

**To scientists, he's the real rock star**

***Dr. Francis Collins has discovered the genes that cause cystic fibrosis and Huntington's disease and runs the National Institutes of Health. But hand him a guitar and he becomes Dr. Rock 'n' Roll.***

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Considering that he's the director of the federal agency that invests more than \$30 billion in medical research each year, it may not be surprising that Dr. Francis Collins was on the Sony lot in Culver City last week for the telecast of "Stand Up to Cancer," a star-studded gala that aired live on more than a dozen TV networks and garnered more than \$80 million in pledges to fund cancer research.

But perhaps few viewers expected to see the head of the National Institutes of Health jamming onstage with the likes of Stevie Wonder, Kris Kristofferson, Aaron Neville and the Wilson sisters of Heart.

In addition to discovering the genes responsible for cystic fibrosis and Huntington's disease — not to mention leading the historic Human Genome Project — Collins has a long history on the stage. The son of a drama professor, he has been performing since he was 4. He recently shared the stage with Aerosmith's Joe Perry as part of the Rock Stars of Science campaign.

The Culver City event was in another league. Celebrities were milling around him in the green room (actually a giant white tent outfitted with sleek white sofas and flat-screen TVs), but Collins was largely oblivious. He did notice two other physicians taking part in the telecast: "Dr. Oz is here, and so is Sanjay Gupta," he said. "I think I'm the only singing doctor."

The unusual experiment was hatched by Lisa Paulsen, president and chief executive of the Entertainment Industry Foundation, the charitable organization that administers the Stand Up to Cancer initiative. Paulsen had seen Collins' Rock Stars of Science gig. So when she ran into him at a fundraiser, she buttonholed him.

"I told him, 'You're a real guitarist, you should be in our show,'" Paulsen recalled. "I was just kidding."

The song for the finale was written for the event by Eurythmics guitarist Dave Stewart, who champions a variety of social causes. It was delivered to Collins a couple of weeks before the show in the form of an MP3 file — no sheet music, no lyrics. Collins donned his headphones and played the song over and over in front of his computer, first typing out the words and then picking out the chords for his rhythm guitar.

It helped that "this song is not that elaborate," Collins said. "Also, I'm fortunate enough to have perfect pitch."

Collins plays an oversized acoustic Huss & Dalton guitar, a gift from his colleagues when he stepped down as head of the National Human Genome Research Institute in 2008. The instrument took three months to custom-design — a mother-of-pearl pattern beneath the strings evokes the double helix of DNA — and another three months to be built.

Collins' turn onstage came at the end of the hourlong broadcast. Like all the performers, he wore a Stand Up to Cancer shirt.

When the music got underway, Collins began bobbing his head and twisting his torso, with his guitar slung across his chest. At first, he stood apart from the headliners. Then, as the song went along, he gradually moved closer to his fellow performers. (Collins later said he stayed on the periphery so as not to distract from the "real" musicians singing the solos.)

Dozens of scientists whose research is funded by Stand Up to Cancer attended the event. To them, Collins was the real rock star. They swarmed around him, smiling, reaching out to shake his hand and pulling out their phones to snap pictures.

Among them was Elizabeth Blackburn, president of the American Assn. for Cancer Research and a 2009 recipient of the Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine.

"Here he is, crossing both worlds," she said, "which is what this is all about."