



Treybian

Birmingham's Bards & Brews

Written by Nancy Dorman-Hickson Photography by Meg McKinney

The beer-drinking strangers are bonding but not in a smoky, dimly lit bar. Tonight the brews are part of a word-centric event in a language-loaded location.

"I've never been carded at a library before," crows one patron, forking over his driver's license to a gatekeeper. He's here for Bards & Brews, the Birmingham Public Library free event that combines a poetry slam with a craft beer tasting. Held the first Friday of each month except December, the program drew 900 people in 2011. Those ages 18 and up are welcomed although serving age for the beer begins at age 21.

The entertainment starts at 6:30 p.m. with local performers such as Pineapple Skinners, LeeAnna Culp, and Patrick Sum-

mey providing pre-poetry music. A tasty spread complements the free drinks donated by breweries and distributors with colorful names such as Good People, Back Forty, and Blue Pants. Each participating poet kicks in \$5 to the pot. A gigantic plastic pickle jar collects tips for the evening's musical act and sweetens slam winnings.

"We wanted to bring people back to the library, especially the younger demographic," says Haruyo Miyagawa, Bards & Brews project director. The program is funded by grants from the Alabama State Council and the National Endowment for the Arts. "Poetry is a natural fit for a library—'Words-R-Us.' We also wanted to show that the library is not a fusty, musty institution where staff constant-

ly go around shushing people."

That persistent image of a scolding librarian is the first one emcee Brian "Voice Porter" Hawkins dismisses. "Disregard that you're in the library," urges the ringmaster. "Make some noise!" Poets follow "Southern Fried Slam" rules such as original poems only; a three-minute time limit; and no props, costumes, or musical instruments.

From 7 to 9 p.m., veteran and novice spoken-word artists enthrall the enthusiastic crowd, a mix of ages, races, and poetic preference. The competitors read or deliver memorized rhythmic rants and riffs with topics that range from rites of passage, politics, relationships, depression and time. Their words cajole, persuade, lament, chastise, and joke.

Voice Porter keeps the evening light, playing up discrepancies between crowd favorites and the evaluating judges. The judges, volunteers from the audience, scribble numbers on dry erase boards then hold them up for all to see. Good-natured boos and cheers greet their ratings.

“The crowd is so open to different topics,” says poet Shaun Judah, an ex-boot camp instructor. The audience “looks to you for something that they can connect with.” He draws inspiration from “everything, i.e. shoestrings, animals, smells, sounds, suggestions.”

For poet Glenn A. Griggs II, better known as “GlennWoodz,” “Poetry is universal and goes beyond skin color. Plus,” he adds impishly, “the free brew provides a nice kick.”

Punky Burwinkle, a spoken word artist for only a year—“one day the muse just came and sat on my shoulder”—says, “I am always just totally blown away by the [poetic] talent that is in our town, a lot of which is a product of our much maligned Birmingham school system.” She describes herself as “an old hippie who never grew up and who finds our political scene a rich source for humorous comment.”

While Voice Porter fosters a relaxed, friendly atmosphere, he takes poetry seriously. “Well-placed words have the power to create and destroy, depending on your intent,” he says. “If you can command your words then you can, in essence, command your own existence. Poetry,” he declares, “is the reason that we all exist.”

We’ll drink to that.



Cynthia Littleton



Judges are volunteers from the audience.

To read poetry from Bards and Brews go to www.b-metro.com



Shaunteka LaTrese



“Voice Porter”



Free specialty beer draws a crowd.

Bards & Brews:
Birmingham Public
Library Poetry Slam
Series
 Central Library, 2100 Park Place
 1st Friday of every month
 (except December)
 6:30 p.m.-9:00 p.m.
 Live music and poet sign-up is at
 6:30 p.m.
 Call time is at 7 p.m.
<http://www.facebook.com/pages/Bards-and-Brews/107736582616622>