
SLAM!

Bullets & Butterflies: Queer Spoken Word Poetry, Emanuel Xavier
(Suspect Thoughts, 2005, 216pp, \$16.95)

Emanuel Xavier, the gifted writer of *Americano*, *Pier Queen* and *Christ-Like*, has produced an extraordinary collection presenting the work of America's top spoken word performers and slam poets. Lesbian, gay and bisexual folks have always been at the forefront of American poetry: Whitman, Stein, Hughes, Ginsberg to name but a few. Now at the cusp of the twenty-first century, poetry as the art of the SPOKEN word is coming again to the fore. Riding on the venerable backs of the medieval troubadours and echoing the reverberations of Whitman's carols, the poets represented in this anthology proves that the lyric is meant for the ear as much as the mind. Many of the authors are not well known outside the Slam, Performance and Hip Hop Poetry worlds. But here they are at last, spinning on the dialectics political, gentrified, aesthetic.



Bullets and Butterflies brings together the varied, and at times shocking, work of Cheryl Boyce-Taylor, Regie Cabico, Steceyann Chin, Celena Glenn, Daphne Gottlieb, Maurice Jamal, Shane Luitjens, Marty McConnell, Travis Montez, Alix Olson, Shailja Patel, horehound stillpoint and Emanuel Xavier. As diverse as their authors' experiences and background, topics covered run from race to religion, cavorting across class, gender, sexuality (of course) and politics along the way.

**INTERVIEW: EMANUEL XAVIER
BY HOREHOUND STILLPOINT**



Emanuel Xavier (Photo: Leo Toro)

Even the most boring hotel on Earth comes alive when it's full of those exotic, peculiar, spirited creatures known as writers, specifically, in the case of this Lambda Literary Festival, queer writers. The Holiday Inn on Eighth Street in San Francisco—a beige on beige emptiness—about burst its normally soulless seams with peacocks and femme-to-butch bookworms and neurotic dreamboats. I

don't much like socializing, but this felt like Heaven to me.

At the opening ceremony, Tristan Taormino tore it up with her jaw-dropping monologue on pubic hair, Matt Bernstein Sycamore glittered effortlessly with his witty, fabulous deportment, and Emanuel Xavier held court with his quiet, gentle, sexy intelligence. Honestly, he took my breath away at first sight, and I think he would have even if his reputation had not preceded him.

His *Americano* is one of my favorite books of poetry by a single author. If you don't have it, get it. The poems are full of heart and heartbreak, spirits crushed and Spirit remaining, families and cityscapes and cocks arising and other fleshy comings and goings. It's real, it's raw, and it's glorious. I have to be honest, though: I'm an extremely bad boy for not having his other books; and while I plan on getting them soon, I still hope Manny will spank me for this transgression soon as we see each other again.

Back at the Lambda Literary Festival, the high point for me was the Poetry Slam. I participated, and even though I didn't do that well—either in the reading of my poem nor in the scoring—it was a blast. Kirk Read's

underwear got auctioned off (for a generously satisfying sum), we all got to hear some great performance poetry, and Mr. Xavier pulled off his baggy hip-hop outfit to reveal a Glam Slam get-up which I remember involving black spandex chaps and a bright red thong. It was hard, hard, to hear his poetry, since my tongue kept getting in the way, believing that if I just kept leaning forward, it might reach his exquisite rump.

horehound stillpoint: I hear you're going to be in a movie, so of course, my first question is how much of your beautiful skin can we expect to see?

Emanuel Xavier: Though it sounds like a porn flick, there is hardly any skin, much less skiing, in *The Ski Trip*.

hs: And here I was hoping you'd be playing a wildly unashamed guy who was totally connected to a fully-loaded range of sexuality.

EX: People still have this idea that if you're gay and sexual, you must also be ashamed and self-destructive. That's what I liked about my character [Carlos] in this film. He may be a stereotypical slut but he's happy and secure. He's not apologetic about being himself and ultimately gets what he wants.

hs: Nice. So, how's the Glam Slam going for you these days?

EX: After staging this event for several years, I found myself wondering if it was still relevant. Originally, I set out to create something positive that would inspire other Houses to consider spoken word as an important means of expression. But you can't reach the ballroom community if you're no longer part of it, and I accept that. So it became an entertaining production for the poetry scene.

hs: But you're still into it, right? It's just satisfying for different reasons now?

EX: It's been getting more difficult to make it happen with everything else that I'm doing. If it ever gets too much, or I feel like I'm not having fun anymore, I'd be happy to let somebody else take over.

hs: What was the trashiest thing that ever happened there?

EX: Well, the "Best Erotic Poem in Sexy Underwear or Lingerie" category could sometimes get out of control. There was one year a competitor used several dildos as props. It turned into a sex act. At first the audience was thrilled, and then they were shocked. You should've seen the look on their faces. No one was expecting it. She didn't read the best poem or anything, but she left an impression. She didn't win the trophy, but I'm pretty sure she got a lot of numbers.

hs: Were people falling in love with you left and right? I mean, here you are, this adorable, sexy poet-with-a-past, you must have had a new stalker every month!

EX: That was back in the early days of my spoken word career.

hs: Oh, come on! As someone twenty-five years your senior, I hope you're not telling me you think you are in any way past it?!

EX: I went through an awkward period after I stopped doing drugs and was no longer struggling to survive out on the streets. When *Christlike* got published, I gained a few extra pounds, thanks to my newfound success and moving in with my lover at the time. I was starting to look like Don Francisco and am surprised anyone still found me sexy.

hs: I think I better bite my tongue here! So, anyway, what are your hopes or your wildest fantasies for *Bullets & Butterflies*...or do you despair for the fate of poetry in America?

EX: Actually, we can't really complain. The spoken word movement has been greatly appreciated and is finally getting the attention it deserves. However, we can't change the world in a day. I don't know, maybe our style of poetry will be considered a true literary contribution.

hs: How did you go about picking the poets who would be represented in your book?

EX: I swore--after reading through all the initial submissions with Alix [Olson] and Regie [Cabico] for the original version of this book--that I wasn't ever going to be an editor. I didn't know I was going to end up doing it myself. That was the challenge: deciding to take this project on when all these other things started happening for each of us. As sole editor, I knew it couldn't be this big anthology with numerous contributors. I wanted to make it really personal and feature poets I admired and who had inspired me. And I think that's what I managed to do.

hs: Yeah, well, quite frankly, there are more than a few people who will ask, "What the hell is horehound doing in here with all these high-profile, well-known performance poets?"

EX: But I love the work you do! Maybe you're not aware of that. All the poets are very intense. Plus, your work has that sort of rebelliousness that all the other contributors share. And I think I really wanted to feature that similarity.

hs: How did you select the poems, from all the ones we sent you?

EX: It was both difficult and exciting because I didn't know if I was making the right decisions. I asked each poet to submit twice as many poems as I could select. If I chose one poem, it meant another would not be included...and I didn't know what the collection would lose or what it

would gain. I mean, you don't know what kind of collection you're going to end up with until you've made all the selections.

hs: Regie told me he thought this was going to be an important enough book that we should showcase our best work, regardless of when it was written or whether it had been published already. I agreed with him, but still, I couldn't resist sending you the stuff I was working on at the time, basically the pieces that went over the best with the audience at K'Vech [a queer open mic in San Francisco]. Plus, a few of the half-assed sonnets I was obsessing over during that phase.

EX: I couldn't make up my mind either--include signature poems or write new poems? That made it all that much more difficult. It's been a learning experience and a test of passion for all of us.

hs: What was your selection process for choosing your own poems for this collection?

EX: I guess at first I imagined including my most popular pieces. I saw the opportunity to reach a wider audience and so forth. Then again, I was bored with those poems because I had performed them so many times. I wanted people to see that I had other things to write about.

hs: How important do you think humor is in spoken word?

EX: Funny, I look back at my work and think, "Oh, God, what have I done? What have I written?" A lot of my poetry is so intense, and yet people close to me know I have such a childlike sense of humor. Every time a spoken word artist reads a poem, people think it defines them. And yet everything we share with an audience is personal--and it's not. You know what I mean? It's important for us not to take ourselves too seriously.

hs: I worry that I'm such a clown, sometimes, in my own work.

EX: In the end your poems have a message, and that's why your work is appreciated. People need to realize that the spoken word scene is not just a bunch of "angry" poets pissed off at the world.

hs: If it's okay, I'd like to end with a personal question about a specific poem in *Americano*. In "Risk," I can't help but wonder if you told your lover about all the things you mention in your poetry that put a strain on your ability to be affectionate?

EX: I let him [Michael] read it as soon as it was written. He actually loved it, strangely enough. I can never speak for him, but I learned a great deal about myself with that poem. He knew from the beginning that I would eventually write about us. But he was very supportive that way.

horehound stillpoint is a writer/waiter living in San Francisco. Other work by him can be found in *Poetry Slam*, *Rough Stuff*, *Poetry Nation*, *Of the Flesh*, *Tough Guys*, *Out in the Castro* and *Queer View Mirror 2*.