



SLAM DANCE

As the National Poetry Slam comes home for its tenth anniversary, some local poets are opting out. John Paul Davis and Ericka Mingo report.

IF YOU'RE HAILING A CAB OR GRABBING A COFFEE AT THE INTERSECTION OF MILWAUKEE, NORTH AND DAMEN THIS WEEK, YOU'RE LIKELY TO RUN INTO A POET. OR A WHOLE TEAM OF THEM. WICKER PARK IS PLAYING HOST TO SOME 250 POETS, REPRESENTING FORTY-EIGHT CITIES ACROSS THE COUNTRY, FOR THE NATIONAL POETRY SLAM, WHICH RETURNS TO ITS HOMETOWN TO CELEBRATE ITS TENTH ANNIVERSARY.

And yet there are quite a few poets right here in the Windy City who won't be making the pilgrimage to Wicker Park. Amidst the overwhelming public spectacle of the nationals are undercurrents of the growing schism between slam—once the medium of young, hip poets—and the work of younger, hip poets who aren't participating.

"I have never considered the slam, because it seems like a joke on poetry," says Michael Hawkins, founder of the PoEtree, a new group that promotes connection and value among poets. "You should not have a group of non-poets judging a group of poets, not that the judging should be done at all."

In fact, the competitive aspect of slam, the very backbone of its distinction as "poet," has put off a number of poets, like Oson Kenyetta. A frequent host at the Some Like It Black open mic, Kenyetta is well-known for the charismatic grace of his lyrical poems.

"I considered slamming and chose No," he says. "It is a literary sport. Sport is derived from the Greek word 'slipport,' meaning 'distraction.' Poetry is the position that we take when we are gathered together as fellow artists and converse. These are the solutions that we come to. When we are presented with competition and mass audiences we forget the positions on which we stand."

"Competition can be fun, but sometimes it gets way too serious," says Anacron Allen, host of two popular reading nights, hip-hop artist and coach for Mad Bar's slam

team. "I have a major problem with drawing scores out of a hat. You can't judge poetry. You have people slamming like [poet] Marc McCray up against a girl who gets higher scores because she has huge tits and a tight skirt, introduce three 30-year-old male judges and it's not fair."

But for slam poets, many of whom find competition and critique drives their creativity, it's a double-edged sword.

"I think the best and worst thing about the slam is the competition," says Marlon Eggera, Mad Bar slam team member and partner in the performance group I Was Born With Two Tongues. "It engages people and forces them to really bring out their best work. The competition does have a tendency to fuck things up. People get caught up in it. There is some horrible poetry that goes forward because it only appeals to sensationalism, the shock value that happens when you cater to an audience. But I'm still of the school that if you really put your all into your poetry, you'll get a really good response. And there's 350 other poets coming to Chicago who feel the same way."

Go back thirteen years and you'll find a group of young performance poets who were tired of tamer, academic poetry readings—tired of rules. The mood of open mic readings in the early eighties was similar to that of a library. "It was always poets coming to see other poets. Some of us were being other poets sligh quietly after a good poem," recalls Len Howard, former slammer and current director of the National Poetry Video Festival. "We wanted to connect to everyday people, to see sparks fly."

Poetry slam grew out of the early-eighties antics of the Chicago Poetry Ensemble, a group of performance poets led by Marc Smith. After Smith witnessed a boxing match of words between two Chicago poets, the concept of poetry slam, a lyrical bout between poets, was born.

For poets, the slam was a gathering place. "In the early days, it was sort of this poet's church. We would sit and listen to each other and write poems all night, then get up and read them," recalls Cin Salach, slam veteran and member of Chicago's first national team.

Dean Hacker, also a veteran of the original team, remembers that sense of community as well. "It was a real community. To be a poet is to take a piece of yourself and hold it out there for everyone to see. To put that in a competition seems like a contradiction, but I like that contradiction. The slam is part therapy, part circus."

Not surprisingly, slam took a lot of flack from academic circles, and from other Chicago poets. "For me, my objections were about cash, competition and control," says poet Michael Brown. "Cash because I didn't like the idea of performing for money, competition because I saw the slam as a kind of gong show, and control because I didn't like how much power Marc had over the show."

Brown's opinion changed after a firsthand experience. Talked into slamming against their two-time national champ Patricia Smith for an exhibition, Brown found that not only was he enjoying himself, but that he was holding his own.

Reggie Gibson, a member of the current Green Mill team, entered slam in a similar fashion. "At first I didn't want anything to do with the slam, years ago. I was thinking that competition was a bastardization of poetry, and I thought it was going to be very good stuff. But I knew Chuck Perkins and Maria McCray were going to the Green Mill, so I figured, 'Let me go down and look and see what's going on.'" After that, Gibson was hooked, and his psychedelic, Hendrix-infused musical performances became a mainstay at both the Green Mill and at the nationals, where he took the 1998 title.

But for many poets, the most significant aspect of slam is no longer avoiding rules, but retaining the sense of community. "When I saw all of these poets doing some very exceptional and phenomenal work, to be accepted as being in the same class as them was thrilling," Gibson says. "I would tell the people who had the community in that sense of people for whose work had respect, who I could learn from."

"Still, that's exactly what others say is missing from the local open mic scene. "There is an overall cliquiness and separation on the poetry scene," Allen says. "A lot of us feel like we are sitting on the planet, and that limits us. There should be more intermingling of different poetry sets."

Hawkins is frustrated with the narcissism that often surrounds readings. "Nobody is listening to anybody else. The mic turns into something like Ecstasy with a room full of folks waiting for the next dose."

But Dennis Kim, a Mad Bar team member who heads up I Was Born With Two Tongues with Eggera, and who slammed for the first time this summer, says the nationals are all about connecting poets. "I originally saw [slam] as divisive and mean-spirited, turning poetry into numbers. But until we participated in the prelims to qualify for the Mad Bar team, I never felt like I could connect to a sense of community," he says. "People were there sharing their work and if you're not caught up in the hype, I think there's really a lot of potential to forge connections. I mean, the basic fact is that there are 350 poets from all over the country coming to Chicago, there are people I've been wanting to meet. I'd never had a chance to meet them and surprise people, hopefully. And that's what I'm shooting for—to make those connections with other poets."

And the conflicting opinions may well come together this week, as many of the city's non-slammng performers have been invited to extend their open mic to Wicker Park if for no other reason than to watch, and participate in the thirty-odd open mic readings that will be held in partnership with the slam.

After all, Gibson says, the poetry and the community—things that slam and non-slam poets can share freely—are what it's all about. "I don't want to tell you any people who judge you are going to go away."