

# Minnesota music mainstay Paul Metsa finds a new direction home

After moving to Duluth, he delivers "Alphabet Jazz," a book of poems, prose and puppies.

By Jon Bream (<https://www.startribune.com/jon-bream/8660039/>) Star Tribune |

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He left Minneapolis for Duluth two years ago, but music man Paul Metsa still maintains an office in northeast Minneapolis. Well, he calls Grumpy's Bar his office.

"Of course, it was before I left, too," he said with a smile, pointing to his corner seat at the bar.

Metsa is quick with a good line. He's long been a gifted wordsmith, whether as a prolific singer-songwriter, tireless activist/organizer, charming raconteur, acclaimed memoirist, articulate op-ed writer, chatterbox broadcaster or relentless self-promoter.

Now he's using words in another way — as a poet.

He authored "Alphabet Jazz: Poetry, Prose, Stories and Songs," a self-published collection of works from 1984-2022.

The title was inspired by Twin Cities visual artist [James Wrayge](http://jameswrayge.com/), (<http://jameswrayge.com/>) who calls his work "Eye Jazz."

"I was thinking 'Alphabet Jazz' because it's a real playful way of looking at language, and the book has several different styles of writing," said Metsa, who will read, sing and talk about his book on Saturday at the Woman's Club of Minneapolis. "It's kind of the linguistic version of jazz. Very improvisational."

Sort of a valentine to Minneapolis, "Alphabet Jazz" chronicles Metsa's 67 years, with salutes to his parents, friends, lovers, mentors, associates and, perhaps most significantly, his dogs. He could have subtitled the book "Poems, Prose and Puppies."

"If there were wings on dogs, then we would have known they were angels," Metsa said last week. "There's a relationship you have with a dog that's as deep as human relationships. It's a nonverbal communication, although I'll sit around waiting for my dogs to talk. Until I started the book, I had no idea that both of my rescue dogs could write."

"Alphabet Jazz" contains printed lyrics — a form of poems really — that illuminate Metsa's compelling motormouth songs like "St. Louis County Fair" and "Robots on Death Row." (And, of course, there's a companion CD of 14 songs.)

The prose pieces in "Alphabet Jazz" are typical Metsa yarns — some sincere such as how Mitch Omer, former proprietor of Hell's Kitchen restaurant in downtown Minneapolis, became Metsa's "last new best friend" for a year before dying, and some shaggy stories like how Metsa



JEFF WHEELER, STAR TRIBUNE

Paul Metsa in his Minneapolis "office" at Grumpy's Bar.

and a buddy stole a barstool from the Stone Pony, the New Jersey nightclub that Bruce Springsteen made famous. (Postscript: The stool resides in Metsa's garage in Duluth.)

And the poems are sometimes aspirationally Beat, sometimes sentimentally sweet, sometimes wildly stream of consciousness, sometimes quite literal like "Hey, Dad," written from the point of view of Blackie the dog.

On a recent snowy afternoon at Grumpy's, Metsa held forth in a rumbling rasp of a voice that was as parched as the Mojave Desert. It was easy to sense his fondness for Minneapolis, where he spent 20 years on the South Side and another 20 in Northeast. Plenty of time was spent on stages and in saloons. He's well known to bookers, bartenders and barflies alike.

"They say alcohol is the writer's lubricant," he said as he sipped coffee before his drive back to Duluth. "I find it to be occasionally useful. Plus you can get a certain melancholy, where after a couple of drinks, I'm not afraid to go deep. That's where the gold lies.

"I've written songs in this bar. There's few bars I haven't written songs in," he said with a chuckle. "I'm a big believer in the saloon ethos. I met some of my best friends in bars."

### **Libraries and bars**

Metsa's fascination with words started in his childhood in his hometown of Virginia, Minn.

"Storytelling Saturday mornings at the Virginia public library with the most aptly named librarian, Miss Smart, when I was in third grade," he reflected. "I loved those stories."

Then there were relatives who were raconteurs, like his paternal grandfather, who owned the Roosevelt Bar in Virginia.

"When Mom would drop me off at the bar to go shopping, I'd be surrounded by older folks and I'd just eavesdrop and hear their stories and realize this is a part of history I might never know," he said.

Metsa started writing songs in sixth grade (his first was "How Many Times Must I Cry" about his parents' impending divorce). Having been encouraged by his English teachers since middle school to read and write, he contributed "stoner essays" to his high school newspaper under the pen name Bernie Scribble.

A college dropout, Metsa schooled himself, reading Beat Generation writers like Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg, novelists like Mark Twain and Joseph Conrad, journalists like Jimmy Breslin and Studs Terkel, iconoclasts like Hunter Thompson and Woody Guthrie's "Bound for Glory."

No matter his format, Metsa is, at heart, a storyteller, capable of vivid detail, amusing embellishment and a spot-on kicker.

Metsa put "Alphabet Jazz" together as he packed up in Minneapolis and headed to Duluth in June 2021. For a year, he lived in the Duluth duplex

where Bob Dylan, then Bobby Zimmerman, spent his first six years. Metsa resided downstairs, and the Zimmermans had called the upstairs home (now being remodeled by [collector extraordinaire Bill Pagel \(https://www.startribune.com/ultimate-collector-bill-pagel-owns-both-of-bob-dylan-s-childhood-homes-and-his-highchair/570660742/\)](https://www.startribune.com/ultimate-collector-bill-pagel-owns-both-of-bob-dylan-s-childhood-homes-and-his-highchair/570660742/) to become a museum). Metsa helmed the visitors book when fans made the pilgrimage to Dylan's first home. He was responsible for asking them to sign the book, if they knocked on his door.

He's long had a fascination with Dylan, "but I don't bow down to the guy. I'm not a Bobcat. I've been interested in Dylan like some guys are interested in baseball. It's a great pastime."

As a 14-year-old, Metsa hitchhiked from Virginia to Hibbing, Minn., and stood by Dylan's boyhood home. He thought: "The kid that walked out of that house went out and really changed America."

He added, "The biggest lesson for me as a fellow Iron Ranger is you can get there from here."

Speaking of Dylan, Metsa has collaborated with Stillwater author Rick Shefchik on a new book, "Blood in the Tracks: The Minnesota Musicians Behind Dylan's Masterpiece," which will be published in August by University of Minnesota Press. The book tells the story of local musicians who received an unexpected invite to play on Dylan's 1975 "Blood on the Tracks" album but didn't receive official credit until 2018.

The same imprint published Metsa's 2011 memoir "[Blue Guitar Highway](https://www.startribune.com/the-long-strange-trip-of-paul-metsa/131827988/)," (<https://www.startribune.com/the-long-strange-trip-of-paul-metsa/131827988/>) which celebrated his unexpected encounters with Jerry Garcia, Karl Rove, Springsteen and, of course, Dylan, among others. That book is coming out in paperback in June.

Metsa has long had a romantic attachment to Duluth, a place where he always wanted to end up.

"My mom and dad met in Duluth. I loved Duluth since I was a kid. I did my first big gig there opening up for Taj Mahal at the NorShor Theatre. I'm just in love with Lake Superior."

He appreciates the vibrant arts and music scenes in Duluth, though he's not performing much in the bars.

"I'm doing an all-instrumental act called Kid Future. I call it from Son House to Sun Ra. I start playing fingerstyle blues, jazz and folk guitar and I use pedals and loopers."

Metsa is also concocting new journalistic ventures. Having broadcast hundreds of his [Wall of Power radio \(https://www.paulmetsa.com/paul-metsa-on-the-radio\)](https://www.paulmetsa.com/paul-metsa-on-the-radio) and [TV programs \(https://www.paulmetsa.com/paul-metsa-on-tv\)](https://www.paulmetsa.com/paul-metsa-on-tv), he is segueing into the forthcoming "Senior Moment Podcast," featuring conversations with interesting people over age 60, and a possible TV program ("Metsamerica") as "I move into my Charles Kuralt with a guitar."

He's happy in the Zenith City, where he frequents the public library.

"I live in the West End of Duluth, which is starting to reinvent itself like

Northeast [Minneapolis] started doing in the late '90s. I own a house. I've got nice guitars. I've got some books in the pipeline. I'm still playing.

"It's not the brass ring," he said with a wink, "but it's a shiny ring."

**Paul Metsa**

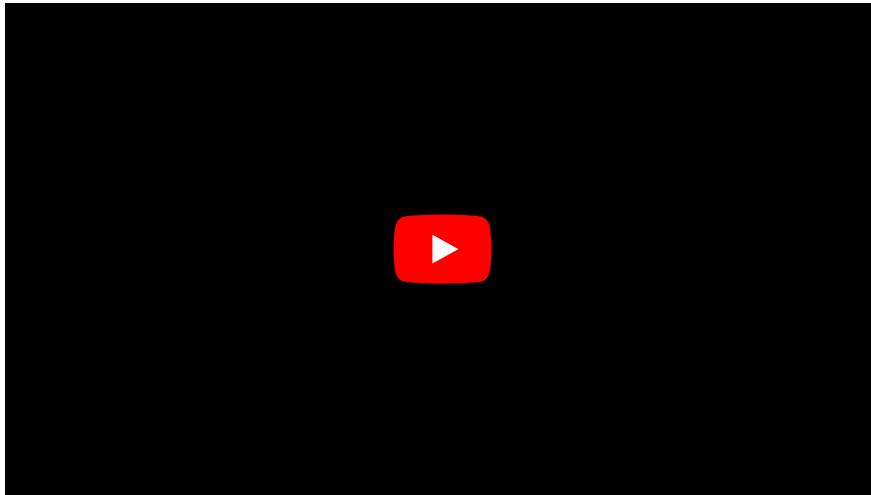
**What:** Reading, performance and Q&A with Andrea Swensson.

**When:** 7:30 p.m. Sat.

**Where:** Woman's Club of Minneapolis, 410 Oak Grove St., Mpls.

**Tickets:** \$25-\$65, [womansclub.org \(https://www.womansclub.org/public-events\)](https://www.womansclub.org/public-events)

**Books:** Available at amazon.com, Electric Fetus and Grumpy's Northeast.



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**Jon Bream** has been a music critic at the Star Tribune since 1975, making him the longest tenured pop critic at a U.S. daily newspaper. He has attended more than 8,000 concerts and written four books (on Prince, Led Zeppelin, Neil Diamond and Bob Dylan). Thus far, he has ignored readers' suggestions that he take a music-appreciation class.

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