



THE TWIN POETS - AL & INAMDI / PHOTO BY MICHAEL MEYER

# POETRY SLAM

## the WORD in REVOLUTION

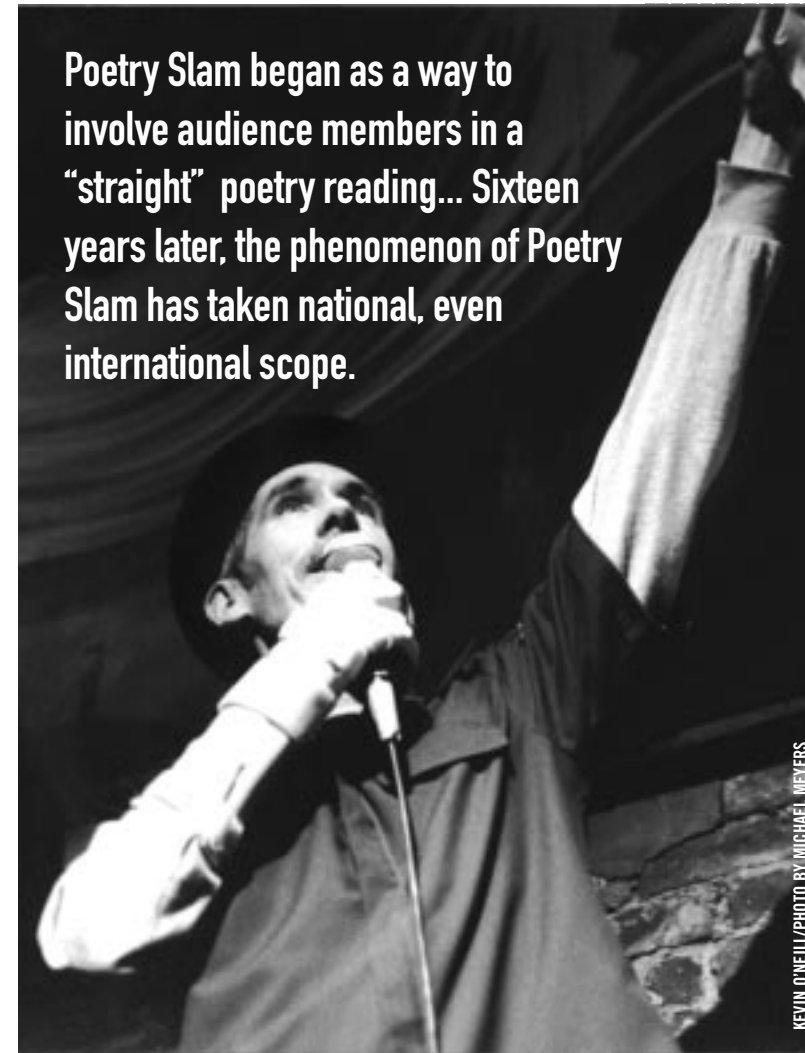
by Clare Ultimo

**In America**, through the 20th century, the spoken word as a vehicle for social change was mainly relegated to the political arena. There would always be the occasional "soapbox" politician or preacher, standing on a street corner making a point about corruption or redemption, but solo "preachers" with a non-religious or non-political following were rare.

Speeches, rallies, keynotes, and organized politics created a platform for words to be remembered and in some cases begin or strengthen social movements that were sweeping through American culture. We all recall what it meant for Martin Luther King Jr. to say "I have a dream". At the very least (even if overused) his words have come to represent an ideal of human equality and freedom that are a permanent reference in our culture.

Through the seemingly omnipotent power of technology, and the glut of information, news and ideas available, we have created a different relationship to social change. Unlike the times when the Roman Catholic Church openly directed the censorship of ideas, proclaiming the Bible as the Last Word in an attempt to control empires, modern censorship is more difficult to isolate. A covert censorship of words and ideas now resides in a world of government secrets and corporate cover-up. The increasingly common communication of the internet has represented a positive side to the dissemination of important social/political information - it holds the possibility of social change as well as social control. While it is a kind of metaphor for personal empowerment in the world of media, it won't replace the personal, the physical

Poetry Slam began as a way to involve audience members in a "straight" poetry reading... Sixteen years later, the phenomenon of Poetry Slam has taken national, even international scope.



KEVIN O'NEILL/PHOTO BY MICHAEL MEYERS

There are Poetry Slams in hundreds of American cities; each year the number of "Slam Teams" to enter the American National Poetry Slam event has grown. In 1990, when the first National Poetry Slam was held in San Francisco, only two teams competed. In 2002, fifty-six teams from across America and parts of Canada came together to "slam". CNN covered the event in 1998. There are ongoing, well-attended slams in England, Germany, and the Netherlands. Poetry Slam has become a sub-culture.

Hybrid influences from Hip Hop to Ginsberg created this mutant performance with a backbeat. Poetry Slam is a combination of political and social ideas communicated live and in person with the rhythm built in. There are no musical accompaniments, and it's generally a solo thing - group slamming is a rare occurrence that generally only happens at National Poetry Slams.

National Poetry Slams are organized each year in different cities by a group known as Poetry Slam Inc., a formal coming-together of original players, performers, and "slammasters" across the country. Poetry Slam Inc. has a lofty mission statement, but perhaps it indicates the potential of this thing called "slam":

*The mission of Poetry Slam Incorporated (PSI) is to promote the performance and creation of poetry while cultivating literary activities and spoken word events in order to build audience participation, stimulate creativity, awaken minds, foster education, inspire mentoring, encourage artistic statement and engage communities worldwide in the revelry of language.*

High ideals in 21st century American pop culture for what many say is just a lowbrow contest of words...

or the visceral contact that human beings trust and seem to need.

Responses to that need have come in many forms. One of them is the "in-your-face" phenomenon called Poetry Slam.

### What is Poetry Slam?

Poetry Slam began as a way to involve audience members in a "straight" poetry reading. As the legend goes, back in 1986, a construction worker/poet named Marc Smith (now known as SlamPapi) decided that his reading at a Chicago bar needed some help. One Sunday evening he asked audience members to judge the poems being read numerically from 1 to 10. Instant interactivity and audience participation! The audience loved it, and as more people came, those writers and poets so disposed to performing their work with a bit of drama and expression came to be more popular than the rest.

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### How Poetry Slam works

A poetry slam typically consists of five poets/writers who perform one poem each in a three-round "bout". Five judges are chosen randomly from the audience for each slam; at the end of each poem, they deliver scores to a "slammaster" or the evening's MC. As in the Olympics, highest and lowest scores are eliminated, and the three remaining scores are added together. A winner is declared at the end of the event, usually a small amount of money is given out and the scope of the competition for that winner broadens to include other cities and venues. It has become common for Slam Poets to travel across continents to perform.

The New York Slam began at the Nuyorican Poets Cafe on the Lower East Side, historically a home for disenfranchised creative types. For a period of time, it was the only Poetry Slam venue outside of Chicago in the US. Since 1993, Friday Night Poetry Slam at the Nuyorican has grown to a 250-plus audience you can count on every single Friday night of the year. Commonly, people are turned away at the door because of overcrowding inside the establishment. The audience is young, old, black, white and everything in between. It is the most famous and celebrated Poetry Slam in the world.

**"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...the poet revels in the challenge. The response is immediate...there is no waiting. There is a lot of love and appreciation for the effort, even if the scores tell another story...(it's) always an adventure. This is the culture of slam." - Keith Roach/Nuyorican SlamMaster Emeritus 1995-00/from FYI/NY Foundation for the Arts/Summer 1999

### A sign of the times

Once upon a time, during the Inquisition, one-on-one personal communication of ideas could get you burned at the stake. Fortunately, things have loosened up on that account; men in pointy red hats no longer call you on the carpet for questioning the virginity of the Blessed Mother. The event of Poetry Slam as a cultural phenomenon seems to long for this kind of watchful eye, though; how can it be effective unless the powers that be are afraid of it?

While we become increasingly distrustful of information that comes through modern media like TV, it seems possible to believe the immediacy of physical presence: someone who is reporting their experience right in front of you. It's not surprising that Poetry Slam became popular as our world grew into an impersonal cyberspace, and the opportunities for direct contact with message-makers became less available. The Slammer wants you to hold him responsible for his statements...actually he/she hopes his authorship will bring him notoriety.

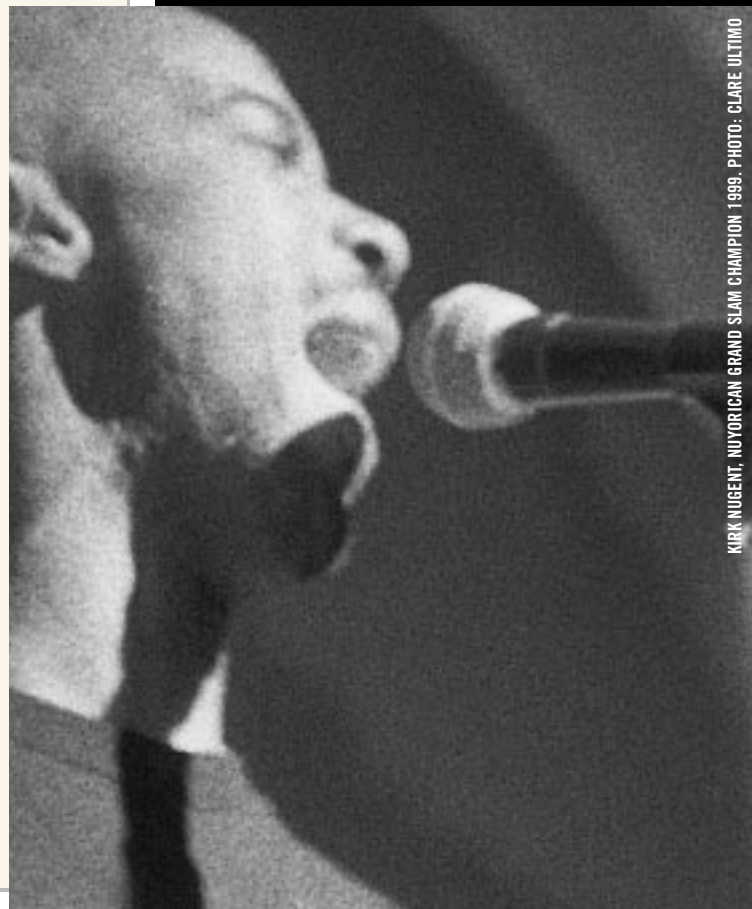
Of course, Poetry Slam would be entirely different if slammers were being locked up for making public statements that weren't censored. The Poetry Slam is a grassroots movement of personal ideas, democratic expression and open acknowledgments of political/social injustice. It was born from a social need to communicate without filters, sponsors or producers. Refreshing, present and on-the-spot reporting. Unapologetically and admittedly biased.

What makes people sit and listen to endless complaints about a failing society to quietly listen to tragic stories of injustice and deeply personal tribulations as Friday night "entertainment"? The opportunity for verbal honesty and instant accountability! Audiences love it. And unlike other forms of expression, even from its beginning, it has been a diverse demographic of performers: white, black, hispanic, gay, rich, poor, female. The very nature of the event seemed to prohibit any prejudices about those who could participate as Slammers, from a racial, gender or class point of view. In addition, judges are chosen randomly from the audience. Poetry Slam has created a community that is colorful and complicated; it truly reflects the time and place from whence it came.

### Standing behind the words (for once!)

Poetry Slam is a physical event, an intimate experience. It's a "real-time" human communication. While some will say that a Poetry Slammer is "preaching" at them, this stuff is not prose. His/her words will rhyme, they will have a distinct rhythm...and they tend to tell a story - to have a beginning, middle and an end, usually within a 3 to 5 minute framework. They are an artistic encapsulation of an idea; and while many

“They’re not my friends, they’re my foes,  
I’m telling you now, these idiots  
are not my heroes.  
And as sure as strawberries make me sick,  
You could never get me to uplift or worship a  
baseball playing crack addict!  
Not when my mother left Jamaica,  
Came to America,  
Worked for some racists as a domestic helper.  
Four degrees below zero, dead of Winter,  
They had her outside grilling burgers.  
All because for her three kids she wanted to  
secure a better future.  
So don’t even think about forgiving me  
if I’m wrong,  
Daryl Strawberry ain’t did shit  
compared to my mom.”  
- from “They’re Not My Heroes”  
by Kirk Nugent



KIRK NUGENT, NUYORICAN GRAND SLAM CHAMPION 1999. PHOTO: CLARE ULTIMO

PHOTO: CLARE ULTIMO © 2003 NUYORICAN POETS CAFE



THE 2000 NUYORICAN NATIONAL SLAM TEAM. From left to right: Felice Belle, poet, Slam-Mistress & Team Coach • Mayda Del Valle, 2000 Nuyorican Grand Slam Champion & 2000 National Slam Champion (she won that year Nationally), and presently one of the stars of “Def Poetry Jam” on Broadway • Tehut Nine • Jade Shwarma • Malcolm



BRYONN BAIN... Harvard Law School graduate 2001. Nuyorican Grand Slam Champion 1999. This photo from a cover story that he wrote featured in the “Village Voice”, April 1999, when he was the subject of police brutality, a story he also told on “60 Minutes”.



SARAH JONES, Nuyorican Grand Slam Champion 1997 on the cover of “Utne Reader”, Oct’02... While she no longer Slams, Sarah has gone on to write and produce one-woman performance pieces across the country. Along with Bryonn Bain, she was featured in the “Utne Reader” October 2002 as one of “30 Visionaries Under 30”.

slammers aim at being politically persuasive, you don't sign up and volunteer for anything at the end.

The Slammer talks about sexuality, racism, gender biases, government corruption, and may openly reveal personal experience with child abuse. (Slammers who choose less edgy subjects are often not as popular.) The Slammer is convinced that his words are going out to change society. The more believable a Slammer is, the deeper the audience responds. And the judges in the audience will respond with higher scores, too, if they “get it”.

Poetry Slam may very well be politics as entertainment (no less than network news in that respect!) Perhaps this makes it less effective as a tool for social change, since Slammers don't commonly organize political movements (yet), but it's possible that this is more a sign of our times than anything else. Intimacy, accountability, and free speech are primary components of Poetry Slam. Entertaining the audience in whatever way you can, is certainly one fail proof way to get someone's attention. Publicly telling the truth - your truth - is certainly another.

### A Reluctant Revolution

As poetry slam evolved through the years, it became more and more performance oriented...the “shape” of the words became less important. The intent of the message, the “sound” of it, and it's delivery became paramount. The ability of the Slammer to “get his message across” as well as his/her political position created the seeds of underground Slam community, with high hopes of changing the world with words.

It hasn't totally worked out that way. At least not now. Most public popularity is permanently married to commercialism: when Sprite wanted a popular Slammer to be the focus of a soda ad, the Slammer's words, his “message” took on new meaning (i.e. needed to be censored in some way). That particular slammer turned down the gig. But next time, he may not. Poetry Slam has given birth to all sorts of media attention and acquirement - most recently, a show running on Broadway, developed by Russell Simmons with nine Slammers called “Def Poetry Jam”. Things like this have brought the issue of censorship to the foreground of Slam dialogue, something that wasn't much considered at first. Hopefully, the Inquisition of Slammers will never happen, but there are no guarantees.

The proliferation of media is certainly a key element to the Slam's popularity. Poetry Slammers have their own websites; they produce and exchange “chapbooks” (small, often xeroxed copies of their work as a small booklet); they record their own CDs and sell them when they Slam. They constantly communicate to each other through list serves and chat rooms

on the internet. The new comfort and “democracy” of traditional and non-traditional communication forms have given the Slam a worldwide community of passionate performers and curious audiences.

“As for the future of the Slam, it is hard to say. America still eats its young. Poets slam one day and may 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.”  
- Keith Roach/Ibid

One of the small but crucial results of Poetry Slam is that it has created a community of people. While that's certainly not a unique development, this community spans continents and has had a strong effect on each other. The diversity of its participants suggests a hopeful sign for the future. The speedy exchange of artistic/political/social ideas in an environment of creativity has opened the door to new dialogues amongst a mixed audience.

It has begun to effect other kinds of artistic expression. As Poetry Slam entered the artistic arena, “performance poetry” was born...possibly helping to create the future of theater as well - the small, intimate, inexpensive performance has hit Broadway now. Profoundly radical politics are “allowed” in the Slam community; heated internet debates between Slammers prove that to be true. Censorship is taboo. The Poetry Slam community at its heart feels that its job is to “get these ideas out” to whatever public will listen; to do it in an entertaining way; to be there to get the heat (or the 10 score). There are no heroes so far in Poetry Slam; no one ready to receive the Nobel Peace Prize, but there is a feeling of positive possibilities that cannot be denied. 4