

Poetry Contests and Improvisations

by Amanda Dargan and Steve Zeitlin

Poetry contests are found in many cultures. During the Hellenistic and Roman periods in Greece, bards competed for prizes at festivals held by a cult of the Helikonian Muses. Among Eskimos, taunting songs are used to work off grudges. In the Arab world, poets duel in the sung oral poetry of the *zajal*, using colloquial language. With nimble minds, these contemporary poets respond to the other in rhyme in a style that first appeared in 12th-century Islamic Spain. In Japan, court poetry originated in poetry contests. Eventually these developed into a special form of poetry match against oneself, in which an individual poet took two different roles and played a kind of poetic chess with himself. He would then send the results to a distinguished judge for comment. In Tanzania, two poet-singers sometimes agree to compete on a certain day. The competitors try to find out their opponent's songs before-hand, so they can prepare sarcastic and insulting responses.

In many cultures of the world, adolescent boys have traditions of ritual insults, often involving rhyme, and in some cases, linking rhymes (where replies need to rhyme with the insults). These traditions

have been documented in Turkey, Mexico, and Africa. In the United States, the African forms evolved into "the dozens."

In Latin America, the Caribbean, and some parts of the U.S., improvised lyrics in the *décima* form are used by poets to "rank" one another in a friendly competition. Though the *décima* has many variations, its structure is based on a ten-line scheme, with each line having eight syllables. This structure was used by the eleventh and twelfth centuries. Most scholars credit its invention to the Spanish court poet, Vicente Espinel (1550-1624), who used it in his collection of poems, *Diversas Rimas* (1591). These used what became the *décima's* basic rhyme structure: abbaaccddc.

Verbal duels are an important aspect of the tradition. *Décimistas* ask the audience for a theme or a *pie forzado*, or agree on one themselves. Then two singers alternate verses, trying to outdo the other verbally. A *concurso de trovadores* is a traditional event in Puerto Rico in which singers compete for prize money. The tradition continues today in the U.S. in many Puerto Rican communities, especially around Christmas.

More contemporary forms of poetry contests, such as poetry slams, freestyle rap contests, and the annual Taos World Heavyweight Poetry Bout, also frequently employ improvisation. A Poetry bout is exactly what it sounds like; a bout of poetry. In the style of a boxing match, the formal setting is a roped off square, complete with ring girls or boys, handlers for each contestant, judges and a bell. Two poets square off by reading/performing a poem for the early rounds. To add variety and excitement, in the later rounds the Bout may include a poetry with music round, and a final improvised poetry round, where each poet improvises a poem using a word drawn from a hat with only thirty seconds to think before beginning. This improvised poetry round generates a great deal of excitement can be an compelling technique to use with students.

Photo by Martha Cooper



Poets Anne Waldman and Victor Hernandez Cruz faced off in a Heavyweight Poetry Bout at The People's Poetry Gathering