

The Heart of Los Angeles

by Joe Posnanski

The evening sky does not darken in Los Angeles in late summer so much as it dulls into lighter and lighter shades of blue. In time, the blue goes cloudy white, then gray, then very slowly fades to black; you can almost hear a director shouting: “We’re losing our light.” It is the end of summer in the City of Angels. You know this because the Dodgers are out of the pennant race. Traffic stops and starts on The 101, violently at times, car horns and squealed tires and middle fingers. The names on the exit signs along the side of highway are startlingly familiar for a stranger. Sunset Boulevard. Hollywood Boulevard. Vine Street. The Hollywood Bowl. Los Angeles is one of those few cities in the world where you can be lost and know exactly where you are at precisely the same time. And another car horn. Another tire squeal. Another middle finger.

And the voice begins to talk. The voice is talking about Charles Fuqua Manuel, Charlie for short. Yes, the voice says, Charlie comes from out of the hills of West Virginia. His father was a preacher. He was third-born in a family of 11...and not only that, he was born in the car on the way to his grandmother’s house.

“Charlie’s a wonderful story,” Vin Scully tells Los Angeles as traffic stalls on The 101, and the summer sky turns to fog. “He’s the sort of story that Mark Twain might have written.”

When Vincent Edward Scully first came to Los Angeles to broadcast Dodgers baseball games in 1958, he worried because he could not find the essence of the city. The center. The heart. He was thirty years old, and he had some clear ideas about what it took to call a baseball game. He thought it was important that the hometown baseball announcer know the hometown. So, he kept looking for this PLACE. That’s was how his mind worked then. There had to be a place. Back in New York, there was always a place.

Vin Scully heard life in New York City rhythms then – well, he had grown up in New York. He went to school in New York. He had worked with Red Barber in New York. And in New York there’s always a place, doesn’t matter if it’s Brooklyn or the Bronx, Harlem or Greenwich Village, Manhattan or Queens. There’s a place you go, where people gather, where decisions are made, where the energy pulses, where everything starts.

“In New York, for me, it was Toots Shor’s,” he says. That was the restaurant, of course, there on 51st Street between 5th and 6th Avenues but closer to 6th. That was where things were always going on, where Vin could feel the city’s vibrations, its power. He might see Joe DiMaggio sitting with Marilyn Monroe. He might catch Frank Sinatra talking a little boxing. He might catch a glimpse or Ernest Hemingway or see Jackie Gleason hold court or see Judy Garland sitting in a corner. More than anything, though, he might hear what was happening in his town, what mattered, and Vin Scully needed to know these things. He felt sure they made him a better baseball announcer.

So when Scully first came to Los Angeles with the Dodgers, he looked around town for the essence. And...he couldn’t find it. Oh there were famous places, of course, more than you could count. The Brown Derby. Musso and Frank’s. Grauman’s Chinese Theater. Places like that. And there were famous people, more of them here even than in New York. But it wasn’t the same. Los Angeles

wasn't the same. Los Angeles wasn't built around a PLACE. New York, the city, was an eight-block walk from wherever you happened to be standing, Los Angeles was a ribbon of highways. New York's jokes were about tourists looking up at skyscrapers and hotel rooms so small that when you put in your key you broke a window; Los Angeles' jokes were about smog and Humphrey Bogart. It seemed to Vin Scully, at least at first, that New York was an open city, emotions always right on the surface. And Los Angeles was tougher to figure.

"I really had trouble with that for a while," he says, and he is about to say something else, but he stops because people keep coming over to say hello. Here's a Dodgers employee who has been gone for a while ("You look beautiful, my dear.") There's Tommy Lasorda ("Vinny, my boy!"). There's the young woman who works in the press dining room bringing him coffee ("You are an angel.")

"Like I was saying, I really had trouble with that for a while," he says when things clear. "I didn't quite know what the city was about. It took me a while to figure it out."

"What did you finally figure out?"

As he is about to answer, two more people wander in to offer hugs. They apologize profusely for interrupting, but they cannot help it, they cannot let an opportunity like this go by. Vin Scully! He has been a Los Angeles icon now for more than 50 years. There are not many of the great baseball voices left, not from the old days. Ernie Harwell up in Detroit – Vin's buddy for almost sixty years – died in May. Philadelphia's Harry Kalas died a year ago April. Jack Buck's gone, Mel Allen's gone, Bob Murphy, Joe Nuxhall, Herb Carneal, Jack Brickhouse, Herb Score, all gone.

Vin Scully, who broadcast his first baseball game in 1950, is still going.

When they walk off, Scully smiles and says: "What were we talking about again?"

You probably did not know this...but more than 2,000 people have actual, official, Hollywood Stars in the Los Angeles pavement. It can be a dizzying experience, walking up and down Hollywood Blvd. and Vine Street, staring at the ground, and realizing that you haven't heard of most of these people with stars on the sidewalk.

"You know, they keep stats of everything these days," Vin Scully is saying on the radio. "But I wonder if you knew that they actually keep track of the number of bats each pitcher breaks over a season."

I walk along, listen to Vin Scully, look down at the stars. I write down some names. Charles Vidor was a Hungarian director who directed more than a dozen pictures, including Frank Sinatra in *The Joker is Wild*. Flora Finch was from England and she played in hundreds of silent films. Laraine Day played in many movies and served as a panelist on various TV shows like *What's My Line?*, but she may be best-remembered for being married to the Hall of Fame baseball manager and lovable (enough) rogue Leo Durocher. Robert Guillaume is a stage actor best known for his work on television as the character Benson Du Bois on the shows *Soap* and, later, *Benson*.

"Can you imagine them keeping a statistic like that?" Vin Scully says, and you can almost hear his eyes twinkling on the radio. "The number of broken bats! Well, I guess it does matter in today's game. And it won't surprise you to know that Roy Halladay is one of the best when it comes to

breaking bats. But his opponent tonight, Hiroki Kuroda, is no slouch when it comes to splitting lumber...”

People wander all around me, and they, too, are looking down at the Hollywood Stars, you can see their faces brighten when they recognize a name. Some people have their photo taken by the Michael Jackson star. Parents point out Shrek’s star to their children. I write down more names. There are George Burns and Gracie Allen next to each other, as they should be...

Burns: “Say good night, Gracie.”

Allen: “Good night, Gracie.”

There’s the bandleader who gave Sinatra his big break, Tommy Dorsey, and there’s Hollywood tough man George Peppard, and there’s the Hollywood star for the Monkees.

“I guess what it tells you,” Vin Scully says on the radio, “is that we might expect to see a couple of broken bats in tonight’s game.”

And there is a son pulling his father’s hand so he can point out Vin Scully’s Hollywood Star.

Vin Scully begins his stories with apologies these days. He’s reached that plateau of fame. “I’m sorry if I’m repeating myself,” he says. “I know you’ve probably already heard this,” he says. “I’ve told this many times before,” he says. It is a mark of the man’s grace that he is the one apologizing repeatedly and not the reporter who asks him precisely the same questions people have been asking for fifty years. Scully genuinely – and generously – wants to help the writer tell a good story.

“I know you’ve probably heard about the radio,” he says, and indeed I have heard it, but I ask if he will tell it again.

“When I was a little boy in New York, we had this radio that stood on four legs,” he says. “It was huge, or at least it seemed that way to me at the time. We lived in a little fifth-floor walk-up apartment then, and the radio was just about the biggest thing in there. I remember – I couldn’t have been older than 4 or 5 – I used to crawl under that radio with my pillow. There was no baseball on the radio then, but there were football games, and I remember I used to love listening even then to the crowd.”

I wait for it. Vin, I think, knows that I’m waiting for it.

“That sound of the crowd would just engulf me,” he says, and then (I’m almost mouthing the words with him now), “it was like water out of a shower head.”

Like water out of a shower head. No announcer in the history of sports has used crowd noise more musically than Scully. Can it be a coincidence? Sinatra used to say that his musical instrument was not his voice, it was the microphone. Scully uses crowd noise as his orchestra. When Henry Aaron hit his 715th home run, Scully was there, and he called the home run, and then he took off his headset, walked to the back of the room, and let people listen to the crowd cheer. Like water out of a shower head. “What could I have said that would have told the story any better?” he asks. And he pauses: “You know what? I still love listening to the sound of a crowd cheering. Don’t you? Don’t you just love that sound?”

The sleeping-under-the-radio story makes it sound like Vin Scully was destined to live this sports broadcasting life, like it was inevitable, but of course it was not inevitable. Vin Scully grew up during the Depression. He was about to turn two when Wall Street crashed in 1929. There was no television. There was little sports on radio. Sports announcer was not exactly a *job* then. He wanted it to be a job, certainly. He does remember writing an essay in school about how he wanted to be a sports announcer, but it was fantastical stuff then in the 1930s, just as the world was about to go to war. He might as well have been saying he wanted to start an Internet social network.

Still, he never stopped thinking about it. He worked hard to lose any detectible accent. He practiced his cadences. When he graduated from Fordham, he sent out more than a hundred letters to radio stations and was not surprised when he was told there were no jobs. His break came at Fenway Park, though it hardly felt like a break at the time. The legendary announcer Red Barber was also sports director at CBS Radio, and he was desperate for someone, anyone, to be at the Boston University-Maryland game (he had moved Ernie Harwell to the Notre Dame-North Carolina game). Scully had introduced himself to Barber a few months before, and his fiery red hair had left enough of an impression that Barber called up someone he knew at Fordham and said, “Who is the red-haired kid who wants to be a sports announcer?” When Red Barber called the house, Scully wasn’t home, but his mother answered and took the message. “You got a call,” she told her son excitedly, “from Red Skelton!”

Scully went to the Boston University-Maryland game, and because of a mix-up found himself broadcasting outside on the roof of Fenway Park in the freezing cold. He did not say a word about it, on the air or off. (“I was so green, I thought that was just how they did things,” he says). Instead, he did his reports, stayed on time, and Barber was impressed enough that he intended to keep Scully on as an alternate. It was only the next day, when Barber got a call from someone at Boston University apologizing for sticking their announcer on the roof in the freezing cold, that Barber realized the kid had something special. “I think he was impressed that I didn’t complain,” Vin Scully says.

“And here’s an exciting moment,” Vin Scully says on the radio. “Rod Barajas is coming to the plate.”

The familiarity of the street names in Beverly Hills – like those of the signs on The 101 – is a bit jarring. How can you know the name and shape of every street when you’ve never lived in a place? But there’s Santa Monica Boulevard – where the sun comes up and over in that Sheryl Crow song. There’s Wilshire Boulevard, which leads right to the Miracle Mile. There’s Rodeo Drive, of course, pronounced “Row-DAY-oh,” and there’s MacArthur Park, where someone left the cake out in the rain, and there, closer, to West Hollywood, is Melrose Avenue. It’s strange to be so familiar and so unfamiliar at the same time. I even know the zip code here.

“Rod Barajas grew up in Ontario and he went to high school in Santa Fe Springs,” Vin Scully is saying. “And so this is a dream come true for him. He came over from the Mets last week, but this will be his first at-bat at Dodger Stadium in a Dodgers uniform.”

Everything, all around, is famous, or at least *feels* famous. As you drive here, it can feel like you’re on television. It can feel like there’s music playing in the background. These are the most-

filmed palm trees in the world. These streets, those buildings, the hotels, the parks, the statues, they are ingrained in the mind of anyone who has spent a lot of time watching television.

“What a special moment for Rod Barajas,” Vin Scully says.

Walter O'Malley wanted Vin Scully to do just a little cheering when they got to Los Angeles. Scully loved O'Malley. When O'Malley moved the Dodgers to Los Angeles, there was a lot of pressure on him to hire local radio broadcasters, well-known Californians, voices that these new Dodgers fans could recognize. O'Malley said no. He would never even consider it. He was bringing Vin Scully with him from New York.

But...O'Malley did wonder if maybe Scully could punch up a little love for the Dodgers. That was impossible in New York. There were three teams in New York then – Yankees, Dodgers, Giants – and you wanted fans of all three teams to listen to the broadcast. But in Los Angeles, there was only the Dodgers – the first major sports team in California. And O'Malley thought it wouldn't do any harm if Scully spent just a little more radio time cheering for the Boys in Blue.

Scully thought long and hard about this. He was not opposed to it on any ethical grounds – the Dodgers paid his salary. But he had learned his craft from Red Barber, who basically invented baseball on radio. “He was hard on me at times,” Scully says. “But he did it out of love. He really was like an older brother to me or a second father.

“And he said to me, and I'll always remember it, he said: ‘You bring something to the broadcast that nobody else can bring.’ I thought, ‘Really? I bring something nobody else does? What?’ And he said, ‘You bring yourself.’ I really took that to heart.”

He told O'Malley that he thought that he should stay with the same style that he had in New York. O'Malley trusted Scully. And it turned out to be a brilliant business decision, as well as a brilliant artistic decision. It turned out that people in Los Angeles had already heard their share of minor league announcers, like the announcers for the Hollywood Stars, who cheered for the hometown team...and something about that felt minor league to them. When the Dodgers arrived, finally, Los Angeles was *major league*. And when Scully arrived, when he told stories about players and managers on **both** teams, when he expressed delight at a great play no matter which team made it...well, that felt *major league*.

They loved him from the start. Scully instantly connected in a way that no radio announcer had ever connected with a city, not even Red Barber. Los Angeles was perfect for baseball on the radio. It was so spread out, so many neighborhoods, so many cars stuck in traffic, no place to go, nothing to do but listen to the ballgame. Old Memorial Coliseum, where the Dodgers played their first four years, was vast and had bad angles for baseball-watching, so people grew accustomed to bringing their transistor radios to games. When things on the field quieted, you could hear Vin Scully's voice echoing and repeating throughout Memorial Coliseum, a radio wall of mirrors.

Scully had fun with it sometimes. One game, he noticed that it was umpire Frank Secory's birthday and, on a whim, he decided to ask the fans at the game to shout “Happy Birthday, Frank,” on his count. Only later did he realize that this could have badly backfired, that it was possible that no one would shout and he would be left looking like a fool. But it wasn't really possible. Not for Vin

Scully. The “HAPPY BIRTHDAY, FRANK!” was even louder than Scully had expected, and he found himself once again marveling at the good fortune of his life.

“I managed a game once, did you know that?” he asks me. I did know it, but I asked him to tell the story again. It was a Sunday day game, the last of the 1965 season. The Dodgers had clinched the pennant on Saturday, and there was, of course, a lot of partying on Saturday night, and things were loose for the Sunday game. Dodgers manager Walter Alston used a makeshift lineup and even put in Tommy Davis, who had not played for four months because of a fractured ankle. Davis hobbled his way out on an infield grounder.

Alston was in a grand mood, so at some point between innings he called up to the booth and told Scully, “OK, I know you’ve always wanted to be a manager... (“I never wanted to be a manager,” Scully says in parentheses as he tells the story)... Well, OK. You’re the manager. You decide what to do. But you have to say it fast.”

Well, Scully couldn’t pass up a chance like that. He told his radio audience that he was now the manager. And the way he remembers it, Ron Fairly came to the plate – Fairly was Scully’s mother’s favorite player (“He was left-handed and had red hair and that was enough for my mother,” he said). He got on base. Fairly, like the rest of the Dodgers, had some fun the night before and was probably not in the greatest condition for the game (though he drove in the Dodgers’ first run). “I hate to do this to Ron Fairly,” Scully remembered saying, “but this seems like a good time to steal a base.”

He asked the fans at the stadium to look at Fairly’s face when he saw the steal sign. And sure enough, in memory, the shock on his face was apparent. He ran on the pitch, and the ball was fouled off. He went back to first base.

“Oh boy,” Scully remembered, “Now, I really hate do to this. But I was always told if it was right the first time then you should stick with it. Sorry, Ron, but the steal sign is back on.”

Again, Fairly looked stunned. Again, the fans were thrilled beyond words. This time in memory, Fairly took off for second, the catcher could not handle the pitch, and Fairly was safe. Scully, realizing that it could not get any more perfect than that (and not wanting to embarrass the Braves) then said: “OK, Walter, I got you this far, you’re on your own now.”

It’s such a wonderful story. A review of the box score from that game, though, suggests that it isn’t exactly right. Fairly didn’t steal a base in that game. Newspaper reports from that game do mention that Walter Alston had turned over manager duties to Scully up in the radio booth, so that’s the right game. Maybe Scully is confusing Fairly with Willie Crawford, a 19-year-old rookie who did walk and steal a base. Or maybe Fairly did try to steal the base and maybe the batter hit the ball – Fairly **was** doubled off in that game on a line drive hit by Sweet Lou Johnson.

Not that the details matter too much. What matters is the joy – the joy of the moment and the joy of Vin Scully’s retelling. That’s what it is all about for Vin Scully. That’s what it has always been all about.

“How about Hiroki Kuroda?” Vin Scully is saying. His voice is on television now – he only does three innings of simulcast on television and radio these days, the rest is strictly television.

Kuroda has thrown 7 1/3 no-hit innings against the Phillies. And Scully will talk about the goose bumps he feels. He will turn 83 years old in November. And he will come back next year for his 62nd season as an announcer for the Dodgers. Why? The goose bumps.

“They always come back,” he will say with wonder in his voice.

It's funny that all those years ago, Vin Scully looked around Los Angeles for the essence. So many things have happened since then, for the city and for him. Happy things. Sad things, too. His first wife, Joan, died of an accidental overdose in 1972. His oldest son Michael died at 33 in a helicopter crash. He has found his faith tested. He has had many doubts in many lonely hotel rooms.

But those happy things – they have been there for him, too. So many moments. So many legendary calls. His final inning call of Sandy Koufax's perfect game was poetry (“On the scoreboard in right field, it is 9:46pm in the City of Angels, Los Angeles, California”). His simple words, “It gets through Buckner,” would send half of New York into hysterics and all of New England into months of mourning. His call of Kirk Gibson's home run in the 1988 World Series for the Dodgers – “She is...gone” – is perfect Scully, the way he used his voice, the way he used the crowd, the way he called a home run “she.” And then he followed it up with the classic: “In a year that has been so improbable, the impossible has happened.” He will say, like he has often said before, that he still doesn't know where that line came from. He thinks it was a gift from God.

With Scully, though, his greatness does not come from the legendary calls, the ones everyone remembers. No, they come from summer nights like tonight, under a dimming sky, when he kindly calls another baseball game.

It is 9:46pm in the City of Angels, Los Angeles, California, and traffic is stuck, and tourists mill around, and deals are being made, and deals are falling apart, and people are sleeping, and people are suffering, and actors are waiting tables, and, yes, after all this time Vin Scully did find the essence, the center, the heart of the city, even if he would never say it. The heart of Los Angeles is his voice.