

Praise Days for the Oral Tradition

by Steve Zeitlin, Director, City Lore

Of these adventures, Muse, daughter of Zeus,
tell us in our time, lift the great song again.

— The Odyssey

Taking a cue from Homer's venerable oral epic, we welcome you to this first-of-its-kind poetry festival, the *People's Poetry Gathering*. At the *Gathering*, many different poetics and experiences of poetry — folk, literary, regional, and inner-city — are brought together for the first time in a poetry village, a hamlet within the island of Manhattan, where, for three days, poetry rules.

Literature and folklore share common roots in the oral tradition, and the *Gathering* represents a pioneering collaboration between the two disciplines. Historically, both fields have placed a tremendous emphasis on the quality of artistic expression. The *Gathering* will present the finest recitation poets, the foremost *décima* improvisers and singers, some of the best practitioners of each genre.

The *Gathering* is also born out of a belief that we all have folklore of our own and that our legacy of language leaves the possibility of artful communication open for all of us. The *Gathering* — which hosts open mic sessions throughout the three days — assumes that careful attention can be paid to artistic quality, while at the same time valuing an open, active participation in the popular traditions of poetic expression. All of us can strive to be poetic listeners attuned to poetry and to the art in everyday life.

In this vast poetic encounter, we highlight the oral roots of our literary traditions. We feature literary and folk poets side by side as bards whose personal and collective visions, whose age-old traditions, are crucial to us as we move into the new millennium. In the same way that Homer's epics were composed in an oral formulaic style specifically to be performed, many of the forms highlighted at the *Gathering* utilize traditional ways to transmit poetry in performance. Forms of oral poetry not only have particular verse structures that can be shared on paper, but they are accompanied by traditions and contexts for communicating the spoken word. The audience plays a role in shaping the performance and, in many cases, the poems themselves.

Among the breathtaking variety of oral poetry forms at the *Gathering*, the *jali* ("griot") poems are sung African praise poems written to be performed at ceremonial occasions including coronations, weddings, and funerals of kings. Cowboy poetry brings with it the ambience of campfires and the occupational specifics of a cowboy way of life, as well as a recitation



tradition and the practice of putting poetry to music. The improvising Latino *décima* poets work in an ancient Iberian traditional verse form but perform to music and devise encounters of one-upmanship (*controversias*) and formal contests (*concursos de trovadores*). Some of our emergent forms, such as the Taos Heavyweight Poetry Bout and the Haiku Poetry Slam, are not new forms per se, but emerging oral poetry formats, new traditions for sharing and dramatizing the spoken word. The *People's Poetry Gathering* highlights these performance traditions alongside the work of literary poets and the art of reading and reciting poems aloud.

In our technological era, where film, video and electronic communications seem to threaten even the printed word, it is easy to assume that oral poetry is a thing of the past. But over the past two decades, in the lyrics of rap music, and in the new poetry-slam traditions at places like the Nuyorican Poets Cafe on the Lower East Side of New York, young, often rebellious voices have, in the words of Miguel Algarín, "set the spoken word on fire." The *People's Poetry Gathering* will feature some of these emergent poetry traditions along with other oral poetry traditions which thrive in communities across America. We hope to take the resurgent interest in poetry a step further, reaching out to the populist poetry traditions of occupational groups and Americans from different ethnic backgrounds. The *Gathering* looks for poetry beyond the academy and the coffeehouse to find it alive and well in the living rooms and around the kitchen tables of American homes.

In fact, poetry on the page is a relatively new idea — common only after the printing press and only in places with high rates of literacy. Until recently, the poems of Tennyson, Shakespeare, and others were shared aloud. Reciting poems from memory was part of family and community traditions — commonplace, like singing songs. A now largely lost recitation tradition thrived in settings as varied as the traveling Chautauqua, the music hall, and the family parlor.

Amid the blare of sirens, the staccato click of computer keyboards, and the chatter of television, the solitary, sturdy voice of the poet speaks with great clarity and power into the roar of the commerce-driven media — quietly reminding us of our humanity.

A Deeper Listening

by Lee Briccetti, Director, Poets House

*Here are the roughest and bearded and space and ruggedness
and nonchalance that the soul loves.*

— Walt Whitman

From the wealth of new poetry books exhibited at Poets House's Annual Poetry Publication Showcase — over 1,000 this year! — to sacred chants, work songs and emergent formats for recitation, the *People's Poetry Gathering* celebrates the many poetries of this nation.

The organizing principle — the joy — of the *People's Poetry Gathering* is gathering. How do the many poetries cross-pollinate and inform each other? How are written literatures continually renewed by oral forms? What can we learn about how poetry moves through culture?

Looking out over the expanse of poetry traditions and formats brought together for this first *People's Poetry Gathering*, one can see giddy similarities between the balladic lines of cowboy poetry and the staccato rhyming that laces up the center of a hip hop lyric. *Poetry serves language*. But language's harmonies and patterns of repetition can operate with remarkably similar techniques in diverse settings, whether binding together a jali's incantation or a troubadour's *décima*, a Petrarchan sonnet or a blues riff. This is also part of the reason we gather: to expand what we know, to be surprised.

But, most importantly what do we find here for our own journey? What of poetry's wide legacy speaks to us personally? This last question is not always so immediately answered. Many poems give up their secrets slowly. With repeated exposure and contact, we find more to love and to inform us — more in the art. This too is the organizing principle of the *Gathering*: to create an atmosphere of respect for many poetry traditions and a readiness to apprehend the difficult or the unfamiliar.

Poetry was the first literature. And the *People's Poetry Gathering* is founded on the belief that it is everyone's legacy. Particularly in this double-speak age of sound bites, poetry nurtures the human spirit by giving us words with meaning. Some reach us instantly on the first hearing. Some, because they are so laden with music and chords of intellect, reward us as we give more to *them*. Either way, the *Gathering* is an exploration of what language can do, the many concurrent tributaries of a great art.

Some have said that we are living through a golden age for poetry in this country. Because of the revolution in computer technology, there has been a 500% increase in the number of small and independent presses during the last thirty years. Consequently, there are more poetry books being produced annually than at any other time in our history. And as the means of production have been democratized, a greater range and diversity of American voices have appeared in print than ever before. There are more poetry readers. There are more attenders of *readings* — in libraries, bars, and nightclubs.

Meanwhile, in the midst of this poetry publishing boom, there is a palpable energy, particularly in urban areas, in reciting poems directly. There is a movement, a great *speaking*: a return to the human voice. Online technologies, CDs and videos have served and reinforced this (old is new again) orality.

For Poets House, a national archive of poetry books, this festival builds on an early successful project which explored links between oral poetries and modern literatures. Now, in a partnership with City Lore, and in cooperation with the Western Folklife Center, we hope to further explore the living confluence of text, voice and performance. Poetry has *always* been at the center of some cultures as sacred tradition, preserver of group values and a document of survival. Over and over, in so many systems of totalitarian extremism, poetry finds its way again to the center as the essential, radical act — the single voice speaking against monoculture. The *People's Poetry Gathering* offers readings, performance recitations, musical happenings and discussions which explore the parameters by which the art grows. And so, welcome. Welcome into a deeper listening.