

November 19, 1990

Again, Clubs for Poets to Read and Rage

By EVELYN NIEVES

In the 1970's, the Nuyorican Poets' Cafe, a hole in the wall on the Lower East Side, served a select few: angry young Puerto Rican poets who met to show off their wares and tears in a neighborhood more popular to drug dealers than artists.

Last month, the cafe reopened and has been virtually packed from its small stage to out the door. This is just one way it has changed.

The new Nuyoricans are not necessarily young, angry or Puerto Rican. By the time the original cafe closed in 1982, one of its founders, the late Miguel Pinero, had become an internationally famous playwright. Another, Miguel Algarin, was teaching Shakespeare at Rutgers. The Nuyorican (for New York-Puerto Rican) movement that had sprung from the streets had sputtered to an end.

Now chic in a low-budget way, the cafe is the newest among several hip downtown music, poetry and theater forums that have opened in the last few years, including The Kitchen, The Knitting Factory and Wevo. The cafe has 35-foot exposed ceilings, brick walls and an eclectic mix of tables and chairs usually filled with downtown neighbors, students and creative types from all over.

"New York-Puerto Rican: that's the narrow definition of Nuyorican," said Bob Holman, 40 years old, one of the cafe's five directors. The others include two original Nuyoricans -- Mr. Algarin, 49, who gave the movement its name, and Willie Correa, 37 -- as well as two "new Nuyorican Poets," Roland Legiardi-Laura, 38, of Italian-Russian descent, and Lois Griffith, 39, a black poet and painter.

"Anyone who calls himself or herself a Nuyorican is a Nuyorican," said Mr. Holman, a Kentucky native. To dispel notions that the cafe has become too chic, he quickly points out that patrons include neighbors from the housing projects across the street and homeless residents of Tompkins Square Park, some of whom also perform.

"The idea here is there are no limits," said Mr. Algarin. "This place exists for poetry."

Mr. Algarin may be the cafe's founding father, but Mr. Holman is its guiding force. He is trying to sell MTV on a pilot for a half-hour poetry series, "Smokin' Words." A former coordinator of the Poetry Project at St. Mark's Church-in-the-Bowery, he has given the cafe memorable themes, including Poets in Concert, where the same poet reads three nights in a row (the idea is to encourage critics to review poets); the Poetry Jam, where 50 poets read for three minutes each, and the Poetry Slam, a sort of poetry amateur hour. Poets and would-be poets read for three minutes, after which audience members rate them on a scale of 1 to 10. Bringing People to Literature

"The slam is getting a lot of attention," Mr. Holman said. "But my hidden agenda is to bring people back to literature. The cafe always served as a place for vital living poetry."

In 1978, Mr. Holman read a poem at the Nuyorican Poets' Cafe for the first time with a backup band. From then on, he said, he began memorizing his poems so he would not have to have a piece of paper in front of him. The practice is now common in poetry cafes.

"The unique thing about the cafe was that the barrier between audience and performer didn't exist," said Ms. Griffith, who teaches at the Borough of Manhattan Community College. In this respect, the cafe remains close to its roots. Now as then, audience members clap, hoot, shout exclamations and occasionally boo the poet. "Poetry has caught up with what the cafe was doing," Mr. Holman said. "All of a sudden, the Nuyorican style has caught on."

Like rock stars, many poets have bands, costumes and groupies. On the opening weekend, Amina Baraka, a poet and

the wife of the legendary Amiri, sang her revision of Billie Holiday's "God Bless the Child," and read a poem set to the tune of "Take the A Train." Dark Star Crew, a poetry crew of city high school students, rapped and bopped. In the works: a production of "Julius Caesar" set in Africa. 'Meaning Is In for the 90's'

The five-story building at 236 East Third Street (between Avenues B and C) belongs to the cafe, a nonprofit corporation. The cafe opened without a heating system in 1989 on a limited run and reopened four nights a week on Halloween, with cover charges from \$4 to \$6.

Except for the cafe floor and new heating, the building remains unfinished. One floor was knocked down to give the cafe its high ceilings. The directors plan to make the basement a bookstore and coffeehouse, the new second floor a multimedia lab for desktop publishing and the top floor a hotel and rehearsal space for visiting poets.

"We've got rap poets, political poets, cyber-punk poets, and from the West, cowboy poets," said Mr. Holman. "Meaning is in for the 90's. It's got a beat and you can dance to it."