



Mike Tyler works the Nuyorican stage: "He hurtles into a reading space like he's just broken out of a straitjacket."

MIKE KAMBER

Cafe Society

*The New, Guerrilla Poets Act Out
at the Nuyorican Poets Cafe.*

By Evelyn McDonnell

It's Friday night, November 30, at the Nuyorican Poets Cafe and Mike Tyler is dying to read a new poem. He has sat

everybody, 'cause it's going to happen to everyone. 'Eek, there's women around!'"

At night I snuggle up close to the warm

Street across from his apartment, which, because "that was where the typewriter was," had become a gathering place for writers. "The cafe was an extension of my

bought the building for \$10,000.

Then began the dark ages—the '80s. In 1981, HUD granted the cafe \$350,000 for renovations. Algarin made the fateful decision to allow the city's Department of General Services to administer the funds and supervise the work themselves. In the spring of 1982, the cafe closed "temporarily" for renovations. It was closed for almost six years, and the cafe's directors charge that as much destruction as construction was done during that time. "When they gave me back the keys in January 1988, it was a shell," Algarin recalls. The money had all been spent on securing the foundation of the building. The heating system and bathrooms that had been installed before the city took over had been destroyed. "I was stunned," Algarin says. "I didn't know what to do."

The final blow came that June, when Miky Piñero died.

*Just once before I die
I want to climb up on a
tenement sky
to dream my lungs out till
I cry
then scatter my ashes thru
the Lower East Side
—excerpt from "A Lower East Side
Poem," Miguel Piñero*

On Halloween 1988, Piñero's friends scattered his ashes in a ceremony outside the cafe. At a party afterward at poet Roland Legiardi-Laura's apartment, Legiardi-Laura and Bob Holman approached Algarin about reopening the cafe. "Miguel had been so depressed over what had happened to his cafe," Holman remembers. "At this moment of incredible release, we began the process of investigating what had gone on during these years of so-called renovation and also energizing ourselves to get the place reopened." Miguel Piñero's picture now stands in a shrine behind the cafe's bar. "The cafe came back to life over the death of Miguel Piñero," Legiardi-Laura says. "He really is a sort of guiding spirit and major troublemaker in all of our minds."

The Nuyorican Poets Cafe reopened in October 1989, with one bathroom, no heat, and the antique bar that had been brought over from East 6th Street on a garbage truck. It was run by five directors: Algarin, Holman, Legiardi-Laura, Correa, and writer and longtime cafe patron Lois Griffith. They had ambitious plans for the building's five floors, including workshops, a media center, and a poets' hotel. "Here was a whole building that we had that no one else could take away from us and that we could develop in any way we wanted—for, by, and about poetry," Legiardi-Laura says. "It's probably the only building on the

It's Friday night, November 30, at the Nuyorican Poets Cafe and Mike Tyler is dying to read a new poem. He has sat through a play, walked out on Robert Creeley ("I couldn't stand it; I'm an asshole"), and watched three fledgling poets compete in the poetry slam. But there's a long list of people ahead of him on the open room's sign-up sheet, and he can't wait anymore. So Tyler takes his poem outside to 3rd Street. With a few friends watching, "the Iggy Pop of poetry" uses the flatbed of a truck for a stage on which to pace and growl. Tyler doesn't recite "V Is for Dot Dot Dot," he exorcises it like it was the demon within. On the poem's last lines—"right now/under hot/young American/hoping not/V is for Vietnam"—he springs to the top of a wire fence, then dives to the sidewalk, landing on his left arm. Which breaks at the elbow.

Welcome to the new poetry, so urgent in its need to break from tradition and get the words out that sometimes it tries to defy gravity.

Walk around the Lower East Side any night and chances are you'll find a poetry reading. It may not look like one—the poet may be accompanying himself or herself on keyboard, or working the audience for laughs like a comedian. The new poets are guerrillas, using whatever weapons are at hand. "The world is changing and it's happening first in the arts. It's certainly happening in the poetry that I see," Bob Holman, one of five codirectors of the Nuyorican Poets Cafe, says. "The fight is really about gay and nonwhite artists taking power. And that's what scares the pants off

everybody. 'Eek, there's women around!'"

*At night I smuggle up close to the warm
blue glow of images provided for
everyone by a select few*

*Listen, they've packaged a shopping
mall so small you can only visit it
with a Video Walkperson, a cellular
phone and a Visa card*

*The world is changing, but we're not
We're stuck in a commercial for Life
Trying to figure out who to give the
money to*

*When, surprise! There is no money
It's 1990*

& Nelson Mandela is free!

—excerpt from "1990," Bob Holman

Two years ago, urban poets crawled out of the hiding places they had dived into when Ronald Reagan was elected president and began a clandestine war of resistance. Refusing to just say no, they fired words at the soft underbelly of the bloated American beast that had tried to smother them, giving voice to the homeless, the immigrants, the minorities, the people with AIDS they found half-buried around them. As the economy declined, they took vows of poverty. And when the U.S. went to war to protect its consumptive lifestyle, poets realized the stakes were that much higher and pumped up the volume of their protest.

With its multicultural programs, ram-bunctious poetry slams, and antiwar marathon readings, the Nuyorican Poets Cafe has been the guerrillas' home base. Poet and playwright Miguel Algarin founded the cafe in 1974 in an old Irish bar on East 6th

because "that was where the typewriter was," had become a gathering place for writers. "The cafe was an extension of my living room at first—my living room and all the wondrous people that came into it and made it a literary salon," Algarin says.

Earlier that year, Algarin and Miguel Piñero had edited *Nuyorican Poetry*, an anthology of Puerto Rican poets. *Nuyorican* was a word they had heard people calling them when they landed in the airport on a visit to Puerto Rico. "It's the islanders' name for a New York Puerto Rican who comes back speaking fluent English," Algarin says. "It's an islander putdown of the main continent Puerto Rican. It was our way of subverting intent." In the wake of the Young Lords and '70s nationalism, the cafe offered Puerto Ricans a place to nurture their culture. With the Broadway run and film of his play *Short Eyes* and his roles in several movies, Piñero was the cafe's celebrity. He shared his success with the neighborhood, casting Loisaida families in his plays and generally spreading the wealth. "When Miky had money, everyone had money," cafe codirector Willie Correa remembers.

As the cafe grew, so did the block. Soon the Nuyoricans' raucous readings and all-night WBAI radio broadcasts were drawing complaints from the neighbors. The cafe had outgrown its space as well, which was becoming structurally unsound. In 1980 it moved into a building on East 3rd Street that Algarin thought belonged to La Mama director Ellen Stewart. When it turned out the city had claimed it for back taxes, he

develop in any way we wanted—for, by, and about poetry," Legiardi-Laura says. "It's probably the only building on the planet like that."

Holman and Legiardi-Laura were new and creative forces for the cafe. Holman in particular brought in programs like the poets-in-concert series—three-night stands for "famous" poets like Amiri Baraka and Robert Creeley—and the poetry slam, a contest where poets' readings are scored by audience judges (an idea Holman borrowed from a Chicago space). With Holman as the enthusiastic, sharp-witted MC, the slam quickly began drawing crowds. More importantly, it began unearthing new poets.

"I felt our audience was basically going to be people in their thirties or forties who would remember the poetry of the old cafe and of the Beats and who would want to come by and hear these masters in a nice setting with music around," Holman says. "Only to discover that while I'd been out on the road, the crossover that I'd dreamed about of black, Latino, Asian, and white young poets infused by rap, full of performance, and with a politics that was from the heart of their hearts, had been gathering at some poetry spots around town and wouldn't mind moving into the Poets Cafe."

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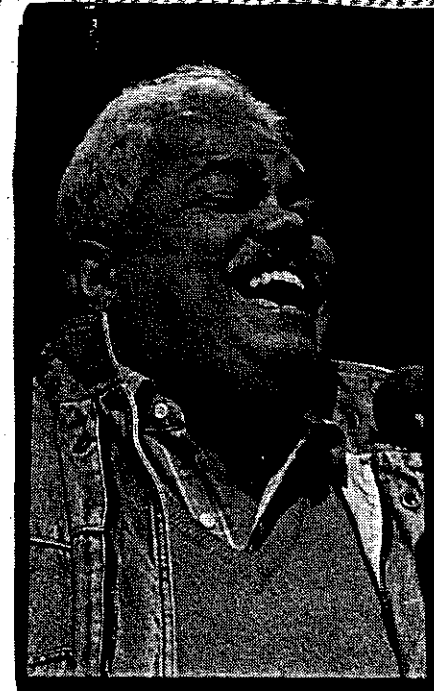
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Founding father: Miguel Algarin

*and gives you less
is a hero
in the complete breakdown of everything
the guy that promises you nothing
and gives you less
and kicks your teeth out
is a saint*

—excerpt from "The Complete
Breakdown of Everything,"
Mike Tyler

To most Americans, the idea of poetry as a revolutionary standard-bearer probably seems odd; in the popular imagination, poetry equals boring. It hasn't always been this way. In ancient Greece, poets were philosophers and historians. In Latin America and Eastern Europe, they are revered leaders and statespeople. Poetry, because it depends on language and nothing but, is a primary, universal art form: Wherever people write or talk, there is poetry. Except, it seemed, in Reagan's America.

The poet's role in this country has always been uncertain: they have been visionaries (Whitman, Williams), dissidents (Pound, Ginsberg), and popular heroes (Frost, Cummings, Sexton). In the 1950s, the Beats made poetry hip, even if their smug otherness was half rebellion and half snobbery. Weakened by its insularity, poetry frag-

went to this private place which is a piece of paper," Bonati says. "It's a little thing. It's got depth, it's got four corners, it's a composition. I can make an enormous structure on something this big, with a pencil and a piece of paper. And no one's going to tell me how to do it. I'm not going to get graded on it, I'm not going to get produced or not produced, I don't have to audition for it. That might be partially why this [poetry] thing has taken off, because it's representative of freedom. It's personal freedom. It's a place where you can go and explode based on what you've written on this little piece of paper, your own personal stage/world."

*Here I was dancing while the young
dark one in the wheelchair
loomed from under his post brain
operation
helmet.*




*The likeness of a football hero
but for the stillness.*

*Then I crept away to
steal his image for my song.*
—untitled, Gina Bonati

Gail Schilke is a visual artist who moved to New York the year Reagan was elected because "it made me feel nervous and I felt powerless in Maine." She spent the decade withdrawn and, increasingly, writing. "I was very isolated during the '80s" cause there was so much crap going on that was scary to watch: the rampant consumerism, the whole yuppie thing—all of that was just so out of control—and at the same time the other side of it, watching what was happening with crack, with the homeless situation. You just wanted to stay in, you didn't want to go out and look at this because it was really horrifying."

After eight years, Gail Schilke felt she had to share the tense, sexual poems she had been writing. She began reading her work at Matthew Courtney's Sunday open mike at ABC No Rio; around this time, she met people like Mike Tyler, Gina Bonati, the young poets of the Dark Star Crew, and Paul Skiff, an artist who runs the Knot Room series with Bonati. The second phase of the development of a poetry scene began at ABC, where writers gathered to test out their work. It was a place where artists who didn't belong anywhere else could develop a sense of community. "For a lot of these people, poetry was the only way they could

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their work. It was a place where artists who didn't belong anywhere else could develop a sense of community. "For a lot of these people, poetry was the only way they could tell the truth, because everything else was killed," Tyler says. "It was like going to church every Sunday, with a bunch of other believers," Schilke recalls.

Schilke and her ilk weren't simply looking for support, however; they wanted to communicate ideas that they thought had been repressed for too long. "It was really a rage at wanting to point out what I saw were some truths," she remembers. "I think that's the role of the poet—to be a truth teller." Few of these new poets have creative writing MFAs, so they had no loyalty to any poetry school. Rather, they were frustrated artists who had turned to language as a vehicle of expression and who wanted to get their message across any way possible, without regard for the rules, etiquette, or purity of verse. They went so far as to call themselves the St. Clark's Anti-Poetry Project, a poetry collective dedicated to supporting nontraditional voices, because, as founder Schilke says, "I went to one too many boring poetry readings at St. Mark's."

For 25 years, the Poetry Project at St. Mark's Church has been a premier source of and forum for poets. Yet inevitably, in the eyes of some, it has also become an institution. "The wonderful optimism of the Nuyoricans is, change comes from the streets," Paul Skiff, who was once booted out of an open reading at St. Mark's, says. "The whole society is constantly mutating; it's breaking down, decaying, and building at the same time. In order to respond to that and be in that and be a part of that and contribute to it, you can't be in an institution. That's another way of being isolated. That's in a sense more isolated from the actual conditions than going in your corner and living on your own private piece of

Weakened by its insularity, poetry fragmented into different schools in the '60s. Increasingly divided in the contemporary spinout of American culture (Tyler: "Post-modernism: that's another piece of conservatism hiding as an exciting idea"), the poetry scene had completely fallen apart by the '80s. Demoralized poets tucked themselves away in graduate writing programs and literary journals, far from the public eye (and ear)—abandoning the public forum to the Great Communicator.

"I want to communicate a different idea now," Tyler says.

The first phase of the new poetry occurred unseen. Even before the NEA began politicizing its screening of grants, the '80s were a hostile time for artists—especially young artists—to develop their work. The conservative atmosphere squelched notions of idealism, bohemianism, and creativity; those whose art reacted against that atmosphere often found themselves rejected even by arts organizations. Driven inside, and unknown to each other, artists began to write.

"I found it rather painful not to be accepted by people in the arts community," Gina Bonati says. Bonati is a dancer who writes delicate lyric poetry and runs the reading series at the Knitting Factory's Knot Room. "I've often felt like I would really love to be accepted. I've tried. And it was this huge sort of painful release to come to a place where I give up. I'm tired of trying to be in your living room and eat your Ritz crackers. You don't want me here so I'm not going to be here. I'll just do this on this little piece of paper here in my corner."

Artists seem to have started writing in a fit of desperation—like cornered animals resorting to primal protective behavior. "I

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MIKE KAMBER

This is the space: a poetry reading in progress at the Nuyorican

paper.”
 In 1964, Amiri Baraka dropped out of the Village poetry scene because he felt that it was speaking to an exclusive, and primarily white, audience. Today’s poets think he was right. “The idea of St. Clark’s was to offer voices that are dynamic but disenfranchised, and to particularly reach out—because so much of this stuff is being run by straight white men—to writers who don’t fall in that category,” Schilke says. When Schilke, who now books the Wednesday night program at the Nuyorican, ran the reading series at the Knitting Factory from August of 1989 to June 1990, she says, “I would only have a certain number of white boys read, regardless of how good their work was, because it’s been heard enough, that same voice over and over again.”

people come bring themselves to your words in a way they haven’t been asked to do before—whatever rhetorical attitude you’re using, whether you’re commanding them or seducing them or fooling them into it—there doesn’t seem to be much purpose to offering what you have to say.”
 The readings at the Nuyorican Poets Cafe don’t always look like poetry. Jennifer Blowdryer, smut goddess of the Lower East Side, frequently performs with rock musicians. Miguel Algarin, the handsome, gray-haired, barrel-chested Nuyorican original, declaims his poems in a booming, commanding voice, often breaking into song. The Poets 4 have a jazz pianist. And Mike Tyler hurtles into a reading space like he’s just broken out of a straitjacket but is still locked in a loony bin, jumping onto chairs,

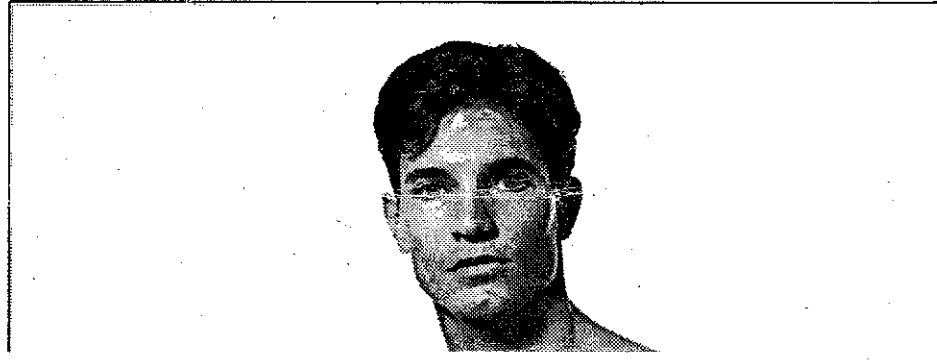
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Yet in its emphasis on readings, the current scene does owe a debt to St. Mark's: The new poetry flows more out of an oral tradition than a written one. But its immediate antecedents are rap and performance art, not language poets or imagists. Poets like Paul Beatty, the 1990 winner of the Nuyorican poetry slam, whose first book is the debut publication of the Nuyorican Poets Cafe Press, and Bob Holman, a/k/a the Plain White Rapper, are explicitly inspired by the wordplay, language, and rhythms of rap. Holman remembers the night in 1980 when he was dancing at the cafe and someone put on Kurtis Blow's "The Breaks": "I stopped in my tracks on the dancefloor. This was an apocalyptic moment for me, hearing a poem that people were dancing to."

Although lit-zines like Tyler's *American Idealism Rag* and the New York-based *Big Cigars* publish many of the new poets, so far the work has mainly developed around readings. In part, this is because poets are trying to reach a nonliterate society. "The role of the artist is to aggravate and agitate," Schilke says. "But if you're saying or pointing out really disturbing things, then you also have to find a way to make that palatable so people can hear it. I don't mean to say that people should just be entertained, but I think it's extremely important that entertainment is part of the delivery of the message."

"I look at doing a reading as a civil disturbance," Skiff says. "If you can't make

manding voice, often breaking into song. The Poets 4 have a jazz pianist. And Mike Tyler hurtles into a reading space like he's just broken out of a straitjacket but is still locked in a loony bin, jumping onto chairs, running into walls, dropping his pants. "I'm trying to re-create the poetic moment," Tyler explains. "If I can make it as it happens be like I'm writing it—that same instance/thing that's flying through me—then it's going to be exciting."

Tyler and Blowdryer are sometimes called performance poets; some purists even say their work isn't poetry. Cover publisher Jeff Wright gave Tyler a zero at a slam because he said he couldn't hear the poem through Tyler's antics. (Tyler responds to such critics in his poem "Suggestion Box": "If you didn't move around so much/I could listen to your poetry/If I didn't move around so much/you wouldn't even bother with/you couldn't listen to my poetry/you just wouldn't listen/to my poetry.") Holman and Schilke think of performance artists as the first guerrilla poets. "I think poetry has not been generous and therefore has lost some of the people who could have been declared poets," Holman says. "It's spawned a whole new art, performance art, because of its feelings of exclusivity."

"Poetry is just a word for me for the actively engaged use of words," Legiardi-Laura says. "Finding ways to make words real, to make them part of your life, and to make war with them. One great thing about the cafe and poetry itself is it's a great way in our society to make trouble, to distort, to shake. We tend to bury our writers in a cacophony, this tremendous din of media and noise and sex and the oppression of the

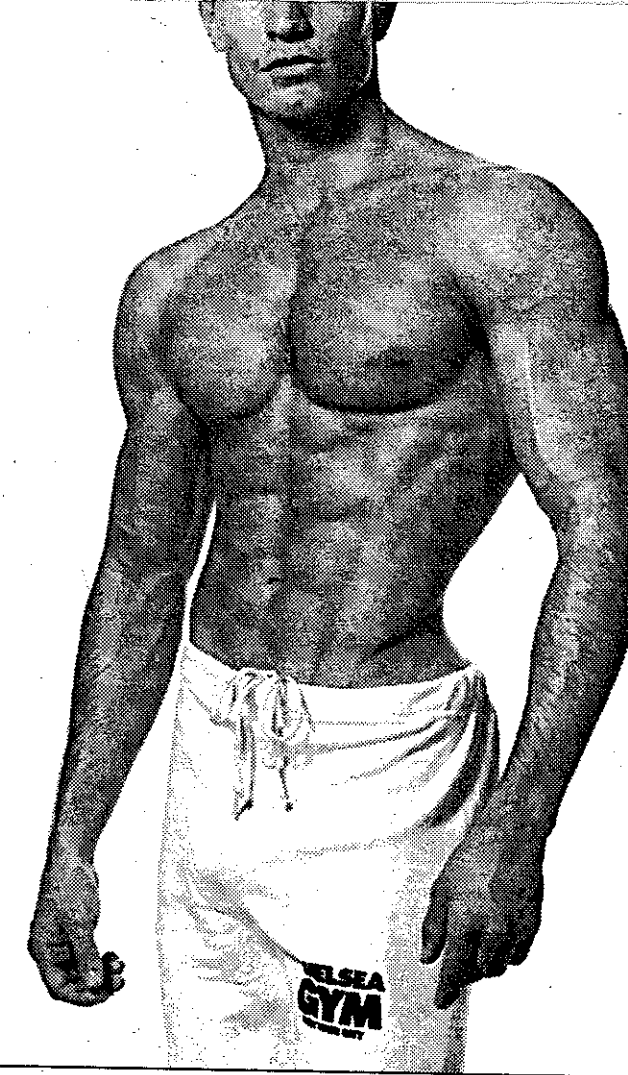


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