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Bard of Barflies Keeps Slamming Home Poetry With an Attitude

By Brandon Griggs
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If Jean Howard's poetry can seduce bleary-eyed barflies and leather-clad bikers, just think what it could do for you.

Howard, a Chicago performance poet, likes a challenge. After a decade of performing her gritty, edgy poems in bars around the Windy City, she decided to go one step further. Three years ago she infiltrated a bar full of rowdy, tattooed bikers and launched into one of her poems.

"I was really nervous. I thought I was going to be ignored or booed out," said Howard in a telephone interview this week.

But a strange thing happened. As Howard recited the poem, a ripple of quiet spread across the room. People were listening.

"Never in my life did I think you could go into a biker bar on a Saturday night, with them all drinking . . . and have them listen to poetry," she said. "It was the most rewarding thing."

A Utah native who moved to Chicago in 1979, Howard will revisit her hometown Saturday night to perform in Salt Lake City's fledgling poetry-slam series at the Lazy Moon Pub.

For the uninitiated, a poetry slam is part poetry reading, part

■ Lazy Moon Pub

Jean Howard will perform at Salt Lake City's third poetry slam Saturday at 9 p.m. at the Lazy Moon Pub, 32 Exchange Place in downtown Salt Lake City. Admission is free, although donations are encouraged. You must be 21 to enter.

theater and all attitude. While it incorporates elements of genteel coffeehouse readings, a poetry slam is closer in spirit to "The Gong Show," the 1970s TV program in which a panel of judges rated burlesque performers and rudely yanked unworthy challengers from the stage.

Participants, or "slammers," perform original poems of up to three minutes. Each poem is given a score from 1 to 10 by a panel of judges chosen randomly from the audience. The slammers with the highest scores advance to the next round until a champion is crowned. Unlike the nurturing atmosphere that surrounds most readings, the climate at a slam can be downright brutal. Audiences are encouraged to jeer boring, sophomoric or sexist poems.

"It's not for everybody. It's intimidating," said Howard, who has seen first-time slammers reduced to tears by low scores and heckling crowds. "The whole purpose of a poem is to expose your heart . . . and then all these people in the bar trample on it."

Critics charge that poetry slams encourage crowd-pandering poems and breed unhealthy competition between artists. But veteran slammers say such events keep poetry vibrant and accessible by bringing the artform to places where people might not otherwise be exposed to it. Poetry slam audiences may laugh or get angry — but at least they are stimulated.

Poetry slams originated in Chicago in the early 1980s and have spread to nearly 20 cities around the country. A national poetry-slam competition, offering thousands of dollars in prize money, is held each year.

The phenomenon reached Utah in August, when Salt Lake City poet Melissa Bond founded and emceed the first-ever poetry slam at the Lazy Moon Pub. Bond had participated in slams in North Carolina and upon arriving in Salt Lake City last year was disappointed at the dearth of poetry readings here. Saturday's event will be the third slam she has or-



Jean Howard has read her poetry at biker bars and pet shops.

ganized in Salt Lake, and the first featuring a major poetry slammer like Howard.

Howard has worked closely with Chicago poet Marc Smith, regarded as the founder of poetry slams, and has pioneered poetry video, which blends images, music and verse into a striking new artform. Howard is director of the

National Poetry Video Festival, and her video poems have aired on public television. In her quest to push the boundaries of poetry, Howard has performed her poems in pet stores, dressed in cat suits and wearing boxing gloves.

"Anything that's taboo is interesting to me," she said. "I'm experimental. I'll try anything."