

* About Slam Poetry

(by its founder, Marc "So What" Smith)

Slam is about all styles. It is about expanding the possibilities of poetry instead of limiting them, about injecting performance into the art of poetry, and most importantly about creating community amongst poets and audiences of diverse natures.

The competition is (or should be) secondary to the creation of enjoyable and artistically meaningful shows. Each slam evolves in its own personal way, and that's a very important characteristic of what the slam movement is—celebrating differences.

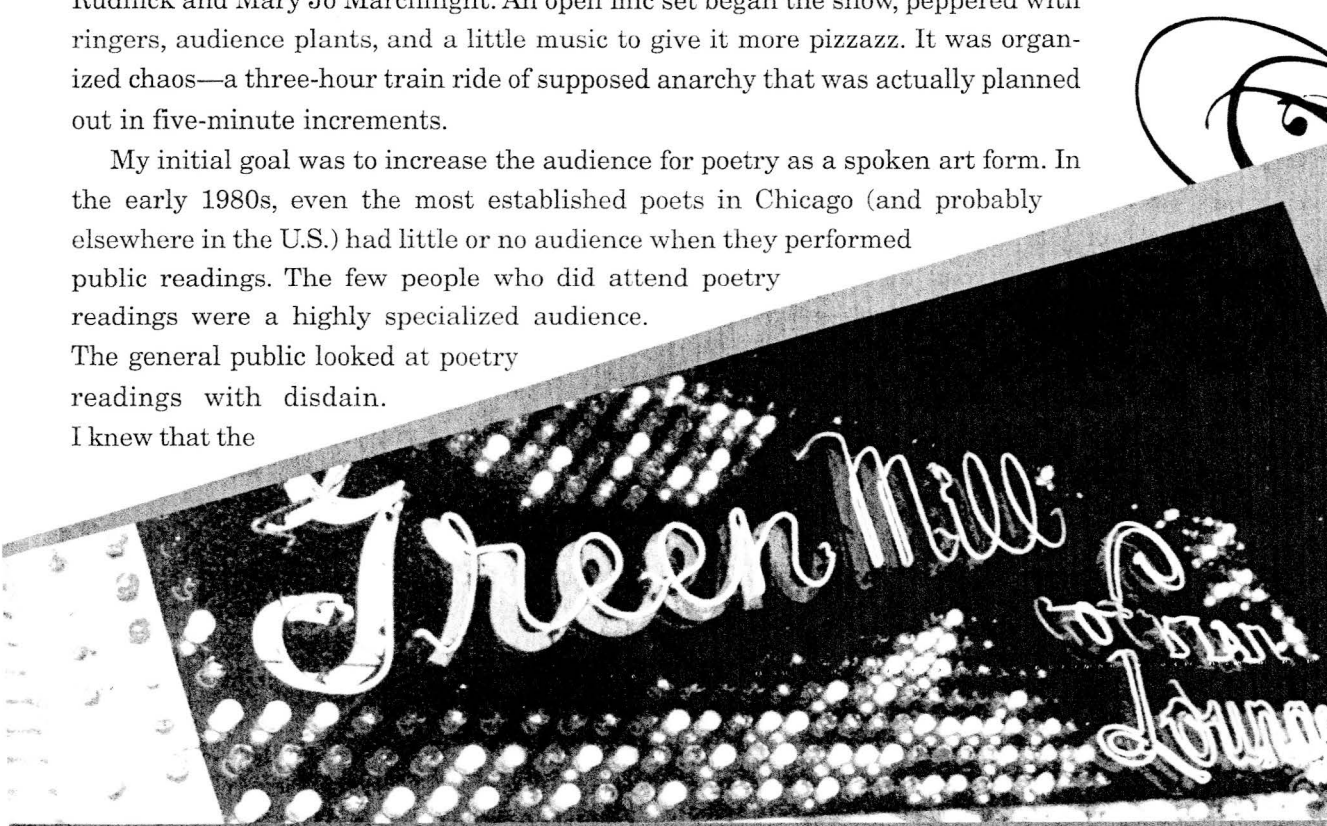
Over the years, many slam poets, including myself, have resisted the commercial exploitation of the slam. Our reasoning was that the movement belongs to thousands of people worldwide; it would be unfair for any one slam or individual to capitalize on its name and popularity. But the door to commercialization is now wide open, and we can only wait and see what it will do to the slam and performance poetry.

Slam poetry is different from many poetry movements because it is performance, and community, and audience. Many young performing poets now take it for granted that they can step up onto the stage of a club and perform their poems to one hundred, two hundred, and sometimes thousands of people. It was not that way before the slam. Even the most widely published and revered poets (the famous nobodies we called them) of the late '70s and early '80s usually read to a handful of people standing between the shelving of a bookstore or under the glaring white of fluorescent bulbs in a library. What changed that? Performance—an obligation by poets to learn the art of performing and put as much effort into that art as they did their writing. What grew from it? A worldwide community of poets

who want to put the passion, excitement, and entertainment back into the presentation of poetry on stage.

The Uptown Poetry Slam at the Green Mill was an outgrowth of the Monday Night Poetry Readings and open mic at the Get Me High Lounge in Chicago begun by Ron Gillette, Joe Roarty, and myself in November 1984. At that time, poets were scoffed at if they “performed” their poems. Critics said it cheapened the art of poetry. We, the ill-bred poets of the Get Me High, did not care. Very quickly, we were attracting a larger audience than our critics believed possible. In 1985, I formed the Chicago Poetry Ensemble, which consisted of Mike Barrett, Rob Van Tyle, Jean Howard, Anna Brown, Karen Nystrom, Dave Cooper, John Sheehan, and myself. We began performing ensemble shows (the first group pieces) on a regular basis at the Get Me High and at other clubs around Chicago. We soon outgrew these small clubs and needed a larger home—more stage space and more room for our burgeoning audiences. When Dave Jemilo bought the Green Mill in the spring of 1986, I persuaded him to allow me to stage a poetry cabaret on Sundays. The Chicago Poetry Ensemble did some shows at Dave’s other club, the Déjà Vu, so he was familiar with our work. On July 20, 1986, the first poetry slam show was staged. There was no competition. It was a variety show directed by myself and performed by the Chicago Poetry Ensemble. Our guest poets that night were Bob Rudnick and Mary Jo Marchnight. An open mic set began the show, peppered with ringers, audience plants, and a little music to give it more pizzazz. It was organized chaos—a three-hour train ride of supposed anarchy that was actually planned out in five-minute increments.

My initial goal was to increase the audience for poetry as a spoken art form. In the early 1980s, even the most established poets in Chicago (and probably elsewhere in the U.S.) had little or no audience when they performed public readings. The few people who did attend poetry readings were a highly specialized audience. The general public looked at poetry readings with disdain. I knew that the



public scorn for poetry readings was an outcome of how it was being presented: a lifeless monotone that droned on and on with no consideration for the structure or pacing of the event—let the words do the work, the poets would declare, mumbling to a dribble of friends, wondering why no one else had come to listen. The slam has changed that. From a handful of strangers at the Get Me High, the slam audience has grown to tens of thousands across the world.

From observing the boring poetry readings of the early 1980s, I came to understand how a better mousetrap could be made:

1. Poets were reading too many poems in open mics; an audience can stand three to five minutes of awful poetry but not fifteen; and though, on occasion, one fantastic (long-winded) poet could wow the open mic; most times it was the awful poets who would mutter on and on. So my first rule was never allow a poet to overstay his or her welcome. I encouraged the audience to boo, hiss, groan, and snap them off the stage. The present etiquette for open mic poets at the Green Mill is one or two poems and never—never!—more than five minutes.
2. Most poetry readings were one-dimensional—no surprises. By creating a show with three sets, each with its own flavor, the audience was given three opportunities to be entertained. If the open mic failed to produce anything of interest, folks could stick around to see if the guest poets in the second set would be worthwhile. If the guest poets sucked, there was always the last set and the slam competition. Turning a poetry reading into a “show” was a revolutionary idea and it worked. “Show” is the reason the slam has flourished, not competition.
3. The competition was an afterthought, it was an easy way of filling up the last half hour. Our ensemble pieces were running too short and it was an impossible feat to come up with new sketches each week. So one night we tried the competition and bingo!—everyone, even the barflies, listened. You could hear a pin drop. So we did it again the next week and thereon. Competition is a natural drama and is an exciting way of ending an evening’s entertainment. Even to this day, very few of us in Chicago take the slam competition too seriously, those who do usually spin off into the land of mucky karma.

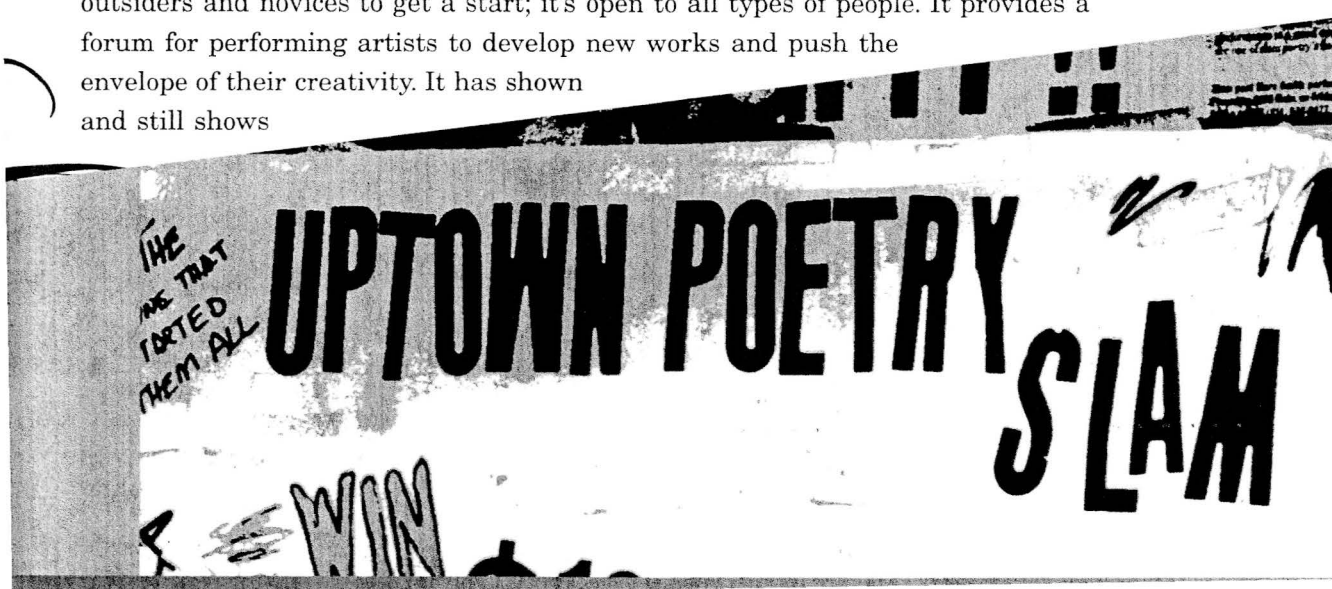


I think of the show at the Green Mill as an art form in itself. From the moment you walk in the door to the moment you're back out on the street, it's a show, and you and everything that happens are part of the action. The main character is the audience. The antagonists are the poets. The slam is organized chaos.

The structure of the National Slam is another story. It was inspired by the first Chicago slam team's trip to San Francisco in 1989 and conceived of by myself with the assistance of Chicago slam poets. The tournament, as it's known today, has been expanded and tweaked over the years, but has remained essentially the same—a four-day tournament consisting of preliminary, semi-final, and final competition nights with five judges selected from the audience—but it is always evolving. The 1990 National Slam in Chicago accommodated eight teams held in four venues. Its final night sold out the Metro Rock Club playing to 750 people—the biggest poetry event Chicago had seen for decades. It put slam on the big map. Serving more than fifty-five teams now, Nationals features events, special sideshows, meetings, arrests, love affairs...it grows and changes each year.

As any good father does, I worry about slam. Its growing success seems to threaten the eccentric nature of the art. More and more young poets copy the chops of someone they heard on a CD or saw on TV. They don't draw from their own experiences. They don't trust their own voices. I regret that the astounding variety of styles, characters, and subject matter present in the early years has, to some degree, been homogenized into a rhetorical style designed to score a "perfect 10." I also regret that many slam poets care more about building a career than they do about developing shows that offer communities, large and small, a much-needed poetic outlet.

Looking over sixteen years of slam, I still believe it provides an opportunity for outsiders and novices to get a start; it's open to all types of people. It provides a forum for performing artists to develop new works and push the envelope of their creativity. It has shown and still shows



the world that the marriage of performance and poetry is a very good thing; it brings passion back into an art form that was becoming too much of an elite intellectual exercise. It has gathered an audience beyond what anyone would have thought possible. It has brought together communities of people who share a passion for creativity, words, and performance and has turned into a worldwide movement fostering free statement and a celebration of communal human spirit. It is a family of many different kinds of people who have learned to accept their differences, to argue and still be part of the family.

Slam has moved everyday people to be passionately involved with art and performance, with words and ideas, with the people who speak the words and the people who come to listen. It has given people purpose and direction. It has challenged people to examine themselves, to take chances, to get to know people and ideas they would have otherwise just passed by.

