

'Slam I am'

Former Athenian finds success in world of performance poetry

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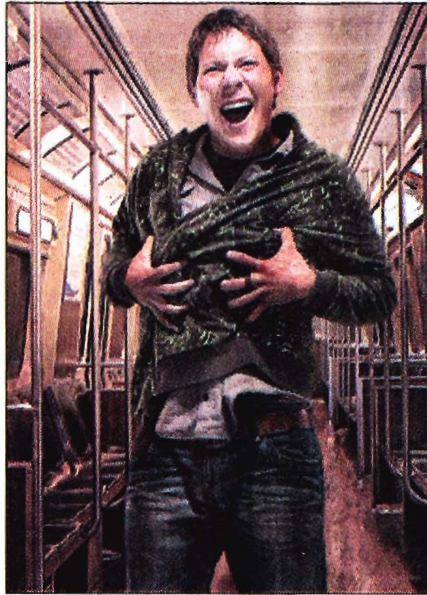
A spoken word poet who honed his craft on the open mic stages of Athens was part of a New York City team that placed third in a national event he calls "the Super Bowl of slam poetry."

Jon Sands, a one-time regular of Donkey Coffee's Designated Space spoken word event and Athens' Hip Hop Shop, performed on New York City's louderARTS team at the National Poetry Slam in Austin, Texas, in early August. Made up of Sands and four other members, the team placed third in the nation out of 75 teams.

"It was every legendary performance poet converged in one area, like being at a summer camp of your heroes," he said.

Sands, 24, got to share the stage with such national performance poets as Buddy Wakefield of Seattle, Anis Mojjani of Seattle, and Jamie DeWolf of San Francisco — heavyweights in the slam poetry world.

Sands' success in performance slam poetry has happened quickly. A year ago he was working at Casa Nueva, making appearances on the stages of Designated Space and the Hip Hop Shop. Originally from Cincinnati, Sands came to Athens as an Ohio University student. He graduated



Jon Sands, a performance poet who honed his talent on Athens stages, was part of a team of poets from New York City who placed third at the National Poetry Slam in Austin, Texas, earlier this month.

last year and moved to New York City in November to pursue dreams of performing spoken word.

In the Big Apple, he worked at developing his style, and eventually got good enough to place as a finalist in a louderARTS poetry slam, winning the right to represent the venue at the National Poetry Slam. LouderARTS is a New York-based nonprofit organization that aims to develop spaces for artists to create and perform poetry.

Performance poetry is more like a rock concert than a typical poetry reading, Sands explained. The crowds at the National Poetry Slam screamed with energy, egging poets on and becoming part of the action, he said. This was not the world of finger-snapping and black berets. This was slam.

"The crowds were crazy," Sands said. "Every night was absolutely packed. With a crowd that energized, you can't help but feed off it. The game is rage. You take all this editing, all this practice, all this honing, and you make everyone believe that you just thought of it right then."

The National Poetry Slam included two nights of performance, and each team performed for three rounds. Sands was called to the mic during the final night of the competition, performing "Why Would Anyone Want to Bring a Child Into This World," a duet piece with Rachel

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Poetry slam scene

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McKibbens, a slam poet from New York City. McKibbens was seven months pregnant with her fourth child during the performance, and the poem revolved around the motives for giving birth in a dire world. McKibbens performed as the mother, while Sands spoke the part of her unborn child. They wrote the piece together for the slam.

"It's probably one of the most important pieces I've ever written," Sands said.

When performing before such an energized crowd, butterflies are a godsend, Sands said. The day of the slam, Sands couldn't eat. He paced a lot. He got the stare. But he wouldn't have it any other way. When he's not nervous, the performance goes flat, he said.

"Nervousness convinces your body to feel the poem," Sands said. "If you can embrace your butterflies, the poem becomes intense. I go to a completely different place."

Besides being an adrenaline rush, the National Poetry Slam helped Sands get connected. He met owners of nationally known slam venues, and he's planning a tour across the country in January and February.

"It's a quick step, but people want me to come out and they'll pay me to do what I do," Sands said. "It's exciting, and it's a great honor."

It's also quite a change. Sands didn't even know the spoken word world existed on this scale before.

"I look around, and I am the bewildered kid," Sands said. "Everywhere I go, my mouth is gaping open. I didn't know about any of this."

New York City gave Sands the microphone, but Athens is where he found his identity.

"Athens was the first place I identified myself as a poet," Sands said. "With Designated Space and the Hip Hop Shop, Athens provided consistent venues that encouraged me to write. Athens is where I found my ideas, where I became the type of poet I wanted to become. New York City is where I found my voice."