

Serving up songs at McDonald's

Want fries with that tune?

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By Linda Strowbridge

The house is already jumping when Fred Ehrlich starts blasting some New Orleans jazz riffs through his weathered horn.

Singers, one in a tuxedo, another channeling Dean Martin, a third looking like Elvis Presley, start belting out lyrics. A line of ladies who arrived an hour early to claim front row seats, is pounding on tambourines, bongos and maracas. By the time all the saints finish marching in, about 80 people, most of them seniors, are clapping, cheering, singing and dancing in the aisles.

It's a typical Monday night at a Pikesville McDonald's.

For the last 53 Mondays, the fast food outlet in the 1700 block of Reisterstown Road has staged free concerts by a growing roster of singers performing show tunes, jazz standards, spirituals and the occasional bit of Italian opera. As many as 140 people squeeze into the restaurant Monday evenings to shake off their aches and woes.

"It's the wildest thing," says John Crow, a recycling industry executive by day who



Gary Richman, left, known as the "Singing Stockbroker," leads Hinda Caplan and Rita Levy, center, both of Pikesville, and Milly Gruber, right, of Mt. Washington, in song at the Pikesville McDonalds.

croons through Frank Sinatra tunes at the McDonald's. "We get more audience enthusiasm and compliments here than any other venue we play. I had one man come up to me and say, 'You people brought me out of my shell. You made me feel alive again.'"

"This is the best hour of my week," says William Blumenfeld.

"I'm hooked," says Hinda Caplan. "If you're depressed or you've had a bad day, you come and listen to the music and all your troubles melt away."

Gary Richman, the "Singing Stockbroker," describes it as "the most infectious form of happiness I've ever seen."

The show's recipe is simple enough. Singers, mostly backed by recorded music, perform enough hits by Petula Clark, Julie Andrews, Johnny Mathis, the Mills Brothers, Peggy Lee, Elvis, Sinatra, Martin and others to transport people back to the golden days of radio, the era of Your Hit Parade, memories of Broadway or their favorite youthful afternoon from 1953. Then stir in some showmanship.

Richman sings his way across the room, flirting with scattered ladies in between lyrics. Moments later, he flips on an Elvis wig, curls his lip and starts jiggling across the stage.

"It's hard to be a kosher ham," he laughs.

The show, he says, is as much performance art as professional music. "It's a cross between The Ed Sullivan Show, The Carol Burnett Show and Looney Tunes."

It has the desired effect on the audience.

"You can't think about how much fun you're having with the music and about all your doctor's warnings at the same time," Richman says.

Listeners, he says, have come up to him and talked of how they used to love to dance to this music but can't anymore because of hip, leg, back or other problems. "Well, three shows later, you'll see all these people up dancing and there's a row of walkers and canes up against one wall. We have a special rack to hold them."



Fred Erlich, of Towson, plays "When the Saints Go Marching in" on his trumpet. The restaurant has presented free concert on Monday evenings for about seven weeks now.

"And when my wife does Mambo Italiano, we have to throw cold water on the audience," he says.

The show has even attracted highly talented audience members.

Pikesville resident Wilbur Baron was tutored by Gene Kelly and was a professional dancer, performing on Broadway and television and in touring shows with his twin brother, William. Now Wilbur sways like a feather across the McDonald's floor with his sweetheart, Irene Abarbanel.

"It's good exercise for my legs," he says.

Romeo Orlando, a retired police officer living in Perry Hall, says he started coming to the concerts "because my wife thinks this is a nice night out and, hey, I'm the last of the big time spenders."

But Romeo -- he's known simply as Romeo among the crowd -- soon began making guest appearances on stage, singing powerful Italian ballads with his clear, rippling voice.

"His back hurts if he doesn't sing," Richman quips.

The crowd hushes when Thierry Lamour, who runs a street ministry in Baltimore, begins singing a modern spiritual. His voice is deep, velvety, fluid and fills the room.

"One day he's going to start singing Johnny Mathis tunes and Johnny Mathis is going to be jealous," says Stanley Plotkin, a regular at the concerts.

"It is definitely amazing to have this much talent in the restaurant at one time," says Donnell Barnes, a 22-year employee of McDonald's who supervises the Pikesville restaurant and four others in the region.

Barnes said he never expected to be hosting concerts inside a McDonald's. But one day Richman, who was a regular customer and often talked business with Barnes, presented the idea.

"He just started singing to me in the lobby. It was kind of awkward," Barnes says. "But he sang a Sinatra song and after he left, a couple of customers inquired about who he was."

Barnes and store owner Cynthia Brown, who were already hosting Tuesday night bingos, decided to host the concerts and see if local seniors would enjoy them.

"I'm so glad we tried this," Brown says. "We have to be good neighbors and give back to the community, and I like to make people happy."

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