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Adventures in Oral Fixation

Sober or not, nightlife denizens get verbal

By [Marya Summers](#)

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I'm a word junkie and a chronic verbalizer. I get my fixes by writing, but some of my best highs come out loud. At open mics, I can read poetry or sing lyrics; I can perform my words and get instant gratification from a live audience. For folks who share my **oral fixation**, on Tuesday nights, there's a trifecta of open mics within a half-mile of Delray Beach, at **Koffeeokee, Kevro's Art Bar,**

and **Dada.**

Koffeeokee advertises the earliest starting time, so I started there. It bills itself as a "sober" coffeehouse, and I'm a party girl, but I came with a higher purpose. When I arrived, most of the patrons were in the breezy back garden, sipping coffee; inside, the place was empty save for an acoustic duo playing covers and Koffeeokee owner/operator Dawn Jonas. The walls were filled with art for sale. Candles flickered on tables, nestled in cups of coffee beans. A mirror ball scattered light around the room. The open-mic signup list was empty.

Koffeeokee also hosts two weekly karaoke nights, a grief group, and a writer's workshop. On this night, there was a 12-step meeting under way nearby, Jonas said. The coffee bar would get livelier as soon as that meeting ended.

Confident that my friend Chris could catch me up on anything I missed at Koffeeokee, I drove the five blocks south to Kevro's. Where the coffee bar was serenely inspiring, the art bar

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radiated creative energy. A futuristic glow emanated from some high-tech digital art displays. Renda Writer, the open mic's host and the godfather of South Florida open mics, was about to kick things off. This signup list already had eight names. Figuring on 15 minutes per performer, I knew I'd have to wait at least two hours to get onstage here, but I also knew that, with *bar* in its name, Kevro's offered lubricants to help kill the time. The bar couldn't survive with sober customers, noted co-owner Deb Sullivan. Still, some had apparently come for the open mic; they were the ones who ordered tap water and at best left a little change for a tip. Wanting to do my part for Kevro's, I ordered a pinot noir from the extensive wine list while Writer exhorted more people to sign up if they were "inspired, moved, or just plain drunk... You don't even have to be good," he said. "You just have to do it."

The first performer offered a song she called "Touché Olé." She'd written it, she said, when she "was angry at heaven and earth." She exacted her revenge in an off-key warble. Open mics tend to attract a variety of performers, from the talented to the not-so. At Kevro's, for example, I was also treated to a guy named Murray who did a topnotch job of singing and playing harmonica along with some oldies recordings. Between acts, Writer bantered. At one point, he offered the audience a joke about a restaurant drive-through where he ordered the number two, ostensibly a menu item, only to wind up with a bag of feces.

There were a couple of poets outside who were miffed that they had to wait so long for their turn onstage. "They're gonna be 45 minutes," one griped about Soul Project, an R&B trio. I suggested that he try Dada, where performers are limited to three minutes, but this only triggered another rant. Dada, he said, was catering to "a high-end Boca crowd" that had "totally eliminated what once made Dada cool." As he and his buddy kept bitching, Sullivan suggested they might be happier somewhere else, but I knew they weren't going anywhere; they were up next.

I made it back to Koffeeokee a half-hour before its 11 p.m. closing time, which was time enough to take in a soulful acoustic solo act. I'd missed a few other musicians but no poetry, apparently, until the night concluded with an intense guy named Dominic, formerly of Brooklyn and 90 days sober,

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who gave a free-associative piece incorporating an array of voices, all at the expense of his own addiction, religion, sexual orientation, and venereal health. "I'm sick of it! I no longer live for your approval!" he wailed hysterically at one point. Getting sober had made him a better performer, he explained afterward.

Finally, I made my way to Dada, where I'd once invested four years nurturing a poetry community. Three years later, the place at first didn't seem to have changed much. It still had surreal art on the walls of the former historic home, but the easy chairs and couches were gone, replaced by stiff-backed chairs. What had been an artsy hangout had become a trendy lounge, a process that was already under way three years ago. I'd left then because I'd been exhausted and defeated by poets' egos and addictions as much as by the struggle to build a poetry-literate and poetry-loving enclave in a society that values status symbols more than literary symbolism.

I arrived too late to sign up for Dada's open mic, but it may have been just as well. That night was an erotic-poetry slam. I have poems about sex, but they're political, not erotic. With just four contestants, however, and three cash prizes with a combined value of \$300, it was easy money for somebody, and the audience was treated to some unflinching poems about sex in various positions, with varied partners and techniques, as the evening moved briskly toward its 2 a.m. conclusion.

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