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Poetry Without Pretense

The Bay Area slam scene is all about love.

The lines came fast and rhythmic. Stage lights reflected off old IRA posters and the pale countenance of a man with a punk rock grip on the mic. "This is my only chance to get laid this evening," he said by way of introducing his ode to the female moon cycle. As he recited verse in a jittery groove, he clutched at his clothing and crotch. Applause and laughter mingled with his half-shouted words. It could have been music. It could have been performance art. It could have been poetry. And when the judges held up scorecards after the man stepped off stage, it was clear that it could also have been sport.

The performer is Jamie Kennedy, the venue is the Starry Plough (3101 Shattuck Ave., Berkeley | 510-841-2082) in Berkeley, and the game is poetry slam. The procedures of a slam are simple: Players arrive early to secure their slot in the line-up. After the "sacrificial poet" warms up the audience and judges, the real mayhem begins, with the audience cheering for off-color couplets and clever alliteration. Judges selected at random score each poem and performance on a scale of 1.0 to 10.0, the numbers drawn large onto laminated flip cards so that the MC can see them from the stage. Incorporating a "word-of-the-night" — *penguins* on Kennedy's night — scores extra-credit points. In the end, points determine a winner and a loser, who receive equal approbation and acclaim.

Though initially intimidated by the rowdy, participatory crowd, Karen Ladson said she finds performing to be an exhilarating experience. "When you feel you've connected with the audience, there's a shift in the energy of the room. It's beyond having captured people's attention. You can feel the common thread between you and individuals in the audience."

At the so-called Bezerkeley slam, jazz by the house band bridges each performance, backgrounding the nearly indistinguishable chatter of the MC, a man with a bandana caught around his kinky hair named Charles Ellik. A veteran of slams in Southern California and San Francisco (placing at several national slam championships), Ellik attributes the success and popularity of Bay Area slams to the cooperation among the slams in the region — San Jose, Oakland, San Francisco and Berkeley. Lack of infighting and collaboration between teams and city slammasters nurture poets toward better performances. The love may be strongest at the Bezerkeley Slam, one of the most regular slams in the Bay Area, occurring weekly, with strong support from the student crowd — though it can be packed even in the summer.



If Berkeley gets a 10.0 for the regularity of its slam, San Francisco wins for attendance with its Second Sundays. About 400 people show up each month at the Justice League (628 Divisadero St. | 415-440-0409) where Marc Bamuthi Joseph steers the fray. Also in the city, Strictly Slam takes the stage at Royal Café (800 Post St. | 415-441-4099) on the last Sunday of each month, while ex-dotcomers can hit the Silicon Valley Slam at Waves Smokehouse (65 Post St., San Jose | 408-885-9283) on the second and fourth Tuesday. Oakland boasts the highest number of slams with the Oakland Slam on second and fourth Thursdays and a Monday night "Sheslam" — both at Blackbox Theater and Café (1932 Telegraph Ave. | 510-451-1932) — not to mention the inimitable Tourettes without Regrets at Talk Of The Town (4493 International Blvd. | 510-534-8255). Tourettes, hosted and styled by Kennedy, flouts most of the slam rules, particularly those regarding costumes and props (usually none are allowed so that the poetry and performance stand alone). One poet bathed in gasoline during a poem. Stage violence and nudity are also common. "Spin your truth even if it's from the gutter," Kennedy said by way of a mantra.

In contrast, slam and open mic veteran Bucky Sinister delivers his poetry with a wide-eyed innocence and storyteller's cadence. One of his poems describes collecting angel halos on the beach, proving that the Bay Area slam scene is all about inclusiveness — of styles, subjects and poets. While Bay Area poetry used to have its own distinctive lilting style, the nationalization of the

scene, the diversity of its participants and the popularization of hip hop has brought a variety of sounds to the Bay Area, from L.A.'s Bukowski-esque banter to a fast, jazzy, East Coast rhythm.

Slams are not always Sinister's style; he ran the open mic at the Chameleon in San Francisco before it became Amnesia. "Sometimes I have a heavy personal piece, and I don't want anyone to put a score on that." Fortunately, the Bay Area also provides numerous other poetry enclaves — a queer scene, readings in the back rooms of bars such as Dalva (3121 16th St., San Francisco | 415-252-7740), a group of cats in North Beach and Youth Speaks, an organization that gets young people involved in slams. "There's plenty of room for poets in this town," Sinister said.

Slams, however, have a particular appeal. "Poetry today sucks dick as an art genre. It's wack. It's boring. It's irrelevant. Poetry came from an oral tradition. It needs to reveal itself in its true power again, without academic histrionics," Kennedy said. In other words, poetry should be able to capture the attention of a rowdy bar crowd. "There is sheer arrogance on the part of the writer's community that if it can't stand up on a page, it's not poetry. That's bullsh*t," Ellik said, and he proves it each week on the stage at Starry Plough, where the best poets leave their notebooks on the table, mixing their metaphors like a DJ on a turntable, heckling the audience like comedians and receiving their scores like an Olympic diver. 🏊

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