

This is where we used to live

Seven original poets of the Vehicule Press remember and celebrate the days of performing and experimental poetry, when they were ahead of everyone else in the game

by Talia Berman
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Montreal wasn't always the veritable Eden of underground, subversive and avant-garde press that we take for granted today. In the 70s, being subversive was "original," as Vehicule Press entrepreneurs the Vehicule Poets can attest. Their performance poetry, multi-voice readings, and found art were mostly alone on an island of conservatives and academics.

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Adrian Buitenhuis

and dance and quickly moved to unorthodox performances spaces: in the streets, subway stations, gardens, and parks.

"We were interested in exploring other ways that poetry could be used," Poet Claudia Lapp says. "We've always been busy trying to make the poem fresh and new and kinetic and lived," Farkas adds.

To mark their 25th anniversary, tonight at the Musée de Art Contemporain, Farkas has organized the Vehicule Cabaret, a free two-part show that involves both modern interpretations of some of the poets' 70s-era work and current readings by the Poets. In addition, they have published a new anthology, entitled *Vehicule Poets_Now*.

This is how we do it

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Above: the Poets, circa 1970s. From left to right, Endre Farkas, Claudia Lapp, Artie Gold, John McAuley, Ken Norris, Tom Konyves, Stephen Morrissey. Top: the poets, yesterday. From left to right: Konyves, Farkas, Lapp, and Morrissey.

intentionality that accompanies traditional theatre, namely, a script – or any amount of forethought.

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poetry scene, a scene that existed in the rest of the world. [The Poets' work] wasn't parochial, it wasn't conservative. It was trying new things and being open to things that weren't academically acceptable yet – but are now. We brought poets like [original beat poet] Anne Waldman, Robert Kelly, Clayton Eshleman [from Los Angeles], and [BP Nichol's] Four Horsemen from Toronto. Nobody else was bringing them in at that point."

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The Vehicule Poets, which include Farkas, Artie Gold, Tom Konyves, Claudia Lapp, John McAuley, Stephen Morrissey, and Ken Norris, began their odyssey at an art gallery on Ste. Catherine owned by Vehicule Press. Their weekly poetry readings incorporated music

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"We knew we weren't inventing the wheel, but reshaping it," Farkas admits. "A lot of spoken word people work with the ideas of the surrealists and Dadaists of the 20s and 30s."

One of their first performance collaborations was a work called "Drummer Boy Raga: Red Light, Green Light." Like much of the Poets' work, the piece developed without the

forethought.

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Other ventures the Poets' were undertaking were equally offbeat. They got into things like choreographed movement, video poetry, and haiku-writing with concrete.

"It was a wonderful time for creative freedom," Poet Stephen Morrissey says. "No one tried to tell you anything – no one had any negative criticism – it was a nice atmosphere."

At the Gallery

All the Poets remember the vibe of the community at the Ste. Catherine's street gallery.

"The gallery provided the right kind of influence. We didn't approach the written word the way most other writers did," Farkas says.

Lapp emphasizes the uniqueness of their experience. "When you're a young writer, you are often writing in isolation, but for us, there was none of that. There was always an editor [to read your work]. That was great. We were very different, each of us, but we respected each others' differences."

The Poets were creating their work in response to the more academic and traditional trends of literature in Montreal prevalent at that time.

"There was a whole other scene at university. There were professors reading far more scholarly, more academic [work]," Lapp says. "We were more experimental."

What the Vehicule Poets brought to Montreal, according to Morrissey, was the rest of the world.

"We brought what was happening in experimental writing from Vancouver to Toronto. Montreal was very cut off from that kind of

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There was some academic support for this type of digression, Morrissey contends.

McGill English professor, and famous Montreal poet Louis Dudek was the reason Morrissey went to McGill. "Dudek is really important for Canadian poetry," says Morrissey. "He helped bring poetry to Canada." In this period, Dudek did a book with the Poets, which, according to Morrissey, "helped [the Poets] more than it helped him."

Writing it down

After the abundance of writing and performing, publishing was a natural progression.

"We were all writing, encouraging each other, and editing each others' work," Lapp remembers. "We started thinking, we need to get this work out." So, they began to publish their work. There was little else to it.

When asked about Montreal's literary scene today, Farkas acknowledges the inundation of art but is reserved about its effect.

"Well, there's more of a performance-oriented literary community than an actual publishing community," he observes. "It's ephemeral," he says of today's outpouring of poetry and spoken word, "Out of the many will come a few good things. I certainly encourage it. Let it work its way out."

Echoes Morrissey: "I think its very dynamic. It's a lot bigger than it was, and writers are more attuned to the kinds of things we were doing more than ever before. There are more little presses publishing poetry – these past few years have seen a real renaissance."

Cabaret Vehicule is tonight at 8 pm at Cinquieme Salle, in Place des Arts, 185 Ste. Catherine W.