

David McNeill

Mr. Song and Dance Man

Daisuke Inoue taught the world to sing with the karaoke machine but never bothered to patent it, losing his chance to become one of Japan's richest men. Is he bitter?

For a man who lost out on one of music's biggest paychecks, Daisuke Inoue is in fine form: toothy smile spreading over the big, rough-hewn face of a natural comedian.

The good humor comes in useful for interviews like this when he is inevitably asked whether he regrets not patenting the world's first karaoke machine, which he invented in 1971.

After 34 years, during which his unlikely contraption has conquered every corner of the globe, accompanied by the sound of a billion strangled, drink-sodden, earthling voices, the question must sound like the whistling of an approaching bomb. But the smile stays.

"I'm not an inventor," says the 65-year-old in his small Osaka office. "I simply put things that already exist together, which is completely different. I took a car stereo, a coin box, and a small amp to make the karaoke. Who would even consider patenting something like that?"

"Some people say he lost 150 million dollars," says

Inoue's friend and local academic Robert Scott Field. "If it was me I'd be crying in the corner, but he's a happy guy who loves people. I think it blows his mind to find that he has touched so many people's lives."

In Japan, many now know, thanks to TV specials and a new movie biopic, that Inoue was a rhythmically challenged drummer in a dodgy Kobe covers band when he hit on the idea of prerecording his own backing tracks.

The band had spent years learning how to make drunken businessmen sound in tune by following rather than leading and drowning out the worst of the damage, so Inoue knew the tricks of the trade when the boss of a steel firm asked him to record a tape for a company trip to a hot springs resort.

Unbeknownst to millions of once-peaceful pubs, karaoke had been born. Inoue and his friends gave it a leg up into the world by making more tapes and leasing machines to bars around Kobe. Taking the machines for a spin cost 100 yen a pop—the price of three or four drinks in 1971—and Inoue never thought it would make it out of the city.

By the 1980s, karaoke was one of the few words that required no translation across much of Asia. Communist China embraced it, and Hong Kong sent it back to Japan as karaoke box, small booths where friends and family could torture each other in soundproofed bliss.

Inoue languished for years in international obscurity. But in 1999, after karaoke had stomped noisily into the United States and Europe, *Time* magazine astonishingly called him one of the 20th century's most influential Asians, saying he "had helped to liberate legions of the once unvoiced: as much as Mao Zedong or Mohandas Gandhi changed Asian days, Inoue transformed its nights."

"Nobody was as surprised as me," he says.

Last year, he was awarded the Ig Nobel Peace Prize at Harvard University, a jokey award presented by real Nobel winners, receiving a standing ovation after calling himself the “last samurai” and attempting a wobbly version of the 1970s Coca Cola anthem “I’d Like to Teach the World to Sing.”

The Nobel laureates in turn (or in revenge) murdered the Andy Williams standard “Can’t Take My Eyes off You.” Inoue loved it, laughing throughout. “I wish I spoke English,” he says. “It would make life easier, and I could go to the US again, do speaking tours and make some money.”

Now he is the subject of a new fictionalized movie account of his life, called simply *Karaoke* and directed by Hiroyuki Tsuji, currently on release in Japan and starring an actor considerably better-looking than the weathered, plump drummer of 1971. “At least they got someone tall to play me,” he laughs.

A typical Osaka businessman, amiable, fast talking, and with a slightly untamable air, Inoue once tried working in a proper company but balked at wearing the salaryman’s uniform: the dark pinstripe suit. “I looked like a rocker, and it didn’t go down very well.”

He didn’t use a karaoke machine until he was 59 but loves to listen to syrupy pre-1960s ballads; his favorite English songs are “Love Is a Many Splendored Thing” and Ray Charles’s “I Can’t Stop Loving You.” “They’re easy to sing, which is good because I can’t sing at all.”

Inoue is tormented by daft questions but takes them in his stride. “People approach me all the time and ask me if I can’t help their husbands sing better, and I always say the same thing. If the singer was any good, he would be a pro and making a living at it. He’s bad because he’s like the rest of us. So we might as well just sit back and enjoy it.”

These days he makes a living selling, among other

things, an eco-friendly detergent and a cockroach repellent for karaoke machines. “Cockroaches get inside the machines and build nests, chew on the wires,” he says. Friends say he is the ideas man, while his wife, who works in the same Osaka office, helps bring them to life.

In the 1980s, he was running a company that successfully managed to persuade dozens of small production companies to lease songs for eight-track karaoke machines. But in the early 1990s, laser and dial-up technology left the firm behind; bored and depressed he had a breakdown but bounced back to life thanks to his dog. “I had to look after it, and it got me out of the house.” He says his next business venture will involve dogs.

Not everyone thanks Inoue for his invention. A 2004 black comedy called *Karaoke Terror* depicts a bunch of bored, middle-aged women and a group of college kids, both obsessed with karaoke, who go to war with each other, destroying a whole city: karaoke as an almost too-easy metaphor for the emptiness of contemporary Japanese culture.

But the ponytailed businessman believes the little box he put together in Kobe has done far more good than harm. “As something that improves the mood, and helps people who hate each other lighten up, it has had a huge social impact, especially in Japan. Japanese people are shy, but at weddings and company get-togethers, the karaoke comes out and people drink a little and relax. It breaks the ice.

“It’s used for treating depression and loneliness. Go to old people’s homes and hospitals around the country and there is a karaoke machine. I keep hearing of places where karaoke is huge—like Russia—and it is used as therapy. It makes people happy everywhere. When I see the happy faces of people singing karaoke, I’m delighted.”

The biopic supports the idea that karaoke is socially use-

ful, rather than the bane of quiet pint drinkers everywhere. Kicking off with a grim list of suicide statistics among middle-aged Japanese men, it depicts a salaryman losing his job, wife, and son after he is fired. He starts singing karaoke and finds a new purpose in life.

“We went to see the movie together,” remembers Robert Scott Field. “They got these good-looking actor and actress to play him and his wife, so he was really happy. Afterwards he said: ‘I get letters and e-mails from all over the world, and now they’ve made a movie of my life story. I have to pinch myself. You can’t buy things like that.’”