

Wide, wide word



The Twin Cities spoken-word community was a black-and-white story until Ed Bok Lee and Bao Phi came along. Together, they've helped build a scene that now speaks to a whole new world.

Tom Horgen, Star Tribune

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Lee and Phi on their writing process

With his arm stretched out and fingers curled around an imaginary gun, poet Ed Bok Lee yells:

"BANG! BANG!"

The sudden outburst draws wincing from his college audience. Some even jump, never having heard gunshots in a poem before. "Riot in Heaven" is about two people, a Korean grocery clerk and a young black woman, who find that the violence that took their lives in the 1992 L.A. riots has followed them into the afterlife.

Lee's eyes squeeze shut as he finishes the poem, hands cutting through the air as a rapper's would.

Of course

even in heaven you can't die twice.

so i just stood there, my heart dripping through my fingers

like wealth in my father's unfortunate line.

In the audience, friend and fellow poet Bao Phi is on the edge of his seat, nodding at the poem's power, "mmm-hmm"-ing like a churchgoer.

Phi, 31, says he's still enamored of Lee's poetry after all these years. Lee, in his early 30s, says the same about Phi. A lot of people feel that way about these two stars of the Twin Cities

"spoken word" scene, whose work -- now available on CDs and in books -- takes them around the country like touring musicians.

The audience packed this evening into a room at Phi's alma mater, Macalester College in St. Paul, is a good representation of the community that he and Lee have helped to galvanize: young, racially diverse and a far cry from what you might think of the age-old art of poetry -- no frumpy old white guys here.

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Ten years ago it wasn't like this. The emerging spoken-word scene -- basically, poetry as performance -- was still very much a black-or-white thing, with other people of color largely on the fringes.

Lee and Phi were politically minded poets who were hungry to hear other Asian-American voices -- a bond that drew them together. They remember sitting in Phi's damp south Minneapolis basement after a potluck meal one night, discovering their shared interests in politics, books and poetry.

"We were talking about how the kind of stuff we were interested in wasn't out there," Lee remembers. "Our experience wasn't being told."

This need -- to tell *one's own* story -- would come to epitomize the scene. Lee and Phi's experience is the story of young Asian-Americans, one that looks beyond the stereotypes of kung-fu fighters, Chinese gangsters, short Japanese businessmen and asexual computer nerds. It's a story of being the children of immigrant parents -- Phi is Vietnamese, Lee Korean -- growing up in the urban ghetto as Phi did, or feeling isolated, as Lee was in Fargo.

"Maybe," said Lee, " that's why we became poets -- because there was no vocabulary to validate our existence. So we literally had to create that vocabulary. Some people try with guns and violence. But what we tried to fill it with was words."

Choosing a path

Phi's family fled Vietnam in 1975 when he was a baby, one day before the fall of Saigon. They landed in south Minneapolis' Phillips neighborhood, where Phi's three older brothers took to the tough street life.

He didn't have to. "Since they were my brothers, nobody really messed with me," he said. "Plus, my parents really pushed me toward books. As a kid, my dad taught me how to walk to the library by myself."

Phi became an activist in high school, speaking at antiwar rallies during the first Iraq war. Later, he led protests when "Miss Saigon" came to town, calling its victimized heroine one-dimensional. Recently, he traveled to New Orleans in hopes of shedding light on the large, displaced Asian population that has escaped notice in coverage of Hurricane Katrina.

Poetry became a way to vent his frustrations artistically. His poems are often issue-based and satirical, funny but always serious. In his poem "Missed Sigh Gone" he asks:

was that you who protested,

holding a sign that said

"Asian women are not props"...

Did they offer you aspirin and a comb

after you hit the glass ceiling?

While Phi stayed tied to his Minneapolis community, Lee spent much of his young adulthood footloose, bursting free from a dreary life in Fargo. Days after graduating from high school, he peeled off in his Mercury Bobcat and spent three years driving across North America, sleeping in his little car and washing dishes for under-the-counter cash.

"I realize now I was in search of a consciousness that wasn't borrowed, shared, or shoved onto my head," he says.

He found it in the people he met, a cast of characters from America's underbelly. Along the way he devoured library books and journaled non-stop, discovering poetry to be his best tool for cataloging his experiences and those of people he met.

If Phi is the fiery commentator, Lee is definitely the storyteller.

Last year he became the first poet in the Twin Cities spoken-word scene to get a book of poetry published. Soaked in his memories of childhood and his nationwide treks, it's called "Real Karaoke People" -- a title he was hesitant about, fearing people wouldn't take it seriously. But singing karaoke "is like baring one's soul," he says. "Many of the people you see at karaoke bars come from society's fringes, working-class people just yearning to be heard."

Phi self-released his second CD, a two-disc set called "Refugeography," last year. It showcases his fast-paced, aggressive writing style, an ability that made him a champion of "slam" poetry battles earlier in his career, and got him a spot on HBO's "Def Poetry" series.

Pieces by Phi and Lee almost always confront the politics of race, class and sex -- issues that Lee says are often "sterilized in mainstream poetry." Their poems can take new listeners by surprise, even upset them.

"The mainstream, even locally, still has this image of Minnesota as Lake Wobegon," said author David Mura, who has been a mentor to both poets. "So people are surprised when Ed and Bao speak the truth about their experiences. It's never been a possibility to them that Asian-Americans would talk like this, much less be angry."

Poetry's new fan base

There's a national spoken-word circuit, and both poets do as many out-of-state gigs each year as any successful Minnesota rock band, for comparable money. But instead of bars and clubs, their shows take place on college campuses, at political rallies and in coffee shops.

Connecting with kids always has been a high priority for them. Each does workshops in high schools. "Spoken word really addresses the struggles and issues that young people relate to," said Phi. "For a lot of kids, it's their only way to speak out."

Both are critical of the literary establishment's slow embrace of this audience. Phi often cites the grumbling of New York-based critic Harold Bloom, who once called slam poetry "the death of art."

"Why would you want to exclude young people from wanting to be poets?" said Lee, who has a master's degree in fine arts from Brown University in Rhode Island. "These kids are poetry's only future."

Phi and Lee's work is now taught at several universities. Elaine Kim, a professor at the University of California, Berkeley, who uses Lee's work in her Korean-American literature class, said the poet's book was her students' favorite last semester.

"If the poetry establishment is dumb enough to turn their backs on these guys, then they're going to miss out on a whole new readership," Kim said. "Or maybe they just want to keep talking to each other."

One of this country's most celebrated poets, 65-year-old Billy Collins, hopes not. He chose Phi's poem, "Race," for the upcoming anthology "Best American Poetry 2006," a showcase billed as "the last word in poetry today."

In an e-mail interview, Collins noted that he'd never heard of 30 of the 75 poets whose work he selected: "Poetry must always continue to expand its sense of what it is and what it can include."

Seeing the future

Today, Phi supplements his performance income with a full-time job at the Loft Literary Center in Minneapolis, where he helps program spoken-word events. "He has benefits," jokes Lee, who gets by on the money he makes from performing and from part-time teaching at Hamline University in St. Paul and Augsburg College in Minneapolis.

"That's the thing about being a spoken-word artist: you're definitely not a rock star," Lee said. "You can't be, because you're also a community servant."

Last month, the two were asked to host and judge the state finals for a national contest called Poetry Out Loud at the Minnesota History Center. Both said it was a clear example of where poetry,

buoyed by spoken word, was going: A diverse group of young poets, an audience just as diverse -- and all of it sponsored by the National Endowment for the Arts.

"All these years later," Lee said, "what we were talking about in Bao's basement was actually happening."

SEE LEE PERFORM

- SASE/ Intermedia Arts merger party, 6 p.m. June 8, 2822 Lyndale Av. S., Mpls.
- Minneapolis Mosaic, 6:30 p.m. June 10, on Hennepin Av. S. between 7th & 9th Sts., free.

CHECK OUT THEIR WORK

Lee's book "Real Karaoke People" (New Rivers Press, \$14) is available at Twin Cities bookstores and at www.edboklee.com.

Phi's CD "Refugeography" (\$14) is available at www.baophi.com.

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