

## Johnny Olson: PAO Productions Interview

*Johnny Olson is the main creative force behind Mad Swirl, a community of poets, writers, and performance artists from all walks of life who come together to share their talents and nurture their various artistic ambitions. Founded with Lisa Carmen and Cheyenne Gallion, and currently boasting a staff which includes M.H. Clay, Tyler Malone, and Madelyn Olson, the Mad Swirl Open Mic convenes on the first Wednesday of every month at the Absinthe Lounge in Dallas. Now going strong for over seven years, Mad Swirl has become a local institution for spoken word and performance that reaches worldwide via its online poetry forum and print zine.*

**PAO Productions: You hail originally from Chicago. How did you find yourself in Dallas?**

**Johnny Olson:** It was a gypsy kind of feeling that I'd get every spring in Chicago to wanna move, to get up somewhere, and I don't know if I was born with that or if it came from being in the Marine Corps, but every spring, especially when you go through, you know, four or five months of a hard winter in Chicago, you kinda get a feeling of wanting to break out of the shell. And every spring for four or five years I would want to do it and Lisa would say no and I'd get over it, and we'd make it through another winter, and the next spring I'd say it again. So really Dallas was gonna be a temporary one year, two year move to kinda get that itch scratched and then move back, and we just kinda started gettin' laid out and things started happening to where moving back just wasn't seeming like an option anymore. I don't know. Dallas was calling me (*laughs*).



**PAO: What kind of poetic endeavors had you been involved in, in Chicago or elsewhere, before coming to Dallas?**

**JO:** Nothing.

**PAO: Did you write? Did you paint?**

**JO:** I painted. I always wrote but I never wrote as far as thinking it was worth anything. As a teenager I wrote poetry... a lot of teenagers will write poetry just as a way to express [their] emotions, but I never thought it to be anything. And about a year before we moved down to Dallas we started a magazine called *Lip*. It was really Lisa's magazine. And I just did the illustrations and helped with some of the layout stuff, but that was hers, and that's when I first

started looking at it as being something that, you know, I do have a voice, and I can share that. But it was never anything that I really pursued. I didn't have a mirror of what's happening here in Chicago at all. It was very unique to me and it... really, Dallas woke me up.

**PAO: There's not much of an arts scene in Chicago?**

**JO:** There's a huge arts scene in Chicago. I just never explored it... Never really looked to be a part of it.

**PAO: When I was there, the art gallery [ed: *Chicago Photography Center*] had some featured photographer I'd never heard of. His work had no soul whatsoever, in my opinion. It didn't speak to me at all, but all these people were just all over this guy like he was the greatest thing since sliced bread.**

**JO:** There's very much a pretentiousness to the arts scene in Chicago, for sure.

**PAO: I say that because I see that a lot down here, too. That used to be my opinion of the arts scene - a bunch of snobs.**

**JO:** I think that's where things like Mad Swirl and ArtLoveMagic, some of the other things that are out there, are a little bit more accessible to people who might not have thought it was accessible before. And instead of trying to put a foot into the door of some other circle, we kind of started Mad Swirl as our own circle. We created the door, so we could open it and allow it to be opened to people to be accessible, and to not have a pretentiousness about it or a closed off-ness to new people, new thoughts, new art. That's probably the number one feedback we get from people sending in poetry and artwork is that they like that we don't have a strict guideline of, besides, you know, no more than 1,000 words on short stories, but that's about the only real strict limit that we have, and that's... it's very open for that. It doesn't have that pretentiousness. Granted, we're not a big gallery, a big organization, but... and I think that's where Chicago, maybe I never did find them because I never felt like it was a door I could even get my foot into or walk into. I never felt welcomed. And I think that maybe that's where Mad Swirl might come off hopefully as a little bit more welcoming to people because I didn't like that feeling.

**PAO: The Chicago scene being what it was, how did you connect with the Dallas arts scene?**

**JO:** Obviously it must've been much better for me (*laughs*), 'cause it is what it is right now and I don't feel necessarily that it's all that welcoming, but we have our own scene, and we've created our scene with the people who are in our circles and who overlap circles. They're all great, cool people and, you know, Dallas is a much smaller city, but still a big ass city, and then once you start getting into circles and knowing people and connecting and collaborating and working together then I think it's very harmonious. I don't feel like there's any real competitiveness that's happening here as far as, in a negative competitive way. I think people

are all supportive of the other things that are happening, and going out to the other open mics and it's not like, "Aw I don't go to Mad Swirl, I only go to this." It goes around because you're a community. A sense of community - you walk into the reading somewhere and you know almost everybody there, and it's awesome. You know, to walk in and have that, it's great. And if that's all the scene that it's gonna be, well man that's pretty damn blessed to have that, having all those people and to have that connection with them creatively.



**PAO:** Did you just stumble upon an open mic somewhere or did you find that maybe there was a void that you were going to fill with the *Mad Swirl* zine and open mic?

**JO:** I'd never done an open mic, never went to open mics. It wasn't my thing. The first open mic I went to was our open mic.

**PAO:** Really?

**JO:** Uh huh. I went to a poetry slam once in Deep Ellum. Clebo Rainey was hosting and it was at the... it was the one that had the four bars, like the Lemon Bar or something maroon. I didn't like the poetry slam at all. I thought, "This isn't cool." It's not because I [got] rated bad and I think that I did great - it wasn't so much how I got rated, it's just the fact that I was being rated that I didn't like. So I didn't really pursue it any further than that. I thought "well, if that's the way I'm gonna perform

poetry, then I'm not gonna perform poetry." But *Mad Swirl* was already going as far as it was a zine where we'd done three, four issues. We did more print in the beginning, and then the website started growing, and as we got more print material I figured well we'll put that material online, we might as well. We already had content so why not make web projects? And so we had that going, and Kevin Christiansen, who owns Absinthe, was just opening Absinthe in 2004, and approached me in the summer of 2004 asking if I would want to host an open mic there. And when you look at the first ads we did for *Mad Swirl*, it's not in those issues I don't think, for Mad Swirl Open Mic...

**PAO:** These are issues 5 and 6.

**JO:** Yeah, in 4 we had one in there saying, "You know, Kevin's asked me to open the microphone up at the Absinthe Lounge and we don't know the first thing about it." And we had this little schematic thing in there: "Here's what we found out when we opened up a microphone," you know (*laughs*).

**PAO: Literally?**

**JO:** (*Laughs*) Yeah, literally. So we were gonna try our best to put this mic back together and see what we can do at Absinthe Lounge 'cause we had no clue, we had nothing to go off of. And Kevin asked me to go to other open mics and I said, "Well nah I'm not gonna go, I'd rather just do it our way and just see what happens, I'd rather not have any preconceived notions of how this is supposed to be run. We'll just run it the way that we're gonna run it." Then it was very sparse to begin with.

**PAO: Five or six people the first night?**

**JO:** Yeah, I mean the very first night, it was probably... we were gonna invite all of our friends. It was gonna be every Wednesday night, and we did that for two weeks (*laughs*). [By] the second one I'm like, "I can't keep asking people to keep coming."

**PAO: It's hard to do it every week.**

**JO:** Oh, for sure. So that's when I told him I would do it once a month. And in the beginning it was a little bit more, and then I think at the lowest times we've had four or five, six people on the mic, on the list for the whole night. The place would be pretty bad. People weren't really coming to Absinthe Lounge anyway except the people who lived there, and it was great, it had to be that way. If there'd have been a lot of attention put on it right away it probably wouldn't have become what it's become, because there would've been a lot of pressure on it. We had to grow into our roles as a space builder. It just started growing, we were growing with it, as far as Lisa and I, Cheyenne, of course on me. I've always been the host but it's been our space that we opened up, and we learned. You know, it's easier to learn and make a mistake with seven people in attendance as opposed to having forty, fifty people in attendance. So it grew organically, and that's the way Mad Swirl has always been, it's always been an organic growth. That sounds like it's something that you would go to the doctor for. "Doc, I have an organic growth on my arm" (*laughs*). But it's grown organically, and that's the way it's always gonna happen and nothing has happened that hasn't been serendipitous with it. And that's the way I like it. I'm not forcing anything or pushing anything - none of us are at this point - to go anywhere where it doesn't seem natural to go to.

**PAO: There were three issues of *Mad Swirl* before you began the open mic. When was the first one published?**

**JO:** We did the first one in 1999, *Mad Swirl 1*. We didn't know there was gonna be another one but we did put on there "first edition," you know, volume 1 (*laughs*), with the hopes that there was gonna be more than one. I met Cheyenne in December of 1998 through a mutual friend. When Cheyenne and I first met we just had an instant kind of a...

**PAO: Rapport?**

**JO:** Absolutely, right away. He's like my little soul brother from another mother. I never had a little brother and he never had a big brother, so it was kind of a very brotherly connection that we had right away. Cheyenne's ten years younger than me, so this is 1999, 1998. I was 28 and he was 18. Big difference between a 28 year old and an 18 year old. At this point, you know, being 41 and he's 31, there's not that big of a gap anymore, but as far as maturity at that point we were at two different places. But I loved his energy; he had a great creative energy. He was really excited about doing things, wanting to draw and paint and write and do everything else, and he saw *Lip*, which is a magazine that was Lisa's and mine in Chicago.

**PAO:** Was that just one issue?

**JO:** We did two issues. In '97... '96, '97. We moved here in '98, and I met Cheyenne. That's when I feel like I was awakened more. I've always drawn, it's always been a passion of mine, but never to the point of what it's become now in my life and that's what I feel was the pivot point, with meeting Cheyenne and discussing those things and doing those things. And he really pushed it to start a project together. He always wanted to start a project with Lisa and I... hangin' out in the living room, doin' our thing, gettin' mellow and pushing the envelope with, you know, *I wanna do this, I wanna do this*. And I had *On the Road* right by me and I was reading it for like the third or fourth time and had highlighted different parts in it the various times that I'd read it, and since we were talking I was flipping through and looking for a name that might pop off the page that's got ideas or things I wanted to share as far as just hanging out and talking. And "*the whole mad swirl of everything that was to come began then*" jumped out at me. And I saw "mad swirl" and like, *oh my god, it's just a... wow, that's exactly how I feel*. I think that was quite a pivot point for us, was coming up with the name. We always thought that it jumped out at me.

**PAO:** "The whole mad swirl of everything to come." That characterizes the philosophy behind Mad Swirl.

**JO:** Absolutely, absolutely. The specific reference around that line is talking about the meanings of the different souls coming together, that were the beatniks. And there was just a handful of people that just got together and it was like, I dig your energy and I dig *your* energy and, you know, they started sharing their words together and sharing their passion together and their lives. And what became of that was a complete movement in literature, a complete movement in society. You all of a sudden have this subculture that was created around these beatniks, that was just a handful



of poets and writers and artists that got together and were feeling deep down [that] they kinda had a similar thread in their lives that they were sharing and exposing and putting out there, and found a connection with other souls who could feel and see and know that or felt beat, which kind of felt like how the circle of people that we were running with back then were also feeling.

So when I read that, it totally struck a chord of *this is our own miniature little beat movement*, and at the very least, “Hey I recognize there’s a madness in you and there’s a madness in me and we kind of share that in common so why not create stuff together and just see what happens?” You know, what one person can do with one vision of their own can be very powerful, but for the most part it has its limits. When two people are looking at the same thing and having the same vision it’s even stronger. When three do it it’s even stronger. And then it keeps growing exponentially. You find that more people are looking in the same direction and seeing this passion, or seeing this vision, and then having the passion put in them to want to contribute to it. And that’s what it was, and that’s what it’s been, and that’s what it is, and that’s what it’s gonna be.

**PAO: So what began with three people has now grown into one of the most well established gatherings of poets and spoken word artists in Dallas, especially for spoken word because there aren’t that many venues for that anymore. Every time you turn around it seems like we’ve lost another one. Most of them seem to be for music - Fallout Lounge is for music, Crown & Harp is for music...**

**JO: Mm hmm.**

**PAO: Would you say that there’s less support in the Dallas scene, such as it is, for spoken word at this point compared to when you started, or do you think that you’ve made an active contribution to that?**

**JO: As far as what I observe that happens - and it’s just going on over seven years that I’ve really had my ear to that ground - and from what I’ve heard from people who’ve been in and out of it throughout the years before me, it’s kind of an ebb and a flow. And I think that at times it might be just a little bit more active and things happening and venues opening or mics opening up and stages opening up. I think what Mad Swirl’s been throughout all of the ebb and the flowing that might have**



**happened in the past seven years has been consistent. Every first Wednesday regardless of if you don’t read any other time in that month, people are gonna show up on the first Wednesday**

to read. They look forward to it, it's something that's an event, it's on a Wednesday freakin' night! (*laughs*). I mean, of all nights for it to be on and to still have people that are gonna come there and stick it out till midnight knowing that they're gonna have to get up the next morning at the normal time to go to work, I think it's just been a consistent open space for people. I think when people like Desmene [Statum] call it a church, I mean it is a spiritual experience for some of us. And she gets that. And there's people who really get it, and those are the people who if it only ended up being six of us on the microphone again, just the right six people... that's just as good as the night when we have twenty people on the microphone. It's not about the popularity of it. That's why I don't go and plaster flyers all over the place and try to get a bunch of new people into it. It's about the quality of people who are there. So if it's only a handful of us, I mean I've had wonderful nights in the beginning when it was just Cheyenne, Lisa, I, Merlin, Chris Hamilton, and a few other people. It's been great nights, just as good as nights when we've had twenty people on the list who've all been good. Just different.

**PAO: Do people generally find out about it through word of mouth? That's how I found out about it.**

**JO:** And I think that's the way it grew. That's... there we go back to the organic part of it. It wasn't so much, you know, I didn't go and buy ad space in the *Dallas Observer* and I didn't start sticking my nose up people's asses who can help serve our goal. There was a "put it out there and see what happens." And Kevin again was wanting us to do some more advertising and I said, "You know I'm doing this for drink tickets, Kevin, and I'm still doing it for drink tickets, that's all I get is drink tickets." I get no cash at all to do it. So I'm paying money, in whatever ways - time, effort, and a few things that I do print out. I said, "You can buy ad space and you can do that but I'm not gonna. People who come, I'll tell 'em to come back next month, and tell people who might dig it to come back next month." And I always said that and I always say it still. It's still part of my intro: If you like tonight come back, here's when we're doing it again, tell people you know who might like it. And that's what happened.

I think while we were doing it we went to one of Paul Sexton's readings that they did down in Oak Cliff, the Oak Cliff Circle of Poets. Chey' and I went out... we were gonna go out and see [if] we can drum up some people to come by. We'd already been doing it for about a year. And Paul came, and what Paul brought was a little bit of legitimacy to Mad Swirl Open Mic. By then we had about a good dozen or so regulars that were coming, so we weren't foundering at that point, but it wasn't the caliber of people that have come since Paul started coming. And [he] then told Opalina [Salas], and then Opalina would tell Zim and Zim would tell Dez, and Dez told, you know, M.H. started coming, and all the people that we know of as the true regulars. And a lot of people are very active in helping Mad Swirl, the lovechild that is Mad Swirl, continue to grow. Paul is the point where I can connect a lot of people that came. Paul is the guy who opened the door for other people to find out about it, who I'd like to give credit to. Our own marketing efforts and the website and everything else, and Facebook at this point and Myspace back in the day, well, I think it's still working out, but probably the most likely way

that people have heard about it and will continue to hear, know about it, is through that.

**PAO: It's probably the most legitimate form of promotion for an open mic.**

**JO:** Oh, for sure.

**PAO: If you actively advertise, you're going to get a high percentage of people reading because it's cool...**

**JO:** Exactly.

**PAO: ... because they've heard that, especially with slam, which is all performance based, it's all based on wowing the audience...**

**JO:** Slam poetry has some actual great content, and I don't... You know, when people dismiss slam poetry, which I'm not a big slam poetry fan just because of the aspect of the grading on it, but there's been some slam poets who I've heard their stuff and it's completely moved me. And there's ones that have come to Mad Swirl that I can completely appreciate. There's all different styles and there's all kinds of voices out there and there's all different deliveries, and if you deliver your stuff in a way that's gonna move me and I can understand your words and your words have some weight behind them and it's not just a smokin' screen kind of performance where you're just, *"You're gonna like me because I'm performing it this way and I'm using this kind of cadence and I'm using these kind of hand gestures"*... you can stand up there with your hands down by your sides and look down at your paper the whole time, and if I'm hearing what you're saying then it's just as good as a slam poet.

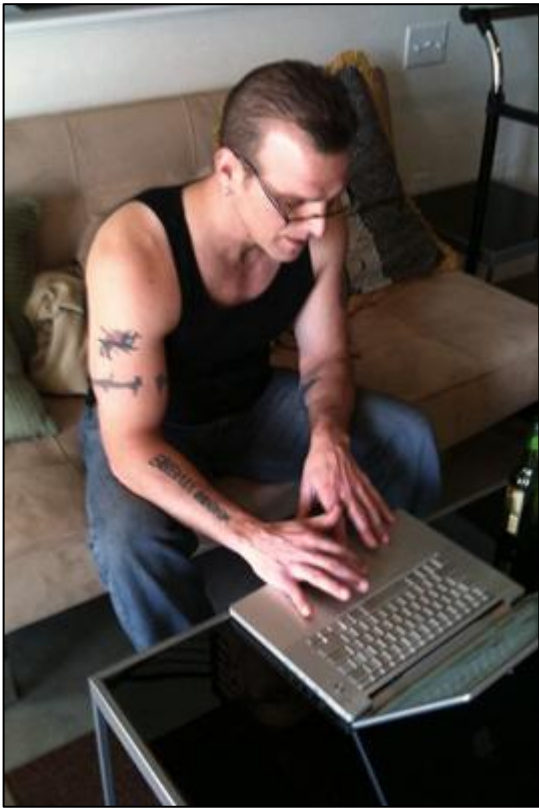
To me it's all behind what they're saying and not so much how they're performing it, although the performance does have a play in it. Which is... I mean I've grown in my performance since I've started going up on the mic. I used to be a lot more head down, just kinda reading through going as fast as I could to be done with it. Now I've got my cadence and the way I deliver and, you know, [am] getting more intimate with my stage self, being a natural introvert, to be an extrovert and to be out there. My nervous energy and my introvert self are saying, *I don't wanna do this, I would rather sit back and maybe observe*. I'm a much better observer than an actual participator. But it forces me to participate and it takes me out of my comfort zone. And it's great. I love it. It's a wonderful experience for sure.

**PAO: I'm more of a behind the scenes kinda guy.**

**JO:** If that's where you're comfortable, but, you know, I'm tryin' to scare myself more these days. And scaring myself has become easier. I don't mind so much throwing myself off and throwing myself for a loop. I think it's very beneficial to my growth. And Mad Swirl's been the same way, it's been baring myself out there when I don't necessarily know how people are gonna take what I'm reading. And part of the reason why Mad Swirl became what Mad Swirl



became was because I wanted to share my own stuff. I didn't want to share it going "Here's my book! This is Johnny Olson's swirling madness thing!" It's a collective, it's a group, there's all of us... and I feel safer sharing my stuff with ten other people, going "Okay, you might not like my stuff but you'll like this stuff, or maybe you'll like my stuff, I don't know." But it's not just my stuff that's gonna be judged, by people who are gonna judge.



**PAO: How would you characterize the state of the scene in Dallas and/or especially Mad Swirl? When you mention "collective," it's more of a collective or collaborative as opposed to just a group of people who occasionally meet up at a certain time and place. Do you think there's more of an air of community with Mad Swirl?**

**JO:** Yes, absolutely. I think the part that's in *On the Road* about the mad ones - "*The ones for me have always been the mad ones, the ones who are mad to talk, mad to be saved*" - I obviously grabbed onto that as a term of endearment for people because I wrote a whole poem about it. "Fabulous Roman Candles" is written around the mad ones, and I think people take pride to be called a mad one. I think to them, that feels like that is a sense of community, and they get that. And you know, if you understand the context behind what a mad one is, not to put a label on that either, but the people can relate to the sentiment of "*people are mad to talk, mad to be saved,*

*desirous of everything at the same time, that never yawn or say a commonplace thing, but burn, burn, burn.*" We all know people like that, and we all want to see that part of that inside of us. Not "we all" being everybody, but everybody who takes the whole idea of Mad Swirl are the people who get the whole idea of sharing.

I think there are people who just come to Mad Swirl as a social obligation, thinking they need to show their face there because it keeps them connected to a community. I don't think everybody's necessarily bought in or drank the Kool-Aid of Mad Swirl. And the ones who have, you know not everyone likes it. It's not going to be everyone's scene. But there are for sure a good core group of mad ones who are part of a community. And that's just the open mic community. We've got countless people online that are part of that community. Some of it overlaps into the open mic scene, but a lot of it doesn't. We've got local poets who never come to open mic who live in the Dallas-Fort Worth area and that we've built a relationship with and never met once who are part of that. And there's plenty of people who come to open mic who are not on the website and might not have even visited the website. It's almost like different entities, so the community as far as in the local scene for sure, but there's also a whole 'nother

one that's starting to connect around the world more and more so.

**PAO: The website pulls in people from all over the world.**

**JO:** All over the world. I just got two new poets that we just added up from Nepal that are contributing poets. And when they become a contributing poet, that's a lot of waiting and time and dedication. We have at least sixty poets in our review queue at all times, sixty different submissions that we have to review at all times. So people will wait two, four, six months before they'll actually become a contributing poet. And we're not losing people from that, we're gaining people from that, which is amazing. And the connection you build by you writing once, we write back, you write back again, you reveal a little bit more of yourself, you share more of your poetry, we write back more personal-like. Then it becomes a relationship on the third or fourth time that you're sending poetry, and we're building bridges with you. I'm starting to know what you do in Nepal... what you're pursuing, know about your writing, 'cause poetry reveals a lot about somebody's internal workings. So Mad Swirl's reaching out all over the place... and then you've got the personalities behind it - you got me, you got M.H., you got Madelyn, you got Tyler Malone, you got, you know, I mean Lisa at that time that she was a part of it, Cheyenne, and this little baby that we've created. I don't know, it's kind of this back and forth swirl. It's really, truly a swirl.

**PAO: I didn't host, but I helped run an open mic for thirteen months, so I can say I appreciate all the work that goes into it, definitely.**

**JO:** You're a curator for the night. That's the role of the host, is a curator. If you're having a gallery show, you got five artists showing, you gotta look at them, their whole bodies of work, and go "Okay, I'm gonna put these together in this kind of way." There's an art form to being a curator. It's seeing an overall picture and going "Okay, here's the way I think this picture's going to look best," and you arrange it that way. If you don't give any consideration, it's not gonna have the flow it needs to have. And that was the way it always was at Mad Swirl, there was never "*Hey you're #1, #2, #3, #4 on the list because that's where you put your name down.*" You tell me your name and I'll make sure it's noted down, then we'll give you a heads up when you're about to come up. But other than that the responsibility's up to us. If you want to get up earlier or you want to get up later, we'll see what we can do to accommodate that, and we usually do, but for the most part you're not gonna say "I'm going right here." It's like "No, no, sorry." And people get thrown off - *Put my name down on the list?* What's your name, I'll put it down. *When am I going up?* I'll let you know.

**PAO: Keeps them on their toes, too.**

**JO:** Yeah, and it keeps moving, it keeps people paying attention for sure. And it keeps the flow and then I can start the list off... always having to cross off and move people and arrow things around and figure out what we're gonna do. And they always look like this, every single one of them. When I first sit down I can go, "Okay here's the way the order's gonna be." It never

works out that way. It never does, 'cause all of a sudden, you know, "*Oh! This person would be good after that person.*"

**PAO: You're a dynamic, energetic host.**

**JO:** Well, thank you. I've grown into it (*laughs*). There's a moment that's created and that night's a night that's created and that mic is a mic that's created by the people who come to appreciate it. If I'm good at opening up the door and allowing people to come and share the space with me, and with M.H. and with Mad Swirl, then that's cool and I can take credit as far as that's concerned. But as far as the success of the night, it always has to do with the people who get up there and perform. I can be a great host and have a bunch of people who aren't into it and think that the whole thing sucks and don't believe in it, and it won't be anything at all.



**PAO: How important would you say it is to support other open mics in the area?**

**JO:** I think it's very important, and I might not be the best supporter of the other open mics. I don't go to every single one that's out there. I try to go enough to show that I'm supporting it. I also like to go and participate in other open mics because it takes a lot of the pressure off of having to host it. And my intentions are always good to want to go, like when you were doing the open mics, and I was like, "I plan on going Peter but you know, Sundays are tough, and sometimes they kick my ass." But I tried to support the features. I was always at *Poets on X+*, I didn't miss one of those, except I think one time when I was out of town. You know, it was every second Friday. I can commit myself to coming every second Friday, I can do that. I can put that on my calendar and it becomes an event that I look forward to going to. And I loved participating there. I thought it was a great space to come to.

So I think it's very important to give, to give what you would expect. Do unto others, you know, the golden rule, do unto others as you'd have done unto you. I want people to come support Mad Swirl, so I gotta obviously show that there's some support on the other side of it. With that being said, if you don't feel like I'm supporting you enough, don't come to Mad Swirl because you feel like you're supporting something, come to it because you wanna come to it. And if you don't like to come to it and you're coming out of an obligation, well then I'd rather not have you come at all out of an obligation. It's an obligation to me. It's an obligation to M.H. to be a co-host. It's an obligation to Kevin as owner of the bar to have the bar open. That's the

only obligation that should really be out there. Swirve, they're the house band, there's an obligation for them to be there. Other than that, if you don't want to go then don't go. I'd rather have you go because you wanna go. I'd rather have the energy because people are looking forward to it and are excited about the whole thing, and not going because *"I'd better go because if I don't go then people aren't gonna come to mine."*

**PAO:** As host of a long standing open performance themed event, and the primary force behind a website with worldwide readership, you could say you have a regular outlet for all of your artistic or creative endeavors that a lot of people don't have. I think a lot of artists or would-be artists feel that they're artistically limited because, perhaps, they're trapped in an unfulfilling corporate job, or they have family obligations and responsibilities that might seem to preclude them from having an outlet for their ambitions. So what would you be doing if you didn't have Mad Swirl?

**JO:** I've thought about it, 'cause there's been times where I didn't feel like I had the energy to wanna continue to do it. I'd say that it happens relatively regularly that I feel like going, *"You know what? I don't wanna do Mad Swirl anymore. I think I'm kinda done, I'm kinda burning out on some aspects of it."* I come around. It always comes around. I can be doing the site for two weeks, and just feel like, *"No one gives a shit, people are just, you know, this is just what it is, and no one's appreciating it,"* and all of a sudden get some reply from a poet saying, *"You know, I've been reading Mad Swirl, been going visiting every day for the last two months, I've really seen stuff on there that's moved me."* Gave specific examples of poets' work that they've read on there, and said, *"It really was a dark time in my life and this really turned me around, it's really done this, it's done that, it's made me want to write, I feel the poetry on there is accessible, I feel the artwork on there's accessible,"* which keeps me going. Okay, this person didn't have a creative outlet before. *Mad Swirl* gave them a creative outlet.



And what's gonna happen to that one person who finds that creative outlet and has children, you know, a mother of three, or father of whatever, or friends of whatever... that ripples out. That person's new outlet which is helping them come forth, bring forth what's inside of them, it's gonna have a ripple effect and then affect those children, affect those friends, affect those spouses... and that ripples out. It continues to ripple out. And each rippling helps Mad Swirl to kinda keep swirling. It gives the energy to want to sit here every day when I get home from work after I've just been sitting in front of a computer all damn day long, doing the same kinda work. I wanna go out, I wanna have fun, I got things I wanna... you know what I mean? There's

other things that I would rather be doing sometimes, but, you know what? It all comes back man, and it's this amazing energy coming back. So at this point, I think the only time I'm gonna quit Mad Swirl is if Mad Swirl quits me (*laughs*).

**PAO: So, a lot of artists say, or by their actions seem to indicate, that the artist has a responsibility to make some kind of social or political statement, such as movie actors wearing the red ribbons at awards shows. But you seem not to do that, other than around Memorial Day and Veterans Day, when you'll have the Facebook picture of the Marine that's saluting the wreath. There's not really any political bias in any of your work. So do you subscribe to the idea that an artist has a social responsibility to address some kind of concerns, socially, politically, morally, ethically, or do you believe that it's perfectly legitimate for someone's artistic outlet to be divorced from any kind of sociopolitical context?**

**JO:** I think it could be completely separate. A lot of people don't know my political views, they don't know how I stand on things because none of my work is really political. And I've had people ask me about the Occupy Dallas - you know, "*How come you're not a part of it? It seems like a thing that you would be a part of, it seems like Mad Swirl could be a part of something like that.*" First of all, I don't wanna blur any lines and I don't wanna alienate anybody. You don't wanna alienate anybody by putting out your own personal agenda when it comes to politics and religion and social issues. I mean, pieces like "Joe," that's speaking out pretty much about how I feel about my world around me and... several other pieces speak out how I feel. It's just my observation of where I'm at. Am I gonna fly my donkey or fly my elephant or am I gonna be going and squatting in downtown Dallas for a week to push my viewpoint? No, there's other people who can do that. That's not the role that I wanna take and that's not a role that we wanna do in *Mad Swirl*. Do we accept political poetry? We sure do. Do we select poetry that has to do with theology, for all different points of view? We sure do. Does that speak to what Mad Swirl stands for? It sure does because it's the whole mad swirl, a bunch of different viewpoints and of different opinions and of different beliefs and faiths and left and right stances. It will speak for itself. You can read some of my work and realize that okay, I am a little liberally minded, okay... oh wait, wait a second, he's talking about being in the service. Okay, so maybe he's not so liberally minded. I love to keep people guessing. People can never put me into a box, they have a very hard time to put me inside of the box because of that reason.

I was in the Marine Corps, you know, for four years. It had a huge impact on who I am. Am I a warmonger? No. Do I respect the military and the people who are fighting? Yes. Do I necessarily agree with the reason why they're there? No. But am I gonna support the people who are there? Yes, because they're not there for those political reasons, they're there for lots of reasons that people who've never been in the service will ever know, all the different circumstances that bring people together to all of a sudden have to bear arms with your fellow brothers and have to go out there and do that. I care about my fellow Marines that are out there. So every Memorial Day and every Veterans Day and every chance that I can go out there and

support - as far as that's concerned - yeah, you'll know how I stand on that. And I don't mind Mad Swirl having any affiliation at all with supporting the troops because I was a troop, and I know what it feels like, and I can't hide that part of me. A lot of my poetry for the most part is just very observational of what's going on in my head and my heart at that point of my life, and if I'm feeling strongly because, you know, there's reading the headlines and watching the news... that's gonna affect the way I write that day. And if it seems worthy enough for me to want to wordsmith it and put it out there to share with my world, then so be it, it might have a little political slant. But is it my obligation as an artist to do so? No. My obligation as an artist is to express myself and to share what's going on inside of me.



**PAO: How do you compose your poetry? Do you sit down planning to write and just wait for the ideas to form, or is it just whenever inspiration hits you in the middle of the night?**

**JO:** Being a very routine based person, I write every morning before I go into my workplace in my car journal, and I have been doing that for years. That voice is completely different and completely, um, almost a subconscious level of writing as I'm still awaking, haven't had anything to really start jading my day. I get to work really early. I'm there at 5:15. I start writing at 5:15 in the morning so I didn't deal with a bunch of traffic getting there, have my cup of coffee, it's usually peaceful, when it's nice out in the spring and the summer and the fall I have the windows down. So I'm sitting out there just enjoying and writing and it's usually very God based. I'm a very spiritual person. I'm not religious, I'm very spiritual. I say a prayer every day, a long prayer, a thirty minute prayer that I do while I'm driving to work, then I get there and I write. And I have a journal that I keep here at the house that I write in at night, or in the evenings or on the weekends, that is a completely different voice for me. Whether it's, you know, I've been partyin' in that period of my life, or whether I'm going through a divorce in that period of my life, or whatever might be going on during that time - you've got opening an open mic, or just got done with hanging out with some friends, or feeling in a funky, crabby, shitty place - that's gonna come out in a different way. But I don't ever really sit down and say, *"Okay it's poetry time, I'm gonna write some poems."*

**PAO: You're a painter, illustrator, and graphic designer as well as a poet, and you designed and coded the entire Mad Swirl website yourself?**

**JO:** The overall look and feel of it was designed by Cheyenne, this iteration of it, the latest one. 'Cause you can tell from *Mad Swirl 5* it's kind of got the same look, feel, color scheme as that one, and we never really varied from it after we came up with that design. [What] came out at the same time that we put out 5 is that we did a revamp on the website, and even the theme of the carnival on the front is on the bottom of the page. That's the same kind of orange that we

used, I pulled a brown out of here... so a lot of the stuff is taken from the look and feel of this issue for the website. I could've done it; Cheyenne offered to do it and he did do it and he did a great job. We've been working on a more web 2.0 version of it that's gonna be more blog-like, that looks different and feels different and can be changed much more easily through CSS and all that. That's his primary role and work that he does. Cheyenne's gone on to become a very successful creative director at one of the biggest ad agencies in the Southwest.

**PAO: That's why he moved to Austin?**

**JO:** That's why he moved to Austin. Cheyenne's doing commercials in L.A. at this point, and he does some great stuff. Cheyenne's full of a lot of great ideas and he's got a great creative energy.

**PAO: But he's still actively involved, in a reduced capacity.**

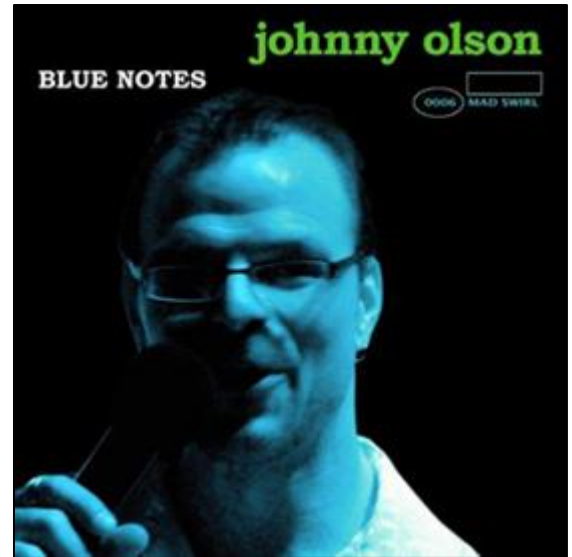
**JO:** Cheyenne and I, every time we talk, Mad Swirl comes up. When he was here over Thanksgiving we sat down and we talked about the direction of it. At this point Cheyenne's a creative consultant, a huge creative consultant and always an inspiration and I'll never take his name off of being part of Mad Swirl. Cheyenne and I are still actively discussing and dreaming and conceiving and seeing what sticks to the wall. M.H. is more of the operational side of it. He and I talk more about our daily operations and weekly operations and monthly operations and dream as well. Those conversations sometimes are all done together, all three of us, and sometimes those conversations are done using me as the middle person talking about, "Well, Cheyenne and I were talking about this idea," and then seeing what he says and bouncing things around and seeing what kind of sticks at that point. Our 2.0 version will be driven by WordPress. It gives you more templated stuff, gives you CSS stuff, you can play with properties to change the colors around, change the colors in the background, change the colors of this, do that. You can go on there and you could say you like it and have it go on your Facebook. You can comment on all the poetry. People will be able to submit and we just have to review it within a web interface. And that way I don't have to go through e-mail and copy/paste - I can just say exactly what I want, post, and put it out there, and *boom*. We can do it a lot quicker, faster. It's a lot more interactive - people have a voice to be able to say what they like and don't like, kind of like what Facebook is doing now. We're putting the weekly poetry forum out there for people to look at and comment on, and say they like and don't like.

We're gonna do an anthology in January, bringing together the best of the poetry forum online, bringing together the best of the gallery online, and bringing the best of the... in our opinion, you know, obviously we're the editors so we get to pick and choose what we like the best. Not necessarily making that **the** best, it's just what we like the most and what we as curators say, "Okay, this poem and this story and this image, they all kind of work together, there's a theme that we're looking at." Every day M.H. puts a poem together on the poetry forum. We call it the best of the poetry forum. There's a theme, and it's funny that every week there's a theme to the poetry that's coming in randomly from all over the place and all these different voices. But it

always seems to be some overall idea, and that's because M.H. is looking, he's reading all this poetry and he's cataloging it. So bringing that all together into a print issue will... *Here's the best of that week, here's the best of week 2, best of week 3, best of week 4*, and that will give an overall theme of how the anthology's gonna come together. I think if we knock it out in the first quarter of 2012 with a 2011 anthology, it's perfect timing.

**PAO: What made you decide to go with a different theme for *Mad Swirl 6*?**

**JO:** Well, you know after doing this for five times and this kind of theme... I mean there's a lot of fun doing it, but it's also a lot of having to spin your wheels and come up with personals, and having, you know, the things that you have to kinda come up with that aren't just straight up content of poetry and art. Which I love, I love coming up with fake horoscopes and fake personals and collaborating with other people when we're feeling all mellow and weird to dream that stuff up. But I liked the curating of this one. I liked bringing it all together and telling poets, "Okay, here's the theme of this next issue, here's what we're gonna do and here's what we have in mind and we're gonna do a recording of it at the end and it's gonna be live and, you know, we wanna have it in with Swirve." And we got to bring Swirve into the mix, we got to play up the whole idea of an album and of this collaboration and capturing this moment in time. The print issue for this one was inspired by the fact that a lot of people don't come to open mic who always want to experience it, and this gave them an opportunity to kinda get an idea of the energy of it.



I've had a lot of great feedback on *Mad Swirl 6*. I love *Mad Swirl 6*. I like the theme of the Blue Note. I love the Blue Note era, as far as the recordings and the artists that went then. The artist who designed most of the album covers, which, giving credit where credit is due, I forgot his name, but I gave him credit in here... Reid Miles. He did the famous John Coltrane shot, all these shots. I got a book that's called *The Blue Notes Issues*, or *The Blue Note Covers* [ed: *The Cover Art of Blue Note Records: The Collection* by Graham Marsh and Glyn Callingham], and so I just was like, "These are badass man. I want to do some stuff like this. I love the way that they did stuff." So I took the same typography, which is fun, I loved it. It was a lot of fun designing it. I want to do more of this. I really liked doing this. I liked having the experience to be able to hear and to read and to see and to do it all into one thing. But I also liked issue 5, and 4 and 3 and 2...

**PAO: Who made the recordings for *Mad Swirl 6*?**

**JO:** Kevin Foresman. I told him I was doing this project. He did the audio for it. We also had somebody videotape it. I want to put this together as an interactive, online issue. I've got all the



content, I've got the design already done, all I have to do is take Mad Swirl and then be able to take some of this audio and take some of this video and piece it together. That's what I'm hoping to manifest come 2012 for the future of Mad Swirl, is to... continue to grow by having more people see the same thing. And if those people who really believe in it that want to contribute to it have certain skill sets and they are passionate about wanting to do those things, then by all means come on board.

**PAO: That's pretty much the end of the questions I had, other than one thing I wanted to ask you about. To get away from the poetry for a minute, you're a senior illustrator, graphic designer... Is any of your other work visible or has it ever been exhibited anywhere outside of *Mad Swirl*?**

**JO:** No.

**PAO: There's never been a showing? There isn't some forum - Flickr, anywhere, another website, where anyone can see any of it?**

**JO:** No. I don't, um... that's one place I suppose that I don't, maybe, support other outlets. I rarely submit my poetry to other lit mags. I've been included, like with "Joe," that was a collaborative piece for 10K Poets. I've shared with them, I've shared with the *Texas Beat Anthology* that's coming out that I got accepted into. I very rarely will share my poetry and my artwork, especially my artwork. I'm very sensitive about my artwork. It's one thing to share my words, it's another thing to share my artwork. I've never had a showing. I don't know if I ever will. I try not to should myself too much. "Should" on myself - you ever hear that before? *I should be doing this and I should be doing that and I should be doing this.* 'Cause you know what, that just gets you into a downward spiral and you start feeling shitty 'cause you're not doing the things that you should be doing.

**PAO: I know exactly how you feel.**

**JO:** I should be painting more and I should be drawing more, but you know what, if I beat myself up on it, I'm never gonna do it because then I'm feeling shittier about shoulding on myself.

**PAO: Funny, I just adopted that attitude recently with the enormous backlog of band shots I have going back to 2009, especially when I have a situation where the band's broken up and I still haven't published the stuff, which really makes me feel like I've dropped the ball.**

**JO:** You know, that's the hard part. You know I want to put this out in a digital way and I want to get 2.0 out and I want... a lot of things I should be doing, but I'm not gonna be beatin' myself over for not doing them because you know what, I can only do so much. I've been very blessed to be able to be standing where I'm standing and doing what I'm doing and to have this

community that was built up around something that was dreamed up in a living room much like this living room, with Cheyenne and Lisa. I mean life ebbs and flows and things, people come and go and energies and commitments change all the time. And if this is all it's ever gonna be, if this is its pinnacle, and everything dies out from now... then it's been a good ride. I've really loved every moment of it. It's been a blessing. It's changed me, absolutely changed me, and it hasn't only changed me, it's changed a lot of people. In the big ass ocean of life that we lead, Mad Swirl's been a bigger ripple than I could have done by myself.

**PAO: Is there anything else you want to say?**

**JO:** Nah man. I appreciate what you do, Peter. I wanna say that.

Olson household, 12/8/2011

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