Poets Slam Housing Plight In Berkeley Competition

By PATRICIA LEIGH BROWN

BERKELEY, Calif., March 2 — In days more bohemian, the Beat poets of the Bay Area wrote about disenfranchised young people living on the margins.

But even they could not have foreseen the Berkeley Rent Stabilization Board poetry slam, believed to be the first competitive performance poetry sponsored by a city agency. "Have a lousy landlord?" read the advertisement in the Berkeley Voice, a local weekly. "Mad at the manager? Put it into words!"

Though the White House recently postponed a national poetry symposium because of antiwar sentiments, here in the home of the free speech movement poets face no thematic constraints. Lured by $225 in prizes and the tempestuous, complex emotions of the landlord-tenant relationship, about a dozen slammers — none of them landlords — seized the opportunity to recite original poems that addressed the trauma of Bay Area housing prices.

They also spoke movingly, if not always eloquently, about sleeping on car roofs and in 24-hour restaurant booths and living with flea-infested carpeting and mold. Lots of mold.

"The stench of mold on wet cement made even the gnats gasp and our throats burned like nuclear reactors," Mark States, a fortyish poet with flowing gray hair, insisted on putting it.

Established in 1980 by citizen referendum, the rent board regulates residential rents and is intended to protect tenants from arbitrary and discriminatory evictions. Although themed poetry slams are not unusual, the event here was believed to be the first in the country to specifically address housing, said Mike Henry, a spokesman for Poetry Slam Inc., a nonprofit umbrella group based in Chicago. Fifty-seven percent of Berkeley's 44,955 households are renters, according to the latest census.

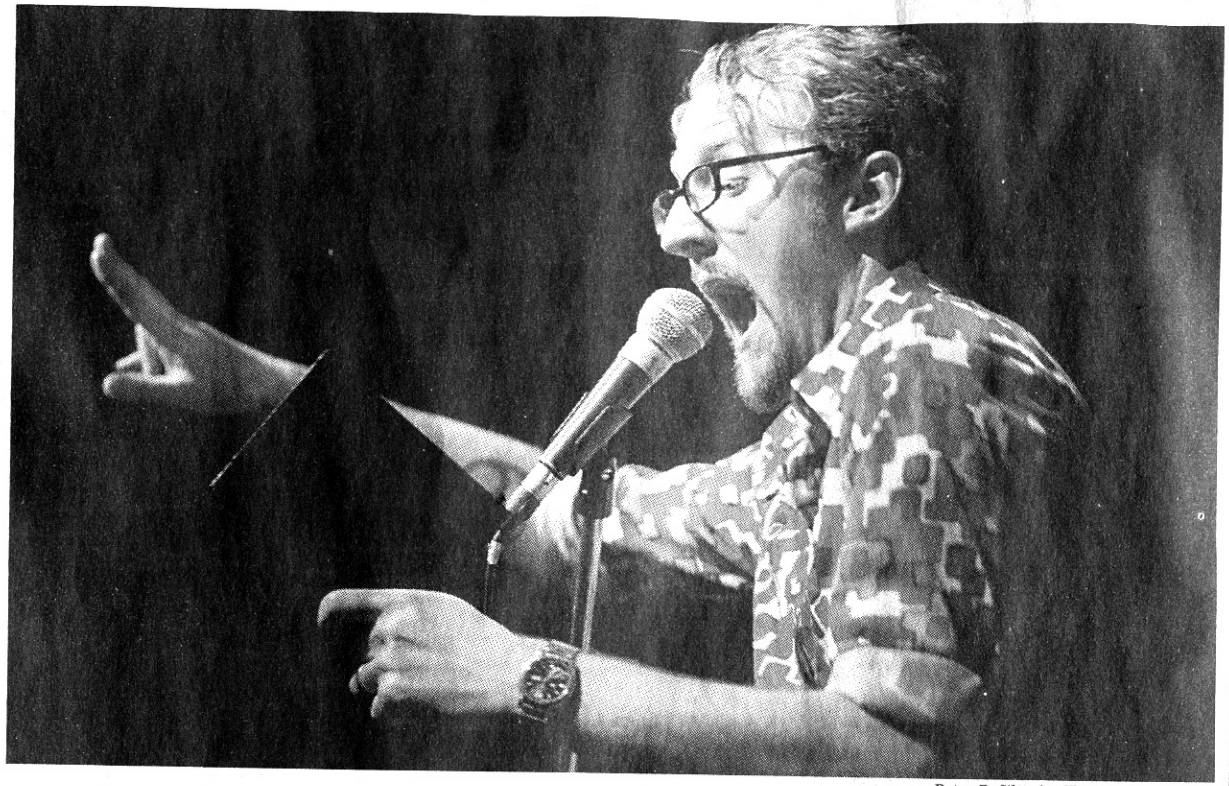
Rents in the Bay Area have dropped recently but are still among the country's priciest: in Berkeley, the average rent for a one-bedroom apartment is $914.

In traditional slam fashion, the crowd at the Starry Plough, a local Irish pub, judged the slammers Olympics-style by holding up score cards after each reading.

Many of the poets, who live in the "flatlands" as opposed to the more affluent hills, came of age in the dot-com era. Some, like Kenny Mostern, 35, a self-described "left-wing political consultant," are former "couch-surfers" who spent months at a time sleeping on friends' couches. Mr. Mostern poem touched on the landlords of his student days, "from the skirt-chasing alcoholic to the 80-year-old pensioner to the 150-pound overweight woman constantly reading 'get rich quick' books."

Geoff Trenchard, a 24-year-old with tattooed arms and a leather jacket, grew up in San Jose and couch-surfed while working at the now-defunct dot-com Infoseek, showering at the office.

Mr. Trenchard spoke of his youth, recalling, "My last 20 dollars after rent in groceries that went rotten in the fridge the landlord promised to fix but never did."



Peter DaSilva for The New York Times

Jamie Kennedy, 25, winner of the recent poetry competition in Berkeley, Calif., that focused on housing.

Mold, fleas and high rent make for moving verse.

A spokesman for the Berkeley Property Owners Association, a trade group representing nearly 700 landlords, was unimpressed. Michael Wilson, the association's president, called the slam "good old-fashioned agitprop." "They don't put roofs over peoples' heads," Mr. Wilson said of the rent board. "They just address conflict."

Members of the association prefer not to use the word "landlord," preferring the term "housing provider."

"We eschew the term landlord, which comes from feudal times," Mr. Wilson said. "We're not lords."

That did not stop intense poets like Jamie Kennedy, 25, who won the first prize of $100, from exploring with lancing verse the "platonic master/slave relationship."

Mr. Kennedy had written his poem on the spot in flowing ink as the evening began, his words swirling around like water in a bathroom drain. Life at his last apartment, in nearby Vallejo, was so bad, he wrote, "I chose to be homeless for nine months just to escape the memory. Every night I slept on the bus, I hoped to run into my ex-landlord in rags so I could scream, so sucker, without a roof you're just another one of us."

Lawrence Ferlinghetti, the Obi-Wan Kenobi of Bay Area poetry, noted that a big difference between Mr. Kennedy's generation and his own was that today "they are interesting in housing; the Beats were interested in moving around."