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Sing with the band at Newport Blues Cafe

By James J. Gillis
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John Miles of Newport sings the song 'Mustang Sally' with the live karaoke band Maxxtone Thursday night at Newport Blues Cafe. (Jacqueline Marque/Daily News staff)

about 400 tunes, ranging from punk (Ramones) to classic rock (Beatles), country (Keith Urban), hair bands (Motley Crue) and even disco (Gloria Gaynor).

On Thursday night, the crowd at the café gave Maxxtone a workout. Some on hand were veterans of the local karaoke scene, regulars at O'Brien's Pub. But the Blues Café is the only local nightspot to provide a band as a four-man jukebox. Singers sign up, and the band provides a multi-page song list as well as lyric sheets.

"It makes you feel so alive when you sing with a live band," said John Miles, 46, of Newport, a familiar face and voice on the karaoke circuit. "There's much more energy."

About 60 people turned out for Maxxtone Thursday night, paying \$3 to venture inside to sing and/or listen. The performers included twentysomethings and retirees. Bill Hofer, 60, of Newport started things up at 9:30 p.m. with "If You Could Only See" by Tonic.

Some in the crowd turned bolder as the night grew older, perhaps some brewery bravery nudging them to the stage.

A young woman in sunglasses and a cocktail dress moved confidently through No Doubt's "Just a Girl," as a guy in a kilt commandeered the dance floor with his pals. A guy in a suit eased into a Tenacious D ballad that can't be named in a family newspaper.

Hofer, who is retired from Raytheon Co., said there's a significant difference between belting songs out with a band or with backing tracks. "With the band, you really have to know the song," he said. "You don't have the bouncing ball up there to kind of guide you through the lyrics."

He started singing karaoke about three years ago when his son dragged him up onstage one night. "Since then, I haven't stopped," he said.

NEWPORT — Are you one of those kids who sang in front of the mirror, a hairbrush as microphone, imagining yourself as Mick Jagger, Robert Plant or Gwen Stefani, with the surge of a hard-rocking band behind you?

Those youthful fantasies offer a touch of reality when Maxxtone is in town.

Maxxtone is a four-piece band from Springfield, Mass., that provides the music for aspiring karaoke singers. Taking up residence most Thursday nights at the Newport Blues Café, Maxxtone can play



Hofer favors alternative rock, as does his friend Mitzi Dwyer, a pharmaceutical sales representative. Dwyer, also part of the O'Brien's crowd, sang U2's "One" but regretted that Maxxtone had no Smashing Pumpkins in the repertoire.

"With a band, you have to lead the song," she said. "With the recording, you have to kind of follow the music."

John Miles said he sings wherever he can. A Community College of Rhode Island student, he opened with Wilson Pickett's "Mustang Sally" and returned later with 21-year-old son Sulaymaan on sax, pounding out a steaming rendition of Stevie Wonder's "Superstition."

Jim Quinn, who books the café, found Maxxtone through a chat with a music agent. The band played two weeks ago and will play most Thursdays (though Eddie Money appears next week instead). "It's something I wanted to do, to bring in some people during the off-season," Quinn said. "We're hoping to get a lot of people up there to sing. I don't know anyplace else with live band karaoke."

Maxxtone's lead singer is 37-year-old Aaron Fay. The band picked up the live band karaoke idea a few years ago after seeing some New York session musicians try it at the venerable Kenny's Castaways club in Manhattan.

The group's members have served in countless cover bands and tribute bands, having played '80s new wave and Pink Floyd tributes. The bald Fay even slaps on a cowboy hat for their Kenny Chesney salute.

The group's also recorded original songs, though it's easier to keep working while playing covers and tributes. "To my chagrin, promoting the original music has been the toughest part of my career," Fay said.

When others sing, Fay helps on backup vocals and chips in with acoustic guitar. To warm things up, Maxxtone plays a few covers on its own. "I tell people I'm the laziest lead singer in show business," Fay joked.

There's little laziness in Maxxtone's act, as the members work to bring out the best in performers, some who could get paid to sing and others who should stick to the shower. "We try to do something for everyone," Fay said. "It's party music, and we want to make sure people have a good time."

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