



entertainment LIVING

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At this new karaoke joint, you can BYOB and sing your heart out in private rooms



STAFF PHOTO BY ENAN CHEDIAK
Ian McNulty sings with a group from The Times-Picayune at Rockabye Karaoke in New Orleans on April 2.

'It's joy'

BY KASEY BUBNASH
Staff writer

It wasn't too long ago that Cajun dance halls were at the center of social life in rural Louisiana, dotting the landscape between rice fields and providing a place where small-town folk could gather to celebrate another week of hard work finished.

So it's only fitting that 44-year-old Ben Miller, born and raised in Vermilion Parish, named his new karaoke club after one such bygone establishment. Singing Cher with 15 friends and dancing to zydeco for hours have more in common than you might think.

"Just watching people really let go and have some serious connection with their people is really hard to find, I think, in a lot of places now," Miller said. "And really necessary."

ROCKABYE KARAOKE

1050 Calliope St. • 4 p.m. to midnight Thursday-Saturday, 4 p.m. to 10 p.m. Sunday • 21 and over only after 6 p.m.

The idea for Rockabye Karaoke, which opened in the Lower Garden District in late 2025, has been churning in Miller's mind for well over 20 years now, ever since he overheard his grandparents reminiscing on the rural dance halls and bars of their prime.

When they mentioned Forked Island's historic Rock-a-Bye Club, the name stuck with him.

Years later, while living in New York and Portland, it clicked. There, Miller was treated to the joys of singing at the top of his lungs in dimly lit, private rooms among friends and co-workers rather than on a stage in front of strangers.

Private-room karaoke, or karaoke boxes, originated in Japan decades ago and are now readily accessible in major cities across the U.S. But in the New Orleans area, the options are few and far between.

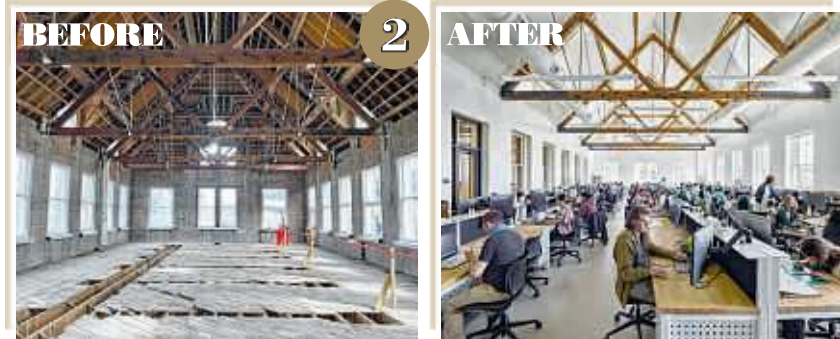
"I would come to New Orleans and I'd be like, 'It's a music-first city, why is there no private-room karaoke?'" he said. "And so I was just really thinking about how to make that happen."

He moved back to New Orleans in 2015, but it wasn't until late last year that the perfect space opened up at 1050 Calliope St. behind Merchant House, where Miller has a design and holiday decor studio. He jumped at the opportunity.

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"What I've seen over and over again is this is a place for celebrations. This is birthday parties, this is bachelorette parties, this is kids' birthday parties on the weekends during the daytime."

BEN MILLER, owner of Rockabye Karaoke



THE TEST OF TIME

Multiple renovations across New Orleans have won 2026 historic preservation awards

BY LEE CUTRONE | Contributing writer

A whopping 19 projects representing nearly 300 years of architectural history in Orleans Parish are recipients of the Louisiana Landmarks Society 2026 Awards for Excellence in Historic Preservation.

And this year's list, honoring outstanding restorations and rehabilitations completed in 2025, demonstrates how thoughtful preservation is thriving across architectural styles and neighborhoods. Residential and commercial properties, school campus landmarks, a former funeral-home-turned-hotel, and a defunct hospital adapted for mixed-income housing are among the winners in a dozen neighborhoods.

"From the Lower 9th Ward to Uptown, these projects prove that preservation and progress go hand in hand," said Sandra Stokes, chair of the preservation awards committee.

According to Stokes, there were 32 entries submitted this year, an uptick from years past. Current emphasis on sustainability, sense of place and cultural identity helps drive the popularity of historic preservation. State and federal historic tax credits, secured by many of the winning design teams, make projects economically viable.

In addition to underscoring that historic preservation is alive and well in New Orleans, the 2026 awards represent a cross section of residential styles. A Craftsman shotgun double, a circa 1900 two-story shotgun double, and a late 19th-century Creole cottage offer a look into the early domestic architecture of the working class.

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1. The Josephine, 2400 Napoleon Ave.
2. Tulane University, 6823 St. Charles Ave.
3. Holy Cross Apartments, 4950 Dauphine St.
4. 2318 St. Andrew St.
5. 2015 Kerlerec St.
6. 1401 Delachaise St.
7. 1100 Ursulines Ave.
8. 632 Esplanade Ave.
9. 621 Kerlerec St.

PROVIDED PHOTOS FROM THE LOUISIANA LANDMARKS SOCIETY

As days lengthen in Louisiana, remember the promise of rest

As summer approaches and the days lengthen across Louisiana, I've been thinking again about evensong, a tradition that nudges us to treasure each day, however long, because it must eventually yield to rest.

I had written last year about evensong, an end-of-day religious service with deep roots in the Anglican Church. The brief liturgy usually includes tranquil choral songs and short prayers that are meant to put the day to bed. When my wife and I visited England in 2019, we tried to see as much as we could.

But the evensong programs we attended at Bath Abbey and Christ Church Cathedral in Oxford reminded us that experi-



Danny Heitman
AT RANDOM

ences can be empty if we don't take time to reflect on what we've seen, felt and done.

After our friend Catherine Harrell learned how much we'd enjoyed evensong in England, she invited us to share an evensong service at Baton Rouge's St. James Episcopal Church.

"It was moving to see all the singers filing in, a shared witness to the beauty of the day dimming

toward twilight," I told readers last year. "While the service unfolded, the light behind the church's stained glass windows slowly mellowed as the sun sank lower outside."

All of this came back to mind last month when I read a newspaper story from London about some new challenges for evensong in England. As attendance declines in some houses of worship and costs rise, many congregations are struggling to keep evensong going. It's a problem that's worrying those beyond the Anglican faith, as Associated Press journalist Danica Kirka pointed out, because evensong is a part of Great Britain's wider history and culture.

One scholar told Kirka that the

practice of evensong centuries ago helped spread the development and reach of the English language.

Reading Kirka's story, I was heartened by the thought that America's mother tongue had found its voice within a daily observance meant to foster calm. At a time when language is so often weaponized on social media and in other forms of public conversation, it's inspiring to connect with the brighter possibility that words can be sources of centeredness and peace.

I was also moved to wonder whether evensong might be facing another headwind that Kirka didn't mention. In an age when smartphones and binge-watching tempt

us to spend every waking moment on the next urgent thing, maybe the idea of powering down at the close of the day is too strange for many of us to embrace.

I'm looking forward to my next evensong service, but in the meantime, I'm trying to bring its ideals into my household routines. That means retiring my phone at least an hour before bedtime, stepping away from the TV and sitting quietly with a book or my own thoughts as the sun sets.

At their best, these small habits have given me what we all want each day — namely, a happy ending.

Email Danny Heitman at danny@dannyheitman.com.

LANDMARKS

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A prominent Queen Anne-style residence listed on the National Register of Historic Places, a Second Empire mansion on the edge of the Vieux Carre, and a 19th-century building with a double-gallery façade highlight refined modes of residential design.

The Creole cottage, in disrepair and on the verge of demolition before its refurbishment, boasts the added benefit of restoring lost housing to its Bayou St. John neighborhood. The cottage was built as a double and later converted to single-family use. The rehabilitation preserved the vernacular cottage form and exterior envelope while giving the interior a renewed duplex layout.

"The wide variety of residential architecture shows the diversity of the city," Stokes said. "And it was refreshing to see a single turned back into a double. It adds to the housing market."

Two buildings originally designed for educational environments are lauded. Richardson Memorial Hall, an early 20th-century Richardsonian Romanesque building that houses the Tulane School of Architecture, combines a comprehensive rehabilitation of the imposing, historic structure with a sizable but visually subordinate rear addition.

The historic Holy Cross School, a stately landmark of the Lower 9th Ward on the Mississippi River, is an example of both adaptive reuse and the power of community advocacy. Designed in 1895 by architect James Freret, the building sat vacant and deteriorating after Hurricane Katrina. In 2018, the Landmarks Society named the school one of the nine most endangered sites in the city. New ownership and sustained



609 JACKSON AVE. BEFORE AND AFTER



community advocacy ultimately ensured it was appropriately rehabilitated and returned to active use as an anchor of the neighborhood.

"We were thrilled with this new vision that once again made the (former) school the focal point of the community," Stokes said.

Other winning projects, including two used for commercial purposes, stand out as models of how successful preservation considers its surroundings. A team that included artist James

Michalopoulos reimaged the former Schoen Funeral Home complex as the 12-room Hotel Pompadour, respecting the original architectural integrity of the structures and maintaining the scale and character of the Marigny streetscape.

The colorful, artsy conversion demonstrates, in Stokes' words, "that thoughtful development can honor the soul of a historic neighborhood."

A longstanding commercial landmark on the Magazine Street

corridor, known for many years as home to Harry's Ace Hardware, was reinvigorated for its second century of life apropos to the evolving commercial character of Magazine Street. Both the industrial elements of the building's architecture and the Classical Revival-influenced brick façade were retained while the rejuvenated building, illuminated by large display windows at night, was adapted for contemporary retail and office use.

"There wasn't anybody in the

community that wasn't heartbroken when Harry's Ace Hardware closed," said Stokes. "We see it's been reborn as a beautiful example of architectural rehabilitation, and we're very appreciative of the work."

Located in the Lower Garden District, the rehabilitation of the former Sara T. Mayo Hospital as The Jackson apartments stands as a striking, four-fold example of adaptive reuse. In addition to saving a piece of midcentury architecture, the project preserves the legacy of pioneering physician, feminist and social reformer Sara T. Mayo, who founded the original hospital in 1905. It brings needed mixed-income housing to the housing market and initiates revitalization of a blighted portion of Jackson Avenue.

The rehabilitation and restoration project of an 1834 building within the Vieux Carre Historic District checks multiple boxes as a win for preservation. Most recently home to K-Paul's Louisiana Kitchen, the building had undergone years of restaurant build-out that had obscured much of its original architecture and natural light. The project, which transformed the property into a fabrication and studio facility for the Historic New Orleans Collection, saved an important French Quarter building while supporting the HNOC's cultural mission.

"From single-family homes to landmarks that define our city, we celebrate the award-winning teams who demonstrate how we build matters as much as what we build," said Stokes.

The Louisiana Landmarks Society 2026 Awards for Excellence in Historic Preservation will be presented with a program and reception May 20 at Gallier Hall. For details, tickets and the complete list of winning projects and their teams, see louisianalandmarks.org



527 ELYSIAN FIELDS AVE. BEFORE AND AFTER



830 DESIRE ST. BEFORE AND AFTER



1354 MOSS ST. BEFORE AND AFTER



4417 DRYADES ST. BEFORE AND AFTER



KARAOKE

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Rockabye offers something a little different than karaoke staples like Kajun's and Cat's Meow. There's no stage, no bar and no DJ taking bribes for better spots in line.

It's just you, whoever you came with and a couple of microphones in a room. But Miller described it as a near transcendent experience akin to that of those old dance halls, one in which fears are overcome, lifelong bonds are formed and microphones are pried from the hands of once staunch karaoke deniers at the end of the night.

"It's play, it's joy in a way that you don't experience," Miller said. "Communal singing is, like, very, very healing."

A vote of confidence like that is impossible to ignore. So we at The Times-Picayune, dedicated as always to fact-checking and

truth, decided to check it out for ourselves.

Let's get it started

Like at most karaoke boxes, the goal at Rockabye is to minimize stage fright and maximize fun.

The three rooms are thoroughly soundproofed for privacy and feature rainbow party lights, a big screen, multiple microphones, an impressive sound system and plenty of seating for 10 to 25 wannabe stars. You can bring your own snacks and booze — which is likely necessary for the releasing of inhibitions — and each room comes with a caddy stocked with ice, cups and a variety of mixers.

At a rate of \$15 per person, per hour, plus a 20% per hour service charge, it's certainly not as cheap as going to the local dive and tugging it out in line. While walk-ins are welcome, Miller said it's best to reserve rooms ahead of time online at rockabyekaraoke.com, and a deposit is required at booking.

But here at Rockabye, you don't have to listen to that weird tone-deaf guy butcher "Sweet Caroline." Instead, you can sing along as your tone-deaf friend screams Queen. It's your own private party, where you can choose from 90,000 songs and adjust the volume, key and tempo.

"What I've seen over and over again is this is a place for celebrations," Miller said. "This is birthday parties, this is bachelorette parties, this is kids' birthday parties on the weekends during the daytime."

Don't stop believin'

The thought of going into a small room with 15 of your co-workers and singing in front of them may sound intimidating — almost more intimidating than singing to a crowd of strangers.

Turns out it is.

After leading The Times-Picayune group to our room in early April and giving us a crash course in song selection, Miller popped

his head in repeatedly over the next 20 minutes — during which not one single song was sung — offering to help us get started. Ultimately it was me who had to break the ice, though, partly because I was the one who forced everyone out for karaoke and also because my boss told me I had to.

I can't remember ever doing a worse rendition of Cher's "Believe."

But Ian McNulty, the knowledgeable food writer he is, brought a box of liquid courage from Patron Saint, which, along with St. Pizza, is conveniently close by. The pile of snacks and drinks littering the room only expanded as more of our colleagues trickled in, and soon the juices were flowing and the setlist was growing.

We are family

I can't pinpoint exactly where things turned. Maybe it was when staff writer Jenna Ross chose Robyn's "Dancing on My Own," or when reporter Chelsea Shannon

chose "Say It Ain't So" by Weezer.

But midway through our two hours at Rockabye, we weren't the same bashful group standing timidly around the screen. We practically screamed "Bohemian Rhapsody," danced together to the Dixie Chicks and, giddy with adrenaline, emphatically cheered each and every song choice.

Miller was right — there's something healing about singing together, about overcoming the awkward and uncomfortable and finding the freedom waiting on the other side.

In the end, Miller had to cut our mics and force us out. As consolation, he let each attendee choose between two stickers bearing opposing sentiments: "I lost my voice at Rockabye," or "I found my voice at Rockabye."

Throat scratchy and cheeks sore from laughing, I chose the former. But really I knew we'd all found each other at Rockabye.

Email Kasey Bubnash at kasey.bubnash@theadvocate.com.