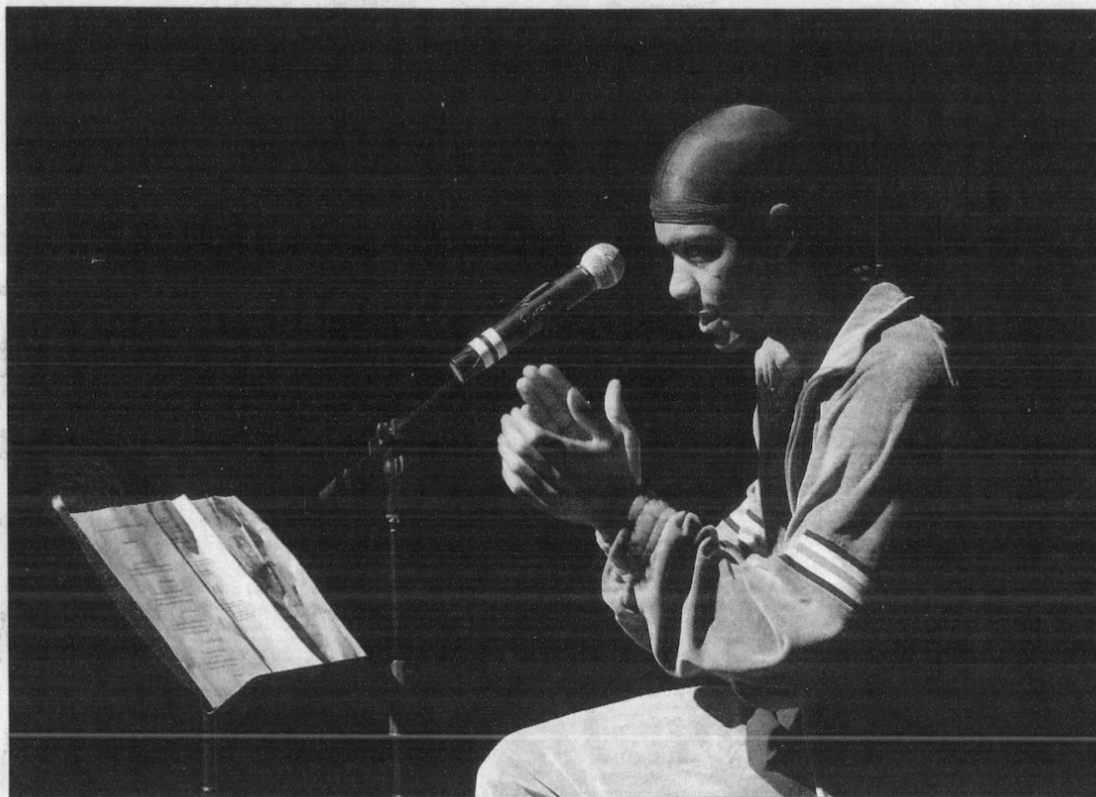


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Spoken word, a mix of poetry and performance not wedded to a beat, is gaining popularity with young African-Americans in the bay area.



Times photo — THOMAS M. GOETHE

Underground Poetz organizer George Gouridine introduces a poet during one of the group's recent gatherings in a small theater at the University of Tampa.

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VERSE

STORY BY JANEL STEPHENS ■ TIMES STAFF WRITER

Venus Jones walks onto the stage, letting the glow from the spotlight illuminate her 5-foot-6 frame. Onstage is a chair, a music stand and a microphone. Jones opts to stand, grabs the microphone and begins reciting a tribute to Ella Fitzgerald and Billie Holiday. "Don't know why, there's no sun up in the sky," she sings in a warm alto voice. "Stormy weather, since my man and I ain't together ..."

After a few more verses, she speaks:

I am weary

I am black mis-er-ry

Full of red passion but blue

Walking blue

But then I heard this sound

And it is true when I say

That that horn had an unfamiliar tune

Her voice flows in punctuated syllables as she gives the young audience a history lesson in jazz. The room of 20- and 30-somethings listens intently as Jones takes it on a lyrical journey from Dixieland to Miles Davis.

The art form is called spoken word, and it's becoming increasingly popular among young African-Americans who use the mix of poetry and performance as an outlet to express their opinions on issues such as race, religion and love. Its popularity has crossed racial boundaries through advertising and compact discs.

Jones, a 20-something African-American actor, is among a tight-knit group of artists in the Tampa Bay area that performs poetry on college campuses, in nightclubs and in coffeehouses.

Hip-hop mogul Russell Simmons reignited the interest in spoken word with his HBO series *Russell Simmons Presents Def Poetry*. The show, which debuted in 2001 and is hosted by rapper/actor Mos Def, features performances by spoken-word artists who use the art form to celebrate their culture, address social ills and release raw emotions. Unlike mainstream rap, spoken word is not limited to a beat or a tempo, says James "J.B." Hillsman, 35, the oldest

member of the Tampa spoken-word troupe, the Conscious Party.

"It's a form that goes beyond the barriers of music," Hillsman said. "It doesn't zero in on the beat of a tune. It has its own flow."

Simmons' show went to Broadway in 2002. Since then, spoken word has been featured in commercials, black sitcoms and award shows. BET recently launched a spoken-word show, *Lyric Cafe*.

For Jones, spoken word allows her to freely express her observations on being a black woman.

"I feel like I have an obligation," Jones said. "When you leave from my presence, I'm hoping you leave with some insight on where you're going to go."



With its roots embedded in African culture, spoken word was born from a centuries-old tradition that used a griot, or storyteller, to recount a village's cultural history and genealogy through oral communication.

Modern-day poet and griot Kwabena Dinizulu says that storytelling has been strongly influential in black music, particularly rap.

Please see **VERSE 4D**

Verse from 1D

"We've always been telling stories, making rhymes," Dinizulu said. "Spoken word has evolved . . . with each generation having something to say and wanting to say it. They're finding their own voice to add to the chorus, add to the story. They're writing their chapter."

Spoken word grew popular during the Harlem Renaissance with Langston Hughes and regained momentum in the late 1960s with black poets such as James Baldwin and Nikki Giovanni. With the death of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr. came the revolutionists. The Last Poets, known for black militancy, released their self-titled album in 1970 condemning white suppression and black immobility.

The word scene dropped off with disco but returned in the 1980s with rap. It made its mainstream debut in 1997 with the movie *Love Jones*, a romantic comedy in which love blossoms amid the backdrop of spoken word.

Love Jones sparked venues in such cities as New York, Philadelphia and Chicago, as people flocked to poetry readings at college campuses and coffee houses. Although spoken word is used on television shows and in commercials to attract the young urban population, it's been slow to catch on in the Tampa Bay area. Only a few venues offer poetry nights.

Creating his own

George Gourdine was searching for poetry that featured African-Americans. He found *Def Poetry* on television but nothing at his college, the University of Tampa, when he moved here two years ago from Boston.

When the 21-year-old couldn't find a place to spin his poetry, he created his own. He formed Underground Poetz: Mind State of a Poet productions in September. The group of six students hosts poetry nights in a small theater on the second floor of the Ronald L. Vaughn Hall. The theater's wooden stage pro-

vides an intimate setting for poet and audience.

On one Tuesday night, freshman Jamal Wilburg walks onstage with a piece written 30 minutes before, which he tells the audience.

That doesn't deter the 18-year-old from delivering a stirring explanation on why he doesn't celebrate Black History Month. He delivers it in a fast-paced, stream-of-consciousness style, applauding black leaders for their contributions and challenging the audience to study its history beyond February.

Sure Martin Luther King was a great man with a great plan trying to lead his people through a terrible land but the history is much more than him and Rosa Parks it should be in our hearts and we shouldn't allow for it to depart.

But for the other 11 months of the year we don't have time to see clear and remember. We would rather buy 22s and Escalades driving down the street in our own personal parades showing charades of freedom when this isn't even our kingdom.

The audience agrees with a loud "unh." Wilburg leaves the stage to applause.

Six months ago, Gourdine's poetry night was just a vision. He held poetry nights in September and November that attracted 70 to 100 people, Gourdine said. Then, there was a poetry slam in December; 20 poets performed. The contest, where the audience is the judge, drew more than 200 people, the largest crowd he's had, Gourdine said. The winners of the jam opened for the Russell Simmons' Def Poets tour show at UT the next day.

Since September, Gourdine has held monthly poetry events, each one with a bigger audience than the one before.

"Russell Simmons brought it to mainstream, put it on the map and gave people the ability to shine," Gourdine said. "That's what I'm trying to do."

Across town at Tropix Nightclub & Restaurant on Busch Boulevard and Nebraska Avenue, Walter "Wally B." Jennings has created a

cabaret-style poetry scene similar to the Nuyorican Poets Cafe in New York City, which is in its 27th year. Jennings' spot isn't as well-known, but it has a loyal following that is growing.

"We come together in an atmosphere that allows you to get on the mike and speak your mind," said Jennings, 26, a facilities manager for the University of South Florida's alumni center in Tampa. He started attending poetry readings as an undergraduate at Florida A&M University. A year later, he met Keith Rodgers, a Haines City native who started a poetry spot out of his apartment in Tallahassee. Rodgers called his venue Black on Black Rhyme, a play on the term black-on-black crime.

When Jennings returned to Tampa, he brought Rodgers' idea with him. He took the job seriously, devising a plan to market the poetry scene to club owners. He held his first show in September 2001 at Lloyd's Cajun Cafe (formerly Blues Ship, now Skulpturz). His poetry troupe, the Conscious Party, has performed at fraternity and sorority functions and cultural events throughout Florida. The Tallahassee chapter expanded to Fort Lauderdale and Polk County.

In *The Answer*, Jennings says:

*I have been blessed to receive my portion,
a token of appreciation that helps to define
my purpose,
with certain benefits and blessings
while testing my ability to keep the faith,
run the race
when the finish line isn't visible,
mental obstacles, for most it's impossible
because of the sacrifice, the strife
between self actualization and a relationship,
a straight-up trip if ever there was one.*

For Jennings, spoken word is a means for the everyday man.

"I see it as a place where I belong," he said. "It allows me to have a voice, a presence."

— Times researcher Caryn Baird contributed to this report. Janel Stephens can be reached at (727) 893-8846 or stephens@sptimes.com.