

Interview mit Marc Kelley Smith - Teil 2

Englische Originalversion

If the latter, how would you describe genuine slam poetry?

The term “slam poetry” has come to mean many things. The first definition would be the merging of the art of performing with the art of writing poetry. Slam poets give performing and writing equal weight. The combination of the two art forms give performance poets far more artistic choices than they'd have if they considered only one or other of these crafts.

Secondly, slam poetry refers to a type of show, a show that encourages all forms and styles of writing and performing, and that leans heavily upon an active audience responding to and participating in what occurs at a poetry slam event. The interaction between performer and audience is essential to a slam experience.

Third, poetry slam is a network of organizers who have learned the art of creating shows, dynamic poetry events that attract large general audiences and create local artistic communities that nurture new expression.

Lastly, poetry slams are associated with a highly entertaining competition between teams of poets and individuals. Competition is a natural theatrical device that focus attention and creates drama -- it's makes for a good show.

Here's what you might encounter on a typical night at the original show at the Green Mill Uptown Poetry Slam in Chicago:

As people are arriving a jazz/rock/funk trio plays music to set the tone for the actions to follow. The host of the show

(usually me) greets the audience and does a poem to the band's accompaniment. He then briefs the audience as to their role in the open mic to follow; the audience is allowed to boo, snap, stomp, hiss, cheer, and/or groan in respond to any of the performances presented. A series a open mic poets ranging from the complete novice to touring professional read or recite one or two poems with or without musical accompaniment to the cheers and/or jeers of the audience. The open mic set lasts about forty minutes.

The second set features one or two guest performers or ensembles. Over the years these acts have ranged from solitary poets reading their works from their recently published collections to singer/songwriters with exciting and challenging lyrics to acrobats standing on their heads reciting the classical works of Byron and Keats. The goal of the second set is to expand the boundaries of how poetry can be presented and explore the collaborations poetry can form with other artistic disciplines.

The final set is the slam competition consisting of 6 to 8 individual competitors who perform one or two poems and are judged on a scale of 1 to 10 by three judges selected randomly from the audience. The winner receives \$10 and hardly anyone takes the competition as a serious determination of who's the best or worst poet. It's a grand theatrical device for focusing the crowd's attention on the final act of the show. Sometimes the competitors are allowed to have music and sometimes not.

The host closes the show with a final poem and says goodnight.

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Let's talk about the origins of poetry-slam:

What frustrated you so much in traditional forms of literary readings? What did you miss? How did you develop the concept of poetry-slam? Was it some kind of trial-and-error-process or was there a clear vision right from the beginning?

What inspired you to such a form of presentation? Can you name any predecessors of poetry-slam in earlier literary movements?

Christian, all the above is covered in my book "The Complete Idiot's Guide to Slam Poetry". I suggest that you get that book through Amazon and quote from it.

Some writers vigorously reject the idea of public vote on their work. They consider competition in art obscene. They regard poetry-slam as a vulgar capitalist deformation. Why are they wrong?

They're hypocrites. The commercialization and commodification of art for the sole purpose of making money is a vulgar capitalist deformation. Slam poets, for the most, perform for little or no money. They take the risk of public humiliation in front of audiences composed mostly of strangers because they are passionate about what they have to say and long to hear the roar of recognition and approval for the works they perform. Publishing enterprises, large and small -- in and out of the academic circles, are highly competitive, and exclusively controlled, business domains. Editors and art boards are the arbitrary judges of which writers get published and which don't. If someone thinks that's not competitive, they had better think again.

Let's talk about the development of poetry-slam: Did poetry-slam change much over the years?

As you travel a lot, you must have seen all different kinds of slams. Are there any notable differences between poetry-slams in the U.S. and Europe, concerning performance, atmosphere or literary work?

The europeans are more akin to the Chicago roots of slam than many of their American counterparts. There is experimentation in both the format and per-

formance styles presented at european slam shows. The Americans are far too concerned with the competitive aspect of slam and in copying the styles of past slam champions. Many seek to imitate performers they've seen glorified on the electronic medias. They compromise the integrity of their work and its authenticity in the pursuit of some gaudy fantasy of glitzy fame and material gain. The europeans, in my opinion, have more respect for the sacredness of artistic expression.

The community aspects of the european slam community and the struggles that go with it is astonishingly similar to the evolution of the slam community in the states. It usually boils down to a battle between the ego of the self-serving performer against the service-minded organizer. I'm on the side of the organizer. Without organizers there would be no slam poetry.

In Germany for example, you generally hear a lot of funny prose at poetry-slams - often the majority of the presented works - and they tend to go down well with audiences. Is there a similar tendency in the U.S.?

The explanation of why we hear so much comedic work on slam stages is this: audiences like to laugh and are willing to laugh at even the most mediocre attempts at humor. However, audiences hardly ever accept serious works that are not well crafted and performed. Since the slam is both a professional and amateur arena, the easy comedic stuff survives the test of an audience's approval far more often than the harder-to-craft serious works. I think you'll find this true in all art forms. We like to laugh more than we like to cry.

Can you trace the main lines of tradition within the U.S. slam-scene?

I do not understand this question.

Are there any new literary genres you've discovered lately while attending a poetry slam?

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The only new artistic form to be born out of the slam, in my opinion, is the ensemble or group pieces. These are very different from the choral works of the past. Both the writing and performing found in group pieces are unique constructions born out of the slam world.

out. We are all rooted back to the amateur status, and I try not to forget that -- so what!

Any that you feel are being neglected?

In general, are you pleased with the development poetry-slam has undergone so far?

What I started twenty years ago has enabled thousands of people on the slam stages and in the audience, to approach life from a new perspective and affect positive change in their lives and the world. That sounds like a bullshit promo ad but it's true. I can list a few hundred people I know personally whose lives have been permanently and joyously altered by their connection to slam. These positive stories far outweigh any negatives slam has brought to the world.

Do you see a trend towards professionalism in the slam-scene? If so, what consequences will this bear?

My original goal was to approach the art of performing and writing poetry as professionally and effectively as would any accomplished actor, musician, dancer, etc. If by professionalism you mean careerism (someone engaging in an art form for the sole purpose of material gain and celebrity) that, I believe, occurs in all art forms, and when it takes precedent over the sacred truths that have traditionally propelled artistic creation and expression, we will have lost the most important messenger of hope in our world of human endeavors.

Judging by your vast touring and publishing activities, you certainly are a professional slammer, but do you consider yourself as such, or do you treasure an amateur status?

I'm a pro. I have performed all over the world to thousands and thousands of people young and old and from all walks of life, but I have no problem sharing the stage with someone who is just starting