

Patrons belt out tunes at karaoke bars

KARAOKE from page 8

drink and stubs out her half-finished cigarette.

"I don't need that anymore tonight," she said.

"God, I'm still shaking a little bit."

Are we live?

In most cities, people in search of karaoke are forced to perform over synthetic-sounding music supplied by laser discs.

But in Lincoln, true karaoke fans display their talents on the big stage at Duffy's Tavern, 1412 O St. Because every Thursday night at Duffy's, live karaoke with local band Shithook rules the proceedings.

Unlike the faux-glamour of traditional karaoke clubs such as Neighbors, Duffy's radiates unpretentious, stripped-down rock 'n' roll. The stage is filled with cigarette burns and beer stains, and it lurches downward whenever somebody begins to move enthusiastically on it. The bright white light from above shines directly into the performers' eyes, and the lyrics are written on large sheets of cardboard or paper, all torn at the edges.

Soft-pop tripe by the likes of Lionel Richie and Barbara Streisand is nowhere to be found. AC/DC, the Rolling Stones and Elvis Presley rule here.

The crowd stomps and cheers or boos and jeers.

But most of all, it's just a hell of a lot louder.

"This is where the big boys come when they wanna be rock stars," said Andy Glaser, a regular at Duffy's, particularly on Thursday nights.

Glaser is - for lack of a better term - a karaoke groupie. He rarely sings, preferring to sit in the anonymous darkness of the bar and watch his friends and acquaintances perform.

"I just think it's funny. Some people get so into it. And other people just look terrified up there.

"Both kinds are fun to watch."

When Glaser does sing, he leans toward rockabilly and early rock 'n' roll.

"I've sung 'Bad Boy' and 'Slow Down' before," Glaser says. "Usually I'll get up on stage when a friend from out of town is here, or somebody who doesn't usually come shows up.

"Some of them think I sing all the time. I don't have the guts for that."

Hard-core fans only

The intensity and enthusiasm that accompanies Thursday nights at Duffy's are the result of volume and atmosphere.

At Pho Den Cafe, 27th and Holdrege streets, they are the result of

sheer fanaticism.

Karaoke is not an incidental occurrence to the patrons here. It is the sole reason for venturing out after sunset.

"I really don't like going out to bars, but I come here all the time," said Thahn Nguyen, a pre-med student at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. "And I only come to sing."

Nguyen is not alone in that sentiment. Nearly everyone in attendance takes a turn at the microphone. There aren't a lot of innocent bystanders to be found.

They sing with emotion. They don't always sound great, but at least they always sing.

The Pho Den Cafe is more than a karaoke bar, and it is much more than a mere cafe. It's a physical representation of all that karaoke pulls from its participants.

It is about the love of music, the love of performance and the love of a gracious crowd.

It is about self-confidence and brazen attitude.

But most of all, it is about being that rock star that everyone really wants to be. And even if it only lasts for five minutes, it's worth it.

At least it's better than playing air guitar in your bedroom.

"If you think you suck, then you'll never get up on that stage"

MARK MINCHOW
karaoke performer

Waddlers welcome at the Quack-Off

BY JEFF RANDALL
Senior staff writer

For many people, the last days of January mean much more than biting cold and bleak skies.

These days are more than days. They are symbolic because they signify the arrival of a sporting event that is unparalleled and unrivaled in every aspect.

It is an event in which the lines between winners and losers are clearly defined, where sweat and snow mix and polite sportsmanship is often forgotten amid the throes of heated competition.

It's not the Super Bowl. It's the Avoca Quack-Off.

And unlike other elitist major sporting events, everyone can participate in this display of sinewy athletic ability and mental toughness.

For the uninitiated, the Quack-Off is easily described as duck races. But for those who have been there, and especially for those who have competed, it is much more.

In the races, contestants line up on an ice-covered tennis court and urge their ducks across a line at the court's opposite end.

But strength and speed do not guarantee victory, because the racers must move their ducks along without ever making physical contact. This is where the mental toughness truly comes in.

One must clap, shout, stomp, scream and holler to move the ducks forward. Victory is the product not only of speed, but also of the duck's fragile psyche.

Many a contestant has chosen a majestic-looking waterfowl for competition, only to find that beauty and grace

To the races

The Facts

What: Avoca Quack-Off

When: Saturday (registration from 10 a.m. - 12 p.m.; racing begins shortly thereafter)

Where: Avoca (about 25 miles east of Lincoln on O St., go south at sign)

Cost: \$10 for registration, \$5 for duck rental

The Skinny: Annual duck races to raise money for Avoca's volunteer fire department and rescue squad



do not go hand-in-hand with winning.

And several contestants have set their sights on the toughest and rowdiest of birds, not realizing that a duck with a bulwark-like personality will not be easily urged across the finish line.

The true Quack-Off connoisseurs have discovered the fine line in duck selection. They choose the bird that doesn't look the best or waddles the highest, but the one that radiates victory.

But to say that victory is the only object of this daylong competition would be an oversimplification.

Since its inception nearly two decades ago, the Quack-Off has been a fund-raising event for Avoca's volunteer fire department and rescue squad. The sheer excitement of interacting with nature - and possibly the alcohol intake - leaves many competitors feeling indifferent toward the outcome.

It is these aspects of the competition that draw so many people to this small town every year. They have taken the irrefutable black-and-white condition of winning and losing and turned it into a celebration of sport, of nature and of humanity.

Either that, or they just like racing ducks.

Artist's work reflects heritage

MEZA from page 9

died was how much I mean to my kids," he said.

Meza and his wife have a 4-year-old daughter, Mila. Meza also has a 9-year-old daughter, Carmen, who lives in Chicago.

The couple works full-time at the Cornhusker Hotel. Meza is a waiter, while Oden-Meza manages the gift shop.

Oden-Meza, who's also an artist, said having a job combined with the responsibilities of child-rearing inevitably stunts the growth of an artist.

Meza expanded on the dilemma.

"My whole paycheck from the Cornhusker goes straight to child support and bills around here," he said. "My spending money depends on the art I sell. But I chose this lifestyle, and I don't believe in letting the kids go hungry just so I can make art."

Oden-Meza, who won the Coleman Award for printmaking while a UNL student in 1996, believes her husband could make a living with his art in a bigger city.

"But he'll never move because he has so much family here in Lincoln," she said. "I think it shows that he's so mature as an artist that he doesn't have to be a big success to validate his work."

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