

VERSE VS. VERSE

AUSTIN AGAIN PLAYS HOST TO A CHAMPIONSHIP FOR SLAM POETS WHO KNOW IT'S NOT ALL ABOUT 'ME'

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Traditional poetry readings can be life-altering and they can be awful. Some poets, whose words pulsate on the page, read their creations with an affectless monotone that can disappoint even the most ardent fan. But no one nods off at a poetry slam, because no matter what's being read/performed, poetry slams aren't dull. And the people who are best at it, the slam poets whose voices vibrate with electricity, are descending on Austin. The National Poetry Slam Championships are upon us. For the second year in a row, Austin is playing host to poets from across the nation (and Vancouver). "Live performance is so much a part of the culture in Austin," says Phil West, co-director of the championships, in an e-mail. "People here welcome artists who take chances on stage," which is one of the reasons, he says, that Austin makes a great venue.

So, from Tuesday through Aug. 11, countless venues around downtown and South Congress Avenue will witness haiku throwdowns; showcases of nerds, Ladies Who Spit at Lunch and Jewish/Twelve Tribes, among others; and, of course, the bouts themselves. Those bouts will narrow the 75 teams down to the five that will compete Saturday night at the Paramount Theatre, and whittle the 300 individuals down to the 10 who compete on Aug. 10. (See sidebar for details and slam bout rules.)

Austin's Neo-Soul slam team came in second place at the Nationals last year - and it was their first year competing. The long-standing Ego's team has also again entered the fray, giving Austinites two home teams to root for.

Austin is one of a handful of cities to have more than one slam team. "One venue, five people on a team, was not enough to really capture those different voices (in Austin)," says Brian Francis, coach of the all African American and mostly female Neo-Soul team. Describing the difference between his team and Ego's, he says, "We may look at the political structure as it impacts African Americans, women, and then the world in general."

Mike Henry, co-director of the documentary Slam Planet and slammaster (host) for Ego's slam, mentions that all the team members have different political views, different experiences. "You make a little bit of sausage when you're a poetry slam team," he says. As a group the team makes something that's "a little bit different than what any of them would put out there on their own." And though Ego's might have a reputation as being the funny slam and Neo-Soul as the African American slam, Henry says, lots of the Neo-Soul folks "have a very strong sense of humor." And, he says, "I don't think there's any poet in Austin that tells the story of the African American experience better than (Ego's team member) Da'Shade (Moonbeam)."

Slam has been criticized for the number of "self-involved" poems, for being essentially

an outlet for anger, confusion and angst about things such as race, gender and sexual identity. People who might have once enjoyed slam sometimes complain that too many of the poems sound the same, are too often simply a venue for people to find and announce their identities, rather than craft exceptional poetry.

Susan B.A. Somers-Willett has been a part of the slam community for 10 years and has been a member of three Austin nationals teams. She's written a book about identity politics in the slam, coming out in fall 2008: "The Cultural Politics of Slam Poetry." (Full disclosure: She's also a close friend of mine.)

"Sometimes when people are performing their identities on stage, they end up sort of unintentionally stereotyping themselves," says Somers-Willett. But there are others doing "amazing" work through parody and persona, she says, pointing to Patricia Smith, an African American woman who performs a piece in the persona of an Anglo male skinhead. "The audience is forced to investigate and question their own assumptions about identity and what they expect from slam performers on the slam stage." And as for people who don't want to hear the identity poems the slam is so well known for? "I would say that the poetry slam is not the right place for that person," Somers-Willett says. In a follow-up e-mail, she also voices something that many of the people I spoke to said: "The preponderance of the identity poem and political overtones at slam do have a great advantage: They get young audiences excited about poetry."

Whichever side of that argument you land on, one thing that's important to remember, as West has pointed out, is that slam is ultimately a democracy - and that includes skill levels. Anyone can sign up to perform at a slam. Anyone can judge a poem. Not every piece will be polished and not every poet will be good. In fact, there's a good chance the audience will hear a rotten poem. But there is something to be admired about the risk and the energy of trying something new, of being willing to fail - and sometimes fail miserably - in a public space. And sometimes, the audience gets to see something wild and new and spectacular.

Of course, one of the advantages of going to the nationals is that this is the cream of the crop. People who might empathize with a beginning poet but not want to listen to her clichés can head to the nationals knowing the performances and the poems have been finely honed. Last year, the finals at the Paramount sold out. Just a heads-up if you want to get tickets.

(BOX)

Why do you slam?

"For sanity and pseudo-stardom."

- Krissi Reeves, Ego's

"The competitiveness makes me want to be more creative. When I lose a slam, I take note of what I can improve on for the next slam."- Mizz Lizz, Neo-Soul

What do you get from slam that you wouldn't get from traditional poetry?

"Poetry slam is a great way to get your artwork out in front of people who would never open a book of traditional poetry. People who claim to 'hate poetry' often love poetry

slam."

- Danny Strack, Ego's

"The immediate feedback from the audience. There is an emotional connection through the work from the audience to the poet that traditional poetry rarely provides."

- Tony Jackson, Ego's

What skills are most important to good slamming?

" 'Girls like boys with skills. ' " Of course great writing - the poetry is always the point! But also a wild sense of abandon and ability to woo the audience and judges with your voice and body is key." - Faylita Hicks, Neo-Soul

"The ability to memorize, use emotion and make eye contact while moving the crowd. Along with working through your mistakes."

- Ebony Stewart-Braswell, Neo-Soul

"If by 'good slamming' you mean 'high-scoring slam poetry,' then you have to be loud, a little angry, a little silly and confident. If by 'good slamming' you mean 'GOOD slamming,' then you have to have something insightful to offer, have some performance chops and be willing to take risks." - Andy Buck, Ego's

What frustrates you about slam?

"I hate hearing the same poems over and over again (both literally and figuratively). People discover that judges reward tragic poems and so they write to this mold. You hear a lot of dark, depressing poetry sometimes. I want to hear more joyful poetry and more slam poets taking chances with topics that aren't traditionally associated with slam." - Danny Strack, Ego's

What do you think is most important about slam - in terms of its role in the broader cultural context?

"In slam, everyone has a voice."

- Faylita Hicks, Neo-Soul

"It's important to keep slam alive because it's connecting people."

- Da'Shade Moonbeam, Ego's

"It can change moments, even lives. We are not a bunch of strange, weird folk; we are mothers, fathers, professionals, musicians, artists and everyday people trying to say SOMETHING to anyone who will listen."

- MichelleDesiree, Neo-Soul

What was the worst line of poetry you wrote/performed?

"Your quarterback just got sacked, 'cause your defense totally lacked, and you're about to get attacked, by me, Danny Strack."

- Danny Strack, Ego's

"I once wrote a poem about Buddha, and it included the line, 'I've got Buddha in the backseat, breaking down boxed-up beats.' Oh my. I apologize to anyone who ever sat through that tripe." - Andy Buck, Ego's

What was the best?

"Our children will be butter brown and beautiful, the perfect combination of hip-hop and hee-haw and they'll learn to love life from all sides."

- Tony Jackson, Ego's

"I think it's yet to come. ""

- Krissi Reeves, Ego's

What's your favorite kind of audience? Respectful? Rowdy? Why?

"All of the above. As a performer I feed off the energy of the crowd. What especially drew me to poetry slam was the rowdy, 'We're going to tell you exactly what we think!' crowd. Respectfully listen then boldly tell me what you think!"

- Faylita Hicks, Neo-Soul

"Look: For three minutes, I think someone can be respectful of the mike. "could you please stop talking about what you did last night, and oh please turn your cell phone OFF! I like it, too, when an audience is very responsive to the words being spoken. It lets me know I'm getting across to them. It scares me when it's too quiet."

- MichelleDesiree, Neo-Soul

(box)

Slam rules and how it works

Slam is the art of creating and performing an original poem before a live audience. There are rules, the most important of which can be boiled down to: No props. No costumes. Keep the poem under three minutes or face penalties. In team bouts, poems can be performed by the team or by an individual - but one person can't perform two poems all by herself.

Before each slam begins, five random members of the audience are chosen to judge the poems. Each judge ranks each poem from 1 to 10 and the highest score and the lowest score are thrown out, leaving a possible total score of 30 points per poem. While it's considered very bad form for friends of competitors to judge, there aren't really rules about who can judge - you don't have to have read or heard a poem before, you don't have to know a metaphor from a Freudian slip.

Slam vs. spoken word

There are lots of artful and subtle distinctions, but again, in a nutshell: Spoken word is a broad category. Slam is a kind of spoken word - it's a competitive, time-limited kind of spoken word.

National Poetry Slam Championships

75 teams from across the United States (and Vancouver) will compete.

When and where: Tuesday through Aug. 11. In addition to poetry bouts, there will be workshops offered on topics such as stage combat and bout management. Various times and venues.

Finals: The individual final is at 9 p.m. (doors at 8) Aug. 10; the team final is 8 p.m. (doors at 7) Aug. 11. Both at the Paramount Theatre, 713 Congress Ave.

Information: www.nps2007.com

Writer's choice

Here are my completely biased picks for the National Poetry Slam Championship-related events I'd go see if I had my druthers. - Moira Muldoon

* Slam and the Academy panel discussion, 11:30 a.m. to 1 p.m. Wednesday, Hideout

Upstairs, 617 Congress Ave. Discusses the intersections and breakdowns between slam and traditional poetry for the page.

* Decathlon Slam Wednesday, 11 p.m. to 2 a.m. Ruta Maya, 3601 S. Congress Ave.

Want to see poets do sit-ups? That, as well as a Ding-Dong eating contest, mixed with poetry in the past at this 2-year-old, goofy, unpredictable event.

* FameCast, 11 p.m. to 2 a.m. Aug. 9 at Antone's, 213 W. Fifth St. Poets submitted online videos of their performances, and by online vote, five finalists were selected; these five will compete for \$10,000. famecast.com

* Revenge of the Nerd Legends Showcase, 2:30 to 4 p.m. Friday, Hideout Theater, 617 Congress Ave.: Nerd poets performing poems about Dungeons & Dragons, comic books, sci-fi.