

Spreading the (spoken) word

by Cheri Hanson

May 2006: With biting honesty and a riveting stage presence, 29-year-old Vancouver spoken word artist Shane Koyczan is quickly obliterating all the rules of poetry and forging his own literary path. Here's the evidence.

Exhibit A: Koyczan turned down multiple publishing offers, both in Canada and overseas, to launch his own Mother Press Media and publish his first poetry collection, *Visiting Hours*.

Exhibit B: Five months after its 2005 release, *Visiting Hours* has sold 2,500 copies and appears to be heading for a sizeable second print run (though the final numbers haven't been determined yet). The title also appeared on the Guardian's online "Books of the Year" list for 2005.

Exhibit C: Koyczan makes a living strictly from poetry and spoken word performances. He has not waited tables, poured coffee, penned freelance reviews, or worked in a video store for eight years. And no, he doesn't live in his car.

Exhibit D: He performs at folk festivals and literary events with a spoken word group called Tons of Fun University (TOFU). Composed of Koyczan, U.S. poet Mike McGee, and writer/musician C.R. Avery, TOFU will perform an estimated 45 shows this year in addition to Koyczan's own 200-plus bookings.

Exhibit E: In March, Koyczan opened for cult rockers the Violent Femmes at Toronto's Massey Hall. His 30-minute set drew calls for an encore, even as fans waited for the legendary band to hit the stage.

Naturally, Koyczan's start as a writer also breaks the mould. Born in Yellowknife, Koyczan says he was unpopular in high school and struggled to communicate by writing prepared responses for questions and conversations. "I thought if I said some random stuff, they'd leave me alone," says Koyczan. "Then people started saying, 'You've got to talk to Shane. He says the weirdest, craziest stuff.'"

After high school, Koyczan attended Okanagan University College in Penticton, B.C., where creative writing instructor Nancy Holmes suggested he set aside fiction and try his hand at poetry. The genre stuck and Koyczan soon started a poetry night at the Hog's Breath Café with his friend Matt Bowen.

After moving to Vancouver, Koyczan continued to hone his craft at open mic nights and poetry competitions. He developed his unique performance style at home with a decidedly neutral audience. "I'd perform for the cat, and if the cat's eyes got wider, I knew I was doing something crazy. Or if it started looking really scared, I thought, 'Okay, I'll back it down a bit.'"

In 2000, Koyczan won the individual championship at the National Poetry Slam in Providence, Rhode Island – topping 250 North American competitors to become the first-ever winner from outside the U.S. In Great Britain, The Scotsman newspaper's David Robinson called his performance at the 2005 Edinburgh International Book Festival the best poetry reading of the event. Closer to home, he has also won the 2004 CBC Radio Poetry Face-Off.

Koyczan has collected international accolades and a diverse fan base that ranges from teenagers to musicians such as Ani DiFranco and major writers including Maya Angelou. All he lacked, until recently, was Canadian fame. The tide shifted at an event that has become a literary urban legend. Koyczan was asked to perform the sponsorship poem at the 2004 Vancouver International Writers & Readers Festival, and his seven-minute performance blew the crowd right out of their seats. "In my 10 years at the festival, I've never seen anything like what I saw that night," says Sandy Garossino, a longtime festival boardmember and co-founder of Mother Press Media. "He finished and the room just erupted – and this is a room of writers and publishers. So, talk about a jury of one's peers."

Garossino offered to help Koyczan secure a book deal, but the pair soon realized that a traditional publisher might not be able to support and nurture his performance-based career. So Garossino stepped in with financial backing, McArthur & Company publisher Kim McArthur agreed to distribute the book, and with the addition of Vancouver editor Chrystalene Buhler, the Mother Press Media collective was born. "You go into Chapters and that poetry section just keeps shrinking and shrinking and shrinking," says Koyczan. "It was important for me to have a book in a store, but I also wanted to continue to do what I do, which is touring around and selling books out of my bag."

Mother Press Media has several new poetry titles and graphic novels in the works, says Buhler, and continues to support Koyczan's quickly ascending career. "Shane's work is very narrative. It's deceptively simple."

Garossino believes Koyczan's performances are exceptional, but says she felt anxious about how the work would translate to the printed page. "You put your money down on someone and then think, 'Am I really crazy? Do I know what I'm doing?'"

Her fear was officially quelled in October 2005 at Calgary's WordFest. Koyczan led a poetry reading that included Margaret Atwood, Robert Sullivan, and Richard Harrison. The festival bookstore was a mob scene at intermission, says Garossino, as audience members snapped up Koyczan's book. "People were grabbing two or three." Visiting Hours sold 83 copies in 10 minutes. "At that point, I knew I wasn't crazy."

