

The artist formerly known as Johnny No Bueno

From the streets to the stage, Sean Aaron Bowers grows up with poetry

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Poet Sean Aaron Bowers, 33, known to many as Johnny No Bueno, writes with the grittiest of voices. Reading his poetry is like jumping into the moshpit at a punk rock show. The brash language spins around to hit you in the jaw while bringing up the nostalgia for cheap booze. Bowers vigorously, and with seemingly no fear, shares with his readers his encounters with violence, addiction, bittersweet love and a lost family.

Bowers' childhood went from "The Villa" of St. Johns to the streets of Portland. His parents were separated and he spent time attending youth correctional facilities. When he was 12 his father, who had introduced him to poetry, was murdered. Bowers soon left home and found himself living a violent and drug-abusing life on the street.

Now Bowers is well known in the Portland poetry slam scene. Under the pseudonym Johnny No Bueno he has published "We Were Warriors" with University of Hell Press. Currently he is at Portland Community College taking creative writing classes.

Claire Valentine-Fossum: *What was it like to spend your childhood on the streets?*

Sean Bowers: To me it was just growing up. I tell people my story and they say "I feel sorry for you." But I say it's just a different setting. But at the same time, nowadays at the age of 33, I have so many maladjusted views of the world. I was able to survive, whereas a lot of my friends didn't. I was able to make it through. Yeah nights were cold and I went without food, but the hardest part is now. Now, because I have such diluted views of the world and interrelationships and how I deal with people. I meet the world with my fists up.

C.V.F.: *Were you writing then, when you lived on the street?*

S.B.: I've always wrote poetry, sometimes more than others. I remember my first trip to San Francisco, hitchhiking to San Francisco. I found a copy of "Howl" by Allen Ginsburg in Golden Gate Park, sleeping in Golden Gate Park in a sleeping bag under the eucalyptus trees and reading "Howl" by flashlight, and like "Oh, this is different." I had liked poetry up to that point, but now I'm starting to love poetry. And I was like, you can do that with language you can do that with words. You can punch somebody in the gut with words and just leave them breathless and to themselves.

Poetry is just a visceral experience and so I always wrote, I always wrote.

C.V.F.: *When did you want to be a poet?*

S.B.: I knew that I wanted to be a poet in 2000. It wasn't just poetry is going to be a part of my life, but it's going to be the main aspect of my life. I read a poem by San Francisco spoken word artist David Singer. The poem is "Mien Kampf," every single line of that poem, it was almost kind of a "fuck you" to the poetry world, but at the same time, it's that duality, at the same time I loved it, like this is us, and this is what we do. And I was all of a sudden, in this little obsession with poetry, I wasn't alone. It is now my obligation to write, my obligation is to do what this poem did for me. I need to write and allow my poetry to do that for somebody else.

C.V.F.: *Who are the "Forgotten City's children" you write about in your work?*

S.B.: Street kids.

C.V.F.: *Are they innocent? You write about innocence a lot in your work, and the image of a child in an adult's body.*

S.B.: There is an innocence. Do they, do we — I have to say we, just because I'm older and I've been able to crawl out of the hell I've lived in, doesn't make me any different. I think I've said it in my books before, the crime may never be forgiven, but that the criminal should always be forgiven. To some extent even some of the most heinous and horrendous stuff.

For example, I'm working right now on forgiving the murder of my father.

C.V.F.: *Are you using your poetry to work through your father's murder?*

S.B.: No. ... Actually I just wrote a couple days ago a poem from the possible perspective of my father's killing.

C.V.F.: *What was it like to try to write that?*

S.B.: For me there was some sort of disconnect. There's a really interesting disconnect that happens when I start to write. I'll start with an image or a specific point in time or a feeling. And then I shut off my heart. I didn't really get into the reasons because ultimately that's what drives me mad now. You know, I've come to terms that my father was shot in the face with a 10-gauge. It took me a little while, the fact that, yes, my father's face was blown off with buckshot and he had a hole through his head, and as sick and twisted as that is, it doesn't really bother me. These are facts. Having an emotional tie to that is only self-defeating.

C.V.F.: *How did you quit heroin?*

S.B.: I was actually not the biggest fan of heroin. That didn't keep me from being strung out for a number of years. Heroin when I first started doing it was just a cheap high ... and then I got strung out. There was definitely an allure, but my allure was more existential. How close can I get to death? I kind of played with heroin like an artist would play with paint. How blue can I get before people start getting worried? How much can I do till it's almost too much?

My ex-wife and I did heroin together and then my quest to really push the envelope with shooting dope got to be too much, to the point where we had gone through the inheritance of my father's death, we were homeless, I didn't care. I had no interest in really even surviving, I was just like, I'm just going to shoot dope and eventually I'll die from an overdose or hypothermia or liver failure and I don't care. And she ended up leaving me. And then, due to her leaving me, I started to develop this deep-seated resentment to heroin, not because of what it had done to me, but what it had taken from me.

I got busted for possession back in 2002 and as they dragged me out of the convention center bathroom in handcuffs I just looked up to the sky and said "If there is a God, thank you." I asked the judge to not let me go, to just let me kick, and I was able to kick.

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PHOTO BY JILL GREENSETHS

Sean Aaron Bowers, a.k.a. the poet Johnny No Bueno, on his future as a professor: "I would like to give (youth) an obsession for craft, as well as be able, especially for kids who are locked up and on the streets, to do some sort of critical analysis. And then be able to take that critical analysis into the world"

C.V.F.: *When did you start participating in slam poetry?*

S.B.: I had rallied for years against poetry slam. I decided it did a huge disservice to the English language and to poetry. I thought it was a thorn in the side of literature. So begrudgingly, because my mentor said I should do poetry slam, I came here (Backspace) with the sole intention I was going to read one of my darkest and most

offensive pieces and everyone was going to hate me and I could go home saying I tried. And I came here and I read one of my most darkest most offensive pieces and everyone hated it and they loved me because it was so visceral.

I had always done spoken word. Spoken word is what made poetry accessible. Before I read poetry, I was trying to write poetry. Then I heard Henry Rollins. I was a born and raised punk rocker and I was like, Henry Rollins does poetry, poetry must be good. So that was kind of more influential than anything else because my childhood heroes were poets. And I was like, OK, gotta do it on stage, like a punk rock show.

C.V.F.: *I read you want to be a professor. Is that still your goal?*

S.B.: I want to teach creative writing and literature at a university level. My big goal is to use that as a means in which I can sustain being able to do creative writing workshops for at-risk and incarcerated youth: homeless shelters, MacLaren School for Boys, juvenile centers, stuff like that.

C.V.F.: *Are there other programs out there like that?*

S.B.: There are a lot of programs, however they could do more. What happens is, especially when it comes to poetry, because of its therapeutic value, because of its cathartic value, it's an easy and great way to investigate identity. What happens in most poetry workshops at that level is it just stays there.

I would like to give (youth) an obsession for craft, as well as be able, especially for kids who are locked up and on the streets, to do some sort of critical analysis. And then be able to take that critical analysis into the world, because that's ultimately what its about, to use those critical skills in everyday life.

It's also the development of the craft. So often I see people, it's almost textbook, anybody who gets sober or does time in jail will write poetry. What's going to happen is they're going to assume there are doors that might be there because they're writing poetry, but (the doors) will be closed because they don't understand poetry. What I would love to do is to take these horrific and yet wonderful experiences that people are having, and be able to turn that into something much greater.

C.V.F.: *Do you have other writing in the works?*

S.B.: I'm working on two books currently and a collection of essays. I'm publicly dropping the pseudonym Johnny No Bueno, and I'm transferring to my birth name, Sean Aaron Bowers. I do want to selfishly break into the world of academic literature. They're not going to accept somebody named Johnny No Bueno, and so if I want to, with my martyr complex, be the voice of the 90's forgotten youth of the streets, and I want that voice to count; I can't be that street kid anymore. I have to play their role and their face.