

Soapbox Poetry

Exploring the Politics of Edinburgh's Spoken Word Scene

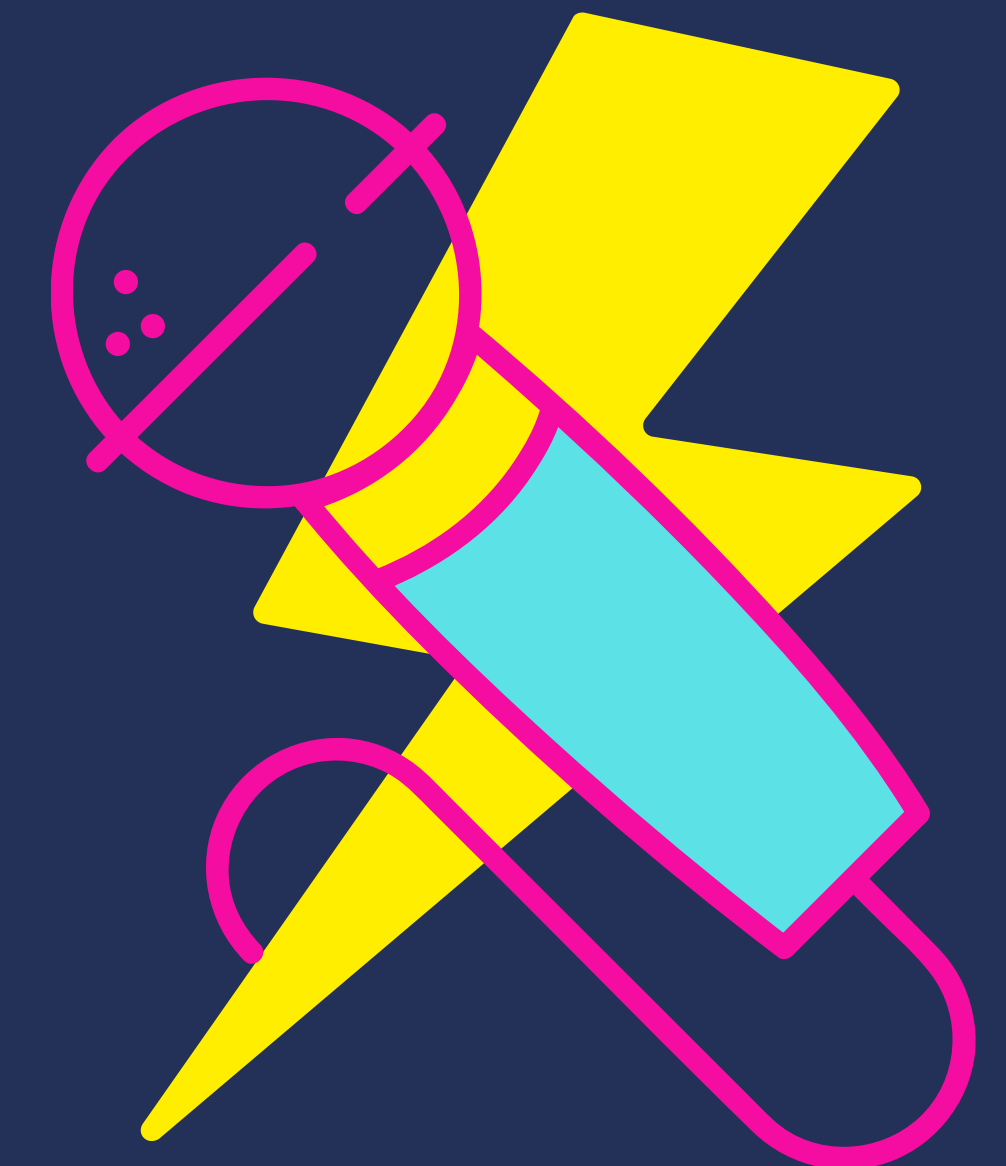
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What is spoken word and is it political?

Possibly the most widely known description of slam came from academic Harold Bloom, who infamously called it "the death of art".¹ This rather dramatic description has hung around in part because it serves as a jumping off point for discussing what art is and how alternative forms of art can function and whether they are art. Spoken word is one such form.

Spoken word or performance poetry, sometimes performed as slam, is the practice of writing poems that are meant to be performed aloud. This is not poetry to sit neatly on bedside tables and tucked into the dusty shelves of libraries. This poetry is meant to be hollered, whispered, rapped and cheered at. Poets perform their own work, setting their own rhythms and making their physical voice as much a part of the poem as their written style. It is often said to make poetry more accessible.

Spoken word is also unquestionably political, with performers raising social issues in their work in a variety of ways. Open mic nights can be a safe space to discuss issues including gender, sexuality, class and race in a creative way. It also means that anyone can speak on these issues and be listened to by a crowd without interruption.



The Personal is Political

Personal stories and anecdotes play a large part in the spoken word scene, some funny and some heart-breaking. There seems to be something about the fact that poems are delivered in the poet's voice that inspires people to write more confessionally than they otherwise might. There's a level of presumed authenticity and truth which comes with spoken word, perhaps in part due to this.

This presumption of honesty can be a bit self-perpetuating, with the fact that this assumption will be made leading others to feel that they should speak their own truth so as not to accidentally misappropriate a story that isn't theirs to tell.

This level of confessional story telling is necessarily political, because a lot of politics is about people and their lived experiences. Iona Lee told me how there's something "inherently political" about anyone, particularly those in a marginalised position, being given the platform to tell people what it's like to be them.² Hearing stories is how we understand people who aren't us and gaining this understanding can help us empathise with others and understand their experience, making facts and figures comprehensible in human terms. An example of this is Hannah Lavery's poem "Thorntonloch Caravan Park" which tells the story of racial abuse she and her son have experienced in Scotland.³ This poem really drives home the fact that Scotland is more complicit in racism than we can claim and emphasises the importance of being actively anti-racist.



Audience and Effectiveness

The audience is a key aspect of spoken word and slam poetry in particular. Slam is meant to make poetry democratic and accessible to people who might think that poetry just isn't for them or that they don't get to have an opinion on it. One key way this is done in traditional slams is by making members of the audience the judges.⁴ This democratisation of poetry makes it approachable and fun regardless of previous experience.

However, the power that the audience holds can be something which diminishes the efficacy of political poetry in changing people's opinions, because people say things that they think are most likely to gain them approval, creating an echo-chamber in which, according to poet Ross McCleary, "people are broadly of a certain mindset anyway".⁵

There is a certain level of left-wing consensus within the spoken word community which could be seen to limit the amount which the political poetry can actually impact views and change minds. But there is also an argument to be had over whether changing minds or sparking revolutions is always the goal of spoken word, or if the goal is often just accessing the power and catharsis of standing up and speaking your truth.



Me!



Conclusions

Spoken word and performance poetry is a broad category which encompasses many genres and personalities and much of it, despite initial appearance, is political. There is something inherently political about a space being open for anyone to come and say their piece without interruption and the personal stories told bring out the humanity which is sometimes hidden in mainstream political discussion. It is a poetry for the people in the most direct sense.

While my research may have not gone entirely to plan, particularly in the second year, I have gained valuable insight and developed personally, gaining countless new skills. One thing I didn't get to do which I had set out to was eventually perform my own political poem, so watch this space!

