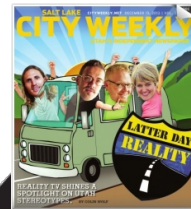


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## GAVIN'S UNDERGROUND

### Salt City Slam

by Gavin Sheehan

0



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POSTED // 2010-03-19 Run into any coffee shop in the city throughout the year and you'll either find a poetry showcase taking place or at least find flyers for the one happening tomorrow. After quieting down for a number of years the Slam scene has been steadily building itself back up, with a new line of fresh blood willing to exude on the page and speak their minds to both inspire and influence those yet to come. And while some of these groups are just starting to get their bearings again and becoming a driving force once more, one group in particular is doing all it can to make a stamp on the city and the nation while they're at it.



Salt City Slam has been going strong for nearly five years, lighting up coffee houses around the city and becoming a bi-weekly showcase at Mo's Neighborhood Grill on West Temple. Not to mention building some of the finest slam teams to compete every year in national competitions. In fact on the 29th this month you can head over to Mo's and catch a SLAM Finals to determine who will head out and represent SLC in a national event. While



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preparing for that I got a chance to chat with the SlamMaster of SCS, Jesse Parent. Talking about his career in slam and improv, joining SCS, thoughts on the scene and a few other topics.

[Jesse Parent](#)



<http://www.myspace.com/saltcityslam>

Gavin: Hey Jesse! First off, tell us a bit about yourself.

Jesse: My name is Jesse Parent and I grew up in Somerset, Massachusetts. A town so close to Rhode Island that we actually know it's not an island. I grew up with blue collar parents, a mechanic and a nurse, who gave me a great work ethic and a wicked sense of humor. My mom, brother, and uncle all work in tattoo parlors, and I was briefly licensed as a tattoo artist in Rhode Island for a while. I still crave chourio and stuffed quahogs and miss fast talking people who drop their R's and say what's on their minds. Otherwise, I'm a comic book geek, grappler, computer nerd, father, husband, and smart-ass

Gavin: What first got you interested in performance art and how was it for you learning the craft?

Jesse: I was always a bit of a clown, growing up. I loved making people laugh and didn't have much fear being in front of crowds. I got involved on and off in theatre through my early years, but really got into it in college. It was there that I also got introduced to the art of improvisation. The idea of being able to go up on stage with nothing but your wits was very appealing to me.



Gavin: You attended Worcester Polytechnic Institute back in

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
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
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Massachusetts. What made you choose their program, and how was it for you taking part in those kind of activities while earning your degree?

Jesse: WPI is actually a great school and is highly ranked, nationally. What attracted me the most was their wrestling program and reputation as an engineering powerhouse. In any environment with a strong culture (like math, religion), you have an equally reactive subculture. So the folks who were doing art and theatre were very passionate about flexing the right side of their brains and we just made time for it, even with WPI's grueling pace. Susan Vick, who was the major theatrical force at WPI, was an incredible influence on making sure I stayed balanced as a human being, allowing time for art and theatre as well as for engineering.

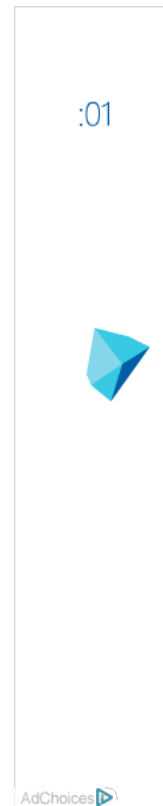
Gavin: What eventually persuaded you to move out to Utah of all places?

Jesse: Julia Moench was one of my closest friends who lived on Daniels Hall's 3rd floor, my freshman dormitory. She was this beautiful, worldly woman who grew up in Saudi Arabia and was way out of my league. She left WPI in favor of getting an art degree at the University of Utah, and when she came back to be in a mutual friend's wedding, we realized we both felt strongly about each other. Two days later, I asked her to marry me. I figured that with a Computer Science degree, I could work anywhere and would stay here maybe five years, tops. That was in 1997. I really fell in love with Salt Lake City: its art, its people, its environment... and its lower cost of living!



Gavin: How was it for you getting involved with workshops and troupes here, and how do they differ from ones you've worked with back east?

Jesse: I honestly didn't believe improv could exist in Salt Lake City when I first moved here, so I didn't even bother checking it out. I first realized there was something when I saw the Skinny Lincolns perform at my church and immediately grilled them about taking workshops, but that didn't last very long. When my daughter was going to be born at home back in 2001 and my wife told me I had to stop doing combat jiu jitsu so I would be healthy enough to help with the birth, I looked around for improv workshops as an alternative hobby. That's when I found Knock Your Socks Off (KYSOff) at Trolley Square, and started taking workshops with their director, Joseph Kyle Rogan. The lessons and games were pretty similar to what I had done in college, and after two sessions he asked me to fill in for a performer and I had



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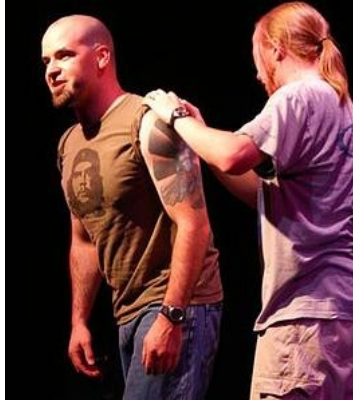
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my first paying gig as an entertainer. I also was introduced to scenic, or long form, improvisation, which is different than the short form, games based improv like they have on "Whose Line is it, Anyway?" In 2002, I traveled to the Chicago Improv Festival to perform with KYSOFF and was exposed to a whole new world of improv. I was hooked.

Gavin: You've made improv a big part of your life, and I can't even begin to list all the projects you've been a part of and have started. What drives you after all this time to still be a part of that?

Jesse: Improv is a bit like a sport. When you play with people who are wonderful and fun and extremely skilled, it ups your own game and fun factor. I try to do projects with people who are willing to try new things and are fun to play with. If you have good fundamentals, you can play with anyone, and just like in sports, there's always some aspect you can get better at. I found a lot of success and fun in partnering with KYSOFF's director, Joseph Kyle Rogan, and we have toured since 2003 as JoKyR and Jesster.



Gavin: When did you start taking an interest in slam poetry?

Jesse: I was looking for a way to do musical improv without having to rely on a musician and got inspired while watching "Def Poetry" on HBO. There was a group called Floetry that wove a cappella music and spoken word together, so I based an improv format on that and created *The Hook*. After finding a cast, touring to a few festivals, and teaching the format, I was at a loss as to where to go with the show. So I decided to check out the local poetry open mic at Cup of Joe's in late 2006 and see if I could get inspired from the performance poetry scene.

Gavin: What personally drove you into wanting to perform that kind of work in front of an audience?

Jesse: Writing down my words actually terrified me, so I knew I was on the right track and pushed my own comfort levels. I dislike



staying in a comfort zone. I truly believe that that is where art and personal development stagnates. When I write, I'm not always funny. Sometimes I downright morose, which actually made poetry a much better fit than stand up comedy for me.



Gavin: What were some of your first performances like with your own material?

Jesse: Memorizing my own words was a very interesting experience. In theatre, I was always of the opinion that as long as you got the gist of the line, you were just fine. With my own words, I was much more exacting. So it took me a while to feel comfortable improvising my own lines if I needed to, in case I forgot something. The audiences were rather generous and appreciative of my first poems, and there are some that I still perform today that seem to do well.

Gavin: How did you eventually get involved with Salt City Slam?

Jesse: After my first open mic in late 2006, I kept going back to Cup of Joe's and writing and performing. I found out that they had a slam team that you could compete to be on that was sending a team to the National Poetry Slam in Austin, Texas. I entered the competition and won a spot on the team.



Gavin: What was it like for you being a part of this group for the first time and not only getting to know the other members, but developing your craft at the same time?

Jesse: I was genuinely intrigued by the whole experience. It was a very supportive group, and they were all interested in seeing each other succeed and were giving great feedback to one another. At one of our regional competitions, I had the highest scoring solo piece, so I was encouraged (especially by my team member and former HBO Def Poet, Morris Stegosaurus) to consider going after the individual competition at NPS. I was also introduced to the idea of group pieces, where multiple team members performed a piece. That collaboration was a good learning experience in making sure that one poet owned the voice of the piece and managed the collaboration.

Gavin: For you, what is it like preparing a piece, and what is your mindset going in and interacting with the audience?

Jesse: I like to think about composing a piece with the same mentality I do with an improvised show or even a monologue: don't bore the audience. I look for multiple emotional and vocal levels to avoid lulling an audience, and try to say something that is true to me. I'm a pretty open person when it comes to my life, so I am looking to share my experiences and perspectives, hoping that they resonate with at least one person in the audience. I truly do want to entertain people. As Marc Smith, founder of the poetry slam, once said, "Keeping an audience entertained is a prerequisite to all art that seeks to communicate effectively."



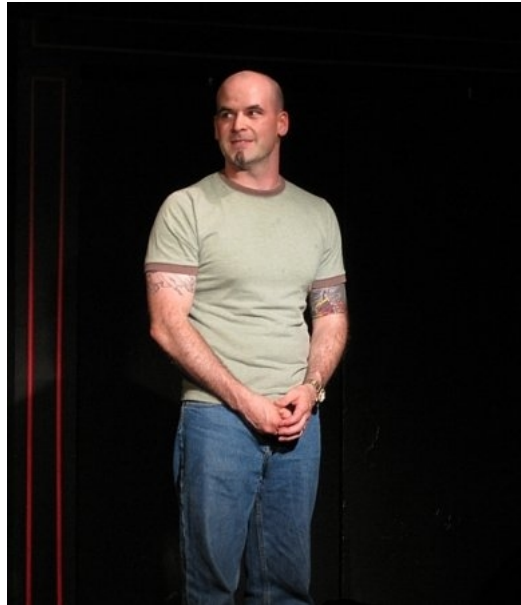
Gavin: What were your thoughts going into competition in Texas a couple years back?

Jesse: I wanted to take in the whole experience and use whatever I could in *The Hook*. I really thought I was only going to be a spectator. I think, on a certain level, I thought I would surprise people because I attacked poetry from the perspective of a theatrical monologue and I thought that would be so fresh and new. Bah! The national field of poets is beyond amazing. I was so far out of my league and I didn't know it, yet. When I saw Rachel McKibbens get up on the finals stage and do her piece about her son giving her tulips on Mother's Day, I wanted to quit writing right there and then. Everything I had come to talk about had been said and in a way that was beyond what I was doing. It was very inspiring. I met so many new friends that summer, and I even got to sneak away and do some improv while I was there. It was an

amazing and humbling experience.

Gavin: How did you eventually become the SlamMaster, and what exactly does that title entail?

Jesse: The SlamMaster is the person who keeps all the paperwork up to date with our national governing body, Poetry Slam, Inc. (PSi). It's a very Type-A job and well suited for me. I make sure our slams are run in compliance with our PSi rulebook, that our membership is paid, and that we are represented in our regular SlamMaster meetings. I took this on because I'm very well organized and able to keep on top of our deadlines. In fact, I now also sit on the executive council for PSi's non-profit board. I'm a nerd.



Gavin: Being where you are now, what's your take on your progression as a performer since joining?

Jesse: I still feel very strongly that I am more of a monologist with a poetic voice than a true poet. I have tried to extend myself and write in a style that incorporates less obvious statements and relies more on metaphor and creating a mood with words. Slam poetry can be very accessible and sometimes oversimplified, but it can also be as pure as any written poem. I am trying to build in layers that take more work to get to, while keeping the layers that can be immediately recognized when you have three minutes to get the crowd on your side.

Gavin: Tell us a bit about the SLAM Finals coming up at the end of the month.

Jesse: The finals will be taking place on Monday, March 29, 2010 at 8PM at Mo's Neighborhood Grill on 358 South West Temple in Salt Lake City. Mo's is an all ages restaurant that provides a full bar with purchase of food. This competition is open to poets who have competed in monthly slams during our current slam season, from September to February, and have earned enough points to be one of the top ten competitors. So these folks represent the best our local scene has to offer, including all five of the team members that competed in last year's National Poetry Slam (NPS) for Salt Lake City. The top five competitors from this competition will go on to represent Salt City Slam at NPS in St. Paul, Minnesota in August.





Gavin: Who are some of the participants that will be performing that night, and what can people expect to see that evening?

Jesse: Our current top ten includes all five of the 2009 Salt City Slam team that was the first team to ever qualify for the group piece finals at NPS. This includes myself, Josh McGillis, Cody Winger, DeAnn Emmett and Michael Dimitri. In addition, we'll see David Alberti, a New Jersey native and student at the University of Utah, Karen Christensen, a young lady who was in last year's team finals competition, Andrew Earley, coffee fanatic and former Baxter's barista, PJ Ryan, who travels all the way from Rock Springs, Wyoming, and my improv partner Joseph Kyle Rogan (JoKyR), who's been trying out poetry slams for his first year.

Gavin: Going a bit local, what's your take on our literary and poetry scene, both good and bad?

Jesse: I have nothing but good things to say about the folks in this scene. For the most part, I feel all the open mics promote acceptance of new talent and provide a place for folks to put their work out in the universe. I do get frustrated with poets and musicians who just "spit their shit and split." There are always going to be boring and even monotonous moments on an open mic, however they are well worth it to not only support the growth of our community, and you may be surprised or inspired by something you hear.





Gavin: Is there anything you believe could be done to make it more prominent?

Jesse: Just keep talking and checking out new art. When you find something inspiring, tell people about it. Find new people and art forms to collaborate with. Have fun, and then have more fun. This is such an amazing and misunderstood art. Folks will cling to this outdated image of beatniks snapping and drumming and poets dressed in black with dark eye shadow talking about gossamer wings and spider webs. Sure, there is some snapping and drumming, and even some angsty poems, but for the most part this art is fun and electric and so much more than I ever thought it was.

Gavin: In your opinion, who are some of the best up-and-coming names in our community?

Jesse: I'm a big fan of Josh McGillis and Cody Winger, both of whom were members of the 2009 Salt City Slam team (Josh was also a member in 2008). They are both so far away from me stylistically with their lyrical and poetic natures and I love their energy. Newer talent that has been surprising and exciting to me are Ashley Yingling, a very structured and passionate young lady, and Joseph Kyle Rogan (JoKyR), my improv touring partner whose outrageous and hilarious pieces cross the same borders I like to with monologue and poetry. And if we can keep PJ Ryan from Rock Springs coming down to our Salt Lake venues, that will be a huge coup for our scene. He's very much in the same vein as Josh and Cody, stylistically.



Gavin: Do you wish there were any specific venues made for events like Slam events, or do you believe it's best they remain in more non-conventional places?

Jesse: Slam poetry was created to be performed in loud bars and to take poetry back for the common people. While it would be nice to have a following that would allow us to play consistently in large theaters, slam belongs in people's faces. It belongs in coffee shops and bars and book stores. I love surprising someone who didn't know what was going on, but loved what they heard and saw, anyway.

Gavin: What can we expect from both you and Salt City Slam over the rest of the year?

Jesse: We are going to continue to have our monthly cash prize slam at Mo's Neighborhood Grill on the last Monday of every month at 8PM. We want to continue to encourage poets to come and test their craft in front of a crowd. We will also be continuing to hold our popular weekly open mic at Greenhouse Effect Coffee (3231 South 900 East) on Sundays at 8:30PM, as well as our bi-weekly open mic at Mo's Neighborhood Grill on the first and third Saturdays of the month at 4PM. For more information on open mics and Salt City Slam, check out our [MySpace page](#).



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Gavin: Aside the obvious, is there anything you'd like to plug or promote?

Jesse: In addition to our SLAM Finals and open mics, I also am involved with the local award winning improv troupe, Laughing Stock. We perform at the Off Broadway Theatre at 272 South Main Street in Salt Lake City and have been around since 1994. We perform every Friday and Saturday at 10PM, and also at 7:30PM when the theater is between productions of plays. You can find more information about us at [our website](#).



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POSTED // MARCH 30,2010 AT 16:42

I concur with N. Oliver's comment.

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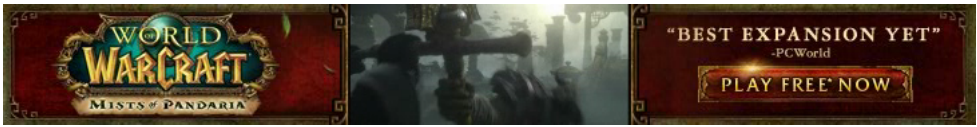


[N. Oliver](#)

POSTED // MARCH 20,2010 AT 04:39

Great article. Super coverage of an outstanding person. Salt Lake City wins again.





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