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Louder than a Bomb: Poetry slams and community activism create a powerful brew

Kristin Lems

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This year in February and early March, as for the past 20 years, the Louder than a Bomb (LTAB) Poetry Festival took place around Chicago, offering five weeks of teen poetry performances at assorted venues throughout the city. Billed as “the largest youth poetry festival in the world,” these electrifying slam competitions, featuring all original work by high school and college-aged poets, encompass 130 teams from around the city and suburbs, who prepare for the event over many months of practice. The teams perform in both solo and group numbers, usually under the guidance of a school coach or club sponsor. (Update: Because of Covid-19 social distancing requirements, the semifinals and finals of this year’s LTAB were suspended beginning March 13, but the finals occurred through a You Tube live stream on April 30.).

LTAB is already legendary, having been the subject of an award-winning documentary, [Louder than a Bomb](#), in 2008, which tracked the progress of several contestants as they prepared their performances. LTAB has won numerous grants and engages in many partnerships. Despite its respected standing, however, the LTAB leadership never rests on its laurels and adds new forms and formats each year. Recently, for example, they have begun to offer school residencies for students at junior high school level, a Latinx-themed competition (“Louder than a Bomba”), rapper-led training in emceeing through a weekly [“Emcee Wreckshop”](#), and a free weekly writer’s salon for queer and questioning youth called [“Queeriosity”](#). To celebrate LTAB and its parent organization, Young Chicago Authors, I will take a look at its Chicago origins, its evolution, and its ongoing impact.

Chicago Origins

Three important strands have nourished the roots of Louder than a Bomb. The first is improvisational comedy. The Second City comedy club, which emerged in Chicago in the 1960’s in the Old Town neighborhood of Chicago, featured a new kind of comedy – comedy on the stage, with humor created on the spot. Second City showcased (and continues to showcase) irreverent, uproarious, truth-telling sketches about current events in an immersive, interactive format not found in other commercial theatre. The Second City format consists of a small team of multitalented actors who present short comedy sketches around various topics. The sketches are very short, and include impersonations, voices, costumes, and props, along with bits of music or musical parodies, sight gags, and even dancing. The evening usually occurs in two acts. In the first half of the show, the cast warms up the audience through pre-written short scenes. In the second half, when the audience is more relaxed and “watered,” the cast solicits words and topics to create sketches right on the spot. Half the fun is watching the actors grapple with improbable words and topics, as the audience tries to stump them – and somehow, never does. Another memorable part of the second half is that a couple of audience members will be dragged up on stage, as “extras” for scenes in which they suddenly have a role. The audience roars its approval (and probably relief that they are not the “chosen ones”), and a good time is had by all.

The Second City format spawned not only many spinoffs, including comedy clubs, sketch comedy, improv classes, and competitive Improv Olympics, but also the hit television show Saturday Night Live (SNL). Many of America's greatest comedians and talk show hosts have trained at Second City, or SNL, or both, including Tina Fey, Steve Carell, Stephen Colbert, Amy Poehler, and Seth Meyers. Even Trevor Noah's *Late Show* on the Comedy Central channel, which humorously interprets current events, can be considered a variation of the comedy genre started at Second City.

The second strand of Chicago roots comes from the long running Uptown Poetry Slam, which has been held at the Green Mill Tavern in the Uptown neighborhood every Sunday evening since 1984 (Kogan, 2011). This homey, un-gentrified jazz club attracts aspiring poets who want to try their skills at moving a crowd. Aspiring performers must arrive by six on Sunday to sign up for a spot. A small band provides continuity between performers. Three judges are randomly selected from the audience, and they pick the winner, who gets a grand prize of \$10. This "anti-contest", a spoof on pretentious literary events, is open to all comers. The now-iconic term "poetry slam" originated with the Green Mill's long time emcee Marc Smith, who said in a *Chicago Tribune* interview on the Slam's 20th anniversary, "I was being interviewed by some reporter and asked what these things were called and I had just been watching a baseball game and I was thinking ... slam, grand slam," Smith says. "Poetry slam" (Kogan, 2011).

The third and probably most consequential strand contributing to Louder than a Bomb is Chicago hip hop and rap, which is influential among youth of color, who embrace and create in these artistic forms, and are central participants in LTAB. Although the genres did not originate in Chicago, hip-hop and rap bloomed here, and they still do. Such world-renowned hip-hop and rap artists as Common, Twista, Kanye West, and most recently, multiple Grammy-winner Chance the Rapper, have grown up and built their careers in Chicago.

From improv theatre, LTAB draws the format of a small team that performs on stage both alone and in combination, to create a kinetic, emotionally intense atmosphere. Weekly poetry slams at the Green Mill and other small bookstore venues provide prospective LTAB writers with a testing ground to perform new work, predating Young Chicago Authors, and still available to them. And hip-hop and rap provide a model for self-expression and social activism which helps these young authors find their voices.

LTAB Emerges

The mission of Young Chicago Authors (YCA) is to "transform the lives of young people by cultivating their voices through writing, publication, and performance education." Although many events and programs have emerged from YCA, the most high profile and public event is certainly the annual Louder than a Bomb poetry slam. It is not only the largest youth poetry slam in the world, but the longest running one. The LTAB Festival boasts "1000 poets for a month of Olympic style poetry bouts" (Young Chicago Authors, 2020).

It is no coincidence that Kevin Coval, one of the two co-founders of Young Chicago Authors, started out as both a teacher and performance poet and developed his chops at the Green Mill. Of slam host Marc Smith, Kevin said, "He believes in the notion that everyone in the world has a

unique story that must be told" (Kogan 2011). Louder than a Bomb provides a setting in which teens develop their "unique story that must be told", in the same spirit. Kevin continues to publish, teach, and conduct training and workshops to help set up LTAB events all over the country.

LTAB Changes and Grows

Thanks to the dedication of its staff and alumni, LTAB has won enough institutional support that it has been able to expand its reach and its program offerings. Using the LTAB umbrella, there are now college-level poetry slams, often mentored by former winners. "LTABU" allows college-aged students to compete, although LTAB has been careful to note that participants do not have to attend college to qualify to enter. A minimal registration fee is set up, not prohibitively expensive but enough to incentivize the team. In addition to LTAB, Young Chicago Authors offers after school programs, author residencies, and an opportunity to be published.

I served as a judge for one round of the LTAB tournaments for three different years, and each one was a privilege and thrill. The judges are chosen through a simple online application at the Young Chicago Authors website, in which we declare that we have no conflict of interest and an abiding interest in youth poetry. Judges sit in the front row of the performance space, get a small erasable white board and marker, and are instructed to write a score from 1-10 (with 10 a "perfect" score) immediately after each performance. The performances are simple, passionate, original, and often on themes of fighting injustice and overcoming struggles with resilience. They are heartfelt, sometimes heartbreaking, and always inspiring. During the performances, audiences are allowed to show approval only through quietly snapping their fingers, and no verbal feedback is permitted. This creates a solemn and respectful atmosphere and contributes to the professionalism of the whole event. After each performance, judges hold up their boards, and the volunteer scorekeeper records them and calls out the average. In addition to individual numbers, there are group numbers, and these are also scored. At the end, the scorekeeper announces the top scoring team, and they receive the applause of the crowd. In the loving and supportive LTAB culture, the teams exchange hugs, compliments, and fist bumps, and camaraderie and appreciation for all the participants fills the room.

All of us lucky enough to be in the LTAB audiences not only hear and see outstanding artistic talent and skill, but also experience something like "group therapy", as these gifted young people disclose their vulnerability and struggles through poetry in this intimate and trusting environment. LTAB events now take place in many other states and cities, and even around the world.

Some Effects

In 2017, a young Chicago hip-hop artist by the name of Chance the Rapper took home multiple Grammys for his breakout "streaming-only" album, *Coloring Book*. This opened up new avenues for music sharing. Chance refused to sell the songs and chose to make his money strictly by selling merchandise at his shows (Cardenas, 2017). Chance was a student of Young Chicago Authors writing workshops, and his success is yet another testimony to the power of the

workshop experience. Chance tipped his hat to Kevin Coval just as Coval had done to slam poetry founder Marc Smith, saying, “Kevin Coval is my artistic father...he mentored my friends...and got me shows, and those shows got me a little bit of bread and the confidence to continue and take the craft seriously...he was that for me and for a lot of people” (Ivey, 2017).

Louder than a Bomb has come to represent a generation of artist/activists; it came full circle when Chance hosted Saturday Night Live in the fall of 2019, and wore the red shirt representing the Chicago Teachers Union, which was on strike at the time. His not for profit, Socialworks, also organizes an annual black arts film festival during Black History Month, and in 2016, a project to make insulated coats that could serve as sleeping bags for the homeless, which were produced at a factory in Detroit. He also worked with Chicago Public Library, until the recent shelter in place directives, to sponsor OpenMike, a regular youth poetry slam that takes place at the library.

Young Chicago Authors’ teaching staff have created a curriculum called [Chicago Writes](#), and this has been aligned with language arts standards, and is approved by Chicago Public Schools. These powerful identity-building writing experiences can occur not only outside school, but within it.

Of slam poetry, Marc Smith says, “Time has proven that what was once dismissed as a barroom fad has staying power and importance equal to any other school of poetry in the history of literature” (Smith, 2015). LTAB’s winning combination of performance poetry, self-expression, writing development, and community building has given rise to a whole generation of young people speaking their truths. All we need to do is listen to them, and learn.

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Online link, including related images: <https://intersections.ilamembers.org/member-benefit-access/interface/grassroots-leadership/louder-than-a-bomb-by-kristin-lems>