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Out of Tune

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It's 8:56 p.m., and I'm at Boheme for Open Mic Music Night. This happens every Sunday night here, apparently. Open Mic nights are notorious for bad music/bad poetry and women with guitars singing about their unfulfilled love lives.

Shortly after 9, a skinny guy with a guitar takes the seat in front of the microphone.

"This is a song I wrote a long time ago. It's about America. It's kinda depressing. It'll be over soon. There's some feedback, and the skinny guy starts singing. It's worse than I would have thought.

"I have a potion/ that allows you to go through the motions/ with no devotion/ to any God/ any God/ any God/ any God...

"And I died/ and I died/ and I died/ and I died/ and I died...

"I thought if I had the choice who would I shove. I'm playin' pick up sticks/ with hypocrites/ and I'm doin' OK/ and I'm doin' OK/ and I'm doin' OK and I'm doin' OK/..."

"They said quit fuckin' off/ and hurry up and wait/ and hurry up and wait/ and hurry up and wait/ and hurry up and wait/ and hurry up and wait/ and hurry up and wait/ and hurry up and wait/ and hurry up and wait/..."

He keeps going on. Good God, this man is bad. He sounds whiny like Billy Corgan or Bob Dylan, only without talent. Eventually, he stops singing. The man, who doesn't identify himself, leaves immediately afterward. So much for talking to this guy. Oh well.

At the next table, some frat boys complain about the price of beer.

It looks like a band is next. While it sets up, one of the nearby frat boys shouts for the members to play the Peter Gunn theme. He explains to the others that this way the band is "pissed off and will fuck it up."

Then they get started. They call themselves Hippodrome. They could be good in a few years. For now, they sound really disjointed. They remind me of what Beck would have sounded like in those first few years. They don't so much end the songs as peter out.

"We're debating what song to play next," they tell the audience.

They do get around to playing the Peter Gunn theme, though. Halfway in, it slips into more of a laid-back, freestyle slacker jazz. Did they fuck it up or are these guys just relaxing the hell out of it? It could go either way.

They describe the next song as the story of Sir Walter and his quest. Right. They discuss how to end the song while they play it.

Finally, the good music starts. "Eric" is a middle-aged man with a guitar. He plays his guitar wonderfully and sings about "the American national pastime — surfing for porn." This is a guy singing really witty songs about porn, boy bands and commercial radio. Yes! Unfortunately, he runs off before I can get to him. Damn.

Open Mic Nights date back to when Dugan's Deli, a precursor to Boheme, was open, says Pete Sherman, 50, owner of Boheme. "There were a lot of musicians, and it wasn't very novice friendly. People would ignore who was playing, and you were better off playing at home. But here, there's a more attentive environment. I think the kind of atmosphere you need isn't a bar-type of place."

Sherman defines the main creative outlets at Open Mic nights as musical and prose/stream of consciousness poetry. "In larger cities, like Washington, D.C., in the city paper, there are half a dozen open mic poetry nights. I know most people write, but they don't share it because most bars don't have the atmosphere."

Sherman credits the whole concept of open poetry and this level of human interaction to the coffee hangouts in the '60s and '70s. Sherman says there was more openness then, and people had more to share. "There wasn't such a huge amount of technology to preclude interaction."

Technology does not preclude interaction at the Boheme on Sunday nights (music) and Tuesday nights (poetry), when anyone can take the stage and let it all out.

I arrived one Tuesday at 9, when the poetry supposedly starts. Nobody had taken the stage at 11. People are talking, but to each other, not on stage. A little after 11, the first person got the courage to speak. Actually, it was Sherman in a wig, joking around with his staff. "Clapping is bullshit," he says. Most of the audience starts snapping their fingers.

Shortly after that, "JD," 26, one of Sherman's friends, gets up to speak. He reflects on being 26. He reflects on his job. "Who can guess what I do for a living? I fix kids. Parents bring me their f*cked-up kids, and I fix them. Then they get too old for my department and
they go to the Richmond Center. Then they turn 18, and I beat the shit out of them.” JD starts ranting about whatever comes to mind, including his roommate, his car, Nietzsche, break dancing and being a vegetarian.

A little afterwards, Tera Ginter, 26, takes the stage. She reads poetry and sings a few songs. She also appears to have a bit of following. Ginter’s been going to Boheme for the past year, and she’s got a laid-back attitude about these nights. “I play my stuff. I don’t have much to say. If you like me, then you like me.”

The next week rolled around, and on Tuesday, I headed back to Boheme. It was late in the night when JD went to the mic. “My name is JD, and I’m about to do something I’ve never done. I’m going to read some of what I’ve written. I’ve been coming here for over a year, and I use this to make a fucking idiot out of myself.”

JD then starts talking about whatever comes to mind. This week, it’s his car, the advantages of priapism and junior high romance. After a while, he steps down and promised to “get back here and do some good stuff maybe.”

Then Jason Mehmen gets up to speak. He reads some of what he’s written about the Cannabis Cup in Amsterdam, a meeting for marijuana fans and about personal freedoms. “Sexual action is the only release from the artificial hell we live in,” according to his poetry. Eventually, it turns into a steady stream of profanity.

Suddenly, two men poke their heads in and proclaim, “Damn, there’s nobody here. Fuck, man.” They immediately leave. Just another random encounter with the drunker side of Ames.

I caught up with Mehmen later. He says he uses writing as a means of expression and frustration with society and government and “just simple evils men do that I’ve experienced.” Mehmen also believes in the need for more self-expression. “I rebel against everything. It’s what life’s about, finding what suits you.” Mehmen got a lot of opinions on personal freedom, respect and the need for people to think for themselves. “What we need is a social leader, not a political one. Someone to speak for the goodness of mankind.”

Sherman and JD take turns reading their poetry and talking about whatever comes to mind, sort of dueling banjos for coffee house types. The loud people from earlier look like open fodder for ridicule. JD starts harassing people. He tries goading his friend, Jocelyn, into going up in front of the fewer than a dozen people watching.

“Come on people, anyone who wants to hear Jocelyn read, raise your hand.” After awhile, he starts reading some poetry and ends up pissing off two women studying nearby. I didn’t see too much of him for the rest of the night.

I’ve got to admit, I have a lot of respect for anyone who can speak of his or her unfulfilling sex life in front of a crowd, no matter how small. Don’t ask me why, but at some point I decided to give poetry a shot. I tried putting together some feelings on paper. I admit it was pretty bad.

There’s only one piece of expression in me, and this one isn’t it. Can’t write, can’t sing, can’t dance, can’t play.

But I’m pissed.

And I’m damn near an artist at it.

I might have been the worst of the night, but what the hell. At an open mic night, there is no good or bad, just expression. Plus, you don’t have to pay to get in.

Aaron Jones is a sophomore in journalism and mass communication.

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