

The Pleasures of Karaoke

I had always looked down on karaoke as a frivolity not worthy of a serious person's attention. It was a perversion of the spirit of originality, a chastening spectacle of wannabes expressing not only their infatuation with certain kinds of music—often mawkish country & western—but also their failed ambitions or their deep-seated mediocrity. Political columnist and musicologist [David Goldman](#)'s abrasive denunciation of karaoke in an article that appears to have been scrubbed and de-archived—good luck to anyone searching for it—would at one time have resonated with me. Put bluntly, karaoke was the pits, musical culture at its lowest ebb.

Until, that is, my wife and I began frequenting Dale Donnelly's [Mallorytown's Landing Trattoria](#), a local watering hole featuring a Kentucky-born, cowboy-hatted [KJ](#) affectionately known as "the Colonel." He had fought in Desert Storm; later, he met and married a woman from our area in small-town Ontario and set up shop as a karaoke impresario with an encyclopedic command of his craft. He knows every song in the book—or books, as there are four thick tomes for neophytes to choose from. The Colonel sings from time to time in the rotation—more often when the crowd is on the sparser side—to keep the pace moving, and he is a master at client interaction. One learns to appreciate the hosting sensitivity needed for the job, which helps to create the feeling of an intimate and unselfconscious gathering of epigone communicants.

Which is what initially struck me about the place, namely, the patronage of township farmers, small businessmen, trades people, clerical workers and retirees—women as well as men—who would get together on a Saturday evening in a spirit of camaraderie, taking turns behind the mic diverting one another—and themselves—with monogrammed renditions of their favorite songs, most of which they had by heart. True, an

unprepossessing singer might send one outside for a smoke—the nic-fit excuse—but offense is never given or taken. There were good nights and bad nights, but the sense of community among a small cadre of regulars was palpable. Karaoke exerts a binding influence, which has nothing to do with poaching or derivativeness. Unpretentious people singing their favorite songs, no matter how poorly, are performing an act of homage to the artists they admire.

There were anomalies, too, people who could go professional were they so inclined. One gentleman, an occasional visitor wearing a Trilby tilted at a saucy angle and waving a white scarf with a showman's aplomb, did a perfect nightclub Sinatra. ("Cock your hat—angles are attitudes," said Sinatra.) A young woman could have auditioned for Andrew Lloyd Weber. A factory worker in his late thirties or early forties would have put Jerry Lee Lewis to shame with his version of "[Great Balls of Fire](#)."

Although pitch-deafness and cracked falsettos were not uncommon, they scarcely mattered except *in extremis*. What counted were mutual enjoyment and communal tolerance as the participants performed their individual covers, giving the songs their own unique stamp and vocal idiosyncrasies. I am put in mind of an [article](#) in *ScienceDaily* about the tuneful behavior of [Australian pied butcherbirds](#) which, according to the experts, "play around with their tunes, balancing repetition and variation" and "balance their performance to keep it in the sweet spot between boredom and confusion." Sometimes the karaoke spot is sweet, sometimes not so sweet, but it's always genuine.

Ultimately, one never knows what will emerge. One of my new friends sings every song as if it were part of an extended liturgical medley, a kind of [cantus planus](#) or monophonic chant. There's an incantatory similarity in his delivery, whether he is rendering George Jones' "[I Don't Need Your Rocking Chair](#)," Hank Williams Jr.'s "[Family Tradition](#)" or

Brooks and Dunn's [Boot Scootin Boogie](#), everything considered, an astonishingly proprietary feat. Each song is definitely his own. Surprises are always in store. In a karaoke contest (including a ["Suicide Karaoke"](#) component), a winning performance may meet with general incredulity, ascribing the verdict to personal sympathy, a split vote, an audience of *claquers*, or special dispensation from the karaoke gods. Nevertheless, one smiles and applauds. After all, as Brian Raftery remarks in [Don't Stop Believin': How Karaoke Conquered the World and Changed My Life](#), "Underneath all the social barriers like headphones and iPods, we're just a world of singing fools."

The second thing that struck me with the force of the unexpected was my wife, that is, her bravura showmanship. An old-school university professor adhering to the standards of exemplary scholarship and strict classroom practice, and a Conservatory-trained pianist, Janice became a fixture at the mic, belting out ABBA and Jimmy Buffett and Alan Jackson and Tim McGraw and the Carpenters and The Eagles and Meatloaf with the best of them. When a student of hers showed up one evening and saw his impeccably attired professor in jeans and t-shirt, entertaining an audience made up not of resentful students but sympathetic locals, he was dumbfounded, as was I at first. The rollicks of karaoke and the rigors of higher accomplishment were not, apparently, in conflict. Goldman notwithstanding, commitment to an austere profession and an apprenticeship in classical music do not preclude appreciation for popular culture.

For myself, though I enjoy the evenings, I admit that singing karaoke is not my thing. I'm not at home with other people's songs. I did warble Leonard Cohen's ["Suzanne"](#) two or three times and twice cavorted through the Soggy Bottom Boys' ["I Am A Man Of Constant Sorrow"](#) with a couple of beer-toting celebrants, but that was the sum of my actual participation. It was the general ambience of friendliness and good fun and

the fact that karaoke enabled me to see my neighbors—and my wife—in a new light that intrigued and delighted me. Karaoke makes for revelations.

In effect, karaoke, as I've come to know it, is an expression of love for popular music, of pure enjoyment in the act of singing with the original musical accompaniment songs that are part of one's personal repertoire of favorites and of performing them before an audience of the likeminded. There is a kind of impersonation at play, and, as I've mentioned, of seeing oneself and others in a surprising way. If the essence of karaoke is rendering another's song as one's own, it follows that it is a legitimate musical genre, practiced by amateurs and professionals alike. Sometimes changes are made to the lyrics, as when one of our karaoke singers introduces the pub owner's name in Toby Keith's "[I Love this Bar](#)," which then becomes "I love Dale's bar," or, on another level, the flamboyant Menachem Herman alters Lynyrd Skynyrd's "[Sweet Home Alabama](#)" to "[Sweet Home Jersusalem](#)." This too is a sort of karaoke.

It should be noted that karaoke also contains a subversive element. Many of the "cowboy" songs beloved by performers express old-fashioned love of country and traditional gender roles, thus allowing people to be politically incorrect in a welcoming environment. In a world coming apart at the seams, karaoke is like a festival of remembrance and an innocent pastime that has not yet been socially frowned upon or ideologically prohibited. As such, it is not something to be disparaged but rather commended as another aspect of musical culture and, as noted, of patriotic sentiment. It is no accident that karaoke does not do rap, which is not music but boring, self-indulgent, infantile babbling that belongs with its endemic vulgarity and the violence it encourages in the gutter. Karaoke is rap's antithesis.

Indeed, karaoke is not so different from singing in a chorus or a choir, a communal endeavor that satisfies one of the most

elemental and enduring of human impulses—to lift up one's voice and to make a joyful noise, however raucous.

First published in