

Spoken Spokane

Arts and Culture



Winter 2010

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SPOKE(s)N(s)

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Editor

I've spent a lot of time trying to figure out the direction I want to take the magazine. I want to stay true to the original vision, but incorporate my own style. In order to do that, I had to figure out what my style is.

In my journey so far as editor, I have learned a lot about what I like and do not like about art. Trying to come up with something to share with everyone does occupy a great deal of my time, and it's unfortunate when I run out of time to try and compile it together every month. In fact, I would say my greatest frustration is trying to balance my personal life with my vision for the magazine.

Because of this, I have decided to run Spoken Spokane as a quarterly magazine. I hope to be able to use the extra time to dig deeper into the creative process of the artists we profile. I want to produce themed issues (poetry, local music, independent film, etc.). I have more ideas than I can possibly share with you right now, but let's just say that I am very excited about the future of Spoken Spokane.

Thank you for your support!

Profile: Mark Anderson



Spoken: Basic background stuff.

Mark: For the first seventeen years of my life I lived in a small town called Mica seven miles outside of Spokane Valley. It's not as much a town as it is a small area with a few houses there, and it isn't at all self sufficient. While I lived there we had a post office, but I think even that is gone now. It used to have a school of its own, a church, a fire-station, a library, and a hotel. Most of the buildings have been torn down or converted into houses. So I feel I can claim to have grown up in the ruins of a forgotten society which disappeared without anyone noticing.

During my junior and senior years in high school I attended Eastern Washington University through the Running Start program, which allows high-achieving students to go to college in their last two grades of high school and pays their tuition for them to do so. Later I stayed at EWU and declared myself a psychology major, working construction during the summer to cover tuition. This is just a couple years ago, but it feels like it was a life away. At the same time as I was working on my psychology degree I started getting active in the poetry slam. Before I knew it I was competing in my first individual World Poetry Slam (IWPS) which was held in Charlotte, NC in 2008. Since then I've gone on to compete in a second IWPS and represent Spokane this year as a member of our first team to compete in the National Poetry Slam team competition. I've also performed poetry in various venues across the pacific northwest, and I am now one of the main coordinators of the Spokane Poetry Slam.

Spoken: What inspires you artistically?

Mark: I'm inspired by life! If I feel something very strongly there is a good chance a poem will come of it. I write very introspectively, and I am also very introspective about the process of writing. I lie in bed wondering what makes good writing, what makes a good person, what makes a good life? But when I'm actually writing I don't think about [those questions]. The ideas come without me noticing their arrival, and suddenly I'm writing a poem and I don't know where it came from. My greatest sources of inspiration are the people in my writing community, especially the other members of Spokane's 2010 poetry slam team (Kurt Olson, Zack Graham, and Danielle Estelle). When one of them writes something great I feel like responding to it, and I think the fact that they all feel the same way really drives us to write better. It's good to have others who've been with me all along, who I respect and am competitive with. Other writers and artists inspire me as well.



I think my best work happens when I start to be honest about things I'd rather not be honest about. Sometimes the process of writing is itself an exercise at getting to where the truth of the matter is.

Spoken: How did you get started writing and performing poems?

Mark: Ever since I was a little kid I've had a fascination with writing. When I was in second grade I started writing poems. Even before that I dictated stories to my mom and she wrote them down. So, writing is something that I've always sort of done without thinking too much about it. I went through several phases of not writing anything creative for years, but I always came back.

Then, in the summer after I graduated from high school I learned from a friend about a poetry open mic at Empeyrean. I had been writing some poetry recently, so I decided to check it out. This open mic was organized by Daniel Harrington, the same person who ran the poetry slam at that time, so I got to know some of the slam poets. I'll make a clarification here: an open mic is an event where anyone can show up and read; a poetry slam is a form of competitive poetry reading in which poets are judged by the audience. Soon the open mic became my weekly sanctuary. It was where I went to feel like I belonged. Every week I'd show up with my four or five short poems, and soon I was part of the community. After a couple months Daniel got too busy to be there and emcee every week, so he asked me to try it out. I still remember how nervous I was that first time as host. Before I got the reading started someone gave me the advice, "Just don't be yourself and you'll be fine." That's the worst advice ever. But it must have worked since it got me on the stage. (continued)

At first I only liked the open mic, and wasn't interested in the slam. Then one night I watched slam poetry videos late into the night and I thought to myself, "I bet I can actually do this." That same night I wrote the first draft of my first performance piece. A couple weeks later I was ready for the poetry slam. It was Valentine's Day and I was an awkward young man with two poems about unrequited infatuation. The crowd loved it and I ended up tying for the win, beating at least two poets who were better writers and performers than myself. That's the nature of the poetry slam. Sometimes the best poets and the best performers don't win. You can never know for certain how a poem will score, even if you're the best there is.

Spoken: Do you have any recurring themes, ideas or subjects that you are likely to explore often, in your poetry?

Mark: You could place a bet that the next time I put my hand on a pencil I'll start writing something about my own insecurity as a human being. I think too much about romance and existentialism, so they often get entangled in my writing. Things I don't quite understand come up often, like personal relationships and sex. Solitude is another topic of mine. I want to understand human nature. Philosophy has been one of my interests since I first found out about its existence, and I think that shows in my writing. I'm always trying to find out what it means to be human. Wolves and fire keep sprouting up in my poetry, no matter what I do. Paul Lindholt, who teaches English at EWU, regularly has me perform for his classes and they give me comments and critique. Once, after a performance, he told me that the main topic he saw me exploring was the confrontation between idealism and reality. I nodded at the insight, and pretended to understand. Since then I've thought about that observation, and though I've grown out of that youthful idealism to some extent I think the bulk of my writing still deals with that confrontation in some form.



Photo by Mark Anderson

(continued)

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

Mark: Over the course of this last year the Spokane writing community has started to come together. It used to be that there were a few different sets of organizers creating poetry events in Spokane only vaguely acknowledging the existence of the others. Now we're all collaborating and helping with all the events. I like this. I'm excited that the underground writing scene has exploded like it has, where there are now several different readings every month of different types, where four years ago you might have been out of luck trying to find a single one. I haven't been around for that long, but people who have been around say that the underground writing scene has never been like this before, with several well attended events going on frequently. I'm definitely proud to be a part of it.

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

Mark: Some people think that you can only do important art in a big city. Let's prove them wrong.

After Words

This is a new feature I want to try out. I already have the editor's letter, but I tend to keep that more about the business of Spoken Spokane, and I always have more to say. There are topics that I want to explore from an artistic and creative standpoint that don't really fit anywhere. Especially now with the magazine going quarterly, I will have more time to really meditate on issues going on in the art scene and Spokane in general.

For my first go at this, I thought I would share my thoughts on one of the biggest upsets for the Spokane art scene. I am, of course, talking about the closing of the Empyrean. There is one issue here, support. How do we, as an artistic community, support our venues? How do we, as a city, support our small businesses?

I will be the first to share in the blame of not going to the Empyrean as much as I would have liked to. I liked the Madison Street space, but I loved the new space. Some would say that the vibe changed when they moved. That's true, but I felt that it was a change for the better. I liked the bigger space. I liked the nooks and crannies. From the moment I stepped in the door, I knew it was a place designed for us crazy artists. It was a place where I could see myself sitting and just letting the muses do their work.

I am sad to say, while I always imagined myself doing that, I never did. I have no excuses. It was close to my home, I am downtown often, and I loved the venue. I just—never went. So, to Chrisy and Michelle, I want to personally apologize for not doing my part.

The more I think about it, the more I begin to see how many issues are at play here. We have the issue of local and civic support of small business. Also, is the Spokane art scene big enough to support as many venues as we have? Do we need more galleries? What is the artistic identity of Spokane? Our city is full of artists who are talented in many different areas of creative expression. We have musical groups made up of photographers, poets, and journalists. I think the Empyrean, perhaps best of all, represented this, which is why I have never thought of it as solely a music venue, but as an artists' space that had music.

In my perspective, the Spokane scene needs more places like the Empyrean, not less. We don't need more coffee shops or white box galleries. We don't need another downtown bar. By all means, please do not open another hip, neon, blaring nightclub. We need another Empyrean, a place that is home to artists of all walks, a place that wouldn't surprise anyone to host a Terrain one week and a high school metal band the next.

It won't create or maintain itself. There is no magic potion that will bring back what we have lost or build the next space. I can only hope that something good grows once the dust settles. I have learned my lesson: When the next Empyrean comes along, I will do whatever I can to see it stay alive.

Thanks for the memories, Empyrean. You will be missed.



