

Behind the Masked Singer, a lifelong passion for music as medicine. Featuring Dr. Elvis Francois.

Dr. Mary O'Connor invites fellow surgeon and singing sensation Dr. Elvis Francois to share his story. Dr. Elvis found fame on *The Masked Singer* after recording and posting inspirational performances accompanied by fellow physician Dr. William Robinson. In this episode of the podcast, Dr. Elvis talks about the importance of integrating humanity into medicine, and how the emotional connections created through our shared love of music inspire resilience and healing.

Dr. O'Connor: Welcome to the Movement is Life Health Disparities Podcast. I'm Mary O'Connor, Chair of Movement is Life and so excited to have with me as my guest today on our podcast, Dr. Elvis Francois, also known as the singing surgeon. So, Elvis welcome.

Dr. Francois: Well, it's a true pleasure, and honor to be here with you all this morning. Thank you so much.

Dr. O'Connor: So, Elvis, you've already, you know, gained quite a bit of fame because you were on the Masked Singer, and your video with Dr. William Robinson as the singing surgeons went viral. So, tell us a little bit about how you came into this music space.

Dr. Francois: You know, it's been quite a whirlwind of a year and a half. I guess the best way to explain it would be music for me from the origin has always been something that's been a soundtrack in my life. I never sort of grew up with anyone in my family who were musicians, but music was always a constant sort of theme in the background. My father, is a Haitian immigrant and you know, growing up, he would always sing. But he would tell you himself, he's a terrible singer.

Dr. O'Connor: Is he a terrible singer?

Dr. Francois: He would tell you that. Those were his own words. So, if you're listening to this dad, he said that himself. But growing up, you know, in good times or bad times, he would always be humming or singing a song. And so, for me, music was always something that I would always, you know, gravitate towards as a mood shift or a mood changer. So, that was the base for me, the baseline. Throughout life, you know, as life ebbs and flows, I would always fall back onto music. When I was in medical school, well, undergrad medical school and training, I never really sort of realized that music was something that would help me get through difficult times, in particular, during residency. As we all know, residency training can be stressful and can be long hours, a lot of time at the hospital. And for me, at that time, music was really helping me get through those long call shifts in particular. So, how this ended up coming to be, was one day you know, where I did my training at Mayo Clinic, there are these grand pianos throughout the hospital. We had finished up a call shift and one of my co-residents, we were both orthopedic surgery residents at the time, he plays piano and we had just finished up a shift and it was about 8 o'clock in the morning and I asked him, "Hey man, you want to just play a song and I'll just kind of sing-along?" And so, he started playing and patients were walking by, and hospital staff were walking by, and it ended up being sort of this incredible moment where for me personally, I realized the power of music and how that could bring people together. And since then, it's sort of just been something I've realized was a missing piece for me in allowing me to reconnect to the humanity and the human side of medicine, which you kind of get lost when you're looking at the books and you're looking at the numbers and looking at the labs, you sort of lose sight of that sometimes. And so that was a reminder for me, and it has been ever since.

Dr. O'Connor: For our listeners, Dr. Francois and I both trained in the same program, the orthopedic program at Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota, a great program. And I can see the piano actually, where Dr. Robinson sat and you stood there to sing. So, you then actually recorded, Music is Medicine in Rochester, Minnesota as basically an album and released it in 2024 as a fundraiser for the COVID pandemic.

Dr. Francois: Yes.

Dr. O'Connor: So, you're still doing your day job as an orthopedic resident. So, how did you find the time to do this and create this album?

Dr. Francois: Yes. You know that whole process was, to say unexpected, that'd be sort of an understatement. I've never recorded music professionally or never actually gone into a recording studio and, sat down to try to actually create music but at that time, we had recorded a performance at the Mayo Clinic. So, that took off on the internet and we started getting phone calls from different people in the music industry. And I guess, let me pause here by saying one of the most incredible things that COVID and this global pandemic has shown me and all of us is the power of togetherness and what you can accomplish when you have a good team around you.

And so, at that time, you know, people were reaching out and saying, hey, how can we help? How can we help you use this music to sort of help people? And so, we sort of brainstormed, and we had the idea that we would record some cover songs, and we would release that on iTunes and Spotify. And we would try to channel that energy into something tangible and beneficial. So, what we did was, you know, Big Machine, which is a record label in Nashville, Tennessee, they reached out and they were saying, we'd love to do this purely philanthropic, how can we help? So, we recorded the songs and we ended up releasing them and donated 100% of the proceeds to COVID 19 charities. And we donated funds directly to families that were directly impacted. And so, it was an opportunity to take a step back and to say, this is a difficult time, but how can we actually sort of harness what is going on and channel that into something for the greater good and that was truly one of the great life honors of mine to be able to be part of that.

Dr. O'Connor: Then, you went to becoming a TV star, right? You were on season four of the Masked Singer as the serpent.

Dr. Francois: Yes.

Dr. O'Connor: So, tell us about that background, how did that come together?

Dr. Francois: I think if you told me at the start of 2021 that, hey, later on this year, you're going to be wearing a giant serpent costume, and you're going to be singing on a major network, I would tell you that you've probably lost your mind, but indeed that is what ended up happening. They reached out and the idea was very interesting because prior to that, I'd never performed on stage before. I'd mostly just sung around the hospital, but the concept was, let's find a way to use what's happened to put some smiles on people's faces. And it was really, really cool to say the least that I went from working at the hospital and operating and working as a spine surgery fellow to fast forward, you know, putting on a seven-foot costume and being a giant serpent, which was really, really cool because the backstory was the serpent was, you know, the caduceus is the medical symbol that has the two snakes wrapped around the staff that was supposed to be a subtle hint at that.

So that's why I was a serpent, but it was really, really cool. It was definitely challenging and stepping outside of the box. It was a giant costume that is very hot on the inside and it's very heavy and trying to perform in that was challenging but it was great to come back to the hospital and have, you know, hospital staff commenting on it and people who I work with who had no idea. So, it was great. A moral lift uplifting moment for everyone at the hospital that I worked at, at the time. So, it was really cool.

Dr. O'Connor: So, you finished your residency training at Mayo Rochester, and then went to Harvard for a spine fellowship. And now, you're getting your practice started. Tell us about where you are now?

Dr. Francois: So now I am just getting started. I'm in Atlanta, Georgia with a private practice group, a multi-specialty group called Resurgence Orthopedics. And so, I'm just getting started in practices. Many people may or may not be aware, that it's the journey to becoming an orthopedic surgeon. It's quite long, its four years of college, four years of medical school, and then its five years of residency, and then one year of fellowship. So, I'm at the very end of the training part and now getting ready to harness those years of training to help as many people as I can. And I'll be doing that in Atlanta, Georgia, and also juggling a lot, but it's been an incredible journey, especially over the past year or so, seeing all those things materialize and come together.

Dr. O'Connor: And how do you envision carrying forth music as medicine into the future for you?

Dr. Francois: You know, for me, as I said earlier, music has always been something that has been there for me. So, for me, it's almost like breathing or doing something naturally. So, what I've realized is that music has an incredible quality of bringing people together in ways that people would not have expected. And so, for me, I think the medicinal qualities of music are so tangible to me and I've seen people impacted so deeply from sharing music with the pediatric unit, with kids in the pediatric unit, at the hospital too, you know, sing songs at the ICU or doing a small show after hours and seeing how that can really connect people. So, for me, what I really envision is finding a space where I can continue to share music with patients, but then with people just in general, because music has this incredible quality of connecting people across the entire world. And that's something that I did not appreciate prior to last year and something that I hope to continue to appreciate and help people appreciate over the next few years to come.

Dr. O'Connor: It's interesting, isn't it because you know, during our training, which is very much rooted in kind of an analytical approach, right? Data-driven evidence-based medicine, and as you already commented sometimes there's less emphasis on the humanity and the emotion and the feeling of what we're doing, and maybe that's where music comes in because music essentially to me is like a shortcut to your emotion.

Dr. Francois: Absolutely. That's a great way to say it actually. A shortcut to your emotion, actually, it really highlights the, you know, the underlying theme that music really, really does that. You can listen to, it's pretty fascinating. And there are studies on this that music can actually shape your mood without you knowing. So, if you have a song in the background, that's at a certain beat per minute, that's pretty fast and a happy feeling, it'll shift your mood. There've been fMRI studies that have looked at that. And so, it is truly a shortcut to your emotion. And as you mentioned, I think oftentimes, with the data-driven aspect of what we do, you're looking at the lab values, you're looking at the numbers, but you sometimes can forget that there's a human being attached to these lab values and a human being attached to the data. And I think for me, music has really allowed me to focus more on the person. And I think that's what I hope to share with providers or people in the space of medicine to find ways that they can connect with whatever their personal passions are that allow them to really connect with their patients on a deeper level.

Dr. O'Connor: So, I have to ask you about your name Elvis and you being a singer. Is that like coincidence or were you destined to become a singer given the fact that your parents named you Elvis?

Dr. Francois: That's quite an interesting story. You know, the destiny question, I'll leave up to the fates, up to the universe, but my mother, she was a huge Elvis Presley fan. I often joke that there are Elvis Presley fans who buy the albums, there are those who went to the

concerts, and then there are the select few that named their children after him. And my mom was in the third category. So, she was a big Elvis Presley fan. Interestingly, growing up, she would perm my hair and she would actually put me in Elvis costumes, not on Halloween just throughout the year and I'd go to school, dressed up as Elvis. So, there was a little bit of childhood trauma, I'm kidding.

But my mom was a huge Elvis Presley fan. When I asked her about it, when I got old enough and said, why'd you name me Elvis? Like, where did this come from? So, she always grew up, loving and watching Elvis Presley. And a month before I was born, she had a dream that she was at an Elvis Presley concert, and her unborn child, she says was there with her. So, she said, she thought it was a sign. And then the week that I was born, there was an Elvis Presley marathon on TV. And so, she took those two things to mean that God was telling her to name me Elvis, and the rest is I guess, history.

Dr. O'Connor: Well, I think that she listened appropriately.

Dr. Francois: Yes, she did. I always also often say, I'm thankful that she wasn't a Bon Jovi fan because Bon Jovi fans, I would be a little strange or yeah. So, Elvis works. I'll take it.

Dr. O'Connor: Elvis works, Elvis works, great. So, another interesting question that I think inquiring minds would want to know is how your social life has been impacted by being named by People Magazine in 2020 as one of the sexiest men alive.

Dr. Francois: Yeah, that was quite an interesting honor. I had no idea actually, that that was happening. The true story is actually we finished a case while I was doing my fellowship and I scrubbed out of the case. And when I walked out into the hallway, one of the nurses mentioned it. She was like, oh my God, did you see this? And I was like walking out. I thought they were joking. But yeah, that's been a very interesting thing.

Dr. O'Connor: So, like People Magazine didn't contact you and say, hey, we're thinking about putting you on our list of the sexiest men alive?

Dr. Francois: I had no forewarning at all, but it was a long day too. And scrubbing out and finding out was pretty surreal. So, definitely unexpected and pretty cool. A lot of my coworkers gave me a lot of gripe about it. They make fun of me quite a bit, but it's been definitely a fun feather in the hat, I guess.

Dr. O'Connor: Okay. Yeah. That's fascinating. I thought that they would've at least reached out to you and said, hey, can we have your headshot or, you know, give us, give us a little more of your bio.

Dr. Francois: Yeah, it was definitely cool and unexpected in ways that I would not have ever imagined.

Dr. O'Connor: What do you have planned for music is medicine in the next few years? How are you going to continue to use the power of medicine to heal?

Dr. Francois: Yeah, I think for me, you know, when this all started with that video that we posted sort of at the middle or beginning of the pandemic, a lot of things have happened since then, but I think one of the most impressive things to me, personally, was getting messages from people across the country, messages from people, you know, across the world in other countries and seeing how music impacted them personally. And so, for me, my goal would be to continue to share music personally, but then also to inspire providers to find the things that they're passionate about, that remind them of the humanity of what we're here to do and that's to take care of people and to help people.

And so, I think you know, I'll continue to share music and sing songs at the hospital and do miniconcerts here and there. And also, I'm working on some original music that I'm hoping to release next year. But I think the underlying and the true goal for me is to really allow people to take a step back, to truly understand that the best way to take care of

people is to realize that you have to connect with that person. And in fact, both of us, where we trained at Mayo Clinic, as you know, Dr. Frank Sim, who is a tumor oncologist at Mayo Clinic, one of the things he told me, it was my intern year. He's a legendary figure, but one of the things he had said after he was walking down the hallway and he just kind of looked over to me after we had a difficult case, it was a young patient who had a sort of a terminal diagnosis. And he looked at me and he said you know, Elvis, sometimes it's very important to realize that you have to bear the burden of hope for your patients. And that quote really stuck to me that you have to bear the burden of hope, meaning you have to find ways to instill hope in people. And for me, personally, music is how I hope to do that with patients. And if it means inspiring a little kid to play the ukulele, or if it means putting a smile on a patient's face by singing, "Stand by Me," which is their favorite song, I think that's how I personally hope to use music and to channel it throughout the next years to come.

Dr. O'Connor: Well. We are both members of the Frank Sim fan club. Dr. Sim is a huge mentor of mine and professionally, I would never be where I am without his guidance and mentorship. So, you know, I unapologetically, you know, love Frank Sim and that's incredible advice and so very much Frank, right? To share how important that is that sometimes we do have to bear the burden of hope. And when you think of that, you know, to me, it's a very easy translation to using music as a way of helping those patients continue to have hope. And in the world of disparities, which of course is what we're about at Movement is Life and combating disparities, particularly in musculoskeletal disparities, you are an incredible, you know, shining star of an African American orthopedic surgeon, who's a spine surgeon, who's going to go out there and serve all of humanity. Share a little bit about your experience with disparities in musculoskeletal medicine and how you feel we should be attacking these disparities to improve equity.

Dr. Francois: Absolutely. And I think you highlighted it quite well there. I think the key term there is equity and making not only access to healthcare equitable but also realizing that it's difficult to be what you don't see. And so, you know, growing up, if I were to think to myself, what do I think of a spine surgeon? You know, there weren't many people who looked like me who were in that profession. So, I think, one of the first steps is to, you know, allow for a greater degree of diversity within the field of medicine and stem in particular, within orthopedic surgery, which I think we are starting to appreciate better. Because I think there's also sort of that disconnect there if you have patients who are not necessarily getting equitable access to care and, also, not seeing themselves well represented within, you know, the provider pool.

So, I think you know, as far as music and how that connects, one of the most interesting things I think is visibility and getting messages from people who are in college who are, hopefully applying to medical school and seeing people who look like them in sub-specialty fields, is very, very important. And I think we're starting to see that change in different orthopedic surgery residencies and training programs across the country. So, I think those things are very, very important, you know allowing us to diversify the provider pool, because I think a pool of providers allows those physicians to connect better with their patients and patients, the quality of trust that they'll have within their providers taking care of them also improves.

Dr. Francois: So, I think those are things that are turning the tide now. And I think we're having those conversations much more across the board and at the table. And so, I think that's how we sort of shift the needle. And I think the music you know, has that interesting quality again, of connecting with people across the board. It doesn't matter who you are and where you

are. Everyone has a favorite song. Music has that quality of bringing people who are very, very different to the table. And that's one of the things that I hope to continue to allow music to do, is to bring people together. And for many reasons, it connects us all in many interesting ways. And if I can be part of that process, I'm truly honored.

Dr. O'Connor: So, what's your favorite song?

Dr. Francois: Ooh, that's a great question. It's like who is your favorite child? I'd say my favorite song is probably "Stand by Me," just because I mean, on service level, it seems like a love song. I'll tell you why it's my favorite song. So, Dr. Robinson was also a co-resident of mine. He plays the piano. This is after we were on the Ellen Show. And so, there was a lot of noise that came with that. But one of the coolest things that came out of that was there was a patient who was in our ICU, who was a gentleman who was unfortunately provided with a terminal diagnosis, and he had about a week or two to live. And he was in a long-term relationship and his girlfriend actually came into the hospital and they wanted to get married before he passed away.

And so, the ICU, they set up a sort of an actual... they brought in a priest. She wore a dress and they actually set up a wedding in the ICU and she asked if we could perform at the wedding. And so, her song of choice was "Stand by Me." And so, I never really thought deeply on the words, but you know, when the night has come, which is how it starts. And it's basically talking about when the darkest of days are here, stand by me and I'll stand by you. And so, as we're singing the song and she's there with him, and he was lying down and really like sat with me and allowed me to really connect with those words on a deep level. So, for me personally, "Stand by Me" is probably my favorite song, just because of the meaning and the gravity of the song. And it's beautifully written.

Dr. O'Connor: All right. Well, I'll have to take a break for a moment because I'm getting all teary-eyed from your story.

Dr. Francois: Yes, it was. That was a tough one to perform without getting teary-eyed myself.

Dr. O'Connor: But that's all about the power of love and how powerful that is and the fact that I can be moved simply by you telling me the story and I wasn't even there. Okay. So, because I'm supposed to be interviewing you and not crying myself, let's wrap up with an important message that you want to share with our listeners.

Dr. Francois: A lot has happened over the past year and a half, things that I did not expect to happen. And I think that's been the case for many of us, anyone who's listening, you know, the pandemic. This is the first time in generations that the entire world was focused on the same problem. It didn't matter if you were in Bangladesh, if you were in Japan, if you were in Miami, Florida, if you were in Wisconsin, we all were facing this one issue. And I think you know, in the darkest of times, nothing shines brighter than the human spirit. And we were witness to that last year and into this year. And if there's one important thing that I've realized, it's that when we come together, we can do so much, so much good can come when we come together. If we look at how rapid the vaccine push was made and how we were able to arrive at a solution that quickly. It's because we all came together. And so, you know, for me going into the hospital throughout the pandemic, one of the things that I really appreciated was seeing people from all walks of life, come together to tackle the one problem. You have people of all specialties being asked to do things that are not part of their job description. And seeing everyone come together at a hospital to take care of patients and, in particular, to focus on one problem. It was amazing to see how good we can be when we're together. So, I think last year, many times we can focus on how difficult it was, but I like to focus on how beautiful it was to see people from all walks of life come together. And I think if it's anything that we could have learned, we can

be better mothers, better fathers, better brothers, sisters, friends when we come together. And I think that would be the one message that I think we should all focus on looking at what we were able to take away from a very dark year, last year, which is leading to a brighter tomorrow. So, that'd be the one message that I'd share.

Dr. O'Connor: How much better we can be when we all come together. Absolutely. And I'm certainly convinced that that's what we have to do to improve health in our nation, to improve health in our communities. I mean, we have to come together multiple stakeholders, you know, listen to our communities, and find out what their needs are; not go in with the classic paternalistic attitude of medicine, which is that we know what's best for you, when in fact we don't. And so, I think that is just a fabulous message. Yes. When we come together, we can do so much. So, Dr. Elvis Francois, thank you so much. We're just delighted to have you as a guest on the health disparities podcast and look forward to more music is a medicine from you in the future.

Dr. Francois: I look forward to sharing. It's a true honor to join you all today. And I look forward to hopefully continuing to share these messages with as many people as possible and thanks for having me.

Dr. O'Connor: You're welcome. Let's close out with our listeners enjoying you perform, "Stand by Me." Here you go.

Dr. Francois: Oh, we did talk about this?

Dr. O'Connor: So, I've invited Dr. Elvis to sing "Stand by Me."

Dr. Francois: Well, we will sing "Stand by Me."

Dr. O'Connor: No, no, that's not what I agreed to but anyway.

Dr. Francois: How about this? So, I'll do the first verse, and then because I think we have the words,

Dr. O'Connor: We have the words.

Dr. Francois: And then you all will join me for the chorus. All right. You know the song, "Stand by Me." by Ben E. King.

Dr. O'Connor: They know it.

Dr. Francois: Okay, great. Great. Do you have the words for the good people?

Dr. O'Connor: Yes.

Dr. Francois: Great. You know, the cool thing about this song is that I didn't know this, but this song was actually written, it was inspired by a Psalm. And in that Psalm, I think it is Psalm 46, but the lyrics are inspired by being in a difficult place, being in a place where there's no help, and realizing that there's help to come. It was originally inspired by a religious song, but these words were then turned into a love song. So, the meaning is pretty cool to me. But you all will start singing.

Dr. O'Connor: We will start singing.

Dr. Francois: Great. You can invite us in when you're ready. Do you want to stand? You can stand.

Dr. Francois: I'll wave you all in. I'll stand. I'll wave you all in.

When the night has come

And the land is dark

And the moon is the only light we'll see.

No, I won't be afraid.

No, I won't shed a tear,

Just as long, just as long as you stand by me.

Dr. Francois: And then everyone:

So, darling, darling, stand by me.

Oh, oh, stand by me.

Oh, darling stand by me.

Dr. Francois: You all did a great job. You all did a great job.

*If the sky that we look upon, should tumble and fall
Or the mountains should crumble to the sea.
I won't cry. I won't cry, no, I won't shed a tear
Just as long, just as long as you stand by me.
Whenever you're in trouble
Won't you stand by me?
Whoa, stand by me. Whoa, darling, stand by me.*

Dr. O'Connor: Whoa.

Dr. Francois: That was good.

Dr. O'Connor: Okay.

Dr. Francois: Great.

Dr. O'Connor: So, with that, we will close our 2021 Movement is Life National Caucus. Thank you very much. Everyone safe travels home and we'll see you next year.

Dr. Francois: Awesome. Thank you.

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