

PEOPLE

One year ago Aisha Ayers was walking around thinking, "I know that I'm an artist, but I don't really know what I'm supposed to do." She's since figured it out.

The 2001 Portland Poetry Slam Champion just released her first CD, *Letters to My Soul*, a collection of spoken-word poems.

Ayers moved to Portland from her hometown of Sacramento, Calif., with her then-girlfriend in 1998. Her plan was to study and learn to make music. "Of course, nothing ever turns out the way you think it will, right?" she smiles.

She soon gave up school and embarked on a series of part-time jobs, constantly musing about what she really should be doing, all the while "scribbling in my journal at home."

Early last year a friend convinced her to come along with her to try out for the Portland Community College production of *The Vagina Monologues*. She was told one part was left—Dominatrix, the play's most infamous role—which she landed, much to the delight of audiences.

"That's how my life is," the 23-year-old explains. "I don't get into a play except I have to have all these orgasms onstage."

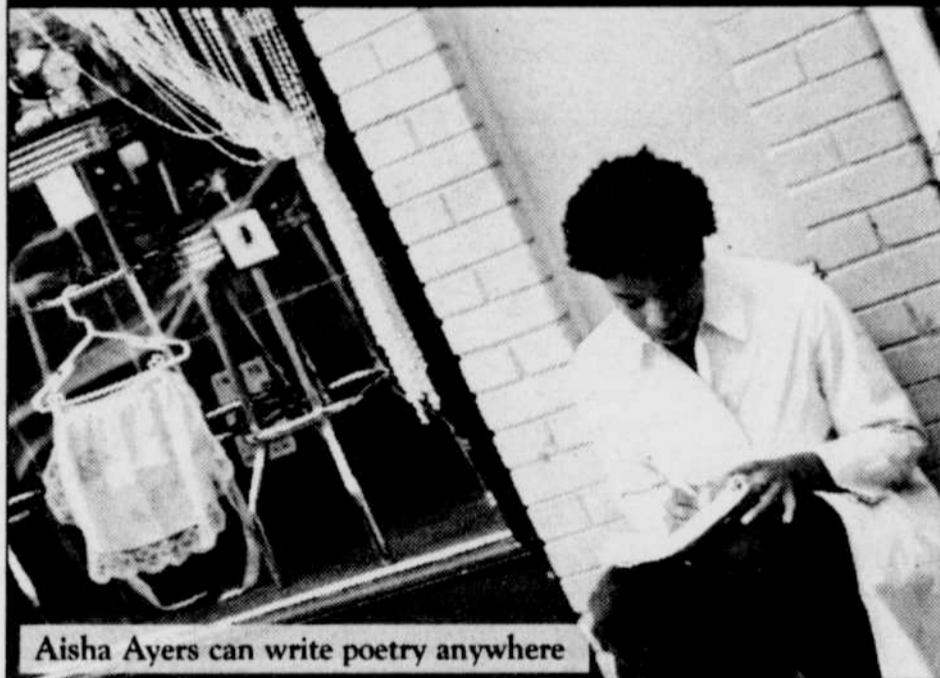
Soon after, this same friend convinced Ayers to perform at International Women's Day. The application asked, "What do you do?" Ayers recalls. Drawing on that stage performance, "I kind of shakily put, 'spoken-word artist.'"

PHOTO BY EMILY HUFFMAN

Slam bang

Aisha Ayers' overnight journey to slam poet champ and recording artist

BY LISA BRADSHAW



Aisha Ayers can write poetry anywhere

Then she realized she'd have to commit some of those scribbled poems in her journal to memory. Which she did.

After that, she moved on to an all-women's slam event, and an alarm went off. "I was like, 'Oh,'" she remembers. "It was good." Good enough to garner her first place in last spring's Poetry Slam.

From dazed and confused to slam champ in three months. It amazes the artist herself, and she flashes a grin that lights up the world: "I've never done this before. I don't know what I'm doing."

So who has the answer to who god is?

I think about it a lot.
My dad's a preacher after all
And he taught me well about
what the
Bible said I was supposed to be
when I grew up.
Unfortunately
I ended up running away from
home with a girlfriend
and finding my love and my god
through my writing
This is my art.

Ayers' work is reflective of her experience—being queer in a straight world, black in a white world and a woman in a man's world. It's a lot of ground to cover, and it's highly personal ground.

That can be tough stuff to expose, she admits, but "at the same time, I don't feel that this is my choice completely. I'm not doing this for any other reason except I

feel led to."

She's also convinced listeners are no fools. "Mostly, I'm saying everything that everybody else knows...they're going through so many of the [same] things.... For them I've almost kind of read them instead of me.... If anything, I think the audience members might feel a little more naked than I do," she laughs.

My hands are inside your body
mastering your divide
I want to feel you lover

ride this out
Spread around my hands
123—One finger for each deity in this trilogy
One for love, two for fear
and three for souls welded beyond intelligent
human control

Ayers can feel a little bogged down in all those identities of hers. Dating white women is sometimes challenging, particularly when a partner's family has to deal with "lesbian" as well as "interracial."

This, too, becomes part of her makeup, part of her work, and she has learned to embrace it. "What else would I have to give?" she questions. "Because that's your thing—whatever is your struggle is your gift. My mom always says that 'to whom much is given, much is required.'"

She and business partner Emily Huffman started Venus FlyTrack Records last year and immediately released *Letters to My Soul* as their first project. The two plan to record other multi-cultural women artists "because we're under-represented," Ayers insists. "We went to [see] Medusa; she's a hip-hop artist from Los Angeles, and her show changed my life...we're so starved for this...I want to find a hip-hop artist out there who's like some fierce little girl M.C. who doesn't have to worry about me hitting on her or trying to get her to be a backup singer when she needs to be frontin' her own thing. I want somebody to have a chance to do it." Amen. ☐

LETTERS TO MY SOUL can be found at Music Millennium, In Other Words, Reverb Records, Reading Frenzy and It's My Pleasure.

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