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## Of Starships and Phantom Sounds

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*By Stephen O. Frazier*

*This model of the Starship Enterprise was used in the original 1960s “Star Trek” series on NBC and was donated to the National Air and Space Museum by Paramount Pictures. For more, see the [museum website](#).*

Nearly six decades ago the intrepid crew of the Starship Enterprise set out on a mission to boldly go where no man had gone before. Actor William Shatner, who played ship's leader, Captain James T. Kirk, almost abandoned “Star Trek” after standing too close to a special effects explosion on set.

For Shatner, that was the beginning of another trek: dealing with tinnitus. The condition's phantom sounds left him distraught, and years later he shared in a public service announcement for the [American Tinnitus Association](#), “There were days when I didn’t know whether I would survive, I was so tormented by the screeching in my head,” [according to ABC News](#).

He did survive and, grateful for advice he received from ATA, became a celebrity spokesperson for the nonprofit. He has also more recently [added his voice to Tinnitus Quest](#), a new patient-led nonprofit supporting tinnitus research.

Shatner joined a list of well-known figures who have shared that they have tinnitus.

[Musicians:](#) Ludwig van Beethoven, Eric Clapton, Phil Collins, Bob Dylan, Dave Grohl, Ozzy Osbourne, Pete Townshend, Barbra Streisand

[Actors:](#) Steve Martin, Gerard Butler, Halle Berry, Tony Randall, Keanu Reeves

[Historical figures:](#) Charles Darwin, Vincent van Gogh, Francisco de Goya, Martin Luther, Ronald Reagan

## A Sign of Damage to the Ear

*William Shatner at the Biohacker Expo in 2024, via Wikimedia Creative Commons*

Tinnitus is a symptom, not a condition itself, and can be an [early indication of hearing damage](#). A person with tinnitus perceives sounds without an external source. It is usually caused by loud sound exposure—a single loud event (as with Shatner) or from exposure to excessively loud music or noise over a period of time, like Ozzie Osborne.

For many, it sounds like ringing or hissing, but it can also manifest as a beeping, a pulsing sound, ocean waves, or even music or a bird chirping.

Nearly everyone will hear a sound without a source at some point in their lives, but it is usually fleeting. But [16 million people in the U.S.](#) seek medical help for tinnitus every year, and it is among the top two health conditions among military service members and veterans, along with hearing loss. Lifestyle adjustments: Barbra Streisand [reduced stress and avoided loud environments](#) to minimize the impact of her tinnitus.

### Coping Strategies

Many celebrities have spoken openly about their experiences with tinnitus and how they [manage the condition](#). Some strategies they use are:

**Sound therapy:** William Shatner found relief by listening to low, soothing sounds at a ear level, via Tinnitus Retraining Therapy, which helped his [brain treat the tinnitus as background noise](#).

**Lifestyle changes:** Barbra Streisand [reduced stress and avoided loud environments](#) to minimize the impact of her tinnitus.

**Acceptance:** Some, like Steve Martin, have learned to [accept the condition](#) and focus on other aspects of life.

William Shatner, now 94, continues to advocate for tinnitus prevention and awareness. [A participant on the online forum Tinnitus Talk reported that](#), “Years ago I remember a guy saying he approached Shatner at some type of gathering, I think for a movie, he said that he mentioned tinnitus to Shatner and Shatner sat him down to talk for about a half hour, listening to the guy's suffering from tinnitus.”

Tinnitus isn't something you can see, but for the people who live with it, it's very real, and sometimes overwhelming. Whether you're a famous actor, a musician, or just someone trying to get through the day, [finding ways to cope can make a big difference.](#)

Shatner's story shows that it's not always easy, but it is possible to keep going, find relief, and even help someone else along the way.

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*Hearing Health magazine staff writer Stephen O. Frazier was trained as a hearing loss support specialist by the Hearing Loss Association of America. He has held local, state, and national positions in HLAA and has presented on a variety of hearing loss issues to groups and organizations throughout the U.S. His advocacy work has resulted in new laws and regulations in New Mexico and elsewhere. For more, see [sofnabq.com](http://sofnabq.com) or contact him at*



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