

Marvin Hamlisch



Showstoppers! The Music of Marvin Hamlisch

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by [Alix Cohen](#) on [Playing Around](#)

*A Benefit to Support the Singers Forum's AEA Scholarship Program (Actors Equity Association)**



Marvin Hamlisch

Imagine being a young actor/vocalist striving towards one's first break or one who started singing in her 60s in order to get a role, any role, in a community theater musical, being given the opportunity to participate in a show with Tony winners. Imagine the pleasure of generous, seasoned performers watching newcomers spread their wings on a professional stage, recognizing courage, admiring burgeoning talent. And the pride of performer/ teachers who have chosen to commit their skills to a non-profit environment rather than charge sizeable, private fees. Imagine these, stir in a thoroughly entertained audience, and you'll have a pretty fair impression of the crosscurrent of feelings inspired by *Showstoppers! The Music of Marvin Hamlisch*.



Marvin Hamlisch died on August 6. Valerie Lemon, who traveled with Hamlisch for 12 years as his principal vocalist, opens this evening holding his photo, singing "They're Playing Our Song." Treatment is balladic. We're reminded that the honoree was one of only two composers to win an Emmy, Grammy, Oscar and Tony in addition to a Pulitzer Prize. Familiar and eclectic selections from theater, film and concert hall are presented showing Hamlisch's extraordinary range.

Chorus Line, perhaps his best known theatrical effort, "a metaphor for life and putting yourself on the line," is first represented by the haunting "At the Ballet." Sentiments are clearly conveyed by Sonja Stuart, Raissa Katona Bennett, and Valerie Lemon who understand. Later in the program, we hear "Nothing" from Robin Westle who makes comic use of frustration, and a gleeful "Dance Ten, Looks Three" from an adorable Elise Holman who works it with the best of them.

Next come two songs from the undeservedly ill fated *Smile* and two from *The Goodbye Girl*. Lemon is completely winning in two portrayals. Really, one can visualize the scene, sets, ancillary characters and all. I find myself empathetically wincing with her pain in "A Beat Behind."

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Eva Kantor, whom I had the pleasure of seeing compete in this year's Metropolitan Room Metrostar competition, then performs "Disneyland." This young woman has the goods. Not only does Kantor communicate but she makes the most difficult musical transitions seem easy. Gillett's "My Rules" personifies the wet, tired, pissed off Elliot Garfield to a T.

Raissa Katona Bennett's full, sob-shaded voice covers the velvety theme from *The Mirror Has Two Faces*. Nina Hennessey expends the lightest touch to "Dreamers" from the unproduced *Jean* (Seberg). "That's the first time I've every sung that song without Marvin at the piano," she tells us quietly. ...'cause to dreamers, the real world can be unreal.



"Here's a show I bet you didn't think you would hear any numbers from tonight," turns out to be the lead in to a musical centered on the feud between authors Mary McCarthy and Lillian Hellman! The Sorrentino Sisters (Niki and Victoria Sorrentino) sing the title song "Imaginary Friend" with high spirits and excellent harmony, after which Melanie Vaughan, the first person to sing the song for Hamlisch, performs "Smart Women." Vaughan brings gravitas to the number as if her character had fully considered its what she's "saying." Bernard Dotson, who was in the Broadway production, offers songs from *The Sweet Smell of Success* with great verve and jazzy, rhythmic emphasis. Benjamin J. McHugh's melting tenor defines a perfectly beautiful rendition of "I Cannot Hear the City."

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Erin Wegner Brooks (a star in the making) gives us a sizzling, sophisticated “Rita’s Tune” imbued with character and musicality. The engaging, young actress has preternatural presence and spot-on control. Marieann Meringolo takes possession of “A Different World” as if staking a claim, yet pensively as the lyric merits. Gillett joins in, creating rich texture.

A member of the original cast of *Success*, Gillett then delivers this evening’s showstopper: a pull-out-all-the-stops interpretation of “At the Fountain.” It’s an extraordinary song; a long, mercurial soliloquy requiring not only notable musical talent but stellar acting ability. The artist is gutsy, desperate, and galvanizing. His impressive baritone fills the room and then some without a single raw edge.



They’re Playing Our Song, the vehicle based on Hamlisch’s relationship with Carole Bayer Sager, is showcased by such as “Falling” performed by the now smoooooth Bernard Dotson, an enchanting reverie by Wegner Brooks, and a wistful, resonant version of “If He Really Knew Me” by Tony-winning Cady Huffman (Ulla in *The Producers*) exhibiting wonderful openness.

The only two songs not by Hamlisch are presented by students whose stories illustrate the nurturing effectiveness of Singers Forum. Asami Tsuzuki quips she’s grateful for no longer being restricted to performing *The King and I* (a cultural reference) and that a family tape of her singing at 1 ½ years old is now realized. Maxine Gelfand, with whom I began this piece, went from not even getting a part to securing leads at her local theater. Gelfand might be the surprise of the evening offering a completely professional number in fine voice and with well plumbed feeling.

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“This is a remarkable night. One of Marvin’s strongest passions was education in the arts,” his gracious and visibly moved widow, Terre Hamlisch, tells the audience. “To continue to sing his music from the depths of your souls will keep Marvin alive. He lives on in all of you.”

“Oh, I’m Verklempt,” exclaims Valerie Lemon, whereupon she leads both audience and performers standing up among us – in a moving reprise of “What I Did for Love.” My guess is Hamlisch would’ve loved it.

** The AEA Scholarship Program at Singers Forum provides subsidized vocal technique lessons to qualified and worthy applicants who are also members of Actors Equity Association. Its goal is to create a program that will allow training to those most in need of, but least likely to be able to afford it. Currently 60 such scholarships are available.*

[Singers Forum](#)

Photos (except opening) by Maryann Lopinto

- 1. Eric Michael Gillett, Sonja Stewart, Raissa Bennett, Valerie Lemon*
- 2. Eva Kantor, Raissa Katona Bennett, Nina Hennessey, Melanie Vaughan*
- 3. The Sorrentino Sisters: Niki and Victoria Sorrentino, Bernard Dotson, Eric Michael Gillett*
- 4. Ben High, Erin Wegner Brooks, Marieann Meringolo, Robin Westle*
- 5. Elise Holman, Cady Huffman, Asami Tsuzuki, Maxine Gelfand*
- 6. Terre Hamlisch*

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A Benefit to Support the Singers Forum’s AEA Scholarship Program

Directed by Eric Michael Gillett

Hosted by Valerie Lemon and Eric Michael Gillett

With Musical Accompaniment by Don Rebec and Jeff Cubeta

Special Guest Terre Hamlisch

With Thanks to The Laurie Beechman Theater

407 West 42nd Street in The Westbank Café

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