Ships in the Night: Songs and Spoken Word, 4 September 2014, Rosemount Hotel, North Perth.

Like many first birthday parties, Ships in the Night is fun, cheeky, sometimes offering a little toilet humour, yet always displaying a raw, emotional honesty. This is no conventional first birthday, and not for the sole reason that it is held in a pub. Adept as a balloon artist, the MC twists each performance piece into the shape of a Beyoncé track. Poets use artifice and misdirection as compellingly as an illusionist or magician. And as with kids playing at pass-the-parcel, there is something for everyone. At this gig, enthusiasts of local music and spoken word come to play, laugh, drink, but most importantly, to be entertained.

It is Thursday evening in early September; as I enter the front room at the Rosemount Hotel, street traffic fuses with the venue’s growing pockets of chatter, adding to the event’s grungy, metropolitan feel — a gritty change from the usual spoken word setting of a library or bookstore. Around the venue, there is an open and mutually supportive mood. The event has drawn a diversity of ages, genders, cultural backgrounds and artistic interests, and the venue is student-friendly with free lit mags at the entrance. The atmosphere is mature and composed, and at $10, the admission price is welcoming. The crowd collectively orients their body language towards the stage, casually anticipating the performance of local, contemporary art. Punters sit cross-legged at the stage-front like children in school; it is story time.

Stories take multiple shapes and forms at Ships in the Night. The evening commences with the soulful, lilting cadences of Caroline J. Dale. Dale sings of love, insomnia, weekend holidays, and pauses to point out that one title (‘Lavender Sawdust and Leather’) sounds like it refers to a masochist circus act. A particularly memorable track of Dale’s tells of a Japanese forest where people go to end their lives, very nearly bringing me to tears. The song includes an arresting change in point of view, with listeners becoming suddenly privy to the voice of one who finds him or herself in this forest. Throughout her set, Dale intersperses this emotive yet simple storytelling with down-to-earth sounds and easy humour.

This delicate balance between drama and comedy pervades the following performances of spoken word, poetry slam, short stories, and open mic. While there is not a common theme uniting each performance, nothing is off limits as artists explore anecdotes of grief, cultural identity, sexuality, travel, family and religion. We hear the imagistic poetry of Michael O’Sullivan, which gives us sensory snapshots of relationships, the body and the home, and Geoffrey Power-King’s poetry that leads us through nostalgic romance and the comforting of a melancholy friend. Chris Arnold expertly infuses sensory images and arresting metaphors with the occasional bare yet loaded line: ‘He asks if she wants to be carried to bed. She says no; she’ll go

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1 The performances from Ships in the Night can be viewed at the following web address: http://www.youtube.com/channel/UCIkiF2VWEufjNysi_i7ENYQ
on her own. And she sits.’ Jakub Dammer bridges the gap between spoken word and rap with his comedic slam style, back by popular demand with his performance on the subject of the female anatomy, drawing rapturous laughter from the crowd.

Davey Craddock leads us through gentle acoustic stories with topics ranging from unplanned pregnancies in Peaceful Bay, through an homage to an overweight man playing cricket at Beatty Park. Punters listen to the controlled, evocative fiction of Anna Dunnill, who performs two different pieces on the subject of ‘stick-and-poke’ tattooing. Her second reading speculates that Jesus and his twelve disciples engaged in this practice (even Matthew, the wimpy, government-employed tax collector). Dunnill leaves us with a hint that this tattoo process parallels the weaving of religious narratives throughout history and time. Byron Bard entertains with his distinct, baritone voice and self-referential humour. To complete the night, open mic performances provide an array of serious, reflective poems and impromptu stand-up comedy.

MC Tristan Fiddler points out that Ships shares a birthday with pop icon Beyoncé Knowles, and links performances by reviewing each in relation to a Beyoncé song. Tying cultural performance to pop culture in this way, the event proves light-hearted and accessible for those who would not usually go to poetry events or spoken word. While the audience of Ships embraces each performer and takes his or her art seriously, the tone and structure of the evening shows that the event, refreshingly, does not take itself too seriously.

Perth has relatively few events of this type, and Ships seeks to partially fulfil a demand for such entertainment. That is not to say that there are no such events; there are weekly Perth Poetry Club events at Moon Café, Voicebox spoken word, Spoken Word Perth at Fremantle Prison, and WA Poets Inc. hosted the Perth Poetry Festival in mid-August. Ships in the Night brings together local writers and musicians who, without such events, are likely to unknowingly pass each other, much as the event’s title suggests. But it is the juxtaposition of music and poetry, the melting-pot of sound, language, and thought that makes Ships in the Night an exciting and unique cultural experience.

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