the BEAT GENERATION

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The beat generation
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"A swinging group of new American men intent on joy"—that's how Jack Kerouac defined the Beat Generation in 1959. And since he had invented the term "Beat" some 10 years earlier, his comments ought to stand as the last word on the subject. But they don't.

Kerouac named the Beat Generation, but the moguls of the media did their best to take it away from him. Maybe the likes of *Time* and *Life* magazines just couldn't accept his belief in "joy" at face value. Certainly there wasn't much officially sanctioned joy available in the U.S.A. circa '59. After a decade's worth of the Cold War and McCarthyism, joy was a controlled substance to be parceled out very sparingly.

So when Kerouac and his cohort Allen Ginsberg came along shouting about visions and cross-country driving and supernatural ecstasy in works like *On the Road* and "Howl," commentators in the press and on the airwaves *knew* it all meant something else. In short order, the Beat Generation became a media symbol for a litany of sins: laziness, obscenity, drug abuse, perversion, smelly feet. Even when Kerouac insisted that Beat stood for "beatific" and offered kind words for President Eisenhower, it was somehow made to sound subversive. *Partisan Review*'s Norman Podhoretz delivered the verdict of many when he denounced the Beats as "young men who can't think straight and so hate anyone who can." Others depicted the Beat Generation as merely overgrown children in need of discipline, hard work, and a bath. Soon the "Beat" was transformed into the "beatnik" (a label dreamed up by San Francisco columnist Herb Caen in 1958), a goatee-sporting, bongo-playing human cartoon unworthy of serious discussion.

Thirty years later, fact and fiction about the Beat Generation have been jumbled together in the same fossilized strata, mixing treasure and trivia together indiscriminately. Sorting through it all takes a clear eye, a sharp ear, and a freewheeling sense of humor—qualities the original Beats had in abundance. Dean Moriarty (hero of *On the Road*) and Maynard G. Krebs (the beatnik goofball on TV's *Dobie Gillis*) may not have been equally significant as cultural icons, yet both testify to the impact that the Beat mystique had on the American psyche.

The truth is, the Beat Generation could only have been born in America. Its heritage was disreputable, however—jazz musicians, junkies, sexual outlaws, hobos, and other marginal types contributed much of their attitude and vocabulary. In this the Beat was almost (but not quite) synonymous with the jive-talking, flashily dressed hipster of the World War II era. Hipsters came in two varieties: "hot" (enthusiastic, fun-loving) and "cool" (withdrawn, nihilistic). Kerouac, Ginsberg, and company were definitely in the hot category.

There was an undeniable racial factor in all this. Disaffected whites viewed the black community as embodying the honest vitality missing from their own culture. It might've been news to many of the "happy, true-hearted, ecstatic Negroes of America" (Kerouac's description) that their lives were so untroubled. Accurately or not, white would-be hipsters picked up on black music, slang, and style as a way out of stultifying Caucasian conformity.

The development of bebop jazz in the '40s was a key influence on the Beat sensibility. Kerouac in particular was a devoted fan of Charlie "Bird" Parker, Dizzy

Poetry Reading in North Beach, Allen Ginsberg, Poet. Photo: Jerry Stoll

Gillespie, Thelonious Monk, and other bop innovators. Making leaps of association between musical and literary ideas, he used the improvisational techniques of Bird and Diz in his writing. The result was "spontaneous bop prosody" (a Ginsberg phrase), the "undisturbed flow from the mind of personal secret idea-words" that became Kerouac's trademark.

The Beats wrote for the ear, not just the printed page. Ginsberg arranged the words of his epochal "Howl" according to patterns of breath and speech, a method that gave his work incendiary force when read aloud. William Burroughs (the third principal figure among the Beat founding fathers) based much of his writings on the spoken routines he amused friends and strangers with. When Burroughs gave public readings of *Naked Lunch* and his other scabrous opuses, he performed them in character to hilarious effect.

The next step was reading to jazz accompaniment—Kerouac first tried live performance in 1957, then recorded three LPs during the next two years. [All are included in Rhino's *Jack Kerouac Collection*, R2/R4 70939.] Other literary figures with and without Beat associations were reciting with combos around this time as well. Chicago versifier Ken Nordine coined the term "Word Jazz" for his own version of these dabblings. In any case, nearly all poetry/music experiments in the late '50s/early '60s were labeled "beatnik" by the non- hip.

Whatever Mr. and Mrs. Mainstream thought the Beat Generation was, they found it a source of fascination, amusement, and repulsion for as long as the fad lasted. Weekend pseudo-Beats began turning up at coffeehouses across the country, sipping strong java and listening to bad free verse. One enterprising New Yorker even started a rent-a-beatnik service for those desperate for vicarious hipness. The Beat way of life—frequently confused with *Blackboard Jungle*-style juvenile delinquency—became grist for the mills of exploitation films and television exposés. Previously obscure or taboo topics (drugs, homosexuality, Zen) were thrust under Middle America's nose because of the Beats.

Even in adulterated and distorted form, the Beat Generation had an unmistakable effect. It was the beginning of a nonconformist uprising that would mutate into the psychedelic and New Left movements of the '60s and the punk rock subculture of the '70s and '80s. The Beats themselves have gone on to become objects of fascination for later would-be rebels. The coffeehouse and poetry-reading revival of the early '90s is evidence of continued beatnik appeal.

Beyond the faddism, the contributions of the Beat writers endure. The works of Kerouac, Ginsberg, Burroughs, Gregory Corso, and their allies have lost none of their power or relevance with time. As the American century closes on a note of anxiety and conservatism, we could use the Beat Generation's ecstatic madness more than ever.

So consider this Beat Generation anthology an audio travelogue, an excursion into the poetic, the puerile, the inspired, and the absurd. Prepare to become immersed in the muck and mire of U.S. pop culture—this is not a journey for purists afraid to get their aesthetics soiled. Our itinerary defies the laws of time and space, giving glimpses of the Beat Generation's forefathers (Lord Buckley) and inheritors (Tom Waits) alike. The sublime sounds of Parker, Gillespie, and Mingus are interspersed with jazz-slanted TV jingles. Perry Como and Rod McKuen offer sidelights from Squaresville. News commentators flit in and out to deliver the Official Line. Here's the raw data—as they used to say, dig it!

Volume One

Jack Kerouac's "**San Francisco Scene (The Beat Generation)**" opens these proceedings on an authentic note. Recorded in 1959, this prose sketch was later included in his novel *Desolation Angels*. He finds the Beat essence in the frantic excitement of a jazz jam session, then slides into a quick portrait of seminal hipster Herbert Huncke, "martyred, tortured by sidewalks...ready to introduce a new world with a shrug." (In fact, Kerouac claimed that he first learned the expression "I'm beat" from him in the mid-'40s. A notorious New York hustler, Huncke survived to publish his autobiography, the aptly titled *Guilty of Everything*, in 1991.)

The mysterious Bob McFadden fol-

Jack Kerouac and Joyce Johnson Outside the Kettle of Fish Bar, Greenwich Village, NYC.

Photo: Jerome Yulsman