

# Robert Pinsky

A Poet Laureate gets jazzy at Festival of the Arts Boca

Written by JOHN THOMASON

To a list of titles that includes essayist, critic, literary translator and three-time Poet Laureate of the United States, Robert Pinsky can add “bandleader.”

On March 5 at Festival of the Arts Boca, Pinsky will read new work and highlights from his vast archive, while a jazz trio will provide live accompaniment. Like any good jazz concert, this hybrid program, known as PoemJazz, welcomes improvisation. Pinsky says it involves “a little planning and a lot of informed, expert surprises.”

Pinsky, 78, has been publishing award-winning poems since the 1960s, and has long espoused poetry’s status as an art form to be spoken and performed, not just read. “The medium of poetry is a human body: the column of air inside the chest, shaped into signifying sounds,” he wrote, in 1999’s *The Sounds of Poetry: A Brief Guide*. “In this sense, poetry is just as physical or bodily an art as dancing.”

So it is with Pinsky’s performances of his own

changed my ambitions to poetry. My poems have always been sort of would-be choruses for tenor saxophone. I’m always a bit disappointed by “interpretation” and “analysis”—have always wanted them to just sound good. So “Poem-Jazz” was a natural step.

## 2 What do you feel your poems and jazz music have in common?

Melody, harmony, rhythm. Pleasure in taking risks. Joy at following an unexpected path. Emotion that defies clichés and laziness, on the way up the mountain.

## 3 What are some of your favorite jazz artists, and why?

I have an advance copy of Laurence Hobgood’s new album, *tresseterra*. Laurence’s piano mediates between a jazz trio and a string quartet, in a mixture of composition and improvisation. The material, in eight parts, is recognizable songs: an eclectic mix from “Wichita Lineman” and “We Shall Overcome” to “Every Little Thing She Does is Magic” and Chopin’s “Waltz in C# Minor.” I love the way the music ignores the differences among idioms (classical jazz, pop, classical-classical) to make something new and recognizable, fresh and deep-rooted.

The singers on my list teach me something about phrasing every time I listen. To hear Sarah Vaughan sing “Over the Rainbow” or “Misty”—along with the amazing treatment of the melody, there’s the awareness and invention of the phrasing. That is PoemJazz.

## 4 Has embarking on this project changed your poetry at all—or at least the way you perform your poetry?

The answer may seem strange, but no, not really. The sister arts have always been one art in my mind. Working with great musicians has been a confirmation of that.

## 5 Though I didn’t live through this movement, I can imagine the beat poets performing their work to the sound of jazz accompaniment in some hip Greenwich Village dive. Do you hope to conjure a similar vibe?

No—I hope that what we do is much more *musical* than that. Allen Ginsberg wrote some great poems, but he was not much of a musician, frankly. This may sound conceited, but I think what the musicians and I do is something different. It’s more like rap—but in a different musical idiom and a different poetic medium.

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poems, which take on new incarnations when spoken to a staccato rhythm. He thinks of his voice as a horn section, delivering the words with an emphasis on their formal qualities. This might mean repeating lines for emphasis, shifting cadences, adding a word here and there, moving to the beat while vocalizing them. Even if you’ve read his work, contributions like “Antique” and “Creole” sound, in PoemJazz, like fully realized songs.

“The greatest compliment for me is when great, high-caliber musicians treat me as a fellow-musician,” Pinsky says. “We play together.”

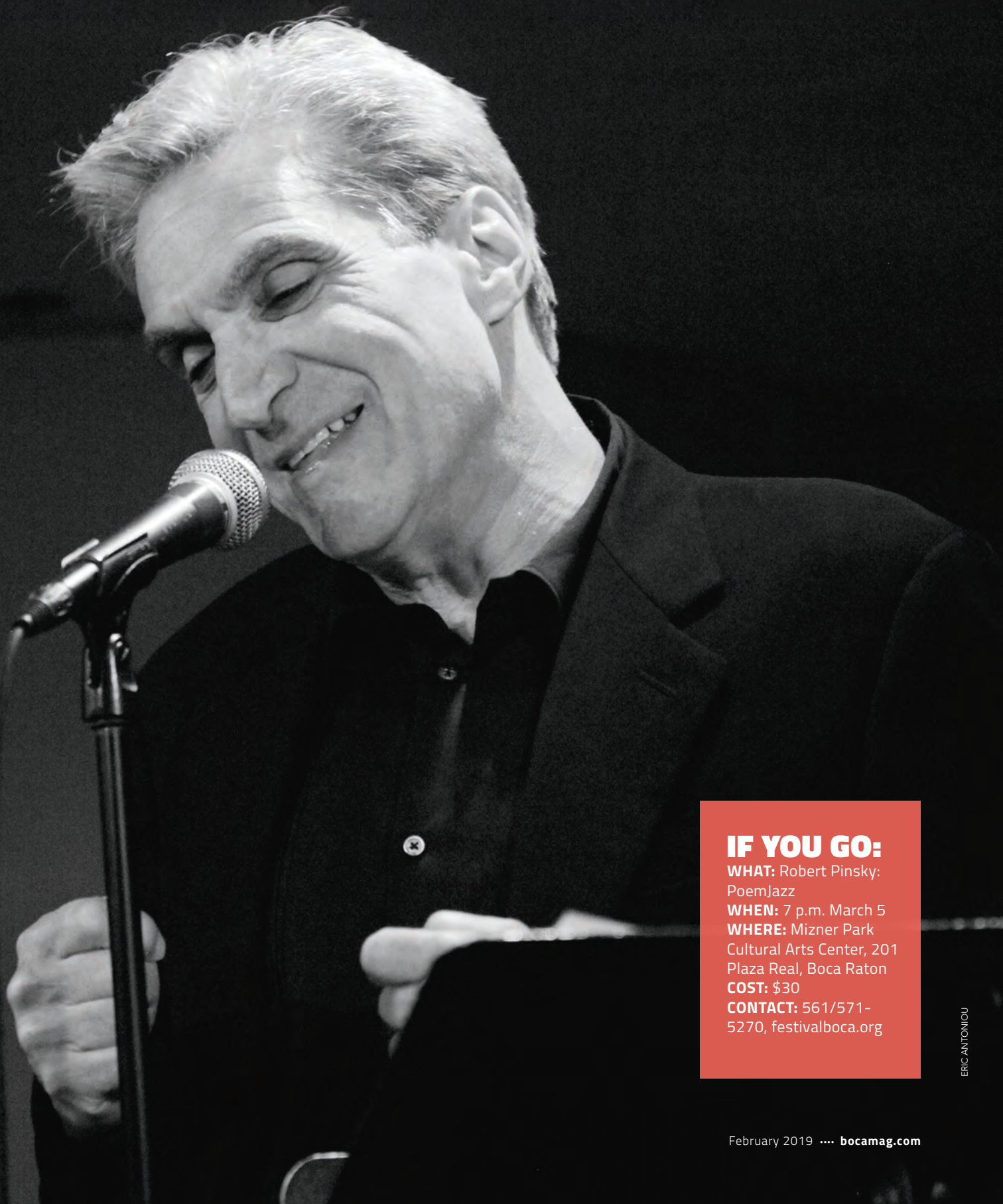
## 1 How did you come up with the idea for PoemJazz?

As a teenage saxophone player, I played dances, bar mitzvahs and weddings, bars, Elks clubs—inglorious gigs but with glorious, vague dreams of being a jazz star. In my

high school yearbook, I was voted not “Most Literary Boy” but “Most Musical Boy.” So the “Jazz” part came before the “Poem” part.

But the truth is, I was not a wonderful musician. In college I played a little but pretty quickly





**IF YOU GO:**

**WHAT:** Robert Pinsky:  
PoemJazz

**WHEN:** 7 p.m. March 5

**WHERE:** Mizner Park  
Cultural Arts Center, 201  
Plaza Real, Boca Raton

**COST:** \$30

**CONTACT:** 561/571-  
5270, festivalboca.org

ERIC ANTONIOU