Popular Music on Display in New York City Karaoke

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Contents

Abstract

This thesis examines the karaoke performance practices of certain young New Yorkers. It is based on fieldwork conducted at Winnie's Bar and Restaurant in New York's Chinatown as well as research done at a few other New York City karaoke venues. The thesis focuses on discourses of evaluation and close readings of performances to consider both how karaoke performance organizes the sociability of Winnie's nightlife activities as well as how karaoke singers perform their knowledge of popular culture and music in novel, socially appropriate ways.

The introduction provides a review of the literature on karaoke and the theoretical background informing the thesis, focusing on ethnographic approaches to popular music and technological mediation in social life.

The second chapter explores discourses and practices of evaluation at Winnie's. It finds that the ability to astutely frame a performance so as to account for the shared knowledge of a song's previous reception and popular meaning is an important element of karaoke "competence," as revealed by audience responses to several performances. I note differences in evaluative practices between patrons identifying as "performers" and as "audiences," but I find that a shared identification as "amateurs" creates social ties among individuals largely anonymous to one another.

The third chapter look at performance style. It finds broad stylistic differences between regular patrons of Winnie's and the majority non-regulars, whose karaoke experiences are few and far between. These differences are most clearly understood in terms of different conceptions of the distinction between roles of performer and audience member. Where non-regulars drastically alter their social identity depending on whether they are performing or observing, regulars more fluidly move from one role to the other. I argue that the shifting roles of non-regulars is in part a discursive stance toward "performance" in popular music generally. By highlighting tension in the role of performance, non-regulars explore their "everyday" position as consumers and audiences, and deconstruct the social stratifications inherent in the mass-mediated division of performers from audiences.

In the fourth chapter, I focus on a single performance, of The Who's "I Can See for Miles." I provide a detailed description of the performance from a video recording made at an Upper West Side karaoke venue. This close reading is presented in dialogue with the singer himself, from an interview conducted after together we reviewed the video of his performance. This chapter argues that karaoke's intertextuality is highly contingent in practice, as karaoke performance comes into contact with the popular original performance in moments of difficulty and confusion. I argue that karaoke performances are informed by listening practices from "everyday" life, and that the details of a karaoke performance are to some extent ordered by the commercial systems in which songs originally circulate.

The conclusion looks briefly at the television show *American Idol* as it provides a useful perspective on Winnie's karaoke. I argue that karaoke has many diverse manifestations, and in many ways karaoke at Winnie's is unique. Nonetheless, karaoke at Winnie's is a social practice in which individuals participate to revise and reconsider experiences of mass-mediated musical culture.

Chapter 1

Introduction

"Onstage"

Winnie's Bar and Restaurant on Bayard Street in Chinatown is packed around 11pm. It is Saturday night, and the crowd is a handful of large groups—few individuals or couples. People overflow from the booths on the long wall, just as they overflow from the bar across the floor, leaning over to speak with the bartenders, finding nooks between stools to make room for others navigating the thirty feet from the back of the bar to the bathrooms.

At the booths some huddle together, looking over a plastic-covered list of song titles in a ring binder. Others lean away in a solitary gesture, paging the list by themselves. Those looking together sometimes point excitedly, sometimes joke, sometimes cajole their neighbor about a certain song; here and there someone gets an idea, and he or she flips through pages determinedly looking for a song in particular; otherwise, there is a leisurely quality to the browsing. And plenty of people have no interest in the songbook at all.

At one end of the bar there is a large TV screen and a rack of audio and video equipment; in front of the electronics a person with a microphone looks back and forth from the screen to the bar, as familiar music plays loudly through the PA system. He sings along with words that flash across the screen in synch with the music. If he is lucky, his amplified voice will be as loud as the music he sings with. These mics, though, can be finicky. In any case he does not have much of an audience. There is no real stage to speak of, so the crowd spills into his performance space, using the stage area as overflow—not to mention people passing continuously by him to and from the toilets. All these bodies create a substantial barrier between the singer and anyone much more than a few feet away from him. The employee who runs

the karaoke system keeps turning up the volume, but the room is small and not designed for a PA, the PA itself is rather low-fi (at least is by now, after years of continuous abuse), and the crowd absorbs most of what sound does come through. Halfway up the floor, if you are not closely attending to the performance, it is just part of the din of a crowded bar.

Which is not to say that people here pay no attention. You have to be on your toes to see when your own request for a song placed twenty minutes or an hour ago finally comes on. There is no emcee to announce you or to call you to the stage; the song's title simply flashes on the screen for a moment and then the song begins to play. People keep singing, one by one, sometimes six by six. A crowd of guys sings Bon Jovi into two mics between them; a pair of friends do a duet of "Love Shack"; a woman sings "The Piña Colada Song" suggestively. Their friends watch, hollering support. Men seem to find their way through the crowd to cat-call for the "Piña Colada" performance. "Love Shack" is joined in the middle by another friend who helps with the backup parts. A few women singing "Material Girl" find themselves supported in the end by a chorus of their male friends singing from the crowd in their best deep-chested robot voices, "liv...ing...in a material world / liv...ing...in a material world."[1]

At some point in the middle of all this, well into the course of the evening—a lot of energy in the bar, about singing, songs, being out with friends, Saturday night, a jostling crowd—a young man with short curly hair wearing glasses and a button-up striped shirt ascends the "stage" to perform Gladys Knight's "Midnight Train to Georgia." He begins it calmly, with obvious relish for the song, a bit of a smirk on his face. The song has a narrative structure and builds slowly, in a long crescendo. The karaoke recording follows the original, faithfully adding backup gospel singers right where they are needed to reinforce the singer. As the song builds the singer moves out into the crowd pushing back into his space and gets lost a little in their mass. He starts to sing like crazy, throws his head back, and screams R&B falsetto: "I GOT to go I GOT to go I GOT to go!"[2] People stop and stare; the crowd shifts its attention toward the stage, not a dissociated collection of friends and strangers with divergent attentions, interests, and motivations, but an audience, a group of people together watching one of their members perform.

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[1] "Material Girl" by Peter Brown and Robert Rans. © Copyright 1984. Candy Castle Music.

[2] "Midnight Train to Georgia" by James Weatherly. © Copyright 1964. Universal Polygram International.

Singing Along

Karaoke emerged in the early seventies as a modification to the jukebox (Hosokawa and Ōtake 1998; Mitsui 1998). Retailers and bar owners tinkered, finding ways to add a microphone to existing machines. The technology evolved incrementally for a decade or more, streamlining incompatibilities and inefficiencies out of its integration of recorded music with live singing. But despite the constant tinkering, combining a singer a with record player is basically a simple mechanical chore. Karaoke's origins depended as much on the industry of the musicians who tackled the non-trivial problem of removing the vocal part from the recorded song—a task without an easy technological fix. To remove the single part, musicians would have to re-record every other part in the song, leaving the space for the vocalist empty.[3]

Since the late eighties karaoke has been an important site of popular culture in the United States. Any night in New York City karaoke happens in myriad ways. Establishments rent rooms equipped with microphones and audio-visual devices to private parties who bring their own alcohol and pay by the hour—called "karaoke boxes," such venues are favored in Japan (Mitsui 1998). Scattered around the city, especially in Chinatown, are bars and nightclubs with dedicated, nightly karaoke. Some are modern, sleek, and flashy, with shiny equipment and glossy, published songbooks. Others, like Winnie's, look more like any New York bar but for the wall of equipment that dominates a corner of the room. Especially common in New York is the weekly karaoke night at neighborhood bars. A bar or nightclub hires a "karaoke jockey" who will bring a cart of portable equipment as he or she travels around the city. Such people are often associated with companies that provide karaoke services, but may contract privately, and own their own karaoke equipment. And more and more popular in New York is "live-band karaoke" (see Oakes 2004, ch. 6) in which, as its name suggests, patrons sing accompanied by a band of live musicians.

Writers about karaoke often seek to explain its novelty by finding historical and cultural antecedents to its patterns of social behavior—citing the presence of important amateur public singing activities into whose mold karaoke naturally fits. Deborah Wong provides a generally applicable formulation: "[k]araoke … falls neatly into a performative niche already well established in many Asian societies" (1994:158). With regard to Japan, the claim of a prehistory of amateur public singing is commonplace (see for instance Hes-

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[3]The origins of karaoke are somewhat ambiguous; see Mitsui 1998 for a detailed history of its genesis and evolution in Japan.

selink 1994; Kelly 1998b 2002; Lum 1996), and contributors to Mitsui and Hosokawa's (1998) collection, *Karaoke around the World: Global Technology, Local Singing*, find such prefigurations to karaoke in British public houses (Kelly 1998a), in contrasting Asian- and Anglo-American receptions of karaoke (Lum 1998), in Italian public culture (Prato 1998:106), and in Swedish parties and public gatherings (Fornäs 1998:123). That is to say they find a largely unchanging social practice (amateur public singing) into which new technologies and media (recorded popular music, amplification) have been introduced, preserving the essential character of the original practice.[4]

I take a different stance. Where commentators familiar with Japanese culture and society recognize in karaoke a familiar practice of public singing, in New York City karaoke I recognize a familiar practice of popular-music audition: the affective participation that characterizes technologically-mediated listening emerges through karaoke performance into social practice. The familiar behaviors that appear in karaoke performance often do involve singing, but more precisely they involve singing along. They respond to and stem from of listening—singing along in the shower, in the car, beer and sociability and an important song on the jukebox. Karaoke at Winnie's reflects preexisting habits of technological and commercial music consumption (listening on a jukebox or radio, practical habits of reception of recorded music, an industrial stratification of roles of production and consumption) into which a new social dynamic (amateur public singing) has been introduced, preserving much of the character of the original practices.

Technology and sociability

I do not mean to suggest that these "habits of technological and commercial music consumption" are not "social," but they are of a different type of sociality than the public singing practices that produce a receptive environment for karaoke around the world. The technologies and industries of popular music that (one story goes) displace an immediate context of musical performance by separating the environments of performance and audition and by replacing a "face-to-face" musicality with diffuse regimes of industrial circulation and

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[4]It is important to point out that identifying social antecedents to karaoke is not necessarily to demystify it or explain it away, or that cultural explanations do not fit. In many of the cases cited above, the authors make a strong case that it is precisely into the settings where public singing already happens that karaoke practice then finds a comfortable home. Further, the identification of antecedent "performative niches" does not preclude considering karaoke's impact and changing character in terms of gender, politics, globalization, or popular culture.

commodification ostensibly privatize, compartmentalize, and stratify (thereby weakening) the social character of musical practice. But this "weakening" of music's social importance is not the obvious effect of these "new" modes and channels of musical experience.[5] Rather, scholarly attention to technological mediations of sociality in popular music often finds highly active, affective, and attuned sociability in and through popular music's technologies. Fox says of the jukebox in country music,

> The poetic use of the 'jukebox' in country music inverts ... alienation, commodity fetishism, and the loss of history into a historically self-conscious assertion of control over the process of mediation. It transforms commodities (old, 'disposable' songs, in terms of the market), into powerfully concentrated feelings, which literally reach out from the past, 'furnishing' the space of desire in the present with dense intertextual references (1992:62).

This poetic transformation of the jukebox precipitates back into the real relations of people and technology in social environments, where the jukebox, with the music and texts it mediates, frequently intervenes in its environment as "an inanimate object that speaks with a human voice" (Fox 2004:47)—either as "participant" in sociable talk (2004:295) or as confidant in interior feeling (2004:147–147).

Despite real cultural differences, Winnie's shares with the Texas bars Fox describes an emphasis on sociable talk and the musical intervention in this sociability by a central and constantly present *object*—the jukebox, the karaoke machine. Fox's study suggests the potential for a technologically-mediated environment of recorded musical commodities to participate actively in the social lives of individuals and communities. This participation is not just of

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[5]Certainly "new" is not entirely accurate. As Keil points out, "mediated musics, sounds schizophonically split from their sources (Schafer 1977) have been with us for over a century," since Edison invented the phonograph in 1877, but as he notes in the next paragraph, "studies examining human interaction with all the mediated music processes, however, are surprisingly few and far between" (Keil 1984). Keil's paper is from 1984, and much work has been done since on questions of "human interaction with all the mediated music processes" (for example Connor 2004; Crafts et al. 1993; Drew 2001; Fox 2004; Hirschkind 2004; Manuel 1993; Meintjes 2003; Minks 1999; Porcello and Greene 2005; Sterne 1997; Théberge 1997; Wong 2004). These studies build on and contribute to an even larger body of theoretical and critical writing about mediation, centering on the work of Adorno and Benjamin, but part of a discourse that dates (at least) to the nineteenth century (cf. Gitelman 1999; Peters 1999; Sterne 2003). Nonetheless, specific ethnographic questions of human social interaction with mediating technologies remain less thoroughly examined—especially in ethnomusicology—than Keil's charge would call for.

the object in the bar, whether jukebox or karaoke machine. Rather, that object is the point of access to an entire world of recorded popular music; it is not just the machine itself, but the words, sounds, and voices inscribed into musical commodities that sonically penetrate the discursive, social, and affective dynamics of the particular environment that houses the machine.

Despite its ancestry and the obvious homologies, the karaoke system (DVD, laserdisc, or CD-G[6]player, video, PA, microphones, and mixer) is not (just) a jukebox; following Keil, karaoke is music "mediated *and* live" (Keil 1984, my emphasis). Karaoke's integration of mediation and liveness involves the close, hands-on interaction of people with mediating technologies. In a very different context Porcello explores a similar phenomenon, the use of the *stop*, *rewind*, and *play* buttons on listeners' cassette decks. As each listener, in his car or after hours in the recording studio, stops, rewinds, and replays sections of the tape, he shares in a revised version of what Alfred Schutz (1977 [1951]) called "we-ness":

> Rewind. Stop. Play. With our tapes, Jon, Bobby, and I de-linearize our experiences in the creation of the musical artifact known as the recording, and reflect on issues of participation in quiet isolation. ... We each use our audio tapes strategically to carve up and rearrange time as we work on our respective grooves. We are able to do so as the result of interpenetrating technologically, socially, and physiologically mediated processes which meet on the medium of analog tape. (Porcello 1998:493)
>
> ...
>
> Because of our ability to manipulate the flow of music, we can selectively and intentionally create multiple variations—partially shared improvisations—on we-ness. (1998:495)

Karaoke performers cannot stop, rewind, or play the backup recordings of the songs they are singing, but they do have the microphone.[7] Wong (1994) sees control of the karaoke microphone and other technologies of mediated and live music as facilitating an agency and freedom of movement among categories of identity and discourses of self-definition in Asian-American communities that must constantly negotiate national and transnational worlds of

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[6]A popular karaoke format gradually being replaced by DVDs, "CD-G" stands for "compact disc + graphics"; using a special playback device, CD-G allows karaoke producers to encode printed lyrics in an extra video track to be displayed in synch with the music.

[7]In fact, karaoke singers usually *can* ask the karaoke jockey or attendant to restart a song if they are late to arrive at the stage or are otherwise unsatisfied with the song's beginning.

fragmented culture, politics, and place. The karaoke I study might be said to approach something similar with regard to musical genre and consumption, one's situation vis-á-vis top-down regimes of culture industries. But I want to consider something smaller, something more like what Porcello finds in the temporal command over listening provided by the cassette deck's controls: agency over one's experience of individual social relationships, or a shared mastery of the musical meaning of a single listening.

The microphone yields control not of music's time but of its *sound*; the karaoke performance is unbound by strictures on inflection, articulation, or affect. The microphone adds a new element to the participatory listening of the jukebox: performance. Ōtake and Hosokawa articulate the distinction:

> the difference between these two sound machines [i.e., jukebox and karaoke] is found not in the meaning of sound-and-vision experience ... but in the theatricalization of space by separating the 'stage' from the 'floor' (although the 'stage' is not always an elevated area physically distinguishable from the 'floor'). (1998:193)

They identify the "amplified voice of the standing singer" as the focus of the stage–floor separation, and it is the importance of that amplification that I am interested in. It is the microphone itself that might be said to effect this "theatricalization of space" by repositioning the "standing singer" with regard to her environment—aurally, socially, and spatially. Just as the *stop*, *rewind*, and *play* buttons redefine temporality in recorded sounds—which gives rise to a specific function of recorded sound, as an intensified and condensed channel for interior contemplation and evaluation of exterior sociability—the addition of a microphone to a jukebox (to phrase it crudely) redefines listening to recorded sounds. It explicitly implicates embodied performance in listening as it structures a separation between the individual who performs and everyone else present who does not. In Fox's description of country music, poetics animates fetishized songs, reinscribing a relationship between people into the commodified relationship between objects (by, for instance, discursively identifying the jukebox as an active presence in social space). In karaoke fetishized songs are literally reanimated as they are embodied and performed by individuals in a matrix of social relations with other individuals, who "are able to do so as the result of interpenetrating technologically, socially, and physiologically mediated processes that meet" in karaoke's combination of amplified liveness and mediated popular music (Porcello 1998:493).

Mediation

By singing into a microphone mixed through a PA with a recording of the background tracks of a familiar pop song, karaoke singers exert a certain control over the social relations of the people with whom they share the bar. It is a dynamic that is *mediated* in the least difficult sense of the word: a particular technology fulfills an intermediate role in an (expressive) communication between two (or more) people. In this case, most simply, a voice is amplified, facilitating its address to several people in the bar. But karaoke is also mediated as singers, articulating through their performance an attitude toward the song they sing, structure an attitude and relationship between their audience and that song; in this way, the embodied singer fulfills an active intermediate role in an interpretive relationship between listeners and amplified recordings. And karaoke is mediated as audiences grant or refuse their attention to performances, structuring a social dynamic in which the performer–audience relation is constantly brought into and out of focus, marked by its construction and subsequently incorporated back into comfortable social dynamics. In this way, karaoke involves the mediation of multiple relations between songs, singers, texts, recordings, and audiences—which means, in this popular musical environment, that karaoke articulates the association of industries and individuals, genres and performances, recorded voices and present voices, relations between objects and relations between people.

Reenactment

Oakes (2004) identifies karaoke as one manifestation of a larger contemporary popular-musical practice of "reenactment," including digital music sampling, turntablism, impersonations, tribute acts, and "record-collection rock" (Reynolds 2004). In musical reenactments, instances of popular-musical culture (broadly defined to include aspects of recording, performance, style, genre, gesture, etc.) are resituated as the constituent elements of *new* instances of popular-musical culture:

> while reenactments are not unique in borrowing musical sounds and ideas from what came before, they are set apart by how they actually carry out and conceptualize that borrowing. A musical enactment becomes a reenactment as a result of being discursively and performatively framed as a reenactment; in other words, they are defined by their own intentionality. Musical reenactments are a highly reflexive form of music making in that they highlight the

> means of their own construction, and also because they invite the listener to compare how a reenacted version is similar or different from the "original" musical enactment. ... [T]hey occupy a liminal space where the very parameters of sameness and difference are reflexively negotiated. (2004:59)

"Reenactment" as such is at the center of karaoke, in which amateur singers take as their material songs that already have substantial histories of circulation and audition in popular music. Karaoke is characterized by a highly dynamic relationship between "original" and "copy": backing tracks made to sound as close as possible to the original play simultaneously with the new performance by the karaoke singer. Karaoke performances are diverse in their styles of and commitments to acting out sameness and difference, from casual unawareness to intensely embodied mimicry of the voice, gesture or style of the "original" enactment. Oakes suggests that it is this reflexive performance of sameness and difference that characterizes the particular relationship between "original" and "copy" in reenactive musics.

This insight resonates with my experience of karaoke at Winnie's. While Oakes looks to the negotiation of sameness and difference in musical reenactments as a site where people craft identities in ideological relation to genre, image, and performance in popular music, I am interested in reenactment as it comprises a set of performance practices. By Bauman's definition, "performance as a mode of spoken verbal communication consists in the assumption of responsibility to an audience for a display of communicative competence" (1975:293). "Competence" is not transparent in karaoke practice at Winnie's, where the great majority of singers are untrained and unpracticed as vocalists or performers and a narrowly defined vocal talent is not the only criterion by which performances are judged. Similarly, because for a dollar anyone in the bar may take the stage at Winnie's, the distinction between performer and audience is easily destabilized—often even during the course of a single performance. Nonetheless karaoke singing, as performance, necessarily involves the assumption of some sort of responsibility to a group of surrounding people. A substantial characteristic of musical "competence" at Winnie's occurs in the reflexive portrayal of the relationship between "original" pop song and its karaoke reenactment. The "display of communicative competence" emerges as a performative presentation of genre, style, voice, and listening experiences that invite a comparison of the singer's performance, body, voice, and "audience," with those of the popular recording.

Texts and commodities

Simon Frith has made the general point about popular music that "in songs, words are the signs of the voice" (1988:120); it is the unique performance, "heard in someone's accent," that constitutes the song. Frith's point, in a popular music setting, depends on recording technology; "emphases, sighs, hesitations, [and] changes of tone" (1988:120) are inscribed in recordings and circulated as they sound, in the unique voice of the recorded singer.[8] This is a type of musicality, and a way of listening, that depends on commodification, the reification of processual, emergent sounds into objects that can circulate and stand in commercial relation to other objects. According to Frith, the listening and musicality that follows from recording and commodification is one that is closely attentive to the individual presence, the "grain of the voice" (Barthes 1990) of the popular singer.

What, then, are we to make of karaoke, a popular music practice in which the recorded voice is with great effort extracted from the song? Kelly observes in passing that karaoke singing produces "a shift from a close identification between professional singer and song to a disproportionate emphasis on the song itself" (1998a:89). Karaoke performances often make pop songs with strong associations to particular celebrities sound as though they could be standards, sketched out in shorthand to be sung by anyone. And karaoke performances are often of songs that are not, or are no longer, so closely associated with a particular recorded performance—"oldies," for instance, and "standards."

In karaoke, there is a very real negotiation between present, embodied performances and past, disembodied voices of popular singers, now separated from the recording, that often linger as traces of gesture or inflection in the body and voice of the karaoke singer. In this way karaoke singing involves assuming another type of responsibility, to the recorded object and musical text itself: to stand in for what has not been recorded but whose absence is noticed, a space left in the music to be filled in by individuals who might see the song in a list of hundreds of songs and choose to sing it.

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[8]Frith's "Art Versus Technology" (1986) considers in more depth the importance of technologies of recording and amplification to the character of listening to popular music, as they focus attention on the sensuality and uniqueness of the individual performance.

Winnie's

Winnie's is laid out as a long rectangle, with the main entrance on the back wall underneath a usually-muted television. The karaoke system is set up on the front wall, between a door on the left to the storage room and a hallway on the right to the restrooms. Down the long right wall are five reddish-orange booths, whose color scheme blends into the reddish-orange wood-panelling on the wall above them. These combine with the dim, yellow-orange frosted-glass lamps hanging over the booths to produce a monochromatic blur on that side of the room. On the left is a wooden bar that curves to the wall at either end. In the near corner, under the television, the bar frames a darkened nook tucked in by the windows to the street that let in little light from the streetlamps outside. The wall behind the bar is mirrored, but any sense of space that they might produce is taped over by crowds of photographs, clippings, and knick-knacks—many of Winnie herself, dressed in the costume of the Beijing opera in which she once sang. Far from being dreary, the particularities of space and lighting mark Winnie's recognizably as a New York bar, giving rise to specific, familiar expectations for this environment. When the room is empty, the karaoke machine on the front wall is the focal point; the huge screen and stack of equipment next to it have a visual definition and contrast that differ from the décor of the rest of the room, and they are not clearly integrated into its dive-bar style. Two microphone stands and a tiny platform, with a sign that says, "Do not stand on the stage," sit immediately in front of and below the screen.

Plan of the present work

This project is based on fieldwork at Winnie's and other karaoke sites around New York City conucted beween the winter and fall of 2005. It is the result of many evenings spent by myself and with friends, singing, talking, and watching others sing. The patrons of Winnie's are mostly an anonymous group, people who come to Chinatown once or twice a year (sometimes only once in a lifetime) to sing, to celebrate birthdays, engagements, bachelorette parties, and college reunions, to distract themselves from the pain of a breakup, to come together, I am told, to mourn the collapse of the World Trade Center, or just to have a interesting night out with friends. Therefore, with the exception of a handful of regulars and employees, I mostly got to know people over periods of hours rather than weeks or months.

Public performance is often anxious enough for patrons at Winnie's, so

invariably my presence with a recording device made potential informants uncomfortable. The unstable nature of Winnie's patronage is such that I did not have the opportunity to develop the long-term rapport with singers I would need to record them more formally. But I learned quickly to leave the microphone at home and to write down as much as possible of the performances I had seen and conversations I had had on the train home at night.

I am intrigued by the idea that night after night a familiar sociability is produced and reproduced by a new group of people who have never met each other and will likely never see each other again. The scope of this project limited me to observations primarily at Winnie's, to explore performances as thoroughly as possible. While a multi-sited project would have clear benefits, my choice to focus on once venue reflects a conscious interest on my part in the sociability of Winnie's itself and its continuity in the face of constantly changing patronage. This is a sociability structured and determined by Winnie's space, its employees, and the commercial enterprise of karaoke, as well as by the demographics of Winnie's patrons, the expectations informed by a broader shared culture of what karaoke is or might be, and knowledge of how to get along among strangers in a place like New York City. But it is nonetheless a frequent revelation that every night so many unknown people come together to sing pop songs, and over time the constantly new faces settle around those pop songs in this space to produce and reproduce something of a community, whose character, if not its membership, has a recognizable continuity.

The following chapter explores discourses and practices of evaluation at Winnie's. It finds that the ability to astutely frame a performance so as to account for the shared knowledge of a song's previous reception and popular meaning is an important element of karaoke "competence," as revealed by audience responses to several performances. I note differences in evaluative practices between patrons identifying as "performers" and as "audiences," but I find that a shared identification as "amateurs" creates social ties among individuals largely anonymous to one another.

The third chapter look at performance style. It finds broad stylistic differences between regular patrons of Winnie's and the majority non-regulars, whose karaoke experiences are few and far between. These differences are most clearly understood in terms of different conceptions of the distinction between roles of performer and audience member. Where non-regulars drastically alter their social identity depending on whether they are performing or observing, regulars more fluidly move from one role to the other. I argue that the shifting roles of non-regulars is in part a discursive stance toward "performance" in popular music generally. By highlighting tension in the role of performance, non-regulars explore their "everyday" position as consumers and audiences,

and deconstruct the social stratifications inherent in the mass-mediated division of performers from audiences.

In the fourth chapter, I focus on a single performance, of The Who's "I Can See for Miles." I provide a detailed description of the performance from a video recording made at an Upper West Side karaoke venue. This close reading is presented in dialogue with the singer himself, from an interview conducted after together we reviewed the video of his performance. This chapter argues that karaoke's intertextuality is highly contingent in practice, as karaoke performance comes into contact with the popular original performance in moments of difficulty and confusion. I argue that karaoke performances are informed by listening practices from "everyday" life, and that the details of a karaoke performance are to some extent ordered by the commercial systems in which songs originally circulate.

The conclusion looks briefly at the television show *American Idol* as it provides a useful perspective on Winnie's karaoke. I argue that karaoke has many diverse manifestations, and in many ways karaoke at Winnie's is unique. Nonetheless, karaoke at Winnie's is a social practice in which individuals participate to revise and reconsider experiences of mass-mediated musical culture.

In most cases, names given in the text are pseudonymous.

Chapter 2

Evaluation: reenactment, "amateurism," and technology

Judgments of karaoke by outsiders are rife with negative evaluations. A research librarian I work with once pushed me to explain, "How can you stand karaoke?" Bradd, a regular singer and patron at Winnie's, once expressed his surprise that I, as a "musicologist," was interested in karaoke, because "most musicologists don't think karaoke is really 'good' music." And "karaoke" is a common metaphor, in both academic and political discourse, for behavior that alienates people from their own voices, replacing originality, ingenuity, and talent with parroted ideas and slogans.[1] Broad-stroke condemnations of karaoke by journalists and music fans committed to a certain idea of popular musical authenticity have been commonplace since karaoke first gained popularity in the states in the late eighties (see Drew 2001; Oakes 2004). But whatever karaoke's representation by outsiders, at Winnie's originality, ingenuity, and talent are negotiated anew in specific, local, and social terms.

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[1]For instance: George H. W. Bush said of Bill Clinton during the 1992 election "We're running against the karaoke kids, willing to follow any tune, like customers at a singalong bar, to help them get elected" (Martin 1992). In Britain, Tory co-chairman Liam Fox said of the Prime Minister, "Tony Blair turned out to be our first karaoke Prime Minister— always desperate to perform and saying whatever people want to hear" (Press Association 2005). Inoguchi and Purnendra's 1997 edited book on Japanese politics is called *Beyond Karaoke Democracy?* Vincanne Adams writes about Tibet, globalization, and the cultural and political influence of the US and China on practice and discourse in Tibet in an article titled "Karaoke as Modern Lhasa, Tibet" (1996).

Competence

4 June 2004 At five minutes to ten on a Saturday night, I walked into Winnie's during a performance of Queen's "Bohemian Rhapsody." There was no crowd to block my view of the stage at the far end of the bar or to muffle the PA system with their bodies and their talk, so I could hear the performance better than usual. One singer was liberally out of tune, as he yelped the operatic section of the song ("I'm just a little silhouette of a man…"[2]). He broke in and out of a British-accented falsetto. The other singer's voice was not falsetto but high and hard, almost screeching, and he bounced and tossed his hair in a way that suggested Wayne and Garth[3] singing along in Garth's car—comical, overenthusiastic head-banging. They furrowed their brows and grimaced as they reached for notes much higher than the song required, daring each other to greater and greater extremes of bodily performance—swinging their arms and feet faster and farther, stretching their voices to their greatest reaches of timbre and pitch.

Five women—they looked like college students—sat at the booth behind two employees waiting for the Saturday night rush. They were focused on a couple of ring binders filled with plastic-covered pages listing all the songs available, with codes specifying disk and track numbers. At another booth two more women looked through a songbook together, pencils and slips of paper ready to jot down the number of a song to sing. A few men conversed at the back of the bar. Otherwise Winnie's was empty.

Onstage, the karaoke recording passed out of its "operatic section," and the powerful guitar break entered. The performers head-banged along for a few bars, soaking up the driving guitar lick as the song moves into its hard rock section ("So you think you can stone me and spit in my eye…"). Something clicked, and the screeching and yelling found a groove with the music of the recording. Still singing in head voices, the first singer's falsetto came down to a hard scratchy yell, almost matching the voice of the second singer. The performers shifted, subtly, tuning-in their performance to each other and the recording. They no longer danced separately, stepping to the limits of the mic cable, spinning or bouncing with eyes closed in a grimace. Instead they glanced out toward the audience, stood closer to each other, watching each other. Their movements—knees bent to jump a few inches, head forward, hair falling in their eyes, then head back and microphone up

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[2] "Bohemian Rhapsody" by Frederick Mercury. ©Copyright 1975. Glenwood Music Corporation.

[3] Of *Wayne's World*, the popular 1992 Paramount Pictures comedy staring Mike Myers and Dana Carvey.

to hold a note, stepping forward toward the edge of the stage, turning back to read the lyrics—responded to and followed each other. No more in tune than earlier, the performance was nonetheless now palpably in synch *with* the recording; the constricted voices and wild stage presence began to make sense with the recording's driving, hard, emotional, and lyrically and affectively defiant sound. Recording and performance fell together into a shared stylistic trope, "rock-'n'-roll," whereas in the previous section the singers' exaggerated "rock-'n'-roll" was set against the recording's "operatic" tone. As the singers adjusted their performance, their affect becoming recognizably related to and in synch with "Bohemian Rhapsody," the women at the booth looked up from their songbooks and their conversation and, after a few lines, began to sing along.

At Winnie's "bad" performances occur alongside "good" performances, and neither term is mentioned often in evaluation of others' performances. An apparently terrible performance can be quite meaningful and affective, especially if it displays its amateurism with particular skill. When two men sang "Bohemian Rhapsody" for themselves and fewer than a dozen others, "badness" was just one of several performance tropes, ripe with signification. Their intensely energetic body language suggested an ironic intentionality: with jumps, kicks, spins, and head-banging they emphasized the most extreme moments of failure to sing the operatic sections of the song.[4] But when their apparently inappropriate style was subsequently applied to the rock-'n'-roll sections of the song, their exaggerated gestures merged meaningfully *with* the expressive content of the song, and a silly performance was now a tuned-in performance that, intentionally or not, invited the audience to listen and participate. Moving back and forth between these two modes of performance, hard rock-'n'-roll sections contextualized the unreadable extremes of performance in other sections as one part of a single, enthusiastic, sometimes over-the-top performance. This performance also recalled a familiar scene from the 1992 movie *Wayne's World*, which had already established a half-ironic, half-sincere enactment of this song—and so the singers found a space for their performance in a history of performances of "Bohemian Rhapsody."[5]

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[4]I will take up the subject of performance practice in the following chapter, including "jumps, kicks, spins, and head-banging."

[5]Allmusic.com gives this history of "Bohemian Rhapsody":

> [V]ocalist Freddie Mercury brought an extravagant sense of camp to the band [Queen], pushing them toward kitschy humor and pseudo-classical arrange-

Just as the performers had begun to sing along with, rather than against, the recording, their friends looked up from their booth and began to sing along with them.

"Bohemian Rhapsody" is often mentiond as a song to avoid at karaoke—like Marvin Gaye's "Sexual Healing"and others in the Winnie's songbook, it is just too hard for most people to sing. When it is sung, the "operatic" section often presents special challenges to the karaoke singer, who must negotiate a vocal style and genre that are less familiar, or easily interpreted, than "rock-'n'-roll." Such heightening of gesture and expression, as these singers adapt "Bohemian Rhapsody," is a common response to the difficulties of this part of the song. An exaggerated style both follows the sense of the recording itself, which steps into "character" during this section, and it provides a way to negotiate a stretch of music that is vocally and interpretively challenging.

It does not matter whether these two performers *could* sing "Bohemian Rhapsody" straight and chose not to with explicit intent. Rather, the performance of the song, whether intentional or not, had multiple vectors of meaning and value that intersected with vocal talent, and those of us listening in the audience were informed in various ways: we sang along to a recording of a song with generational significance for most of us (since *Wayne's World*, at least), in part unable to resist the melodies and hooks that we knew well; we sang along with a particular affect because the men with the microphone brought us into a particularly energetic interpretation of the song; and we watched, laughed, and grinned, even as we may have also cringed, at the spectacle onstage. But in relief against our positive responses to parts of this performance are negative judgments as well, rarely explicit, but important to the sociabil-

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ments, as epitomized on their best-known song, "Bohemian Rhapsody." ...
The first single from the record [*A Night at the Opera*], "Bohemian Rhapsody," became Queen's signature song, and with its bombastic, mock-operatic structure punctuated by heavy metal riffing, it encapsulates their music. It also is the symbol for their musical excesses—the song took three weeks to record, and there were so many vocal overdubs on the record that it was possible see through the tape at certain points. To support "Bohemian Rhapsody," Queen shot one of the first conceptual music videos, and the gamble paid off as the single spent nine weeks at number one in the England, breaking the record for the longest run at number one. The song and *A Night at the Opera* were equally successful in America, as the album climbed into the Top Ten and quickly went platinum. ...
[1992 saw] a revival of interest in "Bohemian Rhapsody," which climbed to number two in the U.S. and number one in the U.K. in the wake of its appearance in the Mike Myers comedy *Wayne's World*. (Erlewine 2005, accessed 28 October 2005)

ity of performance and nightlife at Winnie's: by conversing, examining the songbook, or ordering drinks, we reserve our attention until the performers find a way to involve us as an audience.

The contrast in audience reception between two sections of a single song conforms to Oakes's emphasis on the "intentionality" of reenactive performances, and locates reenactment as an important aspect of performative competence in karaoke. When the karaoke performance was out of synch with the recorded song, in this case as the performers sang and acted in ways that were not rhythmically or affectively coordinated with the recording, the few people in the bar assumed roles unrelated to the performance on stage—they went about their own business. But when the karaoke performance and the recorded song lined up stylistically, musically, or interpretively—when the singers sounded like they were singing "with" the recording, following it, finding stylistic middle ground between personal intentions and interpretations and the meanings and interpretations embedded in the recording and songtext—the people in the bar very quickly shifted into their role as audience. The audience did not just watch and listen; they sang with the recording as though performing themselves—inflecting powerful words with glided appoggiaturas and dynamic emphasis, grimacing and throwing their heads back with dramatic intensity at important lines.

When a performance finds a way to coordinate with the recording, expressively enacting an interpretation that is familiar and recognizably part of the song's history of reception, it brings its audience into social and affective relation with the song. *Wayne's World* already provides a space for ironically energetic reenactment of this particular song, allowing karaoke singers of "Bohemian Rhapsody," perhaps, more freedom to perform wildly than singers of another song. But this performance, and the audience's reaction to it, suggested that at times that wildness was too much, and at other times it was just enough to activate the audience's participatory reception: their knowledge both of how to be an audience for a performer, but also of how to listen to and engage with this particular song. The performers, then, are not "in synch" just musically (i.e., in terms of rhythm and pitch), but also intertextually with a set of familiar and significant performances and interpretations that already exist and circulate. Reenactment, the performers' active and intentional re-performance of the sounds, gestures, and signification of a previous performance, is key here to the performers' success in eliciting positive audience-behavior from their fellow patrons at Winnie's.

Schutz's term, "musical tuning-in," glossed by Porcello as "the living through of a 'vivid present' by experiencing togetherness as a 'We' (1977 [1951])" (Porcello 1998) usefully informs a notion of musical reenactment as

a social dynamic. Performers might be said to tune-in to a recording as their affect, timing, and tone follow it more closely. In doing so they effect a social and musical "tuning-in" between themselves and their audience. Performers in part act as an intermediary node in the audience's channel of listening, and so they bring others into new social and interpretive relations with the people and the recorded sounds that surround them. Singers mediate, through their embodied and amplified performance, a musical relationship between a group of listeners and a song. The ability of an audience to musically tune-in to a recording and to socially tune-in to a performance is the effect of an active social and musical mediation by performers.

Bauman identifies "competence," or "the knowledge and ability to speak [or sing] in socially appropriate ways," as a definitive characteristic of performance (1975:293). In this karaoke performance, competence is not linked to such abstractly "musical" parameters such as "having a good voice" or "singing in tune." Rather, competence at Winnie's is the ability to sing "with" or "against" both the sounds of the recording and the lyrics, genre, and style of the pop song that the recording indexes. Bauman expands on the "creation of social structure in performance":

> Through his [*sic*] performance, the performer elicits the participative attention and energy of his audience, and to the extent that they value his performance, they will allow themselves to be caught up in it. When this happens, the performer gains a measure of prestige and control over the audience—prestige because of the demonstrated competence he had displayed, control because the determination of the flow of the interaction is in his hands. (1975:305)

While "prestige" is apparently a result of highly regarded performances at Winnie's,[6] my interests here focus on what Bauman calls "control." At Winnie's, performative competence—skilled and insightful reenactment—can redefine and transform the social roles of the people witness to the performance.

The performer–audience dynamic at Winnie's is markedly unstable. Different individuals continuously move onto and off of the stage—into and out of the role of performer—and at any given time those who are *not* performing do not necessarily act as an audience. It is not uncommon for a person to sing at Winnie's apparently unnoticed by anyone else in the bar. Those who could be "audience" act instead as friends, nighttime revelers, customers of the bar, or singers anticipating their own performance. But a competent performance

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[6] "Prestige" is considered as it relates to authenticity later in this chapter.

can draw out "the participative attention and energy of [the] audience," exerting control over the social roles of others by bringing them to a role in the performer–audience relation.

Hosokawa and Ōtake note "the theatricalization of space [that occurs] by separating the 'stage' from the 'floor,'" or the way karaoke performance restructures social attention to focus on the "amplified voice of the standing singer" (1998:193). "Stage" and "floor" are usefully metonymic of the social roles they index, performer and audience, especially insofar as "performer" is a role never fixed to a single individual, and the abstract category "stage" stands in well for a role at Winnie's whose inhabitants are constantly shifting.

In distinguishing the karaoke machine from the jukebox, Hosokawa and Ōtake are right to note the basic difference in social roles that characterize interactions with each machine. But the generalization neglects an important point about social and performance roles in karaoke. Namely, in karaoke there is not ever-present separation of the "stage" from the "floor." Rather karaoke's distinctive theatricalization of space is the continuous processual effect of karaoke performance by which the boundaries between stage and floor are repeatedly fixed and then blurred. Separate roles for performer and audience are not given or natural in karaoke, except that competent performances restructure social relations to include them.

In a matter of seconds, the performance choices of the two men singing "Bohemian Rhapsody" captured the attention of people sitting inattentive in booths at Winnie's, eliciting their "participative attention and energy." "Audience" was switched on as a category; it can easily be switched off. At Winnie's, the simple act of listening as an audience both reflects and is itself a form of evaluative discourse about music and performance.

Judgments of taste, value, or competence are always constructed and inflected by social practice (Bourdieu 1984; Kingsbury 1988; Merriam 1964). Judgments of karaoke from outside, whether critical of karaoke's inauthentic relation to song-texts and its untrained and unrehearsed performances or celebratory of it as a popular usurpation of performative agency, tell us more about ideologies of who should make music and what music ought to be than they do about sounds people find pleasing (itself meaningful only socially). At Winnie's, theatricalization—the performative separation of "stage" from "floor" by which an undifferentiated crowd is articulated as active audiences and performers—is the characteristic social dynamic in karaoke. As such, it is also at the center of evaluations of performances. When an audience determines that something about a performance is competent, they turn their heads, put down their drinks, and put on their audience hats. A performer's tuning-in with a recording will potentially effect a broad social tuning-in,

bringing the interest and attention of many, if not everyone, in line with one another. Such synchronization structures in practice, if not always in concept, a shared "we-ness," a phenomenal coming together in collective action and collective attention that is profoundly social (Schutz 1977 [1951]).

There are multiple tropes of competence at Winnie's, of which the reenactive "singing with" a recording is only one. Identifying parameters of evaluation does not necessarily predict audience reactions. Depending on the moods and mindsets of the people at Winnie's, a performance that one night might have brought everyone to their feet might be only mildly acknowledged, or even unnoticed, another night.[7] Even over the course of an evening such dynamics change drastically. Often for the first hour of dedicated singing in an evening every performance is noticed, sung along with, and performers are applauded when they finish. But the tone changes after a while, as the excitement of karaoke wears off or people immerse themselves in their conversations with friends, and it becomes noticeably more difficult to involve the audience. In part this is because "novelty," like reenactment, is prized at Winnie's, and any karaoke performance is novel to someone who has never seen such a thing before, or has not done karaoke in months.

What is said

At Winnie's there is a discourse about evaluation that enforces the idea that "anyone can sing" and discourages any openly negative evaluations of others' performances. When a group from the West Coast came to Winnie's in September 2005, as they looked through the songbook, watched others perform, and had a few drinks in preparation for their own performances, they compared Winnie's favorably with karaoke in California. One woman in particular, Julie, talked about karaoke performers in San Francisco, where singers "take it really seriously. People practice their songs at home and work up whole acts to go with the songs." Julie evaluated Winnie's positively in contrast, noting that it is "really casual," that "people don't take themselves too seriously," and that the environment is welcoming, friendly, and not too "judgmental." Her friends nodded their assent.

Bradd, a regular at Winnie's, makes similar comparisons. He tells of moving to New York from Los Angeles, where he had a regular karaoke spot "in the

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[7]Such a comparison is partly facile, as "performance" as it is defined by Bauman and others is dependent on the contingencies of the social dynamics it structures and negotiates. Such disparate audience reactions, then, would distinguish two performances as fundamentally different, despite apparent stylistic similarities, because they exist so differently in social life.

barrio" with a strong community of regulars. When he came to New York he explored a number of karaoke venues looking for such a community, avoiding karaoke spots where people "take themselves too seriously" or are too "judgmental."[8] At Winnie's he found a group of close-knit regulars (Bradd uses the word "family" to describe them), and for four years he has come nearly every week.

A certain tension happens within groups in the audience when a performance is noted as "bad"—whether it is out of tune, rhythmically out of synch, or if the performer does not know the song well and misses many of the lines. Friends might look at each other and grimace, but not say anything. If someone does comment, "Oh, this is embarrassing," or makes a more specific criticism, "This guy doesn't know the song well enough," such comments are often put down by others with responses like, "no, he's just having fun," or more directly, "anyone can sing at karaoke, it doesn't matter." I have often been on the giving and receiving end of such comments.

More commonly, what negative evaluations do occur concern aspects of performance other than musical talent or vocal ability. One such instance was a night in February 2005 when Marius came to Winnie's with his friend Sarah to cheer her up after her boyfriend broke up with her on Valentine's Day. During a particularly suggestive performance of "The Piña Colada Song" by a young woman from (another) bridal party, Marius looked up at the men gathered around the singer and said, "It's just the same old act, man. Just put an ad in the personals." Whether she sang well was irrelevant, but Marius's comment was harsh in its critique of the woman's performance of sexuality and the men who flocked to the stage to watch.

One night in June 2005, a man going to the stage to sing a folk-country song was followed by a woman from his table. He told her, "Okay, but you have to dance 'country.'" As he sang with an affected southern drawl, she danced a little, unsure, here and there putting her hands on her hips and bobbing at her knees, calling to mind contra dancing and the Irish folk dancing act "Riverdance." As they returned to their booth, a friend commented, "That was *excellent*, I mean, like, *top* quality." The comment seemed to join in on a joke that the performers had initiated in their performance. The stereotyping of "country" in gesture and voice suggested by their performance was more an ironic commentary on genre than a transparent rendering of a song they liked, and the friend's comment, to which they responded with smiles, did not judge their performance, but rather joined their ironic critique of "country" genre and style.

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[8]"take [oneself] too seriously" and "judgmental" are common in these descriptions.

"Talent": self- and other-consciousness

While audiences generally refrain from criticizing performers, performers are often self-critical and hyper-aware of judgments they imagine the audience makes of them. When performers finish singing, they frequently walk back to their friends with an expectant look, asking, "Was that alright?"

Tom and Hillary are stand-up comics who sing karaoke every few months. Tom said, "Other performing you actually have to work for, but karaoke is like killing[9] without the work. You get the satisfaction of doing it but not actually putting any effort into it. No one's going, 'hey, you suck.'"

Hillary interrupted, "No, we just can't hear them. They are saying that, we just can't hear them."

Hillary was joking, but maked her point intently. Her comment suggested a fear common to karaoke performers, that they are judged mercilessly. Often before singing people give a disclaimer, "I am not a singer," qualifying their performance in case it does not go over well. Or they choose another strategy, trying to establish that in fact they are good enough to sing. Karen, who was at Winnie's for the first time, and had never sung karaoke before, told me, "People say I have a nice voice. I'm a singer... Well, I sing in a choir." Such disclaimers seek a freedom to perform uninhibited by the possibility of judgment. In fact, as I note in the previous section, such judgments are very rare at Winnie's, and those preparing to perform likely have not heard people around them making harsh judgments of other singers. For instance, as Hillary commented that audiences do say, "you suck," during Tom's and her performances, a pair of men sang Queen's "Another One Bites the Dust" behind them, unnoticed and unevaluated by her.

This fear of judgment is largely unfounded. The generally unnoticed fact is that patrons at Winnie's do not pay that much attention to singers. The attention of most patrons is focused on their own performances, either recently finished or upcoming, and not on the constant progression of people singing song after song. But disclaimers against judgment by others are so common they suggest something about the personal meaning of taking the stage in front of a group of strangers, even if they are all "amateurs." One woman told me she and her friends like karaoke because, "We love the attention." When I asked her if she felt like audiences actually give her the attention she wants, she said, "It doesn't matter. Singing karaoke is about getting attention." While this woman was unafraid of judgment, her insight about

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[9]Tom is using a word from stand-up comic jargon. "Killing" means performing successfully.

performance is consistent with the experience of anxious performers: singing into the microphone in a crowded bar creates a powerfully personal feeling of being on display, whether or not the audience is actually watching.

Kinsgbury (1988), in his account of the "conservatory cultural system," considers the pervasiveness of "talent" as a socially-constructed category of evaluation and identification. It seems that karaoke singers import from outside karaoke their evaluative paradigms centered on the notion of "talent" into the karaoke environment, where such evaluations of "talent" are otherwise largely absent. For instance, Kingsbury notes "the tension between self-consciousness and other-consciousness in a musical performance setting" (1988:71) as central to notions of "talent" in evaluations of classical performers. Such a tension is analogous, if not identical, to the self-conscious awareness of the gaze and judgment of others that informs karaoke singers. It is not remarkable that individuals bring to karaoke singing a deep-seated anxiety about their own talent and the social appropriateness of public performance. But, if performer and audience are mutually dependent social roles and the role of karaoke performer seems to be linked to notions of performance outside karaoke, it is remarkable that only performers, and not karaoke audiences, bring with them such notions of talent and critical evaluation.

Kingsbury identifies the social role of "musically untalented person" that is "as definitely a skilled social accomplishment as having talent" (1988:74). One of the hallmarks of such people is not just that they refrain from performing, but that they also recuse themselves from evaluating others' performances. In this sense, the enforced "amateurism" of karaoke can be understood to structure an audience of "musically untalented people"—even if outside karaoke many would not consider themselves such—who refrain from explicitly judging performances in favor of the participative evaluation that "tuning in" to a performance effects, because such explicit musical judgment falls outside what is socially appropriate for "amateurs".

"Talent," as Kingsbury considers it, "transforms a succession of social events [performance and evaluation] into the manifestation of intrapersonal traits of an individual" (1988:71). That is, talent is understood to be an immanent quality of certain individuals, part of their social and personal identity that predicts the quality of all their performances, not simply an evaluative marker of single performances. While sometimes at Winnie's an audience member will positively judge a performance by saying, "She's a really good singer," negative judgments, when they occur, are more often of the form, "*That* was awful" (not "*She* is awful"). But for individuals, statements like "I'm not a singer," or "People say I'm a good singer" suggest that "talent"— as part of who they are—is often at stake. While audiences seem unconcerned

with the identities of the constantly changing performers onstage, the performers themselves are engaged in a highly fraught negotiation of their musical self-definition and social identity.

Sound, technology, and infrastructure

After singing her third or fourth song of the night with a friend, Julie (of the September 2005 group from the West Coast) sought me out to tell me, "You should really investigate private room karaoke."[10] Her friend concurred.

I asked, "Why?"

"You can't *hear* yourself here. It's not real karaoke. I've done a lot of karaoke, and if you want to study karaoke you should look into private room karaoke or something. This isn't good karaoke."

Before performing herself, Julie had only positive things to say about the environment and performances at Winnie's. She liked that Winnie's is small, that singers are not competitive or too serious about singing, and that the audience was encouraging and non-judgmental of singers. But after singing, she reversed her position. Not just critical of the poor quality of Winnie's PA system and its lack of dedicated speakers for performers to monitor their singing, she dismissed Winnie's with broad strokes, suggesting that my research must be missing something important about karaoke. Winnie's lack of what Julie understood to be "proper" technology resulted in her wholesale objection to Winnie's as "not real karaoke."

While the technology of karaoke allows individuals to insert themselves in an intermediary position between audiences and recorded popular music (the jukebox), it can also get in the way. When the men singing "Bohemian Rhapsody" finally sing "with" the recording, their performance mediates a channel of reception between their audience and "Bohemian Rhapsody"—and all the song's sonic, historical, and intertextual meanings. The performance at hand, in which Julie and her friend sang Justin Timberlake's "Cry Me a River," was similarly well-appreciated by their audience, who watched, laughed, and sometimes sang along. The problem in this case was not that the lack of technology prevented the audience from appreciating the pop song, or the performance. Rather, it prevented the singer from appreciating her own performance.

The singer is the "consumer" of karaoke performance. She pays to sing. Everyone else watches for free, pays attention or not without too much concern

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[10]Mentioned also in the previous chapter, such "private rooms" are commonly called "karaoke boxes." Dedicated establishments rent rooms with karaoke equipment to private parties, usually by the hour.

about being a good audience or seeing a good show. Singers often say after a performance that "you can't hear yourself sing," but the reverse is rare: people in the audience do not often mention that they cannot hear the performer. The tropes of evaluation are very different between performers and audiences at Winnie's, and this is an important case of the performer exhibiting such a different understanding of events than the audience.

Evaluative discourses that circulate at Winnie's generally de-emphasize *sound* as the basic parameter of judgment. Social roles and identities, novelty, and the ability of performers to bring their audiences into direct social relation with the performance, each other, and the "original" song, are much more explicit in practices of evaluation (whether direct spoken evaluations or the granting or withholding of attention to a performance) than the sounds of voices and recordings. Of course, to grant or withhold attention, to sing along with a performance, to criticize the authenticity of a performance, or to comment on the value and meaning of a particular genre all depend on listening, on the meaningful reception of sounds (in combination with other performance practices such as gesture and speech) as they are performed by a singer at karaoke. But here, Julie explicitly identifies problems of sound as fundamental to her critique.

Julie's criticism is directed broadly at Winnie's in its entirety, not some particular aspect of Winnie's. Noting the unfavorable signal-to-noise ratio from the PA in the place where performers usually stand, Julie's emphasis on sound implicates a particular technological failure of Winnie's karaoke system. Karaoke is defined by technology; without a microphone, PA, and playback mechanism, amateur public singing would just be amateur public singing— not "karaoke." Technology, in effect, is the infrastructure of Winnie's *qua* karaoke venue. As a particular technology at Winnie's is understood by a singer to fail in a particular way, the failure is attributed not to the particular technology but to Winnie's as a whole. "Not real karaoke," moreover, means more than just that Winnie's is not a good place to sing karaoke. "You can't hear yourself" is a general statement (not, "I couldn't hear myself"), and its dismissal of Winnie's is also a dismissal of the "karaoke" sung by everyone at Winnie's and the audiences who watch and enjoy their singing. The small sonic disruption ramifies all the way up to disrupt the basic conception of the bar, its inhabitants, and the social roles and behaviors it contains.

Authenticity: amateurism and consumption

4 March 2005 There was one large bachelorette party at Winnie's this evening that dominated the karaoke singing. The queue to sing is at least an hour long. Unlike other karaoke scenes where a karaoke jockey or emcee might adjust the order of songs for balance and energy (Drew 2001:91–118; Kelly 1998a:85–86), at Winnie's the song requests of various groups sometimes come together as a half-hour of deadening ballads or obscure rock-'n-roll. People have to wait so long to sing they get bored and antsy; they lose interest; sometimes they even get a bit edgy, hostile toward those who do finally get to sing. It is during these lulls that the "audience" most refuses to be an audience. This night the bachelorette party had used its numbers to reserve a several-song set of its own performances. While the energy and enthusiasm of these young women's singing kept the crowd interested for a song or two, it wore thin, and people returned their focus to their own groups of friends, yielding the stage and karaoke—not acting as an audience—to a group of women singing for each other.

Bradd was immersed in his conversation with friends at the end of the bar; they exchanged jokes and stories with the bartenders and employees they know well. The bachelorette party sang half a dozen songs, until Kelly tapped Bradd as the title screen for "Shout" flashed on the screen. He headed to the stage confidently. He took the microphone from its stand and moved left a bit to the side of the screen, facing out toward the floor, and as the vocal cue came up he smiled and sang "*weeeeeeellllll... you know you make me wanna* SHOUT!"[11] holding the microphone in his left hand and pointing out to the bar with his right.[12]

There was a lot of energy in the bar, but for the last half an hour it had not been focused on the performances. Some people nearest Bradd began to call out "SHOUT!" along with him, and he encouraged it, gesturing to them and others to raise their voices, to call out "SHOUT!" at the end of each line. The dozen women from the bachelorette party who a moment ago had been hogging the stage were now an enthusiastic audience whose numbers and energy spread out into the crowd, and Bradd used it. He moved toward their table, pointed the mic at them at the end of each line as they happily yelled "SHOUT!" In thirty seconds it had spread to the whole bar. Most conversations paused, people sitting in booths with their backs to the performance craned their necks around to peer through the crowd, yelling "SHOUT!" every fourth

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[11] "Shout!" by O'Kelly Isley, Ronald Isley, and Rudolph Isley. ©Copyright 1962. EMI Longitude Music.

[12] *Italics* between quotation marks designate singing.

beat. They sang "*haaayyy-aaay-eeeyy-ay*" in singsong call and response with Bradd. He did not look at the screen except here and there to make sure he was with the form of the song. Instead he was right there with the audience, pointing the microphone out toward them, planting his feet as he stopped suddenly to put his head back and croon "*now* WAY-AAAAAIIT *a* MIN-*ute*" to cheers from the crowd, especially from the bachelorette party.

"*A little bit softer now...*," and the audience crouched a bit and whispered, "SHOUT!" They followed Bradd through the whole crescendo, almost screaming, "SHOUT!" before Bradd has sung "*a little bit louder* NOW" for the last time.

When he finished a woman from the bachelorette party called him over. He went, smiling. She asked, "Do they pay you?"

"What?"

She continued, "You're a ringer. You HAVE to be! You wait until people aren't having fun and then they put your song up instead of someone else's so you can work the crowd." She had been among those singing along loudest during his performance, but now it was not clear whether she was actually angry that he might have fooled them.

Bradd denied it, but she would not believe him. He came back to the bar flustered, sipped his beer. "That woman just called me a ringer!" he said as someone else took the stage to sing Elvis.

Bradd sang "Shout!" and everyone in the bar joined in, but one woman got up-in-arms at the possibility that the performance she just witnessed, and quite enjoyed, might have been paid for. Bradd's performance was too "good"; he was too comfortable and natural handling the crowd. Something must be untoward.

Bradd's performance was among the "best" of the night, using nearly any criteria we might imagine for how "good" is constructed in karaoke. It was in tune, in synch with the music. The crowd participated in the performance with relish, paying uncharacteristic attention to Bradd's singing. Bradd himself seemed to enjoy singing, communicating with the audience, and grooving with the song; when he finished his smile was broad and triumphant. The performance was social glue, bringing everyone back to a central focus on karaoke, the "musical tuning-in," that Schutz said is the social significance of music (Schutz 1977 [1951]). It was also loaded with signification, where the song "Shout!" was likely familiar to most in the bar, and Bradd's performance and the audience's participation called to mind a moment that might have

been orchestrated by a DJ at a wedding—easy for the audience to find their own participatory role. But the possibility that Bradd might be a "ringer" undermined his performance for one woman. He apparently failed a test of karaoke "authenticity," where amateurism is a sometimes spoken and often assumed ideological rule.

While such an explicit accusation of inauthenticity as "you're a ringer" is uncommon, Bradd *is* often noted by patrons at Winnie's as different, "not one of us." His performances are among the few events at Winnie's that elicit a conception of a group identity, an expressed "us" defined in contrast to Bradd's style of performance. I missed a performance of his of "Mustang Sally" once, but when I came back into the bar and rejoined the people I was with, they asked me, "do you know that guy?" I did not then, but they continued to talk about him and to wonder who he might be. They noted his familiarity with the Winnie's staff, how comfortable he seemed onstage, how much "fun" the performance was. Bradd's uncommon competence at karaoke performance gained him prestige, but it also distinguishes him, with possible negative implications, from everyone else.

Bradd's performance of "Shout!" was neither especially novel nor terribly "reenactive"; reenactment, following Oakes, is defined by its intentionality. While "Shout!" has a tremendous history of performance and reception, it has no definitive or canonical performance; Bradd might as well be said to have reenacted a familiar wedding party event. But Bradd's performance did bring a group of people who were very much not an audience back into an active role in the karaoke performance dynamic. It was "competent" because he has a good voice, he sang well and confidently, and he smiled and was charming. It was a performance that might even overcome the preemptory judgments by karaoke critics of the low quality of karaoke performances. And just as it was a conventionally good performance, it set Bradd apart from others in the bar. It might be said that Bradd set himself apart by singing too professionally; he took the notion of the "stage" too literally, perhaps, over-articulating a distinction between performer and audience that at Winnie's is usually more subtle. This made him vulnerable to a critique of his authenticity—especially notable because "authenticity" is usually one thing that ought never be an issue at karaoke. As the critics cited at the outset of this chapter might ask, What is less authentic than karaoke?

While I do not wish to reify "authenticity" as a stable category of judgment at Winnie's, reactions to Bradd suggest that those unfamiliar with and unpracticed in karaoke have a real identification with the category, "amateur." Such a conception is anchored both in the performance styles considered appropriate and in the constantly shifting habitation of performer–audience roles.

Though rarely spoken, the sense of an "us" defined by a shared amateurism appears when it is challenged by emergent professionalism, and this identity at least partially mitigates against the fear of performing and being judged: *We're all amateurs here.*

There is another important way to state this: *We're all consumers here.* "Ringer" and "amateur" both relate to training, practice, and confidence in performance, but they also specifically implicate the exchange of money. Cash is exchanged for every song sung at Winnie's, but performers pay the establishment, not the other way around. By calling him a "ringer," the bridesmaid—however facetious or hyperbolic her statement—accuses Bradd of being on the other side of the exchange. She articulates an implicit economics of karaoke that is part of the ideology of amateurism at Winnie's. And in fact Bradd, though many of Winnie's patrons likely do not know this, often does not have to pay to sing.

Like "amateurism," "consumerism" is not explicitly stated as ideology at Winnie's. But the basic practice of karaoke is structured in mass-cultural relations between producers and consumers—in karaoke, those normally inhabiting the (stable) role of consumer destabilize the make-up of that role by engaging in at least one practice that is usually reserved for producers: singing into a microphone. It is necessary, therefore, to also consider karaoke as popular music consumption in Adornian terms, in which the reception of music is as interested in the act of purchase as it is in the "music itself" (1991 [1938]). Such an approach importantly addresses the re-characterization of social relationships that results through commodity fetishization. In the case of karaoke, musical commodities (the discs of karaoke recordings) circulate, but it is the experience of performing that is directly commodified; everyone pays a dollar to sing.

At Winnie's, the experience of performing is structured in exchange, and the construction of an identity as "amateurs" is bound up with a constructed identity as "consumers"—the difference between musical roles based upon "use" and those based upon "exchange" (Adorno 1991 [1938]:38–39). Many karaoke venues do not charge per song, using karaoke to bring customers into the bar and buy drinks.[13] Even at Winnie's, the dollar is something of a token, and while the money surely helps cover the costs of upkeep of the karaoke system,[14] what it brings in is insignificant compared to the busy business done by the bar. But that token is significant (and signifying) as it structures a

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[13] Drew 2001 considers such venues.

[14] The equipment is so well used, I have seen on a number of occasions that it has been necessary for the CD-G or DVD player to be replaced in the middle of an evening, from a reserve kept in the back room.

relationship of consumption, bringing the unfamiliar popular musical practice of singing by fans at least partly into the more familiar category of "leisure and entertainment" (Warren 1993).

If "we're all consumers here," then Bradd's performance—insofar as it is seen to be paid for—is literally "patronizing." It enacts a performer–audience relation of exchange in which audiences pay to enjoy a performance as an audience. But at Winnie's the exchange relation is normally the other way around, in which *performers* pay for their role as performers—a social environment in which the performer–audience relationship flattens, or even inverts, the normal stratification and hierarchy of commercial performance sociality.

Theatricalization

While explicit evaluative discourse is largely eschewed by Winnie's patrons, it is clear that evaluation takes place in a wide range of discourses and practices around karaoke performance. Participative "tuning in" articulates an engaged interaction of audience and performer that depends on certain notions of intertextual popular musical competence—reenactment, in particular. Performers fret constantly about evaluation, such that the imagined judgment of an (in fact largely unconcerned) audience on their performance is the basis for a common experience of anxiety about public display. Audiences, on the other hand, forego explicit judgement—and the social power that comes with the ability to judge—by coming together under the rubric of "amateurism," an ideology of social and musical identity that is protective against inauthenitic or cynical manipulation by a performer. In every case, discourses and practices of evaluation at Winnie's refer to the liminality and markedness of the social roles put into place in karaoke practice: the new identities of "performer" and "audience." These identities are contingent upon particular uses of technology and modes of performance that effect this overarching "theatricalization of space," in which a normal-seeming environment like Winnie's—another dive bar in New York City—is transformed into a locale of highly stratified and mediated sociality

In the next chapter I pursue this focus on theatricalization further, considering performance style as it relates to and reflects the particular social environment of karaoke at Winnie's.

Chapter 3

Karaoke performance practice

In this year's "The Best of NYC" issue, the *Village Voice* rated Winnie's "Best Karaoke Bar." The blurb reads:

> Tiny Björk-looking girls grab the veil from a Jersey bridal party and challenge them to a fight while an informal after-party from the gay prom congregates in the back corner, and we all drink pitchers of nine-alcohol fruit punch and get laughed at by the cops. Jesse Jackson's dream has finally been realized at WINNIE'S, in karaoke form. (Village Voice 2005)

One would hardly know that anyone sings at Winnie's if not for the word "karaoke" mentioned once in the text and once in the title. The *Voice*'s blurb focuses on the variety of social roles and identities at Winnie's, but provocatively suggests that such diversity is realized "in karaoke form." The phrase suggests that these identities emerge in karaoke performance, or at least that there is a correlation between karaoke and social diversity—that it is no coincidence that "Jesse Jackon's dream" and karaoke go together. And by highlighting social roles over performance as the justification for Winnie's "best of" rating, the *Voice*'s appraisal is in concordance with the modes of evaluation used by Winnie's patrons.

Winnie's is without question "diverse" in the way the *Voice* describes. The write-up stands out to me because in its humorous limning of the social diversity of Winnie's, and its emphasis on race and sexuality as primary social markers, it misses the always-present social fact that a substantial number of people at Winnie's are Asian-American. The varied types of people, so easily distinguished by the *Voice* with this astute shorthand ("Björk-looking girls," "Jersey bridal party," "after-party from the gay prom"), do not so distinctly

emerge in performance. That is, it is not always (or ever) possible to predict how a singer will perform based on these social labels.

There are, however, two broad categories of social distinction that are reflected in performance styles of the two centers of sociability at Winnie's: regulars and non-regulars. These categories map onto several social markers, including ethnicity (Asian- and Anglo-American), age (over- and under-thirty, say), and social gatherings (regulars come alone or in pairs to meet their friends, while non-regulars come in groups).

In this chapter I will consider these two broad styles of performance, first looking at performances of regulars to provide a helpful contrast to the style of non-regulars—the group that is the primary focus of my research at Winnie's. In the rest of this chapter, I explore anxiety, irony, and theatricality—tropes common to the performances of non-regulars—as aspects of performance style and as affective or discursive modes in the karaoke practice of Winnie's non-regulars. Further, I hope to demonstrate that these and other tropes of Winnie's non-regular patrons' performance practice contribute to a marking of the communicative and social practices of karaoke performance at Winnie's as distinct from everyday life and "ordinary" performance.

Regulars

4 June 2005 I sat at the bar. "Bohemian Rhapsody" ended and no one went up to sing, so the place was quiet. The women in the booth behind me were having an audible conversation about what song they were going to sing together, alternately looking through the book and pausing to sing a snippet of a song or make a joke about some of the items in the songbook. "Let's sing 'Oh Susanna'," one said, joking. The songbook at Winnie's has a number of items that seem totally out of place in the company of hit pop songs from the last few decades—"Happy Birthday," "Hava Nagila," "High Hopes." "'On My Own,' from Les Mis" said another, and she sang a melody. Joking again: "'Okie from Muskogie'... obviously, country!" expressing some ironic insight about genre.[1] "I'm all about singing 'On My Own'," the woman said again, petitioning her friends, perhaps.

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[1]On another night I told Sarah, whom I had met a few hours before at Winnie's, that I was upset that my voice was not suited to singing R&B—I desperately wanted to pull off some Marvin Gaye—but that instead I had "more of a country voice." She responded enthusiastically that I "should sing some country," because, "it's really funny." Driving her point home, she repeated the phrase, "It's really funny," a few times, the implication being, "perfect for karaoke."

A bartender, who must have been in the back when I came in, put in a disc and sang "Killing Me Softly." She samg it softly, but she had a rich, strong voice that sounded both practiced and emotive. Often when the bar was quiet this bartender would sing something casually like this, sometimes sitting down and singing a few songs in a row, taking advantage of the calm. She sang without any of the indications of stage fright or insecurity I often see in non-regulars as they head toward the stage to sing.

As I was watching this performance, the women at the booth behind me continued to browse the songbook, apparently ignoring the singer. Their chatter continued along the same lines—mostly silence broken by interjections when someone has seen something notable in the book.

"My favorite, from Father of the Bride...."

"*Your cheatin' heaaart, will tell on you,*"[2] affecting a heavy country twang. They all laughed, hard. I had been mostly attending to the performance of "Killing Me Softly," and this outburst startled me.

One took the lead, "All right, guys, we're picking a song, what was that one?" All five sang a few notes, "*this is what it sounds like ... when doves cry.*"[3]

The bartender finished her song. A minute later she put in another disc and sang "Misty." Sitting at a booth with two other employees, stretching the microphone cable to near its limit, she samg from outside the blind spot under the speakers that makes it so hard for singers to hear themselves onstage. She held the microphone lightly but straight out from her mouth, singing into its small sweet-spot, and her voice cut clearly and audibly through the bar noise, the bad acoustics, and the low-fi PA. The song was in a comfortable register for her voice, and using the microphone as she did, she could sing softly, without effort, letting the PA do the work.[4] Her voice, then, was open and unstrained as she sang with a slight accent and near-perfect diction. She looked at the monitor twelve feet away, her back to her table and Winnie's patrons, and she sang "Misty" with an economy of movement and expression. The song's melody and lyrics were precise and easily understood. I made a mental note of the counterpoint between the laughter and silliness of the group behind me and the focused, nostalgic singing being performed in front of me. The table behind me sang a fragment, all together, "*just another manic Monday.*"[5]

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[2] "Your Cheatin Heart" by Hank Williams. © Copyright 1952. Sony/ATV Acuff Rose Music.

[3] "When Doves Cry" by Prince. © Copyright 1984. Controversy Music.

[4] Note Frith (1986) on "crooning" and the use of technologies of amplification by popular singers to allow a quieter, more "personal" vocal sound.

[5] "Manic Monday" by Prince. © Copyright 1985. Controversy Music.

"I would sing the Bangles."

"Once Bitten, Twice Shy," said another matter-of-factly, not so much suggesting the song as noting its presence in the songbook.

One sang in a stylized chest voice, "*Pump up the jam, pump it up*!"[6] The other women laughed at this display.

"How 'bout, *let's get physical, physical*?"

The woman who first demanded that they pick a song said "Alright, are we going to take up 'When Doves Cry' or the Bangles?" Two of them brought their request to the front of the bar, where Kelly was there to accept it.

A girl still at the table said, "Okay, we're gonna sing."

People had been trickling in. Some men behind me spoke in Chinese; I knew one of them a little, David. Soon there were five people at the bar. Bradd, whom I know the best of the family of regulars who are almost always at the bar, came in, followed by a group of his ESL students. They sat at a booth—unusual for Bradd, who would usually sit at the end of the bar by the stage, in the company of his friends and the bartenders. No one talked about karaoke but the women waiting to sing "When Doves Cry."

The bartender sang another song—"Moon River." A large group of people came in and filled up the big wrap-around booth by the back window. I went outside for some air and listened to Winnie's from the street. The clear rendition of "Moon River" came filtered through loud male conversation in Chinese and loud female conversation in English. It ended to some applause; the conversational volume decreases.

All five of the girls sang "When Doves Cry." They stood in a semi-circle, facing the screen, their backs to the bar. They were nearly motionless except when one of them gaffed, stumbling over a phrase or her voice breaking on a high note, when they looked at each other and laughed. When the bartender who just finished singing passed behind the bar, I heard her vocalize the bass line under her breath, grooving a little.

"When Doves Cry" ended and a woman who had been sitting with her date at the bar near me got up to sing Whitney Houston's "I Have Nothing." She walked the microphone to a booth near the stage, and sat in the seat from which the bartender sang a few moments earlier. She began singing, and her performance was a lot like the bartender's—strong, unstrained, each word clearly enunciated, every rhythm precisely articulated. She too knew how to use the microphone to project her voice, holding it out from her mouth, singing directly into its center. Unlike the bartender, though, who sat relaxed, looking

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[6] "Pump up the Jam" by Thomas de Quincey and Manuella Kamosi. © Copyright 1989. Colgems EMI Music Inc.

straight at the monitor, this singer held her shoulders stiffly straight and back, and glanced to her date once or twice, otherwise keeping her eyes averted and down. Her voice sounded young, light, occasionally unsteady. Sometimes the pitch wavered slightly, elsewhere she cut off held notes a beat or two early. At the chorus the accompanying music built climactically, anticipating a Whitney Houston-like crescendo "*I have nothing, nothing,* NOTHING."[7] The girls at the table behind me sang along with the bridge, "*stay in my arms if you dare / or must I imagine you there / don't walk away from me. . .*," but they stopped there, leaving the climactic hook for the singer at the microphone. The song structure built toward a strong and emotive "nothing, nothing, NOTHING," and the audience's participation heightened the building musical tension. But this singer did not raise her voice in parallel, so as the recording crescendoed, the contrast made her voice sound even softer. Countering the musical expectations of the recording and the audience, the sense of restraint produced an unexpected sort of musically climactic tension.

The first time I met David, a regular and friend of Bradd's, was at Winnie's on a busy Saturday night. After waiting his turn for nearly an hour, David went to the microphone to sing Elton John's "Your Song." The bar was crowded and noisy, it was difficult to see the stage, and people were too busy to pay attention to most of the song. David placed himself solidly in front of the crowd, under the speakers where you cannot hear yourself, holding the microphone up and out from his mouth to sing straight into its sweet spot. Singing this way, his voice cut through the din of the bar. He stood still, surrounded by people, facing out toward the crowd without looking at the lyrics on screen. In a comfortable register, his voice unstressed, David sang the melody and lyrics clearly, enunciating each word, in tune. In moments, the audience perked up, eyes searching for the singer hidden by the crowd. Many sang along, and by the end of the song, there were few in the bar who did not join in the last chorus, supplying their own inflection and affect where David sang steadily, "*I* HOPE *you don't* MIND / *I* HOPE *you don't* MIND. . .,"[8] chins out, their heads cocking on hope and mind.

I initially mistook the woman singing "I Have Nothing" for a regular, part of the Winnie's "family," as Bradd likes to call it. Because she and her date were Asian-American, and, though not middle-aged, were not the young-adults who dominate the casual patronage, and were not at Winnie's with a large group, I typecast her as either an employee or a regular I had

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[7] "I Have Nothing" By David Foster and Linda Thompson–Jenner. © Copyright 1992. Howe Sound Music.

[8] "Your Song" by Elton John and Bernard Taupin. © Copyright 1970. Universal Songs of Polygram International.

not seen before. Whatever my stereotyping first reaction, her performance style located her as a regular. It was calm, quiet, comfortable and easy with the microphone. She sang seated, not onstage, not performing for others, just singing the song onscreen. The clear presentation of lyrics and melody, without dramatic heightening, was comparable to the bartender's three songs, despite her timidity. David's singing, too, though he stood at the stage and faced outward to an audience, was notably clear of diction and steady of pitch; he hit the mic's sweet-spot so lyrics and melody cut through the noise of the bar. Performances by regulars are rare; usually on a busy night the queue is too long, and they sit at the bar playing "Chinese dice" and talking. I note these performances because they provide a useful and performatively meaningful contrast to the more common performance style of Winnie's "irregular" patrons, whose performances lack, in particular, the clarity and precision of the regular patrons' performances, replacing them with a combination of anxiety, irony, and theatricality that mark their performances, and their brand of karaoke, as out-of-the-ordinary, not "everyday."

Non-regulars

Anxiety

The laughter of the women who sang "When Doves Cry" as their first song of the night was their only distinct expressive outburst; otherwise they stood noticeably still, singing without comment except when they "messed up." They were turned inward, toward each other and the lyrics on the screen, their backs to the still-sparse audience. The build-up to this performance took nearly an hour, during which time this group of women were intent upon the songbook, considering songs to sing. They dismissed some songs out-of-hand, commenting on their preposterousness ("Oh, Susanna," or "Okie from Muskogie"). They noted others more seriously, slowly whittling down candidates, weighing each according to a calculus of genre, performability, familiarity, and interpretation. Their time spent with the songbook exercised a broad insider knowledge about popular music, genre, performance, and the social and cultural meanings and significance loaded in each title.[9]

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[9]This study is not a survey of listening habits or genre. Of course reenactive performances cannot escape experiences and histories of listening or the constant meaningful presence of genre. Though a study like Crafts et al. 1993 (see also Perlman 1993) would certainly provide much insight into the intentions and understandings of karaoke performers, the issues involved are too complex to consider in this paper, whose focus is specifically performance practice.

The build-up to this performance—the time spent selecting their song and watching others sing—was energetic, full of jovial banter and conversational and vocal freedom. At their table the women spoke loudly and sometimes sang even louder. When they identified "When Doves Cry," all five sang expressively, furrowing their brows and shaking their shoulders as they sang the song's titular hook. But the expressivity and ease with which they sang aloud at their booth disappeared, mostly, when they finally sang onstage. The pleasure and freedom of anticipation were replaced by the reality of public performance and display, and these women did their best to hide in full view (as an informant told me, noted in the previous chapter, "it doesn't matter [if no one is watching], singing karaoke is about getting attention"). They stood still, turned their backs to the audience, and sang quietly over the tops of their microphones. Such "hiding" was articulated by discursive blankness here, as the singers' stilled bodies and plain singing (in contrast with the motion and expression of their singing at the booth) avoided any gestures that might be construable as their own—refusing to take personal responsibility for a performance. While certainly nervousness and blankness are stylistic tropes of performance like any other, this body language of backs turned to the audience directly implicated Bauman's elaboration of performance as the taking of social responsibility for a competent communication (1975). That is, the *anti*-social body language of turning-one's-back marked this performance as not-performance, the avoidance of performative social responsibility.

The moments of expressivity and sociability, when the women turned their attention, if not to the audience, to each other, occurred when they laughed self-consciously at their perceived gaffs or mistakes—moments of failure. If their inward-turning, impassive asociality can be understood in light of the evaluative anxiety of singers discussed in the previous chapter (i.e., such impassiveness shields oneself from potential judgment by refusing to offer anything personally expressive to be judged) then these moments of laughter furthered the goal of inoculating the performer against judgment by preemptively identifying and disclaiming perceived mistakes.

This is not to say that when these performers laughed at their mistakes such laughter represented a cynical or calculated intent to manipulate an audience's potential evaluation. In fact as the performance continued, these laughing moments occurred more frequently, and by the end of the song their playful laughter at vocal failure became the dominate trope, largely replacing in the stiff impassivity of the performance's beginning.

Where the song began with self-conscious anxiety necessitating protective measures against negative evaluations by an audience (including the gestural refusal to engage an audience at all), by its end one of those protective

measures, nervous laughter at mistakes or failures, evolved into a new performative style based on playful commentary on their mistakes. Making mistakes (voice cracking, singing a wrong word or coming in at a different time from the other performers, entering a phrase on a note in a difficult high register) became fun. Rather than fear of failure or judgment dominating the whole performance, those tropes that reflect such anxieties themselves became the basis of a playful, enjoyable performance, where "failure" was transformed into an energetic, sociable trope of performance.

"Fun" mediates between fearfulness and playfulness as approaches to failure and has to be understood as a stylistic trope of performance in its own right. That these women sang together can be initially understood, like their unexpressive singing, to be a protective measure as well—there is safety in numbers. But when finally the singers were able to enjoy the performance, that pleasure came through in their social laughter with each other. They shared and commented upon their mistakes between themselves, not directly with those watching them. The performance, then, remained closed, never articulating a performer–audience relation with others at Winnie's but instead remaining a reflexive group activity. The mistakes that they laughed at are shared, owned jointly by the whole group. Fun, then, was a group activity for them, not found directly in a pleasure at being on display but in a shared playfulness with failure that was founded on anxiety about display. The tropes of "fun," especially laughter, occurred initially in the song as tropes of failure. Over the course of the song the context evolved, but the expression itself, laughter, remained the same.

Theatricality

Later the same night Mary, a woman from another group of several women, sang "These Boots Are Made for Walking." It is a common song at Winnie's, providing singers an opportunity to act out, to play a character. Mary is tall and thin. She kept her arms and legs bent and strode around the stage area, stiffly taking angular steps and stomping her feet down heavily. At times she shook her hips. Her voice alternated between a nasal snarl and a low growl. Her face stayed in an angry grimace with her upper lip curled. She sang each note separately with a strong accent, articulating every word as its own phrase, "THESE. BOOTS. ARE. MADE. FOR. WALK*ing*,"[10] and she set down a big, stomping step with each. Her attention was entirely on the audience. Mostly she sang to her friends at a booth near the stage, but when the rest of the

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[10] "These Boots Are Made for Walkin" by Lee Hazelton. © Copyright 1965. Criterion Music Corporation.

audience cheered appreciatively for her she turned to them as well, grimacing and sneering. Mary acted out a character, putting on a nasty, angry affect and directing it straight at the audience.

I use the term "theatrical" here to encompass a number of elements of style by which performers heighten the affective quality of their performance. Karaoke performers assume roles or identities different or more heightened than their offstage personas. Such theatricality can serve to encompass a varied performance within a single affect. Thus while Mary's performance deployed several vocal, gestural, and affective elements, they came together within a cohesive performative representation. In this case Mary's performance was characterized overall by the denotation of something like "anger," or "nastiness"—her sneer seemed to be the dominant figure from which her exaggerated stomping her feet and shaking her hips, her vocal growls and snarls, and her pointed singing to the audience emerged.

The putting-on of a character is a common mode of theatricality in performances at Winnie's, where a performer doing a Sinatra song will often affect a laid-back, loungy tone, or a singer of a country song will affect a "country" drawl, and perhaps move in a stylized line or contra dance.[11] I use the term also to include the heightening of affect that may not specifically refer to an alternate identity—speeding up movements, stretching limbs, straining the voice, interacting with audiences, heightening the sexual, emotive, or humorous qualities of a song. By putting on a character, or by heightening the affective qualities of a song, performers distinguish between on- and offstage, marking the stage as a space for social roles largely unavailable to them elsewhere.

Karaoke is not unique in its shifting roles. Performance always involves the assumption of new social roles, and often that means the assumption of a new social identity or persona. Rather, such theatricality distinguishes karaoke performance from musical performance generally because performers' offstage roles are always very near at hand. Just as reenactment invites comparison between a present performance and a previous one, so does this dramatic heightening invite comparison of the present persona of the performer onstage and the persona the same person had moments earlier, and will take back up

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[11]An important contrast is, again, with the regulars at Winnie's. One man, older even than most of the regulars, will often sing Sinatra when he does sing. His performances, though, do not enact any vocal or gestural moves that suggest Sinatra. He does not clean up or round his voice with the vocal "purity" that the non-regulars often use to denote "Sinatra-ness". Nor does he sway his hips or step with a swagger as the non-regular performers of Sinatra often do. Rather, he stands onstage as himself, singing in his own voice—in tune, with clear diction, and precise rhythm.

when the song finishes.

"[S]eparating the 'stage' from the 'floor,'" what Ōtake and Hosokawa (1998:193) call "theatricalization," results from the realignment of social roles that amplification and performance effect on the geographical and social space of a karaoke venue. "Theatricality," as I am using it, is the stylistic result of that realignment. Performers mark their new social position with particular tropes of heightening and character—intensifying gesture and voicing and adopting altogether new gestures and voicings.

Irony

26 March 2005 "Roxanne." The woman singing moved a lot faster than the song's tempo, almost running in place, agitated. She sang here and there in falsetto, elsewhere with a throaty growl. She was so active onstage she missed lines and lyrics, but did not interrupt her performance to take notice of the gaps. She looked only occasionally at the monitor, and mostly her performance synched rhythmically with the recording only when chanting as she head-banged, ""*put on the red light / put on the red light / put on the red light....*"[12] It sounded like a new song; or it sounded like the song did not matter so much as the performance. But every time she sang the word, "*rooooooxxx-anne*," she sang that drawn-out first syllable nasal and emphatic, just like Sting.

It is the single word, *roxanne*, that I want to focus on in this performance—the rest of the performance reflected the heightening of affect, voice, and gesture of "theatricality."[13] My fieldnotes as I watched this performance note *roxanne* as the singular instance of explicit, reflexive reenactment, and the rest of the performance, like, perhaps, parts of the performance of "Bohemian Rhapsody" discussed in the previous chapter, seemed willfully to avoid "tuning-in" with either the musical sounds broadcast over the PA or the abstracted presence of the remembered sounds of Sting's original performance (and a notable reenactment of the original in the 2001 motion picture, *Moulin Rouge*).

Hutcheon provides a general (and appropriately open) definition of irony:

> [Irony] happens in the space between (and including) the said and the unsaid; it needs both to happen. ... [t]he said and the unsaid coexist for the interpreter, and each has meaning in relation to the

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[12] "Roxanne" by Sting. © Copyright 1978. EMI Blackwood Music Inc.

[13] Though this singer's "putting on" of Sting's voice for an instant was also, of course, an instance of theatricality, just as singers of Sinatra affect a vocal quality resembling Sinatra's voice for their performances.

> other because they literally 'interact' (Burke 1969 [1945]:512) to
> create the real 'ironic' meaning. The 'ironic' meaning is not, then,
> simply the unsaid meaning, and the unsaid is not always a simple
> inversion or opposite of the said (Amante 1981:81; Eco 1990:210):
> it is always different—*other than* and more than the said. This is
> why irony cannot be trusted (Kenner 1986): it undermines stated
> meaning by removing the semantic security of 'one signifier : one
> signified' and by revealing the complex inclusive, relational, and
> differential nature of ironic meaning making. (Hutcheon 1994:12–
> 13)

When this singer vocalized *roxanne*, her utterance a sounding icon of Sting's
recorded voice, her performance was inflected[14] by the juxtaposition of her en-
ergetic out-of-synch-ness in the rest of her performance against this moment of
heightened vocal mimicry. The word *roxanne* was marked by its pronunciation
as the only discrete element of direct reenactive signification. It was a dis-
cretized segment of iconic resemblance to an original enactment, whereas the
remainder of the performance suggested no clear referent or reenactment. The
contrast between the single referential element and its context in a heightened,
theatrical performance of embodied energy reflexively commented on the *new-
ness* of this performance, marking the "original" with a kernel of mimicry as
the ground against which the emergent figure of this performance played out.
"Newness" carries evaluative signification, and the situating of a performance
as "new" in this way can implicate further considerations of gender (a woman
makes her voice sound like a famous man's), kitsch and/or genre (for instance,
the nasality of this utterance is exaggerated, and at Winnie's affecting a nasal
tone—especially when humorously or derisively singing country songs with
a "twang"—often implicates evaluative generic meaning, so this performance
might direct a similar humorous derision toward the music of the Police), and
image (the utterance's iconic resemblance linking a broader knowledge of the
images and sounds associated with Sting).

Further, the single moment that mimics Sting's voice enacted in perfor-
mance a quality identified by Adorno as fundamental to music in capitalist
society: "the moments of sensual pleasure in the idea, the voice, the instru-

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[14]I use the passive voice because I do not propose that intentionality is necessary to
irony "happening." Certainly irony requires interpretation—"irony isn't irony until it is
interpreted as such—at least by the intending ironist, if not the intended receiver" (Hutcheon
1994:6)—one such interpretation I am providing here. I hope to identify the possibility
of ironic interpretation, or to elaborate my own reading of the irony happening in this
performance, is enough. As irony might be said to resist straightforward exegesis, it is not
clear that ethnography can provide much more.

ment are made into fetishes and torn away from any functions which could give them meaning" (1991 [1938]:37). As this performance powerfully tore away the "moment" of the sensual quality of Sting's voice from any representation throughout the rest of the song, it enacted in practice the quality of musical fetishism that so concerned Adorno, literalizing performatively what is elsewhere a characteristic of reception and interpretation in music. That the single word, *roxanne*, was the only clearly referential element of this performance, while its immediate referent—it iconically signified Sting's voice in the original performance—gave way to a breadth of interpretive meanings, highlights the "inclusive, relational, and differential nature of ironic meaning making" (Hutcheon 1994:13).

Considering irony as a trope that marks the articulation of space into "stage" and "floor", it is not enough simply to say that irony's "removing the semantic security of 'one signifier : one signified'" (Hutcheon 1994:13) maps onto the unfixing of performer–audience relations. Signification is never so simple, and semioticians who work on music have identified music as already necessitating such a breakdown of simple binary signification.[15] And irony, of course, is present in "conventional" performances as well, unrelated to their more strict performer–audience separation. But there is a homology that too neatly fits my focus on the distinction of performer–audience roles to ignore:

> Unlike most other discursive strategies, irony explicitly sets up (and exists within) a relationship between ironist and audience (the one being intentionally addressed, the one that actually makes the irony happen, and the one being excluded) that is political in nature, in the sense that '[e]ven while provoking laughter, irony invokes notions of hierarchy and subordination, judgment, and perhaps even moral superiority' (Chamberlain 1989:98). (Hutcheon 1994:17)

An important aspect of irony in performances at Winnie's is that it is often a trope of reenactive intention. There may be all sorts of other ironies circulating at Winnie's but the one that seems most characteristic of karaoke is that which references, but does not explain, certain shared (or unshared) knowledge about the songs being performed, suggesting interpretations without laying them out. Thus the momentary vocal mimicry of Sting's voice linked the performance interpretively to a breadth of potentially informing knowledge,

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[15]For example, Nattiez (1990 and elsewhere) explores the implications of a productive, serial signification to musical "signs," where musical meaning would be found in chain of relationships between musical elements, rather than as the product of arbitrary relationships between each musical element and some referential content.

and it was ironic in particular because what was understood to be "unsaid" depended so much upon the "discursive communities" (Hutcheon 1994:17–21) who did the interpreting, and what body of knowledge they drew on for their interpretation.

Thus, as it is frequently used at Winnie's, irony often participates in the mediation that performers enact between audience and recorded song in which, by articulating a particular "tuning-in" with the recording, performers bring their audiences into a new relation with the recording. Similarly, the ironic articulation by performers of certain interpretive attitudes toward the recording affects the interpretive stance of the audience, such that by enacting the role of performer individuals bring about a new interpretive relationship between an audience and a song.

A further important and common use of irony at Winnie's is to make a space for sincerity and earnestness in performance where such attitudes might otherwise be proscribed by disclaiming, deflective, and protective measures against judgement that tropes of anxiety or theatricality put to use. I note a performance that struck me as particularly sincere:

4 June 2005 Will Smith's "Just the Two of Us": The singer knew the song well, and smiled a lot while she sang. She was relaxed and not especially in character. The verses of the song are rapped, and she sang them chattily, as though talking, her voice in an easy register and unstrained. She directed the song at her table of friends a few feet away, so the tone was distinctly conversational. She stepped lightly, back and forth from one foot to the other, and never checked the screen for the lyrics—notable because the song is wordy. Before the last verse she put her finger to her lips, and said to her friends, "shhh." One responded, "take it down girl," her unamplified voice louder than the singer's through the PA. The singer bent her knees, crouching a little, half-closed her eyes, and rapped the verse gently, nearly whispering, but she swayed her hips a bit more and moved her head in time with the music, grooving strongly, if quietly, with the music. On the last chorus, she raised the microphone and her voice, and she bent her knees in preparation for a climax. Moments later her voice cracked. She fell out of tune and straightened up, stilled, for a few beats struggling between the higher register she sought and the comfortable middle register she had sung in till now. She finally found the lower register, but never settled back into the groove she found earlier.

There was something about this performance that resonated with my observations of many other karaoke performances. The presentation of the song was layered: on the one hand, the singer performed a caricaturized version of earnest and engaged performance, almost making a joke of it, putting her

finger to her lips and closing her eyes as she sang to her friends. But on the other hand, her performance was also markedly *earnest*, not just a presentation of earnestness. When she tried, and failed, to sing a final climax, she both exposed her attempt at real musical and emotive expression, but she had also shielded herself from vulnerability to substantive judgment of that expression by veiling the performance in an ironic layering. Leaning over and shushing her friends at the near booth specifically implicates the performer–audience relation, and it positioned the singer in a dramatically heightened mode: she performed performance. The assumption of the performer identity allowed her to try earnest musical emotion—because that earnestness is in part real, and in part only a representation of itself.

Another singer, Hillary, told me she often likes to sing songs that are more "sentimental" than she usually sees people sing at Winnie's, but that it can be difficult to balance all the different motivations when selecting a song. Earlier that evening, she had sung Michael Jackson's "We Are the World."

> "We Are the World" was more kitsch value than anything. I knew it would be a crowd pleaser. A lot of things I choose aren't really crowd pleasers, so it's a weird sort of balance, because you feel this obligation to please a crowd, but also I don't want to at the same time. I just want to enjoy myself. (Interview, 9 April 2005)

In the context of our conversation, "I just want to enjoy myself" specifically meant singing "sentimental" songs that had emotional meaning for Hillary as she sang them. But the balancing act Hillary pointed out, between "kitsch value" that pleases a crowd and just enjoying her own singing and the song she sings, is one that was apparently—though not necessarily—at play in the performance of "Just the Two of Us." The singer articulated the kitsch value of the song by caricaturizing elements of its performance, but doing so seemed to open up a bit of space for her to enjoy herself, not through the sensibilities of being on display, but by engaging earnestly with the song itself.

Markedness

I began this chapter about the markedness of karaoke performance with a discussion of the performances of regulars because it presents a useful and clarifying contrast. The marking of performance is not necessarily a universal attribute of karaoke. Rather, it is based on the social roles designated by the separation of stage from floor and performer from audience. Regulars, in general, do not mark performance so reflexively as non-regulars. Their performances seem not to require changing social roles; "stage" and "floor" seem to

be less clearly articulated for regulars than for non-regulars. Indeed, regulars often sing from a sitting position in the booths, facing the stage. They tend not to sing to the audience, or interact with the audience in visible ways; nor do they hide from the audience or refuse to acknowledge their presence. They sing in "neutral" singing voices, not straining toward unreachable pitches, nor affecting caricaturized voicings of pop singers. Regulars bring their offstage personas with them onstage, largely neutralizing the distinction between performer and audience that is so marked among non-regulars.

The performances of regulars suggest that there is a continuum of separation of stage and floor, and that theatricalization happens by degree. Following Bauman and Briggs, "performance is a variable quality; its salience among the multiple functions and framings of a communicative act may vary along a continuum from sustained, full performance to a fleeting break-through into performance" (Bauman and Briggs 1990:74). So Bradd (a regular) performs "Shout!," taking on the audience enthusiastically, while his vocal style remains in the "neutral" style of other regular performers. And the singer of "I Have Nothing" stiffens her shoulders and avoids eye contact with the audience, refusing the assumption of social responsibility of performance without marking that refusal by turning her back or laughing at moments of failure. Similar examples are available in which non-regulars sing without marking their performance so distinctly. The binary division of non-regular and regular as it informs the tropes of performance is not strict, but it does map a broad orientation that contrasts the roles of performer and audience on the one hand, and naturalizes the social roles of regulars in both performance and non-performance on the other.

It is especially notable—and perhaps explanatory—that the tropes of performance that I find among non-regulars are relatively consistent over time, from night to night, even though the individuals who constitute that group are almost always different every night. Besides members of the "family" of regulars, Winnie's patrons attend very infrequently. Non-regulars separate their karaoke outings usually by several months, and in many cases, years. Nonetheless, the constantly changing, anonymous groups of people who patronize Winnie's manage to reconstruct a very similar sociability around performance from night to night. Audiences may be more or less enthusiastic in their reception of performers, and performers may be more or less energetic in their performances. There are nights when people seem to be especially shy, during which anxiety and hiding may characterize many performances, and others when they are especially daring, where performers may be more theatrical in their renderings. Such changes can take place over the course of a night as well. But from night to night performance itself is constructed as

a site for negotiating social roles through theatricalization.

Bauman and Briggs explain that "performances are not simply artful uses of language that stand apart both from day-to-day life and from larger questions of meaning.... Performance, rather, provides a frame that invites critical reflection on communicative processes" (1990:60). By marking karaoke performance as "out of the ordinary," performers and audiences at Winnie's do not simply separate karaoke from the world outside Winnie's or from conventions of performance beyond Winnie's. Rather, the performance practices of non-regular patrons of Winnie's act as a critical reflection on performance as such, and popular music performance in particular, "to such an extent that identities, social relations, and the constitution of the community itself become open to negotiation" (Bauman and Briggs 1990:63).

Performance is a site for critical reflection on language and speech by language users (not just "etic" analyses of the meaning and function of language and speech by outside analysts). Fox (1992) explores this notion in a popular music context, considering an inverse process whereby language that has been "denaturalized" by its incorporation into poetic forms is subject to "renaturalizing" by the ideologically unmarked ordinariness of country music singers: "a highly marked 'public' mode of communication in capitalist society, namely, singing as consumable entertainment, is heard to strain for the ideological naturalness of 'ordinary' private speech" (1992:55). Thus the conventions of language are both exposed as conventions (denaturalized) and then actively reincorporated into sociable listening and practice (renaturalized).

Just as poetic language "calls attention to the rules of language *itself* ... [and] calls attention to the conceptual and ideological order those rules express (Jakobson 1981 [1960])" (Fox 1992:55), karaoke calls attention to the rules of performance itself, especially the particular roles and modes of sociality that structure performance. By performing anxiety, irony, and theatricality, non-regular performers and audiences at Winnie's show a sharpened, reflexive sensitivity to the role of performer. The transparency, or naturalness, of the ideologies about social roles embedded in professional performance are denaturalized in karaoke. As singers and patrons focus their performances and their attention, they bring about a noticeable shift in sociality toward a separation of the performer from the audience—the "stage" from the "floor". But by allowing "ordinary" people to take the stage, karaoke also flattens the hierarchical stratification of performer from audience, resisting theatricalization. As it reproduces and reinforces hierarchical social ideologies of performance, karaoke also strains for the ideological naturalness of "we're all amateurs." As individuals in succession circulate on and off the stage, the sociability at Winnie's shifts constantly to and from a hierarchical performer–audience dis-

tinction. That shifting, with its requirement that every performer must "elicit the participative attention and energy of his audience" (Bauman 1975:305) to construct the performance *qua* performance (or not do so), objectifies performance itself as a topic of sociable, musical discourse in the karaoke practice at Winnie's.

That karaoke at Winnie's takes as its object "singing as consumable entertainment" (1992:55) and situates karaoke (and all reenactive music) as part of what Sterne calls a "second layer of circulation to this economy [of recorded music]: *re*production, *re*distribution, and secondary consumption" (Sterne 1997:25), to which must be added "*re*enactment." "Secondary" is also "meta," and Sterne makes this clear, stating that the retail stores he considers, customers of programmed music, "consume consumption insofar as they are interested in listener response to the music itself" (1997:25). He concludes,

> the phantom objectivity—the reification—of experience itself [is] a pervasive social phenomenon. In mass mediated societies, this process is part of an endless chain in which the outside social world of recorded songs, mass mediated images, and programmed spaces and schedules is folded into that which is most inside and private: the substance and affect of experience (1997:46).

Karaoke venues purchase recordings for their patron to sing with from distributors who have packaged, programmed, and commodified "listener response to the music itself." Fox's (1992) argument is that unmarked language and ideologically "natural" commodities are simultaneous participants in the same processes of denaturalization and renaturalization—the marking of language by its poeticization is also the denaturalization of the musical commodities in which that language is recorded, just as the performative straining for ordinariness of "private speech" reincorporates both language and commoditized recording into "natural" sociability. Karaoke performances denaturalize and renaturalize Sterne's second layer of commodification, calling attention precisely to the social relations that are concealed by the commoditization of music and singers' experience as listeners, while marking, and thus denaturalizing, the stratification of performer and audience just as they struggle to reincorporate those social roles into their local sociability.

A final point: the markedness of performance that I identify is present as well in the genres that circulate and the songs people sing at Winnie's. I do not propose here to sort out the details of genre and song as they index social identities and affective modes of sociability. I expect, however, that such a study would offer parallel conclusions to mine with respect to performance practice: that the performance of obscure one-hit-wonders, widely circulating,

"classic" pop hits, and especially the individual musics of one's own early listening both incorporate marked or absent musics into "ordinary" practice as they mark karaoke practice itself as out-of-the-ordinary.[16]

Reenactment likely happens more fully at the intertextual level of genre and history than in the details of performance practice, and it is seriously limiting to consider the tropes of reenactive performance without considering issues of genre and its performative representation. I refrain from such considerations in part because the mapping of genre onto identity, even the marginal or unorthodox play with genre and identity in environments like karaoke, carries the risk of perpetuating an approach to popular music reception that reifies the categories of music producers and distributors—especially genre as it is packaged, rather than subjectively understood. My approach has been to focus on what people do in performance, with the idea that embodied practices and performances can be as revealing as abstract discourses and categories. My project might be understood as a complement to projects like Oakes's 2004 dissertation, *Losers, Punks, and Queers (and Elvii too): Identification and "Identity" at New York City Music Tribute Events*, which focuses on such categories and processes of identification.

Popular culture, locally mediated

Karaoke practice is saturated with discourse about music, with performances that are in many ways metacommentaries on the songs they display, and with local, public sociality that is strongly informed and characterized by a shared knowledge of mass-mediated popular culture. Karaoke, that is, is a rare site in which the knowledge individuals have as members of large-scale society is performed and talked about, and in which the social categories of mass-mediated culture are put into explicit dialogue with individuals' knowledge of local sociability. If we understand the "culture" of "popular culture" to mean something like what anthropologists usually mean by "culture," i.e., a shared system of social knowledge and meaning, then as researchers we are immediately confronted with the problem of how to access that knowledge. The material of popular culture is everywhere present in the form of media,

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[16] An example: Mary's performance of "These Boots Are Made for Walking" in the summer of 2005 might be better understood were my study to focus on the ambiguity of its "original" enactment—whether Nancy Sinatra or Jessica Simpson, or both. If both, reenactment as a transitive relation between the karaoke performance, through the contemporary "cover," to the "original" would potentially offer a unique perspective on the theatricality of the Mary's performance.

technologies, and infrastructures, as well as networks of transportation, information, and distribution, but the practices by which such material is received, filtered, and understood as meaningful so often happens in private: in cars and living rooms, in the alone-in-public privacy of retail stores, restaurants, and movie theaters, and via compartmentalizing, privatizing practices like wearing headphones or reading silently. In karaoke popular meaning does not just happen in public, it happens publicly, as a shared, interactional, sociable, local popular culture.

In this way, karaoke offers a unique insight into questions of how popular music is socially, formally, and referentially meaningful. In the following chapter I ask these question on a smaller scale, investigating what the karaoke performance of a pop song can tell us about the everyday existence of pop songs as music, as texts, and as commodities.

Chapter 4

Performance emergencies:
Tony sings The Who

Transcription[1]

27 April 2005 Tony sang The Who's "I Can See for Miles and Miles." We were at another New York City karaoke venue, a bar on the Upper West Side with weekly karaoke on Wednesdays, where he agreed to let me record his performance on video.[2] He stood for a moment holding the microphone lightly at his side, waiting for the song to start. A guitar riff introduced the song and Tony straightened up, smiled to the karaoke jockey standing near him, and lifted the microphone to his mouth.

That was the wrong cue, and Tony waited another four bars before singing, nodding his head, swaying left-to-right slightly in time. He looked out to the

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[1]Or more properly, "description." This section describes in moment-to-moment detail Tony's April 27 performance in search of the elements of Tony's "style." The following section of this chapter returns to moments of the performance seeking to understand those stylistic elements in meaningful context.

[2]As mentioned in the introduction, I have been unable to record performances on video of my informants at Winnie's. This project is specifically concerned with Winnie's, and I have made statements in previous chapters suggesting that the tropes of performance and sociality at Winnie's are particular (if not unique) to Winnie's. The utility of a detailed description of performance that can be had with a video recording outweighs my concerns that dynamics particular to Winnie's will be missing from a performance in another venue. My own ethnographically informed sense is that the performance discussed in this chapter is very similar to performances at Winnie's, on levels of style and sociability. Additionally, many of those in attendance on this evening were people who have performed or participated in karaoke at Winnie's previously, and for many Winnie's would normally be their first choice of karaoke venue.

audience and smiled broadly, then looked back at the screen as it counted down his cue, gripped the microphone with both hands, brought it to his mouth, and sang, "*I know you've deceived me, now here's a surprise.*"[3] His voice was low in the mix; it was difficult to hear the words. On the second syllable of *surprise* he opened his mouth wide, stretching the note, creating a "flange" effect with vowel space, *a.i.e.i.ez.* [4]

He finished the long note, moved his head away from the microphone, nodding and dancing slightly, watching the lyrics on the screen in front of him. He brought the microphone back to his mouth, still in both hands, curling his lip before entering on the second line, "*I know that you have cause there's magic in my eyes.*" He curled his lip again in a snarl on *cause* and *eyes. Eyes* takes the same flange effect as *surprise*, *a.i.e.i.ez*, rhyming. As he held out the note, Tony hunched his shoulders with his lip curled, suggestive of head-banging, assuming a "rocking out" (Interview, 16 Sept 2005) stance.

Tony missed the cue for the chorus because he sustained *eyes* too long, so the recorded backup vocals sang "I can see for" as he noticed his mistake, danced a little to get his bearings, half-crouched, and came in with "*miles and miles and miles and miles and miles.*" His voice on the chorus was low and monotone; the backup vocals and chord changes were active, moving quite a bit around his tonic pedal.

On the final *miles* he jumped to an upper register, his voice moving from chest to head, becoming clearer, rounder, less airy, more powerful as he did so. Tony's voice broke on the attack, an accented grace note, MAI-*aaaillles.* He held on *a*, not flanging the vowels as he did their rhymes in the preceding verse. This was the first time in the performance where Tony seemed to get "into" the song, putting the performance at stake to realize the high note. He stretched his neck and tensed his body as he attacked the note, and as he settled into the sustain he wiggled his hips and shoulders. Where the three preceding lines were sung in an easy, middle register close to Tony's speaking voice, this leap into his upper register distinguished clearly between speaking voice and singing voice, and its increased volume, steady pitch, and single-vowel articulation reflected this. As he finished the note he removed his second hand from the microphone and smiled at the video screen.

Tony returned the microphone to his mouth, still in one hand, and paused a moment looking at the screen. He seemed confused for a second, reading

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[3] "I Can See for Miles" by Peter Townsend. © 1967. Essex Music Inc.

[4] "Flanging" is an electronic sound effect common in US rock music that uses time delay filters to create a "whooshing" sound that moves regularly up and down the pitch spectrum. Tony's back-and-forth *a-i-a-i-a* effects with vowel-space created a similar effect of motion from low to high and back in the pitch spectrum above the fundamental.

the upcoming lyrics, and then missed the next cue, "If you think that I don't know about the little tricks you've. . . ." The line's scansion was awkward, and the color-changing text that marked the lyrics' rhythm was not enough to decipher it. Tony managed to sing the lyrics *don't*, *'bout*, and *played* hesitantly, his voice low and quiet, but did not attempt to sing any others in the line. He missed the entry for the following line, too. "And never see you when. . . ." He entered halfway through the line with, "*deliberately you put things in my way.*" Despite its prosodic similarity, Tony did not hold out or embellish *way* as he did *surprise* and *eyes*, but cut the note short after two beats, still shaken from his difficulties at the beginning of the verse.

He paused as the recording broke between the end of the verse and the upcoming bridge and got his bearing, entering on cue, in a high, intense voice, "*well here's a poke at you / you're gonna choke on it too.*" He finished with what I am calling a "rock-'n'-roll grimace," in which he would crinkle his nose, squint, and furrow his brow. He brought his free hand to the microphone for a moment, then removed it. On the third line of the bridge, "*you're gonna lose that smile,*" Tony hesitated, nearly missing the cue as the scansion was again difficult, but he got through it and, grabbing the microphone with his free hand, sang as the music built to the chorus again, "*because all the* WHILE," holding *while* out in his head voice, strong and steady.

In the second chorus Tony alternated between smiling and rock-'n'-roll grimacing with every four-bar phrase: [smile] *I can see for miles and miles* / [grimace] *I can see for miles and miles* / [smile] *I can see for miles and miles and miles and* [grimace] *miles and miles.* As he held the last note, Tony looked up and out to the audience for the first time, smiling while singing. Someone in the crowd hollered, at which Tony looked out again, widened his smile, freed a hand from the microphone, clenched his fist in front of his body, and rock-'n'-roll grimaced at the audience. (Until now, Tony's gaze had been fixed on the monitor in front of him. Unlike at Winnie's, the karaoke jockey here had placed a screen with lyrics between the singer and audience, so singers would not have to turn away to view the lyrics.)

Tony turned back to the screen and took his second hand off the microphone. He sang the next line. It was prosodically difficult, like the previous lines. He got it this time, but still sang timidly, without the vocal power he had when singing the chorus hooks, "*you took advantage of my trust in you when I was so far away.*" His free hand hung at his side, mostly limp, as he concentrated on the lyrics onscreen. His body language and vocal style continued into the next line, "*I saw you holding lots of other guys and now you've got the nerve to say.*" At the end of the verse he breathed in deeply and quickly, in preparation for the upcoming bridge.

With a head voice, in his higher, stronger register, his voice cleaner, less airy, and more precisely pitched, Tony entered the bridge (*"cause you still want me"*), brought his free hand to the microphone (*"well that's as may be / but you gotta stand trial"*), rock-'n'-roll grimaced, and shook his head side-to-side (*"because all the while"*). He opened his mouth especially wide on the last note, *while*, and as he closed the syllable, on the final *l* the tip of his tongue flicked past his teeth. There was a force to the word; it was a gesture in itself stretching toward physical limits as it opened, while the tension of that openness pulled close through the diphthong snapped the word shut. The kinetic force of articulation overpowered its diction.

Rocking left to right, shifting his weight from one foot to another in the closest gesture yet to dancing in this performance, Tony grimaced again, sang *"I can see for miles and miles,"* and shut his eyes with some force, so they bounced back open, a facially-constricted extension of the rock-'n'-roll grimace's squinting. The previous *while* and this extended grimace formed part of a gestural heightening as the song built toward a climax. *"I can see for miles and miles,"* attacking the final *miles* with an upper-neighbor appoggiatura, this time Tony's voice did not break; the appoggiatura was melodic and emphatic. *"I can see for miles and miles and miles and miles and miles."* The strength of Tony's voice did not hold out for this long repeated series of *miles*. He quieted as the line continued, dropping a couple *and*'s. Finally he sustained the last *miles*, but let it trail off, as the recording entered an instrumental break.

During the instrumental break Tony danced, slightly, stepping left and right. He stared at the screen, looking up for a moment only to check the connection of the microphone cable. As the cue for the next verse came on the screen, Tony brought the mic to his mouth, his free hand at his side. He stopped dancing, stood straight, and watched the screen as he sang on cue, *"I know you can see me now here's a surprise,"* in a chest voice in his middle register that was loud and round: his singing voice, not his speaking voice. His voice sounded, despite the lower register, like it did during the chorus and hooks, when he sang with energy in his head voice. But he moved like he did during the difficult passages of the verses, standing still and straight, eyes on the screen. He continued this posture and voice through the next line, *"I know that you have cause there's magic in my eyes,"* which led into a partial chorus, without an intervening bridge. He brought his free hand back to the microphone, sang *"I can see for miles,"* his voice catching for a moment as he found his spot among the background vocals singing harmony. Again the background voices moved with the chord changes, while Tony took a moment to find the single note on which he would sing the repeating *"and miles and*

miles and miles and...." Toward the end of the line he wiggled his knees, hips, and shoulders in the buildup to the final note, *miles*, which he held out strongly, inflecting the note with a slow, pulsing vibrato: *ma i a i ailz*.

There was a momentary pause as Tony registered the lyrics for the following line. He squinted at the screen, not crinkling his nose or furrowing his brow in a rock-'n'-roll grimace, but looking intently to parse the phrase before the recording cued his entry. The screen read "The Eiffel tower and the Taj Mahal are mine to see on clear days." Tony mumbled over the top of the microphone, only articulating *Taj Mahal* clearly, until he found *days* at the end of the line, which he sang softly with indeterminate pitch. The following line was equally hard, "you thought that I would need a crystal ball to see through the haze," and Tony mumbled only a few words of it, still squinting at the screen while standing stiffly, his shoulders hunched a bit. He did manage to sing the final *the haze*, again indeterminately pitched.

The haze led into the bridge, but Tony's discomfort with the preceding verse kept him unsure of his position in the mix, and he sat out most of the bridge, alternately bringing the microphone to his mouth and letting it fall forward as he concentrated on the screen to find his place again. The bridge provided Tony enough time to find his bearings again, and he entered on cue with the chorus, but he found his upper-register note higher than he wanted, and strained to sing so high and to stay in tune for the first two lines, repeating "*I can see for miles and miles.*" The moving background parts did not provide a clear pitch for Tony to sing on. By the third line of the chorus, Tony found his pitch, and his voice strengthened and his diction was more precise. For the first half of the line, "*I can see for miles and miles and miles and miles and...,*" Tony's posture remained stiff and straight, his eyes on the screen, not stretching his lips around the lyrics to smile as he did in previous choruses. With the fifth *miles* Tony rock-'n'-roll grimaced slightly and his posture relaxed, and by the end of the line his voice broke as he sang the final *miles* with the accented upper-neighbor appoggiatura that he had established throughout as the characteristic melodic gesture of this phrase. He let the sustained final note trail off slowly.

This was toward the end of the song, and the chorus repeated once more. Tony brought his second hand to the microphone, gripped it tightly, and maintained a constant rock-'n'-roll grimace as he sang the repeating line, "*I can see for miles and miles,*" nodding with a shortened head-bang. The fourth time, Tony looked out to the audience and smiled, briefly. The recording began to slowly fadeout. Tony sang the line once more through the fadeout, "*I can see for miles and miles.*" The recording ended. Tony looked up, smiled, shook his head, set the microphone by the monitor, and walked offstage.

Analysis

Tony's performance is suggestive of the complexity of karaoke style. His attention rested mostly on the lyrics on screen; occasionally he looked to the audience; in the most "tuned-in" parts, he looked at neither, but lifted his head, maybe even shut his eyes, as he focused on his own singing. His hands moved, in apparently discreet gestures, holding the microphone hanging at his side or clenched into a fist in front of his body. Tony's face was highly expressive, even when he was not obviously communicating directly with the audience, and the gesture I have been calling his "rock-'n'-roll grimace" was a recognizable, repeating expression, though it varied in intensity and focus. His voice changed registers frequently, and he sang with a range of dynamics and timbres, often linked to sections of the song, or affective modes he presented singing different sections. Beyond simply the sound of his voice, Tony's diction was a parameter of style. He embellished held vowels by diphthongizing them, and he emphasized words by inflecting their articulation with kinetic, gestural power. Diction is also a function of "tuning-in," and the difficulties of certain phrases or lines led in several instances to mumbling, an indeterminacy of phonetics and pitch.

Despite the degree of variation within Tony's performance, his overall range was narrowly circumscribed. He stood in one place for the duration of the performance, and his arms remained close to his body. His facial expressions consisted of a few primary elements—smiles, grimaces, closed eyes. His voice shifted between two registers, middle and high, without ever straining for especially low or high pitches. Though his performance suggested a distinction between loud, round, "singing" tone and quieter, airy, more speech-like tone, he did not "theatricalize" his voice further by nasalizing or pharyngealizing lyrics, or by altering his voice to suggest the significant sounds of another performer's style. It was within this circumscribed range, then, that his articulation of a word like *while* at the end of the bridge leading into the chorus could carry such kinetic weight. Because Tony's movements had a narrow overall range, the motion involved in his pronunciation of a syllable were evident by contrast: the shape of Tony's mouth, its range of motion, and the force of it motion in the articulation of a syllable were perceptible as gestures rather than simply speech. Bringing phonetic articulation into the realm of bodily movements literally calls attention to the communicative channel itself (Jakobson 1960), where the medium—the mouth, tongue, lips—is put on display, objectified (Bauman and Briggs 1990:73). Movement overtook language as the mode of performance as articulatory gestures slipped beyond the normal bounds of diction.

As at Winnie's, the PA system was a basic factor informing how performances are rendered. Tony told me,

> I specifically remember thinking, "man, this guy needs to make this whole system louder and he needs to turn up the vocals." Part of my problem was that I was trying to belt out everything at full volume for everything I was singing, because I was like, "how's anyone going to hear what I'm singing?"[5]

The PA is the intermediate channel between the singer's voice and its audition, and Tony's criticism of the sound system is rooted in the sociability of performance as communication: "how's anyone going to hear what I'm singing?" Asked about what he does with his hands, especially the difference between holding the microphone with two hands versus letting his free hand hang, Tony said,

> it seems like it goes hand-in-hand with vocal exertion. I was making a conscious effort to try to sing loud so I could get through that microphone. I was really trying to breathe as well as I know. You know, to really fill up and pump through. So I was like...

He took a deep breath, pressed his hands together as though gripping a microphone, and clenched his chest tightly. "You know, kind of like that."

"Vocal exertion" was first about making sure he was heard. The two-hand gesture was also an expression of "tuning-in"; the moments when Tony brought his second hand to the microphone coincided in general with the bridges and choruses, the most strongly affective parts of the performance, where Tony's rock-'n'-roll grimace was most prominent in what he called "rockin' out a little bit."

As he concentrated on being heard, Tony also focused on the song's lyrics, sometimes struggling to render them vocally. I asked if his "focused concentration" on singing loudly enough was the reason he stood largely motionless throughout the performance. Tony agreed, adding that he was also "concentrating on getting the words right." There was an important relationship in this performance between the song's lyrics, their melodic and rhythmic setting, and the dynamics of Tony's performance. Especially in what I will call the song's B section, whose lines are rhythmically similar but melodically different from the first verse of the song, Tony had real trouble translating the lyrics as they appeared on the screen into a melody that made sense with the

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[5]All of Tony's statements quoted in this chapter are from a recorded interview I conducted with him on September 16, 2005.

recorded accompaniment he heard. His problems singing these lines depended on the shifting and sometimes unpredictable ways the song set prosodic meter into musical rhythms as well as the relative unfamiliarity of the melodies of the B section in Tony's conception of "I Can See for Miles." The first line of the song was "I know you can see me now here's a surprise." In The Who's performance, stressed syllables receive quarter-note rhythms and unstressed syllables eighth notes, mapping prosodic stress onto rhythmic length. The long notes are on the first and third beats of the measure. It was therefore a simple matter to read the lyrics onscreen, fit them into the musical meter heard through the PA, and sing the lyrics with the appropriate rhythms. Tony sang it as it is sung in the original recording:

♪ ♩ ♪ ♪ ♩ ♪ ♪ ♩ ♪ ♪ ♩
Ĭ knów yŏu dĕcéived mĕ nŏw hére's ă sŭrpríse

But in the B section, where the song lyrics naturally have binary (iambic or trochaic) meter, the song retains this short-short-long rhythm, forcing triple meter onto binary phrases. "If you think that I don't know about the little tricks you play" are trochees ending with a monosyllabic foot:[6]

íf yŏu thínk thăt Í dŏn't knów ăbóut thĕ líttlĕ trícks yŏu pláy

The Who set it musically with the same rhythm established in the opening lines: quarter-note accents on the first and third beats of each measure alternating with pairs of eighth note on the offbeats. *think*, *don't*, and *'bout* are primary points of musical articulation/accent.[7]

♪ ♪ ♩ ♪ ♪ ♩ ♪ ♪ ♪. (♪) ♪ ♪ ♩ ♩ ♩
íf yŏu THÍNK thăt Í DŎN'T knów ăBÓUT (thĕ) líttlĕ trícks you play
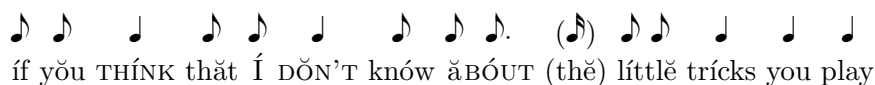
Alternating long and short notes like this without melisma requires three syllables from the lyrics for every half measure. This creates something of a prosodic hemiola, where the natural stress of the lyrics (shown as acute accents over the stressed syllable) is contrary to the musical stress of their setting (shown as SMALL CAPS). The musical setting forces triple, anapest

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[6]The line is perhaps more naturally parsed as iambs, beginning with a single anapestic foot, *ĭf yŏu thínk thăt Í dŏn't knów ăbóut thĕ líttlĕ trícks yŏu pláy*, but for the sake of simplicity I'll assume trochees.

[7]Note the exception: *tricks*, shortened to an eighth note that leads into the syncopated attack of *you* and *play*, and *'bout*, shortened to a dotted quarter that allows the sixteenth-note the to squeeze between two feet.

feet onto naturally binary, trochaic lyrics. It alters the scansion of the lyrics significantly, cutting the total feet, stressing *don't* rather than *I* or *know*, and removing *the* from metrical significance. The accent on the naturally unstressed *don't* lands on a strong musical beat, yielding a sort of "syncopation" of prosodic stress, while its setting at a melodic peak and on a strong downbeat mark the word as point of musical articulation.

As he read the lyrics being highlighted on the screen, Tony did manage to sing *don't* and *'bout*, the two strongest syllables in the melody, in their correct rhythmic positions, and landed on the final *played* as well, but while he moved his lips hesitantly as he tried to parse the rest of the line, he was unable to articulate any lyrics other than the musically accented ones. Instead, he watched the screen, nodding his head until he could jump in with a word whose rhythm he could parse.

The following line, the second half of a couplet with "... the little tricks you play," is, "and never see you when deliberately you put things in my way." Parsing this line with accents on the first and third beats of the melody yields every syllable as an eighth note (with lengthening and syncopation toward the end of the line):

♪ ♪ ♪ ♪ ♪ ♪ ♪♪ ♪ ♪ ♪ ♪ ♩ ♪ ♩ ♩
ănd névĕr SÉE yŏu whén dĕLÍberătelý yŏu PÚT thĭngs ín my wáy
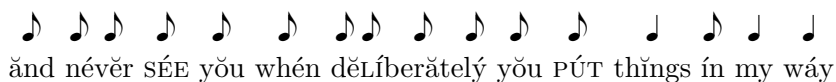
Prosodic stress is preserved, but the length-to-stress mapping has to be altered to do so. When Tony entered this line halfway through, he retained the stress-to-length mapping established throughout the song—singing stressed syllables as quarter notes—and so he sang *delíberatelý* as a syncopation, though the song melody sets it with continuous eighths:

♪ ♩ ♪ ♩
dĕLÍberăteLÝ

The other couplets of the B section presented similar difficulties rendering their prosodic scansion into musical rhythm. For instance:

the EIFfel tower and the TAJ MaHAL are MINE to see on CLEAR-er
    DAYS

you THOUGHT that I would need a CRYStal BALL to SEE you right
    THROUGH the HAZE

Guitar chords in the karaoke recording emphasize strong accents on the first and third beats. Where Tony did manage parts of these sections, he sang the feet in the middle of the line

DON'T know aBOUT

deLI berately you PUT

TAJ MAHAL are MINE

These occur on the clearest downbeats (two strong guitar chords punctuate the two accents) and at the melodic peak of the phrase. Though the melodic shape is the same for each line, the total feet of each prosodic line varies, so without the musical emphasis of melodic peak or rhythmic accompaniment, the recording contained no clues or cues about where within the musical meter to parse syllables as long or short, accented or unaccented.

This lack of cues in either the onscreen lyrics of the recorded accompaniment meant that Tony had to render the lyrics convincingly on the spot. In these parts of the song where the lyrics' scansion did not fit transparently into the song's rhythm, this was an especially difficult task, one that in several cases Tony could not accomplish. As Tony said, "why the hell did he [Peter Townsend] write these stupid lyrics? ... like the 'Taj Mahal'? It's pretty strange."

Tony told me, "the difference between fun and not fun was knowing what I was doing and not knowing what I was doing." The knowing and not knowing here primarily implicated the song-text, whether the line was parsable or not, but also that Tony did not clearly remember the melodies of the B sections to bring them to mind at any moment. When language froze because of the difficulties of the song text, Tony's voice, face, and body froze with it. But when Tony sang parts of the song that were familiar to him, he gripped the microphone with two hands to sing with "vocal exertion," trying to project his voice "through" the faulty sound system to be heard by the audience. He also danced and grimaced, and sometimes he looked up and smiled.

Tony moved his lips, mumbling inaudibly during the phrases whose rhythms he could not parse. This phonetic indeterminacy accompanied his very still posture during these passages. Tony stood in one place, leaned toward the screen, his eyes narrowed, holding the microphone with one hand. His lack of motion in these sections contrasted with his presence later in the performance, on the last note of the bridge before the song landed forcefully on the chorus. Here, Tony scrunched his face in an expressive rock-'n'-roll grimace, gripped the microphone with two hands, almost dancing, shifting from foot to foot, shaking his head as he sang without any trouble with rhythm, pitch, or diction, *because all the* WHILE. The final word of the bridge, *while*, extended the range of articulatory motion, opening his mouth wider for the low vowel and

closing it, springing through the diphthong, with a gestural force that threw his tongue out beyond his teeth, overshooting the *l*.

From comfort with language (the performer knowing what he is doing with the words onscreen) the performance gained gestural possibilities. Tony's comfort with the line, *because all the while*, expanded his vocal and gestural range with dancing, facial expressions, and different movements of his limbs. In this way, Tony performed the musical energy of the song's build to a climax before it resolves to the chorus. The absence of such movement during the passages in which Tony was unable to muster up any words suggests a reliance of movement on language: gesture did not occur without singing. Note that problems in other aspects of the performance, for instance the faulty sound system, did not present such limitations to Tony's performance. Confronted with problems of amplification, Tony did not back off or seize up as he did when he encountered problems of language. Instead he brought his free hand to the microphone to steady himself as he tried to sing even louder.

When Tony did move, dance, and gesture in addition to singing energetically, the movements of his body had a momentum that extended to the small movements of speech articulation, so *while* itself took on the gestural, embodied energy that marks performance and separates it from "normal" communication—what Frith calls "a physicality that *overflows* the formal constraints of the performance" (1998:217). It was through comfort with language that the performance could be articulated as performance, as the assumption of communicative competence to an audience, of which Tony's dancing and facial expressions were a trope. The voice unlocked movement but language unlocked and coordinated the voice.

I have seen the reverse to be true as well, in performances where a singer's social discomfort (nervousness, embarrassment) enforced a limit on his or her gestural range, brought his or her limbs inward to his or her body, stilled his or her feet, and focused his or her gaze unflinchingly on the screen, while also limiting his or her vocal power, reducing singing toward speech, and sometimes reducing speech toward mumbling. The relationship between language, voice, body, and sociability is intricate, and intimate. As the voice coordinates movement, so does sociability; social comfort and verbal comfort free movement, but their absence limits movement.

To identify such a channel does not mean it is always determining. In this same performance Tony performed the reiteration of the opening verse with both vocal expressivity and gestural quietness, singing loudly, clearly, and in a vocal style that sounded much like his "fun" style but in his lower register. Nonetheless during this passage Tony stood still, eyes ahead, his free hand at his side. "Voice," even the embodied, performative aspects of voice

(range, power, diction), could apparently be deployed without the gestural heightening of the body; the reverse, though, did not seem to be true in Tony's performance.[8]

The distinction between familiarity and unfamiliarity—fun and not fun—as it generated and limited gestural expressivity in different passages of a song generalizes to song choice: "If I make a bad karaoke choice and pick a song that I thought I knew but I don't really know it, I'm just going to be struggling—just looking at what the hell's going on. But if I was able to pick a song I was completely comfortable with, you know, I'd ham it up a little bit." For Tony, "I Can See for Miles" was somewhere in between "completely comfortable" and "don't really know it:

> It's a good song. . . . I picked it because whenever I go to karaoke the things that I grew up listening to are not usually options to sing. . . , like Iron Maiden or something like that. . . . The Who is not a band I spent a lot of time listening to. They're pretty cool, but it just seemed like a fun song with maybe some interesting vocals to do.

The song and the band were familiar, but not intimately. During unfamiliar passages, Tony was "*just* struggling," whereas the moments of familiarity allowed the extra gestures—grimaces, smiles, squints—to emerge in addition to his singing, not necessarily what Tony would call "hamming it up," but moving in that direction.

Though the lyrics were presented to him on screen in combination with recorded accompaniment, the melodic and (especially) rhythmic rendering of the lyrics—in some essential way at the heart of what a song *is*—was not clear to Tony. We should remember that these songs are almost always heard, and rarely printed. Reading, apparently such a transparent mediation of language, intervenes problematically in karaoke between aural texts and aural productions. Such textual mediation might bear some of the blame for troubles Tony had remembering the musical text of "I Can See for Miles." Where the melodic setting of the lyrics was unavailable from memory, during unfamiliar passages, Tony had to reconstruct the song, as language set to music, from scratch on the spot. Memory was not the entire basis of "knowing what [one is] doing"; certain lyrics may be set in more complex, less natural ways

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[8]Or stillness may be another form of gestural heightening, contrasting with surrounding sections that are full of movement. I did not pursue this line of thinking in my interview with Tony, but it would have interesting ramifications for an understanding of the intentionality and overall shape of amateur performance.

than others.[9] But memory was also an important part of the reconstruction of the song from lyrics and recording.

> There are certain parts to the song that sort of stick in my head. They're not the whole song.... If someone brought up that song, then I would start thinking, right away I would go to the chorus, the 'I can see for miles' part, because that part sounds really cool. The whole song sounds cool, but that part particularly.

The chorus, the "hook," was what was most memorable, most familiar, to a listener like Tony who did not know the song intimately. But the hook was also a *sign* of the song; the few words and notes of the chorus stood in metonymic relation to the song as a whole. It was what "comes to mind" for Tony when someone would mention the song's title.

Adorno calls this "commodity listening," fundamental to the "fetish character of music." Such listening focuses on "the memorability of disconnected parts, thanks to climaxes and repetitions" (1991 [1938]:41).

> The hit song remains salutarily forgotten in the half-dusk of its familiarity, suddenly to become painfully over-clear through recollection, as if in the beam of a spotlight. One can almost equate the moment of this recollection with that in which the title or the words of the initial verse of his hit song confront the victim. (1991 [1938]:49)

What interests me in this performance is the relationship that was active in performance between the elements of the musical fetish and unfetishized, forgotten passages elsewhere in the song. Commodity listening "snatches the reified bits and pieces out of their context and sets them up as a pot-pourri. It destroys the multilevel unity of the whole work and brings forward only isolated popular passages" (1991 [1938]:41). In the passages where Tony found it difficult to sing, the unfamiliarity of these sections resulted from the reification of "bits and pieces." The "'phantom objectivity'" of reification—the metonymic relation between the "popular passages" and the whole song— "seems so strictly rational and all-embracing as to conceal every trace of its

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[9]A problem formalized to some extent by linguists who work on metrics. The work of Hayes is particularly relevant to questions of musical metrics (Hayes 1989 2005 In press; Hayes and Kaun 1996). Unlike linguistic forms in general, lines of poetry or song are often much more ambiguously metrical and less satisfactory in terms of constraints on wellformedness (Hayes In press). In this sense, "complexity" is a notion especially relevant to metrics.

fundamental nature" (Lukács 1971; cited in Sterne 1997:45). Thus the song-fetish obscures the parts of the song that have not been reified. I distinguish between song-texts, the setting of words to music, and song-fetishes, which are—following Adorno—the phenomenological result of regressive listening's substitution of a metonymic representation of a song—the reified "popular passages"—for the sound-in-time character of musical experience.

When Tony tried to perform those sections that fall outside the song's reified hook, the work he did and the intensity of his concentration on the screen, was a problem of textuality, of putting written words and imagined melodies together into an embodied performance. But this problem was motivated by the representational practices of reification; the song-text for the difficult parts simply was not included in the "I Can See for Miles" fetish. The emergent problem of performance that results from commodity listening was that the song-fetish did not contain a complete song-text. The absence of complete instructions for performance was a limitation of commodity listening.[10]

This is a point worth noting because performative emergencies can arise directly from the musical fetish as well—not just from the signifying relation between fetish and text. I provided Tony with an early version of this transcription, in which I noted during the first chorus (the "I can see for miles and miles and miles..." section) that by singing the melody on a single note he seemed to be singing the "wrong" melody. I imagined that his vocal part should follow the background vocal parts, which are melodically very active as they follow the frequently changing chords. Tony remembered the part I had referred to, and his memory of his performance choices differed with my interpretation:

> My impression was that it was like a multi-part thing where the top part was like a pedal.... I thought the Daltrey part [Roger Daltrey, lead singer for The Who] was the top and that the inside voices were the backup singers. Although, having mentioned it, it actually kind of makes sense that Daltrey would be singing one of the inside parts, because they're the more interesting ones.

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[10]This assumes a karaoke practice in which songs have a primary circulation outside of karaoke, and karaoke performance puts in practice musical ideas developed elsewhere. Certainly this is not a complete account of the texts of karaoke performances. Some songs ("Shout!" for instance) seem to exist primarily in situated, social contexts—wedding receptions, parties, karaoke. In Tony's case, though, it is clear that listening habits developed in "everyday" life outside the karaoke environment mediated the textuality of his karaoke performance. The general, dispersed, or mass mediated has distinct ramifications in specific, situated, and locally-mediated practices.

Many karaoke recordings add parts to the recording that mirror the karaoke singer's part, to help guide the performer during difficult or obscure sections of a song. This recording provided no such cues. In reviewing and transcribing the tape, my understanding of the conventions of karaoke led me to interpret the background vocals as melodic cues for the karaoke singer. Tony, on the other hand, had a sense of the particular song and so concluded that he would sing "the Daltrey part," the part missing from the karaoke recording. For both of us, the karaoke recording was not fully transparent. For me, the problem was to find the proper melody to sing with the karaoke recording, so my question was, "what would the lead vocal part be?" not "what would the Daltrey part be?" In his performance, though, Tony went a step further, thinking through the relationship between the original recording and the karaoke recording, searching for the "Daltrey part."

To the extent that the question, "what is the Daltrey part?," asked simply, what is the lead part? or what part should I sing?, it was a matter of songtext—how words, melody, and accompaniment go together. But it was also very much about searching for the individual voice and body that had been removed from the song by its karaoke production. Voice and body, here, do not just implicate the physical, objectified sounding voice of Roger Daltrey; rather, Tony's choices about how to sing the song were linked to an imagined intentionality of Roger Daltrey, the original singer, who probably would have wanted to sing the more interesting parts.

The question of the relationship between original and reenactment, especially as mediated in this way by so many layers of recording and circulation, was necessarily a question of aura, the "quality of ... presence" (Benjamin 1968 [1936]:221) that an observer experiences in an object. To the extent that Daltrey's sounding voice was removed from the reproduction in the karaoke recording, the power of his reproduced voice to signify the presence of his original, embodied voice is deteriorated. Benjamin's discussion of recorded performance, whereby the performer must "operate with his whole living person, yet foregoing its aura" (1968 [1936]:229), is rendered somewhat inapplicable to the karaoke recording. But, according to Tony, there remained a question of intentionality; while Daltrey's objectified voice did not inform Tony's performance, Tony did consult a conception of Daltrey's subjective persona, asking, "what would Daltrey have done?" Elsewhere, Benjamin has written about the aura as a social relationship between subjects, rather than simply a phenomenological experience by subjects of objects:

> The experience of aura ... rests upon the transfer of a form of reaction that is current in human society to the relation human

> beings have with the inanimate or with nature. The person who is looked at or who believes himself to be looked at looks up. To experience the aura of an appearance is to endow that appearance with the ability to look up. (Benjamin 1968 [1939]:187–188; cited in Weber 1996:99–100)

Or, the relationship between observer and auratic observed has the character of a social relation, in which subjectivity is a characteristic of both observer and observed. It is not a coincidence that for audiences at Winnie's "looking up" is so constitutive of the social dynamic that defines performance—performers and audiences depend upon each other as active participants to remain performers and audiences.

Weber elaborates, "the experience of the 'aura' ... is, it turns out, more the experience of a *desire* than of a unique and unapproachable reality" (1996:100). Frith suggests that pop singers are both voices (objects) and personas (subjects), which means that both subject and object must be reified in the musical recording (1998:205). In Tony's performance, there were no cues that the presence of Roger Daltrey's objectified voice was signified, but an imagined subject, "Roger Daltrey" emerged for Tony as the basis of an informed performance.[11] The relationship between Tony's reenactive performance and Roger Daltrey's original performance implicated not "a unique and unapproachable reality," but the reenactive imagination (desire) of subjectivity that might be found through or within the recording and song-fetish.

The musical semiotics of commodity fetishism

Oakes writes, "[a] musical enactment becomes a reenactment as a result of being discursively and performatively framed as a reenactment; in other words, they are defined by their own intentionality.... [Musical reenactments] invite the listener to compare how a reenacted version is similar or different from the 'original' musical enactment" (Oakes 2004:59). Karaoke performances are full of local, emergent, social, *original* acts, but they are also always a negotiation of the current performance in relation to an original. Tony's performance was intentionally reenactive when he tried to *do* what Roger Daltrey *did*. But it was also reenactive when he had to negotiate on the spot a musical rendering of lyrics whose original setting he did not know.

In this way, original and reenactment in karaoke reproduce a sort of recursive textuality of popular, recorded music, in which performances of song-

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[11]Whereas, in the performance of "Roxanne" discussed in the previous chapter, it might be said that the singer's vocal mimicry did signify Sting's objectified voice.

texts are themselves entextualized as musical substance: "Just as a singer is both performing the song and performing the performance of the song, so we, as an audience, are listening both to the song and to its performance" (1998:211). Karaoke performances engage songs as texts in real time, processing linguistic and musical puzzles on the fly *as* they engage songs as performances in real time, processing genre, gesture, sound, and subjectivity. Rather than being irreconcilably distinct, the performative relationship between text and fetish is dynamic. The reified musical fetish, its character clearly marked by the familiarity and enthusiasm with which "popular passages" are performed, structures the song-text, so lyrics and melody are present—transparently available—for the familiar parts but notably absent during the unfamiliar parts. And reification frames the performance, constraining possible interpretations, suggesting characters and caricatures to act out, inflating or weighing down the contours of inflection and expression. Text and commodity are equally the province of gesture and voice, language and melody, personality, celebrity, prosody and semantics.

I considered in the previous chapter how karaoke denaturalizes performance by objectifying social dynamics, where social distinction—the stratification of roles of audience and performer—is the marker of performance. The different approaches to reenactment in Tony's performance effected a related process, by which karaoke performances mark *listening* as an ideologically ordered set of practices that are normally unquestioned. Because the recorded accompaniment and lyrics onscreen do not provide a complete script for performance, karaoke requires that performers access from memory the musical framework of a song. In this way, karaoke performances suggest empirical verifications of critical theoretic claims about listening. The structure of karaoke performances reflect distinct proposals about musical form and mediation: on the one hand "regressive listening" and on the other "loss of aura." I propose that we might better understand karaoke performance and, through karaoke performance, the semiotic substance of popular musical culture if we follow Sterne in noting that these epistemologies of regressive and mediated listening are "folded into that which is most inside and private: the substance and affect of experience" (1997:46). Karaoke performance brings these listening habits out of their "phantom objectivity" (Lukács 1971) and sets them on public display, where false starts, mistimings, wrong pitches, and moments of confusion highlight the incompleteness of the listening habits that inform these performances.

As Kelly says, karaoke performances represent "a shift from a close identification between professional singer and song to a disproportionate emphasis on the song itself" (1998a:89). Performance itself accomplishes this; as Bauman

and Briggs point out, performance "puts the act of speaking on display—objectifies it, lifts it to a degree from its interactional setting and opens it to scrutiny by an audience" (1990:73). While performance enacts an intimately contextual relationship between performer and audience, it also objectifies its material, articulates it as set apart from its context, and entextualizes it. So when amateur singers perform popular songs, commodities of commercial music become the texts of embodied performance—"the song itself." The "close identification between professional singer and song" in commercial music is a function of the reification of musical sounds by technology (Frith 1986). But in karaoke, the musical fetish so informs listening that it remains as a framework for performance. Kelly's insight is that karaoke effects "a *disproportionate* emphasis on the song itself"; that is, the song itself is so opaque, due do the effects of the musical fetish, that karaoke singers must engage an awful lot of their energy just trying to figure out *how the song goes* in the parts that do not stand out as "the reified bits."

Karaoke rearticulates alienated, commodified songs in social relationships, using them as the material of an intimately mediated sociability of performative communication. All the while the fetish character of these songs remains intact, structuring the performance, enforcing a musicality that depends on the tropes of regressive listening and the desire for auratic presence. In a related context Fox writes that "Texans sing to reappropriate the vocal material of language as the stuff of (their) culture, and to reunite alienated, commodified sound with local canons of sense" (2004:320). Karaoke, rather, reminds us that alienated, commodified sounds often *are* our local canons of sense, as "the vocal material of language" remains embedded in a semiotics of commodity fetishism.

Chapter 5

Conclusion

"Whatever, Justin Guarini"

Under the towel dispenser in Winnie's men's bathroom, someone has written in purple marker on the tile:

<div align="center">WHATEVER JUSTIN GUARINI</div>

Justin Guarini was the runner-up in the first season of the television singing contest, *American Idol*. Tall, with curly hair and a wide smile, Guarini's competition with Kelly Clarkson was a national sensation in the summer of 2002 (Battaglio 2002; Bauder 2002; Hartlaub 2002). *American Idol* is mentioned frequently as an important influence in the growing popularity of karaoke in the last few years (Music Trades 2003; Lamb 2003; Morris 2005) The converse is plausible as well, that widespread familiarity with karaoke has some responsibility for *American Idol*'s popularity.

This graffiti on the wall at Winnie's is harshly critical of some person or persons in the bar. It seems to suggest that Winnie's singers' take performance too seriously, as though there were something as large as a national television audience at stake. It might even dismiss the entire karaoke enterprise with its offhand reference to an *American Idol* star, carrying with it a world of judgment about the glitz and naiveté of aspirations to commercial musical success and the cynicism of its competition.

Whatever its impact and importance for US karaoke, *American Idol* is an uncommon point of reference for Winnie's patrons. Public display is at the center of Winnie's performances, but without reference to pop stardom. Many karaoke industry executives ascribe to their customers a motivation that is notably absent in karaoke at Winnies: the pursuit of stardom in moments

<div align="center">69</div>

on the karaoke stage or the use of karaoke recordings as practice material for later, more professional performances. Display at Winnie's is more explicitly local in its sociability: individuals sing with and for their friends, or they enjoy the gaze of strangers, and some, like stand-up comics Tom and Hillary, sing karaoke in order to perform without the stress of their professional performance lives—specifically the opposite of this quasi-professional, *American Idol*-style approach to karaoke.

So while "whatever Justin Guarini" is a particularly vicious slur, it could also be the proud slogan of a singer at Winnie's, its pointed criticism of *American Idol* slicing out a space for karaoke without the taint of mass-cultural naiveté, commercialism, and competitiveness. "Whatever Justin Guarini," as censure or slogan, might be understood as an amendment to the ideological motto, "we're all amateurs here." Contestants on *American Idol* are themselves amateurs (or are asserted to be), as are those who sing karaoke for the chance to "pick up a mic and feel like a star" (Music Trades 2003), or to practice in their pursuit of professional singing opportunities. But all such karaoke-style activities define their amateurism on a continuum with professionalism—either it amateurism fetishizes celebrity or aspires to professionalism. But at Winnie's, karaoke amateurism rejects personal associations with such popular culture tropes as celebrity. Which is not to say that celebrity is out of mind at Winnie's. Performers here caricaturize, reenact, or refer to pop stars as part of the communicative competence of performance; they do not aspire to fill such roles themselves. Karaoke performers at Winnie's do not adopt the roles of popular figures as though to experience those roles themselves—the commonly cited reason for karaoke singing in other contexts. They put-on those roles as part of a musical practice that takes songs and celebrity as the textual material of a situated, social performativity.

Guarini experienced a moment of celebrity in 2002, built on his television performances of others' songs. *American Idol* represents a genre of musical reenactment, and as such, its performances negotiate both social roles and original performances. Guarini's performances, whatever *American Idol*'s commitment to a democratic amateurism,[1] structure a sociability that strati-

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[1] *American Idol* judge Randy Jackson contrasts his show with professional recording industry A&R practices:

> It's easier now to come on the show and take the ridicule and go through 50,000 or 70,000 contestants to try and win than to try to get a record deal. The music industry is in a really serious slump. Who in the world is gonna give a new artist, unknown from wherever, a hit song? ... So you come to a show like this. You show up with your talent, your uniqueness and your hopefully star—style personality, and you've got a shot. (Sigesmund 2003)

fies audience and performer. Audiences are encouraged to make judgments as their form of participation rather than avoiding evaluation altogether, as audiences do at Winnie's. Guarini's own person is incorporated into the cultural industrial milieu of production and circulation. In this sense, by presenting himself as though in some social and performative ways he transcends connections to original performances, Guarini's *American Idol* performances are less intentionally reenactments than are the performances of Winnie's patrons. Unlike the social rules of performance at Winnie's, Guarini's performances do not operationalize reenactment as a parameter of evaluation. Instead, while much attention is given in the show to important figures in popular music history, judgments of *American Idol* performances are framed in terms of originality, the singer's personal musical talent, or the singer's projected ability to sell recordings were he or she to win the contest.

When in the role of *performer* patrons at Winnie's do import evaluative measures such as talent and originality into their understanding of the sociability of performance. Insofar as they put their bodies on display and at risk of judgment, they present themselves expectantly as though in a role similar to Guarini's—one in which audience judgments can, in fact, bear importantly on the singer's social identity. Nonetheless, such notions of talent are conceived within the narrow bounds of Winnie's walls. "Talent" is not important to a singer at Winnie's because of the prospect of mass media stardom; it is important because it has tremendous bearing on how a singer expects his or her friends to receive a socially risky display. And such measures seem, in socially occurring discourse, to be only reflexive; rarely do performers evaluate other performers in the same terms they use for themselves.

Tony, when he sang "I Can See for Miles," engages performatively with the popular cultural world beyond the walls of the karaoke venue by looking backward, as it were, to the song-text and the song-fetish. The culture industries provide the material for his performance, and he must activate his knowledge as a member of mass cultural society to structure his performance from moment to moment. But the substance of karaoke performances is directed outward very narrowly, to the individuals who populate the space in which the singer performs. Unlike Guarini and other popular culture figures, Tony need not "operate with his whole living person, yet forgoing its aura" (Benjamin 1968 [1936]:229).

Local popular culture

As Sterne proposes, "[i]f ethnomusicology wishes to recover and critique modes of experience in a society fully saturated with the mass media, it will have to consider the phantom objectivity—the reification—of experience itself as a pervasive social phenomenon" (1997:46). Karaoke is one such environment in which "experience itself" is commodified, by the exchange of money for the experience of singing on stage. In karaoke we can observe the processes by which such reification—especially the karaoke recordings and the lists of songs producers sell to venues—"is folded into that which is most inside and private: the substance and affect of experience" (1997:46). We can watch as individuals take the stage and incorporate these fetishes actively and substantively into intense, emotional sociability.

It is an important task of contemporary musicology to investigate the musical epistemologies of technological and commercial mediation: the recording of voices and their consumption later, in diffuse and unconnected spaces. But such a project is often hampered by the geographic and social dispersions and disconnections at the core of mass-mediation. Listening and consumption are often obscured behind private doors, on the other side of car windows, or sealed in headphones. In karaoke performances we can observe private listening crystallized into public practice; interior experience translates into exterior expression. Such a translation is by no means complete, but we can identify in karaoke performance a trace of otherwise obscured listening experiences: texts, fetishes, the mediation of subjectivity and objectivity, and critical theoretic claims about how consumption structures perception are all made partially visible in the karaoke performance.

My goals in proposing a study of karaoke were to find a way, somehow, to look "through" karaoke toward some privately known musicality, that, I assumed, is largely shared. And I believe it is the case that karaoke is a strangely reflexive and public popular practice, in that its reflexive and public displays are put on by listeners and consumers in local, confined spaces—not by producers or celebrities working through the media. In this way, karaoke gives us a reading of listeners and consumers own views and knowledge of popular culture, not through surveys or ratings, but in their own musical practices.

Karaoke performances are part of what Sterne calls the "secondary layer" of circulation, distribution and performance. These secondary layers are meta-cultural practices by which the "primary" is revised and revisited, in processes that are productive as much as they are reflexive.

> Judgments made about similarities and differences—continuity with the past and change—are part of what I will call metaculture, that is, culture that is about culture.... One aspect of culture, conceived in this way, is not only its inherent dynamism, its built in propensity for change, but also its ability to generate self-interpretations or self-understandings that help to define what change or sameness is. (Urban 2001)

So while karaoke yields insight into the popular musical knowledge of private individuals, it perhaps more powerfully reveals the discursive means by which popular audiences take charge of the musical terms of mass mediation, reinterpreting and reclaiming as dynamically social texts whose musicality was apparently fixed years ago, in a mastering studio in Los Angeles or someplace "not here."

Karaoke is not just musically mediated, ritualized sociability. Rather, it is a site of serious (if playful) engagement with the fundamental systems and infrastructures of popular culture. If popular music circulates in reified voices, figures of celebrity, and fetishized hooks, karaoke takes on each of these, enacting, reenacting, and radically revising them. When a singer performs "Roxanne," mimicking Sting's distinctive vocal tropes at will and perhaps at random, she intervenes in the desire for auratic presence implicit the circulating recording of Sting's voice. She takes the song's hook and Sting's voice out of its (mechanically reproduced) context, disentangling and unfixing the music from its reification, making free use of tropes of musical reification as simply another element of her engaged, social performance. The "reified bits and pieces" of a popular song (Adorno 1991 [1938]) are snatched out of the pot-pourri of their commodification, and the song-fetish becomes just another aesthetic of performance.

Even Tony, whose performance I argue in Chapter 4 is bound by commodity listening, nonetheless recontextualizes the tropes of the musical fetish in terms that aestheticize and localize their affective power. "Rocking out" to the hook of "I Can See for Miles," Tony socializes what is otherwise a private musical experience, bringing relations between people right back into the aesthetic mix. Karaoke may be ritualized, musical sociability, but it is a ritualized sociability that itself mediates the mass media. Musical reification is simply another trope of popular culture, one that is certainly powerful, but without the power to fully determine social, performative relations. Insofar as karaoke is "secondary," it takes as its primary practice the breadth of popular culture, resituating the apparently determining structures of the culture industries as simply another aspect of culture—a shared aesthetic to be called

upon when socially appropriate.

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