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PERFORMING ARTS

Almost famous

Days and nights, joys and tears with Detroit's poetry slam crew.

BY KATHLEEN DAVIS

"I never expected this many people for poetry. I guess I should know better by now," said Marc Smith as he looked out at the hundreds of bodies crowding the aisles and sharing seats in Chicago's cultural center. They were there for the opening ceremonies of the 14th annual National Poetry Slam (NPS) on Aug. 6.

Smith had no idea what he was starting 17 years ago. This year's national competition hosted 63 teams from all over the country, as well as several foreign teams. At this level, the combination of competitive poetry and performance is serious business.

The history of slam

Stuff worth writing poetry about —Kalimah Johnson

A long road has brought slam back to where it all began. Smith was a construction worker in 1986 when he approached Dave Jemilo, the owner of the Green Mill (a Chicago jazz club and former haunt of Al Capone), with a plan to host a weekly poetry competition on Sunday nights. He had been writing poetry since he was 19 and was looking for a way to breathe life into the sometimes pretentious open-mic format.

Smith borrowed from baseball and bridge to coin the term "slam." He instituted the basic features of the competition, including judges chosen from the audience and cash prizes for the winner.

The Green Mill has since evolved into a mecca for performance poets, and the Uptown Poetry Slam that Smith started there continues every Sunday night. Yet Smith himself is no expert on the rules; throughout the national tournament, including finals night at the Skyline Stage on Navy Pier, Smith consistently forgot some of the rules and reminded the audience that he had no clue how these things were scored.

Founders of slam



METRO TIMES PHOTOS/KATHLEEN DAVIS

Scott Heath rehearsing in Ella Singer's Hamtramck back yard.



Detroit Slam team (from L): Scott Heath, coach Aurora Harris, Kalimah Johnson, Angela Jones, Cassie Poe and Blair (seated).

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Punish the world with poetry —Cassie Poe

It only took two years for slam's tentacles to reach out beyond the Windy City, and the first place they touched was Ann Arbor. Vince Kueter was a regular at the slams at the Green Mill before he moved to Ann Arbor in 1988 and started attending a poetry reading held at a local sub shop.

While shopping at the Salvation Army for more tacky ties to add to his collection, Kueter stumbled

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upon the Heidelberg Pub on Main Street. By August of that year, the nation's second slam was born, funded with Kueter's own money. The Ann Arbor slam is still held at the Heidelberg the first and third Tuesday of every month.

The Detroit slam, on the other hand, was slightly longer in the making. In 1995, a St. Clair Shores schoolteacher, Matt Smith (no relation to Marc Smith), started the poetry slam in Ferndale and produced Detroit's first team, which competed in Ann Arbor at the 1995 NPS. The Detroit slam has since evolved and is currently held September-April at the ZeitGeist Performance Venue (2661 Michigan Ave., Detroit). Coaches Ella Singer and Aurora Harris, who are hoping to add more venues, are lobbying to have the national competition held in Detroit in 2005.

Players in the slam saga

You will get paid up front — you are working for yourself —**Scott Heath**

Chapbooks don't go platinum and slam poetry still doesn't really pay. The poets, though, aren't in it for the money. The Detroit team made a name for themselves by winning the national competition last year. But the \$2,000 prize went right back into bringing poetry to the people by funding slam expenses. Competitions are held twice a month throughout the year with local finals held in May at ZeitGeist, where the next team to go to the nationals is selected. The next few months are filled with rehearsals, preparation and fundraising events for the team's trip to the ultimate level in August.

The 2003 Detroit team was comprised of Cassie Poe, Scott Heath, Kalimah Johnson, Blair and alternate Angela Jones. Angela is the youngest member of the crew and this was her first experience with slam. The soft-spoken 22-year-old was excited and inspired by the whole process and would love to do it again when she returns from a stint as a beekeeper in Paraguay with the Peace Corps.

Cassie is a 30-year-old legal secretary by day. She first got involved in slam a year ago and traveled to the nationals in Minneapolis to support the Detroit team. She's been writing fiction and romance since she was a little girl, but branched out into poetry after her husband died in 1998. She sees herself primarily as a writer and hopes that slam will be an avenue to get published.

Scott just moved from Ohio to Washington, D.C., to teach literature at Georgetown University. The 29-year-old has been involved in slam, spoken-word and open-mic events in North Carolina, Ann Arbor and Detroit. He traveled to nationals once before in 2001 with a team from Vermont.

Kalimah first went to a poetry slam this past year to support a friend. When he didn't make the team, she decided to try her hand at it, and ended up making the team and, eventually, the semifinals. However, it was by no means her first time in front of the microphone. The 34-year-old sexual assault counselor for the Detroit Police Department has been performing since she was 13. She started out as a rapper and many of her poems still have a hip-hop feel. "I switched back to being a poet — I didn't like where rap was going," she says.

Blair was on last year's winning team. And while the 30-year-old has since toured the country as a featured poet for slam events, as well as with his band Urban Folk Collective, he started in slam and performance poetry only five months before making last year's team. This year, Marc Smith asked him to be part of the tribute to slam and its most memorable moments at the championship finals.

What is slam poetry?

Well-read passages that make truth —**Scott Heath**

"To be a successful slam poet, you have to be a good poet, but not necessarily an excellent poet. [However] you do have to be an excellent performer," says Deb Marsh, vice president and secretary for Poetry Slam Incorporated (PSI).

"Poets who are young and hip tend to do better than the middle-aged ones," adds Marsh, who along with her husband, PSI executive director Steve Marsh, has been with the Ann Arbor slam since 1990.

She continues, "Comedy usually works and sentimental stuff normally doesn't. It doesn't necessarily have to be timely. It just has to speak to the human condition."

Judging for slam is a combination of Olympic accuracy and barstool opinion-spewing. The judges for all slams, from the local to the national level, are picked at random from the audience.

The rules are simple: The judges score a poet based on content and performance. They give each poet a score between 0 and 10. The lowest and the highest scores are dropped and the middle scores are added together to make the total for any individual poet a score between 0 and 30.

Audience participation is not only allowed but encouraged. It ranges from boos and hissing to snapping, applause, cheers and grunts, and it no doubt influences the judges, whose scores almost always tend to go up as the night goes on.

Slam poetry vs. "real poetry"

My name is poetry but my mother always called me a poet —**Kalimah Johnson**

"Slam marries spoken-word, performance, writing and acting. It makes poetry more accessible and fun," Blair explains. But, he adds, some of the best poets might not be found in slam: "There are a lot of great poets out there; it would be arrogant to think that they are all competing in slam.

"You have to find your own voice, and I think that is why Detroit won last year. We sounded unique."

Overall, Blair sees slam as fun and, in the end, it all comes down to a simple truth: "A good piece is universal. It doesn't matter who is judging — anyone can relate."

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Kalimah remarks that slam is about being inspired and not just entertained. She says that she likes it that slam is getting younger people involved and encouraging them to write, but that a lot of it is reactionary: "I've dodged bullets in barroom brawls just to hold a mic — these cats don't understand that."

The future of slam

They will write poems for me when I am dead and gone —Scott Heath

The first day of the national competition, a member of the Rhode Island team mentioned it, and the sentiment was echoed throughout the competition: "Poetry should not be used to sell Pepsi."

And while that nightmare may seem far-fetched, it may not be too far off. Slam poetry has moved from relative obscurity to an international phenomenon in a few years, thanks in part to the national competition. Already it's beginning to receive some major media coverage. Cassie hopes that this will make it ever more popular and accepted. She says, "I hope it paves the way for more recognition. I would like to see it televised like Miss America."

Others are worried that its popularity will corrupt it from its original purpose, and that showmanship threatens to overshadow content. As Scott notices, some teams concentrate more on their performance than their literature: "In slam, there is not a big push to publish. You get your 15 minutes of fame, but there is no prosperity."

The competition

They will paint murals and print T-shirts and some will cry —Scott Heath

It all came down to four days in early August. All the talk, the planning, the preparation, all of the nights at the ZeitGeist and the breezy Sunday afternoon rehearsals in Ella Singer's Hamtramck back yard concluded with the national competition.

Poets and performers from all over the country congregated on the streets of Chicago and in the bars and theaters in Wicker Park. Marc Smith kicked it off Wednesday afternoon in the cultural center. Standing in front of a mass of anxious authors, he bellowed, "If you need to squeeze it, squeeze it now. If you need to kiss it, kiss it now. And if you need to scream it, scream it now!"

His declaration was followed by one-minute introductions from each of the teams. Detroit capped off the hour by singing and dancing: "I've got nothing but love for you ... Detroit."

The Motor City team's first bout took place that night at 10:30 in the dimly lit, nearly packed downstairs of the Subterranean Bar. They walked in with confidence, glancing over the stage and checking that none of the judges selected from the audience seemed fishy.

Moments earlier, however, they had huddled anxiously in the parking lot outside, whispering words of encouragement to each other, and a visibly nervous Kalimah sat on a bench on the other side of the road reciting her piece with Aurora.

They were up against San Jose and Winnipeg. Kalimah took the stage first for Detroit and blew the audience away with her hip-hop-infused poem, "Don't Nobody," about the degradation of women in rap music. She scored a surprisingly low 26.6, but was still the highest scorer in the round. As Cassie and Blair went up against the next poets, things continued to look promising if not hopeful. Their scores were higher or on par with their competitors'.

But toward the middle of the competition, things started to seem suspicious, with one of the judges repeatedly getting up for beer or to use the bathroom during Detroit's performances — and members from the San Jose team were sitting near the judge. In the last round of the night, Scott scored a 26.6, while Mike McGee from San Jose scored a 28.2, making the final scores 105.2 for San Jose and 104.4 for Detroit.

The Detroit team tried to hide their disappointment as they congratulated the other teams, but by the next day they had drafted a formal complaint letter to present at the Slammasters meeting. Their complaint about San Jose's participation was upheld and individuals on that team were penalized, but none of the scores were changed and the Detroiters still kept their second-place ranking.

The next two days were filled with events celebrating slam. Among those with the highest attendance were the hip-hop slam that featured a freestyle rap battle, the fifth-wheel slam for the team alternates and a youth performance workshop hosted by Detroit's coach, Aurora Harris.

But for the Detroit team it all came down to Thursday night and Phyllis' Musical Inn, a hole-in-the-wall bar on Division Street. If they were going to qualify for the semifinals and then for the finals, they had to get first place in the bout. They knew the pressure that was riding on this performance, but just in case they had forgotten, the MC started the evening off by saying, "This should be a good night. Detroit is here and they are last year's national champs." Blair leaned over to Aurora: "They are not supposed to mention that."

"It doesn't matter," Aurora responded. "Because we are going to be this year's champs too."

But it's doubtful that the team completely believed her. Kalimah rested her head in her hands as she stared at the ground, saying, "I don't think I am going to do this again. I guess I am just a sore loser."

They were up against teams from Montevallo, Ala., and Pensacola, Fla. Their scores matched or came in slightly below the other two teams throughout most of the rounds and while a win looked possible, it started to look less and less probable.

Blair was the last poet for Detroit. He did a politically and racially charged poem based on Huck Finn that sent the crowd into wild applause, got competing teams rushing up to hug him and left Aurora, as well as other audience members, in tears. He received a 29, the highest score of the night, but in the end still not high enough to secure first place for Detroit. They lost to Pensacola by two-tenths of a point.

The team was understandably frustrated as Aurora called and told the other coach, Ella, and team manager Christina that the team didn't make it and there was no need for them to drive to Chicago.

Kalimah and Blair sat on the steps outside rehashing the experience as Marc Smith walked by. A disappointed Kalimah's demeanor changed as she told Marc, "Now I am official. I have always been a poet, but now I am a slam poet."

After Smith walked away, she said, "I got a big head now. I am a better writer and performer." And then seconds later, "We should go to a drag show at the Baton (a famous drag bar on North Clark). I need to get my mind off of all of this poetry stuff."

And so, in a moment of team solidarity, they drowned their sorrows and nursed their bruised egos with mixed drinks and lip-syncing drag queens. By the end of the night, they were still disappointed in their loss, but winning no longer seemed like the point. As the bar was closing up, Blair said, "I had more fun this year than I did when we won last year."

The next two days, individual finals, semifinals and the big final competition took place. Detroit was in attendance as the Los Angeles team took the prize money and the trophy of a sword through a stack of books.

Smith's final comments seemed fitting to the whole experience of the national competition: "We all know that any other night things could have been different. The points are not the point. The poetry is the point."

Final reactions

And special thanks for all the memories, but that is not enough —Scott Heath

The team had surprisingly different reactions to the experience at nationals. Angela didn't even get the chance to read, yet she emphatically states that she would do it again. "It was hectic and stressful, but really inspiring," she says. "I got to hear some great poems and meet some great people."

Cassie comments that she had a better time at last year's competition, when she didn't compete, yet she would definitely do it again.

Whereas Blair enjoyed this year's experience more: "I had a blast. Last year we were so focused that every time we won we had to go work for the next bout. Once we were out of it this year, I think we all were able to relax a little and just enjoy Chicago and all of the poetic visitors."

However Blair and Kalimah don't plan to return to slam next year. "It just takes a lot out of you," he admits.

Smith joked about it at finals that Saturday night: "I bet some of you are thinking, 'I came all this way to read two poems?'"

But for Detroit and for most of the teams there, it was about so much more than that.

Kathleen Davis is an editorial intern with Metro Times. E-mail letters@metrotimes.com.

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