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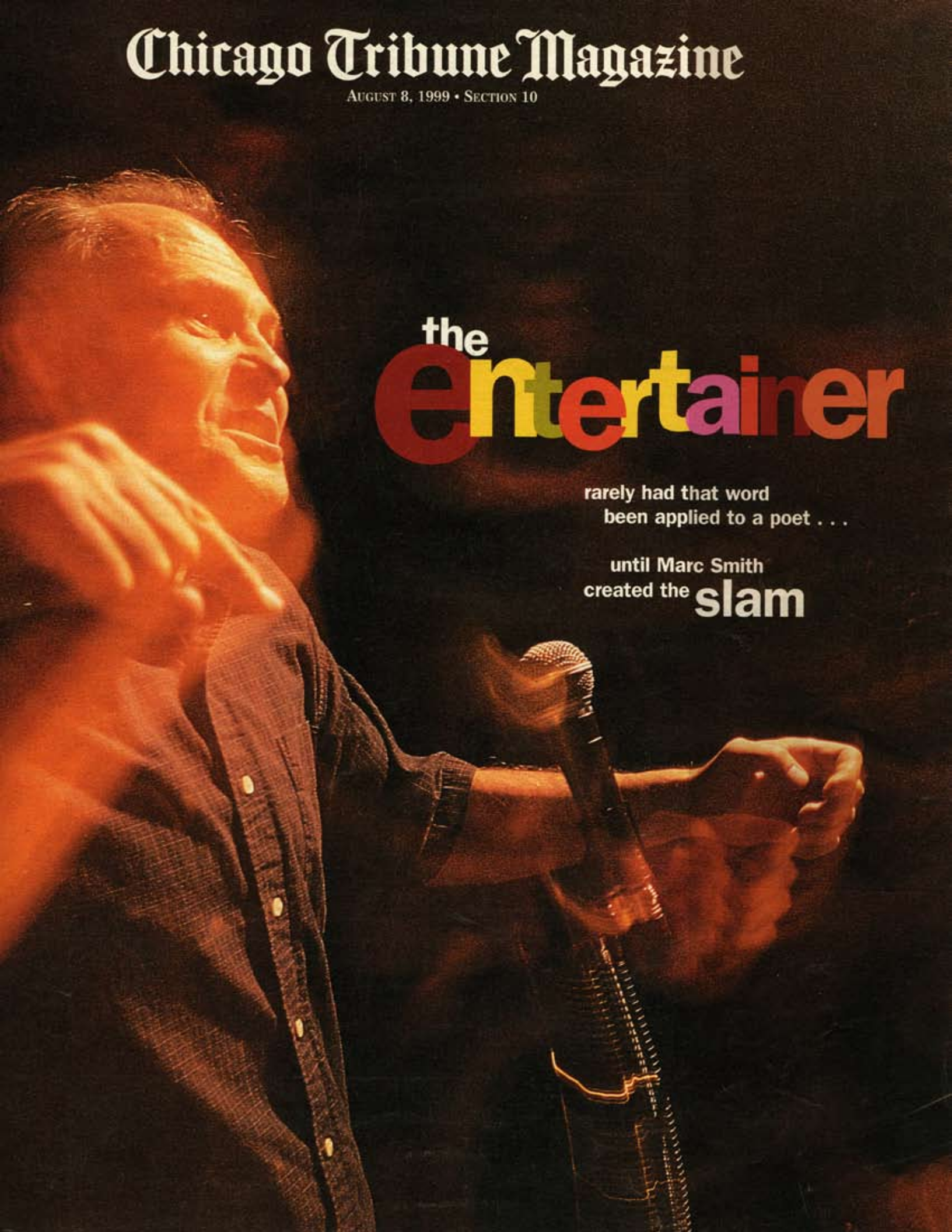
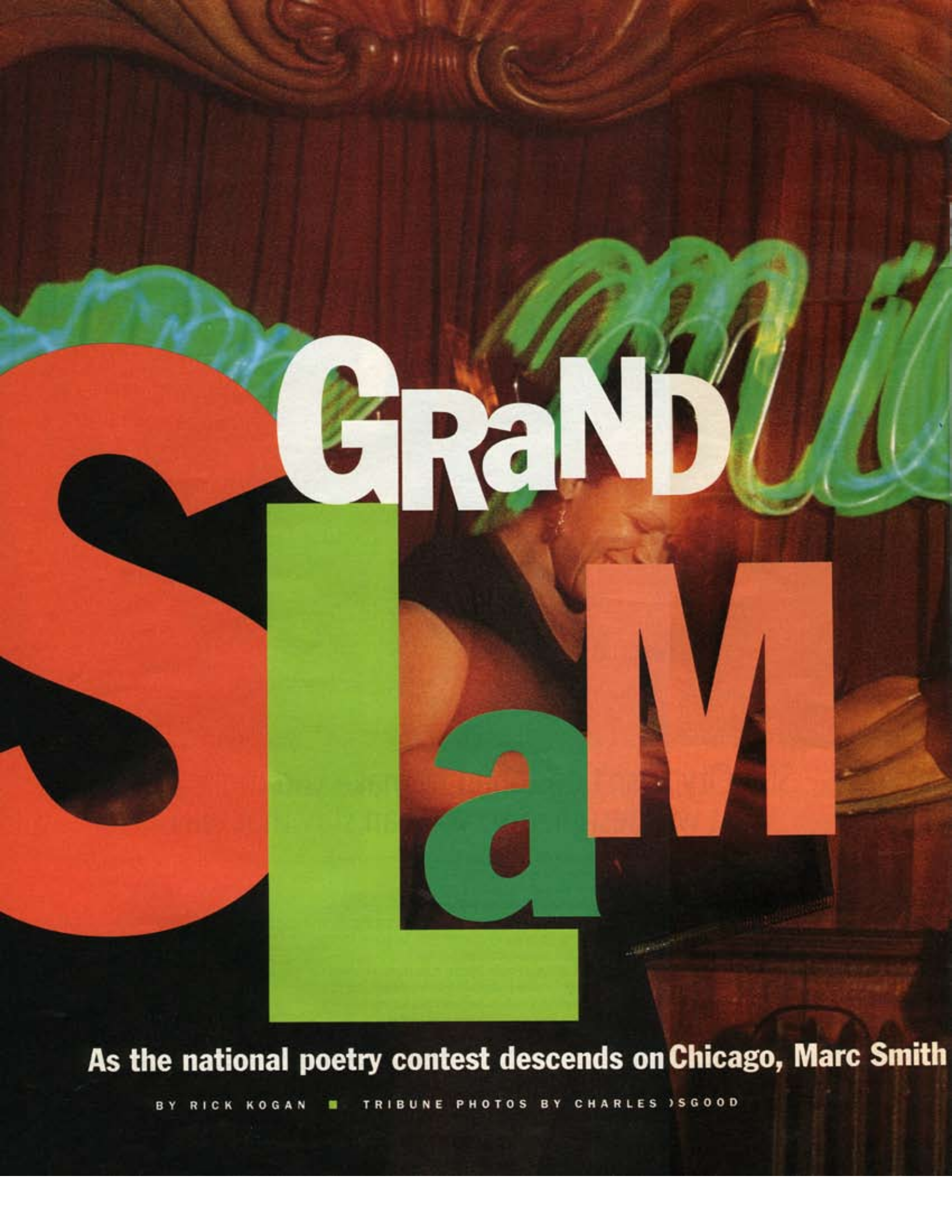


the entertainer

rarely had that word
been applied to a poet . . .

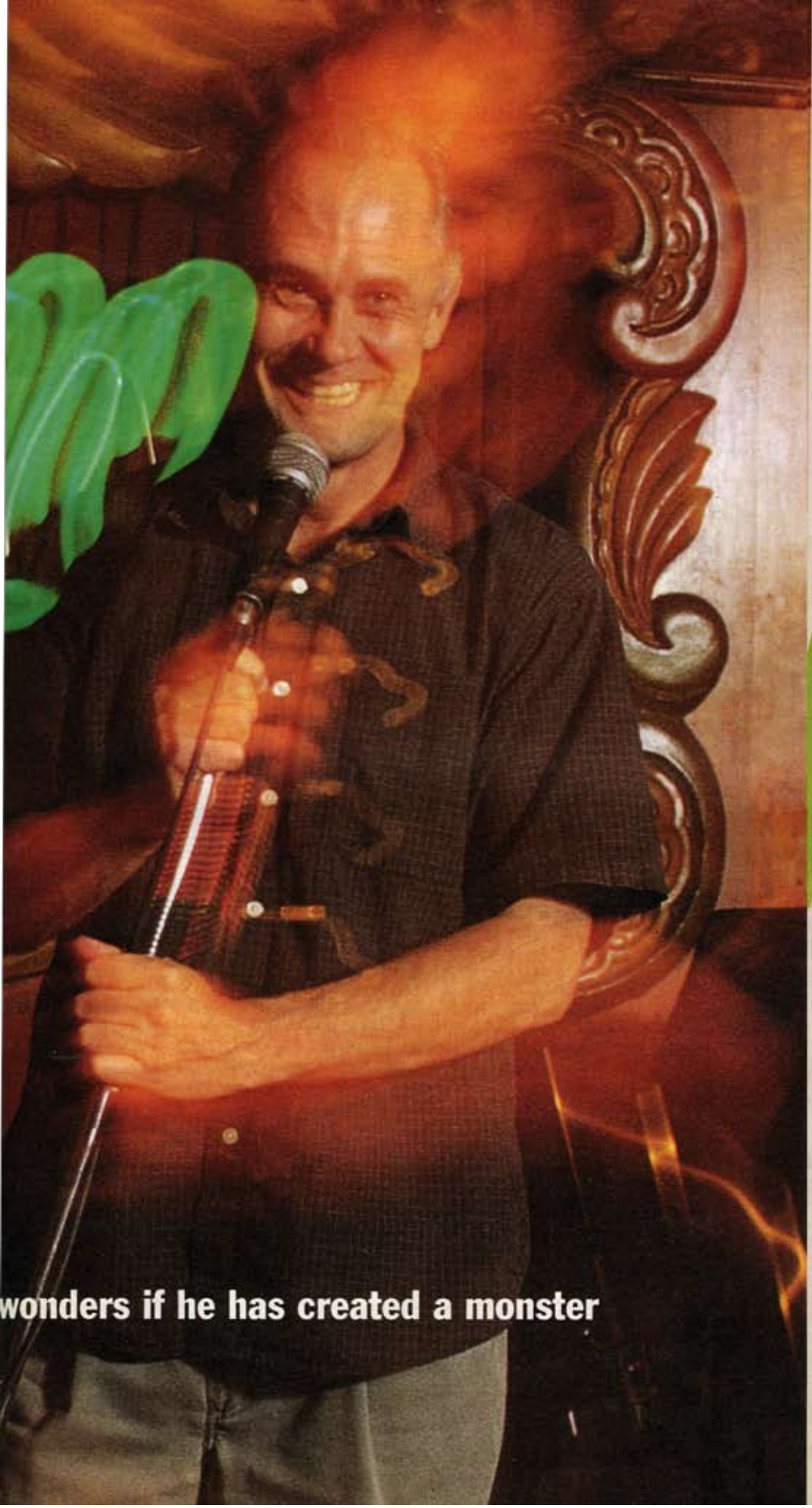
until Marc Smith
created the slam



GRaND SLaM

As the national poetry contest descends on Chicago, Marc Smith

BY RICK KOGAN ■ TRIBUNE PHOTOS BY CHARLES OSGOOD



wonders if he has created a monster

A scar courses jaggedly across a portion of Marc Smith's face, just below his right jaw. It is an old scar, growing faint, and only those close to Smith can see it. But no one is close to him now as he shouts from the stage of the venerable Green Mill jazz club near the shabby corner of Lawrence Avenue and Broadway: "I heard it on the roof. It rained today. . . . Poetry is a sky dark with wild duck migration. Poetry is the heart of the people and the people is everyone. What everyone says is what we all say."

"What the hell's that mean?" asks a young man sitting in a booth.

"Shut up," says his female companion. "It's poetry, you dummy."

The audience, many of whom are still damp from a violent Sunday storm that has moved out over the lake, is a lively but attentive crowd. Young and old, white and black and brown and yellow, wealthy and paycheck-to-paycheck, it's the sort of urban mix that would make a populist proud.

Most are drinking. All are here to see the Uptown Poetry Slam. It is Marc Smith's creation and, in its fashion, his ongoing salvation.

"You know what's interesting about all the love poets who get up on this stage?" he says. "They always come alone."

He smiles a wicked smile. He's like Elmer Gantry, an audacious, exciting combination of show biz and evangelical spirituality. And that has served him well over

In 1951, the famous critic Mark Van Doren wrote that the poet's job "is what the job of poets has always been: to think and feel as deeply as he can, and to assume the existence of persons who will be glad that he has done so."

The Green Mill audience is filled with such persons, for whom the definition of poetry is marvelously broad.

"I come here because it enriches me," said 43-year-old attorney Ron Lido, who said he has seen a couple of dozen slams over the last year. "I'm not compelled to get up and read. I don't write. But watching and hearing these poets does make me think."

In the last decade of this century, communication never has seemed easier: Fax me. Call me on my cell phone. E-mail me. But these are icy forms of human intercourse; the electronics lack intimacy, warmth. A backlash of sorts is taking place. The need to communicate, shoved into this chilly realm, has manifested itself in the increasing popularity of such phenomena as call-in talk radio and the self-confessional outpourings of television talk shows.

"The slam is empowering," says Sallach, who walked into one of Smith's first poetry slams in 1986. "I was changed after the first night.

SHEILA DONAHUE, WHO WILL HELP REPRESENT CHICAGO IN THE NATIONAL SLAM, CALLS MARC SMITH AN "INSPIRATION."

"IT'S NOT HARD TO UNDERSTAND THE SUCCESS OF THE SLAM. IT'S A CROWD PLEASER."

Though I didn't read anything, I quit my full-time job in advertising the next day. I knew that this was going to be the way to explore myself."

Smith will be the first to tell you that he did not invent the intermingling of poetry and performance. That has a lengthy, if spotty, tradition in Chicago, from poetry read to jazz accompaniment in the 1920s to 1960s' poetry readings and even some competitions among poets. Today there are open-mike poetry readings in venues from bookstores to bars. What Smith did, almost by accident, is to synthesize performance and poetry and create a hybrid that would satisfy the self-expressive needs of those willing to get up on stage and also would attract an audience willing to pay ($5 at the Green Mill door) to hear those expressions.

In so doing he found his own comfort and shelter, and each time he watches a poet—especially one who has never before read in front of a crowd—one imagines his mind floating back to a 1983 night and his own first public reading. It was his epiphany.

It was at the Left Bank Book Store in Oak Park at an open-mike event.

"It was a formal and stiff affair, and I was scared to death. There was no reaction from the audience for any of the poets. When my time came, I got up there and just exploded. My arms were flailing and my voice was a sledgehammer. At the end of a poem called 'The Father Has Faded,' a man started applauding furiously," Smith says. "Finally, I thought that I was the best at something. I rocked 'em. It felt good.

"And that is the root of it all."

What he means is the root of all that came later: quitting his job to write full time; reading in various venues but especially at the Get Me High lounge with his pal, poet Ron Gillette; starting the Green Mill slams.

But the actual root of it all was planted Oct. 3, 1949, when Marc Kelly Smith was born in South Shore Hospital, youngest of three kids raised in a small house in the Avalon Park neighborhood on the Southeast Side. His mother, Daisy, was a homemaker. His father, Archie, was a construction superintendent.

"My mother [still living] was a very good person. My father was a tough man," Smith says. After Archie's death, this is what his son wrote in a poem titled "My Father's Coat":

It's not that I'm trying now
to be proud of my father.
I didn't like him.
He was a narrow man.

"As a kid, I always felt kind of alone," Smith says. "In school I was not the real slow kid, but I was in the dumb row in class. I had a very hard time reading. I suppose now they'd be able to figure out I have some kind of reading disability, but then . . . it just bugged the hell out of me. I just faked it. I even had trouble reading comic books."

He managed to teach himself to read, graduated from high school and enrolled at Western Illinois University with the intention of becoming an architect. Those aspirations crumbled after he "met up with calculus." He switched his major to English and he met a girl. Her name was Sandi Amster and she turned him on to e.e. cummings and other poets. He had already fallen in love with Carl Sandburg.

"I had read some poems in high school," he says. "I was trying to figure things out. And I won an essay contest in 8th grade but didn't do very well on writing assignments."

Inspired by Sandi, he wrote "tons and tons of bad poems, blatherings off the top of my head." He left college and, a month before his 21st birthday, he and Sandi were married and moved to South Carolina, where she taught 4th grade and he "played poker, hauled garbage and wrote more lousy poems."

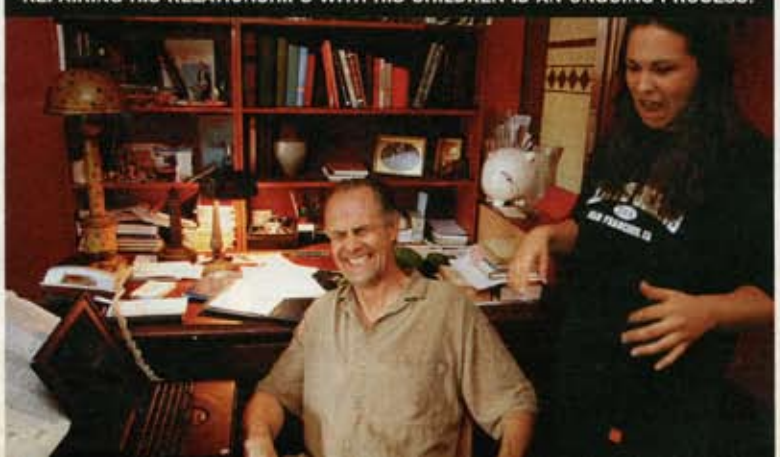
"Lousy" is a subjective word. During this time he won $35 in a South Carolina poetry contest and had his first poem published. It appeared in a bygone Melrose Park-based publication called the Cardinal Poetry Quarterly.

After a couple of years in South Carolina, the couple returned to Chicago, settling in Berwyn. They started a family, and Marc began a series of jobs in the construction industry. All the time he wrote and soon began drifting to poetry readings around town.

"I had always felt so insecure, so isolated with my poetry. But I started to go listen to people read and think, 'My stuff is as good as that,'" he says. "But it took me a long time to get up the courage to face an audience. Even that night at the Left Bank I wasn't sure I could do it until I heard my name called and just found myself walking up there."

David Hernandez remembers Smith from those days. Hernandez was already an established poet/performer, having founded in 1972 Street Sounds, a

SMITH GOOFS AROUND WITH HIS DAUGHTER, SARA, AT THEIR BERWYN HOME. REPAIRING HIS RELATIONSHIPS WITH HIS CHILDREN IS AN ONGOING PROCESS.



group that combines poetry with jazz, folk and Latin music.

"Marc?" Hernandez says, laughing. "I taught him everything he knows. No, really, I remember Marc when he first appeared, reading at bookstores.

"I certainly like the idea of what was behind the slam, bringing poetry to the public. I have never liked what I call the jock-strap mentality—the competitive aspect—but I like that it shook up the academic community. It has helped destigmatize poetry and make Chicago a mecca. There are poetry events every night in Chicago and that has a lot to do with the slams."

Smith's poetry-performance events started at the Get Me High in 1984 and found a steady home—and the catchy name—at the Green Mill in 1986.

"I was being interviewed by some reporter and asked what these things were called and I had just been watching a baseball game and I was thinking . . . slam, grand slam," Smith says.

It was a hit. The Mill was packed every Sunday. Poet Sallach remembers one of the first slams there: "I couldn't believe what I was seeing. There was Marc and he was an amazing poet and performer. I started writing my own poems. It was liberating and frightening and nurturing. And I was there every Sunday, just like church."

But the preacher had a problem.

"I think I was a good man when I was sober," Smith says. "I know I was out of control when drunk."

Nothing was more out of control than the night of Sept. 26, 1987.

He had gone to the Red Lion Pub, a Lincoln Avenue restaurant-bar, to meet and attempt to bed a young admirer. He drank and drank and wound up a few doors north at the Guild Complex, where, during an open-mike event, he proceeded in loud tones to describe a group of poets as a "bunch of phonies."

Dragged from the Guild Complex by a friend, Smith then traveled to the campus of the University of Illinois at Chicago, where he stood up in front of 500 people who had come to hear a reading by Pulitzer Prize-winning novelist and poet N. Scott Momaday.

"I behaved very badly," he says now.

He stopped at the Get Me High for a nightcap. Or five.

Finally, driving home alone, west on North Avenue, he blew through a red light at Milwaukee Avenue and tailgated a car filled with what he remembers, foggily, as students. He honked. They turned. The drivers exchanged gestures and then words. Both cars pulled to the curb.

"It was terrible," Smith says. "They just kicked the——out of me."

Bloody and boozy, he made his way home. His wife wanted to take him to the hospital, but Smith wouldn't go.

"I'll be OK. They just knocked a tooth loose," he told Sandi. He got a piece of string and tried to extract the tooth.

But it wasn't a tooth he tugged. It was a piece of his jawbone, fractured in the fight. Smith wound up in the emergency room that night and in alcoholism rehab the next day.

"I knew I had a problem. I had been trying to stop drinking since I was 22 years old," he says. "But the longest I was ever able to go without a drink was seven days."

He spent 21 days in rehab. That did the trick. He has not had a drop since. And the jagged scar on his neck is there ever to remind him.

But sober, his personal life was a shambles. He and Sandi separated; it would take eight years for the divorce. And he is still repairing the damage booze did to his relationships with the kids. Things are chilly with 25-year-old Adam, a drummer and artist. Carl, who is 23, works in marketing and often helps out Sunday nights at the Mill. Sara, a 21-year-old college student who lives with her father in a little Berwyn bungalow, says, "I love my dad."

The house is neat and orderly, with a small garden in the back. The rooms are small, the furnishings mostly in dark shades. There are a couple of bookshelves—some poetry, a lot of Chicago history, Smith's collection "Crowdpleaser" (Collage Press).

In an office off the living room, Smith works on a laptop computer that sits near a massive dictionary.

"I don't consider myself close to being a good poet," he says. "But I have worked hard. I have paid my dues. After I stopped drinking, my poetry became better, less angry and less self-absorbed."

He writes every day and there are poems, portions of poems, ideas for poems trapped inside his computer. His work has been suffering lately. The phone is always ringing in the weeks before the National Poetry Slam. Being the father of the slams has become a pain for Smith.

"I'm not a businessman. There was some talk about trademarking the slam, and I thought about it. What was best, to control it in that way or give it away? What would make it grow? I figured that this was a gift. No one person has a right to claim the slam," he says.

There's no money in poetry.

"I don't think my dad's bought any new clothes in 20 years," says son Carl.

But he has been able to take care of the bills, thanks to what he earns at the Green Mill slams, from poetry-music ensembles he has started, from proceeds of readings and performances and, more recently, from taking the slams to college campuses.

"What I want is to be a playwright. My true art form, as I see it, is running the slam. It's a drama from the moment you walk in. It is theater," he says.

He has dabbled—working sound and

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