

*"The patriarchy's worst nightmare: a loudmouthed spitfire with a wicked wit and an elegant way with zinging the powers that be."* THE WASHINGTON POST

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**FOLK POET**

# **ALIX OLSON**

**MISSED AMERICA 2004**  
PERFORMERS: BETTY, STACEYANN CHIN  
IMANI HENRY, POPPI KRAMER, ALIX OLSON

**TEA MAIL**  
A CONVERSATION WITH  
MICHELLE TEA

**WOMEN OF THE ISRAELI  
DEFENSE FORCE**  
PHOTOS BY ASHKAN SAHIH

**GAY MARRIAGE**  
WHERE DO WE  
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# She Slams

Alix Olson is a road poet on a mission

*Walk and I teach it and  
I poet and I preach it  
I hold it and I mold it and  
I know it*

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## Balls to the Wall

by Nora Ritchie - July 27, 2006

Alix Olson ( pictured ), a self-proclaimed queer artist-activist, brings her fiery brand of spoken word to Brattleboro this week. Known for her strong commitment to social justice issues as well as her confrontational and confident performance style, Olson has recently joined the ranks of spoken word superstardom--twice headlining HBO's Def Poetry Jam and starring in the documentary Left Lane, a chronicle of Olson's life on the road.

Getting her start in the mid-'90s in New York City, where the raw energy of performing poetry in a live and competitive fashion first began to flourish, Olson fine-tuned her ballsy performance style in the small cafes and bars of the Village, debuting in the now famous Nuyorican Café.

The exciting part of Olson's spoken word, her belief that the most powerful poetry comes from a place of simultaneous strength and vulnerability, grew from these slam poetry competitions. Olson writes about this experience in her poem "Warriors": "It's a choice to make noise, it's hard to be heard, They'll toss you a muzzle wherever you go. But baby, it's the waves that let you know the ocean's alive."

July 29, 8 p.m., \$15, Hooker Dunham Theatre and Gallery, 139 Main St., Brattleboro, Vt. (802) 254-9276, <<http://sanctuarytheatre.org/>><http://sanctuarytheatre.org>. July 29, 8 p.m., \$15, Hooker Dunham Theatre and Gallery, 139 Main St., Brattleboro, Vt. (802) 254-9276, <http://sanctuarytheatre.org>.



# alix olson

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To schedule an interview with alix contact Shani



## Feminist slam poet shooting her mouth off at UAF

Feb 2, 2006, by LORIEN NETTLETON

### Stage

*The world of radical grassroots multi-cultural, multi-sexual resilience is always beset with stress. The people with the most compassion and sensitivity to the world are consumed with sadness at things that appear to be out of their hands. Listening to world news can make a person feel voiceless amid the ongoing conflict of the world and the nation.*



*Reminding us that a voice is more important now than ever, activist, slam poet and radical feminist Alix Olson will fire up her spoken word for a performance in Fairbanks.*

*From political lambastes that level the current administration's policies, to inward examinations of what it means to be a radical feminist seeking to deconstruct gender stereotyping, Olson's spoken word is a feisty recourse to powerlessness. At the heart of her work is the desire to build meaningful connections between like-minded people, while opposing the spread of a mass American amalgamation of culture.*

*Maintaining momentum in the field of progressive radicalism isn't always easy, Olson admits.*

*"It's easy in this culture to collect mutual sentiment against this administration because it is so glaringly bright colors of ugly," she says. "It's harder for people to figure out what to do. The positive side of having such a bad administration is it woke a lot of people up, but the down side is there is so much of it, it feels like everyone is scrambling – it can seem overwhelming."*

*In trying to simplify the complexities of current events, Olson is searching for a new language of resistance to identify and oppose the sources responsible for creating a climate of fear and helplessness.*

*"The vernacular almost has been deprived of meaning," she says. "We need new vocabulary of persuasion. I've been trying to put new names and words to the situation."*

*Constant travels have given Olson plentiful contact with poets, artists and activists who are working at the grassroots level to effect change. That's one of the best things about being a joyfully outraged activist poet, Olson says: Meeting people who are doing things to benefit their world.*

*"I get to meet so many people who are attacking the problem from so many different angles," she says. "I get rejuvenated every night."*



## Hear me roar

**Spoken-word artist Alix Olson calls her craft a mix of anger and optimism.**

By Chris Garcia

AMERICAN-STATESMAN FILM WRITER

Friday, September 30, 2005

Seven summers ago, at the Paramount Theatre, Alix Olson did her spoken-word thing, gesturing, crouching and pointing, rapping poetry with a metronomic charge, words spraying like paint from a can to make swooping graffiti spelling out exalted rage.

Olson's performance of "America's On Sale," her poetic screed at capitalist inequities, thrust her Nuyorican Poets' Café slam team to victory during the National Poetry Slam Competition. And right here in Austin, Alix Olson's spoken-word career took off.

Olson, then 24, began touring, playing colleges, bars, cafes and festivals, tooling about the country in a beloved van she named June (after late poet-essayist June Jordan). At one point she was touring 300 days a year.

That number has since dropped, but this spoken-word star with a profoundly feminist, unmistakably lesbian voice still takes it on the road, recording CDs (a third is upcoming) and, last year, filming the tour documentary "Left Lane." The movie is a rambling, funny, foot-stomping, mind-prying journey from city to city with Olson and her musician friends, whose acoustic strums and tom-tom slaps often lay down the beat to her rhythmic recitations.

On Sunday, Olson returns to Austin with director Samantha Farinella to screen "Left Lane" during the Austin Gay and Lesbian International Film Festival. The award-winning movie documents "the search for independent thought, grassroots defiance, passionate connection, organic food and clean laundry," say the filmmakers.

All of which conjures a particular stereotype, an angry, outspoken, persnickety, razor-shy genus ruled by ideology, quick with a slogan and happy to roil the social-political sediment. Their currency is symbolic gestures (spelling history "herstory"), noisy activism (throngy protests) and exploiting the raw force of language (hello, Alix Olson).

But stereotypes are made for smashing, and Olson, now 30, seems to wriggle out of pigeon holes and parry labels, despite flaunting her political biases and megaphoning her "queerness." She dubs herself a "folk poet," and prefers "dyke" to lesbian. With youth on her side, she says her style and writing are following an "evolutionary process." After studying acting in high school and college, Olson moved to New York and started doing street theater to protest Nike sweat shops. Her ire was trained on big, obvious targets — "in general, just The Man," she says.

"My poetry started out that way as well," says Olson from her home in North Hampton, Mass. "It takes getting older to begin seeing grays. I always hated looking at the grays in life, because there is so much plainly wrong with the world that is black and white. But it limits your creativity. My early poetry is way more black and white and less interesting to me now."

**Hear me roar** (continued)

If Olson today sics her writing on finer-grained issues, her sophisticated wordplay can make even well-travelled ideas bound and bop. Read this from her poem "Pirates" and you are whipped by the breathless tempo, challenged by the knotty, congested cadences:

*So the hypodermic media shoots us up until our brains are entombed, petrified, lying side by side next to our 401(k)s and our SUVs, chain-stored in the chamber of a Wal-Mart mummy freeze*

*And outside that sarcophagus of American flags and "god blesses," our collective conscience is brought right down to its knees*

*Praying forgiveness for this nation exporting numbness*

*For treasure looting the oil, the ozone, the airwaves and the grain*

*These are our true colors running, and they are running away with everything . . .*

There is exhilarated uproar in those words, a galloping run-on demanding wide berth. Picture Olson, this pierced punk pixie, nearly enacting the words onstage with rock-star physicality.

In the performances in "Left Lane," Olson commands but never intimidates. Even when she's channeling the metered fervor of Bob Dylan, Lenny Bruce, Ani DiFranco, Chuck D and Jesse Jackson (whom Olson calls "the premier spoken-word artist"), Olson radiates prickly charm. She wears all black. She has shaggy, bottle-blond hair with dark roots defiantly grown out, and huge, immaculate teeth. She lets out curt, girlish gasps between lines of poetry, refueling her lungs for the next blast.

"I like the craft of words," she says. Olson is a laughter, expansive and chipper, a subject with whom a journalist chats about almost everything but the questions he planned. We talk about what kind of pens we like to write with ("Uniball, fine point, but not extra fine. It has to have some meat to it. Always black ink.") and how one of her heroes, Angela Davis, taught at my university.

Olson has been writing all her life, and has always been steeped in political discourse. She grew up in Pennsylvania, where her parents were ex-hippies and political science professors. They brought baby Olson to strikes and protests and meetings. In her poem "Womyn Before," she recalls: "I was still sucking my thumb the first time I sang 'We Shall Overcome.' "

"I knew what we were protesting and I felt that we were right. It made sense," Olson says. "There was a lot of joy in it. It was very powerful and very formative. I remember being little and sitting underneath the table and coloring and listening to heated discussions."

Her writing organically swerved to politics and social topics — race, rape, inequality, misogyny, religion, oil, Bush, the military's "don't ask, don't tell" policy and, the poem's title says it all, "Armpit Hair (Mammally Factual)."

She rages, rants, rips. The point is communal release, a gestural salve. "Anger fuels a lot of it," Olson admits. Yet art can wilt without a measure of cheer and the ecstatic. Olson's poetry is streaked with a dark humor that lets in light.

"Spoken-word artists are a very lighthearted, light-spirited, funny community," she says. "There are jokes followed by anger followed by jokes. It's an interesting mix of anger and optimism, and that's why people respond to it."



## **Alix Olson: Word Warrior**

by *Elizabeth DiNovella*  
October 2003

Concerned Women for America, a conservative women's group, named Alix Olson as one of the ten most dangerous women in this country.

The reasons why were clear on a hazy summer afternoon in Madison, Wisconsin, when the twenty-seven-year-old spoken word poet and lesbian feminist took the stage at Tomboy Girl Fest.

With her big mouth and mischievous grin, Olson dominated the stage. She turned her head to the side, covered the mic with her hand, and in a nasal voice mocked the tone of an in-store announcer: "Attention Shoppers! America's On Sale!" And she went on: "We've unstocked the welfare pantry to restock the Wall Street Gentry / It's economically elementary because values don't pay! Yes, American Dreams are on permanent layaway (there was limited availability anyway)."

Olson is an electrifying performer, who seduces her audiences with wit and energy. Rocking back and forth on her heels, she spins tales of life on the road in between her loud and fiery poems. A sharpshooter with theatrical flair, Olson oozes both love and rage.

Olson's website ([www.alixolson.com](http://www.alixolson.com)) features praise from historian Howard Zinn: "Alix brought me to my feet. She is an ingenious poet, a brilliant performer, a funny person, and serious thinker. She is, quite simply, extraordinary." Hip-hop artist Sarah Jones also lauds her: "Alix is a vital feminist voice and a true spoken word powerhouse. She is a clear alternative to a polluted mainstream."

Olson began writing as a child. Raised in a conservative Pennsylvania town by progressive political science professors, she guesses she began writing poetry at age ten. "It always seemed a natural way to translate the world around me," she wrote to me via e-mail, "and I think my words grew up with my political consciousness."

For her, art and politics are inseparable. "Poetry and art in general are a kick in the butt, a reminder that people can speak truth," she tells *The Progressive*. Olson speaks truth to several powers: governmental, corporate, and patriarchal.

She writes in her poem "Womyn Before": "I was still sucking my thumb the first time I sang 'we shall overcome.'" This poem relates how Olson joined a union picket line with her mother. "I asked her 'why are we so mad?' / And she parked her head down in the freezing rain and saw me / So serious and small with my big Mack Truck union sign / She smiled to herself, pondered the politics of fingers curled / 'This is solidarity,' she whispered to her baby girl."

She also takes on the media and other "pirates" in the poem of the same name: "So the hypodermic media shoots us up until our brains are entombed, petrified, lying side by side next to our 401 K's and our SUV's, chainstored in the chamber of a Wal-Mart mummy freeze / And outside that sarcophagus of American flags and 'god bless's,' our collective conscience is brought right down to its knees / Praying forgiveness for this nation exporting numbness / For treasure looting the oil, the ozone, the airwaves and the grain / These are our true colors running, and they are running away with everything . . ."

**Alix Olson: Word Warrior** (continued)

Olson is no fan of President Bush, but he's not her only target. "I certainly make lots of jokes about him and use him as part of my progressive rhetoric," she says. "But it's the capitalist machine that really scares me, not him in particular."

In "Independence Meal," she writes, "Yes, the new sharecrop / Is the flesh and bones / Behind the cell block / And the Wackenhut corpa-prison sits right on an old plantation / Birthed right over the slave graves in that soil / An African mother / its step-father is Reaganomics / A barren corporate heiress delivering a lineage of toxins."

Olson is an outspoken lesbian, and she does not shy away from sex and desire in her art. In "Dear Mr. President:" she says, "Well, I don't desire your superstar badge of bravery / For enduring modern-day slavery / In your maniacally economically-driven death trap. / Anyway, I'd give the U.S. a bad rap / I'd kiss every fine Iraqi dyke on the front line, / Fuck national pride, / I'd go to their side-- / I prefer cross-national desire to crossfire anyway."

Olson says she receives a lot of e-mails from young queer kids who are just coming out. They thank her for making queer life not just legitimate but celebratory.

"And that's why I'm in this," she tells *The Progressive*. "To celebrate life experiences and whatever identity we choose to be."

Olson first became involved with the poetry slam scene in the late 1990s, when she moved to New York City "with the intention to change the world." She went to the famed Nuyorican Poets' Café with some guitar lyrics and performed them as poems. The effect was immediate.

"I realized I didn't need an instrument," she says. "My voice was going to be an instrument for myself."

A poetry slam is an amplified, competitive poetry reading. Performances are theatrical and sometimes accompanied by a musician or two. Poets duel with each other, using their words and rhythms as their weapons. Individual poets form teams to compete against others. Olson joined the Nuyorican Poets' Café slam team.

In 1998, the Nuyorican Poets' Café team won the National Poetry Slam competition, with Olson performing "America's On Sale!" Soon after, local feminist groups and gay and lesbian groups on college campuses started calling her, asking her to perform. Her touring life had begun.

"It just steamrolled from there," she tells *The Progressive*. "It was very fortuitous."

She's formed her own production company, Subtle Sister Productions, which published her last two books, *Independence Meal: The Ingredients*, and *Built Like That: The Word*. A third book, *Burning Down the House*, was co-authored by the other members of the Nuyorican Slam Team. She also has recorded two CDs, and is busy working on a third, but nothing compares with seeing the poet live.

Olson tours 300 days a year. She lives out of her van--which she named June, in honor of the late June Jordan, the poet, essayist, teacher, and former *Progressive* columnist--though she does have a home base in New York. "Traveling artists are people who carry truth from one town to the next town," the minstrel explains. "We represent alternative media to each other."

All the touring may be exhausting, but she gives no hint of that. Her travels seem to energize her. "Part of what I get to see are the small council meetings and protests that are happening in towns that we don't hear about," she says. "It would be too dangerous if we heard about all the small> rebellions."

-- Elizabeth DiNovella is Culture Editor for *The Progressive*. You can hear Olson perform three of her poems in an interview she did with *Progressive Radio*.

<http://www.progressive.org/radio.html#anchorolson>

## Woman Rock Magazine

### Review of Independence Meal

Fans of Ani DiFranco will take readily to the neo-folk style and progressive politics of Alix Olson. There is a warm but edgy spirit to her delivery that runs the spectrum from sweet and charming to a fiery feminist rant. These songs are poems put to music. These are socially aware poems that can sit next to Allen Ginsberg. While she is not alone in having this message, she delivers it with superlative style and vigor. Olson also has a real gift for imaginative narratives like “Kindness and Rage”.

**VENUS**zine.com

### Alix Olson Spoken Word Artist

by *Jamie Murnane*

Alix Olson serves up yet another plate-full of truly independent spoken word on her latest Subtle Sister Productions release, *Independence Meal*. The new album successfully displays Olson’s ability to deliver her politically-charged verse with a fierce driving voice one minute and a calm melodious one the next. Olson’s work has always been best known for its brutal honesty and independent mentality. It’s safe to say that those traits are never compromised. Sticking close to her political musings, Alix Olson justifiably rants about the war in Iraq and the slanted media coverage—issues that are too often pushed under the rug by many conventional artists. Howard Zinn sound bytes are laced throughout “Pirates,” the leading track on the album, as Olson recites, “...the TV news anchors say rage flows for no reason, now stick these antennas on your head, freedom of thought my channel treason, yes freedom of thought my channel treason.” Of course, there is a softer side to everything and Alix Olson, as angry as she may seem, is no exception. On the seductive track “Unsteady Things,” Olson lures listeners with lines such as “...Your best is impossibly beautiful, your charm transcends unbearable, and I’ve got all this desire clutched behind my back. I will lay down my resistance; I will wait for you to crack...” *Independence Meal* not only doles out great lyrics, it’s full of great supporting music as well. Prominently, Olson’s pal Pamela Means (who she’s also known to tour with) spices things up with her feverish guitar strumming. Olson’s spoken word may stand alone just fine, but with Means’ help, *Independence Meal* seems to be the best dish on the menu. When you’re ready for dessert, top off listening to Alix Olson’s second album with a hearty live performance. Check out [www.alixolson.com](http://www.alixolson.com) for more information.



## [indie chicks] file

**Music Genre:** Spoken word.

**Discography:** Built Like That, 2U02 & Independence Meal, 2003

**Background:** The political background is that I was always being carried from protest to protest. My parents were poor hippies turned radical political science professors, who were dedicated to raising me gender-neutral, thus my name, Alix, and boy outfits – and with a commitment to speaking truth and challenging authority. In that way, I was extremely lucky. I always understood my outlook upon the world to be fringe, and always felt a desire to add to political dialogue.

I learned and played Suzuki method violin from the time I was three years old until I was about 14. I was begging to do community youth theatre at the Pennsylvania Youth Theatre at around 10 years old; that's where I fell in love with the rush of performance, the smell of the theatre makeup, the backstage bustle, the hum of the audience. I was accepted into a five-week scholarship theatre program at 16, which was probably my first experience with true art activism, having a circle of queer-ish friends and teachers engaged at grassroots levels of theatre. I came back to my high school and directed *Our Town* and we staged little scene "sneak previews" in front of the local grocery store.

At Wesleyan University in Middletown, Connecticut, I was heavily into performing. By this time, I was also heavily invested in writing short stories, poetry and one particularly significant class called "African-American Women's Poetry." That was my first exposure, I think, to spoken word, where I first began to perform my pieces to the class. I was also coming out as queer at this time, and embracing this new part of my identity, so a lot of my first spoken word focused on queer-feminist activism. I put together a feminist art night in our college café, and that's the first time I performed my poetry. I was playing really bad guitar, and would accompany my spoken word.

I moved to New York City after graduation to pursue political theatre, but I really had no idea what that meant, simply that I was invested in it. One night, September of 1997, I ended up at the Nuyorican Poets Café, performed in an open slam, won the slam that Friday night. That's when my New York City team won the National Slam Poetry National Finals in 1998 and began touring shortly thereafter.

**When and how did you start in the music business?** I've been performing spoken word poetry for about four years full-time. I went to the Nuyorican Poet's Café when I graduated from college, with a few poems tucked in my jeans pocket, having heard about the café from my African-American Women's Poetry professor. I had directed a women's performance evening in college and performed my first poem then. It was an incredible night. I connected with the art form immediately – the community, the politics, the embracing, the New Yorkness of it all. Keith Roach, who ran the café, came up to me that evening and whispered in my ear, "You're gonna do something with this art." I later found out he was a former Black Panther. He became a formative mentor and ally in my career and life.

**Band Members:** Me, with varying musicians on tour from time to time. The current CD, *Independence Mean*, features Pamela Means, Lyndell Montgomery, Chris Pureka; my first CD, *Built Like That*, featured Catie Curtis, Pamela Means and Chris Pureka. I guess I get attached to my musicians, but they also happen to be some of my best friends, and are the type of players who get how to do poetry.

**When and how was the band formed?** The Nuyorican team went to the National Slam Poetry Competition in 1998 and won. From there, we started touring. Eventually I quit my waitressing and bookstore jobs (at the Oscar Wilde LGBT bookstore in New York City, which has since closed) and began touring full-time. Now, I employ two booking agents, a booking manager, two publicists and an intern. I have no apartment anymore, but a big van named June that we live in, along with hotels. It's pretty surreal to me.

**Musical Influences:** Everyone from Adrienne Rich to Michael Moore to Howard Zinn to Ani DiFranco to Mother Jones magazine: I look to all types and styles of words, not just music or poetry.

**Upcoming projects:** A video featuring life on the road of the grassroots artist. (Me, as well as lots of artists we travel and converge with)

**Website information:** [www.alixolson.com](http://www.alixolson.com)



February 2003

## Brattleboro Reformer

by Dave Madeloni

**There were shouts, screams, hoots, guffaws, whistles. A visceral synergy emerged between performer and audience—an electricity flow from the stage to the crowded floor and back. All eyes were riveted on Alix Olson.**

In what was clearly one of the highlights of last spring's WAMfest (a Lillith-like gathering at Mount Holyoke College) Olson ignited the passions of the crowd by incorporating the humor of a standup comedian, the verbal dexterity of a rapper, and the grace of a trained thespian. The grinning, flirtatious folk poet was obviously feeding off the reaction of the crowd as words flew out in torrents, her cadence quickening then suddenly pausing—her rhythmic phrases espousing feminist empowerment, political defiance, and playful eroticism .

Olson, a member of the 1998 Nuyorican National Championship Poetry Slam Team, returns to headline the Iron Horse Music Hall (along with Oona's alum Pamela Means) tomorrow night. That esteemed venue rarely, if ever, books anything but musical acts. In an email exchange, I asked the Brooklyn-based performer about playing in a place better known for presenting folk music.

"Though I'm not a musician, I feel very connected to music..." said Olson. "I hear melodies and rhythm in my head and body whenever I write, and most of my on-the-road peers and friends are folkies. Spoken word/beat poetry has a musical history, so it makes sense to me. I feel very lucky to be traveling in the folk circuit, a powerful lineage of activist artists and grassroots venues."

I imagine that many who were wowed at WAMfest will be returning to Northampton to be re-energized by Olson's subversive verse. In a time of intensifying polarity between the political establishment and a skitish, increasingly skeptical populace, Olson's anti-establishment tirades should land upon plenty of sympathetic ears . "While any time of conservative domination is frustrating, I always try to put us in history's timeline, both so that we feel less alone and so that we may learn from the past", explained Olson. "We've had painful times before, and the trick is to focus on present specifics (like our impending attack on a nation of innocent civilians), ongoing problems (sweatshop labor, prison industrial complex), and preparing for future activism (for example, how do we secure a third party in this country). In this work, I am fortunate enough to be consistently inspired by communities of thinkers and activists all across the country who are doing just that.."

Olson, who once graced the cover of Ms. Magazine, is in Woodstock, NY recording her follow up to Built Like That her 22-track debut cd. "The tentative title for this new album is "independence meal". This past year has been a really transitional and reflective time for me personally, kind of a get over love gone awry year. Simultaneously, I've been dealing with being a global citizen in a suffering national climate, one of tremendous loss, and overwhelming powerlessness. I think making this project has nudged me to steal back my power on political and personal levels, and I really hope it will help others to do the same in a small way."

The Wesleyan graduate enjoys and nourishes a refreshingly reciprocal relationship with her fans. "My shows are in large part a recycling of audience energy, and so I am thankful to have audiences who listen hard, who are willing to go where I go, to laugh and get furious with me so I'm not alone." said Olson. She noted a performance in at the University of Wyoming in Laramie, where the hate-crime murder of Matthew Shepard made international headlines. Explained Olson, "Maybe a hundred people in little folding chairs. Ugly, fluorescent lights , no stage, a microphone that kept breaking, so I had to do half the show sans amplification. It made sense though: in the sense that reclaiming space takes work and it's not pretty." Olson makes her living using words in a communal effort to reclaim space for the disenfranchised and marginalized, a group that is getting larger by the day.

2/7/03

## Move over, Sappho

Poet and performer Alix Olson is one of a new breed of politically active lesbian wordsmiths

By BRIAN MOYLAN

WE'VE COME A long way from Sappho. The most popular lesbian poet of all time, the ancient Greek lyrical wordsmith lived on the isle of Lesbos, from which the word lesbian is derived.

But we are far from the historical moment of Sappho and the type of poems that her brand of female-only love inspired. In an age of fast-moving information and free-floating ennui, there are poets such as lesbian Alix Olson.

"I see myself as 50 percent activist and 50 percent poet," Olson says, but then clarifies her position. "I never go into a room, and think, 'Here's an audience of malleable minds, and I can change the way they think and live.' Education doesn't work that way. You have to be inspired by something really personal."

For Olson, personal stories and poems aren't necessarily things that have happened to her, but the way that she sees and interprets the world, which is almost entirely through language and rhyme.

"I think in rhymes. In some ways, I always have. So, I think something, and then I write it down. I think the lens is political, I think everyone has one.

### FOR MORE INFO

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I translate the world on a moment-by-moment basis," she says. "What I can do is speak my truth and people can see that's possible and then they can speak their own truth. I think people are afraid to clarify their opinions about something, and if I can show them that they can, that's what I want to do."

THE TRANSLATION OF that world and her politics are left of center. From equal distribution of wealth to a shift in national power dynamics, Olson has nontraditional views of how she would like society to be run.

Does she have any advice for President Bush?

"I don't think he's the problem. I make lots of jokes about him, because I think he's the funny evil character in the play, but it's not the people, they're just players," she says. "I think they're evil, but it's the democratic process that's tainted."

Olson isn't one to jump on the flag-waving bandwagon; she claims that the principles we are led to believe our country was founded on are misleading.

"I think our democracy is tainted, but I think democracy is great. Democracy is based on a grassroots process and we don't have that. Very few people had the power to vote when this country was founded, so to call it a democracy is a fallacy. But I think that democracy is a value system and socialism is an economic framework and I think they can coexist. You can have democracy without capitalism, which we are led to believe are linked," she says.

Olson is not only a firebrand on the stage and in her political beliefs, but after the breakup of a long-term relationship, in her personal life as well.

Thursday, May 30, 2002

## Alix Olson, Iron HorseFriday

By LARRY PARNASS, Staff Writer

The little sticker on Alix Olson's CD says a lot about music today, if only I could figure out what that is. The pasted-on label specifies which of the CD's 22 tracks are "FCC compliant." The reasons the other are not have to do with those words that you apparently still can't say on the radio. In Olson's politico-erotic world, many of them refer to body parts.

While Olson has her angry side (though she's businesslike enough about FCC conventions), she hits her targets with grace and humor. Mainly, she takes aim at heterosexual hegemony, in songs and spoken-word pieces that she's performed at poetry slams. In "Daughter," on her CD "Built Like That" (Feed Fire), she offers a stream of consciousness tale about a child's future that reaches for feminist and lesbian victories.

She's pointed, but not dogmatic, which opens her work to a wider audience than it might otherwise attract. In "Daughter," she lists all the things that might come her character's way, or not. "She'll do all of this and she'll do none of this." That feeling of liberty and individual choice marks a difference between the powerful sisterhood expressed here and the sort of consensus gender pride I recall from records that Cris Williamson used to put out, more than 20 years ago.

In an overpackaged world, Olson's is a call for liberty. "Built Like That" is loaded not just with words that make the censors blush but with buckets of ideas and observations. The presence of so many musings warps the politics here very nicely, making this CD a compendium of thoughts and doubts as much as it is a prescription for the way things ought to be.

The track that shares the CD's title slyly delivers its politics, without posturing. It manages to sum up the hard road this sort of music must ride in America.

On that score, Olson delivers her broad-brushed "America's On Sale" with a perfectly mocking tone. These are tracks that defy summarization. Speaking of snide, if you want to hear the most perfectly insincere laugh, listen to Olson's response, when a DJ compliments her work and then notes that "The Compliment," as it is reproduced on the disc, comes from a white man. I suspect Olson liked the sound of her laugh more than the guy's remark.

While her fast, light voice is plenty on many of the tracks, I also like it when she brings musicians to her aid; she's joined here on some tracks by Catie Curtis. "Checking My Pulse" is vigorous, alluring and appealing, using the oomph of a band to double up on what a track can deliver.

She's compelling because she has something to say and the wisdom not to make too much of it. She makes fun of her own cursing. Her preoccupation isn't with her own sexuality, though she takes us through epic encounters. She likes people. "I believe people are see-through if you hold them up to the light," she recites at one point in "I Believe."

That's one of her isms, and a humane one at that.

With Pazza Ragazza, 10 p.m., 20 Center St., Northampton, \$8.

# JOHNSON STATE COLLEGE

JOHNSON, VERMONT

## **Olson ignites: Powerful poetry in motion**

*by Valerie DeBrita*

Have you ever decided to get one of those rubbery, bouncy balls out of the vending machines and then curiosity got the best of you? You chuck it with all your might down the narrowest, longest hallway imaginable. You watch as it hits the left wall, shooting to the ceiling, then rocketing to the right wall traveling ever faster with all this catastrophic energy.

She's outrageous. As well as funny, warm spirited, zany, VOCAL, curious, a personality with so much energy bubbling over, infecting everyone around. She's full of charisma, she is real, and she's full of life; she's Alix Olson.

Olson visited the Johnson State College Community to take part in the annual ally dinner, doing what she does best. Olson performs her poetry on topics ranging from patriarchy, sexuality and capitalism. Proving that the once taboo word vagina can be used more than twenty times in less than five minutes. Try it, you'll feel free, maybe even invigorated.

Olson engages, challenges and captivates folks all over the world with her honest, enthusiastic and raw ideas. But it's not only what Olson says that leaves a mark on you; it is how she delivers her performance that makes it so memorable. It is almost as if her body is taken over by something foreign. At times, she clenched the microphone, she closed her eyes, she opened them real wide, hands motioning, gesticulating, all of Olson is passionately involved - she feels it.

America's On Sale: "Nike bought the revolution/Law school bought the Constitution/Tommy Hilfiger bought the Red White 'n' Blue/A flag shirt for fifty dollars/The one being burned is you! MasterCard bought the national soul/Broadway bought talent and called it CATS!/ The Republicans bought the Democrats!/ America's on sale!/(Restrictions may apply if you're black, gay or female...)"

The spoken word artist describes her poetry as "energizing," so does her audience. Olson lit my mental fire, with her powerful and visionary performance. She left me in a wake of grins, wanting more. She's outrageous. As well as funny, warm spirited, zany, VOCAL, curious, a personality with so much energy bubbling over, infecting everyone around. She's full of charisma, she is real and she's full of life; she's Alix Olson.

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**Minnesota Women's Press, Inc.**

*The place for women's words, ideas, and values.*

*alix olson*

## Slam poet packs a feminist punch

by Lisa Mabley, photo by Lisa Mabley

Onstage, Alix Olson works the mike like a weapon, launching scathing epithets against injustice, ignorance and intolerance. A New York-based spoken word artist, Olson is always political and often intimately personal in her work. She tackles brashly feminist subject matter, from sexual politics to the media to corporate fat cats to body hair. Her voice rises fast and furious and then falls to a whisper, keeping the audience engaged even with silence. Sprinkled with emphatic obscenities, her poetry inspires audiences and challenges them to think, leaving many dizzy and breathless. Her honest humor makes people laugh before they realize they're learning something.

Olson is a champion of the poetry slam, literally. And she is one of the most recognized artists at the forefront of spoken word, a decade-long revolution in the world of poetry. She is also the co-editor of the anthology "Vagina Verses" from Zero Panik Press and an upcoming queer slam poetry anthology, "Bullets and Butterflies."

Earlier this month, Olson was in Minneapolis for a pair of performances at the Bryant-Lake Bowl. MWP's intrepid designer, Lisa Mabley, took the opportunity to interview Olson about life, art and feminism.

The art form of spoken word began in the late '80s in Chicago with competitive poetry slams. Unlike the rarefied poetry reading, the slam quickly emerged as a democratic medium, rooted in the assumption that anyone can judge a poem. Fourteen years later, slams have stayed decidedly proletarian. Even at national championships, the judges are randomly selected audience members. Slam poetry isn't judged on a rigid and arbitrary set of standards, but on how it affects people.

"It's feminist," Olson asserted, "the valuing of each experience."

Critics claim spoken word dilutes the essence of poetry by making performance such a vital aspect of the work. Olson insisted that isn't the case. Performance, Olson said, allows her to connect with audiences more directly and with more impact.

"Performance poetry's been around forever. We're taking it back. [Poetry] started out as an oral tradition, as a way of connecting face-to-face with other humans. It was really the printing press and capitalism that put it on the page, started to sell it, and made it cold."

Because of her fiery delivery and her fearless attacks on the status quo, Olson is often described as being "in-your-face," a label she rejects. "I prefer saying proactive instead of saying in-your-face," she corrected. "This society is very proactive about creating consumers, and about creating people are racist and sexist and homophobic. People don't say 'Shoptite is really in-your-face about trying to sell you food,' but it is. It's necessary to be equally in-your-face to combat that."

Feminism plays a big role in Olson's work and she has always considered herself a feminist. "My mom was a big feminist, my parents were radicals, and I went to a college that was deeply entrenched in radical thought," she confided.



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**...Slam poet packs a feminist punch (continued)**

Inspired by the foremothers of the feminist movement, Olson says that both her ideas and the freedoms she has today build upon the work of those who came before her. Ideologically, she considers herself one of them, a thought that gives her comfort. “As soon as you feel like you’re a part of something bigger than yourself, you develop a sense of optimism and courage, and you are much braver and safer,” she said.

That attitude has helped Olson work to bridge the gap between generations of feminists. Olson said she and Amy Neevel, her partner in life and in poetry, make a conscious effort to bring feminists together. Fans report that in some communities their performances create the atmosphere for groundbreaking, intergenerational discussion groups.

“I think a lot of times older feminists are accused of not having done their work in terms of including women of color and being class conscious,” Olson said. “In some ways I think that’s a fair accusation because there were separations, but I also think that older feminists did a really good job and they aren’t lauded [enough] for their accomplishments. We live on their backs, and the next generation will live on our backs.”

Every generation has its unique struggles, Olson said, even her own. “The current movement of transfolk is something that [our generation is] struggling with, that we’re not doing a great job of figuring out,” she admitted. Some women’s communities have been divided by controversy over the place of transgendered persons in the community.

While it would be easier not to address such a complicated issue, Olson and Neevel say they feel accountable to their community’s needs. Instead of avoiding the issue, they faced it head-on. The poem “Gender Game,” written jointly by Olson and Neevel, describes their rebellion against rigid gender classifications and their wish to define gender as a broad spectrum rather than an absolute. The poem addresses gender in a way that most audiences can identify with, because nearly everyone deviates from the exaggerated stereotypical expectations of male or female.

Audience responses indicate they are succeeding in reaching out across gender boundaries. From heterosexual men who say, “I’ve been oppressed all my life for having long hair get called ‘ma’am’ all the time,” to the transgendered community, their message has resonated with audiences. One young transgendered person wrote them a letter explaining how “Gender Game” encouraged him to save his own life. He had been suicidal, sitting in his car with a gun to his head, when a tape of “Gender Game” began to play. He listened to the song 10 times, then decided not to kill himself.

“This is not just about getting to the gig on time and having your photo in some magazine,” Neevel stated. “This is about human survival.”

That survival depends on opening up dialogue where those outside mainstream culture can see themselves and be themselves, each telling his or her own truth. Olson believes this feeling of empowerment is especially important for disenfranchised youth.

Feed the Fire productions, a joint effort between Olson and Neevel, sends spoken word artists into high schools within New York City’s prison system and into queer youth centers. Spoken word is an especially powerful and accessible medium of creative expression for these young people, Olson said, because, unlike many art forms, it doesn’t require expensive supplies or classes. And in many cases, they can immediately see the impact of their efforts.

“I’ll get there and they’re all watching Motive queer kids watching heterosexual videos and then we start working and they’re so animated,” Olson recalled. “It’s amazing to watch the transformation: five seconds from consumer of culture to culture creator.”