

Poetry Out Loud

by Malcolm Azania, photos by Drew Myers



WILD ROSE COUNTRY. PINK PETALS PUSHING UP ON ROADSIDES LIKE WEEDS. Beauty alive where no one's looking or thinks it should be. Yeah, that's a symbol. Dig it: performance poetry. Slams.

Perhaps because of hip hop's verbal dynamism more young people are writing and performing poetry, but it's not only teens declaiming now: the annual Stroll of Poets festival reverberates with more grey hair than pink. Enough verse cafés and cabarets had sprouted up by the summer of 1998 that even Edmonton-Strathcona MLA Raj Pannu hosted a night for lyric rhythm in the heart of E-town's arts district. Electoral politics together with poetry? This is not the Alberta of Ernest Manning or, for that matter, Ralph Klein.

Wild rose urban performance poets are redefining the Alberta scene. In your burg. Downtown. In the bars or cafés. Sometimes on the streets. The new beats. The new hip. The new verb. In Edmonton, a community of poets has taken root, and, feeding on each other's successes, it's growing.

Mark Kozub, the Alberta beatnik

Mark Kozub and I first met at a slam—a poetry competition in which the audience judges the winner on both word choice and performance power—that he organized in the late nineties. Kozub didn't swagger like a mogul or kingpin, but it was his name on the lip of every poet I talked to about the great heights achieved in Edmonton's scene. Recognizable everywhere for his retro goatee, hipster shirt and voice with all the musicality of Satchmo's trumpet, 39-ish Kozub is the former president of the sweater-vesty Stroll of Poets Society. He's currently assembling a "best of" CD called *I Love Alberta Beat*.

As a kid, Kozub played with his brother and dad in their wedding band. The music never left his bones, and by 2000 he was the don of the Raving Poets, an edgy gang who spent the next four years of Tuesday nights stoking the Backroom Vodka Bar's weekly poetry-meets-jazz jam furnace. But now, Mark "Alberta Beatnik" Kozub is beaten. Seven years of hosting open mic nights proved too long and in December

the Raving Poets stood down, perhaps never to stand together again. Whyte Avenue's Backroom Vodka Bar may be silent Tuesday nights forever more.

To know Kozub is to know the scene, for he's less likely to discuss his own work than that of those he's seen. Because of him, hundreds of local poets have launched their work publicly and been given priceless, instant feedback from audiences. Some have toured Canada and had books published, most notably Mingus Tourette, whose first poetry performances happened on Kozub's watch. And while Kozub misses his friends, he believes Raving Poets will continue without him.

His greatest moment? "The absolute height, where poetry transcended itself and became a higher form of human communication, was Peace Talks," he says, referring to a post-9/11 series at the Backroom Vodka Bar. A university student who'd come to the Backroom for its sense of community told him: "If the rest of the world could be like it is in this bar tonight, we would have a really good world."

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Four Edmonton performance poets on poetry, politics and image

Such gatherings bring people together, even into bars, says Kozub, out of “a sense of higher purpose. They want to share their deeper emotions, their thoughts, their feelings, about issues, particularly at that time, that were pretty raw.... I was feeling pretty messed up about the way the world was headed, and fearing that loss of a sense of community, fearing that fear would become much more rampant on a basic community level, and realizing that I had to do something to change this. If you’re not a politician and just a writer, then you attempt to do that through creating a sense of community where freedom of speech can reign, because we desperately need that in this world, with a diversity of voices.”

Gail Sidonie Sobat, the wildcat

“I’m not one of those really wonderful people like Laurie Anderson and Sheri-D Wilson and Dawn Carter—those are performance poets,” says Gail Sidonie Sobat. “I’m just a shy white girl.” The first two women on her list are white women, of course, but I dodge that dodge until she (finally) admits that she’s “been reading poetry aloud in cafés since 1985.”

Author of two fantasy novels, including *A Winter’s Tale*, and a collection of romantic and erotic poetry named *Aortic Caprice*, Sobat is a word warrior, a U of A Education instructor, long-time high school English teacher of at-risk youth, and a Writers Guild of Alberta operative who for nine years has been at the vanguard of YouthWrite, a summer lit camp held outside of Bragg Creek.

In the summer of 2004, Sobat released *Aortic Caprice* at the WGA headquarters in Edmonton in the most impressive launch

I’ve ever seen: swinging with the dozen-odd crooners of the U of A a cappella jazz ensemble Happnin’, her voice skywriting while her eyes mimicked stars.

“I just thought that jazz and poetry go really nicely together,” she says. “Vocal jazz is often overlooked. It’s one of those peripheral, marginalized categories of jazz; it gets short shrift. And because I’m part of that scene, and I really like those people, I thought it would be a nice marriage of music and song and words.”

Scanning the produce aisle of *Aortic Caprice*, we find “Forbidden Fruit,” Sobat’s ballad of a fictional high school teacher who in split halves of a dual universe imagines having an affair with a Grade 12 boy, and actually pursues it:

*dismissal time
what are you doing my sweet love?
wandering the halls to your locker?
stopping to chat with the young things
who hang about*

you

*like so many moths to a
light?
...it’s hard to love you
hard to love
innocence
innocently....*

*whisper
that you want me and how
writhing about
coiling under
snaking over you
are we doomed
to fall
again?*

And on it goes inside *Caprice*... for 13 pages, chased by the poem “cougar ovulating.” For the crowd who knows

**“Some people think I’m demure.
I’d like to think I defy that impression.”
—Gail Sidonie Sobat**





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Sobat as a former high school teacher, only half the performance is onstage—the rest is in the raunchy laughter and scandalized fidgeting the audience produces.

It's about "the sublimation of desire," she says, "Some people think I'm demure. I'd like to think I defy that impression." Impression, I don't know. Impressed I am with how Sobat combines chorus with verse from her conviction that vocal poetry and vocal jazz originate in the same place.

"I think they're very similar," she says. "Technically, learning to sing well, like writing, is very demanding and requires years of training. I've been training since I was 14. A really beautiful thing I've learned over the years from First Nations teachings is that singing and breathing and speaking and crying and laughing all come from the same place—one technically would say the diaphragm. In a more Jungian sense, the same place, if you want to call it the unconscious, or the safe-centredness that one would have in dancing, the expellation of air, the aspiration/expiration, is an amazingly freeing and almost holy experience.... It's the closest to sacred that I get."

Mingus Tourette, the image

Mingus Tourette. A moniker side-mouthing both the sophistication of jazz and the chaos of uncontrolled utterance. He's been in Edmonton for about 13 years, hailing from "just all over Alberta. All the hot spots: Fort McMurray, Grande Cache, that sort of thing." If you witness a—wait for it—pink ambulance careening down your street, chances are it's his. Mind you, the tall logo might be a giveaway.

"The Write the Nation Tour was a 12,000-kilometre cross-Canada blitzkrieg in a pink ambulance," says Tourette. "It's got the red lights, they all work, the bullhorn works, the sirens work—it's fully functional, just like you'd see on the street, except that it's bright pink, and on the sides it's got 'Mingus Tourette's Write the Nation Tour.' And that certainly turned a lot of heads, got a lot of attention. It's

really the only reason that a lot of people came out and saw some of this: 'See the freakshow! See the idiots that are driving across the country in a pink ambulance.'"

Tourette and his crew slipped from Edmonton to Vancouver to Montreal and back covering about 15 cities in three weeks. Ten to 12 poets went with him. Since then many of them have started their own reading series, recorded spoken-word CDs and printed chapbooks and magazines.

Tourette forces me to understand that performance poetry doesn't end at the edge of the stage. Promotion itself is performance. "Image is very important. One of the things that's been missing from poetry is image. There's no image to be associated with just about any poet in Canada. You can't remember their names if there's nothing to stick visually with that. So I think it's incredibly important in trying to push poetry further, to get people to remember it. It's a dangerous art form—or it can be, certainly."

Many audiences are disappointed after meeting authors and poets whose public personas don't embody their literary content, he says, adding, "It's the old question the audience will always ask the author: 'How much of this is true?' And what they really want to hear is 'Everything is true.' You are exactly who you say you are. Because that's what people want to believe. So I think if your image matches all that, then they're happier. Then they go, 'Wow, this guy really blew up a cow. This guy ripped out people's eyeballs. This guy has sex with six women a day. He's a lunatic. He's a drunk.'

"And you know what? Yeah, I am. I mean, that's not all completely true, but parts of it are. So when you meet somebody, you go to the reading, you step into the room, you become a little bit more 'Hey, you know what? I'm dangerous, I might take your wife home; you know what, I might punch you in the face if you look at me wrong.' But I think afterward they're gonna say, 'That was an enjoyable evening of performance poetry.'"

"Our spoken-word scene is quite diverse. I've seen some incredible, brave poetry here."

—Dawn Carter

Dawn Carter, the poet pugilist

Sister Dawn, regal, beautiful like a 13th century Benin carving in ebony, tonight has a mouthful of other women's words. It's a November jam in the capital city's Liva Cappuccino Bar. Through the window, the artificial aurora borealis of Christmas lights on a construction crane sanctifies the event. Strong Brew Trio: Adriana Davies, Delvina Grieg and Carter—a benefit for the TRI-Shelter Christmas hamper program, MCed by Janice Kozub. The poets are all women, and tonight they'll be reading each other's work. Such surrender of ego would be unthinkable in Toronto, Carter says.

Of the Edmonton poets she says, "Our spoken word scene is quite diverse. I've seen some incredible, brave poetry here. There is so much room for collaboration, whereas in Toronto you don't really see a lot of that. I was out there for about five years, but I found poets out there aren't quite as risky as people out here."

Formed in the forge of Fort Saskatchewan and Gibbons, Carter's been performing since 1992; she's always been writing. It took being mentored by an older local writer who was a "woman of colour" (whose mere existence here was a shock to Carter) to get her to join the Stroll of Poets. In 2002 she began working with Mark Kozub and the Raving Poets Band, finally discovering that she needed music as much as she needed words.

From what Carter tells me, she doesn't perform her poetry, her poetry performs her, revealing (not only to her audience, but also to herself) that which lies inside her. She says her work is autobiographical, confessional enough to make her audiences writhe in discomfort.

While she explores racial identity in some of her work, she says her verse is universal. But she's firm that her work isn't exhibitionist: "I'm not a person who likes to bring her business to the street." Instead, she aims to share her earned discoveries like 5,000 loaves and fishes at the seaside.

Take, for example, "What She Didn't Tell Her Girlfriends," a poem about a "dating experience" she had "with a man who was white." She'd been unable to discuss the non-violent but humiliating incident with her closest female friends. "It wasn't about two people getting along," she says of the encounter. "I was objectified. He had something to prove. With me being a Black woman, I'm quote-unquote obviously this hyper-sexed being, and here he is, on a date to conquer this 'beast.'"

*...What she didn't tell her girlfriends
Was how embarrassed she felt
Because she was so careful this time
Because she wasn't the good time girl
anymore
Because she wanted to be sure he wanted to
be with her
And not for the stereotypes he thought were
embedded in her brown skin....*

*When consent becomes unpleasantly non-
consensual
...what can a woman do when she's in the
midst of the moment
Except to wait for it to be over
Quietly lock the door after he leaves
Have a hot bath
A good cry in an empty bed
Swallow the pain as if from a dirty shot
glass....*

"I was shaking after I performed it," says Carter, referring to her incantation at the Backroom Vodka Bar, the first and only time she unleashed the lamentation on an audience. Her audience, she tells me, was moved regardless of gender, despite, or perhaps because of, how uncomfortable the piece made everyone feel.

In performance poetry, the personal is frequently political and always public.

Malcolm Azania is an Edmonton writer, broadcaster and activist. His novel *The Coyote Kings of the Space-Age Bachelor Pad* was published under his pen name, Minister Faust.

