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• LIZZIE SIMON

On a Monday night 10 years ago, Jim Caruso, working in press relations at a now-defunct club, threw a party for his performer friends. It was their one night off from performing, but the group nonetheless found their way around the piano and sang there until 3 a.m. "It was a blast," said Mr. Caruso. "The next day the manager asked me if I could do it every Monday night."

A decade later, Mr. Caruso's Monday open-mic night has its home at Birdland and is still a magnet for performers on their off nights, as well as a wide assortment of amateur and celebrities. "In an evening you'll have Liza Minnelli, and a woman who wrote a song about her feet, and then Martin Short trying out his set for Letterman, and a 19 year-old who just moved to New York and wants to land a part in a Broadway show," he said. "It's very democratic."

Memorable performances include one by lyricist Betty Comden. "She was well into her 80s when she showed up and sang from 'On the Town,' which she wrote. It was her last public appearance."

Then there was the couple that decided to make Mr. Caruso's Cast Party their wedding reception. "That's a cheap reception, by the way," he said. "They were all eating fried chicken."

Why do so many eight-a-week performers want to sing and play on their night off? "Well, it gives people the chance to do different material, to stretch their wings and show off," Mr. Caruso said. "It's like Oprah says: Everybody just wants to be heard."

