

Letter to the Straits Times Sep 1, 1999

I refer to Mr. Lee's letter "Why is it an offence for jazz enthusiasts to have jam sessions?" (ST July 16), and Mr. Chang's reply "Customers are allowed to perform only in karaoke outlets" (ST July 28). At first I observed this debate with only detached interest, however it is Mr. Chang's reply which prompts me to offer the benefit of my professional experience as a jazz musician.

Mr. Chang explains that the reason for the law preventing musical jam sessions is "to prevent public order problems resulting from ugly incidents such as fights and serious assaults". It seems Mr. Chang has not attended a jazz jam session. In my 20 years of performing music I have yet to see a fight break out at a jam session. Can the same be said of karaoke bars?

Nor have I ever witnessed at a jam session "customers clamoring to get on stage or being critical of one's performance", as Mr. Chang suggest of jam sessions. This instead reminds me of a karaoke bar where drunken businessmen clamor for control of the mike so they can scream out their inhibitions in public, only to be critisized by their peers for their terrible singing and drunkenness. At jazz jam sessions the feeling is much more serious, subdued, and forgiving, because the music is demanding to play and most students trying to learn this artform are scared to death of making a fool of themselves onstage. The customers are very sensitive to this. It's the only chance for students to learn from the pros, in a supportive and receptive environment. There is rarely any drunkenness because in order to "sit in" with professional jazz musicians, you need all your wits about you. If you are drunk and out of control, you are not allowed onstage, nor would you have the guts to show up in the first place. Can the same be said of karaoke bars where anything goes?

Finally, Mr. Chang suggests that in karaoke bars, there is no annoyance caused to others by the customers singing. Really? It annoys me. But the customers at a jazz jam session are never annoyed by "sitting in". It is my experience that this is the favorite thing for customers to witness. It's a proven and appreciated tradition. Customers love it!

One thing I love about going out in Singapore is that I don't have to worry about fistfights and other ugly incidents. But then again that's because I stay away from karaoke bars and their drunken patrons, and frequent instead the peaceful, friendly, and sober environment of Singapore's jazz venues.

Respectfully Yours, Greg Chako, musician and jazz lover

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