

Slam Poets Compete on Road to Final Four

By MEGAN GREENWELL

Some of the biggest names in the world of East Bay spoken word went head to head at the Starry Plough on Wednesday in the first semifinal of the Berkeley Poetry Slam, a seven-month-long competition.

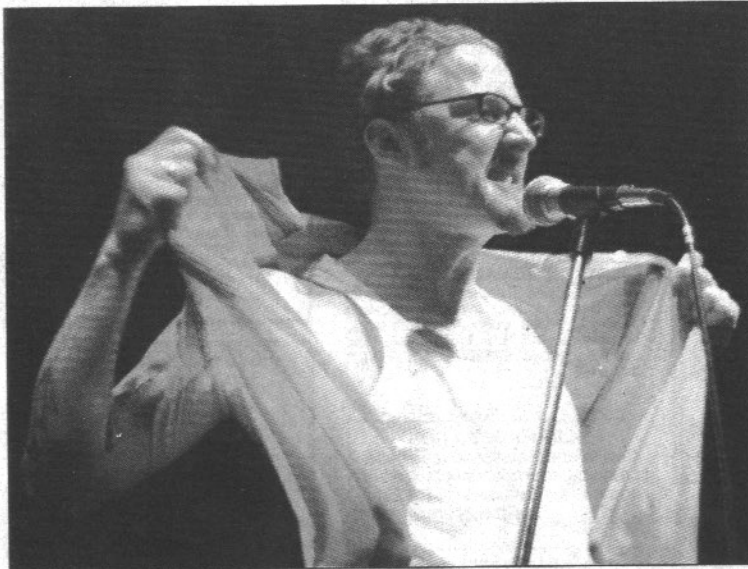
After Wednesday's three-round competition, four of the eight poets qualified for the finals, the next step in their quest to earn a spot on the Bay Area team that will compete in the National Poetry Slam in Chicago in August.

The results featured few surprises, with Jamie Kennedy, a returning member of the 2002 East Bay team, taking the grand prize. Jason Bayani, a poet who called herself Kat, and another poet known as Daled also quali-

fied for the June 11 final.

Before the slam, competing poets stood outside the club chatting, warming up and building their energy level for the performance.

The eight poets earned their place in Wednesday's semifinal through a series of weekly competitions that began last November. The poets are judged both for their verse and their performance, and the top 16 finishers during the season qualified for two rounds of semifinals, the second of which will take place next week. The resulting field of eight will be narrowed to four who will then compete in the Bay Area finals alongside the winners of the San Francisco finals; the Bay Area will send a unified team to the National Poetry Slam for the first time since 1999.



Photos by Erik Olson

JAMIE KENNEDY took top honors at Wednesday's poetry slam.

Slam co-host Charles Ellik, who coached last year's East Bay national team, said the high level of competition at Wednesday's semifinals was a good sign for the group's chances at nationals.

"No matter what happens after this, this is definitely a team that can win in Chicago," Ellik said. "These are some of the best poets anywhere in the country."

The audience in the packed pub seemed to recognize the high skill level, shouting out compliments when favorite artists took the stage or after a particular line of poetry.

"Daled's bringing the championship back to the bay," one audience member yelled. "Jamie, will you marry me?" cried another.

Wednesday night's competitors used a mix of new poetry and audience favorites to rack up their scores from the panel of five judges.

The highest score of the night—a 29.6 out of a possible 30—went to Kennedy's poem in the second round, a tirade against brand name clothing that encouraged participation from many members of the audience who had heard the lyrics before.

Kennedy's first-round poem was a tribute to "walking time bombs in lipstick" that he's dated. He drew laughs for his lines asking women to "let Jamie Kennedy be your therapy."

"I trust well-balanced women like I trust Ghandi to have my back in a bar fight," Kennedy said.

The poets focused on a variety of subjects, including racism, war, money, and love. Two well-received poems, by Daled and

seventh-place finisher known as Victor, raged against President Bush, whom Daled called brainless and Victor labeled a coward.

"Someday soon it'll all go 'boom,'" said Daled, prompting cheers and whistles.

Other poems were more personal. The first performance of the night was from eventual sixth-place finisher Nazelah Jamison, who spoke about her desire to find a man who truly loves her.

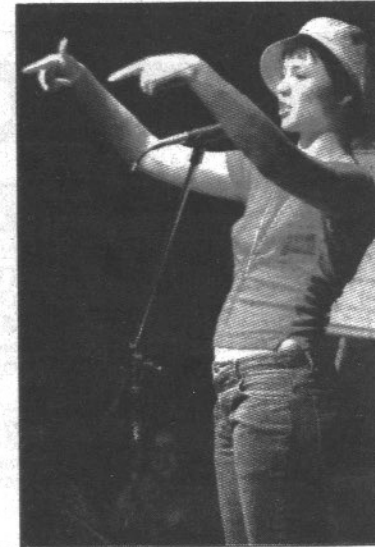
"I wanna, be somebody's sunshine, his fine wine," she said, smiling. "I wanna, be somebody's big thing."

One surprise Wednesday was the elimination of the poet Rupert. A member of the 2002 East Bay national team, he finished fifth in this year's semifinals. Competing poets were limited to three minutes per round, and Rupert's time penalty on his first poem cost him the two points that would have pushed him into fourth place.

Nevertheless, Rupert drew cheers at every mention of his name. Rupert was the loudest of the performers, yelling lyrics about impatient customers and drunken bar patrons that earned high performance scores from the judges.

"I am the worst employee that this copy store has ever seen!" shouted Rupert during his poem about his job.

Kat was the one newcomer among the four who made it to the finals. Although her first performance did not come until late February, Kat's passionate lyrics and quiet presentation earned her a second place finish in a field of slam veterans.



KAT at the microphone.

Kat's poetry drew from personal experiences, such as being homeless, her mother's diagnosis of breast cancer, and a troubled romantic relationship. Each piece silenced the often raucous crowd.

"All I wanted to do was take away your pain, but you wouldn't let me try," she said in her third poem, an address to her ex-boyfriend.

The poets showed their support for each other's work, giving hugs and high fives throughout the competition. When slam co-host Dani Eurynome announced the four finalists, all the competitors gathered on stage and remained in a group until long after the event had ended.

"It's all about this community," co-host Ellik said. "That's what keeps this going."

The second round of the Berkeley Poetry Slam semifinals at the Starry Plough will be on Wednesday, June 4, at 8:30 p.m. The finals will take place Wednesday, June 11, at 8:30 p.m.