

Bay Area Slam Series Redefines Poetry for Many

By John Harris Jr.
Staff Writer

The 5th Annual Battle of the Bay, a competitive spoken word / slam poetry series, kicked off its July tournament last Monday at the Canvas Gallery and Café. Boasting a night of raw, hardly traditional, in-your-face

noting the usual uproarious holler or vocalized disdain of the crowd's reaction to the scoring results, "and we also offer to escort judges to their cars at the end of the night."

Content and delivery found in slam poetry is often far from the ilk of your average high school English class. With its often coarse subject matter accompanied by raucous presentation, the excitement and emotion of the evening's poetry translated into thunderous applause from those crowding the intimate setting.

The slam saw its share of heartfelt love poetry, searing social commentary, uproarious comic routines, and bitter-sweet personal confessional pieces. Slam poets are free to do work in any style on any subject in the competition, provided it is original and without props.

"I want the emotion and power in my poetry to speak to everyone in a room at the most honest level possible," said Jason Bayani, the only poet to receive a perfect 10 at the slam. Artfully cataloging personal



"I hope to make this my life's work," said Banyani, a youth counselor in Oakland's Tenderloin district. "It's my dream to provide a positive intersection for youth and art that many never experience."

The San Francisco and San Jose teams tied for first place at Chicago National Poetry Slam Competition in '99. "They liter-

ally tore the trophy in half," said Litvak, "it was an unprecedented victory for the Bay Area."

After the close of the July series, the five local teams will go on to challenge teams from all over the US, Canada, Europe and Asia in this year's national finals. More information and poetry event listings are available at www.norcal slam.com.



Poetic Dream: Jason Bayani prepares to deliver his poetry.

Photo/ David Huang (www.poeticdream.com)

emotional outburst, the inner Sunset venue was fraught with excited poetry virgins and seasoned members of the Bay Area's growing spoken word community.

"This is a chance for the best of the five prominent local poetry teams to compete for a northern California title," said Vadim Litvak, series coordinator and longtime poetry enthusiast. "All proceeds go to sending the teams to the nationals in Chicago this year."

Regional teams from Berkeley, San Francisco, Oakland, Sacramento, and San Jose each produced four representatives to square off in verse.

Each poetry slam is an interactive experience where members of the audience are randomly selected to judge the poets on a "one to ten" scale similar to those of the Olympics. After every poet has performed, the points are tallied and the team with the highest combined score is that night's winner.

"We encourage judges to score according to their most basic reactions to the poetry's content and delivery," said Litvak

battles with both his economic and ancestral roots, his poem "Proletariat Bronze" moved the audience to screams and tears even before its completion.

"While growing up in Fremont, I always loved writing. But my schooling never pushed me toward poetry," said Bayani who rediscovered his youth's attraction to words in college and has since graduated from SF State with a degree in Creative Writing.



Audience Participation: HURRAHS, BOOs, and randomly selected judges are the heart of a true poetry slam.

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