

HIP-HOP KARAOKE

Making new friends with profanity

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"Honey, check it out, you got me mesmerized/ With your black hair and your fat thighs..." I stammered into the microphone.

I had been in Toronto only five hours, but already I was standing onstage, a room packed with strangers sizing me up. Unfortunately for the crowd, I had done nothing to deserve an audience. It was my first night in Toronto and I had been duped into performing at the city's monthly Hip-Hop Karaoke night.

Earlier that night, while downing pints at the Embassy on Augusta Avenue, I had bragged that my version of *Iron Man* brought down the house at a heavy-metal bar. In response to my unchecked hubris, my friends challenged me to flex my skills at HHK. I swaggered past a spooky and deserted Bellevue Square Park and upstairs to The Boat in Kensington Market (in May, Hip-Hop Karaoke moved to the Gladstone Hotel). How tough could it be to rock the crowd in a dusty, nautical-themed dive bar? As we watched a young guy in a polo shirt, a bulky cellphone clipped to his belt, masterfully deliver every single lyric in the five-minute Wu-Tang Clan song *Triumph*, I understood why.

This was hardly a Monday night belting out Journey hits for half-conscious barflies. People were seriously prepared. The software engineer-type, whose version of *Triumph* had us in awe, reentered the crowd and brushed past me, sweat streaming down his face. "Great job, man," I gushed. "That was amazing." He looked me in the eye, panting, "That was lots and lots of practice."

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Reality has a way of setting in just a moment too late.

I was up next. I hauled a friend onstage to help lessen the inevitable blow to my pride - a pathetic response to karaoke cold feet. As soon as I turned around, he snuck back into the crowd. The DJ cued my selection.

Despite the heavy rotation of my song, A Tribe Called Quest's *Electric Relaxation*, in my car stereo during high school, I couldn't remember when to come in. At other karaoke nights, you read lyrics off a monitor that follows along with the song. Here? Someone shoved a crumpled lyrics sheet into my hands and patted me on the back. The Wu-Tang aficionado hadn't needed a lyrics sheet at all.

I had also temporarily forgotten that *Electric Relaxation* is exclusively and explicitly about sex. Belting out the opening line jogged my memory. I wasn't going to let squeamishness over lyrics like, "my mind was in a frenzy, in a horny state" hinder my performance.

The profanity escalated, but so did my confidence. The event's hype-man, Toronto MC More or Les, helped me work the crowd and bailed me out when my lyrical memory lapsed. I even started enjoying myself, throwing a little booty-shake into my delivery.

That night, I saw how much enthusiasm and support Toronto has for hip-hop. And I had entertained my friends with my willingness to recite crude lyrics in a new city. But the real shock came later, when people I had never met actually recognized me from Hip-Hop Karaoke. I guess someone who has heard you shout, "Let me hit it from the back, girl, I won't catch a hernia" into a microphone doesn't stay a stranger for long.

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