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[Home \(/\)](#) [About the PCIJ \(/about/\)](#) [Stories \(/list/stories/\)](#) [Blog \(/blog/\)](#) [Multimedia \(/list/multimedia/\)](#)
[Books \(/list/books/\)](#) [Disaster Aid \(/yolanda\)](#) [MoneyPolitics \(http://moneypolitics.pcij.org/\)](http://moneypolitics.pcij.org/)

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MARCH - APRIL 2008

Himig Pinoy

Conquered by videoke

by Prime Sarmiento

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SHE HAS always loved to sing, and as a young girl even joined amateur contests held in her hometown of Mainit in Surigao del Norte. Now based in Los Baños, Laguna, Christine Ajoc hasn't foregone the joys of singing to an audience, even if she has not become a professional singer. If the 25-year-old is not in a videoke bar where she and her friends feast on crispy *pata* and take turns singing songs by Rivermaya or Christina Aguilera, Ajoc is singing (and eating and chatting) with the help of a videoke at a friend's house.

For Ajoc, videoke singing is a way to de-stress from her busy schedule as a college lecturer and graduate student at the University of the Philippines (UP). It's also a form of expression, and she says that when she and her fellow lecturers at UP Los Baños are in the videoke bar, they are not their "usual selves." As Ajoc puts it, "When you do videoke, you can be the *jologs* that you're not expected to be."

"There's a transformation that happens," agrees Rolando Esteban, an anthropology graduate student and another videoke enthusiast. "When (you're in a videoke bar), sometimes you invert your status."

Indeed, for many, taking the microphone and singing their hearts out in public takes them to a place that is far from their reality. This is largely why even the most remote barangay has a videoke or karaoke joint, and never mind if it's just a shack with a couple of tables. The wanna-be singers will come and so long as they are holding onto the mike, they are not farmers, fisherfolk, or itinerant vendors. Or teachers, for that matter.

Michael Tan, chairperson of the Department of Anthropology at UP Diliman, says, "It's amusing whenever I attend gatherings with other professors and there's a *videoke*. You can even see middle-aged women singing Madonna's songs (such as) 'Like a Virgin.'"

In this issue

- [Make \(beautiful\) noise \(/stories/make-beautiful-noise/\)](#)
- [Soundtrack of a nation \(/stories/soundtrack-of-a-nation/\)](#)
- [Video: The season of protest songs \(/stories/video-the-season-of-protest-songs/\)](#)
- [Music and the machines \(/stories/music-and-the-machines/\)](#)
- [Living rhythms \(/stories/living-rhythms/\)](#)
- [Conquered by videoke \(/stories/conquered-by-videoke/\)](#)
- [The business of making music \(/stories/the-business-of-making-music/\)](#)
- [Name that tune's price \(stories/name-that-tunes-price/\)](#)

Tan also notes that no Filipino gathering — whether it's a class reunion, a birthday party, or simply another weekend drinking session — is complete these days without a videoke.

That videoke singing has been added to the Filipinos' growing list of "brief escapes" is not surprising. After all, singing has long been a national pastime in this country; now, for as low as five pesos per song, one even has an audience. For P1,500, one can also rent an entire videoke unit overnight and have one's friends come over and take turns channeling either their inner Michael Bolton or Mariah Carey.



NO Filipino gathering — whether it's a class reunion, a birthday party, or simply another weekend drinking session — is complete these days without a videoke.
[photo by Alecks Pabico]

- PERSPECTIVE
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(/stories/executive-privilege-versus-public-interest/)

Videoke singing, however, also performs a few other functions that are vital in Philippine society. For one, it lets the individual shine, even for a moment, in a society that puts a premium on conformism and the group. In the videoke bar, notes Ajoc, "the element of *hiya* (shame) disappears. That's empowering for the ones who are singing." For another, it provides yet another avenue for bonding between friends and relatives.

Attests Ajoc: "Before, my friends and I weren't super-close. But because of videoke, I have been able to reveal my 'other side,' my less formal self. And we've become closer since."

Videoke singing is also a way for the socially careful Pinoys to communicate without being confrontational, says Almond Aguila, lecturer at the UP Diliman's College of Mass Communication. She points out, "We are uncomfortable with directness. We are always worried about other people, (what they will say)."

A trip to a videoke bar, she says, could help ease any awkwardness between certain individuals, including those set apart by social or professional rankings. Aguila argues, for instance, that office tensions could be relieved somewhat by a bit of bonding over a few songs. "*Pag nag-videoke na kayo*, your boss is just like any other person," she says. "*Tapos tuksuhan na* (Then it's teasing time). When you go back to the office, the working relationship is better."

IT'S INEVITABLE thus that a Filipino would claim to be the inventor of the machine that later evolved into the videoke. The late businessman Roberto del Rosario even clinched a Philippine Supreme Court ruling that said he was so, but a Japanese drummer by the name of Daisuke Inoue would also step up to say he thought up videoke's precursor, the karaoke, which combines the Japanese words for "empty" (*kara*) and "orchestra" (*okesutera*). The term "karaoke" is said to have been coined in 1979; Pinoy inventions lore has del Rosario coming up with what he called a "sing-along system" or SAS in 1975, although he secured a patent for it only in 1983.

In any case, neither del Rosario nor Inoue seems to have made a real mint out of their respective contraptions, which were essentially cassette tape players with microphones and amplifiers. The ones who raked in the profits out of karaoke and later videoke (so called because of the introduction of video into the system) machines were the many companies that tweaked and made improvements on these, enabling them to sell these by the thousand per year by the mid-1990s. Today videoke has become a multibillion-dollar global industry; videoke machines are ubiquitous fixtures not only in the Philippine setting, but also in other parts of Asia (including Japan and Korea) and elsewhere.

In the Philippines, a local company has even created a videoke application for cell phones that enable users to download songs onto their mobiles and then sing along with the help of lyrics flashed onto the tiny screens. There used to be a videoke channel on TV, too, and while this has since gone off the air, a videoke-inspired game show is still going on strong after several seasons.

One of the most enduring business spawns of the videoke, however, is the KTV restaurant, where it is not the menu that is the come-on, but the prospects of singing loud and proud with a group of friends or loved ones. For sure, it's a form of self-expression, but videoke singing is not something one does by one's lonesome.

Bernadette Escudero, co-owner of the World Music Room Family KTV in Greenhills, says that none of her customers ever books a private room just so that he or she can sing alone. Her customers, she says, always come in groups, ranging from *barkadas* of high school students to families residing in a nearby subdivision, to troops of company employees who pooled their money just so they can sing the night away — together. Escudero herself wound up owning a KTV restaurant after months of nights spent with friends singing and having fun in videoke bars in Quezon City and Makati.

But those without a group to sing with need not despair. They can just go to videoke stalls that have mushroomed in streetcorners, neighborhood markets, and malls, where even passersby become part of the instant audience. Some malls do provide a private booth for the singer, but for some reason, there is a loudspeaker outside, assailing the ears of unwitting shoppers with whatever is coming out of the videoke singer's mouth.

Observers and certified videoke fans alike insist it simply would be no fun at all if one sang alone. The secret to enjoying videoke, they say, is not really in keeping on key but in having an audience — which is probably why the more popular videoke tunes are those that allow the singer to emote shamelessly or to put on a performance that could almost be worthy of being staged at the Araneta Coliseum.

The videoke crowd cuts through social classes, age, and gender. The divergence comes only in the kind of videoke haunts these one-hour or one-night singers patronize, as well as in the repertoire they choose.

Mixed (as in boys and girls) groups usually bring the house (or room) down with a rousing rendition of “Build Me Up, Buttercup” by The Foundations or ABBA’s “Dancing Queen,” complete with choreography. Among the female soloists, the top choices include Gloria Gaynor’s “I Will Survive,” Charlene’s “I’ve Never Been to Me,” Karyn White’s “I’m Not Your Superwoman” (and its Pinoy version, “Hindi Ako Si Darna”), and whatever love song is enjoying the most airtime at the moment (current favorite: Yeng Constantino’s “Hawak Kamay,” which roughly translates to “Holding Hands”). Male videoke singers inevitably choose ballads, with the older “performers” often warbling a heartfelt “Delilah” by Tom Jones or Marco Sison’s “My Love Will See You Through.”

IT IS always a plus, of course, if the audience is friendly, considering that those taking center stage are amateurs.

Unfortunately, not a few murders have occurred because the hapless videoke singer was hopelessly offkey. Last year, it was even reported that local videoke bars had taken Frank Sinatra’s “My Way” off their song catalogues because this often led to serious fistfights, if not outright murder attempts. Some videoke habitués have also gone after their fellow amateur singers who refused to let go of the microphone. (Videoke-related violence, however, is apparently not a purely Pinoy phenomenon. In Thailand, one man reportedly went on a killing rampage earlier this month after his videoke-addicted neighbors refused to sing with less gusto.)

Despite such risks, Ajoc says she does not see the point in singing alone, not even if she has a videoke player and mike at home. She says she takes these out only when she has guests, pointing out, “You want to be heard by others, that’s why you sing. Whether or not they want to listen to you, so long as you feel it’s okay for you to sing, you go and do it. You need an audience, to boost your self-esteem. If you hear good feedback, your notion of what you are rises.”

“Videoke is very democratic because it allows even those without talent, *basta malakas ang loob* (so long as they have the nerve), to sing in front of an audience,” Tan says. “No one ever really mocks anyone no matter how bad they are in singing. Everyone jokes about it and the singer will take it well.”

Well, most of the time, anyway. Aside from the risk of being bludgeoned or shot by a sourpuss (and often inebriated) stranger, there have also been cases of longtime friends parting ways because a “performance” had been met by snickering. Ajoc herself says she keeps her criticisms to herself if the singer is not really that close to her. This is even though good-natured ribbing is part of Filipino culture and those on the receiving end are supposed to take the teasing without complaint. Aguila, however, says that sometimes videoke singing does provoke one-upmanship among the participants, leading to less than positive outcomes.

This being the Philippines, though, a really good singer is bound to be part of any videoke barkada. Escudero in fact believes that it is precisely because “there are a lot of people who are excellent singers” that videoke bars have become so popular. “These have become their outlet (for their talent),” she says.

“*Dapat meron sa grupo na mahusay talagang kumanta dahil mas enjoy ‘yun* (There should be someone in the group who can really sing because that’s more enjoyable),” comments Esteban. “*Ako, enjoy akong makinig* (Me, I enjoy listening myself).”

The naturally talented, however, needs to observe a certain ritual, says anthropologist Tan. In a country where showoffs are shouted down and shoved aside, good singers are at risk of being cast an evil eye if they dare take the mike too often. And Tan says there first has to be a *pilitan* (mock forcing), where the audience or the rest of the group cajoles the really talented to perform. It is only after a few minutes of this *pilitan* that the “reluctant” singer gives in and belts out a tune, to the delight of the audience. Afterward, the singer must remember to let the others take their turn — and to egg them on.

Videoke enthusiasts stress that while singing to an audience allows the individual to bask briefly in the spotlight, the experience remains communal, with everyone’s level of enjoyment dependent on the participation of each member of the group (whether as performer or commentator). Those who insist on hogging the mike therefore have no place in a videoke joint, and may be better off trying out for “Pinoy Idol” or “Wowowee.”

Perhaps that’s why “My Way” makes some videoke joint-goers homicidal; they’d rather have it sung as “Our Way.”

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