

*From Cab Driver to
Carnegie Hall*

DAVID SINGER



PALMETTO
P U B L I S H I N G
Charleston, SC
www.PalmettoPublishing.com

Copyright © 2024 by David Singer

All rights reserved

No portion of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system,
or transmitted in any form by any means—electronic, mechanical,
photocopy, recording, or other—except for brief quotations in printed
reviews, without prior permission of the author.

Hardcover ISBN: 979-8-8229-3521-1

Paperback ISBN: 979-8-8229-3522-8

eBook ISBN: 979-8-8229-3523-5

Dedications

Barb, Thank you for your love, support, patience, for your insightful suggestions and for lifting my spirits when I get discouraged. You are my number 1 collaborator. I am not sure I could have written this memoir without you.

Deborah, you are my oldest and most cherished friend. Thank you for always standing by me through good times and bad. I am proud of your fifty-plus years as a professional violinist. You are seemingly selfless and giving and I am so grateful you are my sister.

Laura, I am so very proud to be your dad. You changed my life for the better when you came into this world. I learned that there was someone more important than myself. You have a special zest for life which is infectious, in a good way. What a great editor you are!

Lisa Febre, how lucky that I happened to ask Rhondda Dayton about a recommendation for an editor. You are an inspiration in more ways than you know. Thank you for being such a great teacher, for sharing your talent and for your *joie de vivre*!

A special THANK YOU to all who read and advised me through this entire process. I bet you are all tired of hearing me talk so much about myself. Soon, I will come back to earth and begin being a better friend to each of you.

Last but not least, I want to thank Sophia, Katie and the other highly skilled editors and artists at Palmetto Publishing. You provided this first-time writer tremendous support and guidance through the many steps of publishing and releasing my story. I can't imagine more professional, highly skilled, good natured and patient partners than you.

Table of Contents

Introductionxi
1 Orange Groves, Fruit-Stained Shirts, and under the Covers with Vin Scully and the Dodgers	1
2 Family Dynamics	8
3 One Magical Year: Sitting in the Vienna Philharmonic Next to My Teacher, Rudolf Jettel	21
4 Music Academy of the West: A Profound Experience and a Youthful Mistake	49
5 The Curtis Institute of Music, Undergraduate Years 1967–1971	59
6 Going to Europe on a Half-Bright	94
7 Back in the United States	131
8 Curtis Institute, Advanced Studies in Chamber Music 1974–1975	138
9 Marlboro Music Festival	150
Photo Album	
10 My New Family/Driving a Taxi	176
11 Metropolitan Museum of Art Recital Debut and Leonard Bernstein	187
12 The Orpheus Chamber Orchestra	193
13 Bartók’s Contrasts with Yehudi Menuhin in Carnegie Hall	225
14 Laura’s First Steps and a Move I Was Not Looking Forward To	232
15 Back in NYC with Laura	249
16 Montclair State University	259
17 Brief Encounters with Other Great Musicians	275
18 Being Alone	282
19 Going Home	286
20 My Life Today	289
About the Author	307

If you cannot teach me to fly, teach me to sing.

—Sir James Barrie, *Peter Pan*

Introduction

How did this all happen?

How did this all happen? *The New York Times* wrote, “David Singer is an extraordinary clarinetist...to describe his playing would be to enumerate a catalogue of virtues” (Joseph Horowitz, *The New York Times*, December 16, 1980).

I have enjoyed an exciting and perhaps even eventful career, having performed and recorded with a virtual who’s-who of musicians at the Marlboro Music Festival, around the world as a principal member of the Grammy Award-winning Orpheus Chamber Orchestra, and with other esteemed colleagues including Yehudi Menuhin and Rudolf Serkin. My early experiences with music began in Vienna, sitting with and surrounded by the world-famous Vienna Philharmonic as a twelve-year-old, turning pages for my teacher during opera performances.

I was also a cab driver, a welding rod salesman, and I sold telephone rests on the streets of New York City. My debut memoir, *From Cab Driver to Carnegie Hall*, provides a panorama of life from the late 1950s in Southern California to Philadelphia; New York City; Vienna; and Bnei Brak, Israel; and the opportunities to get to know many of the greatest musicians of the twentieth century, perhaps in a slightly more personal way than hearing them perform or reading their reviews.

You will also get to know Rudolf Jettel, my musical father, who was suspended as a clarinetist from the Vienna Philharmonic in the 1940s for helping Jews escape the Holocaust.

Today, December 6, 2023, a plaque hangs in the Vienna Philharmonic Museum in Vienna, honoring Rudolf Jettel for his heroism saving the lives of many Jews from the Nazis during the 1940s.

I invite you on this journey with me, through my challenges, disappointments, accolades, joy, thrills, and finally satisfaction of my success.

CHAPTER ONE

Orange Groves, Fruit-Stained Shirts, and under the Covers with Vin Scully and the Dodgers

Late 1950s

In the shadow of the Santa Monica Mountains sat the little town on the outskirts of Los Angeles where I grew up. Canoga Park was known for midnight high school car races, Bob's Big Boy hamburgers, and not much else. Sometimes late at night, if the wind was blowing just right, I could hear a train in the distance. The rattling of the tracks and the whistle blowing were all the train offered us. No stopping in my town. I used to dream about being on that train. Where was it going? Would I ever go anywhere?

In the late 1950s, the northwest side of the San Fernando Valley was still dotted with fertile orchards surrounded by dry, flat, dusty plains. Enormous orange groves and full, lush pomegranate orchards had not yet been replaced by the suburban sprawl that now dominates the valley. The long walk to Sunny Brae Elementary School took me through a field of fruits and vegetables, lying exposed and ripening in the California sun. The temptation was too much for my friends and me to resist. Our detour through the fields always led to us

2 *From Cab Driver to Carnegie Hall*

throwing fruit at each other. One particularly fond memory I have is engaging in a one-on-one laughing and fruit-flinging fest with my friend Bruce Teague—normally a sweet, kind boy—who, it turns out, also loved letting loose, engaging in the hilarious and spirited contest to see who could make the other more drenched with the fruit splashing on our shirts. The playful fights would leave our clothes stained and our hands sticky throughout the school day. Later, my mother would shake her head patiently as I explained why my shirt was splotted with red and orange. More than once, she would remind me of how she had just washed my clothes that morning.

Like every other middle-class home in the valley, our yard had the same tall, sun-bleached wooden fence holding us in. Between the nearly identical houses were vast open spaces, wide fields of dirt marked by thick clouds of dust hanging in the air above. Early in the morning, as I walked to school, it was the fog that surrounded me. I used to have fun walking straight into the heart of one of those open fields, the fog so dense in the center that when I stopped and turned completely around, I could not see more than a few feet on any side of me, front or back. This must be how it felt to stand in a cloud.

My first love was a mutt of mysterious breeds whom we plucked from the pound when I was six years old. I loved her with all the love a little boy could muster. We called her

DeeDee because that was the only thing my one-year-old sister, Deborah, could say at the time. At night, DeeDee stayed in our backyard in her doghouse, under the clothesline behind my swing set. I hated knowing she was out in the yard alone. Many nights, after my parents went to sleep, I would open my bedroom window and whisper into the dark, “DeeDee...DeeDee...” From the dark yard, the eager little dog would come running to my window, tongue out, and jump into my arms. Quietly, so no one would hear, I lifted her up into my room. In the morning, my parents were surprised to find I was not alone. DeeDee would come bounding out of my bedroom. We all had a good laugh, and I was thankful they never stopped me from doing this.

I was a twelve-year-old boy mostly interested in baseball and girls, though not necessarily in that order. The kids in the neighborhood played touch football in the middle of Wyandotte Street, where I lived. The rules of touch football dictated that we could only stop the opposing player with the football from advancing down the field by “touching” them below the belt. We boys took the “touch” part of the game very seriously, and not just because we were playing on pavement and didn’t want to lose skin. Julie, an older girl in our neighborhood, was a running back for the other team, and I was very thankful to be on the opposite side. It was my job, when she was running with the ball trying to score a touchdown, to touch her with both hands. With

every tackle, I was very much aware of her shape, even at twelve years old. I wondered if others were thinking the same thing.

Summer nights were spent in bed under the covers listening to Vin Scully, the legendary Hall of Fame voice of the Dodgers, speaking to me through my transistor radio. The trick was keeping the radio as quiet as possible so my parents didn't hear. Vin's descriptions of the ballpark were as interesting to me as his game calls. Which way were the flags streaming from the wind blowing that night at Dodger Stadium? Were they blowing in toward home plate or out toward those gorgeous mountains? Would the direction of the wind help the pitchers or the hitters? Was the outfield grass wet and slippery? Was our nemesis, Willie Mays, fidgeting on the bench, just waiting to hit and once again do damage to my beloved Dodgers? In Candlestick Park, San Francisco, the groundskeepers would make the infield almost muddy to prevent Maury Wills and the other speedy Dodgers from stealing bases. Since the Dodgers were a running team, Vinny would discuss the condition of the dirt each evening wherever the Dodgers were playing. In Dodger Stadium the dirt between the base paths was kept as dry as the desert so the fast runners would get great traction digging in their spikes just before another opportunity to propel themselves to the next base in their quest around the diamond to ultimately come home. Vinny's voice would rise in a crescendo

at the same rate as the unseen ball rising into the sky above the outfield wall. Vin had a way of magically making the game appear in the darkness under my covers around me. He had been my buddy since 1958, when the Dodgers moved to Los Angeles from Brooklyn, breaking the hearts of many in New York. But I won the lottery as a nine-year-old boy growing up in LA.

Baseball was my obsession. I spent my days running, hitting, catching, pitching, and chasing the ball from morning to night. My love of the game was obvious to my family, and they encouraged me to play. My Uncle Norm could throw the ball so high that I would lose it in the sky.

My dad signed me up for Little League and was often the game announcer. During one of the games, I hit a home run. He was so excited that he forgot himself and yelled through the loudspeaker, "That's my boy!"

While in middle school, I played in the Senior League, becoming a local hotshot of sorts. I was a pitcher on the All-Star team and occasionally played the outfield. By the time I graduated, I had reached such a high level with the game that I was invited to a camp run by the Baltimore Orioles.

That season, though, it was becoming clear that my future as a ballplayer was on the line. Late in a game, I was up to bat. The bases were loaded with two outs in the final inning. We needed a run, yet I was full of dread. Later in the game, standing in the outfield, I prayed that the ball would

not be hit to me. Confused and disheartened, I talked to my father about how I had been feeling.

“It’s clear this game is not for you,” he said, recognizing immediately the flaw in my game.

Luckily, I had an offer to attend the Music Academy of the West in Santa Barbara on a full scholarship. What had at first seemed like a difficult choice—to choose between baseball and the clarinet—was now revealing itself to be obvious.

Like the beginning of any good story, I started playing the clarinet because of a girl. I was in the third grade and desperate to get Amarie to notice me. I decided the sure way to do that would be to audition for the talent show. She was trying out, too, and I figured this would be my chance to get close to her.

“How are you going to play music if you don’t know how to play an instrument?” my father pointed out when I told him of my plan to audition. He decided that he would help me. He was the band director of a local high school, so he brought home different instruments for me to try. The cello had a nice sound, but I had a very difficult time coordinating the bow and my finger to play on the same string. Buzzing my lips was also not something I was good at—I was just spitting through the trumpet. When I tried the clarinet, though, everything fell into place—hands in a very natural position in front of me while blowing into this tube of wood, and the feel of the reed vibrating against my lip. It just felt right.