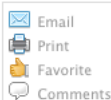


Not Speaking of Spoken Word

By Candace Nicholson

When we talk about poetry readings, you might imagine calm, soothing recitations of written lyrical meters and free verse at a Barnes & Noble book signing or a presidential inauguration. But there exists another poetic performance that's more subversive. Not intended to be calming or soothing, spoken word takes the traditional form of poetry and delivers it in a jazz-influenced style that plays with rhythm, cadence and message to emotionally connect with the audience.



From Langston Hughes and Ezra Pound to Audre Lorde and Leonard Cohen to Jill Scott and Saul Williams, performing poetry has grown into a method of addressing topics of inequality, taboos and sexuality. It's no wonder that large multicultural, interethnic communities like New York, Chicago and San Francisco were quick to foster this art form to address their struggles and share their stories.

However, spoken word, often enjoyed in poetry jams, poetry slams, showcases and open mic nights, hasn't just thrived in major melting pots. Cities like Boston, Washington, D.C., and Raleigh, N.C., have also witnessed their poetry scenes flourish. But not in Indianapolis.

But Not For Me

One of the younger full-time poets in the Indianapolis area, [TOO BLACK](#) has a growing and dedicated following in the scene. Known for combining sharp humor, social commentary and an uninhibited flow to shine a light on out-of-sight, out-of-mind issues, TOO BLACK feels the Indy poetry scene is in desperate need of a boost. "There's no unified front in Indianapolis. That's why there's a lot of venues closing."



[click to enlarge](#)

TOO BLACK is a young Indianapolis spoken word poet with a growing following.

Poetry scenes, made up by poets, fans and venues, need collaboration to sustain themselves: between the poets by cross-advertising and co-creative growth; by the audience with consistent attendance and financial support; and from the venues through marketing, cleanliness and honest pay for the artists. Collaboration keeps scenes prospering and entices new artists and fans to their communities.

In the past five years, Indianapolis has seen many dedicated poetry spots come and go. From Earth House and Locals Only to The Cozy and Urban Element Cafe, all have either shuttered their doors or discontinued their poetry nights.

It's hard to pinpoint an exact reason, but the first problem is probably that people just don't know about Indy's poetry scene.

"I heard about it through the grapevine," recalls TOO BLACK. "If you're not in certain circles, you'll have trouble finding it."

Let's Stay Together

[Adam Henze](#), an eight-year veteran performance poet of the local and national scene, believes the less-than-vibrant Indy scene is due to a lack of cooperation among the artists and the venue owners. As featured in his newly published poetry collection *Written in the Dish Pit*, Henze blends honesty and alacrity with a refreshing voice that guarantees to provoke and resonate. So when he says he feels infrastructure and cohesiveness is missing from the Indianapolis poetry scene, you know he's not dancing around the issue.

"I very much like this city," says the native-born Tennessean. "But I think it's hard to be an artist in Indianapolis. There's a segregated scene here with no sense of a collected community."

Henze believes the artistic sphere is growing and developing more now than ever, but when he performs in cities all over the country, he notices some important differences. "The scene in Chicago, Boston and New York is more multicultural and cooperative, encouraging each other to be better and supporting all artists as a whole."

Yet Henze doesn't feel all is lost. As a matter of fact, he sees poetry as a tool for community building.



Up and comer [Januarie York](#) couldn't agree more about the necessary community aspect of poetry, but she disagrees with Henze that Indianapolis is missing the cooperation aspect of other major spoken word scenes. "There are ups and downs, good and bad about the scene," she says. "But there are amazing artists here that are also devout community-driven people."

In the last decade, York has created a brilliant name for herself, both literally and figuratively. Her vivid, playful imagery bricklayers keen insights with earnest messages of hope. She credits her success in Indy's spoken word scene — which includes two CDs, a BlogTalkRadio podcast, and a book, *The Scary Beautiful* — to that community foundation she discovered shortly after jumping into poetry. "I've had my share of local artists who have been doing it much longer than I have reach back and give me a helping hand and put me on to different shows and opportunities," she beams.

You could argue community building is about give and get, and no one gives as well as she gets better than [Tasha Jones](#). This fiery tongued storyteller with the radiant hair to match her poetry and personality has performed from coast to coast throughout the United States, where she is happy to represent this city's name in spoken word circles. She

United States, where she is happy to represent this city's name in spoken word circles. She asserts without hesitation: "Indianapolis is growing culturally, and the scene is growing too!"

Like York, Jones stays positive about the poetic landscape, acknowledging that there's plenty of good to go with the bad. She feels that it all comes down to the audience in the end. "People support the artist. There are venues that support the genre, but people support the artist!"

Jones went from being a burgeoning young author searching for an outlet to express her desire to console and uplift to a two-time Indiana Poet Laureate nominee in just a few short years. Perhaps her success has left her feeling more optimistic about the scene than others, but she has high hopes for Naptown poets.

Build It And They Will Come

Despite optimism, Henze's observations about Indianapolis' limitations aren't without evidence. When you're the home of three major professional sports franchises, as well as the center of NCAA basketball mania every year, it can be hard to demand an equal space for the arts — especially an art form that has a reputation of being subtly subversive.

Although frustrated with the shifting performance spaces, Too Black doesn't let that stop him from seeking out the spots he believes support the poetry scene and foster a sense of community.

"I would still encourage people to get involved even if the venues change and the spots are hard to find," he says.

One of the best ways to do that is to reach out to younger audiences. TOO BLACK believes getting teens and college students more involved in the scene will encourage a lifelong appreciation of spoken word, not to mention breathe some much needed fresh air into the cipher rotation. Yet, for some reason, the transition from teen to adult audiences isn't happening here in Indiana.

"Poetry has become this niche market after college. It should just be wherever the people are," he insists.

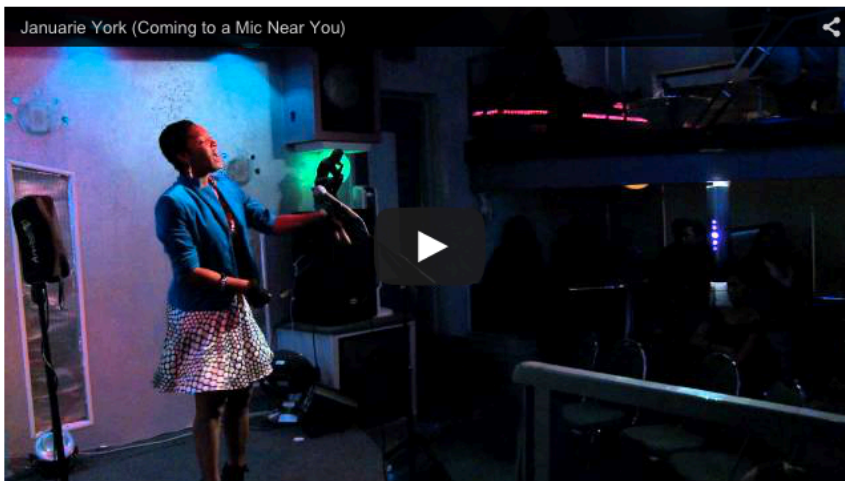
Ideally, some Indy spoken word artists feel a need for a dedicated space that symbolizes their community's identity the same way the [Green Mill](#) in Chicago or the [Nuyorican Poets Cafe](#) in New York captures their poetic scene's identity. However, until Indianapolis has a

their community's identity the same way the [Green Mill](#) in Chicago or the [Nuyorican Poets Cafe](#) in New York captures their poetic scene's identity. However, until Indianapolis has a stable venue to unite the voices of the poetry scene, multiple performance spaces may be best arrangement.

Beyond The Horizon

Despite its ups and downs, Indianapolis poetry has the support of many artists. Outsiders may question why so many Indy poets continue to support an environment where they're confronted with a high turnover of venues. For TOO BLACK, the answer is simple: "I know people who say poetry has saved their lives. And I believe them."

York also believes in the healing power of poetry, but she appreciates the variety of the spoken word scene. Not just in its performers, but also in its audiences. "You can go to four different poetry spots and while you might see some of the same poets, you will see a wide range of audiences. That's the beauty of it too."



Juggling his busy schedule of teaching classes, studying for classes, acting in plays and mentoring young artists, Henze still makes time to support other poets. "The point is to grow a global community."

With that point, he and Tasha Jones are on the same page. "I would like our Indy scene to be more consistent. I'd love if every week 200 supporters came out to hear a great show." The [NAACP Image Award](#) nominee acknowledges that such developments require passion and persistence, but that doesn't deflate her confidence. On the contrary, she's as optimistic as ever. "I am excited about the future of Indianapolis poetry!"

York seconds her emotion. "In a perfect world, there could be a poetry co-op where venues work together to collab on who to bring to the city," envisions York. "I would like to just see it continue to get larger and for us to embrace each other. It's much more fun when we work together, laugh together and toast together."

~

Newbie Guide

Even with so many venues closing, more have popped up to fill in the gaps. Each venue is unique, hosting a unique variety of artists and audiences and if your only exposure to spoken word is from watching TVOne's *Verses and Flow* or HBO's *Def Poetry Jam*, you may be surprised.

Henze offers this advice to the curious newcomer venturing out to an open mic or slam for the very first time: "I think every novice attendee needs to understand that every scene is different. There's a give and take to it. There's a variety and diversity out there."

As far as social cues and behavior when in the company of wordsmiths and lyricists, TOO BLACK recommends keeping it simple. "Throw all your stereotypical ideas out the window," he says. "You don't have to snap your fingers, but you don't have to be quiet either."

According to most poets, the best strategy is to simply enjoy yourself. But for a truly unique and inspiring experience, York suggests you take it one step further. "Expect a variety of opinions and thoughts, but also expect to be able to either relate to or be given a new way of looking at things," she continues. "Poets use words and manipulate words in so many ways we never think to do. If you attend a slam, expect to hear a lot of punch lines and out-of-the-box thinking."

Local Poetry Venues

Outspoken

Outspoken is a positive place for positive youth to vocally express themselves
1802 N. Illinois St.
Indianapolis, IN 46202
2nd Saturday of every month
\$5 Cash/\$7 Debit or Credit

The Underground at Write-On Poetry Spot

Open mic held at one of the most respected poetry spots in Indianapolis
3326 Clifton St.
Indianapolis, IN 46208
Last Friday of every month

An Evening With the Muse

A poetry reading series featuring a different poet every month, followed by an open mic open to the public
812 E. 67th St.
Indianapolis, IN 46220
2nd Sunday of every month
Free

Irving Theater Poetry Open Mic

Weekly open mic night at this historic 1913 Indianapolis landmark theater
5505 E. Washington St.
Indianapolis, IN 46219
Every Thursday
Free

The Encyclopedia Show

Part-poetry slam, part-vaudeville showcase, part-improv show featuring poets, musicians, comedians and artists.
5505 E. Washington St.
Indianapolis, IN 46219
Once every 4 months – Next show: November 14th
\$8/\$5 – Student, Senior