

Sing Your Heart Out



Thank God Ellis Island Casino & Brewery isn't being torn down. As Las Vegas is made-over with expensive high-rises it's a relief a few places with prime locations aren't selling out to big developers — at least not yet. No one knows exactly what will come of this budget casino with the world's best karaoke, but I was assured it isn't going anywhere. Whether the Platinum high-end, high-rise condos will be built around Ellis Island or will incorporate the casino has not been announced to the public, but Ellis Island will remain.

Frankly, I don't care. As long as there's karaoke and cheap drinks, I'll be there.

It's funny the real Ellis Island in New York was a refuge for immigrants entering the country: They could make up names and become citizens. And our Ellis Island (4178 Koval Lane) has become a refuge for locals: We can change our identities and sing to our heart's delight.

My best friend is a karaoke connoisseur. I've accompanied her to the Imperial Palace Karaoke Club (3535 Las Vegas Blvd.) and played air guitar while she sang a cappella, but Ellis Island is our favorite. Casino workers finishing their shifts, local rock stars like Andrew Karasa of the Clydesdale — who joined us one late night after his concert — and savvy tourists seeking out a true Vegas hot spot, all congregate over massive binders filled with karaoke songs.

The ringmaster is Tim Welsh. He and his assistant take each index card filled out by future karaoke stars and line them up. Because so many people will get up and sing over and over, there's a strict order to the cards, which slowly move in a snake-like motion as each song is sung.

Welsh, who is quite the emcee, announces the

singers. And he's an even better saxophone player. If you're lucky, or if you ask, he'll get out his instrument and play in between songs, adding an authentic quality to the mood.

Don't get me wrong, there's nothing fake about the singing or the singers. These aren't amateurs (OK, other than me butchering Stevie Nicks' "Stop Dragging My

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Heart Around"). These are people who can carry a tune. But it's not the singing that gets me. It's the destruction of stereotypes taking place at Ellis Island that I love.

For example, a couple of days ago, a long haired guy in all black with chunky boots, gets up to the mic. And out of his beard-clad mouth comes:

"Moon river wider than a mile, I'm crossing you in style some day. Oh, dream maker, you heart breaker, wherever you're going I'm going your way..."

I would have been more surprised if this was my first time witnessing this type of

song choice. My mind went to Audrey Hepburn on the fire escape in "Breakfast at Tiffany's" with her guitar. Then to my little sister who did her own rendition at the age of 11. My eyes caught his and I couldn't stop staring. It looked funny to see him singing, but he was amazing.

When my friend got up, she stood with her hands at her sides, composed but visibly nervous — despite having an incredible voice. She insists she loves Vegas karaoke, but admits she misses her corner bar in New York where the microphone was passed to people in their seats. There was none of this standing in front of a crowd nonsense.

"I'm a cowboy, on a steel horse I ride, I'm wanted dead or alive, whaaaanted ... dead or alive," she picked Bon Jovi. If you closed your eyes you'd be transported to a rock concert — she belted every lyric, hit every note and sang with an attitude Jon Bon would be proud of.

Perhaps the best example of judging what song a karaokeer is going to sing — and being wrong, happened at the Imperial Palace. A sweet, frail-looking man in his late 70s took the stage and belted out:

"She's a very kinky girl, the kind you don't take home to motha. She will never let your spirits downwwn, once you get her off the street, ow!" Yup, this guy was singing "Super-freak."

Chris Wright, 33, who sang Stone Temple Pilot's "Plush" at Ellis Island, later broke it down for me: "My motto is Mozart to Metallica, the fact that people get up there to sing I think is great."

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