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From Jonathan Luxmoore and Christine Ellis

TAKING THE STAGE AT OXFORD'S WORLD-CLASS OPEN MICS

In the James Street Tavern, just off Oxford's bustling Cowley Road, a pair of guitarists pluck and strum through a smart sound system, as beers and soft drinks are handed across an array of candlelit tables.

When the Tavern was refurbished a year ago, tripling in size to include an outside garden and marquee, it quickly reasserted itself as an attractive live music venue. The Wednesday Open Mic is one of several run by Lee Davies, where freelance performers can sign up to play and be assured of an appreciative audience.

Davies kicks off each evening with his wife Cheryl, in one of the county's finest singing duos, and is routinely followed by 12-15 separate acts.

If you haven't checked out the Open Mics, you've missed an important part of the Oxford experience, since places like this have helped make the city one of Britain's best for impromptu live music - as well as providing a key focus for social life and community-building.

"Each time I put up the microphones and speakers, I'm always thinking how I can get the best from the performers, since if it feels good for them, the punters will enjoy it as well", Davies explains.

"Some of the people who play here weekly could be professionals - and a few actually are. But they're all doing it for love, creating a unique atmosphere with the audience. Every time, I go home feeling happy and lucky to be part of it".

The James Street Tavern's is just one of the Open Mics in east Oxford. Just up the Cowley Road, the Bullingdon Unplugged is hosted by singer-entrepreneur Nash Chirata, while similar free-entry evenings are held in Iffley Road's Mad Hatter and the Port Mahon on St Clement's, which recently added a special LGBTQ event on Tuesdays.

Down on Magdalen Plain, musicians can choose between the Cape of Good Hope, a venue that's hosted bands from Coldplay to the White Stripes in its time, and the Half Moon, whose Thursday Open Mics are run alternately by Richard Brotherton and Sparky the Dangerous Poet with his minder Laine Locke, in a raucous atmosphere which wouldn't have been amiss in the alehouses of Tudor England.

While some Open Mics give performers free drinks, all offer them unique opportunities to polish their acts and get used to audiences, as well as mixing and exchanging ideas with other like-minded souls.

Julie Dyson, an Open Mic regular, sees the evenings as a dress rehearsal for bigger events, as well as providing a "wonderful night out" which costs nothing and carries no obligations.

"Many of those who play have had training and really know about music, the harmonies and riffs going into a good song - and this can be a bit unnerving", Dyson says.

"But they're also supportive and helpful, since they've all been out there too. And most importantly of all, these music events create a fantastic community vibe, bringing together people from all ages, backgrounds, nationalities, cultures and professions".

Open Mics, a British speciality, are distinct from the folk clubs and sessions which survive from the folk music revival of the 60s and 70s, and are also plentiful in the area.

In 2012, a Live Music Act de-regulated Britain's music scene, allowing pubs and bars to lay on entertainment without local authority permits. The result, in the space of months, was a huge Open Mic expansion, giving ever more people a chance to get up and sing in public.

Live music was and remains, most experts agree, an area of national excellence - with deep roots in local culture and a significant place on the social happiness index.

It's also a major industry, generating 6.5 million "music tourists" and over 24,000 full-time jobs annually, according to reports by UK Music, propping up areas of the hospitality sector which might otherwise face closure.

And it's fitting that Oxford should be a leader in the field. It's the city, after all, which produced the likes of Radio Head, Supergrass and Bellowhead, all of whom started out in local music venues.

Sam Lunn, a singer-songwriter, thinks Oxford's Open Mic network is a cut above London's. Whereas they're widely spread out in the capital, and often highly territorial, they're inclusive and welcoming here - friendly to all-comers and popularised by word of mouth.

"The Open Mics provide a kind of gateway for throwing your songs into the world, especially for aspiring performers testing themselves out for the first time," Lunn says.

"And there's much more of a community feeling here than I ever found in London. Everyone gets the same opportunity to do their thing - it's like one big supportive family".