



Lydia Low gives her best at the Broun Sessions at Broun Cafe (below).

# No experience necessary

Open mic sessions allow all and sundry to showcase their musical talents and are becoming more popular



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IT WAS a muggy Wednesday evening and down at Broun Cafe on North Canal Road, a young girl named Lydia Low was onstage, armed with her guitar, performing a set of covers and originals for the patrons.

Which, including this writer, amounted to a grand total of five people — two of whom were obviously her friends. Nevertheless, Lydia still received

generous applause, mostly from Laura Kasenda, who runs Broun with hubby Ewan Wong.

"She's quite good," Laura commented. "If only there were more people. Usually, we get a lot of people in on Wednesdays. Maybe it's because of the rain earlier."

We were at the Broun Sessions, a regular open mic event that was initiated when the cafe opened in October last year. Musicians perform here from Wednesday to Sunday.

That not many in Singapore know who these musicians are isn't the point, said Laura.

"We wanted to support local Singapore talent as we ourselves have many talented musician friends who enjoy performing but are not 'seasoned enough' for the big names like Tab, Timbre and Blue Jaz," she said. "We felt it would be great to have a place where everyone who had some talent had a chance to perform."

## The place to be

Broun isn't the only establishment in Singapore conducting open mic sessions — and open mic sessions aren't new, but they are spreading.

The Originals Only Open Mike (OOOM) has been going on for years. Originally called GOT (Gathering Of Talents) back when the Singapore Art Cafe (SAC) was still at the Esplanade, open mic sessions were held every Friday, as well as xinyao open mics and band showcases.

"After I closed down the SAC in August 2008, a number of SAC supporters told me the closure was a loss of a much-loved platform for music-making," said Jonathan How, who organises OOOM.

"I decided to create a platform focusing on original material as many musicians had performed their own compositions at the SAC, and I believed open mics for original songs would fill a



gap in the local music scene.

"OOOM was launched at Emily Hill in December 2008. After a good run there, the Singapore Art Museum invited me to host it at its premises, hence birthing the OOOM@SAM series."

OOOM has since gone from strength to strength. At each session, a performer — as selected by a panel of guest judges — will get a chance to perform on radio station Power 98FM, as well as win a prize.

The success of this series has also allowed How to offer Xinyao Only Open Mike (XOOM) and Covers Only Open Mike (COOM), which will be launched on



(Left and right) No lack of performers for the Uke Got Talent sessions.



July 28 and 30, respectively.

For a while, it seemed like OOOM was the only avenue for emerging musicians to get their music heard. But places like Broun, Black Cafe and The Pigeonhole, as well as organisations such as the Ukulele Movement (UM) have since kept the flag flying.

UM believes in the benefits of open mic and started the bi-monthly Uke Got Talent, with a twofold objective.

"We wanted not just to showcase talent but also to showcase the ukulele ... as an instrument on stage, too," said UM's Glyn Chan.

These showcases are usually themed — such as "movie music" or "mash-ups" — and usually feature up to 12 performers per session.

Over at The Pigeonhole in Duxton, the idea for open mics came when musician Nicholas Chim, who'd been asked to perform at the launch, mooted the idea, said co-owner Ave Chan.

"Basically, we wanted to give a chance to emerging artistes to practise their craft," she said.

"We want to create that culture in Singapore, because we noticed that it isn't often that young fledgling songwriters can find a place to showcase their work in front of a crowd."

Unlike Broun, which only features one artiste each time, The Pigeonhole's showcases feature five acts, and are held "every fortnight," said Ave, often with Nicholas playing host.

## Playing fare

Still, not just anyone can perform. To ensure a certain amount of quality control, most performers are either recommended by trusted sources or they have their demos sent in for a listen. At Broun, musicians also have an added criterion to meet.

"They need to be wholesome, healthy and homely — like our slogan," said Laura. "We make it very clear to them that we are strict with their band names, song choices, lyrics, et cetera, and do vet through some of them."

So far, these guidelines haven't posed an issue for the performers.

"We get pleasantly surprised at how some bands specially tailor their sets to a stripped down style — which also helps them to improve on their versatility," said Laura.

The Pigeonhole's musicians are told to play originals, because "that's what we want to promote," said Ave.

"But having said that, there are some who have only started writing their own songs ... and if they're not comfortable filling the 15-minute set with all originals, we usually say, 'Okay, you can do a cover but the rest must be originals,' and they're pretty okay with that."

"I've been to a few open mics," said singer-songwriter Vanessa Faith, who's played at OOOM, Broun and The Pigeonhole, "to gain exposure and to get people to hear my music. And it's actually

a good avenue to do that. But they don't pay, so if you're looking to make money, you might be better off at a nightclub instead."

## Getting better all the time

Despite the lack of fees, organisers say it's encouraging that there is no lack of participants.

"We do get many first-timers ... More than seasoned players, in fact," said Glyn. "More and more, people are registering to play ... Double the number we used to get before. Some lack the experience in 'stage technique' or confidence. But I was impressed by the calibre of those at the last one."

Said Ave: "We are actually booked up for the next few weeks. It's a bit funny telling people, 'Yeah, I can put you in, but can you wait until two months' time?'"

"The acts are getting better,"

added Glyn. "We started with most performers just strumming and singing ... Now most form their own band, complete with ukulele bass, percussion, saxophone and violin."

Open-mic participant Lydia agreed that it has helped build confidence.

"In the beginning, you don't know anybody ... the reception that you get at the gigs here is not that great as in other countries," she said. "You have to kill yourself to get their attention. But as you go on, you know what to do."

What's also encouraging for the musicians and organisers is that the public seems to be warming up to these events.

"At first, it was discouraging for the musicians to be performing to a nearly empty space," said Laura. "Thankfully, this was only for a very short time."

Glyn said attendance for Uke Got Talent grew by "about 20 per cent each time" and that many are regular attendees.

And people actually pay heed to what's going onstage, said Ave. "I'm quite surprised. Even the younger people who come to The Pigeonhole — they're also pretty quiet and give the musicians their attention."

Said Laura: "We do have guests occasionally calling in or emailing and asking if there'll be a performance on a particular evening — which is a good sign that people do come specifically for the music."

Visit the following for more information on open mics: **Broun Cafe** ([broun.sg](http://broun.sg)); **The Pigeonhole** ([www.facebook.com/The.Pigeonhole](http://www.facebook.com/The.Pigeonhole)); **Ukulele Movement** ([www.ukulelemovement.com](http://www.ukulelemovement.com)); **OOOM** ([www.openmike.sg](http://www.openmike.sg)).



Where it all began: Open mic sessions at the Singapore Art Cafe.

SHE SAID

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*Glyn Chan, Ukulele Movement*