

By Eric Lindbom

**A**FTER THE BEATS BROUGHT their syncopated rants from coffeehouses to watering holes, New York City bars became meeting grounds and performance spaces for poets, providing a receptive, artificially jolly crowd that might listen to a stranger ruminate—provided he was loud enough.

The sparks generated when innocent bystanders collide with art justify the creative process. Yet today's

## POETRY

New York poet faces monumental pedestrian apathy on street corners (in Washington Square the competition includes skateboarding Evel Knievels able to leap five garbage cans) or the incestuous, preaching-to-other-poets atmosphere of most readings. No wonder wordsmiths turn to performance art, rap or dub (à la Linton Kwesi Johnson) to cross over to a wider audience.

Bridging that gap is a chief concern of Bob Holman, who works in video, writes and directs plays and makes teaching appearances at city high schools. "I don't look at my job as just writing poems on pieces of paper. I'm an activist trying to use poetry to liberate the imagination," he says.

At a reading in New Jersey, Holman traded poems with Rev. Pedro P. Pietri, a self-ordained Hispanic street poet who types short poems onto tiny envelopes, sticks condoms inside and tries to sell them. (A Pietri safe sex haiku: "you and your bottle/ and your smoke/ and your coke/ are cordially invited/ to attend a party/ If you cannot make it/ send your bottle/ and your smoke/ and your coke/ to keep the party going/ until you are/ able to party with us!")

As the two writers unwound with drinks, an idea struck them. "You've got poets in schools, hospitals and prisons—why not in bars?" Holman wondered.

They posed the question—in the form of a grant proposal—to Creative Time, which funds site-specific art projects. The organization, under Project Coordinator Barbra Silver and Executive Director Cee Brown, agreed to underwrite a "Poets in the Bars" series of mostly free readings throughout New York City. The series was created to "celebrate the oral tradition, honoring the poets who are doing it now and looking toward the future."

**The last next thing:** When Holman sarcastically calls poetry "the last next thing," he's also observing that "poetry has always been a generous and inclusive art." Despite a vast knowledge of the subgenres of American poetry, Holman supports the assimilation of other art forms into poetry. He counts rock'n'roll, Dadaism and Spike Jones among his key influences as a writer.

So it's not elitism that makes him deride "so-called performance art ... a pretentious redundancy." That's just his way of standing up for those

who dare to call themselves poets (he once described LL Cool J with the "P" word, and the platinum rapper shushed him fast).

"If you scratch the surface of this series, you'll find many ways into poetry other than here's a poem cold—read it," Holman says. Some of the poets who read in the series fuse live music, found sounds and other aural stimuli with the spoken word.

Poetic justice prevailed when Allen Ginsberg opened the series at the Village Gate, a posh West Side jazz club. Ginsberg howled alongside a band that "ran the gamut from [Captain] Beefheart to blues to punk" (Island Records has slated an album of this stuff). Also appearing were Amiri and Amina Baraka, who read with Blue Arc, a jazz quartet that regularly backs them at the Barakas' own Newark, N.J., club. Amina read her poems alongside jazz standards while Amiri's were backed with scat singing and newer, more radical jazz sounds.

Bars were chosen as reading sites for their histories as literary haunts or to honor specific poets. For instance, Holman and Pietro searched for a bar near the Brooklyn docks that inspired Walt Whitman. After Five, a gay bar, volunteered its space. Three gay poets (Roberto Bedoya, Dennis Cooper and David Trinidad)

and one lesbian (Eileen Myles) read to a Sunday afternoon crowd of middle-aged regulars, fans of the poets and walk-ins from the neighborhood. "It was a magnificent reading hearing them speak the unspeakable in this crowd; it swept me away," says Holman.

**Liquid sanctuary:** A reading at the Lincoln Cocktail Lounge, a Spanish nightclub, was organized in honor of Maggie Smith, who once booked talent for the club Tin Pan Alley, a much-missed Midtown forum for ear-ringing rock bands, poets and other malcontents. Four poets Smith admires were picked to read (Kofi Natambu, Safiya Henderson-Holmes, Kimiko Hahn and Sharon Shively).

A similar homage, this time honoring a bar, was set at The White Horse, liquid sanctuary for Dylan Thomas and Thomas Wolfe, as well as Norman Mailer before his migration to Brooklyn. A big turnout required outdoor speakers that blasted the words of four Greenwich Village poets onto the street. Tuli Kupferberg, a member of The Fugs, a subversive hippie rock band close to Frank Zappa's heart, read with Bernadette Mayer (a poets' champion who regularly organizes readings in the Village). In deference to the once-boho, now gentrified East Village, the Nuyorican

Cafe, formerly a vital poets' space, re-opened for a one-shot reading. Holman wants to re-establish it as a nightly poetry club that doubles as an educational facility by day.

Series attendance was high despite scarce press coverage (the day Ginsberg read, the *New York Times* ran a typically academic piece on Yeats; too bad the series wasn't called Dead Poets in the Bars). More importantly, Holman claims more than half the attendees weren't regular poetry listeners. The learning experience extended to several of the poets who had never read in a bar before. Some adjusted better than others.

"At St. Mark's Church," says Holman, "it's so quiet that what a poet might take as thunderous disapproval is actually love between an ear and a word. My definition of a bar poet is someone who can stand next to the cash register while it rings up the mugs of beer, and whose voice rises above the splash of ketchup."

**Not high, and dry:** A sobering atmosphere characterized the reading I visited. The fact that seltzer was the beverage of choice didn't help. Perhaps a drink minimum should have been imposed for aesthetic reasons.

Still renowned as the bar that brought painters and poets together, the Cedar Tavern once attracted abstract expressionists like Franz Kline and Jackson Pollock, who drank with Jerome Rothenberg and LeRoi Jones (who later changed his name to Amiri Baraka). The scene blossomed under the guiding hand of Museum of Modern Art curator Frank O'Hare.

The mix of poets who read at the Cedar bore out Holman's theory that success as a bar poet can hinge more on performance charisma than the depth of verbal expression. With Jeff Wright the problem was timing. Wright, who edits a magazine with a poem as its centerfold, makes conversational phrases evocative ("Going on a trip? What to take? Valium"; New York is a "plunger of tears" where "the fabric of society unwinds"). However, he

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paused after each pearl, waiting for a reaction. What he heard was a smattering of applause or a forced giggle.

Conversely, Don Lev, a twitchy Teyve with a Borscht-belt comic's delivery, seemed bar-born. A Village fixture for decades, Lev's long-suffering self-deprecation proved as endearing as his words. Rising to the spirit of the occasion, he reminisced about a solipsistic drinking buddy ("I miss John; now I have

no one not to talk to") and his personal drinking problem ("a bar is so much like a woman I sometimes worry").

**Nasty Mead whine:** Taylor Mead clearly enjoyed his celebrity bar privileges, fueling himself on Bacardi and Cokes. Another ex-Warhol scenemaker who makes a living from name-dropping, Mead pens tomes about his decadent past. He describes himself in the third person, as if uttering his fearsome name invokes an automatic amyl nitrate buzz. I'd scoff if this wasn't the '80s, the decade I'll always remember as the time when nothing fun was fun anymore. So Meade's precious ramblings have historical value, though he's not half as funny as Ondine—king of the Warhol queens.

Mead struggled through a tedious chapter of an episodic autobiography, skipping anything juicier than a reneged dinner invite from his favorite starlet, Beulah Bondi. He was better served just blurting out shards of imagery ("Eight million bucks is all I need for my junkie friends") and possessed a weird aptitude for boom-box osmosis; he kept turning his radio on at perfectly appropriate moments during commercials or Muzak ditties to intro each of his disclosures.

More deliberate in his sampling, Kenward Elmslie closed the reading armed with stacks of perfectly synchronized cassette tapes. The tapes, featuring music arranged by collaborator Steven Taylor, helped Elmslie realize his own theatrical vision of poetry, even though he only played snippets of Cajun music or a guitar ballad.

Artists who litter their resumes with slashes (painter/director/musician/thinker/masochist/etc./etc.), reflect our generalist era. Forget the glib nomenclature and call Elmslie a thespian. He writes and acts out his poetry, plays and librettos, and his pieces are operatic in tone, amplified by his quivering delivery. Elmslie mixes fear and joy with the same walking-on-eggshells trepidation as Pere Ubu's David Thomas. Though many poets are constipated by self-absorption, Elmslie is full of voices. A bar seems too tiny for Elmslie; he has enough ideas to fill an amphitheater.

While his presentation is "big," he compartmentalizes and subdivides his thoughts rigorously. Elmslie chronicled an "A-to-Z alphabetical crawl" through "26 bars" (the title of a collection of his writings). One piece was merely his rendition of the table of contents of a fictional poetry book. Detail freak that he is, Elmslie even invented the index of first lines: "Cranberry juice and V-8 come with the territory;" "It riles me when an attractive woman says shit." Melding music and minutiae, Elmslie never failed to enthrall.

All four poets at the Cedar Tavern, and the rest of them throughout Pietri and Holman's series, showed there are infinite modes of poetic delivery—and more than one way to work a bar.

Eric Lindbom is a New York writer.

Adam Hume

Drinking it all in: Potable, poet-able —like a fish in water.

## Speak easy at the live poets society



# Petroleum

Continued from page 3

tion is "too burdensome" for the oil industry and too expensive for the consumers who rely on the industry.

Willie Fonteneau, an environmental specialist in the Louisiana State Attorney General's Office, rejects this contention.

Fonteneau, who says that at least one-third of his state's Superfund sites were created by the oil industry's "non-hazardous" drilling wastes, concedes that a lifting of the exemption will create a very immediate and visible expense to many oil producers. But he says the short-term cost of properly managing the waste at its source "will be much, much less expensive" than the less visible, long-term costs of dealing with drilling waste once it has seeped into aquifers, entered the food chain and poisoned the human population. □

Jim McNeill is an *In These Times* intern.

## C A L E N D A R

### WEST LAFAYETTE, IN

May 25-June 11

Registration is now underway for the Conner Center tour to the Soviet Union, October 2-17, 1989. The tour will stop in Leningrad, Tallin, Minsk, Moscow and Zagorsk with special focus on the Christian community. The program will explore the theme of theology of worship with the Russian Orthodox, Baptists and Methodists. For more information contact Don Nead, Conner Center for U.S.-USSR Reconciliation, 320 North St., West Lafayette, IN 47906, (317) 743-3861.

### NEW YORK

June 8-17

THE NEW YORK MARXIST SCHOOL  
THURSDAY, JUNE 8—Media, Education & Empowerment; Steve Brier, Chris Bratton; 8 p.m.  
FRIDAY, JUNE 9—Education & Equality; Stanley Aronowitz, Barbara Omolade; 8 p.m.  
SATURDAY, JUNE 10—Fred Frith, 8 p.m., \$6.  
SUNDAY, JUNE 11—Poems of Everyday Life, 2-5 p.m., \$3.  
FRIDAY, JUNE 16—Race & Class in the U.S., Noel Egnatiev and others T.B.A., 8 p.m.  
SATURDAY, JUNE 17—Performance by HOOPLA, 8 p.m., \$6.

12th national Intensive Summer School, with Harry Magdoff, Ralph Miliband and others T.B.A. Monday, July 10-Friday, July 21. \$200. Limited scholarships available. NYMS, 79 Leonard St., NYC 10013. Unless otherwise listed, admission is \$5. Information: (212) 941-0332.

### June 9

Ron Daniels, former director of the National Rainbow Coalition, will speak on "African-American Empowerment and the People's Movement of the '90s" at a reception/forum for Frontline's 6th anniversary. 7 p.m., \$10, Casa de las Americas, 104 West 14th (6th Avenue), Manhattan.

### CHICAGO

June 17

Soweto Day 10-K Walkathon, with proceeds going toward the legal and medical expenses of political detainees and their families in South Africa. Registration begins at 9 a.m., at the Hayes Center, 4859 South Wabash. For pledge forms, more info, call the Chicago Committee in Solidarity with Southern Africa (427-9868) or Church World Service (953-2767). The walk will be followed by a Soweto Day rally at the Hayes Center at 1 p.m. Rally is sponsored by the Illinois Labor Network Against Apartheid. For rally details, call 583-6661.

### June 17

The Illinois Campaign for Choice presents "A Rally for Choice" Saturday, 2 p.m., Daley Plaza, Dearborn at Washington. Several thousand women are expected to demonstrate that the American public will not accept a return to back-alley abortions. The Illinois Campaign for Choice is a coalition of more than 50 organizations statewide, including the Chicago Catholic Women, American Jewish Congress and the Women's Bar Association. For more information call 427-7330 or 922-0025.

### June 23

"A Rally to Abolish the Death Penalty," sponsored by Amnesty International USA at 4 p.m. in the Daley Center Plaza at Dearborn Ave. and Washington Blvd. Over 1,000 AI USA members, in Chicago for the 14th Annual General Meeting, will be there. Speakers, balloons, buttons, inspiration. For more information call (312) 427-2060.

### PITTSBURGH

June 15-22

Marxist Literary Group presents Institute on Culture and Society. Featured speakers include Gayatri Spivak, Fred Jameson, Samuel Delaney, Denis Brutus, Page DuBois, James Berlin, Alan Wald, Stanley Aronowitz, Barbara Harlow and Michael Sprinker. For more information call or write: Paul Smith, English Dept., Carnegie-Mellon University, Pittsburgh, PA 15213, (412) 268-6447.

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June 24

Grailville presents the third of four "Saturday Special" workshops — Using Goddess Symbols: In Words and In Dance. An exploration of the beliefs and practices honoring goddess figures in different cultures and the feminine principle. Participants will share in movement, dance and ritual related to concepts of sacred space. Sally Walton is a consultant/trainer in stress control and cross-cultural adaptation and author of *Awakening the Inner Dancer*. For registration and additional information contact Grailville, 932 O'Bannonville Rd., Loveland, OH 45140, (513) 683-2340.

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June 30-July 4

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July-August

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August 10-13

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November 2-11

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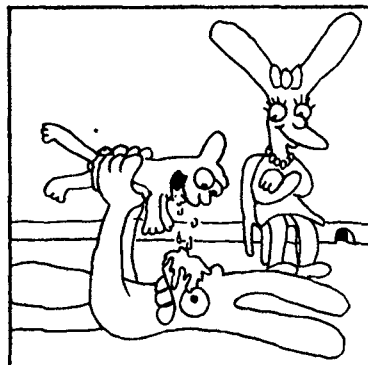
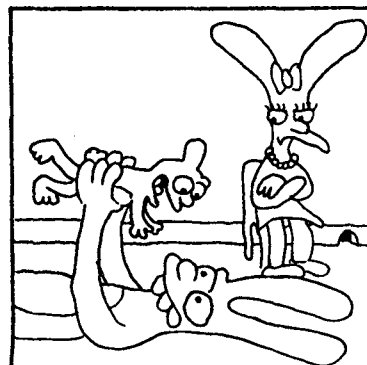
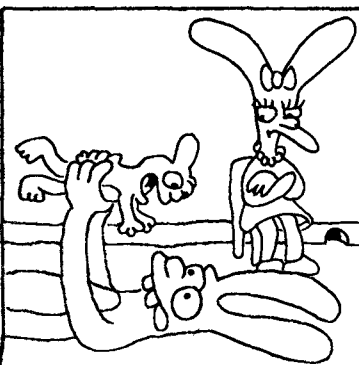
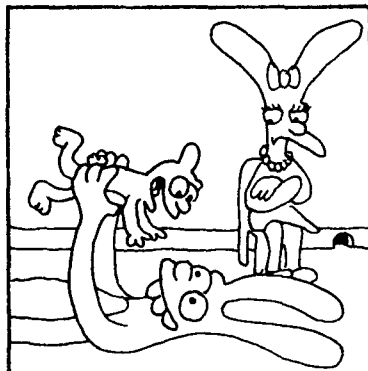
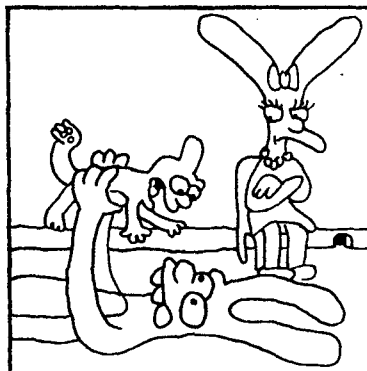
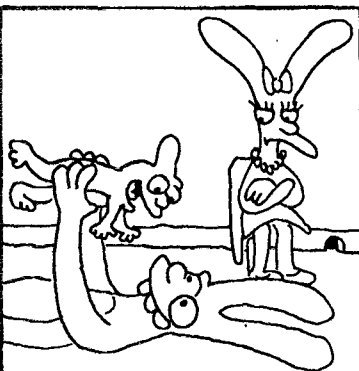
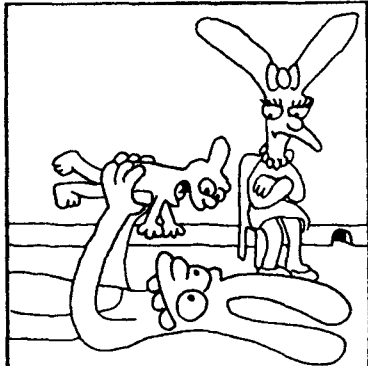
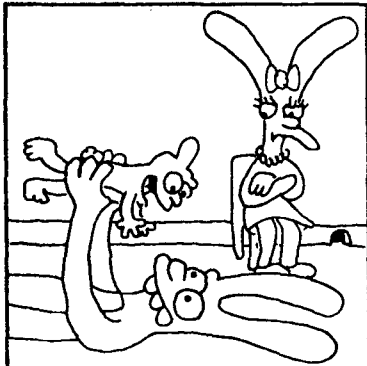
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## LIFE IN HELL

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**HOW TO CHEER UP A DISGRUNTLED NEW MOTHER**

A SAD BUT TRUE STORY





# #ummer REPEAT#



By Pat Aufderheide

**This is Sequel Summer** at the box office, and studio executives are already counting the cash. In a culture that prizes novelty over innovation, that treasures the security of brand names yet also covets "the latest," Sequel equals Success. Just think of it as more of the same, only different.

As one studio executive put it, if sequels don't sell, then this is the summer we'll find out. Watch for *Ghostbusters II*, *Karate Kid III*, *Star Trek V: The Final Frontier*, the new James Bond film *License to Kill* and, of course, *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*. The long-awaited *Batman* isn't exactly a sequel, but it is a second take on a pop culture legend. *Peter Pan*, being re-released by Disney, isn't a sequel either, but it, too, has put down deep and tangled roots into the pop culture landscape.

**Filling the abyss:** Other big-budget films, such as *The Abyss*, *Casualties of War* and *Dead Poets Society*, are counting on sequel exhaustion to pick up customers. But the offbeat, the independent, the low-budget films (the kind honored in the just-finished Cannes film festival where American independent work took the honors), have largely been pushed aside. The big-budget summer sequels typically have guaranteed 10-week runs in the major theaters, which increasingly are owned by the major studios.

Still, the studios wouldn't give their big-ticket items such a priority if they didn't sell. And audiences love a sure bet. Historically sequels make about 60 percent of the original's gross. When you figure that *Ghostbusters* cleared \$200 million, that's a fair bit of change. Let's face it—in the summer, films are movies, not an art but a toy for the overheated mind and body. They're not making sequels of *Last Year at Marienbad*, now, are they?

Summer's the season for a potential hit; around 40 percent of annual box office comes in the summertime, with a hefty chunk of the rest centering on holidays. The era when people

**Hollywood sequelmania is more than a seasonal diversion.**

went to the movies every week is long gone. Movie-going patterns now reflect a nation full of two-worker families, with everyday leisure time in short supply.

But the sequel glut this year is making some marketers nervous. More than half a billion (yes, billion) dollars has been sunk into this summer's big-ticket movies. So the heaviest marketing guns have been drawn, and expert studies have been conducted to target audiences in an attempt to make the sequel a cross-commodity experience, one that moves out of the movie theater and into your life. In fact, the biggest spectacle in Sequel Summer may be the war of the marketers. (And in an era when "California raisins" products out-gross the raisins they were intended to promote, the financial clout of merchandizing tie-ins can't be ignored.)

Anyone who can still remember back to 1978 in the movies will recall that *Superman* hit the cross-sell big time with comic books, toys and in-store promotions. It wasn't just a smart marketing move but a symptom of conglomeration. Under the Warner umbrella were both the film studio and DC Comics, as well as Warner Books. (Since then, of course, Warner Communications and Time Inc. have merged; see *In These Times*, March 29.)

Licensing of commodities associated with movies is now a sophisticated business with its own trade conventions and magazines. And studios have become pieces of ever-more-

baroque corporate conglomerates. It shows in the ubiquitous promotions and licensing deals for Sequel Summer.

Oh, yeah, there are the trailers, the in-store stand-ups, the junkets. And record-high TV advertising budgets, which not only try to nudge viewers off the couch and into the theaters but also leave a memory residue for videocassette rental time. (The VCR revolution has been very, very good to sequels, since videocassettes keep original movies in the public mind long after they leave the theaters.) In cable TV, MTV is taking the lead with promotions, including ones that offer the chance to win the *Ghostbusters* Ectomobile and a Batmobile replica.

**Indiana wants me:** You won't be safe from the sequel specter when you leave the house, either. To lure the food shopper, supermarkets and convenience stores will be full of Indiana Jones-Pepsi Cola sweepstakes offers (win a trip to Venice!). On other shelves Fuji Film and Ralston Purina both have tie-ins with Indiana Jones, and Peter Pan peanut butter and Wonder bread are both co-sponsoring promotions with (of course) *Peter Pan*. At the fast-food joints Indy's got Hardee's, and Peter Pan claimed McDonald's.

You can also wear your favorite sequel affiliation. For the sporting look (Banana Republic, move over), try Indiana Jones Stetson hats and clothes. Or, in the slightly more fey line, check out Batman, Ghostbuster and Peter Pan cos-

tumes. Sears, which has a lock on Peter Pan products, will also sell a kids' clothing line.

Toy shelves are filling up with Peter Pan dolls and stuffed toys and Batman Nintendo games and walkie-talkies. There are also Ghostbusters toys that pick up on the TV show. And recorded soundtracks are hitting the music stores.

But even in pop commodity cross-feeding there is a point of diminishing returns. "You don't want to overcommercialize," Columbia's marketing director told the *Los Angeles Times*. "The idea isn't to meet someone who says, 'Well, I bought the cookware, but I don't want to see the movie.'"

Even if they do, of course, the profits trickle back to the conglomerates with a grip on the movie images. Some links are tighter than others. Columbia's *Ghostbusters II*'s tie-in with Coca-Cola is a natural, since Coke owns a controlling interest in the studio. Warner owns the Batman character in comics as well as the movie. And Warner Bros. records expects to do well with Prince's soundtrack, as well as a separate original song, "Batdance."

With cross-marketing on a scale like this, and with entertainment conglomerates rapidly becoming behemoths, it's no wonder that American popular culture assumes a cartoonlike quality, bounding out of our TV sets and fast-food containers. And it's not just entertainment; it's culture. In fact, it's going right into your national museum. Indiana Jones' brown fedora and leather jacket have just been donated to the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History, where they'll snuggle up to Judy Garland's slippers from *The Wizard of Oz* and Tom Selleck's Hawaiian print shirt from *Magnum P.I.*

So when you register to get your Indy Jones "adventure packet" at the local 7-11, just remember, it's not just movie hype; it's a little piece of your cultural history in the making.

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