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How Marilyn Monroe's Vocal Coach Taught Me to Sing

The great pianist Hal Schaefer insisted I wasn't tone-deaf — and to prove it, he helped me find my voice

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*Things you do come back to you
As though they knew the way*
—from “Where or When,” by
Rogers & Hart

When I first met Hal Schaefer in 1978, he was in his early 50s, which then seemed old to me. I was barely 30. He had just moved from New York to my hometown of San Francisco with his second wife, Brenda, a singer in her late 30s. Hal was a famous jazz pianist. In his younger days, he had made his mark as a protégé of Duke Ellington, who routinely introduced him on stage by saying, “Now you’re

going to hear a *real* piano player.” But rumor had it that Hal's career was later thwarted by alcoholism, although he had been sober for many years by the time I met him.

More than a pianist, Hal was also a songwriter, arranger, composer and vocal coach. And not just any vocal coach. During the 1950s, he worked for major film studios, coaching such luminaries as Judy Garland, Jane Russell and Marilyn Monroe.

Hal met Monroe when he was hired to be her vocal coach for the musical *Gentleman Prefer Blondes*, in which she sang “Diamonds Are a Girl's Best Friend.” In the 1954 movie, *River of No Return*, Schaefer accompanied her on a honky-tonk piano as she crooned a saucy, Wild West barroom number called “I'm Gonna File My Claim.” (You can see this scene on YouTube.) “Marilyn insisted I play for her to give her confidence,” Schaefer told me. At one point in the song, she tousles his hair.

As I later learned, Hal and Monroe became lovers. In 1954 their relationship was at the center of a tabloid scandal that involved Joe DiMaggio, whom Monroe was divorcing, and DiMaggio's drinking buddy Ol' Blue Eyes. Getting on the wrong side of Sinatra probably did as much to harm Hal's career as the booze.

I was introduced to the Schaeferes by a friend, who took me to a party at their Art Deco apartment on Russian Hill. Over dinner, Hal boldly claimed that anyone could sing — that it was actually harder to sing off-key than on. “We are not born singing off-key,” he told his guests. “Little children sing on key.”

I told him I was tone-deaf. “There's no such thing as being tone-deaf,” he replied. “Distinguishing notes is simply a matter of learning how.”

"Most people can't sing because they have psychological blocks," Hal went on. "To sing, you have to put yourself out there. You can't be afraid to open your mouth. Why do you think opera started in Italy? It's because Italians are vocal. When we go to sing in front of others, we're afraid of being criticized. We tighten our throats."

I liked his theories, but didn't completely buy them. After all, I couldn't sing a note, even in the shower. Of that much I was confident.

I had always wanted to sing more than anything. The funny thing is, when I sang in my head, the song sounded pitch perfect — but when I opened my mouth, the notes came out shrill and flat. Not being able to sing had made me the odd man out. I never landed a role in my high school's annual musical, except to zip up costumes backstage. Whenever *The Star-Spangled Banner* was played at ballgames, I'd stand mute, or lip-synch the words. At concerts, I'd practically slink under my seat when a singer invited the audience to join in. I lived in constant fear that hootenannies would come back into vogue.

After Brenda served us dinner that night, we adjourned to the living room, where Hal played songs for us on his lacquered Steinway. Brenda got up and sang a song the couple had written together, about a woman in love with a married man, called "I Can't Give You Sundays."

"If only I could sing," I said afterward.

"You *can* sing," he replied. "You just don't know it. I could teach you."

Since I was a feature writer on the *San Francisco Examiner* and Hal was looking for some exposure to attract new students, we hit upon the same idea at the same time. To prove his theory that anyone could be taught to sing, he offered me a month of free vocal lessons. I agreed that if he succeeded I would write an article about my miraculous transformation (and maybe, if things went *really* well, my upcoming tour).

For the next month, I worked with Hal in his soundproof studio in the back of his apartment. Most of the songs he set out to teach me were from a Rogers & Hart songbook, which included such standards as "My Funny Valentine" and "Where or When." With their wide vocal ranges and complex intervals, these weren't easy songs to sing.

Each hourlong visit to the studio was like an exorcism of my musical phobias, starting with exercises to warm up my vocal chords and deep breathing to help me relax. Although Hal had struck me as a bit high-strung and jittery — maybe from all the black coffee he drank — he couldn't have been calmer or more patient with me during the lessons. I felt like Helen Keller to his Annie Sullivan.

As Hal played the piano, I'd stand next to him and sing each song in tiny segments: He stopped me every few words and told me to listen to the notes he was playing, then I sang them back to him. Sometimes he'd have me sing in the corner of his studio, facing the wall, so I could hear my voice better. Whenever I managed to sing a note on key and without vibrato, he'd cheer me on: "Yeah! Yeah! Yeah!"

No wonder Marilyn insisted he be there for her in *River of No Return*. Although I left each session exhausted, I was also euphoric. I was doing something I'd never thought possible. And no one was telling me to shut up.

By the time the month was over, I could actually sing a few songs in tune. But as much as I loved fulfilling my saloon singer fantasy, I wasn't delusional. I knew I'd never be the next Frank Sinatra, even if we both did sing "You Make Me Feel So Young" in the key of B-flat. Being able to carry a tune doesn't mean you have great vocal chords — those you're born with. And even then, you have to exercise them every day. But I wasn't looking for a career change. I just wanted to be able to sing along with everyone else at parties, ballgames and weddings.

It's been decades since I took those lessons, and I truly have no idea how good or bad I sound today. Probably not very good, though I think Hal's basic rules have stayed with me — like when you see a high note coming, prepare for it. "You don't strain to hit those notes," he explained. "You need air in your lungs to launch them."

After my article came out, I developed a friendship with Hal and Brenda. They even gave me a framed copy of the sheet music of "My Funny Valentine." Hal had signed it: "To my miraculous student, from *The Miracle Worker*." (It hangs in my bathroom today.) One night Brenda and I went to hear Sinatra perform, though Hal bowed out. Given their history, I could understand why.

During our friendship, Hal gave me another gift that has enriched my life. He taught me to appreciate the technical qualities that make a good singer, like lack of vibrato, and intonation, which is the ability to sing in tune. As to what makes a *great* singer, "I can't tell you," he said. "That will always be a mystery."

He made me listen closely to singers I had dismissed as square or old-fashioned: Vic Damone, Jack Jones, Mel Tormé, Steve Lawrence and Doris Day. "When her version of *It's Magic* came out in 1948, every musician in Hollywood was stunned by her voice and what she could do with it," Hal told me.

And he turned me on to jazz singers I'd never heard of — and to this day can't get enough of — like June Christy, Johnny Hartman, Anita O'Day, Joe Williams, Billy Eckstine and Carmen McRae. These artists' cool, confident styles allow them to sing even the sappiest of lyrics without sounding sentimental.

Hal gave me the confidence to interview many of my newfound singing idols, including Peggy Lee, Rosemary Clooney, Sammy Davis Jr., Mabel Mercer, Margaret Whiting and Francis Faye. Thanks to Hal, I once wrote a piece about Sinatra that sounded so informed (no, it wasn't about the scandal) that he wrote me a thank-you note, which I keep framed in my den. And he gave me the confidence to try other things that I had always been too afraid to do for fear of making a fool of myself, like taking ballroom dancing lessons — even doing the tango on the dance floor of the Rainbow Room atop Rockefeller Center.

As so often happens, you lose touch with friends who helped define part of your life — who made you a better person in ways you didn't fully appreciate then. After a few years in San Francisco, Hal and Brenda moved back to New York. I last saw them in the early 1990s, when I went to hear Hal perform at a concert hall in Long Island.

Last spring, as I was driving to my office in Minneapolis, where I now live, I had the radio tuned to KBEM 88.5 FM, our local jazz station. As I was pulling on the freeway, the DJ put on a swinging piano rendition of *Pennies From Heaven*. I had never heard it played like that before. Even though it was up-tempo, it contained dreamy, Debussy-like undertones. It was stunning. I had to order it.

When the song was over, the DJ said it was from a newly released CD called *Reflections*, by "the great Hal Schaefer." I couldn't believe it. After all these years, Hal was still hot.

When I got to work, I found the CD on the Internet and bought it. The website provided contact information, and I immediately emailed Hal to congratulate him. A few days later he replied: "Can you believe it? I'm 85 now and living in Fort Lauderdale. Brenda died 10 years ago of ovarian cancer. I still can't get over it. She was my soul mate. Your note came on the anniversary of her death. I'm so glad you like the new recording. It means a lot to me."

An interview with Hal appeared in *The New York Times* the following August, timed with the release of the movie *My Week With Marilyn*. In the article, Hal talked about teaching Monroe to sing: "I told her to buy Ella Fitzgerald's recording of Gershwin songs. And I ordered her to listen to it 100 times."

I went to see the film, which starred Michelle Williams as the iconic blond bombshell. Over the closing credits, Williams, as MM, sings a breathy, sultry solo rendition of *That Old Black Magic*. I couldn't help wincing: She was painfully out of tune. Her voice has none of the effortless joy and emotional spark of the real thing.

Like Marilyn Monroe and me, she needed Hal Schaefer at the keyboards.