# A Man Who Never Wanted to Be a Star, But Who Became One Anyway...

Written by Andy Owen

The sound of modern pop music might have a thousand fathers, but its heartbeat often came from just one man.

You probably don't know him.  But you should.

His name is Hal Blaine.

Hal Blaine was a legendary drummer.  He didn't just play the drums - he played the drums on the soundtrack of an era.

From Frank Sinatra to the Beach Boys, from Simon & Garfunkel to The Byrds, his magical sticks set the rhythm of the 60's and 70's.

And yet, like so many session musicians, he was happy to stay just out of the spotlight, his genius hiding in plain sight. As Hal once joked*: "I was just a worker in a factory, putting doors on refrigerators."*

Except, his 'factory' was Capitol, RCA, Columbia and a dozen other studios in Los Angeles - and those 'refrigerators' were hit records that changed most of our lives.

Born Harold Simon Belsky in Holyoke, Massachusetts in 1929, Hal grew up poor, the son of Eastern European immigrants. His father worked menial jobs, while his mother doted on her boy.

The family eventually moved to Hartford, Connecticut - and that's where Hal found his calling.

His father sometimes took him to the local theatre, where Hal would sit wide-eyed as bands, singers and dancers lit up the stage. He was dazzled. And then came the drums.

His older sister bought him his first set, when he was 11.

He would set them up on the porch after school, hammering away while the neighbourhood kids walked home, all the while soaking up the attention.
Soon he was playing in a Catholic church drum and bugle corps – '*a young Jewish kid in a Catholic band,'* as he liked to joke - and then later in high school bands.
But, when California called, the family moved west - and Hal took his sticks with him.


In smoky bars around Los Angeles, he started to cut his teeth - alongside the likes of Glen Campbell and Leon Russell, playing for crowds that sometimes threw beer bottles instead of applause.

But there was something there.

Something in the way Hal could lock into a groove.

Even in the dingiest clubs, musicians noticed him. He was steady, inventive, professional.

n the late 1950's and early 60's, a musical revolution was starting to happen especially in Los Angeles studios.

A group of young, hungry musicians - largely sneered at by the old guard - began to dominate the sessions for a new kind of music.

They were dubbed 'The Wrecking Crew '(sometimes disparagingly at first - *"they're wrecking the business,"* said the old pros.)

**The Wrecking Crew in the Studio**

Hal was their patriarch, their heartbeat. He had a style that was crisp, inventive and - most importantly - reliable.

When a producer booked Hal, they knew they'd get the perfect take.

He played on so many classics…

- 'Mrs. Robinson' and 'Bridge Over Troubled Water' by Simon & Garfunkel.
- 'Good Vibrations' and the entirety of Pet Sounds by The Beach Boys.
- 'Strangers in the Night' by Frank Sinatra.
- 'MacArthur Park' by Richard Harris.
- 'Aquarius/Let the Sunshine In.' by The 5th Dimension

But those were just a few…

Hal Blaine was truly everywhere - an almost omnipresent force behind the scenes of 1960's and 70's pop.

Here's a curated selection beyond the usual suspects above, showing just how varied his sessions were:

'Annie's Song' – John Denver, 'By the Time I Get to Phoenix' – Glen Campbell (and also Johnny Rivers), 'Mr. Tambourine Man' – The Byrds, 'Everybody Loves Somebody' – Dean Martin, 'Help Me, Rhonda' – The Beach Boys, '(They Long to Be) Close to You' – The Carpenters, 'Annie's Song' and 'Thank God I'm a Country Boy' – John Denver, 'Love Will Keep Us Together' – Captain & Tennille, 'These Boots Are Made for Walkin' – Nancy Sinatra.

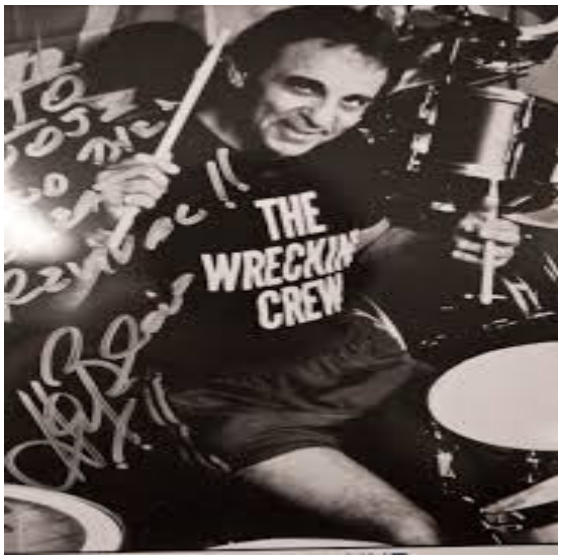
As far as artists he played with, just think of a famous name – Bobby Darin, Frank Sinatra, Elvis, Sammy Davis jnr, Doris Day, John Denver, Johnny Cash, Ray Charles, Cher, J.J. Cale, The Everly Brothers, Connie Francis, Emmylou Harris, Thelma Houston, John Lennon, The Mamas and the Papas, The Monkees, Roy Orbison, Diana Ross, Steely Dan, Ike and Tina Turner and Andy Williams.

Hal played with them all.

Truly incredible, isn't it?

Quite rightly, Hal earned some of the highest accolades in music:

*Rock & Roll Hall of Fame* (Sidemen category), 2000 - one of the inaugural inductees: *Grammy Lifetime Achievement Award, 2018* - honouring his unmatched contribution to music: *Modern Drummer Hall of Fame*, inducted in 2010*: Recording Academy Lifetime Achievement Award*, again underscoring his legendary status: *Palm Springs Walk of the Stars*, Palm Springs honoured him with a star in 2023.




As a Wrecking Crew moment of pride, Hal appeared on SIX straight Record of the Year Grammy Winners from 1966 to 1971.

This is a feat unmatched by any session artist – and something that will never be done again.

*"How could this kid from Holyoke, Massachusetts get so lucky?"* Hal mused when awarded the Recording Academy's Lifetime Achievement award - an echo of his mantra that great music was born from opportunity, not design.

Hal Blaine worked extensively with Elvis during the 1960's. He began working with him around the time of the Blue Hawaii sessions in 1961, sharing drum duties with D.J Fontana.

He supported the King, particularly on soundtrack material and during the iconic 1968 TV Special.

Among the songs he's credited to have played on: 'Return to Sender', 'Bossa Nova Baby', 'Viva Las Vegas', 'Can't Help Falling in Love', 'A Little Less Conversation.'

If you turned on the radio between 1962 and 1975, chances are, that Hal Blaine was playing. It's estimated he performed on 35,000 recordings, including 150 U.S. top ten hits and 40 number ones.

These are numbers so staggering, they almost lose meaning.

As Hal later quipped: *"They called us first call musicians, but really, we were first call survivors."*

In his early years, Hal scraped by on $35 a day. Within weeks of joining the session circuit, he was pulling in $1,000 a day.

He bought a Hollywood Hills mansion. Each year he leased a new Cadillac. For a poor boy from Holyoke, it was dizzying.

But Hal always remained grounded. He adopted a daughter with his wife. He wrote comedy albums on the side (Buh-Doom! and (Hal Blaine Strikes Again!!).


He was enormously popular and the life of every party.

His later email handle was 'HappyDrums.' That summed him up.

Even his gear became legendary. At the insistence of producer Terry Melcher, Hal developed his 'monster set' - double bass drums, multiple toms, a wall of cymbals.

It was a set-up so innovative, it reshaped drumming for the rock era. Within months, every major drum company was producing their own versions.

But like so many stories in music, the good times couldn't last forever.

By the late 1970's, the studio world changed. Record companies tightened budgets, artists insisted on playing their own instruments - and the endless stream of lucrative sessions began to dry up.

Hal, later reflecting on those production decisions, couldn't hide his frustration: *"… it's like someone took a beautiful Ferrari and beat the crap out of it with a sledgehammer."*

For most of us who grew up in the 60's, when the music changed our lives forever, every word of that rings true. Music pretty much died at that point. It has never recovered.

Around the time he made that comment, Hal's personal life started to unravel. His first wife, whom he adored, committed suicide. Left with a young daughter, he tried to rebuild. He later remarried, but the relationship turned toxic. Divorce blindsided him. To settle, he sold his mansion, his Cadillacs - even his gold records. She even made off with his carefully curated record collection.

*"Sometimes you can do everything right in life and all it takes are the actions of other people to bring pain,"* Hal reflected.

Ain't that the truth…

For a while, Hal was adrift. He took smaller gigs, played lounges, relied on commercials and jingles to survive. It was a tough time.

To survive, he lived off credit cards for 14 years. He quipped bitterly: "I went from living in a mansion to living in closets."

But he never stopped playing. Never stopped smiling. Never stopped being Hal. If there was a constant in his life, it was his friends.

Brian Wilson was one.  Their friendship started with 'Help me Rhonda' and endured across decades and included Pet Sounds.

**Hal with Brian Wilson**

Brian even once called Hal to say, "I want to go and make records like we used to make them." Hal replied with a smile: *"Great. I've been waiting to hear that."*

He adored Glen Campbell, with whom he shared those scrappy early bar gigs.

He watched Glen rise to stardom, fall to addiction - and finally find redemption with the love of his wife.

Hal was there in 2013 when Glen recorded his last song, 'I'm Not Gonna Miss You' - a heartbreaking farewell to life, as Alzheimer's claimed him.

That recording gave Hal his eighth and final Grammy.

He stayed close to fellow Wrecking Crew members like Joe Osborn and Don Randi. Their friendships anchored him through the storms. But when Glen passed in 2017 and Joe passed the year after, Hal seemed to dim.

The man who had kept time for everyone else, suddenly felt out of time himself. Hal lived his last decades modestly in Palm Desert. His house was simple, his life quieter.

He remained sharp, funny, and generous - sending handwritten birthday cards, answering fans' questions about recordings, making everyone feel important.

He wasn't on social media, but he kept in touch with friends by email and phone. Privately, though, he wrestled with loneliness.

*"Every day I get older and it's a drag. But life is life and death is death."* he admitted in one of his last interviews.

He had seen it all - friends gone, the phone no longer ringing. Still, he chose to keep his dignity. Even in his final weeks, he insisted on walking unaided in interviews, hiding any frailty. Not out of vanity, but because he didn't want to be a burden.

In an email to friends shortly before he passed, he wrote:

*"No parties or memorials when I leave the planet. I don't want or need any tears… only laughter. I was at the right place at the right time. For me, no big deal. I've had hits with so many others and it's still wonderful for the old ego. But enough is enough. I have no regrets, had it all, seen it all, done it all. When it's over, it's over."*

It's tempting to define Hal Blaine by numbers - the dizzying pile of sessions, the armfuls of hit records. But those are just statistics. What he really left behind was joy.

The joy of a perfect snare crack in 'Be My Baby.' The joy of the rolling toms in 'Good Vibrations.' The joy of a laugh, a story, a humble man who never thought himself better than anyone else.

As one friend put it: *"Being with Hal, you didn't need drugs. Hal was the drug."*

Hal Blaine died in March 2019, just shy of his 90th birthday. His passing shocked many - perhaps because we thought someone who had given us so much rhythm, would never stop.

But Hal had already made peace. He knew that even legends can only keep time for so long. When Hal passed, hundreds of legendary musicians paid tribute.

Ringo said: *"God bless Hal Blaine. Peace and love to all his family - Goodbye Hal, an incredible musician."*

Brian Wilson was heartbroken. *"I'm so sad, I don't know what to say. Hal Blaine was such a great musician and friend, that I can't put it into words. Hal taught me a lot…and he had so much to do with our success - he was the best."*

Charlie Watts said: *"Godspeed Hal. He gave us all so much." greatest drummer ever. We also laughed an awful lot."*

Jim Keltner: *"Hal was huge in my life."*

**Hal with Jim Keltner and Charlie Watts**

It’s been said that great drummers don’t just keep time. They make you ‘feel’ time.

Hal Blaine did that – not only for a generation, but for as long as music will be played.  If you close your eyes and listen carefully, you can still hear it.

The heartbeat of an era.

The quiet smile behind the beat. The sound of a man who never wanted to be a star, but who became one anyway.

Hal Blaine. The drummer who made the world dance.

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