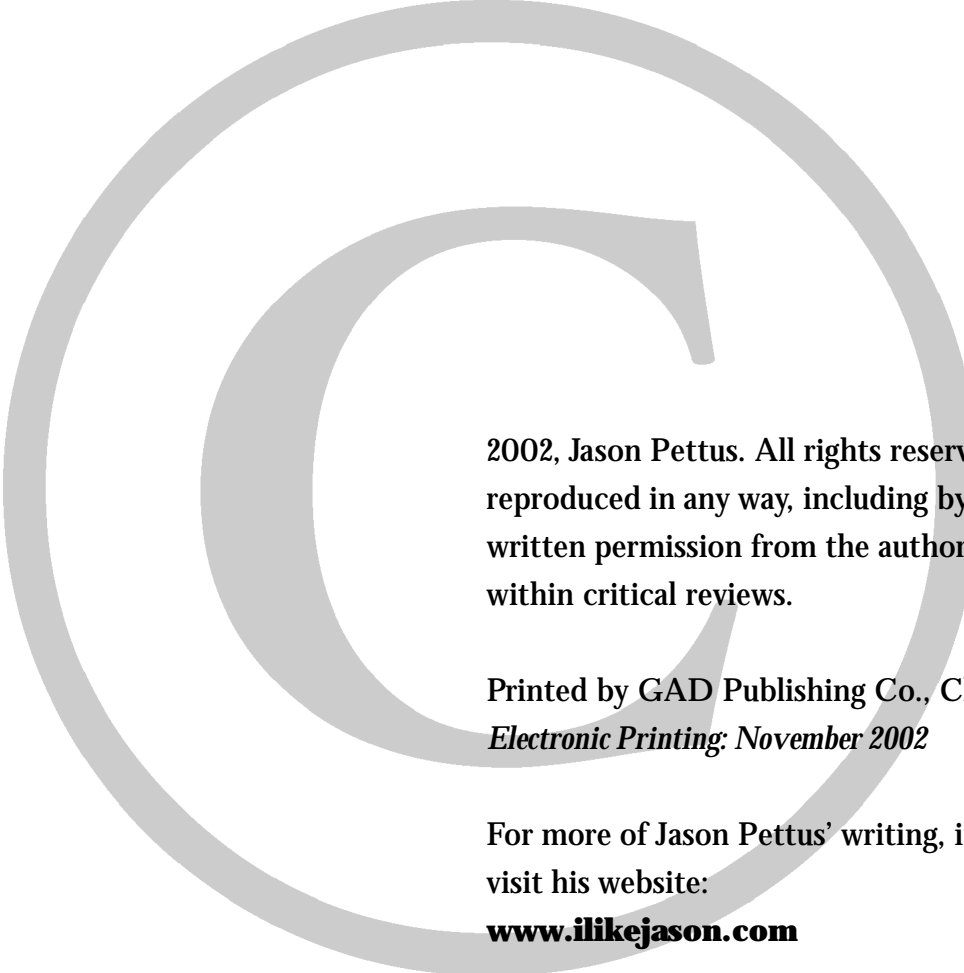


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THE
TUNNEL
R A T
SESSIONS

interviews with chicago poets
from the pages of *Tunnel Rat* magazine

jason pettus



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Printed by GAD Publishing Co., Chicago USA.

Electronic Printing: November 2002

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INTRO DUCTION

There's a belief among many in the underground that the only difference between an artistic community and a famous artistic community is that of documentation. Where would the Abstract Expressionists have been, after all, without Clement Greenberg? Or the Beats without City Lights? The Algonquin Round Table without *The New Yorker*? The punk movement without CBGB? The fact of the matter is that underground artistic communities have been popping up in America as long as there's been Americans around to create them. Dozens of "scenes," in cities all across our country, have grown, thrived, and then disappeared again from our national consciousness, all because no one was around to record what was happening.

This was certainly the case in Chicago in the 1990s. Empowered by the growing popularity of slam poetry and the technological ease of publishing your own work, the Chicago literary community at its height was seeing over 30 different live literary events a month, over a dozen small presses, and easily over 200 local writers producing work and performing it publicly on a weekly basis. It was a great time to be a writer in Chicago, and one could easily find a large and enthusiastic audience for one's work in the 90s without almost any effort at all. There was only one problem--considering the ephemeral nature of live poetry events, there was a growing number of us in the community who felt that some sort of objective record should be being kept, some sort of permanent "transcript" of the events of our city that could be put on paper, saved, and read by generations to come.

Chicago poet and journalist John Biederman started a new monthly publication in 1997 called *Tunnel Rat*, just for this purpose. Various attempts at poetry magazines and newsletters had been started over the years in Chicago, all of them failing for the same reason--given the fractured nature of our city's literary community, no magazine about the scene had ever been able to withstand the various infighting that regularly takes place between various open mics

and small presses here. John was determined to overcome this--using the principles he had learned in journalism school, he was dedicated to producing an objective look at the Chicago literary community, in all its myriad forms. The publication was to look at all facets of the scene evenly, with a dispassionate eye instead of a critical one, and with room for writers from all over the city, not just personal friends.

John asked me to be the design editor and a contributing writer to *Tunnel Rat*, to which I happily agreed. He and I sat down and had a series of discussions about what was to constitute the bulk of the publication. The focus of the newsletter, we both agreed, should be a large monthly calendar of all the various live events taking place across the city--the publication, at its heart, was meant as an information-disseminating tool, and a guide to the myriad events happening in Chicago at the time was sorely missing from the community. John wanted *Tunnel Rat* to include columns on practical aspects of the scene, no-nonsense information that fellow writers could use to help their own careers--articles on copyrighting, publishing and touring, among other subjects. We decided to pick a theme for each issue (race and the poetry scene, sex and the poetry scene, etc.) and to invite writers from all over the city to pen objective articles about what they have noticed concerning the topic. Finally, I thought it important that each issue contain a longer, in-depth interview with an individual writer in the community--after all, I opined, hundreds of people were fans of particular writers here in Chicago, but never are these writers asked to sit down and discuss what motivates them, why they write what they do, and what they think of the scene of which they are a member.

Eight issues of *Tunnel Rat* were eventually published, and at the time it was a rousing success--at its height, several thousand people were reading the publication every month, and we were regularly receiving 20 to 30 new submissions for each issue. *Tunnel Rat's* demise had nothing to do with politics or in-fighting or any of the other things that had happened to publications in the past. Our problem was an age-old one in the arts--namely, no one on staff knew much about advertising or economics, and even after a year and a half we were still unable to make the publication financially self-supporting. It was a shame, too, because I felt that *Tunnel Rat* was just starting to find its mature voice right at the time when the finances of its publication became of critical mass.

In the hopes of preserving some small part of the documentation that took place in that particular time and place, I've decided to publish a book of the three in-depth interviews I personally conducted for *Tunnel Rat*. (The interview with Greg Gillam was intended for a future issue but never actually ran.) It's my hope that these interviews will offer you a small window in which to see the Chicago literary community at a time when it was infinitely exciting, when all of us felt that there were important things going on in our city and that we were out to not just publish works but to learn and to grow from each other. At the time and place where you yourself are reading this book, all three of these interview subjects may already be famous and wealthy, or may have already fallen into obscurity. It's not my place to speculate on such things, but to merely provide the permanent documentation that they indeed existed, that at a certain time they were considered some of the more gifted and successful artists of a particular time and a particular place in American underground history. And if this helps in some small way to remember the Chicago literary community of the 1990s, a time I remember with great fondness, then I will have successfully done my job.

Jason Pettus

January 18, 2002

G R E G GILLAM

was a founding member of "Words to Swallow," an influential poetry troupe in Chicago which paved the way for many of the events of the 1990s to come. He went on to become one of the most successful live-event producers of the decade: He was the creator and host of "The Testing Ground," the weekly show at the Wicker Park bar Sweet Alice which produced many of the award-winning poets of the 90s; "The Quimby's Sessions" and "The Poop Studios Sessions," two monthly invitational shows that each had specific themes (held respectively at Quimby's Bookstore and Poop Studios art gallery), and "The Amazing Gut Carnival," a series of long-form poetry readings at various venues across the city. He is currently the editor-in-chief of the literary website "Fengi," and still writes on a regular basis.

Jason Pettus: Hello, Greg.

Greg Gillam: Hello.

JP: So why don't you start by telling me the story we were talking about earlier this week, about how you started writing and performing in the poetry scene?

GG: Well, the whole reason I started reading poetry and writing poetry was that Thax Douglas asked me to come to his open mic. At the time Thax did these performance art shows, and I thought he was inviting me to see one of his shows. And then when he explained what it was, I realized he was asking me to participate, which I thought was kind of weird because I never said that I wrote poetry, I had no poetry written, and I didn't even really think of myself as a writer.

JP: How did you ever come to the attention of Thax?

GG: I worked with Thax and we would sit around and talk about art and books and then he said, [imitating Thax's voice] "Oh Greg, I have this show at Estelle's and it's an open mic and you can come to it." And I was like, "Okay," and he was liked, "And you can read some of your work too." And that's when I said I didn't have anything to read, that I wasn't a poet.

JP: What year was this?

GG: I think it was 1992. And so then when I said I don't write poetry he asked if I was a writer and I said I'm not a writer, because even though I did do writing, it was all little fragments and rough drafts of letters, fiction I wrote when I was fantasizing about being a writer. But I had decided after I graduated from college that my one rule was that if I wasn't actually producing finished work for public consumption, I wasn't going to go around calling myself a writer.

JP: Unless you were actually finishing projects that were ready to be published. And at this point were you not writing at all, or were you just writing half-finished work?

GG: I was writing only half-finished works, and I wasn't writing any works for public consumption, like, I couldn't even show what I had written to my friends.

JP: What was your major at school?

GG: It was Radio, Television, and Film, and then I was in a scriptwriting concentration for quite a long period of time. I wrote and finished scripts as parts of assignments and stuff but I didn't finish the cycle because unfortunately there were other classes that were much more interesting than the one I was in, because it was a writer's workshop with a bunch of people who wanted to be writers because they wanted to make money first and foremost, and some of them didn't even know if they wanted to be writers, if they wanted to write scripts. And all of these issues were being discussed much more than, like, anyone doing any writing. And I began to think, "Well, this is a little counterproductive," and I don't know if I want to write scripts, and I don't even know if I know enough about life. And then when I graduated from college I drove across the United States, and I encountered so many different people and things that I thought, "I don't really know enough about life to presume to know what kind of scripts..." I mean, maybe this is why so many movies are annoying, because [the writers] go straight from screenwriting school to writing screenplays and that's why some of the coolest and most interesting characters you find are all writers who are just out of school and trying to get their first big break. [laughter]

JP: Can we expand the theory here? Can we agree that this is indicative of the academic artists' atmosphere that has pervaded this country since the 50s? I mean, it seems that we've slowly entered the time period in America where it's no longer valid to be an artist unless you have gotten a degree in art, you know what I mean? It seems there used to be a time period around the Hemingways and Steinbecks, and this was the last time in America where it was okay to be someone who was uneducated, who didn't spend years at college trying to learn their craft.

GG: Well, actually I have become obsessed with a similar notion since high school--and this is a weird story--at the time we had to read stories by Nathaniel Hawthorne and Herman Melville, and at the time I didn't like Melville at all. I think now it was because it was the time I was growing up. But we read this Hawthorne story called "The Minister and the Black Veil," and it's about this minister and his black veil and you never find out what's behind the black veil..

JP: [laughing] Wait, it's about a minister and his black veil?

GG: [laughing] Yes indeed it was. I just realized how absurd that sounded. Anyway, you never found out what was behind the minister's black veil, and Hawthorne was never obvious about that but you didn't care, because that wasn't the point of the story. Well, then Melville writes this story about a woman on an island and something horrible has happened to her, and he actually says something in the story to the effect of, "I'm not going to tell you what happened," which kind of spells out the effect that's not supposed to be spelled out. So I was already disgruntled with the story. I thought, "Wow. This story is really..." I mean, whereas in the story of the minister and the black veil I was glad I didn't know, in Melville's story I felt ripped off. And of course this is written in a time when Melville was a...

JP: A slavish devotee of Hawthorne.

GG: That's what I'm getting to. He also wasn't as good at the time he was writing those stories as by the time he got to Moby Dick and stuff. Then we saw a documentary where Melville had this incident that changed his life where he went on this picnic with Nathaniel Hawthorne, and was so impressed with Hawthorne that he developed an interest in Hawthorne's work and point of view to the point that you might call a crush. And many homosexual scholars have called it a crush. And if you read the letters...damn, it sounds

like...there's this letter to Mrs. Hawthorne that basically says, "Oh I'm so glad you were so friendly, and I came over rather suddenly and, I hope that, you know, Nate managed to read the book and stuff," the subtext of it being, "I know I showed up last night and I was really, really weird and I wanted to talk to Mr. Hawthorne and I'm glad you were patient. I'm sorry, I'm sorry! But if you could call me sometime that would be great! Sorry!"

JP: This is what we were talking about the other day--"No, Herman, Nathaniel's not in right now..." [Greg laughs] "No, I don't know when he's going to be in, sorry." [more laughter] But how does this get back to what we were talking about?

GG: So I began to realize that it really irritated me that Melville was trying to adhere to Hawthorne's idea of intellectualism, when he was a guy who was just a rough-and-tumble literate sailor who writes stories, who basically ruined what might have been a good story, and was irritating us by saying, "I'm writing an important story right now and you should appreciate this." And not only that, but that the literary canon had fallen for it so now I'm being forced to read this really sucky story and analyze it. And I wrote as much as this that day. You had to write a thesis paper your junior and senior year. My thesis paper my junior year was about why I thought people didn't read poetry anymore...or at least none of my friends did...and it was because there were such intensively long, ornate academic analyses of them that it made people think that they couldn't just go read the poem and enjoy it. It made them think that poetry was a foreign language they would never master. And I used e.e. cummings as an example and I used one of his simplest poems--"A leaf falls/loneliness," and that's basically all it is, and then contrasted that with the chapter of analysis of the letter "L" in "A leaf falls," which was actually based on some actual valid observation, but was very scary and daunting. That this academic attitude, because all English teachers went to college, suffused down, and even if the English teacher was to say, "Just read it and enjoy it," there was so much of this culture now that people were actually frightened of it.

JP: And the unspoken thought there, too, that once you're raised in this kind of environment as a student, then as an actual creator you feel like you must write work that inherently appeals to those academicians. That if you're not doing something that can be dissected and have a lengthy thesis written about it then you're invalid as an artist.

GG: Exactly. And my thesis my senior year, that was my second argument, because I read *All the King's Men* by Robert VanHoren, which I realize now that I was much more willing to make this argument about stuff I didn't like. [Jason laughs] I really didn't like that book.

JP: Always much more easier, isn't it? [laughter]

GG: I didn't like that book and I decided that I didn't really like Robert VanHoren, who was a bigass academic, and the book starts out by being about this Huey Long-type senator but then basically in the middle of this really interesting Huey Long story has this digression about the narrator who is this, like, screwed-up, bitter, resentful reporter whose story I found incredibly uninteresting and just seemed like a guy who just needed to try to be happy a little more. And he tried to do this ornate thing about a writer writing and it just bored the fuck out of me. And the only reason I could think that Robert VanHoren thought that this was an interesting idea was that because it's a lot harder to write a thesis paper merely about a Huey Long-type character, although, you know...it was like letting Nick Carraway have his own book and inserting it into the middle of *The Great Gatsby*. You know, you don't have to do that. I mean, why? I mean, there are so many poems about poets writing poetry, and there are so many novels about novelists. And while some of them are good, because poets and novelists are human beings too, there is that thing where I pick up a book and I read that and I think, "Oh, enough already." And now that author has to work twice as hard than if that [character] had been I-don't-know-interesting. Because now I myself am a poet who

hopes to someday be a fiction writer, it's because I've read so many things. Just like any movie that ends with the person writing the movie we've just been watching, I think is a complete and utter rip-off. It is bullshit from day one.

JP: You want to throw things at the screen at the end of the movie.

GG: Yeah, I mean, "BOO! BOO!" It might have been great the first time it was done, but now that John Hughes is doing it at the end of *She's Having a Baby*, it's no longer valid. And while ancient sword-and-sorcery and knights-on-quests stuff can be done again and again, the self-aware, "The point of the story is that I'm telling a story" [stuff], how many times can that be interesting? It's not, you know?

JP: So how does this gel with what you're doing right now? Because obviously you're at a point where you're writing a lot, but your life isn't any more exciting or adventure-filled or experience-filled necessarily than at the point in college where you were writing these papers and having this kind of attitude. How has your attitude changed in the years since then? What allows you to be writing now and feel like you have a right to get on stage and have people listen to your work?

GG: Well, first of all I realized that even though all of [the above] is valid, I ended up reading work that was much better. I read *Moby Dick* and really liked it. And part of the reason I liked it was that you can tell...I actually liked it more because I knew Melville was obsessed with Hawthorne, and I began to realize that despite the fact that it's the worst type of bad writing, to be self-aware--I mean literally, writing to be a writer so you can live the writer's life--that's not very good. But, there are many people who get up and write halfway good or halfway interesting books or something and they're extremely stuffy and academic but if you took them out of the academy, they'd still be writing. They might be writing slightly different stuff, but they'd still be writing. John Irving, an author I love. *The World According to Garp*, the least interesting thing about it is that Garp is a writer. Although it does help it to hold the plot together.

JP: I should say, that book actually has some of the same elements you were just talking about. Interspersed in that book is another book that Garp's supposedly writing.

GG: Except, even despite all that, it's a commentary on the entire literary establishment, which saves it for one reason: it's entertaining and a gripping good yarn and completely engrossing and it's as rewarding to read as it is to sit there and write a thesis paper about it.

JP: It's not navel-gazing, in other words.

GG: Right.

JP: It's a novel about the writing community, but written in a very engaging style.

GG: Right. And I began to realize in fact that my issue was not with academic writers or writers that seem to write stuff that can only be enjoyed if you were writing a thesis paper about it. Because I also realized that these thesis papers I was writing? I really enjoyed writing them. I enjoy writing thesis papers. I enjoy reading them. It's just that it cannot be the sole form of writing. If you do that long enough, it's just like any other form of supposed masturbation--you'll go blind. [Jason laughs] To use a really lame metaphor.

JP: So moved!

GG: [laughter] But it's one of the primary things. Anything done in excess can really ruin something. And then there are some points where I just think that some things are wonderful philosophical treatises and complete failures as entertainment. Whereas you can have an entertaining read that's philosophical. It's like a street that doesn't go both ways. You can start out with something insanely academic and never reach a point where it's entertaining at all, but you can start out with something entertaining and reach a point where it's insanely academic. It's a subtle thing, but I think it's the same difference between someone who's

never worked a day job writing songs about work, and someone who has. I mean, there are some things you don't have to experience first-hand, but there are a few things, like...you have to have worked some place, even if it's cutting the yard, to be able to write about work.

JP: This straddles the fine line that you and I have had many conversations about--the fine line between being writers like us who...well, let's admit it, we and all our friends are from these fairly stuffy academic environments and raised in these suburban home environments, fairly sheltered, fairly white-bread. And how do we as adult writers break out of this academic shell? How do you tread that fine line between having just enough real-life experiences so that it doesn't overwhelm you, that you're able to write good fiction or poetry that's engaging and outside of that academic world, and going over the line and feeling like you must have this destructive artist's lifestyle in order to be valid as a writer? You and I both have friends in Chicago who have gotten in a lot of trouble, sometimes died, for pursuing this very lifestyle.

GG: That's another thing I've been obsessed with, and I actually question. The first question I asked, about the time of high school, is "Is it okay to dismiss something as academic bullshit written just to be famous rather than because the author wants to write?" Is it a case of "Oh, I really want to write this novel and be a pillar of the academic community?" And I began to realize that very few people actually thought this way. They might be living that way, their writing may be full of it, but it's only one of their fantasies. They still really want to write a book. You know, anytime you write something that's not an assigned paper or a correspondence you have to make in order to stay in contact with something, those urges are so murky, and that's what I really believe. To roll back to when Thax asked me if I was a writer, I said no but I was still...at that time I had hundreds and hundreds of scraps of paper where I'd written down little brain exercises, and most of them were based on the fantasy of being a famous writer. I had a very rich inner life, one might say, and I felt like noting down some of the novels I fantasized about living or writing or whatever. So then when he asked me, "Do you write?" I said yes. And he said, "Well, come down, come check it out, maybe someday you can read something you've written." And then of course I saw it and it looked like a lot of fun and something I could do. I looked at everything I had and realized that none of it was very workable. But then I sat down and the next time inspiration hit me, I finished what I was writing. I had my first poem.

JP: From the mere inspiration that you now had a place to perform it? This is what pushed you to finish it?

GG: Not only that I had an audience but also [the thought of] "I'm doing this anyway, why not finish it?" There's all these people having these great experiences from working their brains enough to finish. And I am like that. I'm not just this person who [thinks] other people are writers and I'm not one. Whatever. I think that's one thing that happens in the poetry community. It starts with all these people who can write. And I think in our society, partially because of the academic thing...the act of reading and sitting around talking in many communities is at most something where you are believe you're being intellectual by yourself and read everything by yourself, and the only time to talk about writing with other people is when you're hitting on them. And then suddenly you're in this group of people who are being literate out in public. It's almost like coming out of the closet. And as a host I admit I have something akin to "gaydar." It's like...I don't know, literary radar. You can just sense literate people, you know? And they all want to come out and blossom and engage themselves. And that's a wonderful part of the poetry scene. The problem is that...

JP: Wait. Before you go on, here's a comment I want to interject here. A lot of people don't agree with this, but this is just my own opinion here. I have always been under the

belief, and I have always stated, that bad poets are necessary to the poetry scene. People like to trash bad poets all the time, but going along with your comment, I think there's a lot of people that are pretty decent writers who never thought they could be good enough to get up in front of the audience. And I think one of the things bad poets do is they inspire good poets to say, "Oh, I'm better than that. If that guy can get up and do it, I can get up and do it."

GG: Oh, I think much more than that. I think bad poets create an atmosphere where everyone feels they can participate. And it also keeps the scene alive, because if bad poets can participate....Bad poets are usually people who don't necessarily want to be poets the rest of their lives. They just want to have fun and participate.

JP: That's the nice thing and also the terrible thing about poetry, is that it doesn't take very long to write a poem. It's much like photography in that sense--almost everyone at one point in their life randomly snaps a really beautiful photograph, almost without knowing what they were doing. And everyone who wants to can sometime in their life write a wonderful, beautiful poem, almost by accident. Like the twelve monkeys at the typewriters.

GG: Yeah, but I would also say that there's that thing where a gigantic group of people have the urge to write in a way where you're not being forced to, be it a diary or whatever. Of those people, a slightly smaller percentage of them have something important to say. I mean, something that if even just read in their diary you'd go, "Oh, there's a lot of beautiful insights in here." Then a smaller portion of them--a much smaller portion--have something important to say that they can say well, and then of the people who can say anything well, there's that group who can say it well again and again and again and you can actually enjoy it more than once.

JP: And do it front of a big group of people in public.

GG: As a host and coming from a host's point of view, the initial large group is who you're reaching out to. First of all because you've got to fill time, you want large crowds, and a lot of those audience members who would never read are going to be people who at some point in their life wrote a poem. That's the whole thing--the act of writing poetry, more than anything else, is one of the most universal things. While you might say because it's easy, I might say that it's also because that [of] anything that's fiction--anything you don't have to write--poetry is the most ornate of [all the writing done for personal reasons]. The form you use might be the "This Is a Poem" or it might be a huge set of rules, but it's also part of oral tradition. It's a weird thing that doesn't really serve any kind of function. It can be made to serve a function, but it actually...

JP: It's one of the few forms of writing that's purely aesthetic.

GG: It's purely aesthetic. And unlike other forms of art which flirt with being purely aesthetic, i.e. useless except for as an aesthetic object, [poetry's] the one that requires the fewest tools. All you need is a pen and a piece of paper and an urge to write down a thought, whether weird or structured or fractured...

JP: Very little material involved and very little training. If you're a painter you still have to go through a period where you learn how to use a paintbrush and how to mix paint, you know? Writing is very egalitarian in that respect.

GG: Writing is very egalitarian and poetry is both the simplest and the hardest [form of writing]. But, you know, everyone in one sense or another, I think, has sat down at least once and wrote a whole bunch of random words and phrases, because they were upset about something, they felt strong about something, or they were working out an idea. And if you look at that, it follows no natural sentence structure but it might very well be a poem. Especially if it's read out loud. That's why I think you can have found fiction but most of the time if

you find a random fragment of writing and you read it at an open mic, it's called a found poem. There's a very good reason for that, because anything restructured, reworked or presented in the framework of being a poem can be called a found poem. But that's also why poetry frustrates academics, non-academics, causes fights, makes people get so angry about open mic poetry. I think the reason they get so angry about it is they look at it and it is difficult to define and not a valuable commodity, and it is also sometimes....People are usually willing to agree on really really good poetry, but they'll disagree like hell on what's really bad. [Jason laughs] Some poets I've hated, other people have loved to death. And then some poets I've loved to death at one open mic at one place are really sucky somewhere else. And I [may] think the only reason they're sucky is because I sit down and just can't talk to them. They're just not good talkers or friendly. And then the next time they perform I'm like, "Ah! Well, fuck you!" [laughs] And I don't think you can really do that with a book. I mean, J.D. Salinger can punch you out but if you liked his book... [shrugs] well, you're gonna like his book anyway. And poetry in print can be much like that, but I also say that open mics are some of the rawest, most offensive [experiences] of everything in the poetry world.

JP: I would also submit that a lot of people have problems with open mic poetry because the very act of being a poet--the very act of calling yourself a poet--has come under such ridicule over the last, what, 100, 200 years, you know what I mean? A lot of people have a negative connotation with poets, the stereotypical view, you know...

GG: I was reading something in this magazine called Adbusters. It was very interesting and I wish I had it on me. Maybe I'll give you the quote later. Anyway, there was this guy who analyzed certain artistic notions, like the notion of wonder. He was writing about what wonder could be, the way we define it. Anyway, his final thing was, he talked about how you can use wonder to take even an image that's been mass-produced and used to sell things and still find something about it that doesn't feel fake. You can still find something about it that's weird and memorable. And he delivered a paper about this concept and it turned up in a magazine about ad strategies. Like, "And once wonder is established, it can be used as a direct line to a consumer's impulse!" And he said that there's now this thing where you have this incredibly cynical environment where the overwhelming dominant group thinking is that the only thing that's real--not even necessarily worthwhile but real--is the mechanism of consumer society. And they will take anything, even an argument about it, and find a way to twist it to fit into this view. And thus people become poets because...well, part of it may be because they're fucked-up attention-seekers, but part of it is just this weird urge to write poetry, to get up and everything and see it. I didn't go, "I'm going to read this damn poem because I want to get laid." I didn't even get on stage because I wanted a writing career and thought if I get up and read first I can get an audience reaction without having to publish. I got up and read because it looked like fun, and it was a way of connecting with people who were having fun.

JP: Interestingly enough, that was the whole reason I got involved reading at the open mics too. No other reason. The only pure simple reason I had was watching people get up and have fun, and it seems like something that is fun. It didn't ever even occur to me that I could get laid by doing poetry, and it never occurred to me that I could have a valid writing career from open mic stuff.

GG: And at that time I was working a good job and...well, I'd been through a difficult breakup and I was still immature enough to be obsessing with it two months after it happened. And...

JP: This was last year, right? [laughing] Sorry.

GG: [with fake sincerity] Ha-ha-ha!

JP: [like a mad scientist] HA-HA-HA!

GG: [Greg blows raspberry and a third person watching the interview starts giggling uncontrollably] You can tell we're truly not academics by the way our conversation can degenerate...

JP: [laughing] I have a little too much caffeine in me too.

GG: Anyway...I had graduated from college just a year or two before, and I was feeling like that total stereotypical slacker...

JP: Late-20s, hanging out in Chicago, slacker don't-know-what-the-hell-I'm-doing...

GG: Slacker angst, and I was also being really immature about it. I wasn't taking the steps to actually do anything with my life. I felt directionless. And there's some people having fun so I was having fun with it, and what I got back was suddenly just the discipline of thinking in order. Writing poetry gave me some disciplined thinking and the act of hanging out with people in an environment where I was longer trying to think of something to say. You're hanging out with people who all have at least poetry in common. And it was this wonderful community which then led to self-confidence which then changed my life. Thax, in the end, asking me to go [to his event]. I went down there twice just to watch people read. And getting up to read changed my life. And I think mostly for the better. Of course, poets are also dangerous, drunk and unruly a lot, so I think in many ways I've had many more adventures than I thought I would.

JP: We'll get into that, because I want to talk about that. Let me ask you first--and this is of course your opinion--but how much of what happened to you and of poetry changing your life was getting involved with the poetry scene, and how much of it was getting involved specifically with the Chicago poetry scene? Now that you've had some exposure to other cities' poetry scenes, with the touring you've done. How much would you attribute to the specific scene in Chicago?

GG: Well, you see, the one specific drawback to that is that I haven't been to New York or any other major cities. Anything I've seen has been in like, you know, [places like] Orlando...

JP: And St. Louis.

GG: And St. Louis. So I can't exactly say. But I do know that partly my confidence grew just because I got older, but part of it was that I was involved with a large creative community in an urban center. In this case, poetry.

JP: In Chicago.

GG: Yes. And the community was large enough to include everyone, from the hangers-on who watched but never participated to the wanna-bes who did it every once in a while, to the people who were not only successful and published, but had full-time day jobs and families and were very well-adjusted. You had the whole range. And I think you have to have a big enough community. And I think of all of the communities that are easy to join, poetry is one of the easiest because unless you're completely entrenched, the only way to share your work is to gather in a place and share it. You're basically having an art gallery opening every time you do it, and in fact that makes you a very social animal overall. But you're much more likely to write in public places, write as you're talking to people, make notes about things. It's probably one of the least solitary of all the arts.

JP: It's like having an art gallery and then every Wednesday opening up the room and having four bare walls and saying, "Anybody random who wants to can come by tonight and stick something on the wall." That's what open mics are like.

GG: But then you've got the end of the art gallery opening where the two painters are really drunk and they start fighting with each other or go have sex with each other. Well, imagine a room full of thirty painters and having a gallery opening every week, and you get an idea

of why the poetry scene is quote-unquote "lively."

JP: [laughing loudly] Quote-unquote, my friend. [conversation breaks down into laughter and giggles for about 20 seconds] Well, let's talk about some of that. Let's talk about some of the things you see that are damaging.

GG: Well, I think one of the main ones is the delusion of grandeur. Because [the poetry scene] does involve a literary art form. But on the other hand, the activity itself, like I said...

JP: Well, unlike some of these small cities that we were just talking about, where we can say in one sense that it's better to be in a place like Chicago, Chicago's also one of those places like New York or San Francisco where someone in the poetry scene actually can get noticed and go on to fairly straightforward, fairly large activities. You can move from the open mic scene here to something that's moneymaking, or something resembling a career. Maggie Estep went from open mics to publishing novels. David Sedaris did the same thing. People that were in Lollapalooza and on commercials.

GG: And people see that, people like... say, me... people for whom [poetry] was just much more of a personal, fun experience and then lo and behold became a great confidence-building experience and I realized that I wanted to be a writer, but still now if I want to write anything but poetry I'd have to sit down and work on that. For example, Maggie Estep. She probably got the confidence to go out and submit her novel after all this. But she might be the type of person who would've found her way to submitting her novel in a different realm, you know? Even though some people make that leap from the open mic poetry circle to the [circle of] professional writers hanging out with real publishers, it's not an easy thing. Sometimes the connections you have are not what you make through [the poetry scene], but there's this illusion, and some people get this weird Hollywood mentality. And it's so hard for me to talk about this, because of course this is what people who hate open mic poetry concentrate on, but there's this weird feeling that it should be something more than it is.

JP: You've been fairly outspoken about this in the past. You've actually published articles in a newspaper that used to be published here about the whole idea that poetry should not be a moneymaking activity. No one should ever go out thinking that they can launch a career from the open mics.

GG: And in those [articles] I was actually arguing the entire concept. Now that I think about it more, what I was trying to say is that you shouldn't be thinking, "Be a poet and starve," but because it is so difficult, if you prompt your readers and hosts to have that mental set, at the very least you're going to create a bunch of annoying big-talkers who don't do as much as they talk. And that's already a bad trait of human beings and, if you read any Nelson Algren, a really bad tendency in Chicago. We're a bunch of big-talkers, which is why it's called the Windy City. I think there's a little bit of truth there. Otherwise it's just trope that Algren used to promote his cynical views. So yeah, there's a certain truth there. Maybe it's true in other cities too. But here a lot of people are much more willing to talk about an artistic idea s if they've finished it and it's already being shown than actually finishing it and then talking about it.

JP: I've gotten a lot done in my career but even I have to admit that I've been guilty of that myself.

GG: Right, you know?

JP: You're right. It's a very pervasive attitude in Chicago. It becomes a very accepted thing, to talk about a project as if it was done and already being sold and has already made you your million.

GG: Right, and it'd be like talking about how this interview's going to be edited, right now in the middle of the interview. It's kind of self-defeating, it's kind of self-aware, self-regard-

ing, and it's basically, you know, a mental circle jerk. And like I said, I think that's part of the natural human urges. But if that becomes your sole activity, it can result in a lost of things. I think a lot of the hard feelings that come from the poetry scene are people that forget that, for example, the ten dollar contest at the Green Mill is still that, a ten dollar contest, even though all your emotions are wrapped up in it. You've written a poem, it's extremely emotional, you're in a contest. You know, you win or lose the contest and believe it to be the end-all be-all of judgment on it, when actually it's just a judgment of how you performed that poem at that time at the Green Mill. Although a lot of people who are cashing in on it are also really bad poets, I'll admit. [laughter]

JP: Do you think the Green Mill is something that fosters a lot of this attitude, or do you think it's the attitude of Chicago artists that is the monster that created the Green Mill?

GG: Oh no, I don't think the Green Mill's monstrous at all. I think it's a convenient excuse for those people who would've gotten upset anyway. I think it's easier to...

JP: It's a nice scapegoat for people who want to complain about something.

GG: Right, just as I've gotten very irritated with Marc Smith [in the past] but then remembered, Marc Smith did not start out to be in the position he's in.

JP: Although some would charge that he has certainly done nothing to deter the position he was put in.

GG: Oh no, no. In a way he wanted to be in it, but I don't think when he got into it he knew how much it was going to be--or maybe he did, and it's just this huge double-edged sword. If he didn't make all the effort he did, the Green Mill would not be the event it is today. However, the problem is dealing with the huge amassed group of poets and then also dealing with a large audience who aren't poets. At some point you've got to realize that there are certain factors that come with it that you have to deal with, and I don't think Marc has the patience for it. Now we're talking about something that, if someone's not familiar with [the details], it'd be mystifying. The main thing is that, to get back to more general terms, if you have this attitude that reading your poetry is someday going to make you a rock star, it's probably going to lead at some point to you being an asshole.

JP: Taking the Green Mill out of it, that's a pretty good general thing to say.

GG: Right. And it's also going to make you a lot more thin-skinned, just like...

JP: It's going to make you foster an attitude of competition, whether or not there actually is a competition. And of course the next logical step after wanting to be a rock star with your poetry is [the attitude] that there is only a certain amount of room for people to be rock stars, so get the hell out of my way.

GG: Right, and the thing is that poetry is not rock music. It's not any of those things. And to get back to the Green Mill, the whole reason the contest at the Green Mill was created was because poetry in and of itself does not seem competitive. It's an artificially-created competition to hold the audience's interest. It's a great idea.

JP: When it first started out, it was primarily designed as a fun gimmick to get people to come.

GG: And to get them to shut the hell up during a poem! You know, if someone can win or lose you're much more likely to be quiet. Well, now it's so large that...I've never read in a slam. I've read at the Green Mill, during the open mic [in the first half of the evening], and at least people have always listened all the way through. They may not appreciate or unappreciate it, but that's amazing, to get a crowd that large and that drunk to listen to a poem all the way through without it even being a contest. You need the contest to be there.

JP: And I would say that it's Chicago poets that made the original fun little poetry slam into the big fuckin' thing it is now, the big monster. Except we gotta remember that the first

National Poetry Slam came about because New York and San Francisco started their own poetry slams and got just as competitive as it did here in Chicago, and they thought it'd be fun to put each of their cities head-to-head to each other.

GG: It's a national phenomenon. Because poets are so full of exaggeration, I don't think the whole story of what Chicago's role in it [was] will ever come out. And that's one of those things that's both sad and wonderful. I mean, Chicago's always had problems getting recognition for its role in the artistic community, just because a lot of movements don't really come out of here. An individual artist may have belonged to a movement, but by the time they get national recognition the movement's gone.

JP: This is the greatest town in the nation for underground art.

GG: Not even intentionally underground. Just a lot of art going on.

JP: Well, historically, Chicago has always been a place that first supported a lot of the underground artists who later became nationally known. Like Chicago was one of the first places to publish and appreciate Kerouac, Ginsberg, Burroughs, people like that. They went on to make their careers in other places.

GG: And they were already people who were not necessarily from Chicago to begin with, and then other cities claimed them. I mean, we've barely claimed Richard Wright. And a lot of our people have had careers like Richard Wright--really well-known for some stuff and then the rest of their oeuvre ignored because we don't...I don't know. I could go on and on about it but the thing is, I know I'm not 100 percent familiar with it. But I do have this weird feeling that Chicago does not get the recognition it deserves, and because it doesn't get much recognition, a lot of its artists are not therefore nationally-recognized artists.

JP: It's the same story, over and over again so many times. Someone starts their career in Chicago and then for whatever reason--they get pissed off or get an opportunity elsewhere, whatever--they move to another place and it's there that really big things start happening to them. So history goes down as having that artist be from there. Frank Lloyd Wright is a very good example. He really started his career and really got going in Chicago. But a lot of people think of him in only the Taliesian/desert era. That's the most famous part of his career, out there. Actors are the same way. So many actors get their starts in Chicago and then move to the coasts and that's where they get their big breaks. And the people who stay in Chicago their whole lives and base their entire career here, historically have been known as the gutsy underground people who pretty much toiled in obscurity their entire life and didn't get recognition until the very end or even after their death. Like Nelson Algren, or Studs Turkel. Or Carl Sandberg.

GG: Well, Studs has obviously gotten a huge amount of recognition now, and Studs is a reporter. He's one of many. He's a reflection of an entire era, one that's now ancient. He personifies an entire era of sociology and theory and philosophy and streetcorner philosophy. There was a huge group of them here and the only thing that people know nationally about it, definitely the one most well-known pop-culturewise is Studs. That Studs is a one-man art form. Well, Stud's practically a product of the Dill Pickle Club, and the College of Complexities, and all that.

JP: Well, he was a young man when all of that was at its height.

GG: Yeah, and he's the one result.

JP: Well, no, my whole point is that Studs didn't start receiving recognition for his work until he was well into his fifties. He spent an entire mature adult life working on his work before ever starting to get recognized for it.

GG: And I think it was because of that musical that started in New York, Working, is what propelled him into the spotlight, because it was based on one of his books. You'll have to

double-check this, but I don't think it was a Chicago musical. I think it started on one of the coasts. And there ya go--here's this famous Chicago person who's best known for books where people can read them and not realize that all of his subjects [are in Chicago]. It's viewed as the voice of America, not the voice of Chicago. And he has to pitch his books that way to get them sold. I mean, it was Division Street USA, not Division Street Chicago. But rolling back to the whole idea of fame, ultimately if fame is your one sole goal it's going to be very difficult. And weirdly enough, at the same time that fame cannot be your only goal, I don't believe in the other part of the open mic thing, which is--I believe that you cannot be a poem. I've written this little piece called "The Poet's Creed," and the basic point of the creed is, "I am a poet but I am not a poem." And I'm talking about someone many people have talked about and maybe you'll even interview, which is Smokin' Joe. He's this guy who gets up on the mic, he could be a character from a novel, he could be someone you write poetry about. He's, like, experienced, but he just gets up there and babbles. And it virtually has no structure--maybe inside his own crazed head he's doing something with great structure, but actually he's babbling there with...

JP: With sock puppets.

GG: With sock puppets. And at best you could call it shtick, but it's not really shtick. It doesn't have enough form to be art, but at the same time, because he's doing it on a stage, it's not a 100 percent crazy lunatic experience. It's not as if he was doing this on the street, talking to himself. I don't know what it is. It's just this thing. I used to call it 'this thing' and now I call it 'being a poem.' You get up on the stage and you freak out about your dad who beat you for three minutes. You may have it written down, but you're approaching that fine line of just acting out. Poetry is something you take, you finish, you put outside yourself. If you ever published, people would read it. You're getting up and you're reading a poem.

JP: You're saying then that it's an expression of what's going through your head. It's a symbolized product of what's going through your head, and not the actual process of actually opening your head while you are on that stage.

GG: Exactly. I think people forget that too. So you've got one group getting very touchy because they want to be rock stars and all this competition is upsetting them because deep down they don't really want to be rock stars, they just want to read their damn poem, and they've just gotten so worked up about it. And you've got this other group of people getting worked up because this giant group therapy session they think they're attending isn't giving them back what they want. And the fact is that it's not supposed to be a giant group therapy session, because a giant group therapy session's not going to have an audience except for other group therapy members, and it's going to be unfun, because group therapy usually brings up a lot of painful emotions.

JP: You're reminding me of a little sidebar. I don't know if you were witness to this, but a friend of ours has a boyfriend who died recently. You know who I'm talking about. And at the first open mic she showed up to after his death--'cause she was out-of-town for awhile--she read this poem about him that was just emotionally stark, very opening-up of her head on stage, you know what I mean? And I was just horrified when I watched this. Now I'm realizing that it's exactly what you're talking about. It was her thinking this was a therapy session but the other people in her therapy session were instead twenty drunk people who didn't really know the guy and didn't really care. And they're all like, "You know, whatever," talking [amongst] themselves, and I was just like, "Ooh," you know what I mean? If someone I dated ever died, the least thing in the world I would ever do is write a poem about her and then get up in front of a roomful of strangers and expound my heart on them, on my

sleeve.

GG: And not only that, but that reading in and of itself....She wrote the poem about the feeling she was having, but the whole concept is that any writing you [do is essentially you] arrogantly deciding that your words encapsulate all of reality, [but] poetry because of its brevity or whatever is usually capturing just facets. There are certain things poems can't do unless you write a really, really long one. But also, poems, because they're an artful presentation, are usually emotional truths but they certainly aren't strict truths. Poems are kind of lies. Poets are kind of liars, you know. I'm trying to avoid clichés, but I'll just use them. Poets are liars.

JP: There, that wasn't so bad, was it? [laughter]

GG: Even if they get up and write a poem about a person who died, they are writing a poem, not speaking the truth. And if you get up and try to speak the truth using the poem, once again you are becoming a poem. And I guess you're up on the mic is valid. 'Cause you're a poem! And if a poem got up and could talk by itself, anything it did would be poetic and therefore valid. Even if you're being an asshole. Even if you're berating your audience or being boring or being badly edited or if you're freaking out, it's okay because you're actually the poem. But this is why poems can't talk, or paintings. Because they are created by other people, worked and mastered, and then those people should have enough respect for themselves to present the work instead of presenting themselves. Not only that, but she was getting so upset up on stage there were two performances going on--one of her work and one of herself. And one was very inappropriate and people were not reacting well to it, and it was hurting the performance of the poem which actually had some incredibly good lines in it and might have been a good poem. But I was so appalled by the emotion, especially considering that enough time had passed that getting that upset was also the expectation of, "Well, I'm getting this upset to respect my poem." Once again, if you get upset on stage, how authentic is it? You're already throwing your entire emotions into it plus your authenticity. Because it's not a one-on-one thing. You're not just talking to your friends. You're performing into a microphone.

JP: It was like watching a eulogy at a funeral, which can be very emotional and heartwrenching, except they'd taken out the entire audience of the funeral which were all close friends of the deceased and could sympathize, and replaced them all with drunk strangers. Which was appalling to watch.

GG: To continue this sidebar, a friend of mine said that she didn't like to go to poetry readings, and she was the one who talked about the group therapy thing. And I...

[tape is flipped over]

GG: Anyway...this might be disjointed now. I was dating someone who believed only in public displays of emotions if you were feeling so severely that you couldn't help displaying them in public, but to get profoundly upset something really important would have to be going on. And the first time I ever take her to this one very famous poetry reading, the host gets extremely upset at some people in the audience because they were being extremely rude. But he handles it by being extremely upset on stage and he's actually standing there muttering to himself on the mic about quitting. He freaks out, basically.

JP: I was a witness to this.

GG: And then afterwards he reads this poem, and he's trying to take this [emotion of] being upset to motivate himself to do this piece. And he's up on stage reading the piece and he's really into it, and he's practically on the verge of tears, and one of the people in the audience is being rude, who's also a poet, and she's being moved to tears both by the fact that she was being yelled at and the fact that he's reading this dramatic poem, and there's all this

weird energy going on, and it's all these bizarre real emotions over art, but by the artists, not by an [audience member] being moved.

JP: It wasn't constructive emotion.

GG: And it wasn't emotion being used to produce art, but emotion going on while the art was going on.

JP: [laughing] Emotions despite the poetry.

GG: Yes, exactly. [laughter] And she said, "If you're getting that upset, and the poets participating are getting that upset, and everyone being so upset, how authentic is all that public upsetness? And if you're not really feeling that upset but you're getting that upset, how worthwhile is this experience? Why would you put yourself through that much pain?" Well remember, this is the one who's much more restrained about that but is still a very emotional person. And she's someone who's also a painter, so... [laughs] very different attitude about the whole thing. If you're a painter, no matter how big a catharsis you have, you have to spend time putting it on a canvas, and by the time you're done it's a piece of work about your catharsis, not the actual catharsis. Whereas if you're performing a poem, you can both perform the piece about the catharsis and have some other weirdass catharsis on the stage. The problem is, if you're going to be a real full-scale performance poet, you've got to keep that second catharsis to yourself. Go home, write another poem about the catharsis you had on stage, and get up and read it. If not as passionately, then at least as a reading of a poem instead of an experience. Because no matter what, a lot of your audience either can't experience that poem as you are experiencing it--they can't be the poem with you--or they're going to be repulsed by it. Because after a while, if you're not an insider, who is...Wait. The other problem of the poetry scene is...wow. Digression, digression.

JP: That's okay.

GG: The other problem of the poetry scene is that if you're hanging out with all of your friends, you start to forget that this is a reading with an audience. That's when some of the drama begins to unfold.

JP: Especially if it's an open mic like a lot of the ones we go to, where most of the audience are friends of ours. You forget about the other people there besides your friends.

GG: And you also tend to forget about [the fact that] this is not just a night of hanging out with your friends reading poetry and there happens to be a mic there. It's still a performance experience. Or, it is a night hanging out with your friends with a mic present, but then that means you're much more dramatic with your friends than if the mic wasn't present, but you're also much more friendly with the audience than if your friends weren't there. Both of those things can still be very constructive experiences, but that's usually when everyone stops doing it because they're having fun or learning how to make their art, and do it for all those other weird reasons. That's when the rock-star and drama-queen behavior begins.

JP: It's just like what you were saying just a minute ago. Performance poetry is very unique in the arts because part of the creative process is the actual performing of it. We all know that half of performance poetry is what you write down. But the other half of its success or failure is how you perform it.

GG: It's not done until it's read.

JP: And there's a very fine line there. And people like painters don't have that problem. Exhibiting your paintings is just that, exhibiting. The actual work of creating the project is done by the time you exhibit it. Performance poetry is not like that. You're actually creating the work as you perform it. It's a very fine line and you have to learn to know where that line is between passionately performing a piece of work and becoming the poem onstage.

GG: The difference between the poem's writer and the writer's poem.

JP: [laughing loudly] Shut up!

GG: [laughing] As I was making this entire metaphor I had that horrible feeling [that would come up]. That's a paraphrase from a very stupid quote on the back of a very adequate novel.

JP: You're being very generous. [laughing]

GG: Adequate because it's such a perfect satire of the Self-Published Novel that it raises itself above terrible by being so terrible. [Jason laughs] But unfortunately I now begin to see why that phrase is true. Because it certainly isn't true in the way it was being used [on the back cover of the novel], but in the state of poetry it is. It's like, which are you going to be? Are you just going to go there and read this lunatic attention-grabber, which I call being a poem, or are you going to go up there and read your work?

JP: In a finely-tuned emotional way that manipulates your audience to understand. Ultimately what performing a poem is all about is manipulating the audience to experience the emotions you are trying to present to them.

GG: Or getting an audience to understand, usually in one reading, something that in our society you usually just write down. I think ultimately we've all had this kind of experience in one form or another.

JP: What, you mean where our emotions have gotten carried away from us?

GG: Yes. And it's the other big frustration. The wonderful thing about the poetry scene is that it's a scene. And it's almost like being an intellectual version of a tag football team, in a way. Professional amateurs, in that what you're doing may be a hobby and everything, even if you're successful at it, but you still have to approach it as a complete and utter discipline. You have to have the discipline of thinking of something, writing it down. And the best way to succeed at this is even though you're in this amateur realm, you should approach it as if it were a profession. Ultimately, the goal for success in the poetry scene is, even if you never go on [to anything else], if you get up and give a good clean reading, you have well-written stuff, you behave nicely, friendly to other people, all of those things, you gain all this respect. Even if you're doing it purely for fun.

JP: Professional as in, act professional about what you're doing. Be sincere and be clean and practiced and nice.

GG: In terms of your behavior at the mic. And in terms of your work, realize once again that no matter what you're doing it for, you have a craft. I mean, to interject something just within our own relationship. I have always thought that one of the things, even with your most extremely personal work--and you've written some extremely personal pieces about people that you know--the fact that you still try to create a polished, crafted piece that can therefore be read to a more generalized audience. No matter what weird part of your mind it's coming out of, that is something that always gives people pause. Whereas if someone else just got up there and read something sloppy about someone who's sitting in front of them, they're gonna freak 100 percent completely because it's not a well-crafted poem. You're just doing it to write something about someone in the audience.

JP: Whether good or bad.

GG: Right. But then anytime you, me, or anyone has experienced [that point where] you do cross the line and just write crap because you want to get on the stage and read it about somebody who's there, 90 percent of the time, boy does it backfire.

JP: Whoo boy. We won't go into that. [pause, then uproarious laughter from all]

GG: I'm just talking about general experience. I've had people come up to my open mic and just fuckin' read something because they were mad at the host of another open mic, and I couldn't just cut them off in the middle of their poem, but I'd go up to them afterwards and

say, "Don't ever read that again," because it just wasn't good poetry. I don't know what the hell it was, but it sure as fuck wasn't good poetry.

JP: What are some of your guiding forces behind being a host? What are some of the things you'd say are principles of yours when you host an event?

GG: Well, the first principle, which is still true: Brevity is the soul of wit. I think that until you're getting those NEA grants or you're Jenny Magnus, if you can make it shorter, you should.

JP: The host's banter, you mean?

GG: I'm not even just talking about the host's banter. I'm saying "brevity is the soul of wit" is what I say to the people who are going to be performing for me. If you can drop one of those poems and leave them wanting more, do it. If I come up and ask you to perform another one because it was so good, I really do mean it. And if I don't...I really do mean it. [Jason laughs] That was one of my first philosophies. A corollary of that is that as a host you have to convey what you believe in. You really are setting the tone. You may never get a thank-you, you may never be appreciated, you may never be noticed. But you are the closest thing that a [live] evening has to an editor. Especially if it's an open mic. If you're hosting a [small] set of readers you can be superfluous. If you're hosting for Adrienne Rich you can give her a bad or good introduction and it doesn't make a difference. That's like one or two readers. If you're hosting a night with a lot of readers or an open mic especially..

JP: Let's talk in terms of open mics.

GG: I'm digressing.

JP: No, no, it's fine. But it brings up an interesting question to ask you. Would you recommend to hosts of open mics to envision the open mic as a living, breathing magazine where you are the editor-in-chief? We know so many open mic hosts that have a very different attitude about it. They are just, like, the Keeper of the Microphone and are very overwhelmed about putting any kinds of limits on the people who go up. They just kind of turn the mic over to the people who go up. Would you recommend to hosts out there to think of themselves as the editor of a living magazine?

GG: Right. It's not that different of an attitude. It just means that when you say "one poem," you mean it. When you say "five minutes," you mean it. It doesn't mean having to be an asshole about it. But if someone gets up there and you've said "one poem, five minutes" and they violate it, you either tell the person they violated it, or if you don't have the guts to do that because they're big and scary or whatever, you put them up late next time. You know, I never had any problems--and this may sound bad--but I never had any problems putting all the bad poets at the end. Or at the very beginning when the bar was empty. Whatever worked out. Some people always wanted to go first which always mystified me.

JP: Like me. I'm one of those people.

GG: Which mystified me, why anyone would want to read when the bar was still empty. If they were good people, I would try to delay them, one way or the other. I wouldn't give them what they wanted; I'd give them the audience I thought they deserved. That's another thing--if you're a really good host, you can tell the ebb and flow of your audience. You can tell when [attendance] is going to be at its peak and when people are much more apt to listen. I hosted poetry and music open mics, and it took me awhile to master this. After awhile I realized that at a certain part of the evening the only thing people were going to listen to was music, because a lot of them wanted to talk. It was a bar of a certain size and it was a place where, you know...fashionable people of both sexes hung out, and at a certain point the crowd density would reach a point where hitting on each other became more important than the open mic experience. And because of that...

JP: Well, and there's also certain types of audiences where, once you even allow them the chance to start talking....You put one musician on in the middle of the open mic, they start talking, and they feel like this gives them license to not pay attention for the rest of the evening. Not all audiences are like that.

GG: There's that, and there's what kind of musician it is. There's a musician we both know, Astra Kelly, who writes and performs very strong emotional songs but songs so powerful that people tend to stay quiet and listen. And you can put a poet up after her. Plus she herself is very supportive. She gets off stage and if someone wants to talk to her right then, she'll go to the end of the bar. That's another thing. As a host, what you do during the show...and I didn't even realize this. People told me that they could always tell when I got impatient when I didn't like a poet, because if I were anywhere close to the stage I'd start looking at my watch. I would try to maintain an air of awareness, and if I was getting impatient I'd be standing very close to the stage. Otherwise they'd have to look around and find me in the audience, to see whether I was into it. And one of my philosophies was about trying to be very stoic about it. I've worked as a teacher of teenage students, and I know, remembering that, that at times you're powerless as a host to promote someone you think is good, but if you do let people know you think someone is bad, that is noted.

JP: It's always been my belief that a host holds an incredible amount of influence and sway over how the audience thinks of the person on stage.

GG: And the host is relatively safe. Unless you're an ornately bad host, you are the one bringing in the show. You are giving them the meat. If they're going to blame anyone, they're going to blame the cook. And it's not even exactly like that, because if it's a bad open mic, they're not going to blame you. And if you have them on your side at the beginning of the show, you'll never lose them. Now, the worst experience is being the host and having the audience being on a poet's side, because all they'll do then is randomly pick one person to be on their side and then everyone else just gets it. And also if you're the host of a confrontational show, you're almost stacking the deck because if the audience is on your side at a confrontational show, they'll always be on your side but may be against every single poet whether they like you or not.

JP: You and I just recently performed at a show like that, with a host here in town who is being interviewed for this book, who expressly enjoys running confrontational shows. We had that exact experience. The audience was totally into everything that host had to say, but then turned around and promptly ignored everyone who went on stage.

GG: And I went up there and did a performance that was not a good performance anyway, in front of a set of people who disliked me from the moment I stepped onto the stage.

JP: [laughing] Just the very fact that you were about to go up and disrupt their conversation, you know?

GG: Exactly. And like I said, I hadn't brought my work with me and I attempted to perform a poem which, at that point in the evening, I was too tipsy to remember entirely, so I...

JP: And a piece that you have to listen to to enjoy, unlike the host who can throw out those little... [snapping fingers] ...almost stand-up bits, because [this particular host] also doubles as a stand-up comedian.

GG: It was a very interesting experience because, like I said, it wasn't the best reading I've given, but if I'd done it that way to an audience that was listening, at least they would've liked it, or given polite applause and probably laughed. But since it was a poem with a complex punchline, these people started booing by the time I had three words out of my mouth. And at that point I was beyond caring about the performance. But at least I was actively booed. [Ed. Note: this incident is true. A group of thirty off-duty policemen, there to see another

cop perform stand-up comedy, actually started making physical "boo"ing noises at Greg while he performed.] And afterward, some people who had heard me trying to read something that actually required thought said, "Well, at least you weren't screaming at the audience like other people." Whatever. We're trashing on somebody who doesn't deserve to be trashed.

JP: I don't think we're trashing on him. I don't think there's anything wrong with enjoying a confrontational show. But we as poets kind of have to recognize what kind of audience our poem is for. I think that's something that people who aren't poets don't realize about the poetry scene, that each open mic has its own flavor. Certain pieces go over at certain events that don't go over at other events.

GG: And I would say this about this person's current show. Now, I only experienced it once, but that show is one where virtually nothing I could read, virtually no poetry, can go over very well. What does go over very well is volume and a certain type of thing. Now, you may have a very intelligent poem backing up your volume and certain swear words, but you need the volume and certain swear words, so I'd say [that particular reading] is much more about a certain type of performance art than it is about [the content]. That show is actually almost outside the scene, which in a way is actually a much better forum for that person as a host. I think almost that he should be writing for the people who get on the stage.

JP: It's a very cool venue for this person, and he's already said that he would like it to be like a live version of Jerry Springer. It would make a lot more sense for him to be writing bits, ala Letterman and Chris Elliot, where you have pre-ordained fake characters coming up. Absurdist things.

GG: Because you have people like me who was asked to read and realized I was doomed because I only had the one type of poem, and had to get up and read it and had, I must confess, a less-than-pleasant experience. An interesting experience but one I never want to repeat. There were people who got up and performed who were visibly scared. There were people on stage who were visibly frightened. Not because anything was actually going to happen to them, but because the tension was so high.

JP: And the intimidation level.

GG: And it was an intimidation level that was meant to be fun and part of the act, but once again, there are certain things that I think work at open mics. Intimidation is not really the best promotion for an open mic poet. Intimidation for, perhaps, confrontational and insult comedians is wonderful, because that of course is what it's all about.

JP: So this could almost be said to be another rule of hosting, getting back to your conversation. It's important for the host to know what kind of evening they're running and try to tailor the performers that night to fit the feeling of that show.

GG: Especially if you're inviting people. And if it's an open mic, you have to realize that there's going to be unexpected elements. There's always going to be a Smokin' Joe or a Joeffre Stewart or something like that. But if you have a strong event or you're a good host, you can weather a Joeffre. Joeffre is actually very cooperative if you bother to talk to him and not just get caught off-guard. Getting back to the editor metaphor, a good editor knows his writers, knows his layout, knows that sometimes you can have an article that's a total departure for the magazine but can keep a similar layout or typeface or whatever. But a good editor also knows his writers before he gets in. A good editor must fact-check. A good host has to at least pay attention long enough to remember the incredibly sexist poet who alienated half the audience. If you're at the other end of the bar going through your own personal self-absorption, you run a very good risk of having a poet show up many times...

JP: And never realize that he needs to be put on at the end of the night.

GG: Right, that he's a show-killer. And that's another thing, that as a host you are host-

ing. It's like you're throwing a big party, and you're the only person who doesn't get to have fun.

JP: Well, it's like throwing a party in your apartment. There's a certain type of fun you have, being the host of the party. But not the type of fun where you get to be the one in the corner, getting real drunk and hitting on somebody and smoking pot and dumping a bottle of beer on the carpet.

GG: Just as it's your own apartment, you don't get to break all the furniture. Well, I suppose if you're a destructive person you can break all the furniture. If you're hosting a poetry show, the only person who has to come back next week is you. [Jason laughs] If you want my philosophy as a host. First, brevity is the soul of wit. Secondly, you are the editor and you set the tone. And thirdly, the only person who has to come back next week is you. And therefore that leads to number four--an open mic is not a democracy. It's an opportunity that I control. [laughter from all]

JP: At events I've hosted I've always had the same attitude. I am very public about it and I make no apologies--I am the dictator while we are here. I decide what's going on. It's my job to put people up in the order that I think is going to work best, and to keep [the poets] to a certain time limit that I think is best for the audience. It's my job to make sure the audience is having a good time and that the poets are getting appreciated for the work they're doing. And this does not lead to a democracy at all, you know?

GG: And I never even openly say that. I make jokes about brevity being the soul of wit and everything, but I usually have a pretty long, leisurely amount of time to work in. My show [at Sweet Alice] usually started at eight or nine and ran until close. And still, the last few hours before closing, it always worked best when it was all music or we had a crowd which was divided into people far away from the stage--because it was two rooms, which made it much easier--and then the ones who wanted to hear readers. If we were blessed with a crowd that stayed quiet at the end of the evening, we could go late with the poetry. But lots of times that last half-hour was just a rush to get people up there, get them on the stage so they didn't feel ripped-off, have me listen to them so if they were worthwhile I could put them up earlier next week. 'Cause if someone showed up late they went up late, you know? You juggle it. Like I said, you also have to be a good host. It's in no way a democracy but at the same time, new scared people have to go up before experienced ones, but then if you have a crowdpleaser you could go up, but then someone who's bad but has a lot of integrity, or someone who's obviously working on a big emotional problem, you can't let them run rampant, but you're also not going to crush them on stage. It's not cool.

JP: Well, you bring up something else about being a host that I've noticed before. You have to have an appreciation for the venue that you're at, you know what I mean? You can't be a host that has an open mic at a big trendy bar where a lot of pretty people go to hit on each other, and then at midnight start getting resentful at the audience members who are starting to talk and get drunk and hit on each other. You have to realize that you are not in a coffeehouse or an academic setting. You are in a very social bar. And you have to be able to tailor your show to fit the atmosphere of the environment you're working in.

GG: And once again, I did a lot of laps of the bar while I was there. And some nights I'd go, "No, I'm going to sit in one place," but then people would be coming up to me and I'd find myself moving around again, because you have to work the crowd. Not just from the stage but also walking around, for no other reason than if one person's getting out of control, refusing to be quiet. And if you're blessed with a venue where if people want to talk they have a place to go, you can ask them to go over there. Basically you have to be willing to go the extra mile, because just as the host is the only person who has to come back, the host is

also the only person in the room who has to be professional. Even the bartenders have to be professional only as bartenders. They do not have to serve you. And there's another thing. You should be on the side of the people who are there. You should be on the side of everyone. You should be on the side of a show that works, which means you have to divide your loyalties a bit between the audience and the poets and you come third. Actually you come fourth, because the bar comes third. And remember, before you were there, whoever's working the bar that night, or a coffeehouse, whatever, the bar was there a long time before you. And quite often [will be there long] after the time comes where you freak out and end up getting banned or get real drunk and start screaming at people to shut up. [Jason laughs] I don't think I've actually seen a host do that. Thank God.

JP: I don't think I've actually ever seen a host get banned. I've seen lots of bars fall apart after hosting a poetry night [laughter].

GG: And I've seen bars that obviously visually didn't want their poetry night. But you've got to have the bar on your side as well, and I think that's crucial to [the success of a poetry night] at a social bar. Because I have seen places where the bar workers feel completely alienated from what's going on, therefore they don't help keep people quiet, they don't stop serving noisy drunks, they don't help you out. One of the reasons I could have a poetry reading at a bar full of trendy people was not only because it was a crowd more inclined to read poetry--you know, beautiful women with books under their arms--but we also had one of the bartenders actually perform poetry, you know. I was close friends with a few of the doormen. I knew these people really well, and they all wanted the show to succeed too. They were all having a really good time as well.

JP: Plus the business there was really good because of the poetry night. A bar staff can get really resentful if their usual amount of money in a night goes down because of a poetry night. Especially all these stupid little poets who are broke and never tip. Bartenders get incredibly resentful of that.

GG: And there's something else. As a host there are many things you don't have control over. But if you start seeing certain things, you have to be willing to deal with them, or you've got to be upfront that that's what your poetry reading is going to be about. If it's only going to be your friends showing up. It all rolls back to the idea of being an editor and being professional. The bar is not there to serve you. You are existing [because] of the bar. And if you're lucky, the bar really wants you there and has asked you to do it. If you're not lucky, you've persuaded the bar to let you do it and therefore you better be on your best behavior.

JP: Basically the only reason a bar would have a poetry night is an attempt to bring in more people than they were getting without the poetry night.

GG: Which is why also as a host you have many obstacles to overcome. Obstacle number one is yourself. Because most people host because they've been a performer for awhile and they have a big enough ego to get up there and run one themselves. Instantly you are putting yourself in the position of being the person whose ego can get most out of control over the course of an evening [laughs].

JP: It's like an actor who directs.

GG: Exactly. The second obstacle you have is all the other poets. Because the moment you are in a position of authority, any sort of authority....I had an experience like that. And I will digress and tell you the story because it's a very valuable story that illustrates a lot of what we're talking about. And it's also a great story that encapsulates both the best and the worst of Sweet Alice. There was this poet--and like I said, one of your obstacles is the poets--there was this poet there who I had never met before he started reading there. He's actually a very strong character, of a sort. You actually wrote a story about him, called "The Guy

Who Said Fuck A Lot."

JP: Ah, we're talking about...

GG: The Goad. Phil the Goad. Phil the Goad was a little guy who I guess had been in the army and the rumor was that he got booted because he had a huge alcohol problem.

JP: Well, the specific story was that he got kicked out of the army because he got drunk and got in a tank and ran into a building.

GG: [laughter] Man, I would love to verify that story. [Uproarious laughter from all] Because it's so good and so hard to believe it's true. [More laughter] So anyway, I don't know this guy. He looks like he's twelve. And the only thing I do know about him is that he reads halfway decent poetry that's in desperate need of editing, and that he's incredibly self-conscious on stage, and sometimes the audience would turn against him. He has a little bit of a problem with the time limit, and he's a big fuckin' drunk.

JP: Drinks like a fish!

GG: He comes there drunk because he doesn't have enough money. So he drinks at home and comes in drunk. He is a big...drunk. I usually try to put him up early so he's not too drunk, and also when he's first there he wants to read. But as he sits there he gets comfortable, he gets even drunker, he becomes a moody drunk because he's not really accepted like the regular readers, and he's rejected by the pretty crowd who comes to listen. And I don't really have time for him because there's cooler people who aren't as big a fuckin' drunks. Unfortunately he's a big fuckin' drunk and a nerd. But most of the time he is on his best behavior, and the few times he's not, he's being loud at the other end of the bar where he's not bugging me, you know. I really have no opinion about this man. Until this one night, where he and this one woman who sometimes gets very drunk and tends to sing one of the same three songs every time she gets up to the mic...

JP: [groaning] Oh, I remember her.

GG: He and her are getting wasted. I mean, scary wasted. And apparently she's on acid. I mean, just completely fucked up. And they're being a little problematic. Not problematic in the way like they're starting fights, but they're both so sick that I'm actually worried that they're both going to pass out in a coma. They both don't look okay...and neither one of them have gone up yet. [Jason laughs] I put her up and I say, "No matter what you do..." And this is a bad thing to say to someone who's drunk and, unbeknownst to me, tripping her ass off, but I say, "You can do two songs, but please do not sing 'White Rabbit.' I do not want to ever hear 'White Rabbit' in this bar again." Because she'd get lost in the middle of the song and do like a ten minute version of 'White Rabbit.' [Jason laughs loudly] That night she wanders up and down the bar, she's being loud, she flashes the doorman, and she's not a person who should be flashing anyway. She gets drunk and she gets up there and fuckin' sings half of 'White Rabbit' before I am standing next to her, humorous and friendly, but visibly trying to stop her from singing 'White Rabbit' and sing another song. I mean, I let her sing another song. I am always Mister Affirmation. [laughs] There can be disadvantages to having too much discipline, but I usually ran a pretty tight ship. So she gets off stage and I think both she and Phil manage to go outside and vomit at least once. And Phil falls asleep [at his table], and I wake him up and go, "Are you okay? Because you're going up soon." [Jason laughs] Now I must digress...

JP: [laughing] That's something else we should mention about Phil. He had a habit of falling asleep and also vomiting in the middle of bars.

GG: And I didn't know this. I would notice sometimes that Phil would get quiet and unresponsive when he was sitting with the group. But this is the first time he'd gotten so loaded that he actually passed out in front of me in the middle of one of my shows. And he passed

out and of all things, I woke him.

JP: [laughing loudly] To tell him he was about to go on stage!

GG: Now as dangerous as substance-abuse people can be, the two drunkest people in the bar have an instant [rapport]. They are speaking a language all their own. They are bonded. [Jason laughs] And as two drunk people who have a lot of problems performing when they are drunk, Phil and this woman are hanging out. And they're getting way more wasted together than they even could have gotten by themselves, which is already legally dead in some states [entire table breaks into laughter] according to blood-alcohol level. So Phil gets up on stage with her. Now I will interject an essential detail of this story that I've forgotten to mention. I had a sign language interpreter who would come to the show because she was my girlfriend, and do sign language interpreting for some stuff. Now she wouldn't work with everyone; it was up to her discretion. Sometimes she'd [interpret] for everyone who wanted her to, some nights she wouldn't. And she was a part of the inner clique, and the people who were with the inner clique liked her, those who didn't care didn't care, and those who weren't part of the inner clique resented her because she was the host's girlfriend. And by this point in the history of the show everyone knew this, because at first everyone didn't. We weren't that open about it.

JP: I was surprised when I found out.

GG: But as we got more comfortable with each other and we grew to like each other more, we were more prone to public displays. Etcetera, etcetera. She was not there that night. Sometime Phil had asked her once to interpret a piece for him and she was tired for the evening. Because she worked [during the day] as an interpreter and sometimes she'd work so much she'd suffer from Repetitive Stress Syndrome, and so some nights she'd only sign one poet a night and some nights just hang out with her friends and not sign at all. But I think Phil was extremely disappointed that night she didn't [sign for him]. And then he asked [on the night of this story], "Is Tiffany here tonight? Because I'd like to have some sign interpretation done." And I'm like, "She's not." So I will now give one rule to all poets. The host's girlfriend is sanctasect. You know? Don't fuck with the host's girlfriend. [loud laughter from all] So what he does is gets up there and gets this drunk friend of his to do a mock sign language interpretation. It was a spur-of-the-moment thing. He just said to her, "Get up and fake it." She gets up and fakes doing it, and both are so loaded that they don't realize that in the context of the show, to anyone who's been there before, they know some things. They know something's going on between me and the sign-language interpreter. The sign-language interpreter, in the context of this show, has always been introduced as someone who's worthy of respect, that what she's [volunteering to do] is cool. And so what it looked like...

JP: Well, and a lot of people just had a natural respect for her. A lot of people who, even if they weren't friends with her at that open mic, respected what she did and also enjoyed watching it [in the context of a poetry night].

GG: Now Phil's not getting up there to...and here's the interesting thing, because I saw the whole thing go down. He's not getting up there to make fun of her. But he's wasted and thinks this will be a really great idea, and so does she. And it looks like this grotesque parody. Which, given everything, feels to me like a big fuckin' slap in the face. Specifically, you're making fun of it, and if you're making fun of it you're also saying, "Well, this whole show is..." If I want to take it extremely personally I could interpret it as him saying, "Well, isn't it pretentious for this show to have a sign-language interpreter."

JP: Oh, it's offensive on so many levels. Offensive to deaf people, offensive to you, offensive to your girlfriend, offensive to all of us who enjoyed the sign language.

GG: Plus it's simply offensive to just see two people that drunk try to be funny. [Jason laughs] And they're not being funny. Although I will say this--the poem, which was something about comparing the messiah to cake mix, was really decent. Although very, very badly performed.

JP: Of course.

GG: Plus also the fact that he'd passed out in the bar and she'd thrown up outside. They'd already caused so much trouble. And I had also told him, "Please don't bring her up on stage tonight." I could see he'd been talking to her about it. I said, "Please don't, because she's too drunk." And she almost falls off the stage and the whole thing's very embarrassing, you know. And I'm really embarrassed about it but I'm also pissed. God, they got so drunk. I was mad at them for being so drunk and being assholes. And then it took me a little bit to have it sink in -- "Wait a minute." I know they didn't mean it, but it was like they were making fun of me and making fun of everyone. And fuck them! [laughter from all] And then I became really concerned because my girlfriend wasn't there when they did this, and she was going to hear about this. There's this social circle in the bar that she's a part of, and they're going to go, "Well, did you hear what they did?" My girlfriend at the time was a very strong independent woman with a... [raises eyebrows and pauses] ...bit of a temper. She hears about this and she's really mad. I mean, she's really angry and pissed off. And she takes it the worst way. So same time next week they both show up, and I take the woman aside and say, "Look, you got way too drunk last week and what you did was kind of insulting. It embarrassed me and it embarrassed yourself and also hurt my girlfriend's feelings." And she's like, "Oh, I'm sorry." And I'm like, "Well, I'm glad you're sorry, but you can't perform until next week." Phil comes in and I want to tell him the same thing. "Phil, you drank too much and behaved like an idiot on stage. You pissed me off by being an idiot, and then what you did, some people are going to interpret as being deliberately insulting. I know that you were just so fucked up that you thought it was funny, you know." And that's it. So he comes in and I say, "Phil, I want to talk to you." And he turns around and walks right out of the bar. Tiffany comes up and goes, "Where is he?" Now, she wasn't going to say a word to him. She was going to let me handle it. And I said, "He just left." She caught him in an alley--she ran down the street, caught him in an alley, and verbally ripped him a new asshole. I'm sure he thought he was going to be beaten within an inch of his life. You know, she can be scary, and she scared the fuck out of him. So then he proceeds to go to another open mic and announce that he's been banned from Sweet Alice. [Jason laughs] For daring to satirize sign language interpreters.

JP: A charade of which he kept up.

GG: A charade of which he not only kept up for months, but was actually in a show called "Philip the Goad, Banned Poet." And finally, when I heard about this, I walked up to him one night [at another open mic] and said, "You know, Phil, you were never banned from my show. You were just drunk and pissed me off." And he was like, "Oh, well, uh, you know..." Didn't really know what to say to that except to act like he was sorry. And of course what he told everyone else was that what he did was intentional. He was just testing the limits and that's why he got banned. What he told my girlfriend when he was getting yelled at was, "I'm sorry, I was drunk and I thought it was a good idea at the time." So he managed to change a drunken blunder by going and telling everyone. And of course if you're a host you're in a position of power so everyone was willing to believe that Sweet Alice was some weird sort of P.C. place where you couldn't say or do certain things or you'd get banned. That was fine. Years later, I'm reading an article by someone written for the most recent born-and-died poetry newspaper in town [Jason laughs] about censorship, where this story, Philip's version,

is cited as not only gospel truth, but expanded upon to sound like he did some sort of complex satire which then roused the ire of everyone to the point of getting banned.

JP: It's funny how stories can take on a life of their own here, you know?

GG: And at least I wasn't named, although Sweet Alice was named. But once again, it was written by someone who subtly resents me and subtly resents the fact that I was once a host. It was a dig.

JP: It was a dig.

GG: It was a bit of a dig. But still, the reason that was willing to be believed and the reason why I have a lot of empathy even for Marc Smith and his sometimes eccentric ways is that poets are an anarchistic lot and they're always willing to believe their fellow performers over a host, even if the host is a fellow performer that they like and respect.

JP: Why?

GG: 'Cause they're the host and a figure of authority...

JP: They're the Man and Fuck the Man! [laughs]

GG: Fuck the Man even if it's the Man who is getting fucked over. Which is what I'll close with, 'cause we're running out of tape...

JP: Well, I do want to ask you some more questions.

GG: Okay. Speaking of Fuck the Man, later we got fucked over by the Man because the owner didn't keep up his cabaret license and the city really started cracking down hard on people who didn't keep up their cabaret licenses. And the owner had no friends in the city and then started charging money for bands on the weekends and advertising this fact, and the bar got busted and the show, which was enormously successful, [got shut down]. And since then I've noticed that bars that host poetry shows tend to get in trouble. I don't know if it's that if you're loose enough to accept poets then you're loose enough to have problems with your paperwork, but bars seem to have enormous amounts of paperwork once poets...and especially me...start hosting shows there.

JP: Especially you.

GG: [laughs] I have had no less than three venues fall apart shortly after I began doing things there.

JP: If not more. Three off the top of our heads.

GG: Well, there was this cafe where I didn't even get to do one show. While we were planning the first show it got busted for not having the proper business licenses. So was Sweet Alice. And then most recently was Cafe Equinox, which wasn't even my show. It was your show, but I hosted it one night which sealed its fate.

JP: And don't forget Poop Studios.

GG: Which fell apart because its owner basically got tired of doing it. But in a very stop-and-start, reschedule the show many times before admitting the place is probably not going to stay open long enough for another show to happen kind of way.

JP: You're the hand of death, my friend.

GG: I am the hand of death host. But damn, am I a good host. People like it when I host. And, you know, it's almost worth having your venue close down.

JP: Let me ask you a couple of questions before we run out of tape. Are you at a point in your life where you can say that you like hosting better than writing and performing, or you like writing and performing better than hosting? Or do you find the differences between them too much to make a comparison?

GG: Well, no. Because hosting requires all these skills that don't require writing or performing at all. Frankly, without a regular venue, the act of hosting is so much work for every single show that I have not done one, except for [the substitute night at Cafe Equinox], for

several months. I am wanting to write more. They're not mutually exclusive, but boy do you have to be disciplined in order to do both. And I don't want to go back to doing a weekly show, and I love putting on the occasional put-together show, but right now I want a place where if I'm going to specially invite my people to read, the audience will show up. I'll do that with just a month's worth of work.

JP: Without a herculean effort on your part.

GG: Right. You would not think in a town this big that it'd be a herculean effort, but weirdly enough, the way this city is laid out and some of the things going on with [the Chicago public transportation system] right now, you really have to want to do it. And right now what I really want to do is write and perform. I've found that I'm getting back to my performing roots. Because it's just so much easier to be a performer.

JP: What would you eventually like to be doing with your work? Are you happy with the level you're at? Are you pleased?

GG: I think I've outgrown this. Not to say that you can't grow and change [within the poetry scene], but in the poetry performance scene there's only so high you can go and then you either have to take on a second interest in addition...I don't know anyone on the bar performance poetry scene that's actually out there making money off of performance poetry. Maybe one or two.

JP: Would you like to move to that place, where you're making money from your writing?

GG: Yes. My goal now is to have all the poetry I've created in print form. And of those that are worthwhile reading aloud, write them as page-worthy, or put them in a different place. You know, like have a printed oeuvre and then maybe tour across the country. Go to places I've never been and perform poetry. Because for them it's a fun one-time experience. But as far as becoming a local poetry scenester, I'm finding myself at the same place as I was at the beginning. I enjoy the camaraderie, I enjoy the writing, but I'm going to write more. And eventually I'll produce some more shows, but first I gotta find a better location. The last thing I produced was way too much effort for the size of audience I got. Which was something I used to not have to worry about, but now they've cut so many bus lines, suddenly there's no way to get to the places where I used to be able to get big audiences. You can't get to them unless you drive, and people who drive are less inclined to come out to poetry readings. [laughs]

JP: Yeah. The people who drive are the people with real jobs. [laughter from all] Well, I'm sorry our time's run out. I feel like we could talk another couple of hours.

GG: You're going to have enough trouble trimming this down. [laughter] Now I'm getting so postmodern I am actually talking about the interview as it's still going on. You need to trim that story about Phil so it makes coherent sense. It's a great story that really encapsulates Sweet Alice, although it doesn't begin to tell [all the facets of that reading] or explain how I originally met you. Wait, here's my final story. I met you through Sweet Alice, and let me just say what a pleasure it was.

JP: Well, thanks. Bye, Greg.

GG: Bye.

TINA HOWELL

was the host of the weekly open mic "Anotha Level" at the Afrocentric bookstore Lit X. "Anotha Level" was the subject of national media attention after the release of the popular and award-winning movie *Love Jones*, based on director Theodore Wicher's experiences in the Chicago African-American poetry community, and starring many of "Anotha Level"'s regular performers. Tina is currently still in Chicago and has gained both critical and commercial success with her one-woman show, an intriguing combination of spoken word, hiphop music and dance.

This interview was also conducted in the presence of J. Love, founder of 5A Artist Management, and fellow Chicago writer Dawn Simmons. Their comments are peppered throughout the interview, marked by appropriate notation. The beginning of this interview was lost because of a glitch with the tape recorder; at the time this transcript begins, the group was talking about the origins of Lit X and how Tina came to host an open mic at their venue.

Jason Pettus: Okay, we're running again. Go on with what you were saying.

Tina Howell: It's... being a part of the, you know, the ups and downs, you meet pretty interesting people. Although at that same time, the underground hip-hop scene is flourishing.

JP: This is right around 1990?

TH: Yeah, 1990 through 1992. 1992 is when I really met a lot of interesting people, like Devol and Mario, in 1992. I met Maria McCray when I first started going to Spices. Reminded me a lot of how I could be if I get to her realm, you know what I'm saying?

JP: Yeah.

TH: And Lucinda Boyd, Ann Marie, basically changed my whole thought process. 'Cause, you know, I was partying, doing a lot of stuff, and poetry basically kept me focused from a lot of riff-raff that I could have been involved in.

JP: It sounds, in general, that it was more of the scene going on than a specific individual.

TH: Yeah, right, it's like... to try to name all of these people could take us forever. But nonetheless, a lot of these people have hit the door down there all the way from the time from when we did it inside the store, all the way to the back room, still going strong.

JP: The open-mic at Lit-X is held at an Afrocentric store, and the open mic is known primarily for African-American poets. Now, the first question I have for you about that subject is: was that store chosen deliberately to attract that kind of audience, or have you received that reputation because of where it's held?

TH: Basically, when Spices closed down it was one of the only places where a black crowd could go. So, basically, a lot of the black poets came to the... tended to migrate to our door, which was fabulous to me. But we didn't say, "Okay, we're going to have an open mic and it's

going to be black poets." It just so happens that this is one of the only places to develop at the time. And now there's a lot of places to go.

JP: And what do you like the most about the reputation that you have, and what do you like the least?

TH: Um, the most...

JP: I mean, as it specifically relates to "this is known as a black poetry reading."

TH: Basically, the diversity of the poets. We've had several prominent figures [which Tina lists but the tape does not pick up well enough to list] who have been gracious enough to come down and rant and rave... [laughter from table] ...you know, let off steam and what have you, and we've had some good and bad things happen, but that's all a part of the love that you carry with you, doing something like this. The worst thing was, people tried to put a label on something, you know, or call it one thing. It's kind of too divergent to have it happen.

J. Love: Just the fact that we're in Wicker Park...

TH: Mm-hmm.

JL: ...it personifies the mixture. It's hard to be in a location like we are and not have people of all walks of life come through. Look at the different poetry coming though, they all operate on different levels. So the people that we get, people tend to follow them wherever they perform. So coming down here is something that convinces people all throughout the city to come down. From the Newsweek story, to the Tribune and Sun-Times, that's why people hear of us, even from out-of-town, and come down and find out what we're doing. I think it transcends race.

JP: I want to talk a little later about the reputation Lit-X is receiving from the interviews, but first I'd like to talk about Spices for a little bit -- and a very specific thing about Spices. Now, understanding that I was not living in Chicago while Spices was running... there's sort of a lore, a lot of stories that go around, and one of the stories was that people would shout 'Devil in the house'... [Tina breaks into laughter] ...whenever a white person would come in. Now the first question I want to ask you is do you think that the things that went on in Spices was a specific thing that was going on with that crowd, or is it an overall frustration of the Chicago poetry scene altogether?

TH: No, I would say basically that, speaking for myself, people at the time were getting into their so-called...

JL: Culture.

TH: Blackness and their culture and they were very..

TS: Guarded.

TH: Yeah, right...

JP: Was there a reason at the time to be guarded about the space, or was it just people having fun and...

TH: You could take it both of those ways. At one point people would laugh and shout out and it was funny and stuff. And then people kept shouting it out, which gave them the reputation that it wasn't nothing but a bunch of hecklers and angry black people down here [table laughs], you know, 'I don't wanna go down there!' la-de-dah, but it wasn't like every white person that was down there... it was like saying 'virgin' [a common playful heckle throughout the Chicago poetry scene, referring to anyone new to that specific stage --Ed.].

JP: It sounds like it was just another friendly heckle that goes on all over this city.

TH: And a lot of people either took it out of context, started an uproar... one poet actual-

ly took it seriously and wrote to the Tribune about it [laughing] but there was a lot of stuff going on behind that at that time... I don't even remember her name, but she was mad at a specific poet down there and she wrote the Tribune about it, and that's what gave up the whole boo-ha-ha and the whole thing, you know, which blew it up, but it wasn't nothing personal about it. It was just a thing that was said.

DS: It was certain individuals.

TH: Yeah, like somebody would be sitting way in the back, coming out of the bathroom...

JP: Yeah, all those people sitting at the back of ALL the bars...

TH: Yeah! [table laughs] And they'd just scream shit out at will, and people took it personally.

JL: Speaking of taking things out of context, people have to realize, like [Tina] said, people at that time, there was really a sharp rise in black consciousness. So when you've got a child with a new toy at Christmas, that child's going to try to protect that toy from the other kids. So when you have people who have been denied their culture and who they are for a long time...

TH: Yeah.

JL: ...and you finally discover that, it's like, 'Hey!' And it's not like you're shutting down everyone else's poetry or trying to get people away from you, but, you know, there's a fine line between being overly guarded and being guarded for a reason.

TH: If you get a chicken wing and all of a sudden another picnic comes along and tries to pick it, you guard it. It's the whole consciousness thing.

JL: We don't have a lot of things that are ours.

JP: This actually brings up another thing I wanted to ask you guys. I think everyone in Chicago in the poetry scene recognizes the necessity of having open mics that are based around different races. What do you think of that? The necessity of race based open mics?

TH: Mmm...

JP: Or maybe it's too simplistic a question.

TH: What I try to do is have an open door for everybody.

JP: Well, and when I've read at Lit-X before, I got a very, very deliberate feeling from you that you're trying to run a very open mic.

TH: I'm very much trying to do that, because if we keep basing everything on race, we're not going to get anywhere. Just know also that I'm trying to make my people aware. There's still a long way to go. But if somebody can come out and hear a white person or a Vietnamese person coming out, having the same problems that they've got, maybe that'll bridge some of that gap that we have, pull down a lot of truth. I'm not trying to save the whole world right now [laughs].

JP: Do you think it's still important to have these open mics that we have right now in Chicago, that are primarily black, primarily Latino, primarily gay?

JL: I don't think it's important, because number one, like she says, it builds more bridges, and we've got enough, I mean, we have enough obstacles. Getting back to this neighborhood [Wicker Park --Ed.] and how open it is... it's important for black people to have something that they call their own, yeah, but black people historically have been a very open and welcoming people to other people, to come in and embrace our culture. As long as you respect it, that's fine, and it's still that way. I don't think it's necessary for people to be separated. Chicago is too segregated as it is.

TH: Right, it's too segregated anyway. It's the whole black-white-poor thing. I want you to feel comfortable coming through the doors.

JL: And maybe learn something. Learn something about black culture that maybe you didn't understand and were afraid to ask. And it's the same for us. There might be some questions about hispanic culture that I might be too afraid to ask but, if I go to a poetry reading, I learn.

JP: What kind of readings do you do outside of Lit-X? Do you go to a lot of different things in town?

TH: Yes. I try to frequent as much as I can, but my schedule, you know, me working eight and a half hours every day and doing my own thing. I try to pick out the best things to fill the time that I have.

JP: And what kind of readings is it that you end up going to?

TH: I like the ones where basically you're not inhibited from saying what you feel. For me, number one, poetry is always something that's a feeling or a downstairs emotion and getting that out so you can go on to the next phase. If I can find a reading like that where there are poets who have good writing or if the crowd's energy is really high, I can go out and have a good time. Those are the ones I like, whatever part of the city it is.

JP: Yeah.

TH: Just that I'm comfortable walking through the door.

JP: And are you finding these places around town?

TH: Yeah, The Guild Complex, and Mo Java when they have poetry readings, Jazz and Java, which is a very nice underground coffeehouse, very very nice. Places like that.

JL: Tina's also going to be doing a lot of college gigs this fall -- she'll be at Roosevelt in a couple of weeks, and then next month at Western Illinois University.

TH: I'm about to get the ed-u-ba-ca-ted crowd [table laughs], you know, hear my words [Tina laughs].

JP: What is your background on that, by the way? Did you go to college?

TH: No. The streets is my college. And I used to have a problem with that, I used to feel that something was wrong with me 'cause I didn't go get higher education. But being out here on these streets, learning how to interact with these people on a day-to-day... it's a lot of school. I plan on going back. I'm in the profession of hair, basically, beauty products by day. I've always been able to maintain a job through that, working at a salon. Hair's basically been my bread and butter for the last seven years.

JP: And how do you feel about going and performing at these college campuses now?

TH: I don't really feel no way about it [table laughs]. To me, it's just like any other crowd... but I might have to make it PG or something, instead of rated R like it usually is -- tone down the brief nudity! [table laughs loudly] And adult content. But basically, just like anybody else, I don't let them scare me, just like I don't let the people that come down here [to Lit-X] scare me. But I'll see how I feel once I come back! [Tina laughs loudly]

JP: [After having JL whisper in his ear for a bit] What's going on with that, that's just been whispered in my ear? This song going on?

TH: Oh! [whole table laughs and groans] I'm on a solo project...

JL: There's two projects. Mention both of them.

TH: Oh yeah! [Tina laughs] You see, that's why I've got a manager! [whole table laughs loudly] The first project that I worked on was back in May. It dropped recently and it's

called "Word Sound Power," an Urban Sound Gallery project. That was produced by Levon Trent, who produces dance music. Very beautiful dance music, I might add. He has a lot of soul. It was pretty enough for me to work on. I tend to like pretty music. The second project...

JL: The first project, by the way, is... [Tina laughs] ...is doing pretty well overseas, and it's just arrived at Beat Parlor in Wicker Park... Go buy it! [table laughs] Word Sound Power!

TH: The second project is on a compilation album, and it's on... you gotta help me with this, J.

JL: The second project is on a compilation album through Guidance Records, a local label, and it features twelve poets, five of which are area poets, and they're all a part of Tina's family, 5A Artist Management. [JL lists artists at this point, but the tape recorder can't get the specific names recorded well enough to list]. It's due to be released in January of 1998.

JP: Nice, nice. Now let's move on to what we had just started to talk about a little earlier, which is about Lit-X itself and the attention it's been receiving. Now I'm going to repeat a little information for the purposes of the article, stuff you know already. It's not a secret that a lot of interviews are being done right now about Lit-X, including Newsweek, The Chicago Tribune, The Chicago Sun-Times, places like that. And it's also not a secret that you've been critical of several of the finished articles that have come out. Let's talk a little bit about the problems with the articles -- what were the things that happened between the interview and the article that didn't sit right? Why have you been critical?

TH: I haven't really been critical -- my partners, basically, have been critical. To me, there is no such thing as bad press. Bad press always makes people want to do more, and that's a good thing. The Tribune article that was written back in... March, was it?

JL: Yeah, March.

TH: Basically was written by an observer who didn't really know much about the scene. She came in and basically wrote some very hard tunes that people weren't able to... it wasn't the fact that she wrote the article. She didn't describe the poetry. She described the way people looked or the way people were dressed, or personal features about them, which a lot of people felt was low. It basically hurt a lot of feelings. I was quoted as being a poet with rusty dreads and flinging a beer in one hand, and when the little excerpt from the poem was printed, it had a particular line in there that made me sound like I was drinking it hard in there, which wasn't really the case. The poem was basically about a woman who had her heart broken by a particular cat and she didn't really think she would amount to anything -- it basically pulled her apart. And [the Tribune reporter] could have wrote the article and filled it with poetry and this-and-that, this-and-that, but she's calling a lot of poets "animated" and another name that I won't mention in this article... [table starts laughing] ...or I'll get my ass whupped! [table laughs loudly]

JL: Yeah!

TH: Yeah, I won't even go there, but a lot of things were said that really wasn't supposed to be said.

JP: Well, there's a common complaint about that [in the overall Chicago poetry scene]. There's a lot of journalists that try to do these articles about creative themes, no matter what the medium is...

TH: Right.

JP: ...and they just totally get it wrong. They just concentrate on the stuff that we don't

want. We want to talk about a certain sort of thing...

JL: And the thing about [the Tribune] reporter is that she wasn't there long enough in the first place to even talk to anyone, to get anything. She left so fast...

TH: She didn't ask any questions. She just came down and saw the people down there on a personal appearance level, and not really dive into what anybody was saying, or the feeling or the ambiance on the night, or anything like that.

JP: Well, that was the next question I was going to ask you. Given an article that was going to be written about Lit-X, what would you like to see written about it? It sounds like you would like to see an article out about the spirit going on down there.

TH: Yeah! What a person learned, why they were there. Stop trying to be a journalist and being so suit-and-tie-ish, and start writing about how you felt being there, about the night and being around all those poets. Did any of that hit you? Could you identify with any of the poets? No matter if they came and they were naked or whatever. Did you identify with what the person was saying, instead of attacking the personal appearance.

JP: We're at a point in Chicago history where there are several mostly-black poetry nights going on all over the city. But Lit-X is getting picked out to be the focus of most of these articles. Do you have an opinion on why that is?

JL: Lit-X has been around the longest, and it's always come with quality poets. As Tina said, I think that's always been the appeal. And it still has such an underground feel, people are really enjoying it. You know, earthy and funky, you see?

JP: Uh-huh.

JL: And I think the number one thing is that it's been around the longest. Everyone knows Tina, she's a great host, people always feel at home coming down, and word of mouth.

TH: We didn't pass out flyers for years, it was just word of mouth -- telling people about it at parties, tell my homies that there's an open mic. We used to go for hours and hours. But that was when we were undisciplined. [table laughs loudly] We were just winging it!

JL: And back when we were younger and didn't have anything else to do. [whole table groans and laughs loudly]

JP: When you could do that all night and it didn't matter!

TH: You get a job, and all of a sudden you need sleep and all that, you gotta curb down the time. But it used to be all night and 'hey, when am I going to read?' At the time, I didn't even have a list -- I would try to do it all from memory. And then I had to get a list [laughs]. We were just trying to do a lot of things and over the years we barged into other levels, which is why we went to Howard [Bailey, the owner of the "Lit-X/Anotha Level" space for the open mic] and he put his addition on and called it "Anotha Level," 'cause we were getting more clothes, more different kinds of stock, and then more people, who I had never seen before, because at the time we had these regulars, and then these people would come and they would have two or three people with them. And now, more and more each week, I get a new crowd of people who I've never seen before, who just heard about it. They'll come to my job and I'll just hand them a flyer and, like, 'There's poetry tonight, I've got this flyer, try to come by' and they're like 'is it going on?' and I'm like 'yeah!' and they come down.

JP: And this leads to my next question -- and you may disagree with this...

TH: Okay...

JP: ...but in a lot of ways, you're being set up almost as a spokesperson for the black poetry scene, you know what I mean? You're the one being the focus for a lot of these articles

and interviews. Do you get flack or shit from other people in the poetry scene?

TH: Yeah, people are always doing that. You're trying to mend, you're trying to do the right thing, trying to get over a certain gap or obstacle in your life, and people come and try to rip that from you. Or try to break down your self-esteem, try to make you feel that you're doing wrong. Yeah, I get that.

JL: The price of fame!

JP: What's your opinion on that? And just from a personal standpoint, what are some of your worries about being put in that position? Do you worry about it at night when no one else is around?

TH: Yeah, I'd be lying if I didn't say I wasn't frightened by it, by when people look up to you. I don't know, it's frightening but it's a good feeling, because I know I'm doing the right thing. I know I'm living right for Tina. And, you know, bring the articles on...

JP: How do you deal with all that stuff going on?

TH: I just deal with it! I got too many other worries going on in my life... [table laughs] ...with just trying to get my thing together, with the tour and going places and doing poetry. I just want to put out quality work, and that's my only job. I show up to my job and hopefully have fun with it. I'm like Michael Jordan -- what do you want me to do? You pass me the ball, I'm going to shoot it in -- I'm going to get the points. It's not really anything I can describe. I don't really know how to feel about that. Just gotta do the job.

JP: It's a difficult question to answer if you're the person in that position. [points to JL and DS] Maybe I can get an opinion from you two.

JL: I think, speaking as a manager, the hardest thing for her... we've got a lot of people on our roster from Lit-X. We've all known each other for years and that's what makes it a good relationship. And I'm a writer and a poet too, but I've been away from performance for like two years now. And looking at it from the other side now, the hardest thing is that we're getting so much acclaim now, and we're getting all these shows and offers. The hardest thing is handling the fact that it's not just something to do now just for fun. We want to KEEP it fun, but at the same time we want to keep in mind that this is a business now for us. There was a time when I never thought that poetry was something we could make a living from, but now that has changed. So the hardest thing is getting used to that and making the adaptation from just being a hanging out kind of thing to 'this is a business' and this is something we need to do not only to feed ourselves and make a living but also that we put out an important message. We're educating people. It's not just a poetry thing where you come and hear poetry about love and how your lover did you wrong and your dog ran away... that's not the kind of messages we're putting out. We're trying to make an impact on society as a whole, not just black society. We're trying to make commentaries that speak to everyone.

JP: I think that's something important that needs to be said about poetry in Chicago. That, just like you said, it's not just a matter of saying, 'We're trying to make an impact in black poetry or white poetry' or anything like that, but people in Chicago really look at it in a community view, you know? It's one of the really nice things about being a poet in Chicago. People look at it in a much more city-wide view, all around.

JL: Yeah.

JP: This melts into my next question, which is that there's this newfound national attention to the Chicago poetry scene. Things have been happening in the last year like "love jones" coming out, that was based on Spices, and it became a much, much more popular

movie than anyone thought it was going to be...

[at this point the tape stops without the table knowing and some conversation is lost]

JP: Okay, we're running again.

JL: I think naturally with the hip-hop scene, which is really a near and dear cousin to poetry, really the same thing, just differences in delivery and production, whatever. I think on the whole, a lot of people nationally were looking for good things to come out of Chicago. They've been looking at hip-hop for years, and things are starting to pick up now. It's been at a slower pace for awhile, but in 1997 we made leaps and bounds, entertainment as a whole, but especially poetry. And it's something the city can rally behind, like the Bulls. It's something Chicago can claim a special right to, the spoken word genre, while a lot of cities can't say that. And the movie kind of brought that back home.

TH: I'd like to elaborate on the movie. [Theodore Wicher, the writer/director of 'love jones'] was another influential person down at Spices to me. Here he is, this little tiny man, but who could really write a script that was... really made a lot of points, but too bad he couldn't do it like I know he would have, but he did it out here and it brought mad attention to everybody and everything connected to the whole poetry scene. If it wasn't for his movie coming out, I don't think Newsweek would have come down so soon.

JP: Right! [table laughs] And that's a crucial question that needs to be asked -- is the national attention necessarily a good thing? Is it good for these poets to get this exposure on a national level, or should we worry about it?

TH: Oh, uh, well... [Jason laughs] For me personally, I've seen the rise and fall and the second coming of irae, hip-hop, a lot of different things. We need to look at everybody's scenes -- all the microscenes -- and make sure that the people running the money, or the media or whoever, who come in and associate all the bad things... like that the fall of disco was due to coke and promiscuous sex, so they thought to associate that with disco, when disco wasn't even about that. It was about the whole scene of going out and dancing and letting your hair down. But then you have people who come along and throw a lot of bullshit in and get the national attention and then you have people fighting, and then you have 'down with hip-hop,' or down with anything. You just have to make sure that the outside forces don't come in and do that to us. Come in and rip it up.

JL: One other thing about that, too. I think part of the change of switching focus to poetry has been because of all the violence and negativity that's been associated with hip-hop.

TH: Mm-hmm.

JL: Poetry's the next best thing, and you see a lot of advertisers and a lot of people embracing poetry because it's a lot safer. We may say controversial things about different issues, but for whatever reason, it's been embraced a lot more quickly than hip-hop. I guess it's something where people think it has a lot longer history... but it really doesn't. They both probably date back to antiquity, anyway. But poetry is seen as a lot safer vehicle.

JP: Is that something that's made up by a lot of people? The experience I can tell you about is that I just went to the National Poetry Slam this summer, and this hotel that we stayed at just had no idea what was going to go on. They put up 160 poets in the hotel, and they had some sort of... I don't know. Some sort of attitude or mindset that all these people were going to be college professors, with patches on their elbows of their suitjackets or something. And we all went out and got TRASHED the first night, 160 poets got trashed and were skinny-dipping in the pool, and the hotel just FREAKED OUT. Is this something artificial,

where the media looks at it and says, 'poetry's going to be safer than hip-hop?' Assign these false feelings of chaos to hip-hop and not poetry?

JL: To an extent, I think. There's rap artists that people look at and think of as safe -- Jazzy Jeff and the Fresh Prince. I think a lot of it is about how the media presents it. If someone were to come see a show by Marvin Tate or someone like that, they might not come back with the same report. They might not bring people to come see a brother like that, because his show is controversial.

TH: It's just like everything. There's your conscious earthy poets, there's your butterfly poets, there's your blue-collar working poets, there's your booty poets... [table laughs] ...people that strictly come out to get ass! [loud laughter from whole table]

JP: No names being mentioned tonight!

TH: People who come out strictly to play on the minds of... I'm not going to say helpless women [laughs]...

Dawn Simmons: Open women.

TH: Open women, you know what I'm saying?

JP: I know what you're saying.

TH: People who just have that whole gift of gab thing and just come out and play on their dick. Or play, back in the Spices days, if I can add this, they just found out about their blackness and coming down and cutting everybody off by the heads. You're going to have every type. Just like you had a lot of hardcore rappers, like Easy-E, Ghetto Boys and all that, who were considered 'gangster rap,' who just wrote about their environment. So if you can criticize these people for writing about their environment, you gotta look at yourself and 'what are you doing to try to save your environment?' if you had to try to live that life. So people are going to try to put a label on poetry, but you can't. It's gumbo, that's what it is! [laughs] It's a whole lot of people just doing what they know.

DS: It's all they can do. Or all they want to know.

TH: It's nothing too complicated about it, no big-bang theory about it. It's just poetry. It's just words coming out of you in separate ways that somebody in the room will get. Somebody will.

JP: Let me ask you about this while I have you, because this is really intriguing me now. You guys have referred to this period right around 1990 where people were suddenly getting in touch with their blackness, and several times you guys have mentioned this and laughed while you mention it. Why do you laugh about it?

JL: I laugh because for a large part of the people who embraced it, it turned out to be nothing but a fad. Like, for a large part of the people who aren't with us now and who want to talk trash about us, it's because they left. They discovered it and embraced it while it was fashionable, you know, Public Enemy and 'Fight the Power' and 'Do the Right Thing' and all that, but then it sort of lost its appeal to them. Once WE found that thing that had been lost from us, we held on to it.

JP: So for the three of you sitting at this table, that's something that's still very important to you.

JL: Yeah, I think one of the distinctive things about Lit-X is that a lot of us are pro-black as a community but not anti-anything. It's like Malcolm said, you don't have to be anti-white to be pro-black.

TH: Why be anti-anything when you can just, you know, turn the shit around. Instead of

getting on these people, let's come together and find out what we have alike.

JP: I think that's a struggle that goes on no matter what the race is right now. I think that's something that's just happening with living in this time period. We're living in a period of American history that's long enough and established enough where, no matter what our heritage, we're going through that difficult process and going back and trying to understand where we're from, where we come from, while still trying to find out...

TH: Yeah.

JP: You know, we're not doing it to try to say anything bad about anyone else. Just from the simple standpoint of understanding where we came from. I think it's misinterpreted a lot, especially... I think in the black poetry scene, there's a lot of people who WANT to misinterpret it, want to DELIBERATELY misinterpret it, as some sort of dig. I think it's something very important to understand, that the root of all that is just this very basic need to understand the people who you're still carrying the genetic code of.

TH: Considering that things were never told to most people of what our parents learned or things like that, people are starting to ask, "Well, where did you get your information from?" and "Who told you this?" as far as the whole black-white thing going on. I'm tired of that. I want to hear what everybody has to say. I'm tired of the whole mad at whites thing.

JL: People kind of misinterpret our zeal about that. People have to realize, and this gets kind of into the back of people's minds, but what we're finding out about ourselves, what we're discovering about ourselves -- it wasn't given to us. We had to scrape for the information, to find out where we're from. Where a lot of other races know where their homeland was. We don't have that. We have to grasp onto whatever we can find.

JP: That's a very good point. For a lot of cultures, there's a very established history, something you can simply go back to, say, your grandparents, and they have all this information sitting in their home or in a safety deposit box, and it's all right there, while in the black community there's a lot of digging that goes on.

TH: And grandparents are becoming younger and younger by the generation. And if your father's mother hasn't told you anything, you're walking around like a lost cat.

JP: Plus there's an added complication, and I don't know if this applies to your life, but to my life especially, I just have relatives who flat-out lie [table breaks into loud laughter]. They're like, 'Oh yeah, this happened and this happened' and then you find out a little bit later, none of that happened!

JL: Or you have relatives who don't say anything at all. Some of us are at the age... well, for the most part, all of us [at this table] are in our late-twenties, early-thirties, and some of us had grandparents, who, like me, I got some things from them on where I'm from outside of this country, but outside of that, my grandparents died last year. So when I got to the age where I wanted to hear these things, they were at an age where they were starting to FORGET a lot of those things. And what do you do?

JP: I just have a couple of questions left, and then we can finish this up. And these are all very general questions, so answer them in any context that you want. First, what would you like to see happening with Lit-X?

ALL: Bigger space!

JP: So you still want to be hosting it for awhile?

TH: Yes. I would like to keep doing it for as long as I possibly can. I still love it. Every week coming through those doors hits me in the heart. I don't know where I would be if I

didn't have that. But I would definitely like to have a larger space.

JP: Would you like to see the store get a larger space, or would you like to move the open mic somewhere else?

TH: Well, the open mic definitely needs to be in a larger space. I hope in the future to have a space in another part of town where it's more accessible and have workshops and things of that nature. And we're working on it, and with the grace of God, the grace of the Creator [Tina kisses the air] I hope that happens. We're working on a lot of different things -- just keep your ear to the ground, you know? [Jason laughs] And we'll be coming to a neighborhood near you.

JP: And the last question is in two parts, and this is even more general than the last question. Firstly.. and this is just your opinion and should be understood.. but what is the biggest problem in the Chicago poetry scene? What the biggest thing to be fixed? [Tina sits in silence for five or ten seconds] It's a loaded question, obviously.

TH: Wow! What needs to be fixed!

JP: Or, at least, what's one thing in the Chicago poetry scene that you could point to and say, 'Here's what bugs me the most?'

TH: More people need to come out! Or people are just going to fly right past, and people are going to be like, "Where the fuck they coming from?" I think the support system -- getting more people to be aware that this is something that's happening whether you like it or not. This is something going on. We're here, we're not going nowhere [table laughs]. It needs to be a little bit tighter, and people need to get their ideas about what the scene is and just come out and stop saying, 'Well, it's this or this..' You know, I asked the brothers on the block, 'Hey, I run an open mic. You all rap, don't you? Come on out!' That's poetry to me

DS: You know, you have a saxophone and you play? Well come out and play -- you don't have to say a word.

TH: Or come out and listen. Or come out and dance, or whatever. Everybody, come out and do their thing.

JL: I think a big problem in the Chicago poetry scene as a whole -- and really, not just poetry -- is that there's a lot of egos. And the egos that people have kind of precludes a lot of people from working together. There's not a lot of cooperative work. We're kind of overcoming a lot of it, like with 5A Artist Management, we can kind of come together and there's never an occasion we have one artist performing at a space and somebody else in our family's not performing. So we're trying to do things together and trying to do more things outside of our core group. But there are a lot of people in the city doing things, who are having readings and this and that, but not reaching out. It's like that crab in a barrel mentality -- everyone wants to be on top, everyone wants to be the man, but they're not realizing the fact that the one thing that has kept Chicago as a whole off of the big picture, entertainment-wise, is just getting together and doing it. New York and L.A., you have that. You can go to a hip-hop club in New York and find one person performing, and everyone in the hip-hop community's there, supporting. They're there supporting the music, making sure that the art form continues. And that's something we don't have happen. We don't have poets coming out to hear other poets.

JP: It's a common complaint about the Chicago poetry scene, and a big reason why John started Tunnel Rat.

TH: People need to be in the know. As far as media goes, I wish that the big media was-

n't so hyped on scandals and would just tell it like it was instead of sensationalizing. I find that if you just talk to people like they're people and not like they're a commodity, that people feel more comfortable with you as a person. If the people who write articles would just come out and see what's going on just by... 'you know, I'm here tonight to hear some poetry!'

JL: See with your ears, you know what I'm saying?

TH: And stop trying to get the scandal.

JP: And the very last question I have to ask is what the best thing going on in the Chicago poetry scene? What are the things that are working?

TH: The whole ball. There are just some great writers that are here. Going back a little, in January we kicked off a book signing at the store which allows poets to come down, and people came out and they were quiet and people had a good time. Just the people. I try to run a people spot. Ordinary Joes, ordinary Janes can come and hear a good selection of poetry.

JL: The quality of gigs that we're getting and the quality of people, stands out in my mind of the best thing going on right now. We're no longer relegated -- and there's nothing wrong with the space we're in now, there's nothing wrong with doing the smaller gigs and the Chopin [Theatre] and the Blue Note and all that -- but if you want to consider the colleges and some of the more major venues and all that, we're getting a lot of people who previously never wanted to work with us, would never have approached us. And now they are. They're people we wanted to work with all along. I think the quality of where we're able to go and perform is probably what stands out in my mind as the best thing right now. We're getting the respect for what we do, we're able to make a living from it, people are paying us and respecting us as artists.

TH: You meet some really shitty people who think that God specifically put them on the planet to, you know, be here and be the shit [table laughs], like the ground you walk on is your shit, is blessed. And just to be able to do something with them where they'll come down and be a part of the whole thing.

JL: That's all part of it, too, why we want to get a bigger space, so we can accommodate bands and bring in... I think a lot of people don't come down and support Lit-X basically because, not only the proximity, but because of the size. I don't see it as a difficult thing for us to pull in a couple hundred people every week, if we had the space to accommodate that.

TH: We're working on it.

JL: We're working on it.

TH: We're working on it... now [table laughs].

JP: Okay, thanks.

TH: Could I add one last thing?

JP: Sure.

TH: I'd just like to say to my family and friends who have helped over the last four years to make this worth doing, thank you. I don't do this shit alone -- trust me, it's hard work. To brother Mario, my right hand, who's just like that, he's always been there. To Howard, who's given the space. To J Love, my management team, they're great, I love you, and hopefully this will be going on for forty more years.

THAX DOUGLAS

is the closest the Chicago poetry scene has to a living legend. His career began in the 1980s at the fabled performance venue Club Lower Links, performing alongside such now-main-stream artists as Henry Rollins, Eric Bogosian and Karen Finley. In the early 90s Thax started hosting a monthly variety show called "Thax After Dark" at the indie-rock staple Lounge Ax, introducing a wide variety of poets, musicians and performance artists to a large audience for the first time. He has had two books published, along with a spoken-word CD produced by rock veteran Steve Albini. He has collaborated with National Public Radio on several occasions, and frequently goes on the road as the opening act for such alternative rock bands as Guided By Voices. He is currently hosting a weekly literary show called "Salon de Thax" at Myopic Bookstore in Chicago. Like all of his endeavors, the show is a quirky cult favorite among the local underground.

Jason Pettus: We are speaking to Thax Douglas, October 14, 1997, at Peter's Diner.

Thax Douglas: Yeah.

JP: Well, I was starting to lay out my questions for this interview, Thax, like I normally do, lay out a page full of questions to ask the person ahead of time. But then I realized that I'm friends with you and the things I wanted to ask you about are things that I've just naturally wanted to ask you about for awhile, so I am forgoing the written questions tonight and we'll see how that works.

TD: Okay.

JP: I'd like to start with a little background and a little history about how you got involved with the Chicago poetry scene in the first place. Did you go to school in Chicago? Were you raised in Chicago?

TD: Yes, I went to UIC for awhile.

JP: And were you studying English there? Writing?

TD: I was auditing.

JP: Okay.

TD: Because I worked for the UIC Hospital, so I audited.

JP: And were you writing for yourself at that time?

TD: No, I wasn't. I wrote a lot in the '70s and then I quit in 1983 and was a born-again Christian for about three years. I stopped writing during that time. Am I talking loud enough?

JP: Yeah, I think so... yeah, you're fine.

TD: But I met this great writer, I think you've heard of him. Carl Watson?

JP: I think I have heard of him.

TD: Yeah, yeah.

JP: And this was in the period where... during your born-again Christianity?

TD: No, that was before. I met him in, like, 1981.

JP: Okay, all right.

TD: As the born-again phase was drawing to a close, I just thought of Carl and called him up out of the blue. I just happened to read somewhere that he was performing at a bar.

JP: Okay.

TD: And I called him up and asked to speak to him and he said, "Well, Thax, I was just telling someone about you!" and that made me feel pretty good, so we became friends and he was going to the Green Mill, so I started going there in July of 1987.

JP: To the Green Mill?

TD: Yeah.

JP: And was that your first foray into the spoken word scene in Chicago? Or were you doing it beforehand in the '70s, also?

TD: No, I... things were different in the '70s. There wasn't a spoken word scene, I lived in the suburbs. Up until recently, the spoken word scene was this little tiny underground thing that you had to go deep into the dark city to go to, so...

JP: But you end up at the Green Mill in 1987, you say?

TD: Mm-hmm.

JP: And that had to have been the very beginning.

TD: Yeah, it was just getting started.

JP: Tell us a little bit about what that was like. What the Green Mill was like back in those days? And this is time I think Marc Smith [the host of the Green Mill poetry slam] has said that he was still drinking, before he quit drinking, and he's already said some stories about how crazy he used to be when he was drinking and about how he would get out of control sometimes. Did you ever see things like that? Just what was the atmosphere?

TD: Well, it was a lot of fun, because it was new. It hadn't sort of found itself, it hadn't ossified into what it is now. It was a lot of fun. You didn't know what was going on from week to week, and the people were still going, even then.

JP: Was there a lot of competition at this time? Other open mics? Or was it pretty much one of the only open mics?

TD: It wasn't the only open mic, but a lot of the open mics were, you know, pretty deadly dull, and they weren't the sort of places you'd want to, you know...

JP: Academic and stuffy, like that? Or just small and boring?

TD: Small and boring, I would say. And so...

JP: Well, I heard that sometime in that period, in the late '80s, you almost made the Chicago slam team. Is that correct? That you made it into the final round?

TD: I might have, I forget. It's... at the time, the slam was fun. It didn't start getting annoying until the National [Poetry Slam], in 1991. That's when I stopped going. But it was exciting. It was an excuse to perform. So I do know that I used to slam every week, because it was a lot of fun.

JP: And at what point did you decide that... what point did you start thinking, "This might be kind of fun to host something myself?" To put something together?

TD: Almost right away.

JP: Is there anything you can remember specifically, why that started being appealing to you?

TD: I think it was, like, a thing like a lot of people have, where you just... no, I won't say that, 'cause that's not true. But I think basically what it was that I wanted to see people who

I wanted to see perform. So it was like creating my own show -- I'd create a show I'd like to see. The first show was really dumb, because I had some musicians play throughout the whole night and I had five poets come out and read, one after the other, and the musicians were supposed to play in the background, Philip Glass or something like that. And it was Jackie Disler and Mary Shinbine and Patricia Smith and Lawrence Tyler and one other person. And it was at this place called "Batteries Not Included," it was like an old goth club from the '80s. And that was my first show, I guess it was 1989?

JP: Mm-hmm.

TD: And I guess I was...

JP: How did you ever end up there? Did you ask the owner of the place about doing a show there?

TD: Mary Shinbine knew the owner. I don't know if you've ever talked to her, but she goes back to the '70s. She knew all the pub readings and all of that.

JP: And how did that move back to Estelle's? Was Estelle's your first regular week-to-week reading that you did?

TD: Yeah, it's the only regular week-to-week reading I've done. (table laughs)

JP: And when did you start at Estelle's?

TD: June of 1992, and it was until the end of 1993.

JP: So it was at a point where the open mic [at Estelle's] had already been up and running for a couple of years.

TD: Mm-hmm.

JP: And did the current host leave his position? Did he get fired and you were asked to come on?

TD: I was in the mood to do it. And Chris Demonijin, who was running it at the time, was going to choose between me and somebody else. I really wanted to do it, so I just badgered her to let me do it.

JP: Okay. So tell us what happened with that. It was until the end of 1993, you say. What was that like? Well, let's break that down into a couple of questions. First, what was it like doing a weekly reading, where it was a lot of people showing up who you didn't necessarily know?

TD: It was a lot of fun, and I just really enjoyed hosting. It's something that just comes naturally to me. I'm a little like Shappy [the current host of Estelle's open mic], I'm a bit of a ham. It's fun to go up there. Although... no, actually, I wasn't that different from Shappy. He's more comic than I am on stage.

JP: But you two definitely have more similarities than, say, you and a lot of other people.

TD: Yeah.

JP: I see that too.

TD: Yeah.

JP: And then the second half of that question -- tell us a little bit of what it was like... and I'm setting you up for another question later in the interview, but for now, just tell us what it was like, hosting at that time period, in the earlier part of Chicago's current poetry history. What were some of the readers like? Was it pretty much, in general, the same kinds of things we're hearing today? And also the same proportions of good poets to not-so-good poets?

TD: There were a lot of fun things. There were, like, regular people. That was the dawn of the alternative age, so a lot of things that later became performance poetry were new then, so there were a lot of, like... slackers were new then, so all that stuff was new. So there were

people like that, and then there were the people who are still there, like the "honored eccentrics," I guess you could call them, people like Joeffre Stewart and Leonard de Montbraun and people like that. And there were some other people, too, like actors, and... I think I will still going through that period where I was calling it "spoken word" instead of "poetry," I think it was still a word of shame then to say that you were a poet, so "spoken word" sounded better. So there was, like, actors and monologists and people like that, too.

JP: And what happened at the end of 1993? Why did you stop hosting?

TD: I was tired.

JP: Did you have the spark of the idea at the time for Thax After Dark? Or was that after you had stopped hosting for awhile?

TD: Actually, I've been doing Thax After Dark since 1990.

JP: Oh, really?

TD: At Club Lower Links.

JP: Oh, oh oh, okay. Back in 1990 you started Thax After Dark. Was it monthly at that point?

TD: No, it was pretty irregular.

JP: Okay. And you started at Club Lower Links?

TD: Yeah.

JP: And what was that like? That was one of those place, I should mention for the benefit of my readers... there are a number of legendary, almost mythic poetry readings now from the early days of Chicago, that closed before I ever moved here. One of them is definitely Club Lower Links. Tell me a little bit about that.

TD: Well, it was basically a performance art space, and the woman, Lee Jones, who ran it, wanted it to be like one of those little underground spaces in New York, where people could do performance art. Once again, in 1988, it was still really underground.

JP: This was just when people like Eric Bogosian and Karen Finley were just starting to get their first big breaks. People like Laurie Anderson were just starting to get big...

TD: Henry Rollins performed at Lower Links to, like, thirty people, so things were a lot different in 1989, 1990.

JP: And [Club Lower Links] had a whole range of programs, not just a spoken word night. I know Greg Gillam used to host something there, and the Unofficial Soup Kitchen used to do work there, and you obviously started Thax After Dark there.

TD: Yeah, they had a lot of jazz nights and stuff like that. And they had a hip-hop open mic for awhile.

JP: And I'm assuming that it was when Lower Links shut down that you moved to Lounge Ax.

TD: Yeah, it was.

JP: And how did that happen? Were you friends with the owner of Lounge Ax at the time?

TD: No, I did something that I occasionally... I'm not a very good schmoozer, but occasionally when I'm determined to push my way into a scene. And they used to host the Milly's Orchid Show, which is the same genre that I work in. So they kept doing what club owners do when I called, saying "Call me back, call me back, call me back." So I just went there and asked to speak to her in person and said, "I've heard that you're very nice." (table laughs)

JP: And that worked?

TD: Yeah. Well, Jim Carroll [the author of "The Basketball Diaries," among other books] raised his fee [when he did a show at Lounge Ax], so they needed an opening act who would perform for, like, nothing, so I said I'd do it. Then I sort of like scammed my way in by say-

ing that I was going to do a rock spoken word show with these rock people who did spoken word. And it wasn't really that way, there was only one of those people in there (table laughs). But luckily, she really liked the show, so she kept letting me do it.

JP: And it's turned out quite well there. You've been running it there ever since.

TD: Yeah, yeah. She keeps letting me do it.

JP: It seems like a good relationship you have there.

TD: Yeah.

JP: Well, before we move on, let me talk with you a little bit about this. You may agree with this and you may not, and I'll just tell you stories that I've heard and my opinions on it and see what you have to say about it. Which is basically, one of the things that you're known for, basically, with your shows, with you being a fixture on the Chicago poetry scene as long as you have, is that you have a real gift at discovering a lot of people who have gone on, or are going on, to really make a name for themselves. I mean, just from your own mouth just a couple of minutes ago, that first show that you ever did, that's pretty impressive, for just deciding to put a show together. And I've also heard all kinds of rumors about the people you've had over the years... rumors that David Sedaris used to read at your shows, that was one of his first places, along with a lot of bands that have gone on to do fairly well. It's no secret that you're friends with Ira Glass, who does *This American Life* [on National Public Radio], things like that. What would your opinion be on a statement like that? Do you think you're really discovering people? Do you go out of your way to find people who you really like? And are the rumors we've heard true, also?

TD: I wish I could say yes. If I was Bridget Murphy, I could, and I could just let you assume (table laughs). No, David Sedaris was never in my show. I'm really surprised that that's a rumor.

JP: What about the examples that are true? A much higher percentage of the people who you pick and choose and who you really want to be in your shows have gone on to do rather big things, much more than the regular open mics or poetry events that you can point to.

TD: Well, that makes me feel really good, but like you said, I'm the sort of person who, if I really like what they do, I just go up and say, "You're great, do you want to be in a show?" And I also have a pretty good second-sight about, maybe somebody who I've never seen their stuff but I meet them and think that they'd probably do something good, and they do. That's happened a ton of times. And I guess, you know, some of the people are so shy and uncertain of their talent, that just having one person say, "I think you're really great" really does a lot for them, really gives them the courage to do more stuff.

JP: Speaking of the people who have gone on from the early Chicago poetry scene, including David Sedaris, Lisa Busceni, Milly's Orchid Show and all of those things, do you think that's a product of that time in Chicago? Do you think something like that can happen again in the Chicago poetry scene? Or was that indicative of that early '90s period and something that can't be replicated?

TD: Well, how does magic happen? When I went to the Green Mill, it was very magical. And all of us that went there every week... and I went there from '87 to '90... that includes Lisa Busceni, of course Patricia Smith, Sheila Donohue, Cin Salach, Marvin Tate...

JP: A lot of the Neo-Futurists too, right?

TD: Yeah! There was definitely an adjunct to that. David Kodeski...

JP: Dave Awl...

TD: Yeah, tons of people like that. David Hacker, Karasha Lee who went by Ron Miles then, and did stuff about his family, his horrible family. And when he changed his name to

"Right of God" he stopped writing about his family. But the point is, here it is, ten years later, and whenever we meet... I mean, it was really special, so it's like we went to high school together. There was something even more special than that. It was really quite incredible.

JP: I guess that's my question. Every single person who we just mentioned, who you said were all regulars, are all people who have made a name for themselves, either in Chicago or nationally, even.

TD: Yeah.

JP: Do you think that's mostly because that all of these great people were attracted to Chicago and that it all happened because of the city we live in, or do you think it's more of a factor that it was a specific time and things were just starting to break in Chicago and a lot of people got those chances that may not exist anymore?

TD: I would think so now, I mean, the Green Mill is a scene already, with its own rules and its own traditions, so it's just like any other thing. It's like, people are there, and people can either do what you've done, which is to adapt yourself to it, which is a lot of fun. Now when I think of people doing a Green-Mill type poem, I think of someone writing a sonnet which seems really charming or something like that. I don't know, if you want something magical to happen...

JP: Do you think there's validity in the argument that there are new open mics, ones that have just been running in the last year or two, are running now, that are producing some of these "magical environments," these very unique, singular experiences, for a whole new generation of poets in Chicago? Do you think there's a whole group of poets right now who are going to go on and have the kinds of successes as this first wave did?

TD: That'd be really nice.

JP: What have you seen as you've continued to do your shows? Have you seen, still, a good amount of performers in Chicago who are new but still have that spark in them? Or not as much anymore?

TD: Well, wherever I go, I see people that I like sometimes, and I say, "Do you want to be in a show?" And I guess I can go to an open mic and see twenty people that I'm tolerating and one person that I really like, and I just ask that one person to do the show. (Jason laughs) That's what I do. But there doesn't seem to be a scene in particular.

JP: Not in the way there used to be, back in this first wave of Chicago poetry?

TD: Well, is the Shappening really a scene? Or is it? I don't know, what do you think?

JP: Oh... well... in my opinion, maybe not the Shappening so much. The main argument against the Shappening is that it's too wide a variety of poets who hate each other that go there regularly right now. But I've seen other things. Just from my personal experiences, I went to an open mic when I first moved here that was at Sweet Alice [ed note: Sweet Alice has since closed and has been turned into the bar Ten54]. Greg Gillam ran it for a year or so, and it has already turned out to produce several, at least two or three, if not more, published writers now, a couple of years down the line. So, just in my own opinion, I think there are some open mics going on in town that are new open mics. And obviously, I go to a LOT of open mics right now, and so I see these ones around town that seem to have their communities happening.

TD: Have you gone to La Piazza?

JP: I tried to go one week and they cancelled, the week I showed up.

TD: Really?

JP: Yeah. So I didn't get a chance to go. I read a really good article about them in the Reader.

TD: Yeah, that's the article that really made it sound exciting.

JP: And I haven't been back, and they charge, like, two or three dollars to get in, then it's a two or three dollar minimum, and I'm like, whoo, that's a lot of money to spend for an open mic! Especially when I don't know anything about it. So I'm going to try to make it down one week, spend the money, just to see what it's like. 'Cause it sounds like it's a good one.

TD: To me, it's the same as, like, going back to the Green Mill and the way it was, a bunch of us went every week. It really was a scene. My shows are like a "one man" scene. I'm the only person there that makes it to every show! (table laughs) So it's not really a scene.

JP: Well, your show, Thax After Dark, shouldn't really be compared to the open mics anyway, 'cause it's a very deliberate, you know, show...

TD: Yeah...

JP: ...that you specifically put together. It has very little to do with randomness.

TD: Yeah, you're right about that.

JP: It's much more like a variety show that an audience pays to go to, more than a community of writers who are coming every week to read their new stuff for each other.

TD: Part of that is this Chicago thing. Chicago has really tiny scenes that up and flare, like in the '70s there was...

JP: Steppenwolf.

TD: Yeah, with the theatre, and there was a group of punks and writers who were pretty well known, but they pretty much died down by the time the '80s rolled around.

JP: I see. It seems like Chicago, more or less, has had this kind of history throughout the city's history. You can go all the way back to Carl Sandburg and the Green Onion, and all the readings they did, where they got on a stage and... read their work, just like the open mics right now. And they were very popular, and it seems like every ten or twenty years it swells down, swells back up... of course, Chicago was one of the first cities ever to publish the Beat poets, and they used to come in a lot, perform a lot in Chicago. Maybe that's a good question to ask you. Do you see these two different... we frame a lot of our modern discussions of the Chicago poetry scene based on only the last two waves, basically the rise of the Green Mill, and then a dip again, and now we're on this second crest, right now, for the second time in ten, fifteen years. Should we look at it more in the context of the city as a whole, or should we look at these two waves as two distinctly related waves that are bringing a LOT of newfound attention to the city, unlike any of the other waves?

TD: I didn't know there was a lot of newfound attention to the poetry scene.

JP: Oh, well, there's all these things going on, and 'love jones' came out and got a bunch of national attention, there's more and more Chicago writers who are on national tours and getting books published nationwide, and... yeah, yeah. I would definitely say that there's a newfound attention that wasn't there before. But should we look at that? Should we look at the last ten years as the rise of Chicago poetry? Or should we look at it as oh, this is just another upswing of the Chicago poetry scene?

TD: Yeah, I'm going to assume that it's just another upswing.

JP: Well, let's... oh, is the diner closing soon?

TD: Yeah, about ten minutes. Plus I've got my show tonight.

JP: Oh yeah. Shit. Well, we better... well, just a little bit more. Actually, I'm going to turn the tape at this point. (pause while tape is flipped over) Okay, we're running with Thax Douglas again. Thax, we're kind of running our time down of our time available, so let me skip around and ask you a couple of questions that I wanted to get to, and jump from subject to subject a little bit. First, tell me a little bit about your experiences with you and Ira

Glass and National Public Radio. How did something like that happen?

TD: Well, this is another great opportunity where, if I was Brigid Murphy, I would make the most out of it. But my best friend, John Connors, does music for This American Life, and I'm friends with this one Paula Killan I think you know of. Paula Killan?

JP: I think...

TD: She lives in L.A. now, but she's really great and she's always really liked me. But anything I have to do with Ira Glass is because of John.

JP: He was the one who introduced you two. Did you become mutual admirers of each other, or how did you originally start working together?

TD: Ira?

JP: Yeah, Ira, working with Ira. Or was it just a situation where Ira had a space open and your friend John said, "Oh, I have a friend, Thax, he could come in and do something"?

TD: Actually, I haven't had anything for him yet, for This American Life, because I don't think my style of writing would go over on This American Life, so I haven't tried. Like I said... oh, you were AT that show, right?

JP: Oh yeah. [Ed. Note: Thax is referring to the one-year anniversary of This American Life, recorded live at The Flat Iron Building in Wicker Park. Thax was a performer, as well as such notables as The Mekons and Dan Savage.]

TD: How do you know Ira?

JP: Uh, I don't (laughs).

TD: You don't know him?

JP: I don't know him as a friend. Actually, I met him at Thax After Dark! He was an audience member the month I performed "The Day I Turned Gay."

TD: Oh yeah, that's right!

JP: And I was already a fan of Ira's, and I saw him host a fundraiser at Steppenwolf. So I knew what he looked like, and I got really drunk that night at Lounge Ax...

TD: Was that [Steppenwolf] show the show I was in?

JP: Yeah, that was the show you were in, that also had David Sedaris, and Liz Phair... so I got really drunk at Lounge Ax and went over and said, "Oh, Ira Glass, you're so cool, I'm such a big fan" and I made a big fool out of myself and he thought I was stalking him (table laughs).

TD: People love him. I mean, people go really nuts about him.

JP: People literally go nuts about him, and I'm a big fan of his. So he had this 'Letters' show last year...

TD: That's right...

JP: And I went and performed at it, because it was an open call for people with letters. And because I performed for it, that's how I got the invitation for the one-year anniversary, and that's how John Biederman and I ended up there. I ended up getting cut from the show. Wasn't even actually on the show. But I still got the invitation.

TD: So you got to see that show. That's pretty good.

JP: So Ira... I definitely know who Ira is. I'm pretty sure Ira knows who I am. That's not necessarily the best thing (laughs). I'm not sure if he necessarily has a good opinion of me, because everytime I'm around him, I'm this big, doddering... idiot.

TD: Wow!

JP: I'm just like, everytime I'm around him, "Oh Ira, you're SO COOL and I LOVE your show and duh-duh-duh!" (Laughing loudly) Anyway, all apologies to Ira if he's reading this article (table laughs).

TD: Well, if we're going to talk about celebrities, I'd rather drop a name like Steve Albini.

JP: Yeah, have you worked with him?

TD: Yeah, I made a spoken word album with him.

JP: Really? Wow! I had no idea!

TD: Well, it's with this noise guitarist named Alan Jones. And because I'm so incredibly lazy, it's just sitting there. Maybe the guy publishing my book will put it out.

JP: Oh yeah, let's speak a little bit about that, since we're on the subject. Juggernaut Press, Daniel X. O'Neil, is... (to waitress) Are you closing up soon? Do you want us to get out of here?

WAITRESS: Uh, I closed twenty minutes ago, but...

JP: Oh!

TD: Oh.

JP: Okay, just a couple more minutes and we're out of here.

TD: Yeah, he just got married, Daniel, and he's on his honeymoon. So when he comes back, that's going to be his next project.

JP: Did he just approach you? Did he just say, "I'm a fan of your work, I want to publish you"?

TD: Yeah. He's someone I've known for a long time and I really like, because he'd always give me these pep talks about the entrepreneurial spirit.

JP: He's constantly doing that to me, too. It's the whole reason I self-published my first novel, it was all Daniel going, "Jason, you GOTTA do it, you GOTTA!" (table chuckles) He's great, he really is.

TD: And his books look so good!

JP: I know! Fantastic.

TD: So I was really excited. He first brought it up in 1995, and at first I thought he was just talking, but now I know he's really serious.

JP: Will this be your first published book?

TD: Mm-hmm.

JP: So it must be exciting, after all of this time.

TD: The only thing I can say is that by the time the book comes out, I hope you'll be sick of my name, 'cause I plan on getting as much publicity as possible. I'll be like Liz Phair in 1993. (Jason laughs loudly) I know you didn't live here in 1993...

JP: No, no I didn't.

TD: Or Tony Fitzpatrick in 1989, same thing.

JP: Yeah?

TD: Publicity blitzes.

JP: And you're hoping for the same saturation!

TD: Yeah, I'm going for saturation.

JP: Well, Thax, you have a lot of friends and admirers in the Chicago press. I don't think that's going to be too difficult at all (laughs).

TD: Oh, thanks Jason.

JP: Well, the diner's closing up and we're going to have to cut this short, but I have so many other questions for you...

TD: Isn't there a way to talk on the phone?

JP: Maybe a little bit. I know John's clamoring for this and I'm behind deadline. And we've already talked way too much anyway, so much of this is going to get cut...

TD: Oh, okay.

JP: But let me ask you two final questions. And they're going to be general questions, so

feel free to answer them in any context you wish.

TD: Okay.

JP: And they're related questions. First, what are the biggest similarities you see going on right now between what's going on with the poetry scene right now, and when you originally got involved with it?

TD: Well, there is a swelling of hope. I mean, you know, that's always exciting, it's like the old glamour thing. That's what it gets down to, is glamour. Everybody wants to become a big star, everyone hopes, like you mentioned in your poem the other night ["Psycho Poets"], everyone hopes that they'll be writing biographies of us, that we'll all become cult figures (table laughs), even if we're just mentioned as part of the scene. There's this hope rising again that this might happen, and that's always really exciting.

JP: And then, just based on the fact that you've been so active in the Chicago poetry scene for so long, unlike others who were very active awhile ago and not very active now, just purely from an objective standpoint, what do you see as the biggest differences between when you started and now? It doesn't necessarily have to be a bad comment or a good comment, either, but just from your own experiences, what have you seen?

TD: The biggest difference is that all the stuff that used to be alternative now is mainstream.

JP: And you think it's for the better, or for the worse?

TD: Oh, it's for the better. Because, like, a lot of the poetry in my book, you know... someday a book of poetry IS going to sell a million copies. [Ed. Note: Two years later, Ted Hughes' "Love Letters" became the first book of poetry to sell over a million copies.] I like to think that it's mine (table laughs). But someday it's going to happen. And that's because poetry is mainstream now, like slams and open mics everywhere, in the tiniest of towns, and just the subject matter too. Like, especially the persona in some of my earlier poetry, which isn't the persona I have now, but like the persona of the fucked-up gay loser. You haven't read any of that stuff. You don't have a copy of the manuscript, do you?

JP: No.

TD: I should get you a copy... That's what's so different now. In the late '80s, you had a group of poets basically huddling together against a hostile society. Now it's distinctly different. Now you've got a society that's... well, they're not exactly clamoring for poetry (Jason laughs), but...

JP: But they're a lot more open for the suggestion.

TD: They're clamoring for... I mean, they're things that ten years ago wouldn't have been popular, and are popular now, like the movie "Clerks" or something...

JP: Oh, right, I see what you're saying.

TD: So, that's the biggest difference.

JP: Well... thanks, Thax.

TD: Thank you, Jason.

JASON PETTUS

is the author of three novels and, to date, over forty self-published books of short work. His performance credits include National Public Radio, the Chicago Museum of Contemporary Art, WGN-TV, and the National Poetry Slam, where in 1997 he placed second in the nation as a member of the Chicago-Green Mill team. His nonfiction has appeared in such publications as *Broken Pencil* and About.com, as well as being nominated for the *2001 Zine Yearbook*. Mr. Pettus runs his own publishing company and maintains a daily web journal which has attracted a cult following. In his spare time he enjoys taking too much speed and lying about all the famous people he knows. He lives in Chicago.

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