

Drop-in poets' society: lively SoMa midweek gatherings

Diamond Dave hosts boisterous open-mike nights

BY TOM CARTER

By now, everybody probably knows that a while back Robin Williams dropped by the Brain Wash during a Tuesday Comedy night. "I was here," says Samson Whitaker, seated at the counter of the well-lit Brain Wash Cafe & Laundromat at 1122 Folsom near Seventh. "He was here twice and performed and said how welcomed he felt. It was very inspiring. Here, you feel touched by the performers. It's that kind of place."



PHOTOS BY MARK ELLINGER

Songwriter Maria Mango took time out from planting flowers for Janis Joplin on Haight Street to perform at Brain Wash.

Not as well known is that Wednesdays have taken a turn upward, as well. That's Word night, emceed by Samson's dad, Diamond Dave Whitaker, 66, the hoary and wizened incarnation of beatnik-hippie past. Diamond Dave "casts a wide net" for poets and songwriter-singers alike at his open mike. Often he'll recruit poets who read on his Thursday 3 p.m. KPOO radio show for a more intimate live exchange here with audiences of 20 or so, lots more during the summer.

For the three years that Diamond Dave, a North Beach beatnik bike messenger in 1957, has presided here, the number of drop-in poets from South of Market and other neighborhoods has risen. Unpretentious and airy with an element of funk and good smells, its high ceilings and bank of tall windows on two sides allow a vision of the day or night. Poets including Keith Savage, Ed Bowers, Ra Mu Aki and Tammy Irwin have come over from the Tenderloin. All four are featured in the spanking new Tenderloin anthology of poetry, prose and photography published by Faithful Fools.

"Poetry is still very vibrant in the city," says bespectacled Tom Stolmar, 42, a carpenter and Wednesday night regular. Not an "ivory tower" poet, he says he studied poetry at New College on Valencia

and has produced two CDs. After taking a turn at the mike where he read enthusiastically from his notebook, he reminisces in the back about the defunct, once rowdy Chameleon Club on Valencia and the Paradise Lounge that anchored the 11th and Folsom southwest corner.

"But the greatest performer I ever saw was Gregory Corso," he says of the late poet and fellow traveler of Jack Kerouac and Neal Cassidy. "He used to come in the Cafe BaBar (on Valencia) now and then. You can have a good reading at Cafe Prague in North Beach, and at Sacred Grounds (1122 Hayes) people are quiet and reverent."

"Here, you can't get it across very well. You have to yell like I do."

He smiles and his friend Rinaldo Ricketts, who had taken a turn at the mike to shout a rambling diatribe on the rich, the war and Bush, nods emphatically.

In lieu of a hallowed sanctuary, Brain Wash drop-ins of course get Diamond Dave's ubiquitous, effusive support, and that's for poets or musicians. "I don't discriminate," he says. "I've never turned anyone away."

The busy cafe and laundry has a comfort and energy that brings people back. Chi Seppala, a four-month resident of the neighborhood, happened on it one day and found it an ideal place to relax. The first thing he mentions is how great the employees are. "I even do my laundry here," he says. "Interesting people come here," adds Gary Ivanek of Hayward, an amateur photographer with his camera at his table. He has been coming here 10 years, first drawn by the music fare that is now on tap all nights but Tuesday and Wednesday.

In 1999, owner Jeff Zalles, 53, dropped his children's apparel manufacturing company and bought the 10-year-old Brain Wash business. Music was only twice a week then. But Zalles likes to kick things up a notch. So he filled the nightly calendar with entertainment and has watched the excitement grow. "Big time band members working in town drop by all the time to jam with friends who are playing here," he says. "A lot of them end up doing their laundry here, too."

This month, Zalles says, the Cafe's ample sandwich, soup and salad restaurant menu, that sports breakfast dishes like Coin Op Omelets, will expand to include pasta, chicken, fish and seafood dinners — all for under \$10.

READY TO EXPAND

Business is so good that Zalles is looking for another spot in town, or in the East Bay, to open a second Brain Wash.

The laundromat in back, with a glass door on Langton Street to the east, maintains the hip ambiance found in the front. More than 40 washers and dryers share the space with three pinball machines and a counter that handles wash and fold laundry for 99 cents a pound and dry cleaning. Doing a tuxedo shirt is \$2. Over the sound system you may hear Bob Dylan singing "Masters of War." All the washers have somebody's name on them. "Look," says Diamond Dave, "I'm on a double loader!" He joins Jim Jones, Mange and Candy, among others.

Doing laundry entitles you to a \$1 coupon for Happy Hour from 4 to 7, and Pabst Blue Ribbon beer is on tap for \$1. Washing seems to get easier with the suds.

"I never check if someone's doing laundry, though," says Lauren Reidenberg, behind the counter. She came here after Burning Man, fell in love with the city and now isn't quite sure when she'll return to Arizona State University. Love is funny.

Out front, Canadian Maria Mango, 23, dressed in an array of colors redolent of another time, is on the podium strumming her guitar and singing a few songs she wrote. The ATM machine is to her left. She has been living in the Haight-Ashbury for a few months and has been spending the last few days planting flowers underneath sidewalk trees on Haight "for Jerry Garcia, Janis Joplin and Jimi Hendrix." She



Once a 1950s bike messenger in North Beach, Diamond Dave promotes the poetical deliveries in the cafe part of the laundromat.

has a brave smile and when she's singing, her goal is always to "heal hearts."

DAVE TAKES TO THE MIKE

Diamond Dave usually takes a turn at the mike himself. This night he reads from Charles Bukowski's

Living on Luck, a collection of letters from the '60s and '70s. And in his gravelly sing-song voice, Dave is quick to touch on the reference points of hippie history that he lived through, the 1967 Summer of Love, the Diggers dishing up free food in the Panhandle (he was one), The Family Dog night spot that Chet Helms ran at the beach and so on.

For sheer delivery, Sia Amma, 35, reads her well-constructed material with as much control and impact as anyone the whole night. Before going to the podium she explains to this reporter that she wants to educate and to celebrate female sexuality. Her smoldering black eyes belie a penchant for explosive laughter, so when she says she is just now "starting a piece on the labia," then bursts into laughter, it is disconcerting.

She performed at Julia Morgan Theater in Berkeley last year, she says, and will be reading at the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts on March 20, as part of the focus on women's month (March). Her work is called "Clitoris Celebration — Thinking Outside the Box."

"It is something to give women to think about during women's month," she explains. "The clitoris should have its day. And it should blossom in the beginning of spring!" she adds, and that, too, tickles her.

When asked if she was inspired by the Vagina Monologues, she turns frosty. "Not at all," she snaps. "I started working on this in 1996." She went on to explain that in a small village near the Liberian border her clitoris was removed in a tribal ceremony at age 9.

Given this, her reading a few minutes later

A Naked Mirror: New book reflects signs of life in TL literary scene

▶ CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

writer, he said, and has been published locally and nationally. "But as I've gotten older, I find it's harder to finish things. The struggle for survival means that the time for writing has dropped off."

He also designed the *Living in the Land of the Dead* cover. "I think it's sort of lighthearted," he said, "maybe to counter some of the darkness inside."

Still, you can tell this book by its cover: It's big-hearted and honestly iconographic, filled with Dia de los Muertos and Egyptian motifs. A border of mixed original and clip art — skulls, nooses, crosses, Jewish stars, ankhs, boom-boxes, fire engines, candles, guns, sexy silhouettes, dragons, butterflies — surrounds one of Walker's photographs, a colorful Tenderloin streetscape with overlays of cavorting skeletons and a flock of ravens.

Inside, the poems and stories are presented as they came from their authors, scanned to preserve their original appearance, regardless of font, type size, margins. Some pieces had been pecked out on typewriters. Some were hand-written. One preserves the lines of a ruled sheet. Smears — of ink, one hopes — adorn another. Technology in the service of authenticity.

It is a mishmash, like the Tenderloin itself.

Mark Bigelow, who works at the copy shop part time, laid out the book.

POETRY OF SANITY

The poems and stories, Bowers said, "are about pain, intense feelings and oppression from the system. But there's no psychiatric madness here. If anything, it's the poetry of sanity. It expresses what the authors want others to see about the problems of living here."

Megan Trent has two stories in the book, "Valentine" and "Daphne, Evergreen, in Cohen Alley off Ellis." Both, she said, were drawn from personal experience and they're "honest" — they don't distort the reality of rape, for example, or of what being obese does to your self-confidence.

Trent doesn't want to make too much of the fact that this is the first time she's been published.

"In the past, writing was incredibly hard for me," she said. "I had crushing writers' block and I was angry about that."

My resurrection as someone who can write has been pleasurable — a lost power restored to me — but, hey, I'm not kidding myself about my skills. I have really high standards about what's good, and I'm not good yet."

Another contributor to the book, Vlad Pogorelov, said his play, "Smile of Death," was produced by Climate Theatre, and that his poetry and prose have been published in "a few minor publications." Seeing his works performed and in print helps him "move on. You know you're not wasting your life," he said.

When he wrote the poem in this book, "Derelict," his life was pretty bleak, he said. "I had a six-pack of beer, and I was renting a room in a big house, staring at a spider in the corner of the room. Before that I'd lived in my vehicle."

The poem appeared previously in a slim book that Pogorelov, who moved to the United States from the Ukraine 11 years ago, self-published. "It was a chap book," he said, "and I envisioned it as the first book of a trilogy — Derelict, Decadent and Deviant."

LONELY BLAST

In his introduction, Bowers wrote:

"Understand this book, *Living in the Land of the Dead*, contains road maps, accident reports, and prayers.



PHOTOS BY KEITH WALKER

Shopping cart photo from *Living in the Land of the Dead*.

becomes all the more compelling.

With the microphone, and after some verbal jousting with a young bearded white guy at a table close to the podium, she begins her monologue about an experience at a Healing workshop. She came for a fresh start, she says, and is intimidated by the leader who asks everyone what turns them on, a question she has never been asked. "My body has been polluted by my own father," she reads as a thought within herself, and she laughs. One woman, she continues, responds that it's her clitoris and when it's her own turn she feels "hijacked." Her voice drops to finish the sketch. In the end, she indicates forgiveness for her father and that the investigation of her own body and soul will continue.

Another woman, Asza, 25, takes a turn. Formerly of Orange County, she was studying theater when her life took a jog after she did well in a poetry class. Writing became "kinetic again." She is the artistic director at the Globe hostel nearby and no day goes by that she is not without her developing poems, as part of her "constant meditation." She appeared on Diamond Dave's radio show and he invited her here.

Asza recites clearly and reads some, even singing in several pieces. The mixed medium approach, "layering," she calls it, works as many voices singing different parts, she says. She intends to explore it further. With one CD done ("Better Than Love"), her goal is a book.

By 10:30, the mike is quiet. The audience has faded into the night and most of the chairs are up on tables. Diamond Dave and his son load a bulky speaker into a rolling laundry basket. Near the podium, Maria Mango and another guitarist are strumming away. "You've got a lot of nerve," they sing. Dylan again. ■



Doing laundry in the back room gets you a \$1 credit for bappy bour.

"This document is filled with human life crying like a helpless baby, or the blast of a lonely horn, or the desperate reaching out to others who are too late to be saved. . . .

"Naked or clothed, blessed or damned, full of joy or despair, we of the Tenderloin are represented in this book. . . ."

As The Extra went to press, book distribution plans were fluid.

"I think we'll only print a couple hundred copies to start," Walker said. "Probably we'll do a combination of giving out some copies for whatever donation a person can make, and sell the rest at a set price, around \$8."

The Fools, he said, fronted the cost of producing the book, with the paper donated by the family of one of the authors. Everyone worked on *Living in the Land of the Dead* for the love of it. If the book makes any money, Walker said, it's likely to be plowed back into production costs for a second anthology.

Trent thinks the book will encourage many

more people to come forward with their writings. "The best outreach for a publication like this is to just get the first issue out and let others see it," she said. "I hope the project can help people who've abandoned themselves start to express themselves again."

And what about that imprint, Will to Print Press?

According to Walker, one of the Faithful Fools Ministry's supporters said he was curious about what the Fools were willing to print in their shop — in general, not just in this book.

"Their answer, of course, came back, 'We're willing to print anything,' but Willing to Print didn't ring right," Walker said.

Will to Print Press. More poetic. Scans nicely, too.

To get a copy of *Living in the Land of the Dead*, contact Faithful Fools Copy Shop, 673-4567. ■

