

A hybrid art form heaps images on top of imagery

By Teresa Wiltz
TRIBUNE STAFF WRITER

Yup, it's poetry. But this stuff has nothing in common with Lord Byron and those other dead dudes.

A manic-looking Scot, the self-dubbed MC Jabber, fires off a rhythmic round of rhymes, and his words flip-flopping as a rapid-fire, MTV-ish montage of street scenes jolt the eyes.

An extreme closeup frames the serene visage of a black Brit as she matter-of-factly relates the emotional carriage left in the wake of her marriage — "arrested development of a seething sac." As she defiantly proclaims that she's decided to "choose life" since her lover left — that is, choose a life filled with "evenings in/with my pecker pen" — the audience lets out a collective, melancholy sigh.

A hip, tattooed, middle-aged couple wake up beside each other, contentedly reciting Pablo Neruda's "Ode to Things" while they bathe, shave, sew on buttons and shop for groceries. In some of the decade's best poem into a whimsical commentary of the everyday of everyday life in the late '90s.

Poetry

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As demonstrated by these three mini-films, featured over the course of a 10-day festival at the National Poetry Video Festival held at two Chicago locations, this hybrid art form is a mix of a heck of a lot to do with any society of dearly departed bars.

Whether it's a poem about right now—even when the likes of Neruda, Langston Hughes and Sylvia Plath play a leading role in some of them—Frazier's adaptations of the classics to avant garde experimentalism, through "white poems," his hybrid art form marries the temporal with the eternal, the biological, and the economic. In the spoken word a performance poet, visually turning words into images, he leaps, jumps, plets, leap-frogging over iambic pentameter and, above all, making the poet a star.

"When I first saw 'Ode To Things,' I was kind of insulted," says Michael Warr, poet and executive director of the Guild Complex in Wicker Park, which, along with the Museum of Contemporary Art, produced the poetry fest. "I mean, Pablo Neruda is my man, and these images weren't Neruda's. But as I sat and watched and listened, the video translated that poem into my life."

The festival, which was founded by the Guild Complex, a new group of artists, was produced by two urban youth arts groups, Street-Level Youth Media and Video Machete, along with Cin(5).

Actor-poet Saul Williams performs at the MCA in front of slides by Marlene Jones.



Tribune photos by Wes Pope

Poetry Fest of San Francisco. Activities kicked off Thursday at the Guild Complex's space at the Chicago Theater with a video poetry slam competition hosted by Marc Smith. Smith is the father of the modern-day slam, as performance poetry competition is called.

Friday night, the scene moved to the MCA, where international videos were interspersed with live poetry performances by Saul Williams, Sonja Sohn and Cheryl Trivy. Saturday afternoon, teen video poets took over, with young bards such as 15-year-old Kirsha Brown, of Mather High School, grabbing the cameras and bringing their poems to the screen.

"The angry tone of her poem, 'Body Mentality Negatives,' put off people who read the poem when it first appeared in the teen newspaper 'New Expressions,'" she says. "The images and my voice tone down my poem, explains Brown, who shot the video in her Edgewater neighborhood with the help of a videographer from Street-Level Youth Media.

The festival closed Saturday night with excerpts from the 1998 Sundance Film Festival's Grand Jury award-winner "Slam," which stars poets Sohn and Williams and a screening of "SlamNation," a documentary chronicling the 1996 National Poetry Slam, the Olympic of verse, where poets go for the throat in fierce poetry battles.

Implicit in this three-day glut of colorful verse—from the corporate sponsorship of the Sara Lee Foundation to the presence of independent Hollywood filmmaker

ers—is the realization that these days poetry, particularly performance poetry, is rich with commercial possibility.

Last year, poet/screenwriter/director Ted Witcher, released "Lovesong," a film set against the backdrop of Chicago's African-American poetry community. Record label Mouth Almighty puts spoken word talents like Allen Ginsberg, Magie Estep and the Last Poets on wax. Meanwhile, on Sunday nights in Chicago, audiences pack the Green Mill on North Broadway for its poetry fest, hosted by emcee Marc Smith, while downtown, folks cram into Rituals on Printer's Row, where poet Reggie Gibson presides.

Poetry videos sprang out of performance poets' desire to leave an impression that lingers long after last call at the bars and coffee houses where they frequently ply their craft, says Jean Howard, a Chicago performance poet and director of the poetry video festival.

But capturing the energy of live performance proved elusive.

"When you look at a camera stuck on a performer, it's disgusting," Howard says. "It's boring. It has to be marriage of the art of the film and the artist's poetry. Good performance poetry touches people in their soul. You see it and you're stunned, moved to tears."

Of course, just what constitutes emotionally affecting poetry—let alone emotionally affecting video poetry—is open to heated debate. Poetry purists turn up their noses at performance poetry. Meanwhile, performance poets and the

print folks as academics who can't do it onstage.

It is often said that poets can't agree about what makes a poem a poem. Given that, how will they ever decide what makes a poetry video—beyond the presence of a poem and a camera?

There was the home-grown video sent in for consideration at the festival in which a would-be poet recited his lines in front of a Camcorder during a PTA meeting held in someone's living room. (It didn't make it into the festival.) Then there was the film noir-style take on a woman swimming laps while a somnolent voiceover quotes Plath. That one, however, did make it into the festival's slam competition.

Indeed, video poetry is an uneasy alliance between two seemingly disparate art forms, prompting one audience member to ask Saturday night, "What's more important? The words or the actual performance?"

The answer, it seems, lies in the eye of the poet.

"Poetry isn't about the accessibility of it," says Saul Williams, the star of "Slam" and "SlamNation." "It's about the necessity of it. And right now, as we're facing a new millennium, words are important, so we're turning to the wordsmiths and the seers. For a long time, we've been paying attention to dead poets. Now, I can name millions of living poets."

"Most poets are concerned with being stars. The essence of poetry is indeed stardom. It's about letting your light shine."

Marlene Jones, 1999

