

## Grand Slam

**Peter Simpson**

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Kerhab \*\*\*\*

John Akpata (Vanorange Records)

It's been centuries since poetry lost its glorious place as our favoured mode of mass communication, but it still wields the vigour of the language in a way that no other form can match.

To hear the poet read a poem -- guided by his social conscience and fuelled by his righteous indignation -- remains a pure and powerful thing, the most potent distillation of the written word. None has a potency like the distinctly modern form of slam poetry, and a fine example of its power is heard in Ottawa's John Akpata.



CREDIT: Julie Oliver, the Ottawa Citizen  
Ottawa's John Akpata shows the guts and the glory of slam poetry on his new CD, Kerhab.

Akpata is a key part of a thriving slam scene in

Ottawa that fills pubs on Friday nights and takes centre stage at less libationary places. Slam poetry is black and it's white, it's male and it's female, it's in its teens and it's greying at the brow, it's working class and it's upper class -- and it knows the class system is alive and well.

Slam poetry is only a couple of decades old, with roots in the in-your-face force of hip hop, and perhaps further back in the '50s and '60s when poetry took a unapologetic turn towards the political. Slam poetry can be deadly serious or devilishly fun. It is fundamentally democratic, interacting with the audience in a way that is all its own.

It sometimes flirts with music, though when instrumentation is heard it is sparing, never pushing the poem into the realm of song. It's here, on pieces such as Dress Kode and Kanada Day, where Akpata is at his strongest.

These pieces are about a side of Ottawa life that surely is foreign -- and disturbing -- to most readers. In Dress Kode Akpata offers a "modern-day racism quiz" to the doorman of a real Market bar that put up a sign saying "no hip-hop gear, no sports apparel" -- which Akpata reads as no-entry for "those of us who just happen to be a little afro-centric. ... because my skin has been blessed with melanin/ you assume that I have some sort of genetic predisposition to violence and sin."

Akpata doesn't deal in anger -- "I can feel Allah, and God and Ja singing in my soul," he says in Writeous, the first of many declarations of peacefulness on the disc. Rather, he uses clever word-play and biting humour to voice his alienation. "You just get paid somebody else's pocket change plus your hustled tips/ to restrict clientele based on the thickness of their lips," he reads in Dress Kode. "Well, Angelina Jolie is with me, and she cannot get in/ because the doorman is not a

scientist, and he cannot determine if her lips are thick because of a collagen injection/ or maybe master's daughter had a taboo negro rendezvous way, way, way, way, way, way, way, way back when ..."

Kanada Day is a disconcerting stroll through downtown Ottawa on its busiest day of the year. It's not all dominion love and maple-leaf tattoos on rosy cheeks celebrating only "a Molotov cocktail toss away from where the millionaire, billionaire sinister ministers meet." But, in the end he always prefers sharing a blunt to tossing a bomb. "I belong,"

he reads on Belonging, "to one race of human being/ homo sapien sapien/ that belongs on one planet, one Earth/ and we all be longing to live in peace."

Akpata isn't always succinct. After 15 minutes-plus his epic piece 2002: The Marauders of Globalism can seem like a hodge podge of global grievances aimed at the United States, just like the street protests of 2002 -- but maybe that's the point. Regardless, Akpata is a man who's in love with the language and its power to turn art into a social and political force. When you listen to him flow, it's not hard to imagine that poetry really did once play the most vital role in public discourse.

John Akpata holds a CD release party March 31 at the Mercury Lounge. You can also get a taste of slam poetry at the CBC Face-Off slam at 7 p.m. Tuesday on the 4th Stage of the NAC.

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