On Campus

Trivial Pursuits

The local bar with a notoriously competitive trivia night.

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“What were the only two animals specifically named as being on Noah’s ark?” A thick Jersey accent booms from a loudspeaker, rising above the murmur of small talk at 1020, a dive bar at the corner of Amsterdam and 110th. Mike Straniere, host of the bar’s Tuesday trivia night, takes pity on the puzzled crowd. “I’ll give you a hint: they’re both birds.”

On this spring evening, the bar’s best seats — booths with sticky forest-green tables strewn with crumpled takeout bags and cardboard coasters — are filled. In one booth, a team of three puts its heads together. Two Catholic missionaries, Michael Preszler and Justin Petrisek of the Fellowship of Catholic University Students

(FOCUS), fresh out of college and assigned to the Columbia campus, confer with mechanical-engineering student Ben Malec ’12SEAS.

> “Definitely a dove.”
> “A dove and a pigeon.”
> “Chickens ...”

There’s not much time to debate. Questions come fast here — in Straniere’s words, “boom, boom, boom.”

A fourth player, math major James Diotte ’12CC, arrives late and can’t remember the second bird. Neither can another latecomer, FOCUS missionary Laura Scharmer, who says that she has a Bible. But thumbing through Genesis would be cheating, as would the more modern technique of secretly Googling on one’s iPhone. Ultimately, the question inspires the team’s name, How Many Missionaries Does It Take to Find Out What Two Animals Noah Took on the Ark? — We Have Three.

The questions in the first round of general trivia address such topics as geography, science, and pop culture. Petrisek easily recalls the name of the girls’ gang from *Grease* (the Pink Ladies) and later, in a eureka moment, gets the guys’ (the T-Birds). The team also comes up with the cities at either end of the Orient Express (Paris and Istanbul) and the Middle Eastern spread made from sesame seeds (tahini).

“I’m very choosy about my questions,” says cohost Paul Ellerin, who started the game at 1020 in 2007. Ellerin says he is constantly in “trivia mode,” finding potential questions at museums, on posters, on television. “I don’t like multiple choice, and I don’t use true or false. I have a philosophy about what makes a good question: when a person hears the question, he should think, ‘This is something I used to know, something that I learned at one point in my life.’”

Before the second round, the theme round, Straniere gives the customary warning: “Remember the first rule of trivia night — don’t shout out the answers.” Tonight’s theme is TV-sitcom settings. Players are asked to name the cities of ten shows, including *Full House* (San Francisco), *The Drew Carey Show* (Cleveland), and *Happy Days* (Pittsburgh is our team’s hopeful guess).

Hummed theme songs fill the air as Preszler, who’s been dutifully recording teammates’ answers on the score sheet, laments, “I haven’t seen any of these.”

The stakes are modest — a twenty-dollar bar tab for first place, a ten-dollar tab for second, and a pint glass for third — but among people whose egos are closely tied to their intellects, the drive to win can get intense. “For me, I just want to win every time,” says Mithun Kamath, a second-year Columbia law student. “I like the idea of testing your wits against Columbia students who you know are intelligent and have a lot of knowledge about a lot of random things.”

“We suck at this,” Malec says at the onset of the next round, the top ten. Tonight’s list is the top-ten cities for international tourism. The teams write down their best guesses, helped by Straniere, who provides clues like, “There’s only one in the United States.”

With the first half completed, the hosts read out the answers. Cheering erupts for the first round of results (one team is particularly proud of guessing Milwaukee for *Happy Days*), and then come the groans — the top ten is a disaster, full of Asian cities. It turns out Noah’s second bird was a raven.

After a short break, during which the hosts check over the score sheets and announce the rankings, How Many Missionaries finds itself near the bottom. There are thirty more points that could be won in the second half, but another round of general trivia gets mixed results, and then during the music round it all falls apart. Here, these twenty-somethings, quick to recognize Lady Gaga’s “Poker Face” and the Fray’s “Over My Head,” can’t name Peter Gabriel’s “In Your Eyes” or Kim Carnes’s “Bette Davis Eyes.” As the questions wind down, our team begins to face the music: victory is out of reach. Conversation tumbles into job hunts and karaoke venues.

By the time the prizes are awarded, the bar is crowded with boisterous new customers who are not interested in trivia. How Many Missionaries gets a ninety-nine-cent bag of potato chips for a funny answer, having identified Wayne LaPierre as the head of Credit Suisse (he’s the head of the National Rifle Association). The team munches the chips while listening to the final results, which start from the bottom. The moment of truth comes all too soon: “Third from last, with 32.5 points, How Many Missionaries.”

First prize goes to We Had All Week to Come Up with a Name, a regular team that includes Kelly Burdick ’11TC.

“Tuesday is our sacred time,” Burdick says. “It’s a crazy, complex world, and a little bit of trivia time helps.”

We Had All Week would go on to win the following Tuesday, too, but seldom does a team reign for long. A strong university presence means high turnover and, happily for non-Columbian players, extended breaks that provide a respite from packs of brainy undergrads.

“You find the bar half-empty and realize that the term must be over at Columbia. Suddenly there’s room to breathe and fewer teams to compete against,” says Darren Bradley, an assistant philosophy professor at City College. “We never seem to win, though.”

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