

By Kelly Rose Bradford  
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Up close and personal: Kelly Rose Bradford takes a singing lesson from Laura Zakian  
Photo: PHILIP HOLLIS

From [The X Factor](#) to Britain's Got Talent, SingStar to karaoke booths, everyone's suddenly a singer. Some of my closest friends sing semi-professionally, my son semi-coherently, my brother semi-brilliantly.

Then there's me: thanks to early criticism of my vocal skills I have been a life-long mimer. From mouthing Sing Hosanna through primary school assemblies, to pretending to serenade my son with Happy Birthday at his parties. There has only been one occasion in living memory where I have sung publicly, and that involved a New Year's Eve party, a bottle and a half of champagne and a barely recognisable version of 24 Hours from Tulsa.

I could not sing in public as a child and I still can't as a 37 year-old. Why? Because my parents told me, on the rare times I did sing at home, that I had an awful voice.

It sounds ridiculous but it has held me back in life: as a drama student I would not put myself forward for auditions that had any musical element; I dropped out of my amateur dramatics group when they started focusing on musicals. But worst of all, as a parent, I've never joined in anything remotely musical with my son. When he was tiny and all the other mothers were attending parent and baby singing sessions, I was skulking in a coffee shop pretending I thought them a waste of money.

Not being able — or prepared — to sing in front of others has always been a huge embarrassment to me. Finally, I decided enough was enough. I just wanted — needed — to know that I could sing in front of other people without being mocked or told to shut up. I decided to get professional help.

"Anyone can sing," singing teacher and recording artist Laura Zakian told me. "We all have the same equipment." I tell her of my parents' assertion that I was "tone deaf" and "couldn't hold a note in a bucket".

"I don't believe that anyone is tone deaf, or a-musical," she reassured me. "Some people have just got it, but you can improve anyone's voice — a lot of it comes down to vocal technique, but some of it is about letting go and losing your inhibitions — and just having

the connection with the music and your voice and getting it right.”

Getting it right, I discovered, largely comes down to breathing correctly.

Supine on a rug in Laura’s music room, I am taught the basics of breath control. Breathing in and out through my mouth and making a range of sounds from F through to Z. It is embarrassing and I am convinced I am doing it wrong, but I persevere, and eventually “get”, or “feel” the connection between my breathing and the noises coming out of my mouth.

Next, with Laura on the piano, I have to actually make a noise in tune with her playing. She notes I look “terrified”, but she does not fall off the piano stool with horror when I begin my ah ah ah ah-ing along to her scales.

I am watching her closely for reaction; needing her approval. “You have tuning issues,” she tells me, “but it’s nothing that can’t be fixed.”

Her words inspire me and give me the confidence to want to continue. We set up another lesson – one where I would actually sing.

She warns me that it’s not going to be a quick fix; if I want to learn to sing properly it is going to take a while. But after 37 years of miming, I don’t care how long it takes. My son has just had his seventh birthday, I’m kind of hoping I’ll be adept enough to at least sing Happy Birthday in front of everyone in time for his eighth.

## **WHERE TO LEARN**

[www.laurazakian.com](http://www.laurazakian.com)

Laura is a singing tutor and recording artist. She tutors at Goldsmiths and Trinity College of Music, and is an internationally acclaimed jazz performer [www.bbc.co.uk/sing/learning](http://www.bbc.co.uk/sing/learning). Comprehensive information including video tutorials on beginning to sing and tips from professionals

## **LAURA'S TOP TIPS**

- 1** Find a good, knowledgeable singing teacher
- 2** Treat singing like learning any instrument or new skill – practise, practise, practise
- 3** Have fun, whether you’re doing it as a hobby or profession; there’s no point if you don’t enjoy it