

Village People

I WAS TEN YEARS OLD WHEN I REALIZED I COULDN'T SING. AT THE OUTER BOUNDARIES OF MY ELEMENTARY SCHOOL PLAYGROUND—AS FAR AWAY FROM THE ATHLETIC EQUIPMENT AS POSSIBLE—SAT A ROW OF CHAIN-LINK SWINGSETS THAT DOUBLED AS MY OWN PRIVATE OUTDOOR AMPHITHEATER. EVERY TIME WE BROKE FOR RECESS, I'D PLOP DOWN ON THE THICK RUBBER SEAT, KICK THE DIRT FOR MOMENTUM, AND SERENADE MY UNSUSPECTING CLASSMATES IN A SCREECH.

"Her name is Ree-yo," I'd yelp, pumping my legs harder and higher with each verse, "And she dances in the saaaaand . . ."

This was in the mid-'80s, long before commercial-radio playlists became timid and fractured, and on most weekday nights, I'd hide my FM Walkman under the pillow, kept awake by the sounds of rap, rock, and post-disco, all of them aligning on the same frequency. The next afternoon, I'd recite as many songs as I could remember, even if I couldn't remember them correctly: Duran Duran, the Beastie Boys, Wham!, Michael Jackson, Run-D.M.C., and "Weird Al" Yankovic. I did my best to whisper the more provocative lyrics, but most double entendres were well

beyond my fourth-grade education. Years later, when I finally deciphered Cyndi Lauper's "She Bop," I realized I'd spent a good portion of my recess time screaming about vibrators.

At the end of each performance, just as I was about to spring into orbit, I'd drag my sneakers into the ground and look at the seats next to mine. Usually, they were empty. I can't blame my classmates for distancing themselves from me, as my prepubescent voice made an awful racket, one that's almost impossible to put across in print. The only way to re-create that sound today would be to (1) obtain a magical talking seagull; (2) lock that seagull in a room for three months with little nourishment and a copy of *Thriller* on a loop; (3) record whatever noise came out of its mouth when you opened the door.

Still, I kept singing whenever I could, whether it was at Sunday school or Little League games. At the time, I didn't think it was unusual for a kid to go around barking out lyrics; I was just bored and spazzy, and constantly searching for new songs to memorize. So I scrutinized every entry in the Top 40, and when I was finished with them, I read old *Rolling Stone* magazine album guides and tried to guess what certain songs must have sounded like, based on their titles alone. I'd then record these songs a cappella style into a portable cassette recorder, along with a few of my own compositions, including 1985's indelible "Who's Afraid of the Dark?" which went like this:

Who's afraid?

Who's afraid?

Who's afraid of the dark?

Simplistic, yes, but still on par with just about anything ever written by Tom Waits.

In the fall of 1988, my family moved from the suburbs of Philadelphia to the suburbs of Honolulu. My father had been working as a foreign news editor at the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, and when he received an Asian studies grant at the University of Hawaii, we relocated to a suburban home with a view of the mountains and a poorly scrambled Playboy Channel. This should have been the most amazing time of my life, but I was just about to begin seventh grade, which had long been promised as the darker, edgier sequel to sixth grade—a year in which everyone back in my school in Pennsylvania would allegedly get to drink, feel each other up, and go to colonial Williamsburg. I would likely have been socially ineligible for two-thirds of these activities, yet I still felt cheated, and spent most of my ten months in Honolulu sulking around a comic-book store and listening to Tracy Chapman and *Appetite for Destruction*. While in Hawaii, though, I did pick up two important new vocabulary words. The first was *haole* (how-lee), a slightly derogatory Hawaiian word for “white person.” The second was *karaoke*.

My father’s Asian studies curriculum included a survey on Japanese culture, and because Hawaii’s population at that time was nearly 25 percent Japanese, this allowed for occasional in-the-field observations. One night, he and several of his mostly *haole* classmates wound up at a karaoke bar in a downtown Honolulu strip mall, where they watched the Japanese and Korean patrons carry on their century-old tradition of mutual animosity (apparently, the Japanese host was haranguing some of the Koreans for being lousy tippers, which seems like a counterintuitive way to obtain further tips). It was into this marginally hostile environment that my father, a bit soused, got up and sang Frank Sinatra’s “New York, New York.” When my mother informed me of this the next day, I was mystified: Though he loved music, my father sang even

less than he drank—which was just about never—and he'd never once hinted at a desire to perform. In fact, he'd always seemed ashamed of his voice, so much so that when he sang in church, he did it at the lowest possible volume, trying to avoid judgment from anyone who was listening, higher power or otherwise. Yet at this karaoke bar, in full view of his classmates and the greater public, he'd made it through not just a few refrains, but an entire song. To this day, whenever I try to imagine what it must have been like to watch him sing in that bar, there's a dotted, empty outline in the middle. I can build the interior and fill in the seats, but I can never actually *see* him.

We returned to Pennsylvania in 1989, and any time I wanted to deflect my classmates' questions about my lack of a tan—an unforeseen result of that sporadic Playboy Channel access—I'd quickly change the subject to my father's karaoke excursion. This was mostly greeted with incredulous looks, even though everyone in my town had long ago learned to accept the Mummers Parade, an annual Philadelphia pageant in which teamsters play banjos and wear bird outfits. Somehow, this homoerotic *Island of Dr. Moreau* went unquestioned, while karaoke struck my classmates as flamboyant and strange. Unfortunately, there was no way to convince them otherwise, because none of us were actually old enough to experience a karaoke bar for ourselves. It existed entirely in the abstract, which is probably why it was so easy to make fun of in the first place.

I soon forgot about karaoke and carried forth with my burgeoning musical career, joining a junior-high choral group and taking guitar lessons. Both were just fronts for my master plan, which was to form a cover band as a backing guitarist, and then eventually wrestle power from the lead singer in a bloodless but still theatrical coup. Cover bands were everywhere in my school, mostly

because nothing in the suburbs could ever be so dramatic as to inspire you to actually write your *own* songs. Instead, most bands chose from an unofficial list of about thirty or so classic-rock numbers, leading to asinine debates over who “owned” certain songs. If anything sums up how relatively stress-free it was to be in high school in the early '90s—just a few years before mandatory metal detectors and see-through backpacks became commonplace—it's the fact that my biggest adolescent fear was that some other band might learn the Who's “Baba O'Riley” before we could.

Our band had a suitably unoriginal name—Crosstown Traffic—and I only played a few “gigs,” mostly at teen-center events and school talent programs. I recently watched a fifteen-year-old tape of our performance, and I cannot possibly appear more uncomfortable on stage: As the band plays Creedence Clearwater Revival's “Fortunate Son,” I'm hunching over my guitar in the corner, failing at the only thing I really cared about. I quit Crosstown Traffic a few months later.



Despite these setbacks, I kept singing, even if it was just to myself. Not in an unhinged-loony kind of way, mind you—I'm not the old guy standing behind you at the convenience store, screaming “Can-Can” way too loud, though that is my inevitable fate. But every day, some song bribes its way into my head and loiters there for hours, and the only way to kick it out is to sing it; like a cry of pain or a laughing fit, it's a reflexive, uncontrollable act. I see the similarly afflicted everywhere I go: at the gym, where the weightlifters grunt along to some terrible Creed anthem without realizing it, or on the subway, where commuters shut their eyes and move their lips, forgetting they're being watched by others.

I've even seen it at my local bagel shop, where—after more than a year of nothing but frowning transactions—the woman behind the counter one day broke character and started singing along with a Trisha Yearwood ballad on the radio. Remarkably, she managed to keep on scowling while she did this. But for a moment, her instincts got the better of her.

To sing aloud is a natural urge, as just about every important moment of our lives is marked with song. We're treated to lullabies on our first days and hymns on our last—though we never quite get a chance to appreciate them—and in between, there are birthday parties, church gatherings, road trips, weddings, and camping trips, all of which require us to raise our voices, even if we do so reluctantly. Underneath all the social barriers like headphones and iPods, we're just a world of singing fools. If we were to drop all the niceties and just happily let rip with whatever tunes were in our heads, the streets would be filled with people hooting and hollering nonstop, as it was hundreds of years ago:

1290 B.C. (est.)—Every third event in the Old Testament is marked with women singing: the parting of the Red Sea, David killing the Philistines, etc. If the Bible is even partially accurate, being around the Israelites was like being at a Luther Vandross concert.

Tenth century—Gregorians be chantin'.

1620—Passengers on the *Mayflower* head off to the New World carrying small books of psalms.

Mid-1700s—Slaves are brought over to America, using songs to pray and teach.

1770s—Newspaper articles begin running "Broadside Ballads," which are essentially op-eds and articles presented in sing-along form.

- 1835—*The Southern Harmony and Musical Companion*, one of the first widely distributed songbooks, is released.
- 1843—The first minstrel show, *We're All Going to Regret This Someday*, opens in New York.
- 1860s—Home piano sales rise in America.
- 1861–1865—Armies from the North and South pledge their allegiances using Civil War songs.
- 1870s—The Fisk Jubilee Singers, a gospel vocal group, become one of the first superstar acts to sing around the world.
- 1870s—Singing cowboys somehow avoid getting beaten up.
- 1890s—Tin Pan Alley sheet music takes off, thanks in part to “song pushers,” who are hired by publishers to go into a community and get them to sing.
- 1901—Pedal-operated Pianolas—which use paper rolls to reproduce popular hits of the day—drop in price, gaining them newfound popularity.
- 1924—The first sing-along cartoon, *Ko-Ko Song Car-Tune*, debuts in New York City, imploring audience members to “follow the bouncing ball.” Two decades later, the same bouncing-ball format would be used for World War II shorts.
- 1961—*Sing Along with Mitch*, a prime-time musical revue starring Mitch Miller—who looks a bit like Vincent Price, but more menacing, if that’s even possible—premieres on NBC.

For centuries, singing was a communal undertaking, one that could serve as a religious lesson, a narrative, or simply a way to tally one’s bananas. It didn’t hurt if you were talented at it, of course, but I’m guessing that if the cowboys were singing, everybody else was, too.

By the time I was born, though, it had long been established that singing was an act best left to *real* singers, even the annoying ones, like theater majors. When prerecorded music became popular after the end of World War I, our relationship with music became far less collaborative. The songs that had been handed down through generations were no longer in danger of suddenly becoming extinct; they could be now recorded for posterity. And whereas sheet music and Pianolas demanded a certain amount of interactivity from music lovers, the phonograph allowed listeners to simply buy a professionally recorded version of their favorite song and play it nonstop, without having to worry about learning the song themselves.

Most importantly, the advent of prerecorded music soon gave rise to pop stars, and I think this is when people *really* started to become more self-conscious about their voices. Our ancestors didn't have to worry about what their voices sounded like—they just *sang*, because they could. Who cared whether or not they had talent? They just needed something to do while fermenting rotgut liquor. But the popular-performer era established a hierarchy of vocal talent, and suddenly, there was an accepted criteria for what constituted “good” and “bad” singing. In the early 1920s, you might have had the best voice in your church choir, but once people heard Bessie Smith's version of “Downhearted Blues,” yours was just above average. Bessie Smith knocked you on your ass, and everybody knew it.

By 1986, the year I started singing in that playground, most people were familiar with how a song like “Rio” was supposed to sound, including myself. I didn't need critics or teachers or fleeing classmates to tell me that I had a lousy voice; all I had to do was listen to the radio. This might explain why I was so embarrassed whenever my mom would walk around our house singing Johnny

Mathis holiday songs and various Broadway showtunes. It wasn't that her singing was bad—it was just that she wasn't as good as the “proper” recorded version. She wasn't *supposed* to be singing.

So I lived quietly, keeping my songs to myself, and only allowing them out at recess, by which time they were so pent up that I couldn't hold back any longer. And then, more than ten years later, I discovered karaoke, and I haven't been able to shut up ever since.



As was the case with so many other ludicrous pursuits I picked up in my twenties—malt liquor, ska, polyester suits—I was finally talked into karaoke by my friend Mike.

I met Mike in the fall of 1994 at Penn State University, where we'd later become roommates. I couldn't understand why he'd want to hang out with me: He had a girlfriend and sideburns, two by-products of a confidence I couldn't possibly have possessed at that age. But he was as bored as I was in central Pennsylvania, and thus spent the next four years developing as many hobbies as he could, often abandoning them within months, if not weekends. In the time I've known him, his list of on-again, off-again fixations has grown to include Krav Maga, DJing, shoplifting meat, *Quake*, reggaeton, feeding stray geese, call-in talk-radio shows, tattoos, break-dancing lessons, flaxseed oil pills, PlayStations 1 through 3, motorcycling, motor-scootering, skeet-shooting, creatine supplements, Capoeira, and possible enrollment in the Guardian Angels.

Mike owned a car, so on weekends we'd grab a wallet of CDs and go for long drives to the small towns outside of school, even though there was nothing to do when we got there, except to poke

around depressing thrift shops and eat fast food. These trips were mostly an excuse to sing along to the radio, which we did for hours; somehow, I'd met the only other person in the world who didn't think it was weird to let loose with whatever song was currently partying in his head. We'd both grown up in the suburbs, which meant that our shared musical tastes consisted of our mothers' '70s AM-gold collections, classic rock, and modern hip-hop, and we'd drive around Route 80, alternating between Carly Simon and the Wu-Tang Clan. We didn't have sports or fraternity events to bond over, and the video games back then weren't that good. So we sat in a car and tried to remember the right words to "You're So Vain" and "Shame on a Nigga" while eating McFlurries.

Mike had first discovered karaoke after using a borrowed I.D. to sneak into a bar on Long Island. He was nineteen at the time and made a mistake common to so many first-time karaoke singers: He chose "Free Bird." Mike was only tangentially familiar with the song and therefore didn't realize that "Free Bird" went on for nearly nine minutes, during which the vocal parts pretty much excuse themselves and wander around the parking lot. This leaves the singer without a whole lot to do, aside from desperately air-guitaring or maybe making a few errant hoots. Mike flailed his way through the song's finale, and when it was over, he was wounded, but also enlightened. At that point in his life, Mike was most interested in singing, drinking, and behaving clownishly in public, but until karaoke, he'd had to pursue all those interests separately. "Karaoke was the union," he told me several years later. "These three things, put together."

He spent his next few years at Penn State trying to find a local karaoke venue, often with discouraging results, as karaoke in our region was scarce. His most notable success came on a Saturday afternoon in the spring of 1997, when he and our mutual friend

Kevin discovered a temporary karaoke jockey, or “KJ,” who’d set up a stage in the middle of our local mall. At the time, Garth Brooks was in the middle of a local five-night concert run, so the KJ had only thought to bring along country songs and rock ballads. It was a limited song selection, yet even then, Mike could divine the absurd. Whenever he scanned a weak karaoke book, he could always find that one weirdly anachronistic song that the rest of us had overlooked. It was as though the soundtrack for that *exact* moment stood out from all those lines of text and announced itself to him.

Mike and Kevin turned in their song choice, and after the KJ got a look at their selection and their reformed-skateboarder attire, he immediately put them in the back of the queue. A half-hour passed, and as soon as one of the shoppers finished his rousing version of Neil Diamond’s “America”—a performance that prompted swells of patriotic applause—Mike and Kevin took to the stage and began singing Tag Team’s “Whoomp! (There It Is).” Not long into the song, Kevin began jumping up and down, elbowing Mike in the jaw; by the time they got to the *boom-shock-a-locka* parts, the audience members’ reactions had shifted from confusion to revulsion. These people did not enjoy being whoomped against their will.

“You never realize how long that song actually is,” Mike says now, “until you do it in front of a crowd that hates every second of it.”

I wish I’d accompanied Mike on this trip, as well as the other karaoke expeditions he took between 1997 and 1998. But the very idea of getting up in front of others, much less *singing* to them, terrified me. My brief high-school rock-band career had provided enough residual shame to last a lifetime, and after four years of eating cereal out of a family-serving salad bowl, I’d become recklessly overweight (not quite obese, perhaps, but definitely post-

husky). I was far too self-conscious for something as vulnerable as karaoke.

A few months before Mike was to graduate and move to Manhattan, a weekly karaoke night opened up at a sports bar just a few blocks off campus. Mike insisted I go with him, noting that the place was all but abandoned, and that if we went with a group of friends, it would be like our own private karaoke party. I relented, mostly because I'd run out of things to do at night in Central Pennsylvania, and because I could always back out at the last minute. By then, I'd worked out a reliable awkwardness-avoidance strategy: Show up someplace new, indicate some sort of vague illness by rubbing my belly and squinting, and then depart using whatever alternative travel arrangements I'd planned out beforehand. This bar would be especially easy to escape, because it was within walking distance of our house, and because it was one of the least popular bars near campus. When we walked in, I immediately understood why: It smelled like Sam Adams. Not the beer, mind you, but the actual New England revolutionary, indignant and pee-ridden under the floorboards.

We took to the back of the bar with a beer pitcher and the songbook. The place wasn't quite as deserted as I'd hoped, but the few customers scattered about didn't even seem to notice that we were there. Maybe I *could* do this, I thought. Karaoke didn't seem too different from singing with my friends in the car. Besides, Mike had been cajoling me to try karaoke for months, and he was usually right about such things: During our junior year, for example, he'd convinced me to spend the last \$25 in my bank account on a full-body California Raisin costume, one that had no doubt been made by hand in 1983. As I walked around town that night, laughing at myself under my costume, I decided that I could probably stand to take a few more risks in my life, even if those risks in-

volved me dressing up like a giant raisin. After all, Mike didn't care what anyone else thought about him, and it seemed like an incredibly liberating way to live.

So I agreed to try karaoke, with the stipulation that we signed up as a group—that way, we could trade off verses, in case I got uneasy. There were still a few other volunteers ahead of us, and their performances gave me enough time to regret my decision. I began formulating elaborate excuses as to why I could not, under any circumstances, sing at this bar: *I don't remember how the chorus goes. My throat feels a little itchy.* I was about to come down with one of my trademark bouts of hallucinatory nausea when our group's name was called.

We walked from the back of the bar to the karaoke rig, which was a small portable monitor on a stand; I hid in the back of our group, obscuring myself from view. As for the performance itself, there are conflicting accounts as to what song we chose: I seem to recall the words to Stevie Wonder's "Signed, Sealed, Delivered I'm Yours" appearing in front of me, though no one else can verify that. What I do remember is that, at some point during the song, I began to feel calm, as though all the tension in my body—tension that had been collecting for twenty years—was suddenly vanquished. As far as I was concerned, there was no audience; just me, my friends, and this song, whatever song it might have been.

After our turn was over, there was applause and some slippery high fives, and I returned to our table, where I'd remain for the rest of the night: I knew the sudden fit of joy I'd just experienced could quickly be negated if I got greedy. As I watched my friends return to the front of the bar for an unsolicited encore of Aqua's "Barbie Girl," I sat in the back, trying to figure out what had just happened. Only a few minutes ago, I'd been calculating every possible way in which I could embarrass myself, and none of them had come true.

I'd spent the last few years being terrified of karaoke. What else had I been wrong about?



Within about ten minutes of moving from Penn State to New York City—or more specifically, to the suburbs of New Jersey, where I was living while interning at *Entertainment Weekly* magazine—Mike brought me down to a two-floor private-room karaoke bar he'd discovered not long after arriving in Manhattan. With two long hallways branching into sixteen smaller rooms, Village Karaoke looked like a walk-in health clinic, and at times, it felt like one: The check-in process was long and confusing, the bills were loaded with unforeseen costs, and at least one person in the waiting room always looked to be near death.

Mike had become enthralled with private rooms, or k-boxes, during a five-month stay in Osaka. Because he was accustomed to public karaoke available back home, he was initially disappointed when he realized that the biggest k-box audience in Japan would be no larger than twelve overly snug-fitting attendees. But after a long inaugural evening of *nomihoodai*, he realized that in a private room, he could sing for hours on end, without having to wait for a bunch of other people to get their turn. Even the performances became more collaborative, as people could pick up a microphone and join in whenever they wanted. After my first night singing at Village, I felt even more at ease than I had at that Pennsylvania sports bar, as there were no unknown onlookers. I knew maybe five people in the city, and I could fit them all, just barely, in the cheapest room.

Village Karaoke became our by-the-hour social club, a place where we could drop in whenever we wanted, and where no one

would ever tell us to turn down the music. At first, we'd only visit once or twice a month. By the fall of 1999, almost every weekend seemed to end with a cab ride there, and "Bowery between Fifth and Sixth" became the first New York City address I knew by heart. Some nights, I didn't even know why our small group of friends even bothered to go anywhere else, because within half an hour of walking into some party or bar, all we wanted to do was to go to Village Karaoke.

Part of the allure was Village Karaoke's songbook, which included thousands of Top 40 songs from the late '60s to the late '90s, plus lots of random material that was simply filed under "Standard" or "Various." On any given night, one could have walked by our room and heard Shaggy's "Boombastic" followed by Petula Clark's "Downtown" followed by "Hava Nagila." We used a remote control to enter track numbers, but because much of the library was stored within a giant bank of laser-discs, songs often took forever to load, and sometimes disappeared altogether. I imagined they were being sucked into an alternate-realm vortex, where some poor soul was being subjected to "Love Is a Battlefield" three times a night.

We invited everyone we knew to Village Karaoke, no matter what kind of music they liked. There were metalheads, fashion executives, and French people, and one of our parties was crashed by a group of Japanese punk-rockers dressed as samurais. The sessions would go until two or three in the morning, often because we had nowhere else to go. We couldn't afford to get into nightclubs and parties, and even if we could, we surely would have been shooed away by the dot-commers who were then running the city. As absurd as it was, this was our own downtown-Manhattan music scene, even though any *real* musicians who happened to walk into our room would surely have turned around

and fled. Everyone who moves to New York City does so to make a claim on it, no matter how small; if you can walk past just one corner and feel a sense of ownership—if you can say, “That was mine,” even though you never actually paid the rent—then you’ve succeeded. At Village Karaoke, we managed to create something new, in a city where every idea and cultural movement had been wrung out a million times before.

Mike was the de facto host for these karaoke nights, and he developed some very specific rules. These were never actually spelled out, and they were rarely enforced, yet we still live by many of them today:

- No “flippers,” that is, people who have no intention of singing, yet spend hours flipping through the songbooks, pretending to look for the right track. At Village Karaoke, both the songbooks and our capacity were extremely limited, and thus flippers were politely given the gas-face until they either surrendered the book or left altogether.
- If you picked a song and then just stood there as it played, all the while making a confused, apologetic expression, the other people in the room were legally entitled to hit the “cancel” button within one minute. The queue was almost always an hour deep, and it had to be constantly pruned and maintained so that everyone would get to sing (by that same measure, if you accidentally canceled someone else’s song in mid-performance, you had to reenter it immediately).
- The following songs couldn’t be played until the two-hour mark: Guns N’ Roses’ “Paradise City,” the Rolling Stones’ “Sympathy for the Devil,” and especially “Free Bird.” These were all over six minutes long, and if they were whipped

out too soon, they could stall the evening's momentum. The one exception to this rule was "Stairway to Heaven," which was not to be played under any circumstances whatsoever.

- During Temple of the Dog's "Hunger Strike," the group in the room had to be divided in half, with one side singing Eddie Vedder's part, and the other tackling Chris Cornell's part.
- Everyone had to clap during Hall & Oates's "Private Eyes," including the puppets. *Especially* the puppets.

Let me explain the puppets.

During the summer of 2000, Mike and I created a Manhattan public-access television show called *Karaoke! Adventure!* It aired Fridays at 11 P.M., and to best of my knowledge, its audience consisted of one kid at Columbia who accidentally saw it twice. I'd occasionally meet people who were impressed by the fact that we had a TV show, even though getting a slot on Manhattan Neighborhood Network was easy: All you had to do was film something that wasn't snuff or hardcore pornography, convert it to VHS, and drop it off at the MNN offices once every two weeks. If you could manage that—and there were weeks when we couldn't—you'd get a time slot somewhere between *Astoria Psychic* and *Black Kids Playing Videogames*.

In its six-episode span, *Karaoke! Adventure!* rarely followed through on any of its titular promises. The karaoke footage was shaky and incomplete, and the so-called "adventures" were long, noticeably unscripted sketches that starred a bunch of low-budget animal puppets we'd purchased in a toy store. The puppets weren't included with any grand creative intent; they were simply goofy-looking and cheap, and sometimes, there's nothing more

enjoyable than getting drunk and manipulating a googley-eyed piece of cloth. Considering that the most recurring character on *Karaoke! Adventure!* was a chain-smoking frog who sang H-Town's "Knockin' Da Boots," I'd like to think Mike and I pioneered the sort of drunken, unfunny shit now commonly found on YouTube.

When we tired of Village Karaoke's technical difficulties or long lines, we'd occasionally investigate other karaoke venues, few of which offered the sort of slipshod kicks found in our Bowery home. Two especially precarious excursions both took place on the same summer trip to Long Island, where the sing-along options were limited: The first stop was the Memory Motel, a dive bar in Montauk immortalized in a 1976 song by the Rolling Stones. I picked Van Halen's "Jump," and because I wanted to pay proper homage to David Lee Roth's original vocal stylings, my performance mostly consisted of yelling *waahh-ohhh* and/or *waa-ooooh* over and over again. This did not go over too well with one of the townies sitting at the bar, who glared at me the rest of the evening until I lobbied that we go elsewhere.

A few days later, we found ourselves at a fancy gay nightclub that was hosting a *Gong Show*-style karaoke contest, though the gong was a trashcan lid, and Chuck Barris was a surly drag queen. My friend Kevin signed up to sing first, which surprised me: I'd known him since we were about five years old, and when he was younger, he was more interested in sports than music. Yet here he was, jumping around in a gay Hamptons nightclub while wearing a tight-fitting green T-shirt that read "IRISH," singing the Proclaimers' "500 Miles." When the drag queen finally bashed the trash-can lid, Kevin looked relieved, and not at all disappointed. The first 50 miles or so had been more than enough excitement for the night.

Mike and I were up next, and I needed multiple shots of vodka before taking the mic, mostly because I was intimidated by the club's in-the-round seating; it was packed with men, a giant gay thunderdome. We sang the Human League's "Don't You Want Me Baby" and made it all the way through, much to my surprise.

"So, are you guys a couple?" the host asked us during our post-performance Q&A.

"A couple of fools!" I replied, perhaps a tad defensively.

We were immediately gonged, victims of blatant heterophobia. But even on this night, like all the others, we wound up singing out on the streets afterward, so loud that anyone behind us could see the cartoon clef notes zipping above our heads.



Because Mike filmed many of our early karaoke shindigs, I have my first year in New York caught on tape, and the footage is excruciating to watch. I made two strategic mistakes during that time: The first was initiating a near-daily ritual in which I began every day with a buttered bagel and a can of Orange Sunkist, and finished each night with a trip to the Times Square Pizza Hut. The second mistake was enrolling in Supercuts' buy-twelve-get-one-free scheme. Anyone who saw those *Karaoke! Adventure!* episodes would be forgiven for thinking that I was a porcupine who'd learned to pass among humans by wearing khaki pants.

Yet there are moments in that footage in which I'm singing to the entire group, and that's when I look the most relaxed, even if just for a few seconds. When I went to parties, I pinned myself against the wall, out of view; but inside the karaoke rooms, I stood on the table, welcoming the cameras and the attention, knowing every word. Karaoke induced a sort of time-release euphoria, one that

flatlined my anxieties and allowed me to float high above the room. When I looked down at myself, I'd see cracks of self-confidence and wonder where they went during the rest of the week, when I actually needed them. I was a different person when I sang, and after a year of Village Karaoke, I decided to see if I could be that person all the time.

This required me to drastically alter my karaoke lifestyle. In need of clarity, I stopped drinking for a few months, and even learned to perform while stone-cold sober—which is actually easy to do, so long as everyone else is drunk. After a while, I realized that it wasn't the alcohol or the puppetry that gave me this assurance; it was the fact that these people accepted—and even encouraged—the very weirdness that had made me feel so out of place for so long. They emboldened me, and in the spring of 2000, I resolved to finally lose all the weight I'd been accruing over the past decade. I got up early every day and went to the gym, where I sang along with Def Leppard on the treadmill. And I scaled back my hot dog intake, from eight a week to merely two. In a few months, I lost nearly 20 pounds—it all just slid off, as though it was never supposed to be there in the first place.

One night, not so long after I lost that weight, I brought a girl to one of our Village Karaoke parties. I'd only known her for a few weeks, and I was a little too crazy for her, as I'd soon find out with a polite but firmly dismissive phone call. But on that Saturday we kissed on the sidewalk, in an exchange that I'd been expecting for weeks but waiting for since high school: *Finally, a hot girl likes the way I sing.*

None of this, I knew, would have happened if not for karaoke. So I said goodnight and went in to sing for another two hours.