

My City is Finding Its Voice: A Profile of Mighty Mike McGee

by Lane Berger

Mighty Mike is hosting a party. Inside, the air is humid with bodies. Standing room only in the hallway. Everyone's turned toward an eat-in-kitchen-cum-living-room that's been converted into a performance space complete with an electric organ. Someone's swapped in a couple of fuchsia bulbs. They shine on a man with a pin made of Scrabble letters: I ♥ SJ. *I love San José*. Mighty Mike is all sweat, no tremble. His voice is measured. Earnest. "Let's say you are me in this moment," he recites. "You are unintentionally serenaded."

And we are.

Whether by name or by reputation, most everyone in San José knows Mighty Mike McGee, a South Bay institution of creative content. He performs regularly as a performance and spoken word poet and has won most of the awards a male performance poet can win, including the 2003 National Poetry Slam Individual Grand Championship and the 2006 Individual World Poetry Slam Grand Championship. He has been featured on HBO's *Def Poetry Jam*, CBC Radio and Television, and NPR's *Snap Judgment*. In January 2018, McGee was named the 2018-2019 Santa Clara County Poet Laureate.

McGee's relationship with poetry began with spoken word, and he isn't ashamed of it. He doesn't believe there's a "right way" to start, and he balks at any mention of hierarchy. "There is poetry that relates to you and poetry that doesn't. The poetry that relates to you, put it on a pedestal. The words, the thoughts, the concepts that resonate with you, hold on to those." Show them off, he urges. Emulate and prune until you find your voice.

If words are human, poetry is, too, whether spoken or written, metric or free verse. McGee wants the people of San José to have a quotidian and intimate relationship with literature, specifically poetry; and he has made it his life's work to insert poetry everywhere, for everyone. But it is also a matter of pride. McGee doesn't just want to bring poetry to San José. He wants the world to pay attention to the poetry of his city.

Mighty Mike's been beyond San José's city limits. In April 2002, he went on his first solo tour to Vancouver "and caught the travel bug." He began touring almost incessantly—three-quarters of a million miles throughout the United States, Canada, and Europe. In 2005, McGee became one of the first Americans to perform spoken word at the University of Paris, Sorbonne. The year 2009 brought a stopover in Worcester, Massachusetts, just "to actually have a roof over [his] head." For eighteen months, McGee's touring schedule slowed to about one week per month before things picked up again: Portland, Bellingham, then back to Vancouver.

And yet for McGee, the journey's end was never far from his mind. "I was on the road, like, 'Someday I'm gonna go back to San José.' It took me a while to realize I could also figure out life and love [there]. I could just get off the road, stop touring, and be home."

In July 2014, McGee moved to San José for good, and although he still loves to travel, he tours

less and less. “I’m finding living out of a suitcase thoroughly unfavorable,” he chuckles. “No matter how much I liked a place, I always felt like an alien. And there’s such a huge difference between being treated like a marvelous alien and a hometown homie. I spent ten years being a marvelous alien. And I really just wanted to be a local boy. Somebody everyone knows.”

Choosing San José wasn’t a decision made out of obligation. It was a decision made toward belonging, and with hope. “Not only do I feel like I’m claiming a city I’ve always enjoyed, but I feel like it also gets to claim me. I’ve gone out and done a lot of things, and now I want to give San José a person to look to for poetry and laughter.”

McGee serves on the board of the Poetry Center of San José and organizes a growing list of events, such as the San José Poetry Slam, Tournamentertainment at Forager, Live Lit Writers’ Open Mic at Caffè Frascati, and the Go Go Gone Show at Café Stritch. In the summer, he teaches poetry at the School of Arts and Cultures’ camp at Mexican Heritage Plaza.

Although there are days when he feels like he never stops moving, McGee counts his blessings: “Work is fine by me, because I design my own work.”

But San José is full of people for whom professional autonomy is a luxury—for whom art seems a luxury. “I feel like a lot of people live their lives like pain is the default.”

McGee spends hours every week pursuing grants and fundraising opportunities in order to deconstruct the notion of art as a luxury, of poetry as anything other than fundamentally human. “I know there’s a high cost of living in San José. But poetry is free, or very inexpensive. I think more people need it than they realize.”

McGee defends his genre. He explains that poetry is a source of truth. Poetry resonates because it reflects the real world—joyous and horrible. Truth is what allows poems to live on their own, to be had, always, by anyone.

What people do with that is up to them, but McGee hopes “it makes their day a little easier” to feel like someone gets it; that poetry “might force them into some introspection they’d never considered before; and that they might be able to come up with solutions, answers, catharsis.” Ultimately, McGee hopes people will be inspired to write poems of their own.

To reintroduce poetry, to bring it back, and to make it feel lively is an undertaking he feels is equal parts responsibility and privilege. When it comes to his city, McGee is a passionate optimist, suggesting, “Maybe I can help. Maybe I can make people laugh and cry, in the same hour, in a place I love.”

Mighty Mike McGee’s first collection of humor and poetry, *In Search of Midnight*, is available through Write Bloody Publishing.