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TOGETHER: PLACES

Dead poets come alive at the Art Bar Poetry Series' event at Clinton's

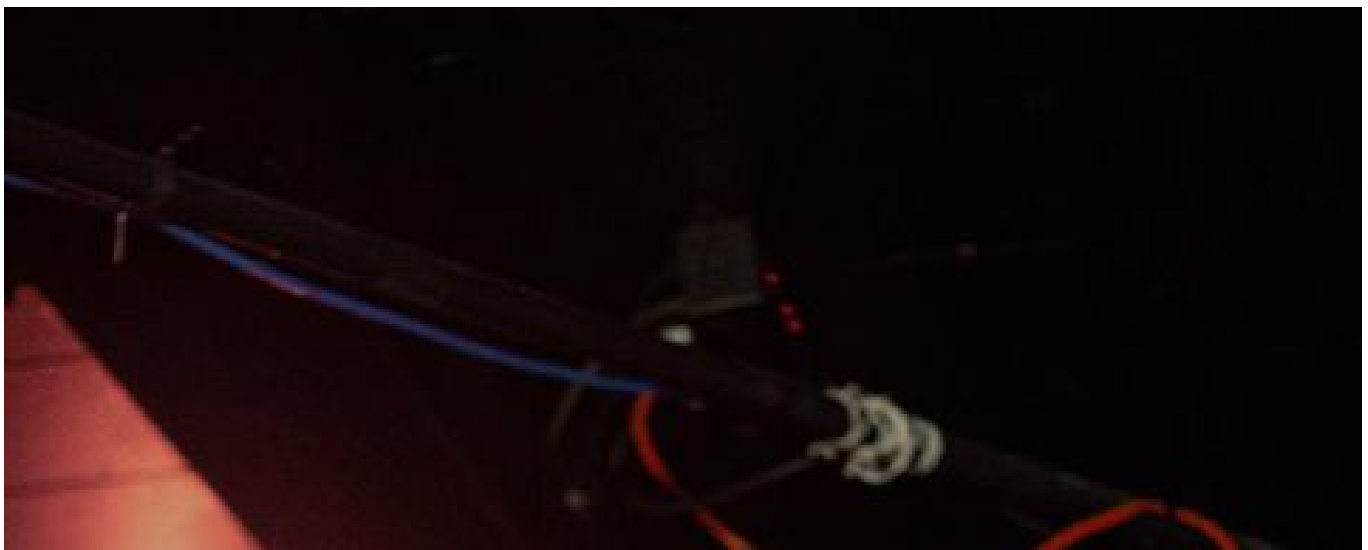
An event at Clinton's Tavern brings dead poets to life

By **Kathy Flaxman** Special to the Star
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JOIN THE CONVERSATION

In the deep darkness of Clinton's Tavern in Koreatown, on a crisp December evening, a figure in a fedora strides onto the small stage. Poet Michael Fraser – his yellow, brown and orange striped shirt and navy flared jeans providing a punch of colour to the room – gives Dead Poets Society Night, the 2021 highlight of the Art Bar Poetry Series, a lively, emphatic start. After he delivers a powerful reading of Arna Bontemps' "A Black Man Talks of Reaping," contrasting the hopefulness of planting with the fury at having the rewards stolen, the rapt audience at tables and sofas scattered around the room bursts into applause.

Nearly every Tuesday night for more than 30 years, poets and their admirers have met in Toronto, some to present, others to listen, at the Art Bar Poetry Series. "There's usually an enthusiastic and open-minded audience at our evenings: a camaraderie," says Margaret Code, the series' director. "We're all sharing our love of poetry." On its Facebook page, the group sums up its mission: "It's about poetry. Reading, hearing, cheering, sighing, laughing and crying. Listening like it's a power (it is). That magic of the contemplative attention to the word that can break your heart, save your soul, tickle your fancy, or dance your heart. It's beautiful."

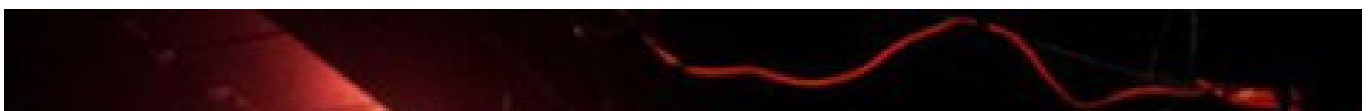




“We have to celebrate these poets,” thunders George Elliott Clarke, another of the presenters, when asked about the importance of the Dead Poets Society events. “They must be heard and honoured. They taught us and they continue to be our mentors. Where would we be without the genius of Shakespeare?”

For Clarke – a former Canadian Parliamentary Poet Laureate, whose new book is titled “White” – tonight is just one of the many times he’s taken the Art Bar stage during the past two decades. Another regular, Myna Wallin, reads a poem by the late Fraser Sutherland, a presentation made poignant by the fact that Wallin knew and edited the esteemed poet.

The current Poet Laureate of Toronto, Al Moritz, who was warmly greeted by the audience, has kind words for the weekly series. “The Art Bar,” he says, “is the longest continuously running poetry series in Canada and counts as a national treasure.”





The name Art Bar comes from a room in the storied Gladstone Hotel, the first venue for the group's weekly readings. However, for a long stretch during the pandemic, meetings went virtual until December's Dead Poets Society Night at Clinton's. In its 30 years, the series has welcomed all forms of the spoken word, including rap, and has given career boosts to such poets as Stedmond Pardy, who wrote the acclaimed "The Pleasures of This Planet Aren't Enough."

Michael Fraser was introduced to the Art Bar series by poet James Deahl, writer-in-residence at the City of York Public Library in the late 1980s. "At the time, Deahl conducted poetry workshops, which I initially attended as a precocious and jumped-up high school student," says Fraser, whose new collection, "The Day-Breakers," will be published this spring. "He introduced me to many of my poetic heroes in the early 1990s at the Art Bar. I performed nervously on the open mic whenever I could. In retrospect, those initial tentative steps reading personal material on the open mic are integral in forging one's stage persona and confidence as a poet."



On this Dead Poets Society Night, one spectator named David says he came because of his love of poetry and the lure of a live event proved irresistible. Nursing a pint, he talks of his own poetic and artistic leanings. "I have a creative mind," he says. "I've done work as a sound editor, though presently I work as a steelmaker."

On February 8 the Art Bar continued its live events at Clinton's with a Valentine's Day celebration, featuring poets Meena Chopra and Shannon Quinn presenting their own works, followed by an open mic.

The future holds lots of poetic promise, with programs like an Art Bar Team Reading and Anthology series, Lost Launches (for poets whose debuts were missed due to the pandemic) and more. "We're pleased to be back at Clinton's," Code says. "A great venue contributes to great readings. The Art Bar is inclusive, with something for everyone who loves poetry."

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