

Monday, April 13, 2009

The Motown Word Fest: The Power of Language Celebrated

By John Jeffire

On an unusually warm and sunny March afternoon in Metropolitan Detroit, over 150 high school students and adult lovers of poetry, music, and language gathered for the first annual Motown Word Fest at Chippewa Valley High School. From world-renowned veterans like Jessica Care Moore to novice student poets and musicians, the day was filled with fellowship and celebration of expression.

The show began with Jabiya Dragonsun and Conscious Matter completely captivating the audience with their mixture of spoken word and African rhythms driven by dual conga drums, trumpet, and various traditional instruments. The group is composed of Dragonsun, Diamond Dancer, Detroit Bleu, and DNA, all of whom brought something distinctive to the performance. They opened with an interpretation of host John Jeffire's poem "sister lover mother queen," and their high energy carried them through a brisk 25-minute set. Featured was Dragonsun's performance of "War Songs," a signature piece based upon his experience as a Vietnam War Veteran.



Jessica Care Moore reads to the crowd at the Motown Word Fest.

Dragonsun was followed by Detroit singer-songwriter John Lamb, who not only sang but explained the origin of many of his pieces. As audience member Jessica Delia said, "The thing I enjoyed most about his performance was that he explained how and why he came up with each of his songs and lyrics. The stuff that he came up with was great because he incorporated the theme with a little Michigan touch." Mixing humor with stellar guitar work, Lamb entertained but also taught. He was sensational.

The final guest was headliner Moore, who brought an intensity and directness to the stage most of the young audience members had never witnessed before at a poetry reading. Student Joel Ettinger commented, "In every one of her works, it was apparent that the words were written out of strong emotion and its purpose was not to entertain, but to serve as a release for her which just so happens to be entertaining." Her set was raw, fierce, and direct, moving through urban and racial themes in tones both harsh and powerful. Perhaps student Deja Wilson summed her up best: "She was real."

Between guests, local high school students took the microphone to sing and recite poetry. MBWP member Matthew Brown also dazzled with his band, The Garden Party. This was a rare opportunity for young people to express themselves on the same stage as the seasoned veterans, an opportunity that several dozen took advantage of. Books, CD's, and t-shirts were available all day as well as a full assortment of refreshments. Souls and bellies alike were filled.

MBWP member Kris Griffor commented afterwards that "the Word Fest turned out awesome. It's so great to see such a great turn out from all groups of kids... It makes a difference when kids know they have an outlet like that." With continued support, the Word Fest will grow and even more young people will have an outlet to express themselves and share fellowship in the arts. Greatest thanks for sponsors MBWP, Poets and Writers Magazine, Ralph Roberts and family, and the Chippewa Valley High School Athletic Boosters, and for all who came to support the event.

All photos: Jabiya Dragonsun

John Jeffire, a 2004 Summer Institute Fellow and MBWP Teaching Consultant, is the author of *Motown Burning*, a novel set during the 1967 Detroit Riots and its aftermath.



John Lamb entertains the crowd

SUMMARY

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