

The music has come back into Mike Mahoney's life

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The wide, warm smile is there, the tan, the ruggedly handsome face. The wit is there too. Fast, as always. But most of all the spirit is there, the gusto for living, the go-for-it attitude that was his trademark.

It is all there again. All in place. And, of course, the music is there, too. The music is always there. The music that stopped for a while but it is there again...the beat, the blues, everything. Only now — at times — the music comes out of a 600-watt amplifier and through two JBC speakers that look like bureaus. For now he is Mr. M. He is Mr. M the music man. The traveling D.J. And the wheel chair is no hindrance because he has a mike and charisma comes through it as he plays the music while they dance.

Three summers ago, on a scorching July afternoon, Michael F. Mahoney of

Swampscott, then a 22-year-old bronzed, muscular youth who always lived without fear, dove off Red Rock and severed his spinal cord.

Friday night Mike Mahoney — Mr. M. — ran his own dance at St. Mary's Cardinal Cushing Center. It was his debut as a professional D.J. He sat in his wheel chair behind the pulsating speakers and hosted the show.

In between, there had been darkness. Early in the game.

"There was loneliness at first and I'd be lying if I said there wasn't," he tells you in his first-floor apartment that is not too far from the beach that he loves. His mother, Mrs. Mary (Carco) Mahoney owns the house and lives upstairs. There are two sisters: Terry and Maureen. But Mike is alone on the first floor. He is completely self-sufficient. This is the way he wants it. You talk with him before he leaves for the dance.

"There was loneliness and there was

some anger, too. I had had a booze problem and with the help of God and a lot of good people, I'd been sober for some time before the accident. So at first I thought I'd walk again. I thought it would be will power. I figured I was straight now and a good guy and I'd walk again. There wasn't self-pity when I found I wouldn't. But there was anger for a while.

"I was in Lynn Hospital for three months and in University Hospital in Boston for three months. A gal at University Hospital — an occupational therapist — told me there were no limits, except walking. Some people told you about limits. So she inspired me then. I had the feeling I could go for anything. And I got more independent and when I did the anger left and the spirit came back. And that's when things started to turn around."

For much of his early life, things went just about the way Mike Mahoney

himself wanted them to go. If you were casting the part of a rebellious, macho, irresponsible teen-ager, then Mike Mahoney was your boy. The son of a lineotype operator for Boston newspapers, he grew up in Somerville and North Reading and set records for scholastic indifference in both places.

"My father has a stereo system and when he died I inherited it. That was part of the music thing. Earlier, my grandfather used to give me a Hershey if I played the piano for him. By ear. I had no talent but I liked Hersheys so I played. And I loved music. Later I skipped school all the time and drove around in cars and went to a million concerts and drank beer. A lot of beer.

"Some of the guys I went with then are in prison now and some are dead. There was a lot of trouble when the booze started taking over. I didn't know what was the matter with me and I remember once, when Chief Cassidy of Swampscott — he was a detective then — was taking me to court one morning. He said that I was a sick kid and that there were places for that. I woke up one morning when I was 21 and I knew my life was going nowhere. I was sleeping in the backs of cars and getting stiff and getting in trouble and that was my life. So I reached out for help and I got help and I found a life without booze. It was beautiful."

He lived in a halfway house on Green Street in Lynn — Ryan House — and he attended to his alcohol problem. He got his high school equivalency diploma and began taking courses in liberal arts at North Shore Community College. Read a paper he did at the time and the flair for language is there. He quit smoking and he jogged. He played golf and worked for a landscape firm. He was brown as chestnut and solid and none of it was lost on the girls he met.

"I'd wake up every day and the gusto would be there. I couldn't wait for the day to begin. I got my license back and a work license but I could only drive during daylight hours, so I'd borrow my sister's Camaro and make dates for 10 a.m. Most of all I got my self-respect back. That's how it was going when I had the accident. I had been dependent as a kid — 'Ma, got a buck, got five?' — and I found my independence when I got sober. So when I was in the hospitals and people were waiting on me I was back to being dependent again and I resented that. It all took time, and there was a lot of help from people and from God, but I'm independent again and I wake up and want to start. Like before."

First there was the van and the stereo system in the van. That's when you'd hear the toot and look over and there would be the big grey van and the smile and

it would be Mike Mahoney tooling around town once more. People worried when he said he was going to drive it to Mississippi with a friend. Was it too much to try?

"I drove to Mississippi and to New Orleans and then over to Florida. My friend stayed in Florida and I drove back home alone. Once, in Largo, Florida I was sleeping in the van in a Burger King lot. The cops came over and I told them the supper at the Burger King was so good that I was waiting for them to open for breakfast. There were some problems, but I made it home. I had lived on Big Macs and tacos and slept in the van and was glad to be back under cool, clean sheets again."

And a girl came into his life and he tells you that the music is even better now. "If you're a little lonely, you're not so lonely and if there's some pain it doesn't hurt as much and all the benefits are twice as good," he tells you. "She believed in me. That I could do this D.J. thing, I mean. But when I have other ideas that she doesn't agree with, she lets me know in a hurry. We went to Jamaica for eight days. I was in the water for the first time since the accident then. We lay on the beach and we talked with the natives. It was great."

He visits University Hospital on a weekly basis and is a power of example, a hope, for the new men in the wheel chairs. And he is loyal to Ryan House on Green Street and to the intermediate rehab program next door. "I never want to get cocky," he says. "I don't want to forget where I came from. My life is great today, but you always have to remember where you came from and you have to give a little back. Always."

"I don't want people to get the wrong idea. Independence is not totally what you can do physically when you've had an accident like mine. Maybe some guys can't do things I've done. You do the best you can do with what you've got. And if your mind is OK there are a lot of things you can do. You have to go after whatever you've got a shot at and do your best with that. That's self-respect and courage. When you're in a wheel chair and you face the day and do your best, that's courage."

And now, Mr. M. will play the hours and hours of tapes he has made in his apartment — new wave, disco, 50's, big band, Sinatra-type, vocals — and he hopes to play them at dances and weddings, at anniversaries and functions, in night clubs and at parties. He will play them and he will laugh and the laugh will be warm and real because the spirit will be there beneath the laugh.

He knows that it is not all just taking, and there are no knots in the gut, and he is free to go-for-it whichever way he wants.