

Live-music karaoke gives amateurs a taste of stardom

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By **MARIKO BECK**
SPECIAL TO THE RECORD

Dot Stein struts to the microphone with the air of a diva, draining her cocktail glass and setting it with a thud on the hardwood floor. When the band leader offers a lyrics sheet, she waves the paper away.

"I don't need the words," she declares, drawing a cheer of admiration from her fellow karaoke fans at Uncle Joe's in Jersey City. "I've been practicing in the car."

With the Super Karaoke Fun Time Band backing her up, the 33-year-old massage therapist from Hoboken belts out an impressive rendition of Janis Joplin's "Piece of My Heart," punctuating the song with air guitar jams and hair flips. Her performance might not make the acerbic Simon Cowell swoon. But any shortcomings on vocals are overshadowed by sheer dramatic flair.

"Even if they're not great singers, they can sell a song," says Otis Ball, the Super Karaoke Fun Time Band guitarist who also serves as host. "This is karaoke times 10. There's nothing like singing in front of a live band."

Forget the shower or the car or even the home karaoke machine. The often painful "American Idol" tryout scenes are proof enough that people are willing to put their rock star fantasies on public display. So why not give the masses the chance to front their own band, if only for three minutes at a time? From Manhattan to Los Angeles, nightclubs have been capitalizing on the karaoke fad, booking bands to lure wannabe crooners on slow weekday nights.

Most credit Los Angeles-based Punk Rock Karaoke for popularizing the idea. Made up of veteran musicians from Social Distortion, Bad Religion, NOFX and Agent Orange, PRK started nine years ago as a one-night lark. Soon, PRK was touring the country and featuring guest appearances by members of other bands, which have included Devo, the Minutemen, Black Flag, the Ataris and Save Ferris. (An East Coast swing with stops in New Jersey is scheduled for May.) "We've seen everything from 10-year-old kids to 50-year-old lawyers to fourth-grade teachers stage-diving into the crowd," says Derek O'Brien, drummer for PRK. "It's a show for us to watch, too."

It wasn't long before bookers and musicians began proposing live-band karaoke as a standing event.

Arlene's Grocery on Manhattan's Lower East Side made karaoke a fixture on its schedule six years ago.

The club's karaoke band draws crowds of up to 100 people every Monday night.

In the cramped music room of the former bodega turned bar, 27-year-old Robert Pfeffer performs Guns N' Roses' "Paradise City" to screechy perfection. Pfeffer, the lead singer of Feff, says the Axl Rose impersonation gives him an opportunity to promote his own band to admirers. "I'll say, 'If you liked what you saw, come see my band.'"

The format at Arlene's used to be punk rock and heavy metal. But since a split with the original house band in November, Arlene's has hired new musicians and now calls the night "Rock and Roll Karaoke." The first house band, known as the Original Punk Metal Karaoke Band, plays a rival Monday night gig at the Continental in Manhattan, where photos of Joey Ramone, Deborah Harry and Iggy Pop line the walls.

Frank Deserto was an Arlene's regular until he switched to the Continental. Dashing in a velvet blazer and striped tie, he dances with the microphone stand and denounces the suede-denim police in the Dead Kennedys' "California Uber Alles." The 22-year-old Brooklyn resident got hooked on live-band karaoke about six months ago. "The first time I needed a beer or two," he says. "The trick is to have fun and let go,



MEL EVANS / THE RECORD

Backed by the Super Karaoke Fun Time Band, Sara Marshall and Yolanda Wallace, above, singing last month at Uncle Joe's Bar in Jersey City; John O'Hara, right, takes his turn singing David Bowie tunes.

WHERE TO SING:

- You can front the Super Karaoke Fun Time Band at 9 p.m. Feb. 10 and 24 at Uncle Joe's, 154 First St., Jersey City (band info at otisball.com).
- The Original Punk Metal Karaoke Band backs you up at 9:45 p.m. Mondays at the Continental, 25 Third Ave., Manhattan (punkmetalkaraoke.com).
- Find your inner rock star at Rock and Roll Karaoke nights, 10 p.m. Mondays at Arlene's Grocery, 95 Stanton St., Manhattan (arlene-grocery.com).

even if you don't sing the whole song."

Though the crowds at both Manhattan spots are unpretentious, there's still the intimidation factor of climbing up on the stage. By comparison, the scene at Uncle Joe's is like jamming with friends in somebody's garage. Super Karaoke Fun Time Band sets up in a back room adorned with a cow's skull and a Bob Dylan poster. Its eclectic song list includes Hank Williams, AC/DC, the Ramones and Sheryl Crow.

About a dozen people showed up on a frigid night last month. Stein usually goes into Manhattan for her fix but learned about the Jersey City gig through another diehard.

"All of us karaoke nerds stick together," she says.

Stein persuades her friend Elizabeth Solaka, a karaoke virgin, to sing. Solaka, a 34-year-old photographer, sidles shyly to the microphone.

"I've never done this before. Please sing along with me," she pleads with the room.

Soon, Solaka is shaking her hips and bouncing through Blondie's "One Way or Another." She gets lost during an instrumental section and Ball jumps in to cue her on vocals. At the end, Solaka lets out a whoop.

Everybody, including the band, applauds.

"That was terrifying," she says later. "I'd do it again though. They were very nice."

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