

# SPOKEN

(Spokane Arts and Culture)

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SPOKE(s)(N)(e)

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# Editor

There is a notion in science called the Mediocrity Principle. According to this principle, no place in the universe is more special than any other place in the universe: Mars is not better than Saturn, Orion is not better than Circinus, and New York is not better than Spokane.

I hear a lot of murmurs about what Spokane lacks as a city. People usually say, "It's not Portland or Seattle," which is very true. Spokane is neither Portland nor Seattle. Spokane, for all intents and purposes, is Spokane.

I happen to like Spokane. I lived in Portland for nine years and I don't especially miss it. I've visited Seattle a number of times, and every time I go there I think to myself, "Boy, I love to visit, but it would take a lot to get me to live here."

This isn't to say I think Spokane is perfect. I wish we had coastal levels of rain here, as I dearly love the rain. I wish places didn't close at 6:00 p.m. (seriously?!). I wish we had Powell's, but I guess only Portland gets to have Powell's. Finally, it really annoys me when people call three or four similar shops in one block, or even next door to each other, a "district." Downtown Spokane is the size of some entire districts in other cities. I'm all for local shops and what not, but let's be realistic about who we are.

So, who are we? I hear it said that Spokane is too small, too old, too boring to do any "real" art here. But in saying that, the naysayers show themselves to be of narrow vision. Spokane is small, which means you can easily find like-minded individuals to help you take on the world. Spokane is old, which means you have a rich history to draw from to inspire present and future work. Spokane is boring because you are complaining about it and not working to change whatever it is you don't like about it.

I support ideas like Terrain, Raw Space, and the photography meet-ups that occasionally happen because I believe in a free-form community approach to art. Galleries are nice for showing art, but I don't want to see them become our focus. We have enough abandoned buildings around here to deprive everyone of the excuse for "not having a place to work or share."

There is nothing that makes Portland, Seattle, New York or Chicago "better" than Spokane. That's in your head. Maybe it's nostalgia or maybe it's propaganda. Whatever it is that makes you think you can't do your best work or succeed because you live in Spokane, it is a lie. If you can't find what you're looking for, start it. "Be the change you want to see in the world," as Gandhi put it.

A city only reflects the people who live in it. Start making Spokane a place that will make people in other places say, "My hometown is fine, but it's no Spokane."

# Is it Art?

*Who the %\$#@ is Jackson Pollock?* is a documentary about a woman who found a painting at a garage sale. She didn't think it looked like much. It was just some paint dribbled onto a canvas, but someone told her it looked like a Jackson Pollock painting. She said, "Well, who the %\$#@ is Jackson Pollock?" So began her journey from her world as a long-haul truck driver to the high-rises of the art world's elite. What did the experts say?

"Yes, it's a Jackson Pollock." Well, except for those experts who said it was not a Jackson Pollock. Private collectors have offered her several million dollars, but she refuses to sell until she is offered the several more million dollars it's worth, if it is indeed an original early Jackson Pollock.

The money is beside the point. Really, whether or not Jackson Pollock made it is besides the point. The underlying theme of the film, and what I want to tackle here, is the question "Is it worth anything at all?"

I'll tell you how I got to this topic. This started as a discussion about whether or not Lady Gaga is an "artist." Do her lyrics have any meaning? Does that matter, or are her songs a small part of a larger "performance art" piece that's a commentary on popular culture and music?

That discussion reminded me of another I have had about the merit of Picasso because "oh, anybody can draw an ear where the nose is." So, do alternative art forms—cubism, minimalism, abstract expressionism, Dadaism—merit a discussion in the grand scheme of ART, or should they be relegated to the side wings of museums while Rembrandts and Michelangelos reside in the main gallery for serious art students and admirers?

First, I would ask those who argue against Picasso, Pollock, or de Kooning, have you ever tried to create a work like that? The answer is usually no because if they had, then they would realize how much time and concentration goes into minimalist, cubist, or abstract expressionist work. What people usually don't realize is Picasso especially had a very well-rounded arts education. He could draw anything and make it look like the object or person in question without breaking a sweat. Cubism was a very calculated presentation of the idea that art is created in a two-dimensional space and for generations could not break free of that construct. It was a way of exploring space and form where, really, there is none. It also deconstructed items to find their core. For example, Picasso's Weeping Woman is one of my favorites because that's how I feel when I'm emotionally distressed. It's emotion on the canvas. You can't do that by accident.

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Pollock recognized something that was missing in the art world, freedom of movement. His work was jazz, beat poetry, and dissonance. It was detached from form, yet still held true to the ideas of composition, color, and tone. His works have layers that you can just fall into. You don't look at a Jackson Pollock, you enter it. Again, you can't do that by accident.

That they are made easily is too often the argument against these art forms: paint is just dribbled or splashed around or a few lines are drawn and colored in. However, that undercuts the amount of work that goes into deciding how the finished piece will look, what colors will work, how shapes fit into other shapes, etc. Even the most minimalist work has hours of thought behind it. The fact there could even be an argument about whether or not a painting is an early Jackson Pollock shows there is an understanding that the technique evolved and didn't just happen overnight.

How does Lady Gaga fit into this? Well, it's the same discussion. The merit of her work can't be judged solely by the end result (her music). Her songs may not be born out of the same process as, say, Sufjan Stevens, but that isn't really the point.

The merit of art is not dependant on whether or not you agree with the message or even understand the message. What is important is that there is a message. Dissecting the art to find the message more often than not kills it.

Picasso can't be dismissed because his paintings don't look like people. They aren't supposed to. That's his message. Pollock can't be dismissed because his paintings don't contain recognizable objects. They are objects. That's his message.

We need to move beyond the idea that art is a product. The process, the thought behind the process, and, ultimately, the artists themselves should be our focus when determining the merit of art. I would hate to be judged as a bad photographer for the picture that doesn't look quite right, if that was my point. I have been and it hurts. It devalues the effort I put into making that statement. It devalues me as an artist.

In the end, if we really want to appreciate art, we need to stop making snap judgments or following the groupthink about what is and is not art. If you only rely on your "opinion" to judge art, then you will end up very narrow in your focus and the best work will pass you by. In other words, don't get caught in the bad romance (rah-rah-romama) of limiting your artistic experience.

# Profile: The Perennials



The Perennials have a timeless quality to their sound that I very much appreciate. I have listened to their self-titled EP several times over the last few months, and I am continually amazed at how fresh the songs sound each time I hear them.

Often, I will just sit and listen (especially to "Radio," which my neighbors may believe to be the only song I have in my possession). I let the harmonies and simple yet powerful arrangements carry me through the fog of my own memories, the joys and sorrows I have felt in life.

On that most proverbial of desert islands, The Perennials will be on heavy rotation.

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SPOKEN: Basic background stuff?

PETE: The Perennials are currently Amanda Wells, Pete Wells, and Aaron Hamel.

Amanda and I recorded a Christmas album in December of 2010 to give out as gifts to family and friends. I had been playing in bands since high school, but Amanda had no musical background whatsoever, so it was supposed to be a joke. Anyway, it actually turned out pretty good, and it became immediately evident that she had a really good voice.

I guess January of 2010 is when we officially became a "band," though it was just Amanda and me at the time. We started writing songs and playing a few local gigs here and there. In October, we released a 5 song EP. Almost immediately afterwards we met Aaron and he started playing drums for us. We did a few shows around town as a four piece with Fawn Dasovich playing keys and singing with us. She has since moved on and is now playing with another local band.

We just got back from a three month trip in Europe, and we're currently down a band member, but as soon as we can find someone to play keys and sing a third harmony for us, our goal is to head back to the full band direction. Also, we'll be recording a full length record through the summer and hopefully, [we'll be] back on tour this winter. That pretty much brings us up to speed.

SPOKEN: How do you approach song writing, both individually and as a team?

PETE: Generally I write all the material we play, although recently, Amanda has started writing as well. There have also been an increasing amount of co-written songs between the three of us lately, and we seem to be heading more in that direction. As far as the creative process goes, we usually start off with a basic musical idea, and a melody that inspires some sort of imagery, and then we write lyrics to fit it. The music is predominately vocally driven, so we try to have harmonies and vocal parts worked out before we take it to the practice space and work it out as a band.

SPOKEN: Do you have certain themes that you return to repeatedly?

PETE: Not as a rule. We try to keep new ideas flowing and not to be overly redundant in songwriting. That being said, the next record we're doing does have a pervasive theme, which is a first for us. The songs are all written about completely different things, but using different children's stories as metaphors.

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**SPOKEN:** Are there themes that you want to explore more in your songs but haven't approached yet?

**PETE:** We don't at the moment. Generally, the ideas we write from are pretty spontaneous. Themes seem to develop naturally on their own. We didn't peruse the idea for a record about children's stories until after we had already written a few that seemed to have a similar theme. Then we just ran with it.



**SPOKEN:** How do you work through creative blocks during the songwriting process, if such a thing were to occur?

**PETE:** We don't run into writers block too often, but when we do, usually bringing in a fresh opinion from someone else in the band is the best remedy. Also, sometimes just letting a song sit and revisiting it later works. We try not to force anything creative.

**SPOKEN:** I know you just recently got back from a tour in Europe. Do you have more touring planned? What does the future hold?

**PETE:** Yea we spent a few weeks in New York and we were in London for about a month. The music scene over there is fantastic. It was great. We are recording a full length record over the summer and should be back on the road either late this fall or early winter. I think we'll stick to the states this time.

**SPOKEN:** What has been your favorite part of the Spokane art community?

**PETE:** Overall we have been surprised by the scene here in Spokane. We feel like we aren't well known, and yet we have been so well received. We enjoy the fact that you don't have to travel too far to go see a great show, or see some awesome local art.

**SPOKEN:** Anything you would like to say to the Spokane art community?

**PETE:** We look forward to getting to know you better!



*You can find their EP, The Perennials, available on iTunes, emusic, cdbaby, Amazon, etc. Also, hard copies can be found at Indaba coffee, or at their shows. Additionally, you can find the band on Facebook, MySpace, Reverbnation, etc.*

*The band is also looking for "a fourth member, (preferably a girl) who can sing and play keys." If you are interested, you can contact them at: [theperennialsarewe@gmail.com](mailto:theperennialsarewe@gmail.com), [facebook.com/theperennials](https://www.facebook.com/theperennials), or [myspace.com/theperennials](https://www.myspace.com/theperennials).*



# April Poetry Slam



April is National Poetry Month. Poetry is one of my favorite creative endeavors. I wish I could write better poetry, but time has only proven to me that I should stick with other artistic disciplines and leave the poetry to the real poets. However, poetry still influences my work in photography. So, for the April Poetry Slam I wanted to try and capture the poems visually. As you look over these pictures, keep in mind that I am not trying to represent the artists but rather the overall experience I feel from listening to the poems and poets.







# After Words



As I'm walking down the street, I come across a man sitting on the sidewalk with a violin and an open case. I have nothing but respect for buskers. I've passed two already, but I don't stop to take their picture. I would, if not for the fact that they happen to be well known and always draw a crowd of chain smoking hipsters. I don't see the image I want, so I move on.

I come across a man sitting on the sidewalk, playing his violin. This one needs to be documented. He doesn't notice the people walking by. He's just there to play for whomever wishes to listen.

I wish to listen.

He plays a little, and then stops. He chuckles, plays a little more. I stop and take a shot. He chuckles again, and greets me. I see the sign in his case.

"What is your passion?"

I take another shot.

He stops, looks at me and says...

"I want to play something sad, but I'm too happy. So, I'm at a loss of ability."

I drop some change into his case. I came prepared, knowing that I would run into at least one busker. Never take their picture without giving them something in return is my rule.

I think about what he said. I will continue to think about what he said.

At the bottom of the sign, it said "Turn me." I imagine something was written on the back. I didn't turn the sign, because I didn't want an answer.

Sometimes I don't want answers. I don't think art lives in the answers. I believe that if we run out of questions, we run out of motivation. Not just to create, but to live.

So. What is your passion?

