

Karaoke:

Creating community through commodity

by Indrayudh Sengupta

Another Thursday and boy am I tired after work. But I don't have too much time to hang around, my friends are waiting. It's karaoke night!

[To the tune of 'Paparazzi' by Lady Gaga]

Singing's not my strongest suit,

but that has never stopped me

Kara-karaoke

from joining friends and strangers in

loud renditions of classics

Kara-karaoke

What appeal exactly does karaoke have? What discourses about the sonic open up if one starts engaging with karaoke, as a globally popular leisure activity?

Because I have been curious about, tried, enjoyed and regularly participated in karaoke, I must now discuss it armed with my voice, a recorder and the insights of scholars of sound studies. This essay, therefore, is generated where first-hand memories meet theories on the sonic.

We enter our regular haunt, The Tavern, located right behind Trinca's, an old iconic establishment on Park Street, which itself is a historical lane for nightlife in Calcutta.

The restaurant, spacious and well-connected to the main road, has regular music performances and is famed for being where many now famous singers and bands started off. The Tavern in contrast is a cosy space, slightly underground, tucked in the corner which is apt because karaoke, as a leisure activity, is associated with smaller, intimate settings. It doesn't hold up well in larger spaces, where it risks becoming a performance.

Karaoke stands for 'kara ookesutora', which is Japanese for 'empty orchestra', no need for space and a live band, a mic and a screen are enough.

It also does not feel odd that there is no consideration for acoustics, dry acoustics would almost be eerie. The irregular reflections off the walls decked with trinkets, the tables full of glasses and the people in all states of movement make the space come alive.

I see a lot of familiar faces, unsurprisingly. While there aren't many places for queer people to gather casually, it's no coincidence that karaoke found such a loyal following since Queer Karaoke Thursdays started in 2023. It is different from a regular bar night, there is a structure to it.

Structure evokes images of rigidity and restriction and some might even be inclined to accuse it of regimentation of leisure. I see it as aligning expectations-- here we all share an understanding of the playing area and as we keep returning every Thursday, it is no less than a ritual.

[To the tune of 'Let it go' by Idina Menzel]

*In a world
of uncertainties,
structure can be comforting,
rituals
amidst chaos
can be so liberating.
Ka ra oke
is a script, a game.
Choose a song,
lyrics on,
it's time for us all to sing along.*

Choosing a song is easier said than done. One must first read the 'vibe of the room'. Then one must consider one's own repertoire of songs.

You know what? Perhaps it is not that difficult.

Today, the commercial motive of music prefers certain sounds, and marketing propels those forward. One need not look much further than the infamous 4 chords of pop. The fetishization of music as a commodity reflects current material conditions where an activity of the body is alienated from its social context, put on sale and reproduced until it loses its meaning (Jacques Attali, 1985, p.5).

Across languages and cultures, everyone hears the same tracks propagated by the algorithms of streaming services monopolizing our auditory faculties.

This song inevitably pops up every time I am here, and I can't help but join in.

[To the tune of 'Dancing Queen' by ABBA]

*Repe-ti-tion is aw-ful,
Boring and so uninspired, ooh
Retro hits, current earworms
Haunting our hearing!*

How is it, then, that I feel invigorated by singing along? The song choices in karaoke change from culture to culture. Culture can be differentiated geographically and ethnically, of course, but more often than not, the anglophone music label promoted variety dominates. Can there only be pessimism about this homogenisation? Is singing English hits of every decade just an exercise in advertisement for record labels?

When music patrons around me from a range of generations resonate with the chorus, when I get to sing with similar enthusiasm in Germany, leagues away from familiarity, if nothing else, I know there is scope for mutual understanding.

Brandon LaBelle (2006) comments “...to produce and receive sound is to be involved in connections that make privacy intensely public, and public experience distinctly personal.” The choice of song and style of rendition is not disconnected to the singer’s mental state and disposition. When people join in and end up closely following a similar style, it is not just because they already know the song, they are in tandem because they have reached deeper levels of understanding. It is common for regulars to pick up songs sung by other regulars and join them the next time. I know I have done it and I know how much camaraderie I feel when I realise someone else has done it for me.

After a few rounds, I have the courage to take the mic, there is a song I want to sing.

In spite of waxing poetic about community building and all that, it is still unnerving to be the centre of attention. True, the divide of performer and audience, sender and receiver, is much more porous in this setting but having the power of amplifying my sonic and inflicting the space with it requires responsibility.

[To the tune of ‘Rolling in the deep’ by Adele]

I’m afraid that I am nooooot

Correct about the viiiibe. (rolling in the deeeep)

Will my song and (you had my heart in-)

voooooice carry (-side your hands)

the vibe further (and you played it)

into-o the night? (to the beat)

I see the person on the podium is offering the mic for the next singer. Oh no! I must hurry before I lose my chance!

“Karaoke supports less the democratic idea that everyone can have a shot if they want one and more the democratic practice that everyone wants a shot if there’s one on offer” writes Dubravka Ugrešić (2011) somewhat critically in her essay. I do not deny that there is allure in being briefly the centre of a happening but I am not here to wrest the mic off the podium. While mic hogs do exist who sing song after song without so much as a “Hey would you like to?”, a successful karaoke, everyone will agree is when one gets to hear voices of all skills, ranges and textures. Tone deaf singers are more than welcome, it is not supposed to be work and value cannot be assigned to one’s skill or lack thereof. Karaoke is a productive social activity liberated from the rat trap of supply and demand.

I am finally able to load the lyrics, the intro begins. I open my mouth to sing but I miss a beat. I blush but continue nonetheless because someone in the crowd had joined in and that gave me confidence.

[To the tune of ‘Pink Pony Club’ by Chapell Roan]

My favourite song

I’m gonna keep on singing once more

My favourite song

Cuz I need’nt simulate how

they sing their lines

I'm gonna keep on singing once more

My favourite song, my favourite song

Singing is not necessarily an ode to the star or an attempt to steal their aura (Ugrešić, 2011). It is also not a display of technique and prowess, though it will find appreciation. The act of trying to sing a song live, that many might be familiar with, becomes a social activity, the commodified song itself now repurposed as a medium for realising social relations.

I pass on the mic and leave the podium slightly breathless and flushed but feeling warm. Even if this the only song I sing on the mic tonight, it is good enough.

I have been able to find the sense of bonding and acceptance the quest for which brought us all here tonight.

Through this narration, I hoped to explore some of the social and economic characteristics of one of the most popular forms of nightlife. The structure and rules characteristic to karaoke as a form of group entertainment encourages regular ritual participation. Through the very consumption and reproduction of highly commodified forms of music, regular participants find themselves less alienated and more harmonised. Karaoke, I have found, thus, helps create community out of commodity.

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