

Would you like fries with your oldies?

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BALTIMORE -

It's 6 o'clock on a Monday evening at the [Pikesville](#) McDonald's on Reisterstown Road in Northwest Baltimore, so naturally the burger joint's jumping. Hold the pickles, hold the lettuce, but don't hold the music. [Gary Richman](#)'s cutting loose with "The Way You Look Tonight," and every customer in the place is loving it.

It's their kind of song. One guy puts down his burger and fries long enough to ask a lady to dance. The guy walked in here with a cane. Now he's up jitterbugging with the lady. Richman, who bills himself as The Singing Stockbroker, gestures their way.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he says, "we give you the [Fred Astaire](#) and [Ginger Rogers](#) of Reisterstown Road."

The Copacabana, it ain't. But for the past year at this [McDonald's](#), they've been cutting loose like this every Monday evening. Richman and half a dozen other semipro singers, backed by taped instrumentals, have been entertaining the locals so marvelously that they've developed a regular following. Some nights you can't get a seat in the place. One elderly woman says her children used to visit her on Monday nights. Now she tells them, "Not on Mondays. That's my night for McDonald's."

"It's billed for a 6 o'clock starting time," says [Stephen Earle](#), another performer, "but you've got people camping out at 4:30 every week to make sure they get front-row seats. What started out as a half-hour show now goes close to two hours."

Who knew it would come to this? A year ago, Richman, 56, was a guy who'd drag his wife, Holly, to karaoke joints and wait around for his turn to sing. He took some voice lessons to help him along, though it's Holly who's the real talent in the family. She does "Santa Baby" like [Eartha Kitt](#). She works at the [Maryland Zoo](#). A year ago, Gary came home one night with a glimmer in his eyes.

"He told me, 'We're singing at McDonald's,'" she recalled. "He said, 'Everybody goes there, it's a

crossroads of people from every background.’ He decided he’s a singer. It makes him happy.”

He’s not alone. McDonald’s management said OK. Then Richman enlisted a bunch of people who work for a living but sing because they love it. Such as [Steve Flynn](#), a former insurance salesman who’s known as “Flynnatra.” And [Thierry L’Amour](#), who works in a ministry trying to get kids out of gangs and into religion. And [Mallory Anthony](#), a former physical therapist, who sings “The Sound of Music” like [Julie Andrews](#) coming over the hills. And [Freddie Ehrlich](#), the trumpet-playing dentist. And [Mickey Light](#), the town’s great Sinatra impersonator.

And [John Crow](#), who works for a paper recycling business but sings here because, he says, “Where else can you walk into a McDonald’s on a Monday night and get applauded? We bring them back their golden years. I sing ‘Strangers in the Night,’ and there’s always somebody in the audience with tears in their eyes.”

A moment later, Crow’s standing in the middle of the crowd, singing “I’ve Got You Under My Skin.” Regular customers in line for burgers turn around and listen. Crow reaches down to a booth to hold hands with an elderly lady who’s tapping her feet while nursing a diet coke and smiling coquettishly.

“I love this,” says the McDonald’s manager, [Juan Bates](#). “I love the singers, I love the people, I love the atmosphere it creates.”

McDonald’s loves it enough that it pays the singers (a few bucks, plus sodas) and also chips in for a good cause. It’s teamed with audience tippers and radio station WCBM to donate money to [Maryland National Guard](#) troops serving in war zones. The money goes toward phone cards for soldiers to call home during the holidays.

“When we started,” says Stephen Earle, “we might average seven people here. Now, we’ve got a following. It’s all word of mouth.”

“Two weeks ago,” says Gary Richman, “the only place you could get a seat was the men’s room.”

He’s clearly delighted by it all. These folks are living in the middle of their very own fantasies. But it’s more than that.

“It’s great to make this audience feel as good as they can,” he says. “They’re not talking about their ills, they’re not talking about their doctors. They’re talking about the music. Some of them come in with canes, with walkers. But they’re remembering what it was like when they first heard the songs.”

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