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Liveness Anxiety: Karaoke and the Performance of Class

This article discusses the performance of economic class using karaoke as a practical example, a way to talk about theories of identity that are difficult to pin down in purely theoretical terms. "The Karaoke Dream" discusses the dream of celebrity, the trope of upward mobility. "Highbrow / Lowbrow" discusses the history of class division, and suggests that karaoke breaks down these divisions. "Performing Class" explores the ways that karaoke is used to perform one's economic position in society. "Once More, With Irony" examines karaoke within the context of the ironic mode of performance and its relationship to the performance of class. Finally, "Liveness Anxiety" is revealed to be a symptom of the Western preoccupation with "live" performance. Ultimately, the article suggests that liveness is a fetish, a tool of the capitalist system of cultural production. In this context, performances of karaoke can be considered an act of resistance because they break down the barriers between "high" and "low" art. Kevin Brown is an Assistant Professor of Theatre at the University of Missouri. His publications include "Auslander's Robot" and "The Auslander Test: Or, Of Bots and Humans" in the International Journal of Performance Arts and Digital Media. He has as well a particular interest in Thai theatre and performance.

Tex is a very large man. He probably weighs about three hundred pounds. I have never seen him sing without wearing his large, black cowboy hat and his shiny black cowboy boots. He has on a black-and-white checkered long-sleeved shirt, cut and stitched Western style at the neck and cuffs. The crowd listens to the first few bars of his rendition of "Folsom Prison Blues" by Johnny Cash (based on "Crescent City Blues" by Gordon Jenkins). Tex takes the stage, and picks the microphone up from its stand with his right hand. He sings, with a slight Southern drawl: "I hear the train a comin' / A comin' round the bend / I ain't seen the sunshine / Since I don't know when". Almost as soon as he opens his mouth to sing the first words of the first verse of the song, I cannot help but think about a television commercial from over a decade ago that used the same melody. Only it went: "I hear them trucks a comin' / A comin' round the bend / I ain't seen so many trucks / Since I don't know when." The fact that suddenly I was reminded of trucks in the middle of a karaoke performance was a bit jarring, and made me think about

the very large role that economics and the flow of commerce plays in the context of a karaoke bar.

Another very interesting thing about this performance was the way in which Tex's persona played into my stereotypes of a certain class of people, the class of people who buy trucks. For decades, truck commercials in America have featured stereotypical images of working-class men, hauling various payloads of materials as part of their blue-collar jobs. Often the urban, "working-class" stereotype bleeds into the rural, "cowboy" stereotype. Tex was a living, breathing archetype of an image from one of these commercials. I was reminded of Jean Baudrillard's notion of contemporary culture as a simulation.¹ Was the image I saw of Tex singing karaoke a reflection of the media's image of class or is the media's image of class a reflection of people like Tex who sing karaoke?

The materialisation of the stereotype was also brought about by the fact that Tex chose to sing this particular Johnny Cash song, the subject of which is a working-class man who is in prison. The coupling of this stereotypical image with this particular song resonated in a way that reminded me about how auto companies develop and market specific products to specific classes of people. Trucks are most heavily marketed toward working-class men. I have no idea what economic class Tex was actually from. For all I know, he could be an "urban cowboy" who commands a six-figure salary at his office job at a bank; but I would be prepared to wager that Tex's performance of his persona was authentic.

The Karaoke Dream

Capone's² is a fairly typical local bar and restaurant, nestled in behind a bank, sharing a strip mall with a gas station, a convenience store, and a fast food establishment. It is located in Springfield, Colorado, a suburban municipality that boasts a population of only 25,000, but is part of the larger Denver-Metro area, which had a total population of approximately three million people as of 2006. Springfield, while perhaps not as diverse as the average community in America, is a relatively diverse city compared to other municipalities in the same county. The amount of diversity among the patrons who come to inhabit Capone's on karaoke night seemed to reflect these numbers. This diversity is what made this site a particularly rich location at which to observe karaoke. The clientele is very diverse in terms of economic class, age, gender, and ethnicity.

In the early evening Capone's is a family restaurant, and the crowd is very different from the regular bar customers who begin to straggle in around nine o'clock when the karaoke singing starts. As the dining customers pay their bills and go home, different kinds of customers begin to take over different areas of the bar. There are at least two kinds of "regular" customers: the regular karaoke singers, and the non-singers. The regular karaoke singers like to sit at the central, long table that is directly across from the karaoke stage. The other regular customers are the ones

who do not sing, and they usually stake out the row of stools at the end of the bar farthest from the stage.

Roger is an exception. He is one of the few barstool regulars who likes to sing karaoke. In full “biker” gear, he approaches the microphone. He wears a black leather vest emblazoned with a Bald Eagle and the phrase “Live to Ride,” a black baseball cap with an American flag on it, and black leather chaps, complete with a silver chain connecting the wallet in his pocket to his belt. He begins to sing the song “Blue Jean Blues,” by ZZ Top. Roger seems to be very nervous and holds his body stiffly. He begins to sing softly and hesitantly: this may be the very first time he has ever sung karaoke. The lyrics to the song are simple and short, perhaps the reason why he may have picked this song. Roger stammers: “I done ran into my baby / I fin’lly found my old blue jean / Well, I could tell that they was mine / From the oil and the gasoline.” As he finishes the song, he is met with a warm round of applause, with the loudest cheers coming from the section of the bar that usually does not participate in the karaoke. I would later find out that Roger is a blue-collar worker, a heavy machinery operator.

I observed Roger’s rendition of “Blue Jean Blues” near the beginning of my study. A week after this, I saw him perform another ZZ Top song, “Sharp Dressed Man,” again in his biker gear. Over the two years of my study, I observed Roger continue to sing and improve. Soon, he abandoned his ZZ Top rock songs and began to sing ballads by Frank Sinatra. I watched Roger transform himself from a nervous, novice singer into a captivating crooner. Interestingly, about the time that he switched genres, he also switched the clothing that he wore to the bar to sing karaoke, abandoning the leather biker gear for simple work shirts and blue jeans. Roger has a dream that is not uncommon among karaoke regulars. I often think of this as the “karaoke dream,” the fantasy that one will be “discovered” singing karaoke and go on to make their mark on the “big time” entertainment industry.

Roger’s dream is even more specific. He wants to be a lounge singer in Las Vegas. On another occasion, one of the regular singers told me that Roger and he were going to go to another karaoke bar where the bartender “had connections” in Las Vegas. Roger was hoping to make an impression and find out how he could become a lounge singer there. He even had someone record some of his karaoke performances, and had a demonstration CD of the recordings created for him, complete with his picture on the cover. Eventually, I was able to sit down and interview Roger personally near the end of my study, in April of 2009. He informed me that he was going to send out some CDs to various agents and producers in Las Vegas as a sort of last-ditch effort to become famous before he went off to Iraq. He explained to me:

I recently got laid off, but I’m going to go to Iraq as a contractor about a month from now. I’m going to drive trucks around Baghdad. I have a

bunch of these CDs that I'm going to send off to some people in Vegas before I go. Probably nothing will happen, but you never know.

Ethnographer Rob Drew often talks about this subject: the extent to which the desire to be a celebrity has become ubiquitous in American society. Drew notes that:

The precise meaning of the karaoke-as-stardom equation is often unclear, in part because the meaning of stardom itself is so elusive. Sometimes it seems only to refer to the outer trappings of stardom; the background music, the guaranteed applause, the microphones and spotlights are said to substantiate fantasies we've harbored since childhood when we hopped around our bedrooms and crooned into curling irons.³

Sometimes, the trope of stardom is used outside of the context of performance to include other aspects of everyday life. Drew observes:

The language of celebrity gnaws its way under the skin of our most familiar rituals; stardom becomes a trope for any sort of public life or agency...These days we scarcely notice our anonymity, our smallness of voice. We notice its absence, which we call stardom.⁴

Drew suggests that the dream to become famous is so widespread in our culture because people generally lack agency in their everyday lives. In this way, karaoke becomes a way for people to enact their agency. Performing karaoke is one of the few ways that the average person can "act out" in public. Karaoke provides a public space where individuals are given free licence to take hold of a microphone and broadcast their performances to an audience, thereby giving themselves a voice.

Highbrow / Lowbrow

In the book *Highbrow / Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America*, Lawrence Levine discusses the ways in which the upper and lower classes became more stratified in America around the turn of the 20th century. Levine argues that one of the results of establishing a status order was that once members of society had obtained a high degree of class privilege, they then began to "attempt to hinder the free development of the market; to withhold certain goods from free exchange by monopolization."⁵ He goes on to explain how the establishment of a new status order at the turn of the century impacted upon the way that art was produced and consumed in America:

The taste that now prevailed was that of one segment of the social and economic spectrum which convinced itself and the nation at large that its way of seeing, understanding, and appreciating music, theatre, and

art was the only legitimate one; that *this* was the way Shakespeare, Beethoven, and Greek sculpture were meant to be experienced and in fact *had* been experienced always by those of culture and discernment. The accomplishment of the patrons of culture at the turn of the century was not only that they were now able to experience the expressive culture they appreciated, performed, and presented in ways they thought proper, but that everyone had to experience them in these ways as well. They became both the promoters and the arbiters of this corner of the cultural world and gradually appropriated the word 'culture' itself, which in popular parlance came more and more to signify the high arts.⁶

In the case of karaoke, lower class members of society become consumers of the dream of achieving the status afforded to members of the upper class. Thus, the economic exploitation of the dream of upward mobility depends upon this rift between the upper and lower classes, and the monopolisation of the production of culture by a small group of people. The fact is, for most people the dream of upward mobility is only a dream. Thus, the Karaoke Dream is made even more appealing to the masses because of the monopoly that the upper class holds over the production of culture.

Karaoke undermines class divisions because it challenges the boundary between "high" and "low" art. Karaoke is ultimately democratic because it allows all members of society equal access to a cultural space that is usually not available to the members of all classes. That is, karaoke as a platform for communication allows everyone to have a voice, regardless of actual social class, thus subverting the status order. This achievement may seem like a minor victory, hardly a challenge to the establishment. A conservative social critic may even dismiss the performance of karaoke as only an illusion of subversion, but the fact remains that the American view of the production of culture is quickly being transformed.

Rob Drew's karaoke ethnography was written less than a decade ago, but at that time the tendency for Americans to be regarded as passive consumers was still widespread. Drew explains:

Every attempt to extend music making runs up against the widespread belief that 'musicality' is an innate gift that some people have and others don't...For many people, 'I can't sing' becomes an unproblematic description of a physical handicap - no different from 'I'm nearsighted' or 'I have a trick knee.'⁷

These beliefs are perpetuated through the typical excuses that people use to refuse to sing at karaoke bars. During my study, I often heard someone say, simply: "I can't sing," or, "Trust me, you don't want to hear me sing." Drew explains how this widely held belief that one is "unmusical" comes about:

Such self-appraisals often can be traced to early childhood experiences: a grade-school music teacher's offhand insult, a failed bid for the glee club. The prescription such people internalize is *not* to sing, *not* to make music - at least not publicly - thus rounding out a cycle that assures their 'unmusicality.'⁸

Yet today, eight years after Drew was writing, Americans seem to be becoming more and more likely to participate in public demonstrations of musical performance.

Brian Raftery explains how the performance of karaoke eventually became "de-weirded" in his recent book *Don't Stop Believin': How Karaoke Conquered the World and Changed My Life*: "The combination of *American Idol*, *Lost in Translation*, and the teen-pop movement may have provided the country with a permission slip to sing."⁹ The chances of an average American participating in an amateur musical performance has been made even more likely by the sudden rise in popularity of interactive video games such as *Rock Band*, *Guitar Hero*, and *Karaoke Revolution*. A similar trend can be seen in the new media, in the movement from Web 1.0 to Web 2.0, a place where consumers become the producers of content on social media websites like *Facebook* and *Twitter*. This new generation of digital performance is encouraging a new generation of Americans to become active participants in performance rather than participating only as members of a traditional, more passive audience. Raftery hypothesises:

Guitar Hero approximates what it feels like to be a rock star - or rather, what we *think* it must feel like. But another reason for the game's success is that in the post-*Idol* era, musical talent has been reduced to a commodity. It's something that can be dissected, replicated, mass-manufactured, and ultimately consumed.¹⁰

Although I believe that Raftery is correct that Americans' attitudes towards musical talent are changing, I disagree with his contention that interactive video games reduce talent to a commodity. If anything, the performance of music by amateur musicians turns them into producers, or at least it turns them into a new kind of active consumer.

The trend for Americans to become more likely to perform music in public backs up the ideas of John Blacking, who believes that the performance of music is a universal human trait. In *How Musical is Man?* Blacking discusses his experiences with the Venda people of South Africa, and how his study of the Venda began to break down long-held prejudices that he held about the superiority of Western classical music and the "primitive" nature of African music. Blacking tells us that in Venda society, it is assumed that every member of the culture is musical, and is expected to take part in musical performance. He writes:

Suppose that I argue that, because there are some societies whose members are as competent in music as all people are in language, music may be a species-specific trait of man. Someone will almost certainly retort that evidence of a widespread distribution of listening and performing ability among the Venda and other apparently musical societies should not be compared with the limited distribution of musical ability in, say, England because the complexity of English music is such that only a few could master it. In other words, if English music were as elementary as Venda music, then of course the English would seem to be as universally musical as the Venda! The broader implication of this argument is that technical development brings about a degree of social exclusion: being a passive audience is the price that some must pay for membership in a society whose superiority is sustained by the exceptional ability of a chosen few. The technical level of what is defined as musicality is therefore raised, and some people must be branded as unmusical.¹¹

The growing popularity of karaoke in America seems to support Blacking's argument that all humans are inherently musical. The karaoke mantra is: "anyone can do it." It will be very interesting to see if this trend continues. Presumably, if more Americans take up karaoke performance, if the trend toward user-generated content on the web continues, and if more and more people begin to see amateur musical performance as something more normal than it has been viewed in the past, then there may be broader implications of this movement in terms of how culture is produced and distributed. This may result in a general loosening of the stranglehold that members of higher economic class have held on the production of culture in America since the beginning of the 20th century.

Performing Class

Closing time at Capone's is drawing near. Usually, at one o'clock in the morning the Saturday night karaoke jockey, Tom, thanks the crowd for coming and begins to pack up his equipment. Tonight, however, karaoke will go on for a little bit longer. A woman in her early fifties named Jane approaches Tom and asks to sing. When he explains that he has closed down for the night, she begs, "Please, please, I need to sing this song!" She reaches into her purse and produces a twenty-dollar bill and hands it to Tom, "Please I need to say goodbye to my baby." Tom relents and lets her sing one more song. She thanks him and picks up the microphone. She tells the audience: "I'm sorry, I'm starting to tear up. I just drove thirty hours to get here to bring my baby to you good people of Colorado." She gestures toward her teenage daughter in the audience. "She's going off to college now. You people take good care of her." The song that Jane has chosen to dedicate to her daughter is "Fancy" by Bobby Gentry, performed in the style of the American country music singer Reba McEntire.

The lyrics tell the story of a young girl whose mother buys an elegant satin “dancing dress” for her daughter, despite the fact that she doesn’t have enough money to buy food or pay the rent. Before she turns her daughter out onto the street, she tells her that she needs to learn how to act like a “lady” in order to attract a man that will take care of her. The daughter, who is the protagonist of the song, explains matter-of-factly: “That was the last time I saw my mamma / The night I left that rickety shack / The welfare people came and took the baby / Mama died and I ain’t been back.” But the character in the song does not despair. She pledges to remake herself, to become upwardly mobile through her charm: “Then I made myself this solemn vow / That I’s gonna to be a lady someday...I mighta been born just plain white trash / But Fancy was my name.” By the end of the song Fancy has made herself rich, explaining, “I charmed a king, a congressman and an occasional aristocrat / Then I got me a Georgia mansion and an elegant New York townhouse flat.” The message of the song is multi-faceted. It is a tale of upward mobility, the story of a woman who ascends the ladder of economic class by changing the way that she acts and the way that she dresses.

In addition to the subjects raised by the narrative of the song itself, there is also an additional level of meaning added through the song’s performance as karaoke. The song has been framed within the context of a mother sending her daughter off to college. The semantics of this performance are also complicated by the parallel existence of a mother / daughter pair in the narrative of the song and a mother /daughter pair in the context of the karaoke performance. Jane’s dedication of the song to her college-aged daughter in the audience invokes the metaphor of a mother who wants to see her daughter succeed in the world. The resonance of Jane’s story with the narrative of the song brought tears to my eyes. I was touched by the honesty of the song and the way in which it was performed as a way to send a young woman off to college, with a dream of upward mobility.

Once More, With Irony

Rich and Sally are regulars at Capone’s. Rich has been coming here for eight years. Sally met Rich here, and they have been dating for about a year now. Rich is a car salesman in a neighbouring suburb. He tells me that sales are slow right now, especially because the state of the economy has slowed down the automobile industry. Sally is a single mother and works part-time for a local man who used to own a CD store, but now sells CDs on the Internet out of his basement. Even though times are tough, they still have enough money to come to Capone’s, order pitchers of beer, and participate in karaoke nights.

Sally does not usually sing, but she comes to karaoke for the community it provides and to watch the karaoke singers. One night near the end of my two-year study, Sally finally got to fulfill one of her karaoke dreams, which is, oddly, to sing the children’s song “I’m a Little Teapot.” Even though it is on the list of available karaoke songs, the first time that she requested the song she was turned down by

the Saturday night KJ. When she finally performs the song it is unspectacular. The song is only about thirty seconds long, and she stands about five feet away from the microphone, singing at such a low level that we can hardly hear her. It is a shame that her performance was not more proficient. Her choice of this particular song reminded me of some of the ironic, self-reflexive performances of the late comedian Andy Kaufman.¹² Just as Kaufman defied the expectations of his audience by playing “The Mickey Mouse Theme” on a portable record player or singing “One Hundred Bottles of Beer” instead of performing standard stand-up comedy, Sally defied the expectations of her audience by singing a children’s song instead of performing standard karaoke fare.

Some of the most memorable performances of karaoke that I saw during my study were put on by Rich. What differentiated his performances from the average karaoke fare is that sometimes he sang wearing various costumes. He explained, “My friend and I used to come here in costume to break the ice. We were both new in town, and it was a way to meet people.” In the past I witnessed Rich sing wearing a “pirate” costume and a “pimp” costume. Tonight he is wearing overalls with no shirt underneath, a straw hat, leather sandals, and he has a long piece of hay in his mouth. Rich has chosen the song “I Touch Myself” by the Divinyls. Rich drifts between singing the actual lyrics of the song and a kind of stream-of-consciousness, improvisational rant.

Rich’s costumed and improvised performances are a good example of what Rob Drew calls an “ironic” performance style (versus a purely “mimetic” performance style). Drew’s discussion of the topic is focused on the issue as it relates to class, and can be found in his article “Once More With Irony’: Karaoke and Social Class.” In it, Drew contends that during the late 1990s, the ironic style of performing karaoke became popular with members of the middle- and upper-middle class. He explains:

Karaoke seemed only to be adopted on the condition that no one took it seriously. Performers at such bars would sing with exaggerated and obviously insincere feeling, or they would sing in inappropriate styles (for instance, singing a ballad in a hard rock voice), or adopt comic voices, or sing parodic lyrics, or (the simplest and commonest options) they would simply flood out with laughter throughout their performances.¹³

Drew turns to theories regarding popular culture by Pierre Bourdieu and Herbert Gans to explain the phenomenon of ironic performance styles among middle- and upper-class performers:

My understanding of class is based in what Gans (1974) defines as ‘taste cultures’ or what Bourdieu (1984) defines as ‘habitus.’ Urban bohemia is defined not only by traditional class markers such as

individual and family wealth, education, and occupation, but by preferences for particular cultural objects.¹⁴

In this case, the cultural object in question is the performance of karaoke. Drew's argument rests on the assumption that during the early period of its history in America, primarily during the 1980s, karaoke was particularly appealing to the working-class taste culture.

Drew hypothesises that the rise of the ironic mode of performance during the 1990s coincides with the rise in its popularity among middle- and upper-middle class performers. Drew proposes that the ironic performance style is a kind of "boundary marking" of economic class:

The object of humor was the persona of 'karaoke performer' itself, the very act of karaoke performance...What is it about the practice of karaoke that incurs middle-class performers' ridicule? I've already alluded to one factor: cultural boundary marking. The very fact that it is a popular working- and lower-middle-class practice often marks karaoke as alien for middle-class observers. The ironic stance toward performance thus allows certain middle-class performers to participate in karaoke while still maintaining a sense of class distinction and superiority.¹⁵

Drew's assertion that the ironic style of performing karaoke is a cultural marker of identity flies in the face of critics like Diana Crane, John Seabrook, and David Brooks, who contend that cultural boundaries have become blurred because of the advent of the mass media.

Crane theorises in her book *The Production of Culture: Media and the Urban Arts*:

It is necessary to replace the outmoded terms *high culture* and *popular culture*. It is more useful to think in terms of culture produced by national culture industries and culture produced in urban subcultures, including various art worlds and ethnic subcultures.¹⁶

Seabrook calls the new, intermingled class that results from the effects of national culture industries "nobrow" culture.¹⁷ Brooks calls it the "bourgeois bohemian" class, or "bobo" for short.¹⁸ Drew explains:

Seabrook's nobrow blurs taste categories and is defined in particular by its embrace of commercial culture...David Brooks coins the term 'bobo' (or 'bourgeois bohemian') to define an urban middle class that, in his view, confounds the old divisions between holders of economic, educational, and cultural capital...Brooks claims that this new 'bobo'

class further confuses class definitions by practicing 'one-downsmanship,' that is, taking on the trappings of the working and the lower classes.¹⁹

Drew, however, suggests that the popularity of the ironic mode of performance among middle- and upper-middle class performers is evidence of an enduring division between the classes. He contends: "The laughter of karaoke can be taken as what card sharps call a 'tell'; it betrays not only the performer's class, but the enduring class divisions within this putatively 'nobrow' cultural form."²⁰

Liveness Anxiety

The performance of karaoke can be seen as both a contagion of and an anecdote for the postmodern condition. In "Karaoke: Subjectivity, Play and Interactive Media," Johan Fornäs states:

A culturally conservative critic might see karaoke as yet another example of how we are voided by the profit-greed of popular culture industries, how personal authenticity is removed and replaced by insipid copies of idols. Here we learn to imitate Madonna and Michael Jackson to artificial melodies that approximate equally artificial pop ideals hatched in some distant multinational metropole. The music and the videos are empty simulations, lacking in soul, false fetiches [sic] for idolatry and submission to the dictates of fashion...Behold, our ultimate colonization by the inauthenticity of mass culture!²¹

Robert Drew also discusses the way in which karaoke has been accused of being a pathogenic symptom of the disease of postmodernism: "The conventional wisdom is that karaoke performers don't express much of anything, they merely sing other people's songs...karaoke is nothing more than a simulacrum, one more symptom of the recession of reality in a post-modern age."²² Negative reactions directed at karaoke (and many other forms of amateur performance) are common among social critics and members of the general public alike. Usually, though, these musings come from people who have never tried singing karaoke. In fact, I would argue, karaoke embraces the potential for cultural resistance against hegemonic tendencies.

I attribute this sort of fear of assimilation that accompanies the topic of karaoke to what I call "liveness anxiety." Liveness anxiety is characterised by attacks on the technological aspects of culture that threaten to replace live performance. Liveness anxiety is a particular kind of anxiety, one that goes well beyond traditional anti-theatricality or performance anxiety. With performance anxiety the fear that arises comes from inside the performer, while with liveness anxiety the fear arises from outside the performer, from the observer. Liveness anxiety is not the fear of performing, it is a territorial behaviour that is common in social critics,

scholars, and artists themselves; it is a fear of performances which depart from the standard template of acceptable cultural production as is dictated by hegemonic forces.

Consider some of the following quotes, collected from various articles from beat writers and music critics in the mainstream press. An article titled "It's Time to Maim That Tune" ran in *Newsweek* in 1992, describing karaoke singers as: "No-Talents, making fools of themselves before complete strangers."²³ A reporter for the *Indianapolis Star* called karaoke: "A strange subculture of regulars who meet at the same places every week to act out their Big Time Pop Star fantasies for each other."²⁴ A promoter at a local bar that had to replace their live musicians with karaoke to cut costs in the struggling economy bemoaned: "It's so anti-music, so anti-life."²⁵

To some degree, these anti-karaoke messages can be attributed to a general trend in American culture, the decline of membership in social organisations and the seeming disappearance of public life. Drew explains: "This image of karaoke performance as a form of sociopathy is a sign of how anxiety-ridden public interaction seems to have become in U.S. society. Participation in public forms of recreation has declined for decades, as has membership in civic, religious, and school-based organizations."²⁶ This general perception that interaction in public is on the way out is commonly attributed to the rise of electronic communication technologies such as the Internet, email, and television. Thus at first glance, karaoke seems to be just another example of an interactive technology that is going to cause detrimental harm to society.

Much of this anxiety also stems from a fear of technology that is particularly common in American culture. Take, for example, the large number of movies and television shows about a robot or computer that maliciously tries to take over the world. In the context of karaoke, the fear becomes directed toward the fact that karaoke seems to be a threat to live performers. Drew writes: "The specter arises of karaoke *replacing* live entertainment. Like sound technologies from the microphone to the drum machine, karaoke gets accused of substituting the 'direct' encounters of 'real' musical performance with a body-snatcher inhumanity."²⁷ In this context, liveness anxiety arises from a fear of mediatisation, a fear that somehow the identities of both performer and audience will be stolen away, swept up in the torrent of bits that comprise the digitised part of the performance.

The notion of "liveness" has been largely challenged in the writings of Philip Auslander. In his book *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture*, Auslander claims that, because members of our society are so heavily exposed to the media, live performance is losing its cultural significance. Auslander maintains: "The primary experience of the music is as a recording; the function of live performance is to authenticate the sound on the recording."²⁸ On the other hand, the simple "live" versus "mediatised" binarism on which Auslander's argument rests has itself been

challenged. Performances of karaoke further problematise this seemingly simple relationship.

At first glance, karaoke seems to be just another example of how ‘liveness’ is being pushed out of our lives. Karaoke, as a technology of music replication, is often subject to the same kind of criticisms that have been directed toward artists who are part of the mainstream music industry. Consider the tendency for hard-core rock fans (and critics) to look down on musicians who play cover songs. This same attitude carries over to karaoke. Drew writes:

I’ve often found that ‘serious’ rock fans react to it with the most disdain. Rock fans and musicians say it involves a high degree of technological mediation...consisting of ‘cover versions,’ which are traditionally subordinated in rock.²⁹

Of course, the notion that “real” music does not involve technological mediation is a fallacy. The technology that allows for the performance of karaoke is the same technology that allows music to be recorded, distributed to consumers, and listened to by devotees.

I propose that the fear that surrounds karaoke, and other types of amateur performance (especially mediatised forms of amateur performance), can be attributed to “liveness anxiety.” Liveness anxiety can also extend beyond the realm of amateur performance, and can become directed at any mediatised performance, regardless of the possible skill and virtuosity of the artist. Ultimately, the idea of liveness is a fetish. That is, it is a cultural object desired by individuals in an unnatural way. Because they see digital media as part of the establishment, many theatre artists and scholars cling to the notion that liveness is the last viable platform from where it is possible to mount performances that challenge the status quo. Theatre artists and social critics who maintain this belief are actually doing themselves a disservice. In reality, the liveness fetish is a tool of the capitalist system of cultural production.

Consider the previous discussion of the history of “highbrow” and “lowbrow” art in America. Lawrence Levine has proposed that the origins of high and low art are rooted in class differences. By the turn of the century a small group of people from the upper class laid claim to “culture.” By monopolising cultural production, this group was able to maintain a grip on the social status that they had achieved. This shift depended on the claim that only a certain group of talented artists were good enough to create art. Thus, amateurs were pushed to the periphery and the means of cultural production was co-opted by the elite. The result was the origin of what is now a widespread belief that the reason why people should not perform is that they do not have talent. Thus, the majority of people in American society have been branded as “unmusical” or “inartistic.” The result is the maintenance of the

social order. The anxiety that surrounds the performance of karaoke can be seen as an extension of these ongoing biases.

When viewed in this way, the ontological claim to the efficacy of live performance can be seen as a power grab. Why should only live performers be allowed to change culture? This is the insidious underbelly of liveness anxiety. The biases against performances that are not “live” perpetuate the division of cultural production, and maintain the position of theatre as a primarily “highbrow” art form. Ironically, these biases are perpetuated by the very same artists who are attempting to overcome the stranglehold of hegemony through their work. Unfortunately, the more that we cling to the notion that liveness is a privileged domain of cultural production, the more we maintain the status quo. The harder that we fight to maintain a claim on the value and meaning of live performance, the longer class divisions and the widespread view that theatre is a trapping of the upper class will continue.

The good news is that the performance of karaoke may hold the answer to this problem. Ironically, the value of karaoke may lie in the fact that it is neither entirely canned nor entirely live. It is what Charles Kiel calls the “mediated and live.”³⁰ Deborah Wong writes about this idea in her article “‘I Want the Microphone’: Mass Mediation and Agency in Asian-American Popular Music”:

Karaoke takes the very notions of live and canned and messes them up, rendering them ambiguous. Performance studies theorist Sharon Mazer suggests that we compare karaoke to the pleasures of watching puppet theatre: the puppet, she says, ‘makes manifest the distinction between alive and not alive because it verges on but never attains the status of ‘living.’” Karaoke hinges on the fact that it’s not *all* mediated, not canned - is, in fact, alive.³¹

The word “kara” in karaoke is often translated as “empty,” but literally it means “void.”³² Johan Fornäs uses the metaphor of the “void” to theorise about subjectivity. In many ways, the ideas of Fornäs bridge the gap between the modern and the postmodern. Tōru Mitsui discusses this aspect of Fornäs’ work in the introduction of *Karaoke Around the World*: “His notion of a ‘disappearing act’ or ‘filling the gaps’ in one’s multiple identities is especially revealing.”³³ Fornäs himself explains further:

This interactive medium can serve as a paradigmatic model for how media texts always offer their users voids. Listeners, viewers and readers enter into these gaps and fill them with their own (re)constructed meanings.³⁴

Thus, it is this live aspect of singing within a performance of karaoke that fills the void created by the recorded background music.

Wong elaborates on Fornäs' idea of karaoke as a void. She writes:

Karaoke presupposes and is structured around an empty space, a place meant to be filled by a live, not-canned person whose performance will merge with the package, a person who fills sonic and social and historical space, and whose performance becomes larger than life.³⁵

Although the background music of the karaoke performance is recorded, every performance of a karaoke song is essentially live because there is no way to tell beforehand exactly how the song will be sung, how the audience will react, or a number of other mitigating factors that arise because karaoke is performed in a public venue in the context of a live audience.

Wong writes that the performance of karaoke can even be seen not as a symptom of postmodernism, but rather as a form of resistance against the mediatisation of the mass media:

While mass mediation is often considered a hegemonic force, people can (and do) reclaim mass-mediated musics for their own purposes. I've seen how Southeast Asians constantly and enthusiastically put liveness back into genres that seem to epitomize the hegemonic evils of the transnational music industry.³⁶

Thus, resistance only becomes possible because karaoke is part of the mass media. It attacks from within. Fornäs echoes a similar sentiment:

We may fill the void in karaoke music with the voids in ourselves. Our voices may smoothly reflect the impersonal surface of the world around us, and perhaps the opportunity to do this is exactly what we need: to try our different masks, to test the fascination of artificiality. But we may also choose to sing with passion, off key and hoarsely, but full of our unique experience which no machine can take from us.³⁷

Because it is already part of the system, karaoke is a viable location for mounting a defence against the onslaught of culture producers.

It is very tempting to dismiss karaoke as a passing fad. It is even more tempting to dismiss karaoke as a gimmick, a technological crutch that gives untalented people a false hope of celebrity. In fact, karaoke is not a fad. It is not going away any time soon. It is, in fact, a multi-billion dollar industry that continues to grow every year. I predict that we will see this trend continue. Karaoke is also part of a larger cultural movement, along with video games like *Rock Band* and *Guitar Hero*, social networking websites like *Facebook* and *Twitter*, that promote the

average individual as a worthwhile producer of culture. This is why karaoke (and this trend in general) is truly revolutionary. It challenges the hegemonic forces of the status quo by breaking down the rules under which cultural production is understood to take place. Karaoke breaks down preconceived binarisms: it challenges notions of “high” versus “low” art, “live” versus “mediatised” performance, and “amateur” versus “professional” artists. Karaoke provides the cultural space and environment where anyone, regardless of their class, gender, or ethnicity, can truly have a voice. The anxiety that surrounds its production is ultimately the strongest evidence of its efficacy.

¹ See Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994).

² All of the names, including that of the karaoke bar, the city in which the bar is located, and the names of people mentioned in this article, have been changed to assure the anonymity of the performers.

³ Rob Drew, *Karaoke Nights: An Ethnographic Rhapsody* (Walnut Creek, CA: Alta Mira Press, 2001), 14.

⁴ *Ibid*, 15.

⁵ Lawrence Levine, *Highbrow / Lowbrow. The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1988), 230.

⁶ *Ibid*, 231. Emphasis original.

⁷ Drew, *Karaoke Nights*, 33.

⁸ *Ibid*, 33. Emphasis original.

⁹ Brian Raftery, *Don't Stop Believin': How Karaoke Conquered the World and Changed My Life* (Cambridge, MA: De Capo Press, 2008), 43.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 41. Emphasis original.

¹¹ John Blacking, *How Musical is Man?* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 1973), 34.

¹² See Philip Auslander, *Presence and Resistance: Postmodernism and Cultural Politics in Contemporary American Performance* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994).

¹³ Robert Drew, “Once More, With Irony: Karaoke and Social Class,” *Leisure Studies*, 24:4 (October 2005): 376.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 372-373. See Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), and Herbert Gans, *Popular Culture and High Culture* (New York: Basic Books, 1974).

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 378.

¹⁶ Diana Crane, *The Production of Culture: Media and the Urban Arts* (Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, 1992), 9, emphasis original.

¹⁷ See John Seabrook, *Nobrow: The Culture of Marketing and the Marketing of Culture* (New York: Random House, 2001).

¹⁸ See David Brooks, *Bobos in Paradise: The New Upper Class and How They Got There* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000).

¹⁹ Drew, “Once More, With Irony,” 373.

²⁰ *Ibid*, 381.

²¹ Johan Fornäs, “Karaoke: Subjectivity, Play and Interactive Media,” *Nordicom Review* 15:1 (1994): 95.

²² Drew, *Karaoke Nights*, 51.

²³ “It’s Time to Maim That Tune,” *Newsweek* (June 29 1992): 57.

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- ²⁴ Mike Redmond, "Karaoke Fans Capable of Killing More than Tunes," *Indianapolis Star* (December 16, 1998): E1.
- ²⁵ Lenny Stoute, "Curtains for Clintons: Breeding Ground for New Talent Switches to Karaoke Format," *Toronto Star* (December 7 1995): H7.
- ²⁶ Drew, *Karaoke Nights*, 69.
- ²⁷ Drew, *Karaoke Nights*, 21, emphasis original.
- ²⁸ Philip Auslander, *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), 160.
- ²⁹ Robert Drew, "'Scenes' Dimensions of Karaoke in the United States," in *Music Scenes: Local, Translocal and Virtual*, eds. Andy Bennett and Richard A. Peterson, (Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 2004), 65.
- ³⁰ See Charles Kiel, "Music Mediated and Live in Japan," *Ethnomusicology* 28:1 (1984): 91-96. Reprinted in *Music Grooves*, eds. Charles Kiel and Stephen Feld, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).
- ³¹ Sharon Mazer quoted in Deborah Wong, "'I Want the Microphone': Mass Mediation and Agency in Asian-American Popular Music," *The Drama Review* 38:3 (Autumn 1994): 164. Emphasis original.
- ³² Tōru Mitsui, "The Genesis of Karaoke: How the Combination of Technology and Music Evolved," in *Karaoke Around the World: Global Technology, Local Singing*, eds. Tōru Mitsui and Shūhei Hosokawa, (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), 40.
- ³³ *Ibid*, 15.
- ³⁴ Fornäs, "Karaoke," 97.
- ³⁵ Wong, "I Want the Microphone," 162.
- ³⁶ *Ibid*, 155.
- ³⁷ Fornäs, "Karaoke," 96.