

## CALL THE TUNE OR CALL A BLUFF; YOU'RE WELCOME AT THE COMMON INTEREST

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The first night I stopped into the Common Interest, a guy offered to buy me a drink. That wouldn't be unusual except that he was wearing a sparkly tuxedo and wasn't hitting on me in the least; he just offered me a drink as if it were his turn for a round and I'd get the next one. There seems to be a tremendous sense of community at the Common Interest -- and it's an inclusive one.

Most patrons are lured to the Common Interest by karaoke. The small stage comprises a mic, a mirror ball and long lines of metallic silver ribbon fluttering from the ceiling to the floor. Patrons line up, sign up and sing: everything from "With or Without You" by U2 to '80s pop, '90s rock and Elvis. (Check the songbook at [www.ciaustin.com](http://www.ciaustin.com) to see if your favorite tune is there.) The staff will videotape or burn to CD your performance should you take your karaoke that seriously -- or should you wish to blackmail a co-worker with a tape of a post-happy hour performance.

A long bar is off stage right; Jello shots in syringes hang out next to the usuals: whiskeys, vodkas, beer and so on. Happy hour starts at 2 p.m. and goes till 8 most nights, so you have plenty of time to take advantage of specials such as inexpensive Dekuyper Hot Damn schnapps. A deejay booth nestles up against the wall opposite the bar, and in the middle of the room sit the patrons, about 75 or so of whom could comfortably stand up and applaud fellow singers.

The faint of heart, who may want to sing but fear the sound of their voice resounding through a bar, can duck into a side room, where one dollar will start up a small karaoke machine with a lot less oomph. The brightly lighted side room (unlike the dim-lit stage-focus of the front room) is smaller, is filled with the friendly smell from the nearby popcorn machine, dart boards and a pool table, and wouldn't intimidate a Sunday school teacher.

But the best room is the smallest of all: It's the one with the poker table. Sundays through Tuesdays, the very in-vogue Texas Hold 'Em separates the bluffer from the bluffed; the rest of the time, blackjack dominates. Karaoke doesn't start till 9 Saturdays through Tuesdays (and starts at 7 most other nights), and the bar may not fill up till 10 or so. But the card players come earlier to play the odds: the table's open from 8 to midnight. Five bucks buys a seat, but cash payouts or prizes are strictly verboten (something about Texas law). The green felt at the Common Interest exists solely for the pleasure of playing and the company of the players. This is the room I like.

The players know each other, just as many of the singers seem to, and they all chat freely. Ernestine, who deals blackjack and has dealt for some time, will welcome a newbie to the table warmly, genuinely, and invite her back if she knows enough not to hit a 16 when the dealer's showing a three. She'll also write your name up on the little whiteboard

behind the table to track your "winnings" -- an official points system tracks who's won, and the points can be used against a future buy-in.

Few things delight me as much as card playing, but one of them is inclusiveness. I've got a soft spot for divey bars and neighborhoody bars and small bars, largely because they often come with a real sense of community, because when you show up and take a seat, someone's going to ask you about your day, maybe offer a friendly drink. And if that offer comes from a man wearing sparkles on a tux who's playing Texas Hold 'Em -- well, so much the better.

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