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The title 'spoken word' is displayed in a large, black, distressed font. The word 'spoken' is on the top line and 'word' is on the bottom line. A stylized orange Zia sun symbol is positioned between the two lines, centered under the 'o' in 'spoken' and the 'w' in 'word'. The entire title is enclosed in a thin black rectangular border.

A Luminaria Production

A Film by Victor Nunez

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Publicity/Press Contact:

MONSERRAT LTD.

Neyda Martinez, c: 917-656-7846

monserrat536@msn.com

Publicity/Press Contact:

PRODIGY PR

Alex Klenert, o: 310-857-2020

ak@prodigypublicrelations.com

Emilie Chan, o: 310-857-2020

ec@prodigypublicrelations.com

CAST

Cruz	Kuno Becker
Senior	Rubén Blades
Emilio	Miguel Sandoval
Shae	Persia White
Ramon	Antonio Elias
Gabrielle	Monique Gabriela Curnen
Cloudy	Rashaan Nall
Renegade	Jernard Burks
George	Maurice Compte
Dr. Lopez	Castulo Guerra
Luis	Johnnie Hector
Roberto	Andre Jamal Kinney
Robin	Courtney Cunningham
Big Mike	Stephen A. Eiland
Candace	Deborah Chavez
Tomás	Jerry Angelo
Rebecca	Nya Marie Serano
Paul	Brandon Zaragoza
Toby	Laurence Chavez
Orderly	Arron Shiver
Reporter	Beth Bailey
Sandoval	Rick A. Ortega, Jr.
Aragon	Joe Manuel Gallegos
Mrs. Maestas	Sophia M. Garcia
Priest	Fr. Julio González, S.F.
Josephine	Myrna I. Vigil
Cheryl	Casey Messer

CREW

Director	Victor Nunez
Producers	Karen Koch
	William T. Conway
Written by	William T. Conway
	Joe Ray Sandoval
Production Designer	Bryce Perrin
Director of Photography	Virgil Mirano
Additional Poetry By	Jimmy Santiago Baca
Editors	Victor Nunez
	Justin Geoffroy
Original Score	Michael Brook

SYNOPSIS

From acclaimed director Victor Nunez (*ULEE'S GOLD*), ***SPOKEN WORD*** tells the story of Cruz Montoya (Kuno Becker, *GOAL!*, *FROM MEXICO WITH LOVE*), a rock star on the West Coast poetry circuit, where audiences from San Diego to Seattle gather to hear him perform. Just off the road from a successful tour, he gets an unexpected phone call alerting him that his father, Senior (Rubén Blades, *PREDATOR 2*, *ONCE UPON A TIME IN MEXICO*), is fatally ill.

Cruz rushes home to his dying father, a reclusive former schoolteacher still leading a traditional life in their once bucolic mountain valley, now ravaged by poverty, drug abuse, and violence. After years away, Cruz quickly begins to retreat into his troubled former life, managing a Santa Fe hip-hop club owned by a local crime boss, Emilio (Miguel Sandoval, *BOTTLE SHOCK*, *CLEAR AND PRESENT DANGER*), who Senior used to run with back in the day. Seduced by the fast action and easy money, Cruz loses his poetic voice, his identity, and almost his life, before he finds a way to heal his relationships with his family, his community, and himself.

A nuanced depiction of an evolving father-son relationship, ***SPOKEN WORD*** depicts the edgy collision of old and new worlds in a rare, authentic portrait of Latino culture in the South West, illustrating how cultural roles and machismo can give way when families can move beyond words, both spoken and unspoken, to share the language of their hearts.

SHORT SYNOPSIS

From acclaimed director Victor Nunex (*ULEE'S GOLD*) comes a rare, authentic portait of Latino culture in the Southwest. Cruz (Kuno Becker), a successful poet, is called home to his small New Mexico town when he learns his father, Senior (Rubén Blades), is dying of cancer. After years away, he begins to retreat into his troubled former life, and loses his poetic voice, his identity, and almost his life, before finding a way to heal his relationships with his family, his community, and himself.

ABOUT THE PRODUCTION

GENESIS

The foundation of the film's journey began with the words of poet Joe Ray Sandoval, a Santa Fe spoken word artist who gives a compelling voice to themes of dysfunctional love, family roots, and the poetry of place. Challenged and inspired by Sandoval's work, producer Karen Koch and writer/producer William Conway began collaborating with the poet under the banner of their recently formed film production company, Luminaria. That inspiration was transformed into the screenplay *SPOKEN WORD*, the story of Cruz Montoya, a successful but troubled spoken word artist who returns to northern New Mexico to be with his dying father, where he must confront his demons, and the past that caused him to run away.

Says Koch, "We are intent on developing material that speaks to the place we're from, and tells a universal story at the same time." Agrees Conway, "We want to do locally based stories and collaborate with local people."

Back in 2006, performance poet Joe Ray Sandoval first met writer-producer Bill Conway at Santa Fe Prep School in Santa Fe, NM, when Sandoval was the commencement speaker at graduation, and Conway's son was graduating. Impressed with what he heard, Conway invited Sandoval to a meeting at Luminaria.

Sandoval remembers, "So I showed up at their office, and pitched this story: my story. I kind of pitched a story about a poet who comes back. Originally, it was a poet coming back to New Mexico and having to face his demons and his life and his family, and everything he was running away from. The screenplay is based a lot on my poetry, which is very autobiographical."

Luminaria liked the concept, so Sandoval and Conway began collaborating on a screenplay outline. Says Sandoval, "We came up together with the idea that he comes back for his terminally ill father." This was a fictional premise, Sandoval points out: "My dad is very much alive and became involved with the movie. They used his paintings for Senior's paintings, and his pickup truck. And they filmed on our family land in Truchas."

Much of the dialogue and character development in the movie emerged from Sandoval's poetry, and his actual poems were also incorporated, most notably "I Want to Get Shot." Like the character of Cruz, Sandoval also had a friend who shot himself in Sandoval's living room.

Sandoval himself grew up in Santa Fe, and then went away just as Cruz does. Sandoval went to college in Las Cruces, NM, and Washington, DC, earning his MFA in poetry, film, and media studies from George Mason University.

Besides co-writing the screenplay for *SPOKEN WORD*, Sandoval, 38, is a performance poet, club deejay, teacher, and producer of the documentary "Poetry Allowed." He has also published one chapbook, titled "Reina," and three CDs, entitled "The Project," "Notebook," and "Sucker Punch." The themes he explores in his poetry are dysfunctional love, street poetry, drugs, booze, the club scene, being a night person, his past, poetry of place, and family roots. Of Hispanic

heritage, Sandoval notes, “*SPOKEN WORD* is a story about our people and our culture and how we live and how we were raised. It’s a narrative that now that it’s being documented, can’t be forgotten. It’s about how we are as a people, and our culture.”

Points of cinematic reference for Sandoval included *THE MILAGRO BEANFIELD WAR* (which had filmed in part in his grandparents’ garage in Truchas, and similarly deals with northern New Mexico), *AMERICAN BEAUTY* (in that it had an avant garde cachet and was about a dysfunctional family), and *BLOOD IN, BLOOD OUT* (a Chicano movie he respected that Jimmy Santiago Baca wrote). Having studied Baca’s poetry in graduate school, Sandoval emphasizes the influence that Baca’s poetry and prose has had on him. “I like his story—how he didn’t accept failure and decided he would learn to read and write, and he did,” Sandoval offers. “His words are magic. They bring me home and remind me of my own childhood. My life hasn’t been picture-perfect, either. There’s been a lot of bad things that happened, a lot of drugs. A lot of good, live fast, die young and leave a beautiful corpse kind of stuff.”

At the root of it, Sandoval believes, “I got disconnected from the land. I got disconnected from nature and the beauty of it. I started working in clubs and spinning hip-hop, and living in the city. I think this movie is a journey for me personally as much as for Cruz, to reconnect with that history and our culture and to accept it and love it and be proud of it.”

Writer-producer Conway brought 20 years of experience writing scripts for such successful series as “Miami Vice” and “Walker Texas Ranger” to the collaboration. “I was impressed with the raw emotionalism that Joe Ray put across through his poetry,” says Conway. “The way I look at it is, through my years as a screenwriter I was able to bring form and dramatic structure to the core idea that Joe Ray had, and through him have access to the particulars of this very specific world that I as an outsider could only imagine or make up.”

As the script was finalized, the producers enlisted Albuquerque-based poet Jimmy Santiago Baca as poetry consultant for his input. Baca says, “I read the script. I see it as the struggle of a poet trying to achieve equilibrium—a balance between his need to write poetry and his worrisome roller-coaster ride of a day-to-day living. How do you manage to live your life in a sort of balanced way and be a poet?”

Most of all, Baca got involved because, “I wanted to lend my name to it because the producers and writers especially had brought so much of New Mexico culture to it, and New Mexico people and New Mexico color. I was gratified to see somebody step up and actually say something about the Chicano culture, which is very beautiful.”

THE MOVIE’S THEMES

SPOKEN WORD is about self-expression and healing, about getting lost and finding oneself. Comments co-writer Joe Ray Sandoval, “When Cruz finds out he has to go back to New Mexico, he thinks, ‘There’s really nothing special where I’m from.’ The theme is that he’s going to find out how special it actually is. Finally, says Sandoval, “It’s a story of reclamation. The character of Cruz has to come home and face his history and his past and his demons.”

Submits poet Jimmy Santiago Baca, “The movie has all sorts of themes; redemption, achievement, inspiration.” He mentions *Piñero*, *The Milagro Beanfield War*, *La Bamba*, *Stand and Deliver*, and his own *Blood In, Blood In*, as reference points, commenting, “Those movies lent themselves to the Chicano culture, and came away really successful in giving beautiful things to the world.”

“It’s a universal story about a prodigal son coming back,” says Conway. “Another universal theme is about an artist returning to where they’re from. A lot of times, to find your voice as an artist, people leave where they’re from. Especially, they leave a small town to go to a big city.” But Conway believes, “To really mature as an artist or as a person, it’s important to integrate where you’re from.”

Producer Koch borrows a poetry metaphor to describe the storyline. “This is a place poem,” she says. “It’s the clash of the old Hispanic culture with the new urban hip-hop, and they do meet somewhere, and that happens in our story.” She suggests, “The opening poem, ‘I Want to Get Shot,’ could be placed in Detroit, in Oakland, in Calcutta, in Mexico City, and yet it grew out of a life in northern New Mexico, and that’s what made me understand it’s a universal story told in a specific place. The theme is that words unspoken can be damaging, and if the real emotions can ultimately be spoken between fathers and sons, brothers, husbands, and wives, it means so much to an understanding of each other.”

Bill Conway looks at it similarly: “The theme of *SPOKEN WORD* to me is about communication— it’s about what is spoken and what is not.”

For director Victor Nunez, the theme is a somber one, about a poet “who has to confront and renounce his own sort of self-destructive escapes from this world, and come to terms with the past. One of the things about the past is that in the past you learn that you grow old and die. When you’re young, no one wants to know that. You can go wild and die—that’s very poetic and romantic. But growing old and dying is a pretty humbling, inevitability.”

Rubén Blades pinpoints, “A movie like this helps you to understand that life is about what you do and what you left behind, and being truthful.”

Miguel Sandoval sees the story in terms of classic drama, offering, “The overriding theme is the epic struggle between father and son, which all of us who are fathers and sons, understand very well. The other theme is how do you reconcile your artistic sensibility with your so-called real life, and how do those intertwine and clash with each other, and sometimes really help each other.”

Associate producer Kent Kirkpatrick puts the theme most poetically: “You can go home again. But when you do go home, home has changed, because you have changed.”

CASTING

KUNO BECKER (Cruz Montoya) is a Mexican actor cast as the lead role of performance poet Cruz Montoya. Says Koch, “Kuno was our first choice. He’s brought an intellectual and

emotional intelligence to such a complicated, dark character. This role was a challenge for him, and it's so different from his soccer-playing roles, in that it gave him the opportunity to show his range. And let's be honest: His looks are striking. To look at him on the screen is awesomely powerful." Agrees Conway, "Kuno really wanted to show a tormented soul. He has the energy and commitment."

According to Becker, "The story has a lot of levels, and Cruz is a cool character for any actor to play. He goes through a roller coaster of emotions and has a complete character arc. He has interesting and volatile relationships with all the other characters—especially his dad, and his girlfriend."

"My character is a very talented, passionate guy," Becker continues. "He's trying to find his path in life. And throughout the story, he learns a lot from his dad and his family and ultimately about himself and where he's from. He has to go downhill and touch bottom in order to go back up."

To prepare for the role, Becker researched spoken-word poetry, including going to see poet Jason Yurcic. Becker came to his own understanding of Cruz's particular process as a poet: "There are highs and lows, and rushes of energy and inspiration that he gets, and that's when he writes. Then he gets the lows, and that's tricky to play, too. We want to make it believable."

The relationship between Cruz and his father particularly moved Becker. "There's no communication between this father and son whatsoever. When Cruz finds out his father is dying, and comes back home, for the first time they start to communicate. It's an extreme situation that the father finds himself in—he knows he has limited time and that there are things he wanted to say that he never said."

RUBÉN BLADES (Cruz Montoya "Senior") was sent the script of *SPOKEN WORD* in Panama. So compelled by what he read, he took a leave of absence from his demanding position as Minister of Tourism to make the movie. The actor takes a philosophical view of the storyline: "The story is about how you face your heritage, and what you can do to improve and preserve your background. Cruz comes back and allows my character the opportunity to redeem himself. My character, as a teacher, felt he had failed his son because he didn't prepare him to successfully face his problems. For the father, it's a matter of making one last effort to teach his son a life lesson."

The fact that Victor Nunez had signed on to direct was added impetus for Blades. "He's got good instincts. The fact that he has directed actors to Oscar® nominations shows his instincts are right." Likewise does Blades, and he welcomed the opportunity to collaborate too with writer-producer Bill Conway, observing, "Bill is here at all times. Usually, a writer's presence is unknown on set, but this writer is here walking around, listening, making notes, and you can talk to him!"

Coincidentally, Producer Koch became convinced Blades was the right choice for the role of Senior when, during scouting of the movie, she was in a Chimayo bar and noticed there were several songs by Blades on the jukebox, which substantiated Blades' bond and presence in New Mexico.

Comments Conway, “The wonderful thing about Rubén is he can play humor and lightness, but still communicate the sadness and pain that’s underneath. With a story about a man who’s dying, we’re walking the fine edge of melodrama and he’s able to walk that edge and pull it back a little.”

MIGUEL SANDOVAL (Emilio Sanchez) is best known for his role as D.A. Devalos on “Medium.” Remarks Sandoval, “It seems to me that District Attorney Devalos is a little bit on a different side of the law than maybe our friend Emilio Sanchez. But they are both guys in a position of authority, shall we say?”

Of the character of Emilio—whom producer Koch refers to as “our Tony Soprano”- Sandoval reasons, “Some people could think of him as somebody who exploits his environment and his people. But I just think he probably considers himself a good businessman.”

Sandoval, who grew up in Santa Fe, says, “I know this territory very, very well, so I was immediately attracted to coming back and doing a film about New Mexico in New Mexico. This is a very credible, believable story. And when I heard that Victor was attached to this project, it sealed the deal.”

PERSIA WHITE (Shae) in real life is married to spoken-word poet Saul Williams, so she felt a kinship to the movie’s poetry subject matter. Says White, “Poets tend to inspire change and revolution, and right now there’s a surge in the poetry and spoken-word movement. It’s definitely a reflection of a positive movement in society towards the opening of minds.”

“Shae’s an artist with a very unique personality. Although self-assured, she struggles maintaining a balance between expressing herself through visual mediums and using actual communication. She has a dynamic relationship with Cruz in her life, because she’s balanced out by his opposite extroverted communication through words.” White says of her character, “More than anything, my character is holding on to love, and her relationship has become her chosen family, and she’s not going to give up on that.”

SHOOTING WITH DIRECTOR VICTOR NUNEZ

“What drew me to this material is there seemed to be a real human balance between the generations.” says Nunez. “These are mixed characters, like in the tradition of literature. They are human beings who make mistakes and try to figure them out, but there’s something inherently good about what they’re doing.” Nunez also identifies another literary technique, “It’s also a fortunate-fall story, meaning that Cruz had to come near to destroying himself to find reconciliation between the members of his family in the end.”

Nunez has a unique filmmaking style, shooting in Super 16 and serving as director, camera operator, and editor. “I started in the sixties when experimental film was very big. My models were much more European than American for the first 20 years, with the whole French New Wave,” he explains. “And operating is how I watch performances. It used to be like, ‘Well, Fassbinder does it,’ and then it was, ‘Mike Figgis does it, and Soderbergh does it.’”

A proponent of classic cinema, Nunez rarely uses the steadicam. In *SPOKEN WORD*, he favors a lot of little dolly moves, the goal being that the camera work should be invisible as this personal drama unfolds. Generally, he uses a very wide shot at least once in a scene, in order to communicate the geography of the place. The rest of the time, he relies on close-ups, but not extreme close-ups. “And I’m doing those sort of dirty over-the-shoulder shots so that you see one person as you’re looking at the other, because you want to emphasize their connection,” Nunez explains. “The whole job for me is to create a space in which the actors can externalize interior feelings and emotional thought. The camera is ideally transparent.”

Regional authenticity is always key for Nunez, who read the books *Land of Enchantment*, *Land of Conflict* and *Chiva: A Village Takes On the Global Heroin Trade* as research, then sent his assistant to a funeral in Cordova, NM, to observe details about ritual and attire. Notes Nunez, “People don’t have black suits to wear just for funerals here.”

Conway recalls, “Victor wanted to know-- do they come in a limo?” (No.) “Does the family sit under a tent?” (Sometimes, yes.) “Do people dress up formally?” (No, they dress casually.) The real priest at the Santuario de Chimayo plays a priest in *SPOKEN WORD* because of a connection that Nunez made.

ON LOCATION IN CHIMAYO AND SANTA FE

SPOKEN WORD was shot entirely on location in Chimayo (Senior’s house and the Chimayo bar scenes), Truchas (the forested Montoya family land), Santa Fe (the Alchemy club scenes and Ramon’s house), and Española (the car accident).

The first three weeks were filmed in Chimayo, Española, and Truchas, all in Rio Arriba County, north of Santa Fe. Most of Rio Arriba County is seemingly bucolic and agrarian, full of peach and apricot orchards, and famed for its red chilies. But this pastoral region is haunted by underlying socio-economic problems. More than one in five residents are below the federal poverty line. Drug use is commonplace, usually inside trailers, bars, and metal-roofed houses. As Erik Eckholm observed in an article published in *The New York Times* during production of *SPOKEN WORD*, “Rio Arriba County, just north of Santa Fe, is a Georgia O’Keeffe landscape of juniper- dotted desert and mountain valleys populated mostly by Hispanics who proudly trace their lineage to settlers of the 1600s—and who, a decade ago, discovered their county had the nation’s highest per capita rate of deaths from overdoses. Hundreds of families are struggling to live with a multi-generational plague of narcotics.”

And then a deeper and darker subtext runs through the town of Chimayo. In real life, it’s the rustic setting of a church from the 1800s that is the site of miracles; but also a troubled town where violence and drug use are commonplace. Koch points out, “People pilgrimage there for the holy dirt. Chimayo has an incredibly powerful soul that has enriched the lives of the people there. But it also has heaviness to it, and a certain responsibility that I think has dragged the souls there down, too.”

Nunez adds, “There’s a kind of specific agrarian quality I’ve been trying to understand. There’s

this amazing contradiction in Chimayo of this incredible beauty and yet this incredible sorrow and addiction, and how these things can exist together. And Cruz sort of embodies that physically in that he has to deal with having the bipolar condition, and also spiritually as a poet he senses the pain of that contradiction.”

Senior’s home was on Chimayo dirt lane, and the funeral scene was filmed at the cemetery of the famed Santuario de Chimayo, a church from the 1800s that has been called the most important pilgrimage center in the United States. Each Easter, some 3,000 seekers still walk there, many on crutches, hoping for a healing from the holy dirt in a back room of the church, that is said to be able to heal physical and spiritual ills. Notes writer-producer Conway, “Yet Chimayo is the heroin capitol of the Southwest. It’s a strange mix of the sacred and the profane.”

Further north, Truchas in the Sangre de Cristo Mountains—where Cruz and Senior go to gather firewood— is one of the highest points in New Mexico, at 8,400 feet. Situated halfway between Santa Fe and Taos, the town began as a Spanish land grant in 1754, and has remained a relatively unaltered outpost since, although artists have made it their community in the last two decades. It is here that *The Milagro Beanfield War* was also filmed in the mid-eighties.

During filming, Kirkpatrick recalls, “My memory is that everyone was filmed in kind of golden light and out of focus, with little sparks of light. It was much more Hollywood. It was a more idealized version of this place.” With *SPOKEN WORD*, “I would hope that it would show a slice of contemporary America that exists—the culture of northern New Mexico—which is completely invisible to the rest of the world. And it’s just as American as Appalachian coal miners or Wall Street brokers. It’s a sub-culture that exists that’s never been seen.”

Promises Koch, “We will show our unique version of a non-iconic Chimayo, but a vision of what the reality may be there. We have tried to be as authentic as we can be.”

COSTUMES

Costume designer Lahly Poore Ericson aimed, she says, “To make these people real people. Not overly dramatic.” She clad Cruz in dark grays, blues, and blacks, figuring, “He’s got a little bit of an edge. He’s a poet.” She shopped at vintage stores like Albuquerque’s Buffalo Exchange for his wardrobe. Similarly, she put Shae in blacks, grays, and plums. “She’s got more edge than anyone else in terms of clothing,” says Ericson.

She outfitted Senior in more subtle, natural colors, purposely buying worn clothes for him from thrift stores. Says Ericson, “He always has his collar done up and buttoned to show that he’s a very private man. We worked with common rural fabrics for him—cotton, wool, and flannel. He didn’t want anything fancy. He didn’t even want to change clothes very often. He’s dying, he doesn’t want to pay attention to that.”

The flashiest wardrobe went to Emilio. “His look is a pleated front pant, standard shirt, bolo, western belt, and cowboy boots, to give him a little boost as an upscale character. He’s also more neat and fastidious. He wears a lot of red. Red is the color his character, and for the people he touches. If someone’s in contact with him or his world, red is appropriate.”

THE SPOKEN-WORD POETRY MOVEMENT

Often giving a voice to the disenfranchised, the spoken-word movement coalesced in the 1990s and has launched a feature-length film (*SLAM!*), documentary (*SlamNation*), MTV television show (“Spoken Word Unplugged”), and numerous performance poetry competitions, or slams.

Seen from a historical perspective, the spoken-word movement parallels the Beat movement of the fifties and sixties, as personified by poets like Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac, and William Burroughs. The Beats were said to have revolutionized modern euphonic poetry and given new meaning to performance art. They shared an anti-Establishment, anti-academic, and non-conformist political agenda and a bohemian lifestyle.

Spoken-word poets epitomize an in-your-face visceral style of poetry that borrows its often confessional and/or confrontational energy from hip-hop and rap. The poetry tends to involve social issues, social commentary, and social criticism, often utilizing a rhythmic beat in its delivery. It is a rough-edged, populist movement with a democratizing energy that brings poetry back to “the people.” Poets such as Henry Rollins, Saul Williams, Maggie Estep, Reg E. Gaines, John S. Hall, and Dana Bryant have gained acclaim with spoken-word poetry. Now considered early spoken-word artists, or precursors to the movement, were Jim Morrison and Patti Smith, back in the sixties and seventies.

A form of literary or artistic performance, spoken-word poetry is said to have originated as a section in record stores for albums without music. It is sometimes performed with a musical background, but the speaker is the dominant force.

Spoken word gained popularity in the nineties through the emergence of “poetry slams,” or competitions where the poets would square off at clubs. The National Poetry Slam started as a competition between poets in Chicago and San Francisco. By 1999, it was enough of a movement that veteran newscaster Morley Safer covered the Tenth Annual National Poetry Slam on the long-running TV series “60 Minutes.” On that show, Safer showed poet Gayle Danley teaching slam, writing on a blackboard: “Did you dig deep?” Safer suggested to her, “Isn’t slam poetry, then, really therapy?” to which she replied, “Yes.”

Amiri Baraka, a black poet who emerged in the sixties, called poetry “the lifeline to the human heart” and said in 1996 that the new poets are “taking poetry out of the classrooms.” In 1997, rapper Chuck D. reflected, “A poet has the gift to slow the world and time down to their particular frame,” whereas, “A rapper keeps up with the time of the world.” D. suggested that a rapper was like “a poet on steroids.”

Miguel Algarin, founder of the Nuyorican Poets Café in New York City, has said of spoken-word poetry, “It is not only meaningful, it is also fun.... It’s not a floating head above a lectern. It’s about getting people excited, about what you say and how you say it. The word is so good, it reminds you that no matter how bizarre life gets, you need poetry.”