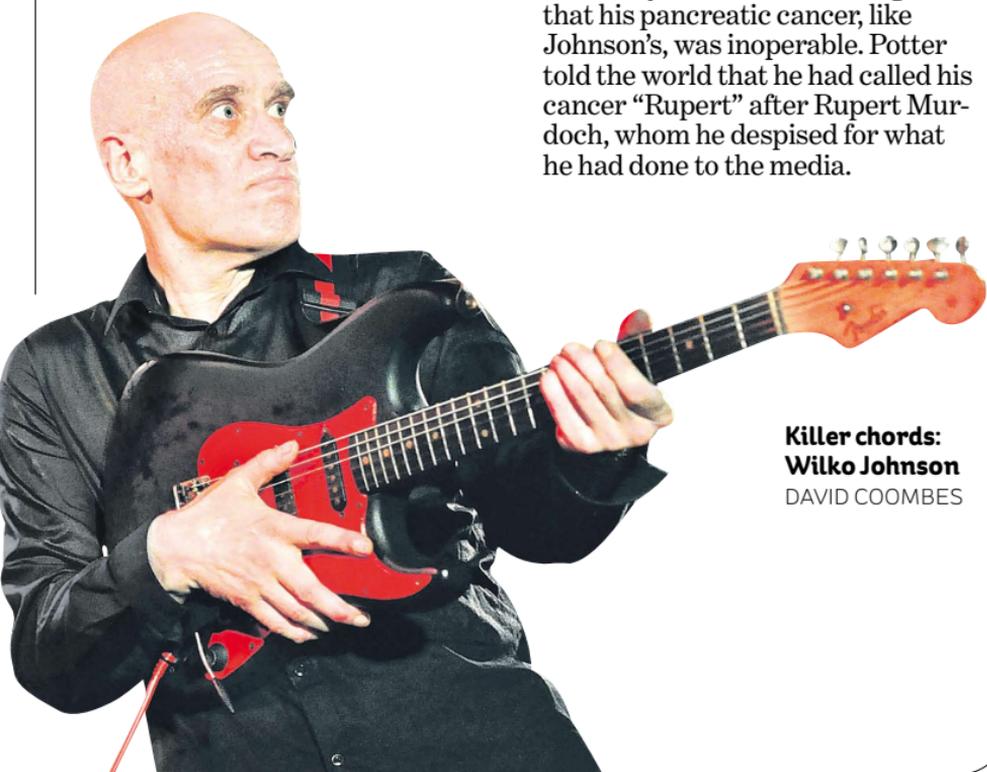
Terminal diagnoses have

spurred such bouts of creativity from many acts. Lee Hazlewood, who wrote and co-performed "These Boots Are Made for Walkin'" and "Some Velvet Morning" with Nancy Sinatra, only went back to the studio in 2005 after he was told his cancer had gone too far. Of the record, *Cake or Death*, he said, "if [it's] not what you like, hurry... get your money back, because that's as good as it's going to be". Meanwhile, George Harrison showed gallows humour when he wrote what was reportedly his first song for 10 years after doctors gave him a grim prognosis on his cancer. He noted the publishing credit for "Horse to the Water", which he sang for a Jools Holland album in 2001, to "R.I.P. Ltd". He died the same year. Film great John Huston directed his last movie from his wheelchair. He died before the film's release. It was called *The Dead*.

One of the most extraordinary performances by an actor on the brink of death comes from Edward G Robinson in the 1973 film *Soylent Green*, where he plays an almost impossibly poignant euthanasia scene. The only person who knew he was dying was his co-star Charlton Heston who wrote: "I've never heard of an actor playing a death scene in terms of his own true and imminent death... Eddie knew it was truly his last."

Five years later, John Cazale played his part in *The Deer Hunter* after being diagnosed with cancer. He was nursed through the shoot by his partner and co-star, Meryl Streep. Like Huston, he never saw the finished film.

The screenwriter Dennis Potter, was interviewed at length by Melvyn Bragg for Channel 4 in 1994, only a month after being told that his pancreatic cancer, like Johnson's, was inoperable. Potter told the world that he had called his cancer "Rupert" after Rupert Murdoch, whom he despised for what he had done to the media.



Killer chords:
Wilko Johnson
DAVID COOMBES