

Reality Slam

The reality television craze has once again set foot in Austin, this time as the brainchild of Kyle Fuller and Mike Henry. *Confessions* would capitalize on Austin's unique creative community by focusing on the little known world of slam poetry artists. While right now the show is in its trial phase, many local artists hope to make their way onto the small screen.

One such local artist is Austin Woman Genevieve Van Cleve. This 33-year-old phenom started slamming, originally, to attract the attention of a boy. While that particular relationship didn't work out, it did lead to the new love of her life: spoken word poetry.

Nearly every Wednesday night will find Van Cleve on stage in a dark and smoky bar, practicing her act. Ego's, a small music and beer venue located in a parking garage on South Congress, hosts weekly poetry slam events. In April, Ego's also hosted The Austin Grand Slam, a semifinalist competition to single out the best of Austin's spoken word artists before the Slam Off 2003 at Ruta Maya.

The slam poetry format differs from more traditional poetry. Instead of focusing on line breaks and internal rhyme and relying on the readers' interpretation, slam poets can affect the observers' experience through word emphasis, speed, volume, and breaths. Slam poetry has gotten a reputation for being a venue for the angry and unregulated spewing of words, but nothing could be further from the truth. In its intended form, slam poetry follows a very strict set of rules, and poets who refuse to follow the rules are summarily dismissed. Each artist must perform her own original work without the use of props or musical accompaniment. Additionally, all poems and performances are subjected to audience judgment. Before every set of performances, audience judges are selected. They are instructed to judge on both the poem and performance, giving a numerical score between 0.0 and 10.0. There is also a time limit. No artist may go over three minutes without a scoring penalty. This can be difficult because audience participation is frequent and loud.

The Grand Slam illustrated the depth of Austin artists, but also the dearth of women slam poets. The subject matter was as varied as the performers. From a love of Austin and distaste for "Dallas bitches" to political calls to end the killing of civilians in Iraq, artists showed their true colors on stage. However, Van Cleve's poetry was a little different. Always interested in politics and humor, she blends the two for her poems. She notices that audience members are slow to accept funny women, or ones who take issue with local laws. But that hasn't stopped her from writing and performing to the beat of her own proverbial drum. And, now, the judges love it. Van Cleve easily scored high enough in The Austin Grand Slam to make it to the finals at the Slam Off 2003.

Her smart style and wry delivery also helped her in the Slam Off, where she secured a spot on the regional team. In August the Austin team, including Genevieve Van Cleve as the only woman, will represent our city in the National Poetry Slam in Chicago. She says she looks forward to the 56 team, national competition even though it requires her to write new material for a bigger audience. Plus, she won't be performing alone. In the national competition, the rules change. There, group slams are not only accepted, they're encouraged. She and the other winners of the Slam Off will work on blending all

of their differences in style, interest, and strengths to make this Austin's best showing yet.

Van Cleve points out there are other benefits to making the national team. She looks forward to taking her original style to a national audience, not just for the National Poetry Slam, but for television as well. Though she recognizes that her natural talent makes her an attractive candidate for being featured in Confessions, she acknowledges that her chances are better now that she has made the team.

Good luck to Austin Woman, Genevieve Van Cleve.