

# PERFORMANCES

## It Could Be Verse

### Performance Poets Live An Old Art

By LARRY GREEN,  
Times Staff Writer

CHICAGO—If Al Capone or his buddy Machine Gun Jack McGurn knew they, their old gang, their hangout had become one of the Windy City's hottest poetry houses, they'd probably have an address reaction.

But, on any Sunday night, their former haunt, the Green Mill, an art deco showplace that barely recalls its grand past, is jammed by poets and their fans. The crowd gets on top, that sometimes, the SHO—Slamitz Rubin Only.

Audiences come to hear an eclectic band of hard-core professional poets, a high school poetry society, a junior, a street-wise painter and uncounted waiters and waitresses—poets have to eat, too.

**Slams Like a Thing**  
For example, Tony Fitzpatrick, the son of a prize fighter and a busy product of all-night beer joints and 24-hour chili parlors, stands at a podium at the microphone to read the first of 30 poems by

*"And there were the sailors/and the ballerina and over a million light bulbs screaming on an ocean floor."*

Across the country, there is a flurry of interest in poetry. Crowds are showing up at bookstores, libraries, coffeehouses and art galleries. But in Chicago, they're packing taverns, where they pay a cover charge to hear live poets.

"There is enormous interest in poetry, and it's coming from everywhere," says poet, author and National Book Award-winning poet, poet Dickey. "It's come back pretty strong in the '80s," says George Tynah, who runs a poetry center for the Detroit Institute of Arts.

**Poetry Has Come A Long Way**

"We're definitely seeing an increase in activity, a revival," says Tom Rosenblatt, editor and program coordinator for Santa Monica, Michigan, Poetry House store. "Poetry was dormant in L.A. for quite a while, but we were fortunate in the fact that you couldn't get an audience. We had to wait a few years. It's come alive."

It is also alive in Chicago. Carl Sandburg's "stormy, husky, brawling, City of the Shoulders" is still the Midwest capital of finance, industry and commerce. It is one of the hottest poetry towns in the country, providing friendly audiences and ample forums for a new generation of poets. In the heart of Francisco gave Beat Generation poets and writers a home in the 1950s.

"Poetry is becoming much more of a social act," says Richard Bray, whose Guild has been at the helm of Chicago's artist community. "This is the liveliest I've ever seen."

In Chicago and a few other cities, audiences are coming to see and hear not just poets, but poetry with theatrical flourish. But poetry with theater is a minority of the theater. Performances can range

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from a simple, contained poem giving dramatic presentations of his or her words, to long poems, using minimal stage settings actually involving video, tape and music.

And then there are the "Poetry Slams." These feature two poets taking turns reading and performing their work as a panel of judges keeps score. Slams are divided into rounds. Verses are occasionally improvised or written between rounds and often inspire chorusing and shouting from the audience, the performance resembling some bizarre literary version of the Friday night Fisticore more than a celebration of the craft and art of Shakespeare, T. S. Eliot and E. Cummings.

"I was suggested to my opponent that we show up in shorts, wear robes and towels around our necks and have managers in our arms," says Tynah, a poet, actor, songwriter, improvisational comedian and part-time waiter and recent slam contestant.

**'Shows' and 'Acts'**

Poet and poetry event promoter Mike Dwyer calls the nights at taverns "shows" and talks about individual poets as "acts."

"I look at it as entertainment," says Dwyer, who runs up a weekly column in the construction trades to devote an annual feature to a poet, according to his poetry newsletter. Open to both theater, but I don't find anything that more makes me start getting entertained or entertained."

He says that poets are starting to merge their acts with performance art. "I'm the executive director of the Poetry Project in New York City. It all seems to be a heady mix between poetry and performance art."

It is not entirely new. The theatrical dimension of these acts was seen by Panchale, owner of Sheffield, another Chicago tavern that features poets. "One fairly well-known poet," says Panchale, "was a strange outer-space language and took the audience's words and screamed his own words back at them. He was a real star."

And, says Haight Murphy, 32, dressed like an old vaudeville act to act out a poem, "I've seen poets who, without a bit of commentary on the poem, almost entirely on burlesque jokes and puns, would take the audience's words with exaggerated, carefully timed gestures and hand gestures. And in a surprising way, they would seem to display layers of poetical wit while the audience cries out from female stereotypes of men."

"Performance art takes poetry to a new, previous, uncharted place where poetry has always been," says Dwyer. "I've seen poets who, without a bit of commentary on the poem, almost entirely on burlesque jokes and puns, would take the audience's words with exaggerated, carefully timed gestures and hand gestures. And in a surprising way, they would seem to display layers of poetical wit while the audience cries out from female stereotypes of men."



Poet and poetry promoter Marc Smith on stage as master of ceremonies at Chicago's Green Mill.

tradition, which provided a home to Sandburg, Iren, Hoch, Nelson Algren ("Man with the Golden Arm"), James F. Farrell (the Slane Longan trilogy) and Studs Terkel ("Division Street, America").

"There's a real connection between hip-hopsters (street dancers), dancers (Graffiti artists) and performance poets," says Bray. "They're often people who may not have had access to the higher culture. Performance poetry is in the tradition of the street performers at the street corners."

"In New York, they think poetry is a high art," says poet and slam contestant Rand. "Here it's closer to the home, closer to the street."

"The academics will try to analyze something that took one five minutes to write with a hangover," says Panchale. "I've known a poet, a 40-year-old man who has been a literary fixture in Chicago for 20 years. He'll always find some symbolism in it, but it's a heady mix."

add Hernandez, who makes his art entirely from his act. "Performance poetry is odd," says Chicago Theatrical Center and who helps run the Poetry Center at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and who is an editor of a small literary magazine. "It's something that's different. They're speaking in more of a filler mode. It's not a performance piece. It's that the performance is an aid toward understanding or illuminating the poetry."

And, reflecting much of the established poetry community's attitude about the Green Mill and other slams featuring performance poetry, Deasovich says its popularity is "not any kind of sign except that people will come out to an event that will include poets, jugglers, strippers, musicians, performance artists and where there's some kind of hip underground scene."

"I think people are trying more to make a scene than trying to understand poetry," she adds. "The debate is academic."

"There are about 10 people out there buying poetry books," says tough Tony Fitzpatrick, pointing toward the trash-littered street in front of the Green Mill. "You have to read it to be interested in it." Fitzpatrick, a 27-year-old artist who reads poetry, says he designed the cover for the sound of the sheep world. "I was in a jamme a film 'Something Wild.'"

"But I'm rattled all the time when I stand up there," Fitzpatrick added.

Clothing salesman Detmer Tymberlake is also a regular reader at the Green Mill because "it gives writers a place to gauge and expose their work and to meet actors, painters, musicians."

**Dedicated to Ellington**

In a piece dedicated to the memory of Duke Ellington, he recalls the song he played in the pit of an amateur jazz band.

"There appears to be neither rhyme nor reason to the Green Mill. All share the same stage."

James Loverde, 40, describes himself as a "blue-collar worker." He works as a janitor and says "my job gave me a lot of material." One recent night, he read a poem titled "Handy Andy."

"I used to do some of my stuff at open comedy nights at comedy clubs, and I got killed, so I thought I'd try it out here," says Loverde.

Jean Howard, 33, has been writing poetry since elementary school days. She marries her living as a model and a business manager. She has written a manuscript for a play. She has written a dramatic recitation that graphically describes very colorful talks about tattoos.

One begins, "I lay many hours/My mind seizes the chisel/The work of the sheep world/Like a woman of my choice."

Green Mill owner David Jimello says he agreed to stage poetry nights in the hope that it would increase the business on Sunday nights. The one night his bar doesn't feature jazz.

"Before we started, we had just a few nights," says Jimello, whose Thursday night bar business has increased more than sixfold since the poetry began.

"I was really interested in poetry. I was always a football player, a linebacker. I think before you have concepts in your head, you have to be used to hearing poets are thinking types who can't think. I was the only one who was in a heavy 'Chicago accent.' A lot of people like the sound of it, so I tell

their friends they like poetry because it's not odd. I didn't really know I liked it until we started."

Jimello's bar is a piece of Chicago and entertainment history. It was once jointly owned by Machine Gun McGurn and was a speak-easy retreat for gangster Al Capone.

Sophie Tucker, Al Johnson and Joe E. Lewis all performed here.

In fact, when Lewis, a comedian and singer, once tried to leave for a higher-paying job, the gangster owners had his throat slit, forcing him to take a three-year hiatus before returning to entertain—at the Green Mill. That episode is remembered in a little ditty carved in plywood behind the bar.

*"Big Al some interesting spaghetti/Alphie Dunn McGurn, strongly still told Joe E. Lewis how he shoulda/If you try to quit the Green Mill."*

Remembering Woody Woodpecker in Chicago, James Hecker in Atlanta, George Harrison, in Houston and Dallas, Jimello in Denver, contrived used to this article.

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