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Part Art, Part Hip-Hop And Part Circus; Slammers Shake Up an Interest in Poetry

By BRUCE WEBER

They tore the trophy in half. When teams of exhorting, exuberantly defiant performance poets from San Jose and San Francisco finished the 10th annual National Poetry Slam in a tie (ahead of the other finalists, from New York City and Oakland, Calif.) on Saturday night, they sealed the contest more like compassionate artists than cutthroat competitors and split the title, ripping the trophy, a stack of books with a boxing glove glued on top.

Mad dancing ensued onstage. And pandemonium -- more pandemonium -- reigned at the mammoth Chicago Theater here, among the nearly 3,000 spectators who had spent the evening screaming and hooting ("You go, girl!" "Change the judges!") and bellowing in support of their favorite poems and poets.

The poets had declaimed their identity. "My name is Big Poppa E, and I am a Wussy Boy!" declared a poet from the winning San Francisco team. They had declaimed their spiritual angst. "God is a blooz man!" declared Regie Gibson, from Chicago who, defending his individual title, barely lost out to a poet from New York, Roger Bonair-Agard. They had declaimed their love of poems. "I've decided/I don't want to be/a poet who just writes/for the slam anymore," began Staceyann Chin, another New Yorker, who concluded: "I want to write . . . real poems/poems that are so honest/they slam." And most of all perhaps they declaimed their birthright: to be heard. Ariana Waynes, a poet from San Francisco declared:

would you have me forget
that the blessed first amendment of these united
states that I can raise my voice to shake the world
or at least the termite-infested foundation
of this atrocious, ferocious
land that I love
but have never been exactly proud of.

Whatever else it all meant, it is evident that slam poetry has come of age. For its 10th year the national slam returned to the city where slamming was born. And the four-day event (preliminary rounds were sprinkled over half a dozen bars and cabarets) was raucous and well attended throughout, replete with the celebratory atmosphere of a circus.

As poetry in general has surged in popularity in the United States, this offshoot from the traditions of the art has emerged as a way for passionate people -- mostly, but not entirely, young and representing a wide ethnic and racial range -- to air their voices and for an evidently eager audience to hear and embrace them. A weird and lively amalgam of performance art, hip-hop concert and, with its randomly selected judges holding up numerical score cards from the audience, Olympic figure skating, it is a form that is still disdained by many.

Traditionalists find it dull that so much of slam poetry revolves around personal narrative or indignant protest, and they revile the ideas that the quality of a poem is quantifiable and that the enterprise of art making distinguishes between winners and losers. But as slammers are fond of responding, "They don't like what they can't do," and in any case, slamming is a bona fide cultural force. It is a grass-roots movement, truly national, that since a Chicago poet

named Marc Smith held the first competitions in a bar called Get Me High in 1984 has grown to encompass regular events in more than 100 places in dozens of cities around the country.

The phenomenon has created a subculture with the feel of a counterculture, complete with shrines (places like the Green Mill Tavern here, where Mr. Smith has held Sunday-night slams since 1986; and the Nuyorican Poets Cafe in the East Village in Manhattan) and icons, the most legendary being Patricia Smith, who is better known in more mainstream circles as the Boston Globe columnist dismissed a year ago after admitting to fictionalizing some columns.

"In 1991 I saw Patricia Smith perform, and it changed my life," said Danny Solis, 40, who, representing Albuquerque, N.M., was competing in his seventh national slam. "She showed me that poetry could be something that lifts an audience to another place, like jazz or salsa or dance."

The first national slam, in 1990, pitted teams from Chicago and San Francisco against each other in one-on-one battle. (Chicago, the visiting team, won.) This year's event included 200 poets on 48 teams from 45 cities, including three from New York, two from Chicago and single teams from places like Chico, Calif.; Hot Springs, Ark., and Fargo, N.D., where the individual poets earned the right to be here by winning competitions at home.

"The scoring is just a way of giving people credit for what they do," said Kristen Garaas, 24, an eighth-grade English teacher on the Fargo team. "I feel like what we're competing for is space, the opportunity to speak, just the way every poet does when they try to find a publisher."

The format is this: Each bout has four rounds, and each member of each four-poet team performs a poem of three minutes or less. Singing is allowed; props are not.

Five judges from the audiences, whose standards are known only to themselves, rate the poems from 0.0 to 10.0. The highest and lowest scores are discarded, the sum of the middle three is the individual score; the sum of the individual scores is the team score.

Judges seem to be influenced by the crowd, which tends not to appreciate low scores. This is both pertinent and not. Although no one really doubts that the competitive aspects of slamming add a nutty, crowd-revving element that helps draw spectators, it is also undeniable that the connection between the poets and their audiences is palpable, and at the heart of the experience for both.

"The first one we saw, we were totally awestruck," said Margaret Barber, a Scrabble tournament organizer from Kearny, N.J., who, with her companion, Vince Anzalone from Brooklyn, has traveled to every national slam over the last eight years. She added: "We heard Indians from North Dakota, we heard blacks from the inner city, we heard every ethnic group you could imagine. There was something different every three minutes, and everyone was so good it was better than a Broadway show. I was never so awake in my life."

The rise of slam poetry has both shared in and pushed along a general explosion in the interest of poetry nationwide, determinable by a number of measures. The Academy of American Poets, a 65-year-old organization in Manhattan devoted to promoting the art of poetry, has had a fivefold increase in membership (to 10,000 from 2,000) since 1994. Bill Wadsworth, the academy's executive director, said that when the group began sponsoring poetry readings in the 1960's, the number of places where readings were regularly held in New York City could be counted on one hand. Today, he said, in New York alone there are 170 places at which to find poets and podiums.

According to Poets House, a poetry library in Manhattan that sponsors an annual exhibition of poetry books published in the United States, there were 989 books of poetry -- individual collections, anthologies and chapbooks -- published by 466 different publishers last year, up from 570 titles in 1993.

Barnes & Noble, the nation's largest book retailer, which stocks 7,500 poetry titles, says it has seen sales of poetry books rise by 30 percent in the last three years. And City Lights Booksellers in San Francisco, whose stock of 3,500 to 4,000 titles makes it perhaps the most avid independent retailer of poetry, says it has had a 60 percent increase in poetry sales in the last eight years.

"Just from watching who comes into the store, there is a real emergence of a younger audience for poetry we haven't seen before," said Paul Yamazaki, the buyer for City Lights.

A number of factors are responsible for the trend, including the rise of rap music, the boom in stand-up comedy and the proliferation of stage monologists, all of which have made the spoken word an entertainment medium.

Booksellers cite the emergence of pop culture figures, like the young singer Jewel, who have published their verse; the establishment, four years ago, by the Academy of American Poets of National Poetry Month, which, with its annual attendant publicity has caused poetry sales to spike each April in bookstores around the country, and the efforts of the poet laureate Robert Pinsky, notably his Favorite Poem Project, an audio and video archive of a cross-section of Americans reading their favorite poems.

All of this has expanded the popular notion of what poetry is and as a result has brought a wider public to a form long associated with intimidating erudition.

"What's happened to poetry in the last 20 years is that it has become so vast and with so many people practicing it that poetry itself has become a category like dance, which includes ballet and break dancing and so forth," said Eliot Weinberger, an essayist and translator. "So people who practice poetry for the page have trouble with slam poetry, which is really an oral art, influenced by performance art and rock and all that. But for them to say slam is not poetry is like a ballet dancer saying break dancing is not dance."

The reading (the melding of the poem and the performance) is at the center of poetry's current popularity. Debra Williams, director of corporate communications for Barnes & Noble, attributes the chain's rise in poetry sales to the readings now frequently held in many stores. And Mr. Wadsworth of the academy concurred.

"We try to connect the popularity of readings to people reading books of poetry, but it's the performance aspect that's responsible" for much of the surge in the interest in poetry, he said. "And the poetry slam, where the performance is far more important than the text, is the ultimate expression of that."

Many slam poets would take issue with Mr. Wadsworth's qualifying clause, but there is no question that in slamming the stage is at least as important as the page. One frequently heard tenet of slam poetry is that the better poems tend to get the better marks; another, often invoked by the mischievous Mr. Smith, who is now president for life of the loosely organized National Slam Poetry Association, is that the best poet always loses.

"I started doing it to get an audience for myself," said Mr. Smith, 49, who has published one book, "Crowdpleaser" (Collage Press, 1997), and who made the decision, after the second national slam in Chicago, to hold it in other cities to facilitate the spread of the form. It has since been held in, among other places, Cambridge, Mass.; Portland, Ore.; Asheville, N.C., and Austin, Tex.

Asked if he felt he had invented a new art form, Mr. Smith called his invention "a new form of show." He is proud of it, though he has worries. "I don't like the stand-up comedy style of poet," he said. "I don't like all the 'my pain' poems, and I don't like all the banal pop culture references. I started this to get away from the TV, and now we have poems about TV."

Mostly he worries that its roots are being usurped, that it's becoming commercial. "The revolution is becoming an institution," he said. Throughout the slam, various poets could be found peddling homemade CD's. Among them, the team from the Nuyorican Poets Cafe was actively promoting slam poetry as a profession.

"It's already possible for a slam poet to make a decent living," said Faraji Salim, 24, a Nuyorican team member who said he read several nights a week in New York City, New Jersey and Washington, and sells his CD's afterward. "You can move a lot of units a night. What we're working on is how to make a six-figure living without compromising the art."

Still, they haven't entirely lost the revolutionary spirit. "Writing you do for yourself; slamming is for the people who hear you," said another Nuyorican poet, Lamar Anthony Hill. "Writing poetry is painful. Slamming is fun."

From the Page To the Stage

god is a blooz man

sittin cross legged

with an axe angled out his lap

lovin and revilin us all like flatted thirds

pressed gainst the frets of pain

god is a blooz man
what got life and death
strung like strings
cross his lovers neck
dig him prowlin round the alleys of our minds
tryin to find children cryin in fear of the night. . . .

From "blooz man," by
Regie Gibson

If only out of vanity
I have wondered what
kind of woman I will be
when I am well past
the summer of my raging youth

. . .
Will it have been worth
the hours of not sleeping
that produced no more than
poorly written verses
that catapulted me
into literary spasms
but did not even whet the appetite
of the 3 o'clock crowd
in the least respected
of the New York poetry cafes
Will I wish then
that I had taken that job
working at the bank. . .

From "In Those Years," by Staceyann Chin