

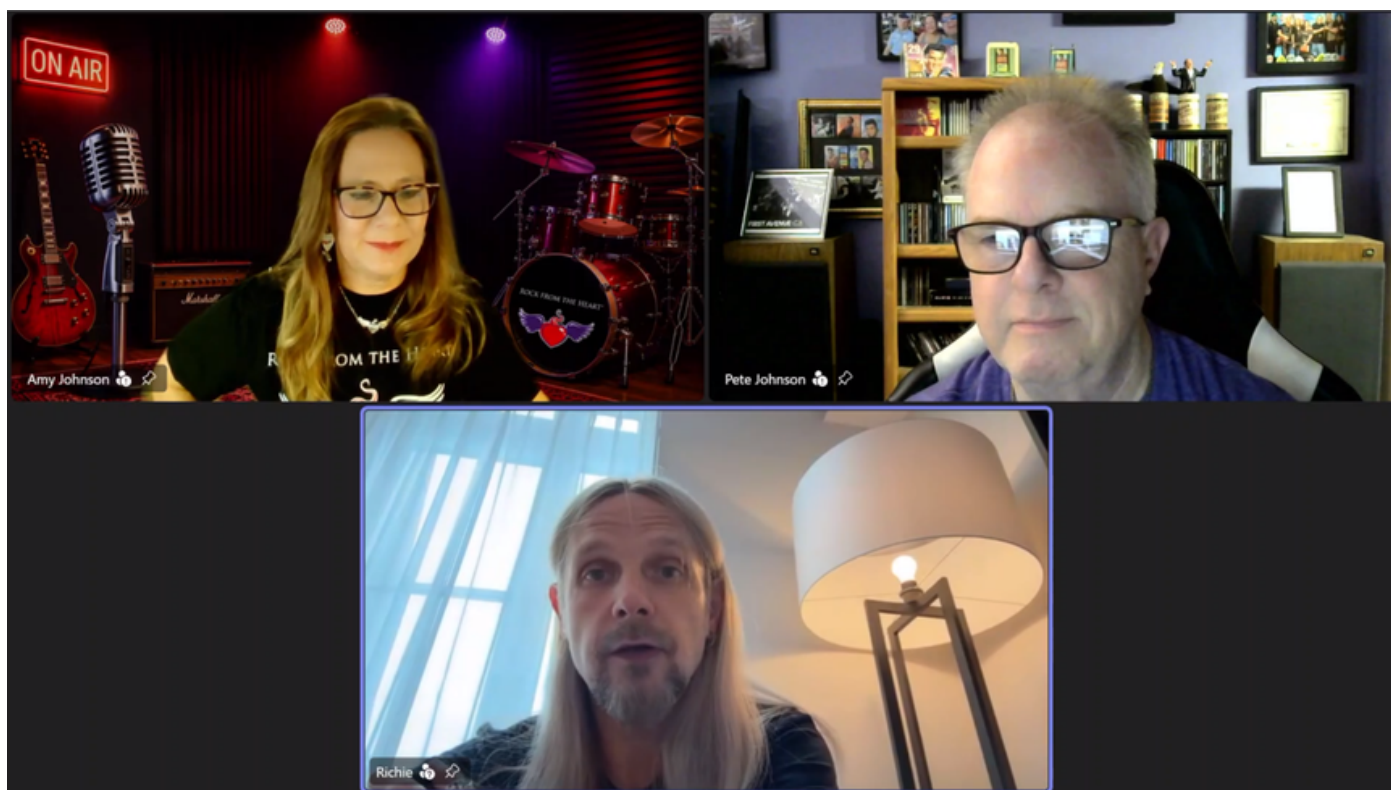
WHEN EVERY SECOND MATTERS

Richie Faulkner reflects on surviving an acute aortic dissection and the road back to the stage.

By Amy Johnson

Founder, Rock from the Heart

A special feature from The Second Set, Rock from the Heart's conversation series.



When Richie Faulkner joined Rock from the Heart from Germany while on tour, the conversation moved beyond music. What followed was an honest look at the day an acute aortic dissection changed his life, the people who helped him through it, and the journey back to the stage.

Music Opens the Door

Some conversations stay with you long after the cameras stop rolling.

When Pete Johnson, my husband and Rock from the Heart co-founder, and I created The Second Set, our goal was simple. We wanted to sit down with musicians who have gone through heart surgery to talk about the moments that changed their lives and what came next. Through music, we've found a way to reach people through non-traditional channels.

While traditional channels remain essential, music has a unique ability to open doors, create connections, develop relationships, and reach people who might otherwise never hear these life-saving messages.

At Rock from the Heart, we've met hundreds of patients and families whose lives changed in an instant because of aortic disease and heart valve disease.

Whether they are a world-famous musician or a school bus driver, there is a common thread that connects them all: the uncertainty that follows a life-changing diagnosis and the determination to find their way forward.

When Judas Priest guitarist Richie Faulkner agreed to join us virtually from Germany while on tour, we knew the conversation would be about much more than music.

We are grateful to Richie for taking time out of a busy tour schedule to share his story with the Rock from the Heart community.

PAINKILLER

Most fans know the headlines. In September 2021, Richie suffered an acute aortic dissection while performing at the Louder Than Life festival in Louisville, Kentucky. Against all odds, he finished the show before being rushed to the hospital, where an experienced surgical team performed emergency surgery that saved his life. The story has been told before, but it was powerful hearing Richie walk through those moments in his own words.

Richie began by taking us back to that day at the Louder Than Life Festival. During Judas Priest's performance of 'Painkiller,' he experienced a sudden pain unlike anything he had ever felt. "There was like an explosion in my chest area. As the song went on, I started to get a bit lightheaded." One moment stood out in particular. At the end of the song, when he tried to lift his guitar over his head as he had done countless times before, Richie told us, "This time, I just couldn't do it."



At the time, he thought he was having a heart attack. Like so many people experiencing an aortic dissection, he didn't realize what was happening. The adrenaline of performing in front of thousands of fans carried him through the rest of the song. It wasn't until he walked off stage that the seriousness of the situation became impossible to ignore.

Before leaving for the hospital, he ducked into the dressing room to change clothes. Looking back, it captures the strange reality of those first moments. He knew something wasn't right, but the full weight of what was happening hadn't sunk in yet.

"I didn't want to go to the hospital in leather and studs," Richie recalled.

Minutes Matter

Richie was rushed by ambulance to UofL Health Jewish Hospital, just minutes away from the venue. There, an experienced aortic team quickly recognized that he was suffering an acute aortic dissection and rushed him into emergency surgery. Richie has often reflected on how fortunate he was that the festival happened to be so close to a hospital with the expertise to diagnose and treat this condition. Not every patient has that advantage. Because the symptoms of an aortic dissection can resemble a heart attack or other medical emergencies, delays in diagnosis can have devastating consequences.

His story challenges the assumption that every life-threatening heart condition comes with warning signs. Young, active, and healthy, Richie had no symptoms until the moment the dissection began. It's a reminder that in most cases, aortic disease doesn't give people any warning. Life can change in an instant.

Richie was fortunate to be taken to a hospital with the expertise to recognize an acute aortic dissection. For people facing this condition, survival often depends not only on how fast they get medical care, but how quickly the correct diagnosis is made. Richie said, "They saved my life and made it possible for me to come home and hold my daughter again."

Richie shared that his partner, Mariah, their daughter, and Mariah's father traveled to Louisville to be by his side. Like so many families affected by a sudden medical emergency, they faced the uncertainty together.

Back to the Stage

As the conversation turned toward recovery, I found myself thinking about a question so many patients ask after surgery: *Will I ever feel like myself again?*

For Richie, that question carried a unique weight. Returning to work didn't mean sitting behind a desk or easing back into a familiar routine. His work involves standing under hot stage lights, carrying a guitar for nearly two hours, moving across a stage, feeding off the energy of thousands of fans, and delivering the kind of performance Judas Priest audiences have come to expect.

What I found especially fascinating was hearing how thoughtfully that return was planned. Before Judas Priest headed back out on tour, Richie and his medical team didn't simply decide he was ready and send him on his way. Instead, they recreated the physical demands of a live performance as closely as possible. With his cardiac specialists on site, he essentially performed a full Judas Priest set, allowing the medical team to monitor how his body responded to the exertion, the movement, and the sustained intensity that comes with performing live. It wasn't simply a medical evaluation—it was an opportunity for everyone involved, including Richie himself, to see that his repaired heart and aorta could withstand the demands of doing what he loved.

That story resonated with me because, in many ways, it mirrors what so many survivors experience, even if their stage looks very different. Recovery isn't only about healing an incision or waiting for a doctor to remove restrictions. It's about rebuilding confidence. It's about trusting your body again after it has betrayed you in ways you never imagined possible.

Richie spoke openly about returning to music with a renewed appreciation for every opportunity to perform. Surviving something as serious as an aortic dissection has a way of changing your perspective, and while it doesn't erase the challenges that come with recovery, it can deepen your appreciation for the moments that once seemed routine. Every concert, every rehearsal, every chance to pick up a guitar again carries a significance that simply wasn't there before.

The story didn't end with Richie's emergency surgery in 2021. The initial 10 hour surgery involved aortic valve replacement and ascending aorta and arch repair. He later underwent a second open-heart surgery to repair a leak that was causing a sack to form around his heart. Today, Richie continues to live with a medically managed descending aorta. It's a reality familiar to many people affected by aortic disease: the first surgery may save your life, but the journey often continues through regular imaging, medication, and a lifelong partnership with your healthcare team.

As I listened to Richie reflect on the past few years, I couldn't help but think about something we say often at Rock from the Heart: survival is not the end of the story. It's the beginning of a new chapter. For Richie Faulkner, that chapter has included more albums, tours, time with family, and opportunities to use his platform to raise awareness about a disease that too many people know nothing about until it touches their own family.



Pete and I had the pleasure of meeting and talking with Richie backstage before Judas Priest's September 24, 2024, concert in Rochester, Minnesota. Richie shared with us that the band would be heading back to Louisville to play Louder than Life just a few days later. Knowing what had happened there in 2021, we understood why returning to that festival meant so much to him.

Three years earlier, he had walked off that same stage and into an ambulance after finishing the band's set, unaware that he was experiencing an acute aortic dissection. Returning to Louder Than Life meant returning to the place where his life changed forever, and he admitted that it carried a tremendous amount of emotion.

During our conversation, Richie told us one of the reasons it was so important to return to Louder Than Life. He felt he owed those fans the show they deserved. They had witnessed one of the most difficult nights of his life without knowing what was happening behind the scenes. Going back wasn't about erasing the past. It was about returning to the same stage and finishing the story on his own terms.



Rock from the Heart

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About last night...

RFTH founders, Amy and Pete, had the opportunity to visit with [Judas Priest](#) guitarist and aortic dissection survivor Richie Faulkner.

"Richie and Pete shared their heart stories and talked about how important it is to educate and raise awareness of this disease.. a silent killer that goes undiagnosed far too often . Seeing Richie up there rocking from the heart, three years after his lifesaving surgery, was truly inspirational. We extend a huge thank you to Judas Priest management and Richie for this opportunity." -- Amy J See less



Photo credit Amy Johnson

As Pete and I listened, we couldn't help but think back to something Richie had shared earlier in our conversation. During Painkiller in 2021, the pain and weakness had become so overwhelming that he couldn't lift his Flying V guitar over his head, something he had done countless times before. Looking back, he recognized it as one of the first signs that something was terribly wrong, even though he had no idea at the time that he was experiencing an acute aortic dissection.

When Judas Priest returned to Louder Than Life in 2024, Richie raised that guitar high above his head once again.

For most fans, it was another unforgettable moment at a Judas Priest concert. For those who knew what happened on that same stage three years earlier, it meant so much more.

It was a quiet reminder of how far he had come and the promise he had made to himself to return.



Photo credit John Molseed / Post Bulletin

Richie Faulkner, Judas Priest guitarist, and Rob Halford at the band's show on Tuesday, Sept. 24, 2024, at the Mayo Civic Center in Rochester, MN.



Photo credit Amy Johnson

Pete and Amy Johnson with Richie Faulkner backstage before Judas Priest's September 24, 2024, performance in Rochester. We had the honor of meeting and talking with Richie before the show. Two years later, he graciously joined us for **The Second Set** to share the story behind his recovery and return to the stage.

Still Rocking

Richie's story didn't end in a hospital room. Today, he's back where he belongs - on stage touring with Judas Priest, continuing to perform for audiences around the world. If you have the opportunity to catch the band live, do it. You'll experience one of heavy metal's legendary bands, and see a musician whose return to the stage represents determination, perseverance, and a deep appreciation for every performance.

*At the time of publication, **Judas Priest** is touring Europe on the **Faithkeepers** Tour. For tour dates and ticket information, visit Judas Priest's official website.*

www.judaspriest.com

