

My mouth dropped open as [Marilyn Maye](#) came around the corner in full makeup, hair done, eyelashes in place and wearing a glamorous daytime ensemble at 1:30 in the afternoon. “How is it possible that you look so beautiful at this hour?” I stammered. She laughed, flipped her wrist at me and said, “Oh honey, if I’m not done up, I’m not out in public.” She was two performances away from winding up a 10-show run at [Feinstein’s/54 Below](#) as a special guest of the club’s co-owner, the singer, pianist and [Great American Songbook](#) advocate, [Michael Feinstein](#).

Later this month, Marilyn will open a three night solo run at [Dizzy’s Club Coca Cola](#), playing two shows each night September 16th, 17th, 18th with her killer trio: [Pianist/Conductor Tedd Firth](#), bassist [Tom Hubbard](#), and drummer [Eric Halvorson](#). Her appearances are part of the seventh annual Jazz at Lincoln Center [Coca-Cola Generations in Jazz Festival](#), running through October 2nd. Marilyn last performed at JALC in May at the annual gala, when her Fats Waller medley brought the entire room of patrons and celebrities to its feet, squealing with delight.

Marilyn is relishing the opportunity to perform material she doesn’t do too often in cabaret rooms. She mentioned just three of her song selections for the Dizzy’s gig to me – “[Something Cool](#),” “[Midnight Sun](#)” and “[Lush Life](#).” Yes, please! Is it too much to hope for “[Take Five](#)?” She’s pleased that JALC recognizes her as the jazz master that she is, and she’s a very busy master, indeed. Between club and concert appearances and the group classes and private lessons she teaches all over the country, Marilyn says it’s pretty much fly, unpack, perform, teach, pack, fly...all the time.

I pointed out to Marilyn that she’s 88. She groaned and said, “Ugh...it’s almost part of my name now! ‘Octogenarian singer, Marilyn Maye.’ I just don’t think people should use that to promote me. Who the heck is going to come out to see an 88 year old singer?” Well, apparently a whole lot of people, including [Bette Midler](#), [Chris Noth](#), [Angela Lansbury](#), [Tyne Daly](#) and youngsters like [Michael Urie](#), but I did get her point. She’s not just “good for her age,” or a novelty. What makes people pack the few nightclubs we have left in this country to see Marilyn Maye at 88?

She’s a phenomenon of nature, yes, and a phenomenal entertainer with a gorgeous voice. Her dynamics and range are enviable and her repertoire is massive and impeccable. She swings hard or gently depending on the crowd. Her patter and jokes seem completely spontaneous, and are mercifully limited. She’s a naturally hilarious person who can amuse her audience just by the structure of a medley. She occasionally does a high kick. She personifies entertainment. She’s thrilling. She was born for the job.

And that entertaining is her “job,” well, she’s more than clear about her position on that. Marilyn has been performing professionally for 78 years, since she won a contest at 9 years old to perform for 13 weeks on the radio in Topeka, Kansas. The inevitable unfolded from there. You can read Marilyn’s history on her [website](#) or in one of the many articles and reviews that have been written about her through the years. But briefly: Marilyn came up at a time [when nightclubs were a “thing”](#) and a singer earned a living wage. One of her engagements lasted 11 years, Eventually she

caught the attention of Steve Allen and then [The Tonight Show starring Johnny Carson](#), on which she appeared 76 times. There were awards and accolades (which keep coming), an exciting [nationally debuted recording](#) on RCA with arrangements by [Don Costa](#), [Manny Albam](#) and [Peter Matz](#), followed by 6 additional albums at RCA. One of her recordings, "[Too Late Now](#)" was selected for the Smithsonian Institution's permanent collection of 20th Century recordings. She appeared in major New York engagements at Copacabana, The Living Room - where she recorded her second RCA album, "The Second Of Maye" - live, The St. Regis Hotel, The Rainbow Grill and Michael's Pub.

In 1964 the [Beatles came to America](#), [Sonny and Cher](#) appeared on the scene shortly thereafter, and the whole live music world turned upside down. Major stardom eluded her, and Marilyn kept on doing her job. "I didn't, and I don't now, over-think it," explains Marilyn. "I just no longer had the national platform I'd had with Carson and [Mike Douglas](#)." She worked continually at club dates and concerts and musicals ([Follies](#), [Hello, Dolly!](#) and [Mame](#) among them), mainly up and down the middle of the country. Then in 2005, the late [Donald Smith](#) of the [Mabel Mercer Foundation](#) invited her to appear at the [New York Cabaret Convention](#) to sing the music of [Jerry Herman](#).

Boom. Well, almost. The crowd certainly didn't know what had hit them.

A year elapsed, and Marilyn was wisely invited back to the convention in 2006. [Billy Stritch](#) (who, along with Tedd Firth, is one of her two accompanists for clubs and concerts) mentioned that a new place had just opened called [Metropolitan Room](#) and maybe she could book a night there after her appearance at the convention. Marilyn said yes and wondered if anyone would come to see her. She needn't have worried. "It was like a movie," said Marilyn, "I arrived at the club and there were people lined up down the block to get in." Since then, just try to get a ticket for one of Marilyn's shows if you hesitate.

"This is a thoroughbred bounding out of the gate brandishing a mane of roman candles." - Tulis McCall, [The Front Row Center](#)

I'm moved to say this was not a comeback, because she wasn't gone, retired, or slowing down. It was more like a gift bestowed by some magnanimous musical god to a city and a genre parched for experience, flawless musicianship, generosity, economy, authenticity, glamour and showbiz.

"The standing ovations were unlike anything I've seen since the halcyon days of Lena Horne at the Waldorf." - [Rex Reed](#), [The New York Observer](#)

"It took me a year from that point in 2006, to build a New York audience," said Marilyn. "I invested in it. I would come for a minimum of 5 shows, never fewer. I made very little money and it cost me plenty. But that's what you have to do with a career. You work at it. You don't think, 'oh gosh, I'm not famous.' So *what?* You do your very best with one day, and the next day you get up and do your very best again."

Just a reminder: Marilyn was 79 years old at the time she began “investing” in a presence in New York City. It has paid off in a rabid following of fans, [tons of ink](#) and a new generation of entertainers to whom she’s been teaching her secrets in master classes and private sessions nationwide.

I ask Marilyn to imagine she’s the CEO of cabaret. What concerns about the firm’s future keep her up at night? She answers, “Well, the *name*, for one. Cabaret has such a bad name! [People have to understand what it is](#), and that goes for the performers as well as the audience. It’s live, it’s entertainment, and it’s fun and happiness. Cell phones concern me - audiences should look at and listen to the performer, not tape them or photograph them constantly at the expense of missing the live experience. As for performers, I think there are many people in it who don’t understand it’s a job and a business. Some people think of it as a self-serving occupation. The audience has paid to be entertained and have fun. It’s the performer’s job to serve them. It’s not a time to be grand and thrill to the sound of your own voice.”

Oh, Marilyn, I think we’ve seen a few of the same people.

And what secrets does she spill in her master classes and privates? “The classes have enriched my life in ways I didn’t imagine they would,” says Marilyn. “I learn new ways to communicate, and I discover how to teach what I just organically know. Some of the things I teach are practical, like [mic technique](#) or how to communicate to your musicians, and other things I can really only try to improve upon like [phrasing](#), dynamics and connecting to your audience. I just hope to develop talent and teach my students to continue to invest the time to develop what is God-given. It makes me very, very happy to work with people who love the Great American Songbook. Things that bother me are when I see a lack of training in movement, or the absence of vocal dynamics within a performance. You know - a song is never supposed to start out at its loudest, or most energetic, and stay there. The dynamic needs to travel between 1 and 10, as I explain it, throughout the song. And something that surprises me is how many people sing in the wrong keys for their voice and don’t know it. I don’t understand why their accompanist doesn’t tell them.”

I know what Marilyn has given New York City. What does NYC give Marilyn? “You get to meet your peers,” she says. “Great people come to see you, and you meet and greet afterwards. It’s fun when a famous person comes up to thank me. I get to do what I love to do, and it’s just happy, happy fun times. And I have to say again, teaching the classes has really given me gifts I didn’t expect.”

Marilyn was ready to run for her appearance on [Seth Rudetsky's](#) Sirius XM show. In closing, I ask Marilyn what she’d do if she won a \$20,000,000 lottery tonight. “Oh, I’d hire the New York Pops, rent Carnegie Hall and do my symphony concert,” she says. I’d buy an apartment in New York City, and I’d have a party! I’m a party girl.”

Rock on, Marilyn.