

THE HISTORY OF SPOKEN WORD POETRY

Spoken word has been around as long as there has been language. Throughout history, storytellers from every culture on earth were responsible for passing down traditions and other historical information from generation to generation. Spoken word was carried by griots who were living, breathing historians of the people's traditions. Griots brought African songs, history, and stories to new continents where their people were enslaved. Native American spoken word can be traced back to their beginnings with stories, history, and fables passed down by tribal elders through generations. Speaking in and about tribal tradition was and still is considered a social practice that is highly valued in Native communities. Wandering poets and troubadours in the Middle Ages “sang for their supper” with spoken words usually accompanied by music. *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* were spoken word poems. Shakespeare’s sonnets and plays were meant to be spoken, not read. With the invention of the printing press in the 1400s, the need for spoken word traditions was not as great as it once had been. As poems were published and available to a larger audience, the necessity and interest in spoken word poetry slowed down, but it is still performed today.

Modern spoken word poetry can be traced back to multiple influences including the Beat Generation poets of the 1950s and the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s. The Beats were a group of authors who composed work relating to American culture and politics in the post-World War II era. They were seen as underground nonconformists who generally wrote poetry about oppression, power, politics, and their struggle in the world. The Black Arts movement of the 1960s emerged after the assassinations of Malcolm X, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and President John F. Kennedy. The Black Arts poets declared a war on racism and spread messages of black unity, power, and nationalism. The Black Arts Movement brought news of the Black Power Revolution and the advancement of social empowerment. They drew on the musicality of jazz, Black slang, and experimentation with spelling, sound, and grammar. Poets in both the Beats Generation and the Black Arts Movement focused on the performance of their work. Performative poetry movements were consequential in political speech and powerful, revolutionary ideas.

The 1990s showed a renewed interest in spoken word poetry with influences from the Beat and Black Arts era. It was during this time the term “spoken word” came to be used for this type of performance poetry. Although the 1990s movement was influenced by the Beat poets and brought attention and credibility to that group, it was much more inclusive than the Beats, who, despite their liberal leanings, were exclusively white males. Much like the Black Arts poets, the artists of the 1990s sought to destroy social, cultural, and political boundaries. They spoke of tolerance and understanding between people. The artists of the 1990s were dynamic performers. They brought to their work subject matter that their audience could relate to and helped young people see that poetry didn’t have to be something they read in a textbook that meant nothing to them. It could be meaningful, artful, and fun.

Poetry slams brought spoken word poetry to the forefront of the literary community in the 1990s. Slam poetry is a competition featuring spoken word poetry. Slam poetry is usually limited to three minutes, whereas spoken word poetry does not have a time limit and is performed in many places. Slam poetry tends to be politically progressive, feminist, current, and culturally engaging which follows the original intent of spoken word poetry: bring the poetry back to the people. Even though slam poetry competitions

have brought lasting attention and an international audience to spoken word, some academics believe spoken word poetry cheapens the art form, calling it primitive and unaccomplished. Of course, many poets of different eras were criticized before being thought of more highly later.

Most recently, social media and video websites have brought unlimited access and a new-found appreciation of spoken word poetry. This new appreciation has encouraged young and old to write about their own lives and to speak those words to their peers and the world. Modern spoken word poetry has enhanced democratic engagement and has empowered voices. In other words, spoken word continues to fulfill its original intent of bringing the world to the people through poetry.

Sources

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