

## SLAM

In 1986, Marc Smith created a monster. That monster became known as poetry slam, a name that sounds like a cross between poetry and a spectator sport. In fact, that is precisely what a slam is – a sports competition in poetry. The idea is definitely not one for the ivory tower type of poet. In a poetry slam, poets compete like ski jumpers or figure skaters. Their performance is judged on a scale from 0 do 10. The highest and lowest scores are dropped, and the three remaining scores are combined to arrive at a composite score.

The origins of slam were influenced by the personality of its pioneers. The New Yorkers Marc Smith and Bob Holman were performance poets as early as the late 1960s. Slam was born out of their search for a poetry niche that would have accommodated people like them.

Although slam's status as poetry has been hotly contested, poetry slam is to mainstream poetry what jazz is to classical music – an attractive alternative that can get more emotional and personal. Many slammers have successfully published poetry collections, music records and novels, and they are hardly the losers of the poetry world.

Slam did not come out of nowhere. It owes its name and its general rules to Marc Smith but it wouldn't take much burrowing in European literary history to identify antecedents of slam in ancient oral cultures, medieval poetic contests or early 20th-century American jazz recordings. Slam was a phenomenon waiting to happen, and all it took was some organizing before it spread all over the world, just as punk rock or jazz had done before (and as hip hop has done since).

Out of America, poetry slams caught on in Europe. In the absence of a language barrier, Great Britain became the first non-American slam scene in 1994 when John Paul O'Neill organized a slam at the Farrago Poetry Cafe, which has been a regular venue for poetry slams ever since. In the mid-1990s, slam fever spread to France (Catherin Mathlon, Pilote Le Hot) and Germany. In fact, the German slam scene is now regarded as Europe's strongest, with slam venues established in practically every academic centre and boasting strong attendance on a regular basis. In fact, the German national slam championships are broadcast on national television (even Great Britain comes short on this count – British slams are only covered by BBC Radio 4). The Germans are also unrivalled in terms of slam publications and anthologies (the Americans and the Brits tend to favour slam audiobooks).

Two major film productions have focused on slam. The first was Marc Levin's 'Slam' featuring Saul Williams and Beau Sia, two megastars of the American slam scene. The film won the Grand Jury Prize for a dramatic production at the Sundance Film Festival in 1998. The other is 'Slam nation', a story of the National Poetry Slam in 1998 with many scenes filled to the brim with useful hints and insights for would-be slammers.

In Europe, other strong slam scenes include Scandinavia (especially Denmark and Sweden) and France (where an annual World Championship is held). Poetry slams are also organized in Bosnia, Holland, Austria, Czech Republic, the FYR of Macedonia, Italy, Spain, Russia and Hungary, but slams are also held in more far-flung locations, such as Nepal, Singapore, Zimbabwe, Madagascar – even the South Pole (though not on a regular basis).

In Poland, slams were introduced by Bohdan Piasecki, who became interested in American culture as a student and was determined to hold a slam in his native country. Thanks to his colossal effort a handful of bemused spectators and eight competing slammers made history as Poland's first poetry slam kicked off at the Stara Prochoffnia in March 2003.

Other cities quickly followed suit, and today it would be difficult to find a Polish region without a poetry slam though admittedly Polish slams are not terribly regular affairs (with the possible exception of the monthly slam at Cafe Kulturalna in Warsaw).

Many star slammers have performed in Poland, including Bob Holman (New York), Taylor Mali (Providence, USA), Jive Poetic (USA), Mahogany Browne (New York), John Paul O'Neill (London), Zena Edwards (London), Charlie Dark (London), JC001 (London), Crisis (London), Francesca Beard (London), DreadLockAlien (London), Nii Parkes (London), Salena Godden (London), Tony Walsh (Manchester), Dike Omeje (Manchester), Chelley McLearn (Belfast), Wehwalt Koslovsky (Hamburg), Boris Peckwitz (Berlin), Franziska Ruprecht (Munich), Xochil A. Schütz (Berlin), Lasse Samstrum (Cologne), Pilote Le Hot (Paris), Thorkil Jacobsen (Copenhagen).

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