

Hal Shaper, songwriter, 72

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Thanks to a loyal reader for this one - Ed.

Hal Shaper

Prolific songwriter of pop hits for Sinatra, Streisand and Elvis

Michael Freedland
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The Guardian

Hal Shaper, who has died aged 72, might well have been a typical product of New York's Tin Pan Alley. He was the outstandingly successful son of immigrants; he wrote the words of pop songs and film music that were constantly played on both sides of the Atlantic; and he was able to tailor his work for such stars as Frank Sinatra, Elvis Presley and Barbra Streisand.

What was more, he produced hits in an age dominated by rock'n'roll and groups, such as the Beatles, who largely performed their own work. And, like many other songwriters whose work was taken up by Hollywood and Broadway, he inspired and helped other tunesmiths and performers by running his own publishing outfit.

The difference was that Shaper worked out of London's Denmark Street, not Manhattan's Brill Building - though that did not stop the likes of Sinatra, Presley, Lena Horne and Bobby Darin from joining the home-grown Matt Monro in recording his lyrics for *Softly, As I Leave You* (1962), and dozens more songs in the following years.

Just before Bing Crosby died in 1977, he made the last of thousands of recordings - Shaper's *At My Time Of Life*. At the writer's own time of life, he was still writing songs for people as diverse as Julie Andrews and Kermit the Frog. Indeed, it was for them that he wrote the words for *When You Were A Tadpole*.

Shaper was born in the now fashionable South African seaside town of Muizenberg, not far from Cape Town. He was the youngest of three children of Jewish immigrants, with a Polish mother from the Lodz ghetto, and a father born in Manchester. Shaper's daughter Hollie describes the family as typical of their generation; they lived in a close-knit community, where almost every family aspired to work hard and educate their children.

From his teenage years, Shaper wanted to be a songwriter, an ambition that dated from seeing *Words And Music*, the Mickey Rooney movie based on the careers of Richard Rodgers and Lorenz Hart. He was also inspired by living close to what he thought was the best beach in the world, and his first attempts at musical theatre were mounted locally. But, possibly because of that parental influence, he did not go into professional songwriting straight away.

In 1955, he qualified as a lawyer in Cape Town, and promptly left for London. He had no plans to qualify for the bar; it was going to be songwriting or nothing. He had a return ticket home, but pride and necessity persuaded him to cash it in for food and digs. He also washed dishes at the Troubadour restaurant in Earls Court. Finally, Shaper persuaded the Denmark Street publisher Dave Toff to employ him as a song plugger, taking material round to artists and

bands in the hope of persuading them to perform the work, and visiting the few record presenters then on the BBC Light Programme or Radio Luxembourg. From Toff, he moved to the more prestigious Robbins Music, where, under the guidance of Alan Holmes and Joy Connock, he began his writing career.

Softly, As I Leave You, an English title and lyric to an Italian melody, was the first to hit it big, after Matt Monro took it up. Shirley Bassey and the American stars followed almost immediately, recording the song both as singles and album tracks.

It made them all a lot of money - not least Shaper, who became sufficiently financially secure to form his own publishing company, just as the big American songwriters Rodgers and Hammerstein and Frank Loesser had done. Shaper's Sparta Music was an instant success, fostering the careers of performers like the Moody Blues and David Bowie.

Shaper was not averse to putting out material that he would never have dreamed of writing himself. Sparta had a reggae catalogue, which published such hits as Desmond Dekker's *The Israelites* and the Paragons' *The Tide Is High*. Twelve years after its original launch, this became a hit for Blondie in 1980, and then for Atomic Kitten last year.

Business success did not mean that Shaper relaxed his lyric writing. For Streisand he wrote *Martina*, for Petula Clark he turned out *My Friend The Sea*, and there was *The Years Of My Youth* for Jack Jones and *The Mysterious People* for Val Doonican. With the French star Richard Anthony, he co-wrote *Mon Amour*, basing it on Rodrigo's *Concierto de Aranjuez*.

There are about 60 Shaper recordings written originally for films, including *Papillon*, *The Boys From Brazil*, *First Blood* and *The Go Between*. He won the Ivor Novello award three times. In the 1990s, he moved back to South Africa, where he wrote *La Bohème Noire*, a setting of the *La Bohème* story in late 20th-century Soweto.

He is survived by his first wife Susan, to whom he was married from 1972 until 1989, their daughter Hollie, his second wife Pippa, whom he married in 1990, and their children Jack, Pia and Harry. Another daughter, Lucy, predeceased him.

**Hal Shaper, songwriter and music publisher, born 10 July 1931;
Died 8 January 2004.**

THE TEN TAP DANCING RABBIS FROM MINSK

words and music by
HAL SHAPER

written for and first performed at the
2004 Leah Todres Annual Yiddish Song Festival
L'CHAIM – SONGS TO LIFE

Scored in collaboration with Fay Singer & Matthew Reid

The world premiere of The Ten Tap Dancing Rabbis From Minsk on 22 August 2004 at the Baxter Theatre, Cape Town was performed by Barry Braun, Sam Chait, David Gordon, Richard Gore, Maurice Katz, Larry Mallach, Gavin Marsden, Mompie Saven, David Shapiro, David Swil and staged by Irma Kesler.

We all were born in Russia
I'm Mischa, I'm Sasha,
I'm Bendel, I'm Morris,
I'm Yitzakh, I'm Gabe
And two of us are Abe.

So you can hardly blame us,
If we're proud of being famous
As the ten tap dancing Rabbis, from Minsk!

Hey! Gezatske, Hi! Gezatske,
Ho! Gezatske, Hee!
Hey! Gezatske, Hi! Gezatske,
Ho! Gezatske, Hee!

When they required some choirboys,
To fill in at school,
On the way we learnt to lay
Tifillin in Shul.
We Read the Torah,
Learned the Horah
And we danced it with them
Our piano teacher - Gershwin - said
We all had RHYTHM!

We all were born in Russia
I'm Mischa, I'm Sasha,
I'm.....
As the ten tap dancing rabbis, from Minsk!

And once we got the make-up on,
We all shouted "OY!"
A Kosher Moisher, expialidocious
surge of joy,
We cut out Latkes,
Got new Gatkes,
And once we hit the board - way,
T'was goodbye Soviet Unionski
And, Hello BROADWAY!

We all were born in Russia,
He's Mischa, He's Sasha,
He's Bendel, He's Boris,
Oy gevalt and tsores!
I'm Yitzhak, He's Gabe
And two of us are Abe.

So you can hardly blame us,
If we're proud of being famous
As the ten tap dancing Rabbis
From Minsk, NISHT PINKST!

Ostrovnia, Cherchovnia,
Petrovnia, Dubrovnia,
Ichikov and Michikov
And Hertzo Govenichikov.
We find we're at the station
'cause we gonna take vacation
from the ten tap dancing Rabbis,
The ten tap dancing Rabbis,
The ten tap dancing Rabbis from Minsk!

Words written in December 2003 and completed 2 January 2004. Musical score completed in collaboration with Fay Singer and Matthew Reid on 7 January 2004. Hal Shaper's handwritten lyrics, notes and instructions for staging given to Philip Todres. Hal Shaper passed away on 8 January 2004.

HAL SHAPER 1931 - 2004

The Show Is Not Over Until I've Finished My Song

"Listen, are you still doing the Yiddish Song Festival?" Hal was already bed ridden, when he called me in early December. When I said off course, he replied that he had a great idea for a song, if I was "interested". That was the sort of offer one could hardly refuse was the gist of my reply.

After a couple of visits and several hilarious phone calls, he rang me on 16 December to say he had "a show stopper". But he was not going to reveal anything to me, even though I was his "favourite producer" (our private joke). He first needed to work on the arrangement with Fay Singer and Matthew Reid. Fay Singer is a specialist in Jewish music and Matthew, a classical clarinettist, is the leader of the Simcha Klezmer Band. They are the Musical Directors of the annual Yiddish Song Festival.

When I went over to discuss the song, it was quite apparent that this project was really driving Hal and giving him a purpose. He became positively my 'old pal Hal' again when he quipped and parried around the subject. He might have had to admit that he wasn't up to writing the score, but he gave me his detailed hand written production notes and was able to tell me quite clearly what he intended and what he hoped to achieve with Fay and Matthew's collaboration.

Fay Singer came to see Hal with me on Friday 2 January, after I had seen him on the first day of 2004 and he had still been able to sit in a wheel chair on the terrace. His deterioration in health was alarming, but the spirit was intact. We arrived as he was adding his final line to the end of the last refrain – an inspired little bit of quirky nonsense, that gave it that special 'Yiddish flavour'.

Hal hummed out the opening theme. "Chopin's Death March?" queried Fay somewhat confused. Hal nodded. Later, when going through Hal's notes, we discovered that this was not the theme he intended to use. The other melody was substituted when the score was prepared and Hal confirmed this as the correct theme.

When Fay apologised for having to run through something again for clarification and remarked on her needing some time, he was gracious in his response but quipped "Fay darling, time is the one thing I can't give you".

Matthew Reid was away and the soonest he could get there was on Tuesday 6 January. When I called to check if he was up to it, Hal's voice was worryingly weak. But it was a firm "off course" to seeing Matthew.

Tuesday was not a good day. Hal was short of breath and in great discomfort. Matthew was taping everything and patiently trying to decipher some of what Hal had to say, while making detailed notes. "My mind's bugged," Hal complained, "it's all in my head, but I can't seem to get it out". Hal was getting both tired and frustrated and I suggested that Matthew should give Hal a break and try and work out the basics on the piano in the lounge. He could then record the melody and take it back for Hal to listen to.

Matthew worked away for about half an hour and then started to play the piece. And in his wheel chair, Hal appeared with his nurse. It was unbelievable to see his determination. He had heard Matthew's playing and was so delighted to hear the song coming together, that he had to be there and input into the process. He made Matthew play through the song bit by bit, making corrections, fingering notes on the piano and putting his stamp of authority to the work.

When we left, Hal was not an entirely happy man. Matthew was not a happy man – in fact he was distraught. He was really worried about being able to deliver the goods to Hal's satisfaction. We stopped by at Joan Cohen, Hal's sister, whom he had entrusted to type up the libretto. Joan now had the final version for us.

Matthew and I sat down to a coffee. I read through Hal's notes to me. I talked Matthew through what I understood was Hal's overall intent. And then Matthew went and spent many hours working with Fay, her original notes and his notes and the tape recordings.

Matthew and Fay became 'forensic musicologists' as they pieced together the clues to arrive at the body of the work.

The next morning, on Wednesday 7, Matthew and I arrived to find Hal seemingly in less discomfort. When Matthew showed him his handwritten score, his spirits lifted. He hummed through the song with Matthew, his fingers playing an imaginary keyboard. He made a few corrections, with an authoritative "no B flat" or curt "there's one too many notes". But he was now convinced that Matthew knew what was needed and obviously seriously competent. When Matthew raised a reservation about a key, he was totally comfortable in replying "you deal with that and make it work".

Matthew then went to the piano and played through the song with the changes and amendments and brought back the recording to Hal. He put on the earphones, his eyes were closed, the finger wagged, the face relaxed into a smile and he gave Matthew the thumbs up! He discussed some minor variations, and he made it clear to Matthew that he had every confidence that he'd got it right.

Hal endorsed my suggestions, based on his notes and our many talks, relating to how the song should be staged. And then added, that on the programme, we should only title the number 'Minsk'. This way, the content of the song would remain a complete surprise, until it actually burst forth at its premiere. It was Hal's uncanny sense of showmanship evident to the last.

He then had the energy to ask Matthew about his musical career. He was interested, charming and sincerely complimentary. When he shook Matthew's hand he said "you're a terrific musician and a great collaborator".

I said good bye, and we intuitively knew it was for the last time.

It had been a heart breaking process. But it had also been heart warming to see the professional and personal working relationship he was still able to forge with Fay and Matthew, and the tremendous satisfaction he achieved in having completed his final song.

My cell phone rang the next day, Thursday morning, and 'Hal' registered on the dial. But it was his sister Joan to say that Hal had died early that morning.