

M

melbourne inside out

FASHION

CORE STRENGTH:
CORSETS MAKE
A COMEBACK

STEPHEN CURRY

PREPARES TO BID YOU
GOOD EVENING

You're the voice

Why Melburnians
have fallen in love
with karaoke

I'VE LIVED
A LIFE THAT'S FULL
I TRAVELED EACH
AND EVERY HIGHWAY
AND MORE
MUCH MORE THAN THIS
I DID IT MY WAY



March 28, 2010

It's dark, the beat is pounding, the disco balls are glimmering, the words on the multiple screens suspended from the ceiling are glowing, and on the stage Natasha is belting out a song called *Tattoo* like there's no tomorrow.

"I loved you once, needed protection ... you're on my heart just like a tattoo," she trills to the couple of hundred or so punters packed into Charltons in Melbourne's Chinatown on this balmy Friday night.

The performance ends with wild applause and energetic squeals from a table of friends. The good-natured crowd mills about, buzzing with expectation. Who's up next?

When it first emerged in Australia in the 1980s it had all the hallmarks of a passing fad, but after a lull in the mid-1990s, karaoke, like Gloria Gaynor, has survived — three decades later it's bigger and louder than ever.

Where2Sing.com lists more than 750 pubs and clubs across Australia where you can stand up in front of a crowd and perform. Kate Kelly, talent co-ordinator of the Australian trials of the Karaoke World Championships, says about 10,000 contestants from around the country entered the competition last year to be our national representative. There's nothing, it seems, like a good old sing-along, even if the person with the microphone isn't quite on-key.

Back at Charltons, it's about midnight and everyone's loosening up. The after-work punters, a multicultural collection reflecting the city's diversity, are mostly in their 20s and 30s, but the requests, a tabletop of notes spread in front of the DJ, Marc, cover many decades of golden hits going way back before many of these kids were born.

Neil Diamond's prehistoric anthem *Sweet Caroline* gets the crowd singing along. A group of men amble up for a *Jersey Boys* routine. A brave soul puts down his drink and grabs the mic to tackle the epic *Bohemian Rhapsody*. Even if you knew the words and were a talented singer you'd struggle with this one. He doesn't, and he isn't, but there's always the air guitar solo at which, to be fair, he excels.

These are scenes repeated all over Melbourne. In the Blonde bar in Russell Street a couple of girls are banging out an Abba number to nobody in particular. At Melbourne Central, a Taiwanese chain, Party World, has opened a local branch on level 3 with 42 private rooms.

Shanghai Club and Chi Lounge in Little Bourke Street and Kbox around the corner in La Trobe Street similarly offer a selection of rooms which, even on quiet midweek nights, resonate to the sound of hits being belted out in a variety of languages.

Party World alone boasts a playlist of 65,000 songs, but before you even get to that dazzling array of options you have to face modern karaoke's fundamental question: private or public?

Charltons offers the sink-or-swim, hard-core public bar option. It's the quintessential karaoke scenario, lyrics on a TV screen, a microphone, alcohol and a bar full mostly of strangers. Some of them might even be hostile — imagine a room full of potential Dickos. It provides the thrill, or the horror, depending on how you look at it, and you don't have to pay to get your turn with the mic.

Alternatively, other venues offer private rooms in a modern variation on the original karaoke theme where for \$25 or more (depending on the time and the venue) you can hire a room for a couple of hours or so with your friends, get some drinks and food in if you like, and serenade each other to your heart's content.

Far from karaoke being a tired old '80s fad, crowds are getting younger, says Charltons Entertainment Complex manager Danny Brun. "I've been here six years and I've definitely noticed a shift in the crowd."

And then there's the *Australian Idol* effect. "Usually two or three months before the show starts, people come and practise, doing the same songs over and over, night after night. The show promotes the karaoke industry quite well. People sit at home and think, I could do that!"

The younger crowd is right onto musical trends, Brun says, so where a few years ago golden oldies were most popular, now it's crucial for karaoke bars to have their song lists up to date. "And if we don't have a song, if you give us some notice, we can often get it."

Jack Poon, co-owner of Kbox, says private rooms, long

It's daggy, noisy and at times woeful. But it's also tremendous fun.

John Mangan grabs the mic and belts out a few timeless classics with Melbourne's karaoke crowd.

PICTURE SIMON SCHLUTER

EVERYBODY

popular overseas, are catching on in Melbourne.

"It used to be that only people who come from Asia or who have worked in Asia, for example people who have taught English language in Japan, know what karaoke in a private room is all about. It was difficult for people to understand what the fun is about if you sing inside your own private room.

"When you invite people to go to karaoke, the initial response is often 'I can't sing well, I've got a scratchy voice' or 'nobody likes to listen to me' or 'I'm afraid I would scare off your other customers'. But more and more people now understand (it's) just another get-together place with friends and colleagues, a place where you can hear yourself think and have a conversation while having yourself or friends belting out their favourite tune in the backdrop."

Another how-did-we-ever-live-without-it option is "calorie-counting" software, which calculates how much weight you burnt up singing the song. "This is a very popular gimmick in Japan and it's working here as well," says Poon.

While Charltons' playlist is dedicated to songs performed in English, Melbourne's karaoke scene offers a window into Asia with its range of Japanese, Korean and Hong Kong pop. Kbox, for example, holds an extensive list of songs in English, Japanese and Mandarin as well as hits from Thailand, Malaysia and Indonesia. "Not many bars and clubs in Melbourne can boast an ambience as truly cosmopolitan as ours," Poon says.

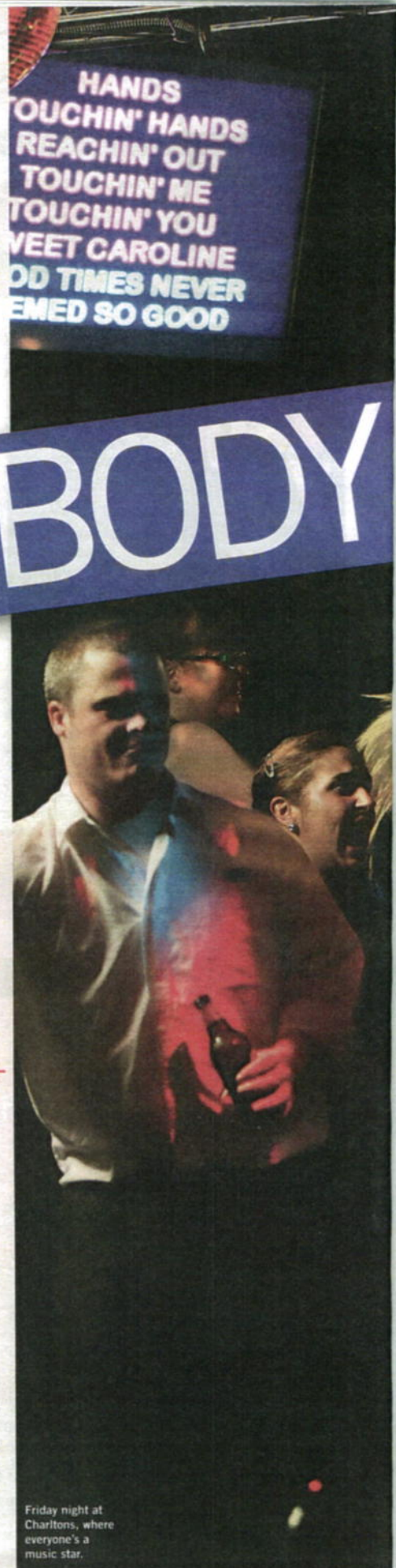
The word "karaoke" is a suitably abstract yet somehow perfect Japanese amalgam of the word "kara" meaning empty, and their abbreviation of the English word "orchestra". The practice has its origins in the late 1960s, when clever electrical engineers and enthusiastic singers started experimenting with the capacities of tape machines.

Just who invented the empty orchestra is hotly contested. KaraokePedia, an online karaoke encyclopedia, notes that both Japanese musician Daisuke Inoue and California music agent and talent promoter Scott Ebright have claims. The debate has generated some angry postings on Wikipedia as Ebright boosters attempted to give the American credit.

What's undisputed though, is that the Japanese embraced singing along to a voiceless music track fervently enough to give it a name that has stuck all around the world.

Last year more than 30 nations vied for the Karaoke World Championship with Dina Bit-David scoring silver for Australia in Finland with a roof-raising rendition of the 1960s hit *Rescue Me*.

This month trials have started across Victoria in venues including the Ferntree Gully Hotel, the Gladstone Park in Tullamarine and O'Malley's Irish Pub in Mildura, to determine who will travel to the world finals in Moscow in September.



Friday night at Charltons, where everyone's a music star.



SING!

Its global status then is secure, but can karaoke go too far? What, for example, induced the inhabitants of Kouvola, in Finland, to engage in a singing session lasting 446 hours — more than 18 days straight — in their bid to set a world record? (They wanted to go longer but broke the official karaoke record attempt rules by singing the same song twice in a two-hour period.)

And, on a more sinister note, what is it about karaoke that has led to what Filipino police have dubbed “the *My Way* Killings”? The Philippines authorities don’t know exactly how many people have been killed for singing the Frank Sinatra standard in karaoke bars over the years, or how many bruising fights it has provoked, but local news media have reported at least half a dozen victims in the past 10 years. *The New York Times* reports that many Filipino karaoke bars have removed the song from their machines. Explanations abound as to why having a few regrets, but too few to mention, should provoke such violence. The so-called “existential theory” suggests the arrogant nature and excessive self-esteem of the lyrics leads to fights. Another theory is that Filipinos, who pride themselves on their excellent singing, have a low tolerance for poor renditions of the classic. Yet another theory says *My Way* has simply fallen victim to its popularity and if a song is being constantly sung in a nation that adores karaoke, it’s bound to coincide with a homicide or two.

Every summer when she’s in Melbourne on holidays, journalist Stephanie Bunbury hires a room in Chinatown for a karaoke night with friends featuring a string of unforgettable ‘60s, ‘70s and ‘80s tunes, with *Darrry Boy* and *Ol’ Man River* usually thrown in for good measure.

“It’s the modern version of campfire songs — or singing round the piano or community singing — with all its bonding virtues and the sense of physical wellbeing that comes with breathing more deeply than usual, letting the voice rip and abandoning self-consciousness,” she says.

That plus the fact that “everyone under 70 has at least a vestige of a rock star fantasy.”

Mathew Chandler, an amateur karaoke enthusiast who was raising the roof at the Chi Lounge a few Saturdays back, insists on the booth option. “It’s got to be a private room, so you can be as silly as a wheel and not bump into strangers in the street the next day who tell you you sang like a dog,” he says.

The key is songs “that get everybody up off their arses and dancing, basically. For me, karaoke is all about how much furniture you can dance on in one evening. I danced on pretty much everything except the TV.” (Warning: dancing on furniture is generally not encouraged by karaoke proprietors.)

Brun, who has been listening to punters at Charltons night after night, week after week, for six years has some tips for those keen to unleash their lungs on an evening of karaoke. “You don’t really need to scream in the microphone,” he says. “People think they have to yell loud but it’s actually the other way round. If you sing softly, in a normal tone, you get the crowd’s attention.”

“Often it’s not so much about the voice, it’s about the performance. You can get someone singing really, really well, but they just stand there and you think ‘he could at least twitch a finger’. It’s the people who can’t actually sing a tone at all, but get on their knees doing air guitar and flips, they’re the ones who get the crowd stirred up.”

SING LIKE NOBODY’S LISTENING

CHARLTONS TOP 10 KARAOKE TUNES

- 1 *Bohemian Rhapsody* Queen
- 2 *You’re the Voice* John Farnham
- 3 *Paradise by the Dashboard Light* Meat Loaf
- 4 *Grease Megamix* Olivia Newton-John and John Travolta
- 5 *Endless Love* Lionel Richie & Diana Ross
- 6 *My Way* Frank Sinatra
- 7 *Girls Just Want To Have Fun* Cyndi Lauper
- 8 *I Have Nothing* Whitney Houston
- 9 *Hands Clean* Alanis Morissette
- 10 *Livin’ on a Prayer* Bon Jovi