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The Word's Turn: Urban Poets Re-emerge

By EVE M. KAHN

A CREWCUT young woman, wearing only black, intones with a sultry, hypnotizing voice: "You moan with/the insanity of such/raw miraculous movements." The poem she is reading this night -- her own -- proceeds to describe an overwhelming sexual encounter. The crowd at the nightclub cheers when she finishes, and then 5 audience judges rate her effort: she averages an 8, on a scale of 0 to 10.

A gangly young man prone to arm flails, her competitor in a surreal contest called a Poetry Slam, counters with a string of non sequiturs loosely tied to American malaise: "Zombies do well in an addictive society/. . . The Pope will let you kiss his ring but he won't let you wear his hat." His scores run from a 7.9 to a 10. As the winner, he receives the \$10 grand prize; but not before the contest host makes sure to remind the listeners that "the best poet always loses."

Such frenetic scenes occur every Friday at the Nuyorican Poets Cafe, a drafty, bare brick loft in the East Village. And while the Nuyorican seems to be the only New York City club that has started regular Poetry Slams, dozens of other night spots and cafes in the five boroughs and beyond have regular poetry events on weekends. The self-indulgent verse sessions of the 1950's Beats have returned, this time with 90's political outrage and hip-hop energy.

"It's an incredibly active scene," says Eve Packer, who calls herself a performance poet and often reads to the musical accompaniment of a live band called the Future. "People hang out, dance, drink, yell, and the work is very urban, very rhythmic, full of sex, drugs, violence, politics, anger, humor. And it's not a depressed scene, it's not introverted or tortured; that's a 50's image."

The monthly New York City Poetry Calendar, founded as a skimpy broadsheet in 1976, has grown unwieldy, with up to a dozen listings per day at more than 60 venues. About two-thirds are old reliables like libraries, churches, art galleries and bookstores; a few private homes also appear. The rest are night spots and cafes that typically discovered the muse less than three years ago.

Bob Holman, the fast-talking host of the Nuyorican's Slams, attributes the scene's new vitality to a cold, high-tech world, where people long for human contact; to rap's "driving the wax out of the ears of teen-agers"; to academic poetry's prevailing lifelessness, and to frustration with empty verbiage spewed by politicians and advertisers. Money is also a factor: poetry helps fill seats at slow hours.

"It's one of our better nights here," says Kerry Smith, owner of Right Bank, a three-year-old bar in Williamsburg, Brooklyn. His biweekly Sunday readings rank as one of the hipper spots in town to bare a soul, says Kathe Burkhart, a poet who lives nearby and won a Nuyorican Slam this month. (Mr. Holman crowned her "Slum Goddess of the 90's"; her most colorful selection raged against the ways women adapt to men and men torment women and concluded, "he will give up nothing for you./Not yet.") Not Quite So Current

The Moroccan Star, on the other hand, a Middle Eastern restaurant near the Brooklyn Borough Hall, presents Sunday open readings that feel like circa 1975 group therapy. Sponsored by the New Press, which publishes a poetry quarterly, the sessions recently prompted John Todras to berate his ex-wife in verse ("Some marriages resemble tossing dice") and Carol Blair to agonize over memories of the Joel Steinberg trial ("Joel, Hedda, Lisa/. . . ecstasy's violent eruption").

The Ear Inn's 14-year-old program is slicker, presenting two established, although experimental writers on Saturday afternoons. Jerome Sala recently mused on commercialism at the cozy tavern, in SoHo, surrounded by women in earth tone blouses and men in faded lumberjack shirts. "O new coke,/it's not your taste we hate so much/as your lack of integrity," one poem complains, and another warns, "no purchase is necessary to disintegrate."

Sin-e, a two-year-old East Village coffee house with soothing peach walls, attracts sleek young men in black leather jingling with chains, as well as 70-ish widows with spiky hair and bemused smiles. Its programs are as varied as its listeners; a few weeks ago, Dorothy Shubow Nelson contemplated global change ("I see icons everywhere/yet no longer see myself/in relation to anything greater/than the places that I go") and Veronica Vera, a self-described porn queen, read a chapter of her racy autobiography.

A few blocks north, the Pyramid Club presents a year-old poetry series heavy on progressive topics like "treatments of the issues of gayness," says Larry Jones, the program's organizer. The Public Theater's cafe started poetry sessions this year, and Max Fish, a Lower East Side bar so cool it keeps its phone number unlisted, provokes "great reading; people really let their hair down," says Ms. Packer, the poet. Like everywhere else she performs, she adds, "there's that arc of contact and energy with the audience; you create a spark and it builds and builds." It began in Chicago

The Nuyorican remains her favorite stage. Founded in 1974, the space closed for renovations in 1982 and didn't reopen again until 1989. To spice up its second incarnation, the directors borrowed an idea from a Chicago bar, the Green Mill Lounge, where Slams have occurred since 1986. "I didn't trademark the name, because I wanted it to spread and spread easily," says Marc Smith, a Chicago poet who is the Slam's inventor and who has watched it expand to 20 other cities so far.

At the Nuyorican, low-cost, highly drinkable wines and beer flow at a bar near the entrance; ethnic groups mingle comfortably, and the staff encourages dancing in the aisles during breaks. But despite the cafe's charms and the spoken-word boom, it is affected by the recession, as are some of its colleagues.

The New Press must shift its programs from restaurant to restaurant, as managers grow tired of late-drinking literati. The Knitting Factory, a renowned setting for avant-garde work in the East Village, no longer pays its poetry readers because New York State has dramatically cut grants for literary efforts. And Webo, a popular performance and poetry club in the East Village, opened in 1990 and died of debt in 1991.

A lot of these places have closed because they can't afford the rent, says Miguel Algarin, a co-director at the Nuyorican, which fortunately owns its own quarters.

"We're not making money," says Mr. Holman. "We're not a smash success. That would require a wholesale rethinking of what culture and civilization are about." WHERE VOICES SPEAK THE VERSES

Here is a sampling of New York City night spots and cafes that present poetry:

CB's 313 GALLERY, 313 Bowery, Manhattan. Readings are on Sundays at 5:30 P.M. Emerging poets are typical fare, some with musical backup. Admission: \$3; beer, wine, snacks and desserts available. Information: (212) 677-0455.

CEDAR TAVERN, 82 University Place, Manhattan. Readings are held erratically on Sunday nights, with full bar available in a glass-walled roof garden. Programs range from established academic poets to younger writers. Free. Information: (212) 929-9089.

CORNELIA STREET CAFE, 29 Cornelia Street, Manhattan. Sponsored by the New Press, readings casually combine prearranged presentations and open mikes from 6 to 8 P.M. on Mondays in a wood-paneled back room. Admission: \$2 plus one drink. Information: (212) 473-1897.

COZY CORNER BAR AND RESTAURANT, 60-01 70th Avenue, at 60th Street, Ridgewood, Queens. On Tuesdays, low-key open and scheduled readings run from 7 to 9 P.M. in a slightly kitschy but warm family-run restaurant. Sponsored by the New Press. Admission: \$2, plus one food purchase. Information: (718) 386-2737.

DIXON PLACE, 258 Bowery, Manhattan. Colorful poetry and fiction readings occur on one Thursday each month, with occasional poetry performances on other nights, in a 60-person performance arena carved out of a tenement's second floor. Admission: \$5 to \$7, nonalcoholic beverages available. Information: (212) 219-3088.

EAR INN, 326 Spring Street, Manhattan. A quaint 19th-century tavern presents two readers each Saturday afternoon at 3:30, usually armed with poems that take risks but do not howl. Admission: \$3, full menu of homey cooking available. Information: (212) 226-9060.

JOYCE'S, 5057 Broadway, at 216th Street, Manhattan. Scruffy local bar that reserves its side room for open and scheduled readings on Sundays at 3 P.M. Poets tend to be unknown and to write of everyday life; performance theatrics are rare. Free. Information: (212) 567-3839.

KNITTING FACTORY, 47 East Houston Street, Manhattan. The performance space's Knot Room holds readings every Tuesday and Wednesday at 7:30 P.M., and auteurs often comment on the neighborhood's troubles. Admission: \$4; full bar available. Information: (212) 219-3055.

MAN RAY, 169 Eighth Avenue, between 18th and 19th Streets, Manhattan. On most Monday nights, poets ranging from minimalists to Rabelaisians speak after 11 P.M. in a black-and-white Art Deco Revival bar. Free. Information: (212) 627-4220.

MAX FISH, 178 Ludlow Street, Manhattan. An intentionally ratty outlet for high-spirited and unpredictably scheduled performances. Free; full bar available. Information: (212) 529-3959.

MOROCCAN STAR, 205 Atlantic Avenue, near Court Street, Brooklyn. A pleasant Middle Eastern restaurant that presents informal Sunday readings at 1 P.M. in its back room. Two poets are scheduled to speak, others are allowed to read before and after. Sponsored by the New Press. Admission: \$2 plus one food purchase. Information: (718) 852-2669.

NUYORICAN POETS CAFE, 236 East Third Street, Manhattan. Readings occur regularly on Wednesdays at 7:30 P.M. and sometimes on Thursdays and Saturdays; Fridays around 10 P.M., the cafe presents Poetry Slams, competitions for most popular poet, plus a briefly open mike. Admission: \$5; beer and generous helpings of decent wine available. Information: (212) 505-8183.

PUBLIC THEATER CAFE, 425 Lafayette Street, Manhattan. Starting on Feb. 9 with Bob Holman, a co-director at the Nuyorican, as curator, the Public Poetry series will occur on every second Sunday of the month in the theater's lobby cafe and present mainly high-energy performers. Free; snacks, beer and wine available. Information: (212) 598-7150.

PYRAMID CLUB, 101 Avenue A, between Sixth and Seventh Streets, Manhattan. This sometimes outrageous, gay-oriented bar holds a "live literary magazine" called the Nile on Sundays at 7:30 P.M. Admission: \$5; full bar available. Information: (212) 529-2336.

RIGHT BANK, 409 Kent Avenue, Williamsburg, Brooklyn. Sunday readings every other week at 8 P.M. in a funky neighborhood watering hole with a bar down one wall and bare brick down the other; next reading is on Feb. 9. Free; beer and wine available. Information: (718) 387-8137.

SIDEKICKS CAFE, 6031 Broadway, near 242d Street, the Bronx. Readings every Wednesday at 10 P.M. present mainly established poets, with an open mike afterward and a musical interlude in between. Restaurant overlooks Van Cortlandt Park; free. Information: (212) 549-5192.

SIN-E, 122 St. Marks Place, Manhattan. Cozy coffee house where poets read alongside an upright piano. Occasional Sundays at 6 P.M. Free. Information: (212) 982-0370.

WINDOWS OF THE VILLAGE, 11th Street and Avenue of the Americas, Manhattan. Open and scheduled readings occur Tuesdays from 7 to 9 P.M. in a former Blimpie's, offering unglamorous but serviceable beer, snacks and sandwiches. Sponsored by the New Press. Admission: \$2 plus one food purchase. Information: (212) 860-7860.

WINE GALLERY RESTAURANT AND BAR, 70-20 Austin Street, Forest Hills, Queens. Open and scheduled readings happen on Sundays from 6 to 8 P.M. in an upstairs enclave that seats 20 and features eerie lighting that makes pages seem to glow in the dark. Sponsored by the New Press. Admission: \$2 plus one drink. Information: (718) 544-0894. -- EVE M. KAHN