

I Couldn't Carry a Tune. Here's How I Finally Learned to Sing

I developed a fantastic singing voice—and gained some confidence along the way.

By **Laura Petrecca**

Updated January 19, 2018



CREDIT: EUGENIO MARONGIU/GETTY IMAGES

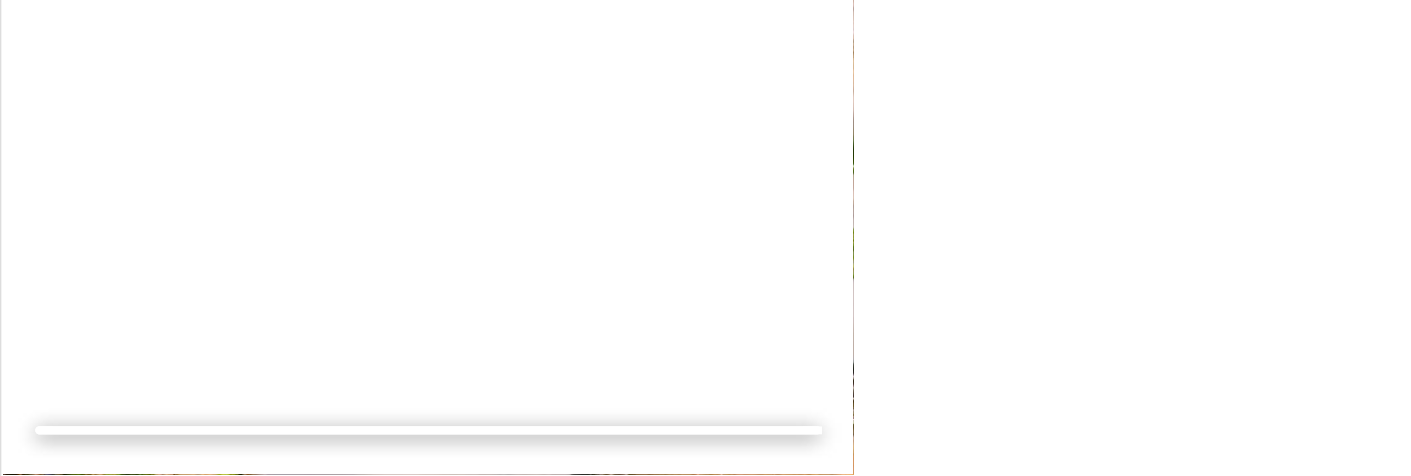
While carting a load of freshly dried sheets out of my apartment building's laundry room one afternoon, I spotted a yellow flyer on the bulletin board. "Anyone Can Sing," it proclaimed.

"Wrong," I thought, as I stepped in for a closer look. That paper, pinned among ads for used Ikea shelving and dog-walking services, promised that vocal coaching could transform even the worst singer into a capable crooner.

I had my doubts. I come from a family of notoriously bad singers. Over the last four decades, I've endured hundreds of ear-piercing versions of "Happy Birthday." During the few times I dared to sing in public—beginning with elementary school music class and ending with a sorority songfest—I've been told that I am out of tune.

I always knew I was terrible. I can hear.

PAID CONTENT



Reynolds Kitchens® Slow Cooker Liners

Pair this Salsa Verde Chicken Recipe with Reynolds Kitchens® Slow Cooker Liners to get ahead of dinner AND cleanup – No Mess, No Stress.

From Reynolds®

Yet, here was assurance that I could improve, and despite all indications otherwise, I wanted to believe in singing salvation. I yearned to belt out Billy Joel's "Piano Man" when it came on the radio during car rides with friends, to join in when my boyfriend's boisterous family sang carols during holiday gatherings.

I ripped off the tab with the instructor's phone number and placed that shred of hope in my kitchen drawer, where it remained untouched. I was too scared to call.

Months later, my mother asked what I wanted for Christmas. I revealed my hidden desire and requested lessons from the "Anyone Can Sing" instructor. After a moment of stunned silence, she said matter-of-factly: "It's a waste of money. Our family can't sing. We should go shopping instead."

I tucked away my songstress dreams and ended up with three new dresses.

A year later, hope arrived again, in a small box that held a certificate for a class called "Everybody Can Sing." It was a surprise gift from my musically-inclined beau, who knew of my vocal aspirations. I was still fearful and skeptical, but in early January, I joined 12 others in a bright basement classroom with an evangelistic instructor who assured us that our voices would indeed improve.

First, she had us stretch. Then we hummed and flapped our lips to make exaggerated motorboat noises. Throughout the class, the instructor talked of chords and octaves and other terms I didn't fully understand.

It was agony. Out came the insecure me, who would rather hide in a bathroom stall than interact with strangers in an uncomfortable situation. After the hour-and-a-half class ended, I left feeling dejected.

The following Tuesday, I wanted to skip class, but since my boyfriend had paid nearly \$200 for the six-week series, I gave it another go. That evening brought more stretching, more motorboat noises and more confusing terminology, along with some squeaky group singing. Ninety minutes felt like nine hours.

In the third session, I tried to soothe my anxiety by sitting near a woman who was visibly nervous. My type of gal. We were shepherded into groups of three, told to briefly practice any song we liked and then perform it in front of the class. Terrifying.

I talked my trio into singing the "Hokey Pokey," figuring that the arm and leg gestures would distract from my voice. Afterward, the instructor had the three of us stand shoulder to shoulder. She told us to listen—really listen—to each other's voices and to get in harmonious sync, which we were actually able to do with her coaching.

I was still uneasy, but I began to realize I could change my voice by opening my mouth in different ways. And my singing did sound better when I stood up straight as instructed. The next week, my trio performed “Itsy Bitsy Spider,” complete with hand motions. I was 10 percent less frightened than the week before.

By the fifth week, it was time for our first solos, for which we were given detailed instructions: Stretch your body, warm up your voice, read through the lyrics, hum the tune before singing it. I learned that if a song sounded good to me, it would probably sound good to others.

Practice, we were told, was the key to success. So, for the next week, I sang “Let it Be” over and over and over again—in the shower, walking to work, up the escalator, down the escalator, walking home from work. I hummed the song. I sang along with Beatles videos on YouTube. Each night, my boyfriend played “Let It Be” on his keyboards while I joined in.

The evening before the fifth class, two hours into practicing, the coaching from the instructor and my boyfriend converged, and in a eureka moment, I realized that my singing voice was an instrument that I could control. Fueled with excitement, I jumped up from the couch and proclaimed that this was something like a present day version of Helen Keller understanding Anne Sullivan’s teachings. My boyfriend assured me that my singing progress was admirable, but nowhere near the scale of Helen Keller’s success. Still, I felt empowered.

On performance day, I sang “Let it Be” during the entire 20-minute taxi ride to class. I wanted some extra practice and figured my chance of ever seeing that cabbie again was slim.

Down in the basement, the instructor said she was thrilled that all 13 students turned up, noting that solo night often had no-shows. She asked us to make a circle, and we shuffled around to face one another. My heart thundered. We needed a volunteer to kick things off, and a slim blonde woman obliged. She took half a step forward and began to sing “Hallelujah” by Leonard Cohen. Her voice was velvety and angelic—where mine had always felt tinny and tuneless.

I was intimidated. I became weak and woozy, with wooshing noises in my head joining the thumping in my chest. I hadn’t heard the others sing solo before, and I

realized that some—maybe most—might be in class to enhance an already-good voice. Other students performed, all better than I had expected. My angst grew.

Only a few non-singers remained. I would have to do this soon if I was going to do it at all. I straightened my posture and took a step forward.

Then I sang.

My voice was smooth and sweet. Not quite Adele, but wonderfully melodious. I felt like an Olympic diver who'd nailed much-practiced pikes and tucks to win gold. Sure, I was the same person who slinked back down the high-dive steps as a kid, too afraid to jump. But this time, I leapt.

And I realized: You don't have to be who you've always been. Bad singer, unhealthy eater, people pleaser—all that can change. It takes work, and yes, some courage, to become the new-and-improved you, but it is attainable. If I could learn to sing, then almost anything was possible.

After class, I headed to a nearby wine bar. Earlier in the day, I had asked my boyfriend to meet me there. I knew a botched solo would be a prime opportunity to berate myself, so I wanted to debrief in a soothing setting. As I approached his table, he asked about my performance.

“Fantastic!” I gushed. His eyes widened. I was surprised he was surprised. Hadn't he heard my voice improve and recognized my potential?

I asked him why he was so shocked, and he quickly clarified. It wasn't my singing success that took him aback—it was my confidence. In our nearly six years together, he had never heard me report on any accomplishment without first listing all the things I could have done better. Yet here I was, proud.

I sat down, ordered a celebratory Sauvignon Blanc and began to plan my next solo. Perhaps I'd take on “Hey Jude” or “Hotel California.” Maybe I'd organize a karaoke outing with friends. The possibilities were endless. I was now a singer.

Laura Petrecca is New York City bureau chief and senior editor of special projects at USA TODAY.