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Sinatra Song Often Strikes Deadly Chord

By [NORIMITSU ONISHI](#)

GENERAL SANTOS, the Philippines — After a day of barbering, Rodolfo Gregorio went to his neighborhood karaoke bar still smelling of talcum powder. Putting aside his glass of Red Horse Extra Strong beer, he grasped a microphone with a habitué's self-assuredness and briefly stilled the room with the Platters' "My Prayer."

Next, he belted out crowd-pleasers by Tom Jones and Engelbert Humperdinck. But Mr. Gregorio, 63, a witness to countless fistfights and occasional stabbings erupting from disputes over karaoke singing, did not dare choose one beloved classic: [Frank Sinatra's](#) version of "[My Way](#)."

"I used to like 'My Way,' but after all the trouble, I stopped singing it," he said. "You can get killed."

The authorities do not know exactly how many people have been killed warbling "My Way" in karaoke bars over the years in the [Philippines](#), or how many fatal fights it has fueled. But the news media have recorded at least half a dozen victims in the past decade and includes them in a subcategory of crime dubbed the "My Way Killings."

The killings have produced urban legends about the song and left Filipinos groping for answers. Are the killings the natural byproduct of the country's culture of violence, drinking and machismo? Or is there something inherently sinister in the song?

Whatever the reason, many karaoke bars have removed the song from their playbooks. And the country's many Sinatra lovers, like Mr. Gregorio here in this city in the southernmost Philippines, are practicing self-censorship out of perceived self-preservation.

Karaoke-related killings are not limited to the Philippines. In the past two years alone, a Malaysian man was fatally stabbed for hogging the microphone at a bar and a Thai man killed eight of his neighbors in a rage after they sang John Denver's "[Take Me Home, Country Roads](#)." Karaoke-related assaults have also occurred in the United States, including at a Seattle bar where a woman punched a man for singing Coldplay's "[Yellow](#)" after criticizing his version.

Still, the odds of getting killed during karaoke may be higher in the Philippines, if only because of the ubiquity of the pastime. Social get-togethers invariably involve karaoke. Stand-alone karaoke machines can be found in the unlikely settings, including outdoors in rural areas where men can sometimes be seen singing early in the morning. And Filipinos, who pride themselves on their singing, may have a lower tolerance for bad singers.

Indeed, most of the "My Way" killings have reportedly occurred after the singer sang out of tune, causing other patrons to laugh or jeer.

"The trouble with 'My Way,' " said Mr. Gregorio, "is that everyone knows it and everyone has an opinion."

Others, noting that other equally popular tunes have not provoked killings, point to the song itself. The lyrics, written by Paul Anka for Mr. Sinatra as an unapologetic summing up of his career, are about a tough guy who "when there was doubt," simply "ate it up and spit it out." Butch Albarracin, the owner of [Center for Pop](#), a Manila-based singing school that has propelled the careers of many famous singers, was partial to what he called the "existential explanation."

"I did it my way" — it's so arrogant," Mr. Albarracin said. "The lyrics evoke feelings of pride and arrogance in the singer, as if you're somebody when you're really nobody. It covers up your failures. That's why it leads to fights."

Defenders of "My Way" say it is a victim of its own popularity. Because it is sung more often than most songs, the thinking goes, karaoke-related violence is more likely to occur while people are singing it. The real reasons behind the violence are breaches of karaoke etiquette, like hogging the microphone, laughing at someone's singing or choosing a song that has already been sung.

"The Philippines is a very violent society, so karaoke only triggers what already exists here when certain social rules are broken," said Roland B. Tolentino, a pop culture expert at the [University of the Philippines](#). But even he hedged, noting that the song's "triumphalist" nature might contribute to the violence.

Some karaoke lovers are not taking chances, not even at family gatherings.

In Manila, Alisa Escanlar, 33, and her relatives invariably gather before a karaoke machine, but they banned "My Way" after an uncle, listening to a friend sing the song at a bar, became enraged at the laughter coming from the next table. The uncle, who was a police officer, pulled out his revolver, after which the customers at the next table quietly paid their bill and left.

Awash in more than one million illegal guns, the Philippines has long suffered from all manner of violence, from the political to the private. Wary middle-class patrons gravitate to karaoke clubs with cubicles that isolate them from strangers.

But in karaoke bars where one song costs 5 pesos, or a tenth of a dollar, strangers often rub shoulders, sometimes uneasily. A subset of karaoke bars with G.R.O.'s — short for guest relations officers, a euphemism for female prostitutes — often employ gay men, who are seen as neutral, to defuse the undercurrent of tension among the male patrons. Since the gay men are not considered rivals for the women's attention — or rivals in singing, which karaoke machines score and rank — they can use humor to forestall macho face-offs among the patrons.

In one such bar in Quezon City, next to Manila, patrons sing karaoke at tables on the first floor and can accompany a G.R.O. upstairs. Fights often break out when customers at one table look at another table "the wrong way," said Mark Lanada, 20, the manager.

"That's the biggest source of tension," Mr. Lanada said. "That's why every place like this has a gay man like me."

Ordinary karaoke bars, like the Nelson Carenderia here, a single room with bare plywood walls, mandate that a singer give up the microphone after three consecutive songs.

On one recent evening, at the table closest to the karaoke machine, Edwin Lancaderas, 62, crooned a Tagalog song, "Fight Temptation" — about a married man forgoing an affair with a woman while taking delight in their "stolen moments." His friend Dindo Auxlero, 42, took the mike next, bawling songs by the Scorpions and [Dire Straits](#). Several empty bottles of Red Horse crowded their table.

"In the Philippines, life is difficult," said Mr. Auxlero, who repairs watches from a street kiosk, as he railed about government corruption and a weak economy that has driven so many Filipinos to work overseas, including his wife, who is a maid in Lebanon. "But, you know, we have a saying: 'Don't worry about your problems. Let your problems worry about you.' "

The two men roared with laughter.

"That's why we come here every night — to clear the excesses from our heads," Mr. Lancaderas said, adding, however, that the two always adhered to karaoke etiquette and, of course, refrained from singing "My Way."

"Misunderstanding and jealousy," in his view, were behind the "My Way" killings. "I just hope it doesn't happen here," he said.

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