

THE CULTURE OF SLAM: CREATING COMMUNITY

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On December 19, 1998, a group of poets came as a team to slam against a team of Nuyorican poets. The poets were from New Jersey where they have a regular reading series at Bogie's in East Orange. The organizer of the reading, Steve Donaldson, was interested in having the Jersey poets read at the Nuyorican because of the crazy and diverse audience he had come to appreciate. The nature, or accident, of slam is that it creates community.

The poets are not slamming against one another. They are reading, or reciting their poems. The audience and the judges, randomly selected from the audience, will respond to the poet and the poem as some connection is sure to have happened, for good, bad or indifferent. There is no waiting. The judges, either taking themselves entirely too seriously, or having figured out that the joke is on them, weigh in with "numerical equivalents" for the poem. At the end, one poet has garnered a higher number than the others, and will go on to the next round. The others will come back on another Friday and try again. In the interim they will talk with other poets, attempting to figure out how to raise the numerical equivalents, or to just deliver the poem as the poem requires.

What does this mean? Ever since the slam's origin in a Chicago bar, poets have attempted to figure out what makes the slam tick. Perhaps what makes the audience tick. Or, a poem. Since Bob Holman brought the slam to the Nuyorican, the question has been extended to New York and a bunch of cities all over the USA and the world about this thing called slam. There are poets who will not slam, suggesting that they do not compete, and there are poets who chomp at the bit to slam, who do not necessarily compete either. But they do slam. For that moment when the magic of the reading and the reaching out to an enthusiastic group of people seated and waiting for the revelation of strategy (what round should I read this poem?), the poet revels in the challenge. The response is immediate. As I said before, there is no waiting. There is a lot of love and appreciation for the effort, even if the scores tell another story. Sometimes they are in harmony, sometimes not. They are always in adventure. This is the culture of slam.

Poets at the Nuyorican Cafe have connected, through the slam, with poets in New Jersey, Connecticut, Philly and Delaware. College students flock to the Friday night slams and bring the poets to their colleges to read. There is a drama in slam, whether one thinks in terms of competition or not, that makes the \$5 admission a far better investment than current movie tickets. The poet's battle is with his or her self and the audience gets to share in that struggle. The poet has comrades in the same struggle, will rush over with advice or congratulations, or conspire to produce another reading in another place in another week or month. More culture of slam.

In the early days of my exposure to slam, the excitement that accompanied the readings and the anticipation of certain poets reading grabbed me and has yet to let go. The slam was to bring people back to poetry readings, snatch the academy's stultifying grip on the

poem and reawaken poetry's first place: wherever people gather. Slam does not differ from poetry readings as such; it is first and foremost that. It's just that the popcorn and raisinets are free, and the audience is clear about their stake in the event and it's outcome.

The slam is international and every year poets from the United States and Canada (for the most part) come together for four days of slam and partying, hanging out and politics, bragging rights and rites, and most of all, for the money awarded to the teams that finish first, second, third or fourth. And for the "non-competing" ones who find their way to slam, maybe the attraction is politics, who knows? That is the culture of slam.

When the Nuyorican Poets Cafe won the national slam in August of 1998, it was covered by CNN, the first such coverage of the national event. The attention that came in the wake has created opportunities for the poets to have a longer road on which to speak their words. Sometimes slammin' and sometimes just reading. There are poets forming teams all over and encountering each other at an OK Corral type of place. If they are lucky, there is a bar or cafe nearby, a place to run to afterwards to plan the next poem and slam. The variations of slam surrender only to the community that finds that peculiar adventure in numbers, both of poets and judges scorecards.

At the Nuyorican, the event "Braggin' Rites" depends on the response of the entire audience to determine the winners and somewhere some poets are scheming to fill up the joint with an audience that loves poetry and having an opinion counts. That is the future of slam.

Poets slam one day and do Burger King and Nike commercials the next. Slamming has a grass roots kind of connection and so long as the draw is from that well, there may yet be hope. There is a fortune in poetry that eludes sponsors and profit chasers alike. But it must also be said that some have used poetry for the sole purpose of making a profit. As the slam remains the birthing place of new talents and visions, it may well take care of itself. Let us hope then, that this will be the case.

The slam is headed to a town near you. Grab your markers and score cards, or prepare to make noise to wake the dead. Bring 'em to the slam. Dead poets slam too, hawking their wares from bookstore shelves. You judge with your pocketbook. Bring the poetry home and slam against television and top 40 radio. Bring a poet home and have a communion. Call it a slam and do not compete. "Just read the poem!" •