

# A Brief Guide to Slam Poetry

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Because Allen Ginsberg says, "Slam! Into the Mouth of the Dharma!"

Because Gregory Corso says, "Why do you want to hang out with us old guys? If I was young, I'd be going to the Slam!"

Because Bob Kaufman says, "Each Slam / a finality."

--Bob Holman, from "Why Slam Causes Pain and Is a Good Thing"

One of the most vital and energetic movements in poetry during the 1990s, slam has revitalized interest in poetry in performance. Poetry began as part of an oral tradition, and movements like the Beats and the poets of Negritude were devoted to the spoken and performed aspects of their poems. This interest was reborn through the rise of poetry slams across America; while many poets in academia found fault with the movement, slam was well received among young poets and poets of diverse backgrounds as a democratizing force. This generation of spoken word poetry is often highly politicized, drawing upon racial, economic, and gender injustices as well as current events for subject matter.

A slam itself is simply a poetry competition in which poets perform original work alone or in teams before an audience, which serves as judge. The work is judged as much on the manner and enthusiasm of its performance as its content or style, and many slam poems are not intended to be read silently from the page. The structure of the traditional slam was started by construction worker and poet Marc Smith in 1986 at a reading series in a Chicago jazz club.

## WHAT IS SLAM?

As the founders of Youth Speaks put it, slam is a form of expression for "a generation of young people speaking for themselves; a generation ... reciting struggles and successes on open microphones ... transcending traditional stereotypes by speaking their truths and listening to the truths of others."

"A poetry slam is like a lyrical boxing match that pits poets against other poets in a bout," according to journalist Shilanda L. Woolridge of the Austin American-Statesman. In plain speak, a slam is a competition in which poets perform original works alone or in teams before an audience that boos and cheers as it votes on the best performers. Each poet's work is judged as much on the manner of its performance as on its content or style.

The structure of the traditional slam--a spoken-word performance of three minutes plus a 10-second grace period--was started by construction worker and poet Marc Smith in a 1984 reading series at a Chicago jazz club. The emphasis on performance soon laid the groundwork for the energetic brand of poetry that would eventually be exhibited in slam. Similar competitions quickly spread across the country and finally found a notable home at the Nuyorican Poets Cafe and in similar "slam cafes" around the country.

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In recent years, slam has also carved out a niche for itself under the bright lights of the Big Apple--first when Russell Simmons's Def Poetry Jam moved from HBO to the big stage and most recently, in 2004, when the rising star poet Sarah Jones's *Bridge & Tunnel* finished a successful off-Broadway run with plans for a move to Broadway.

Really, though, the roots of slam can be traced from hip-hop back to the first storytellers, Shakespeare, and the Beat poets of the 1960s.

### FROM SPOKEN WORD TO WRITTEN WORD

Although slam most obviously draws on urban street rhythms like hip-hop, it is first and foremost a contemporary manifestation of the oral roots of storytelling and poetry.

Oral storytelling predates the written word. In ancient times, stories were passed from lips to ears and traveled from place to place, changing as subsequent story-tellers forgot details, deliberately left things out, and added their own embellishments. The idea of written poetry as a static object on the page to be enjoyed in solitude is also relatively new. In ancient Greece, traveling bards nurtured a strong oral poetic tradition as they performed to audiences across their land, reciting the lines of epic poems.

Over the course of history, there has been a transition from the oral tradition to a written one. The earliest example of written poetry is Homer's *Odyssey*. Composed around the eighth century B.C., this epic poem was most likely the synthesis of several oral versions of the events surrounding the journey of Odysseus, which took place around 1200 B.C.

Perhaps the most famous poet of all is William Shakespeare, whose written work was meant to be performed rather than read. He wrote 37 plays and 154 sonnets between 1588 and 1613. Like the ancient Greeks, Shakespeare wrote of his plays in verse. Most many often, he wrote in iambic pentameter, a structure that is composed of five sets of iambs, or pairs of unstressed and stressed syllables. This excerpt from *Julius Caesar* vividly illustrates this rhythm:

Friends, Romans, countrymen,  
    lend me your ears;  
I come to bury Caesar, not to praise him.  
The evil that men do lives after them,  
The good is oft interred with their bones;  
So let it be with Caesar. The noble Brutus  
Hath told you Caesar was ambitious:  
If it were so, it was a grievous fault,  
And grievously hath Caesar answer'd it.  
Here, under leave of Brutus and the rest,--  
For Brutus is an honourable man;  
So are they all, all honourable men,--  
Come I to speak in Caesar's funeral.

It is said that iambic pentameter, composed of 10-syllable lines, is modeled on the rhythm of the human heartbeat-bom-BOM bom-BOM bom-BOM bom-BOM bom-BOM. This

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structure was thought to elevate theater to a new height of language, separating it from the language of every day.

### BEATING TO THE SOUND OF THE TIMES

Although poetry has traveled in many different directions since the time of Shakespeare, it has always retained a deep connection to the oral tradition.

In the 1950s and '60s, for example, the Beat poets brought poetry directly to the people by reviving the ancient ways of the roving storyteller. Like today's slam artists, the Beats came to be known for their unique performance styles.

Allen Ginsberg is one of the most celebrated poets of the Beat generation. He first read his most notable poem, "Howl," in a series of famous readings that took place in October 1955 in San Francisco.

It was Ginsberg's first public performance, and it made him instantly famous at the age of 29. After starting his recitation in a calm tone, the story goes, he soon gained confidence and began to sway rhythmically with the music of his poetry, responding to the enthusiasm of the audience:

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Breakthroughs! over the river! flips  
and crucifixions! gone down the flood!  
Highs! Epiphanies! Despairs! Ten years'  
animal screams and suicides! Minds!  
New loves! Mad generation! down on  
the rocks of Time!
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Ginsberg and other Beat poets such as Jack Kerouac, were heavily influenced by jazz music. This is most obvious if you listen closely to the music of their words as you read them aloud.

### POETRY FOR THE PEOPLE

Slam has a mission for poetry --it seeks to bring poetry back to the people through rhythm, rhyme, and music. "What poetry is about is people," says Mike Henry. "Slams have put the voice back into ... the hands of the people."

Although the Beat poets were more influenced by jazz, slam poets have turned to hip-hop for inspiration. The godfather of popular slam, as we know it, is Russell Simmons. In 2001, the father figure to such rappers as Ludacris and Jay-Z created Def Poetry Jam (now called Def Poetry), a televised slam for HBO. The series has showcased such artists as poet Ursula Rucker; the hip-hop spoken-word performer Saul Williams; and the British musical diva duo Floetry.

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The first season of "def" (slang for excellent) poetic pondering was hosted by hip-hop superstar Mos Def, who often opened the night with a classic poem by Byron, Shelley, Keats, or Wordsworth. After that, the audience was treated to slam poetry such as Saul Williams's "Said the Shotgun to the Head":

CURRENTLY  
MOON MARKED  
AND  
SUN SPARKED  
UNMARKED BILLS  
WILL I AM  
CERTAIN  
I SPEAK A NEW LANGUAGE

as is ALWAYS  
THE FIRST SIGN  
of a  
NEW AGE

Def Poetry clicked and brought slam to center stage. In 2002,

The success of DPJ has made people all around the country appreciate this form of expression. Matthew Murray, theater critic, put it best when he wrote, "Def Poetry Jam... [is] dedicated to proving that poetry needn't be ancient or stodgy, but that it can still prove ... inspiring to the current generation."

Whether it is being recited on Broadway, in your classroom, or in a local coffeehouse, the same is true of slam.