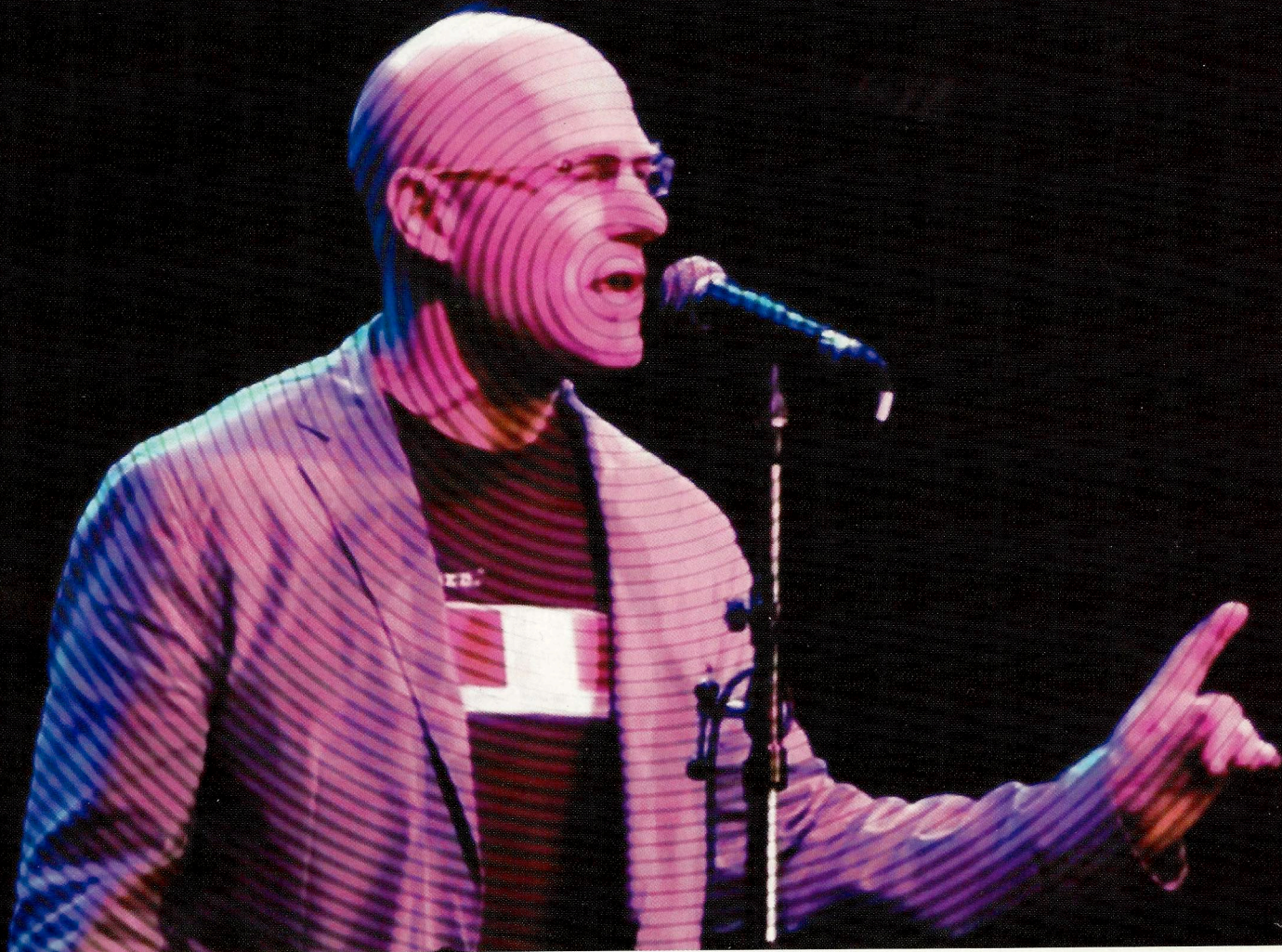


# arts & ideas

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■ IAN FRENCH, AKA "IF"

## PROFILE

# New classics

Spoken word brings wisdom at any age by Jane Welowszky

**BY DAY, IAN FRENCH, 54,** is president of a successful downtown Toronto direct-marketing agency, with an impressive client list and an equally impressive reputation. By night, IF, as French is known on stage, is taking the world of spoken word by storm. Last year, he

earned the title Canadian Individual Poetry Slam champion, and now French is poised to compete in the World Championships in Paris, France, in June.

How does a middle-aged advertising executive not only compete—but win—in

an arena where cultural diversity, youth, and street cred reign supreme? Not surprisingly, it's a question French has heard before. Both audiences and poets met his early appearances with skepticism, but as they listened to French's poetry and distinctive approach to the material, they gradually came to embrace IF as one of them.

For years, songwriting and playing in live bands were French's creative outlets. About 10 years ago, he started listening to hip-hop

to stay involved in his then-teenage son's life, and was immediately captivated by the way the artists played with lyrics. "I thought they changed the whole lyrical game in an astounding way," he says. Inspired, French started writing in the same style, and where he lacked the ability to perform rap, he found success turning his songs into poems.

A few years later when French stumbled on to live poetry readings at a neighbourhood café, he knew he was on to something. But it wasn't until he made his first slam appearance at Toronto's Drake Underground that French discovered the competitive side of spoken word. French was hooked. "I knew that was the art form for me," he recalls.

French believes that one of the rules of good poetry is that the more intimate and personal it is, the more universal it becomes: "a strange juxtaposition," he admits. His own formative years were fraught with difficulty, giving him a wealth of material to mine for his art: a childhood diagnosis of ADHD; drug- and alcohol-related run-ins with police; and going to five different high schools. Yet, he says his early life experiences have been leavened with wisdom and empathy as a result.

Where issues of race, poverty, and political strife colour younger poets' performances, empowerment and transformation are at the core of IF's message. Rather than an "us-and-them perspective," his age allows him to channel his rage in a more optimistic, hopeful way.

In addition to French's unique perspective, he also attributes his success to great mentors. While a member of the 2013 Toronto Slam Poetry Team, French met Ian Keteku, the team's coach and 2010 World Slam Poetry champion. Keteku introduced French to different styles of writing, and forced him to dig deeper on an emotional level. French relies on humour to tender difficult issues, but under Keteku's mentorship, he also learned to delve into personal areas that were the most troubling and allow his vulnerability to emerge.

To French, spoken word is a gift he never saw coming. "It has allowed me to express myself in a way I never thought possible," he says. "It's just been a magical trip."