

'This Is The Beat Generation' by John Clellon Holmes

This is the complete text of the article by John Clellon Holmes that ran in the New York Times Magazine on November 16, 1952. This article introduced the phrase 'beat generation' to the world, although the writers who would come to personify this generation would not be published for several years more. For more on the origin of the term 'beat', see the article following this one..

My commentary : There are some interesting points in this article, but I can't help feeling annoyed at the idea of categorizing an entire generation. I don't believe any true statement can be made about a million or more people, except statements that are so general they are true for all times. So, for the hipster and the Young Republican here, substitute the hippie and the straight of twenty years ago, or the slacker and the yuppie today. Newspapers and magazines love to get excited about how 'different' each new generation is, but each new generation is just going through the same crisis the one before it went through. It's called 'growing up.'

In saying this, I don't mean to 'flame' John Clellon Holmes, a good writer who recognized the inanity of labeling a generation and even alluded to it in this article. Furthermore, I'm sure the idea of defining a generation was nowhere near as played out in the early 50's as it is now.

This Is The Beat Generation

by John Clellon Holmes

The New York Times Magazine, November 16, 1952

Several months ago, a national magazine ran a story under the heading 'Youth' and the subhead 'Mother Is Bugged At Me.' It concerned an eighteen-year-old California girl who had been picked up for smoking marijuana and wanted to talk about it. While a reporter took down her ideas in the uptempo language of 'tea,' someone snapped a picture. In view of her contention that she was part of a whole new culture where one out of every five people you meet is a user, it was an arresting photograph. In the pale, attentive face, with its soft eyes and intelligent mouth, there was no hint of corruption. It was a face which could only be deemed criminal through an enormous effort of righteousness. Its only complaint seemed to be: 'Why don't people leave us alone?' It was the face of a beat generation.

That clean young face has been making the newspapers steadily since the war. Standing before a judge in a Bronx courthouse, being arraigned for stealing a car, it looked up into the camera with curious laughter and no guilt. The same face, with a more serious bent, stared from the pages of *Life* magazine, representing a graduating class of ex-GI's, and said that as it believed small business to be dead, it intended to become a comfortable cog in the largest corporation it could find. A little younger, a little more bewildered, it was this same face that the photographers caught in Illinois when the first non-virgin club was uncovered. The young copywriter, leaning down the bar on Third Avenue, quietly

drinking himself into relaxation, and the energetic hotrod driver of Los Angeles, who plays Russian Roulette with a jalopy, are separated only by a continent and a few years. They are the extremes. In between them fall the secretaries wondering whether to sleep with their boyfriends now or wait; the mechanic berring up with the guys and driving off to Detroit on a whim; the models studiously name-dropping at a cocktail party. But the face is the same. Bright, level, realistic, challenging.

Any attempt to label an entire generation is unrewarding, and yet the generation which went through the last war, or at least could get a drink easily once it was over, seems to possess a uniform, general quality which demands an adjective ... The origins of the word 'beat' are obscure, but the meaning is only too clear to most Americans. More than mere weariness, it implies the feeling of having been used, of being raw. It involves a sort of nakedness of mind, and, ultimately, of soul; a feeling of being reduced to the bedrock of consciousness. In short, it means being undramatically pushed up against the wall of oneself. A man is beat whenever he goes for broke and wagers the sum of his resources on a single number; and the young generation has done that continually from early youth.

Its members have an instinctive individuality, needing no bohemianism or imposed eccentricity to express it. Brought up during the collective bad circumstances of a dreary depression, weaned during the collective uprooting of a global war, they distrust collectivity. But they have never been able to keep the world out of their dreams. The fancies of their childhood inhabited the half-light of Munich, the Nazi-Soviet pact, and the eventual blackout. Their adolescence was spent in a topsy-turvy world of war bonds, swing shifts, and troop movements. They grew to independent mind on beachheads, in gin mills and USO's, in past-midnight arrivals and pre-dawn departures. Their brothers, husbands, fathers or boy friends turned up dead one day at the other end of a telegram. At the four trembling corners of the world, or in the home town invaded by factories or lonely servicemen, they had intimate experience with the nadir and the zenith of human conduct, and little time for much that came between. The peace they inherited was only as secure as the next headline. It was a cold peace. Their own lust for freedom, and the ability to live at a pace that kills (to which the war had adjusted them), led to black markets, bebop, narcotics, sexual promiscuity, hucksterism, and Jean-Paul Sartre. The beatness set in later.

It is a postwar generation, and, in a world which seems to mark its cycles by its wars, it is already being compared to that other postwar generation, which dubbed itself 'lost'. The Roaring Twenties, and the generation that made them roar, are going through a sentimental revival, and the comparison is valuable. The Lost Generation was discovered in a roadster, laughing hysterically because nothing meant anything anymore. It migrated to Europe, unsure whether it was looking for the 'orgiastic future' or escaping from the 'puritanical past.' Its symbols were the flapper, the flask of bootleg whiskey, and an attitude of desparate frivolity best expressed by the line: 'Tennis, anyone?' It was caught up in the romance of disillusionment, until even that became an illusion. Every act in its drama of lostness was a tragic or ironic third act, and T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* was more than the dead-end statement of a perceptive poet. The pervading atmosphere of that poem was an almost objectless sense of loss, through which the reader felt immediately

that the cohesion of things had disappeared. It was, for an entire generation, an image which expressed, with dreadful accuracy, its own spiritual condition.

But the wild boys of today are not lost. Their flushed, often scoffing, always intent faces elude the word, and it would sound phony to them. For this generation lacks that eloquent air of bereavement which made so many of the exploits of the Lost Generation symbolic actions. Furthermore, the repeated inventory of shattered ideals, and the laments about the mud in moral currents, which so obsessed the Lost Generation, do not concern young people today. They take these things frighteningly for granted. They were brought up in these ruins and no longer notice them. They drink to 'come down' or to 'get high,' not to illustrate anything. Their excursions into drugs or promiscuity come out of curiosity, not disillusionment.

Only the most bitter among them would call their reality a nightmare and protest that they have indeed lost something, the future. For ever since they were old enough to imagine one, that has been in jeopardy anyway. The absence of personal and social values is to them, not a revelation shaking the ground beneath them, but a problem demanding a day-to-day solution. *How* to live seems to them much more crucial than *why*. And it is precisely at this point that the copywriter and the hotrod driver meet and their identical beatness becomes significant, for, unlike the Lost Generation, which was occupied with the loss of faith, the Beat Generation is becoming more and more occupied with the need for it. As such, it is a disturbing illustration of Voltaire's reliable old joke: 'If there were no God, it would be necessary to invent him.' Not content to bemoan his absence, they are busily and haphazardly inventing totems for him on all sides.

For the giggling nihilist, eating up the highway at ninety miles an hour and steering with his feet, is no Harry Crosby, the poet of the Lost Generation who planned to fly his plane into the sun one day because he could no longer accept the modern world. On the contrary, the hotrod driver invites death only to outwit it. He is affirming the life within him in the only way he knows how, at the extreme. The eager-faced girl, picked up on a dope charge, is not one of those 'women and girls carried screaming with drink or drugs from public places,' of whom Fitzgerald wrote. Instead, with persuasive seriousness, she describes the sense of community she has found in marijuana, which society never gave her. The copywriter, just as drunk by midnight as his Lost Generation counterpart, probably reads *God and Man at Yale* during his Sunday afternoon hangover. The difference is this almost exaggerated will to believe in something, if only in themselves. It is a *will* to believe, even in the face of an inability to do so in conventional terms. And that is bound to lead to excesses in one direction or another.

The shock that older people feel at the sight of this Beat Generation is, at its deepest level, not so much repugnance at the facts, as it is distress at the attitudes which move it. Though worried by this distress, they most often argue or legislate in terms of the facts rather than the attitudes. The newspaper reader, studying the eyes of young dope addicts, can only find an outlet for his horror and bewilderment in demands that passers be given the electric chair. Sociologists, with a more academic concern, are just as troubled by the legions of young men whose topmost ambition seems to be to find a secure birth in a

monolithic corporation. Contemporary historians express mild surprise at the lack of organized movements, political, religious, or otherwise, among the young. The articles they write remind us that being one's own boss and being a natural joiner are two of our most cherished national traits. Everywhere people with tidy moralities shake their heads and wonder what is happening to the younger generation.

Perhaps they have not noticed that, behind the excess on the one hand, and the conformity on the other, lies that wait-and-see detachment that results from having to fall back for support more on one's capacity for human endurance than on one's philosophy of life. Not that the Beat Generation is immune to ideas; they fascinate it. Its wars, both past and future, were and will be wars of ideas. It knows, however, that in the final, private moment of conflict a man is really fighting another man, and not an idea. And that the same goes for love. So it is a generation with a greater facility for entertaining ideas than for believing in them. But it is also the first generation in several centuries for which the act of faith has been an obsessive problem, quite aside from the reasons for having a particular faith or not having it. It exhibits on every side, and in a bewildering number of facets, a perfect craving to believe.

Though it is certainly a generation of extremes, including both the hipster and the radical young Republican in its ranks, it renders unto Caesar (i.e., society) what is Caesar's and unto God what is God's. For the wildest hipster, making a mystique of bop, drugs and the night life, there is no desire to shatter the 'square' society in which he lives, only to elude it. To get on a soapbox or write a manifesto would seem to him absurd. Looking at the normal world, where most everything is a 'drag' for him, he nevertheless says: 'Well, that's the Forest of Arden after all. And even *it* jumps if you look at it right.' Equally, the young Republican, though often seeming to hold up Babbitt as his culture hero, is neither vulgar nor materialistic, as Babbitt was. He conforms because he believes it is socially practical, not necessarily virtuous. Both positions, however, are the result of more or less the same conviction -- namely that the valueless abyss of modern life is unbearable.

For beneath the excess and the conformity, there is something other than detachment. There are the stirrings of a quest. What the hipster is looking for in his 'coolness' (withdrawal) or 'flipness' (ecstasy) is, after all, a feeling on somewhere, not just another diversion. The young Republican feels that there is a point beyond which change becomes chaos, and what he wants is not simply privilege or wealth, but a stable position from which to operate. Both have had enough of homelessness, valuelessness, faithlessness.

The variety and the extremity of their solutions are only a final indication that for today's young people there is not as yet a single external pivot around which they can, as a generation, group their observations and their aspirations. There is no single philosophy, no single party, no single attitude. The failure of most orthodox moral and social concepts to reflect fully the life they have known is probably the reason for this, but because of it each person becomes a walking, self-contained unit, compelled to meet, or at least endure, the problem of being young in a seemingly helpless world in his own way.

More than anything else, this is what is responsible for this generation's reluctance to name itself, its reluctance to discuss itself as a group, sometimes its reluctance to be itself. For invented gods invariably disappoint those who worship them. Only the need for them goes on, and it is this need, exhausting one object after another, which projects the Beat Generation forward into the future and will one day deprive it of its beatness.

Dostoyevsky wrote in the early 1880's that 'Young Russia is talking of nothing but the eternal questions now.' With appropriate changes, something very like this is beginning to happen in America, in an American way; a re-evaluation of which the exploits and attitudes of this generation are only symptoms. No single comparison of one generation against another can accurately measure effects, but it seems obvious that a lost generation, occupied with disillusionment and trying to keep busy among the broken stones, is poetically moving, but not very dangerous. But a beat generation, driven by a desperate craving for belief and as yet unable to accept the moderations which are offered it, is quite another matter. Thirty years later, after all, the generation of which Dostoyevsky wrote was meeting in cellars and making bombs.

This generation may make no bombs; it will probably be asked to drop some, and have some dropped on it, however, and this fact is never far from its mind. It is one of the pressures which created it and will play a large part in what will happen to it. There are those who believe that in generations such as this there is always the constant possibility of a great new moral idea, conceived in desperation, coming to life. Others note the self-indulgence, the waste, the apparent social irresponsibility, and disagree.

But its ability to keep its eyes open, and yet avoid cynicism; its ever-increasing conviction that the problem of modern life is essentially a spiritual problem; and that capacity for sudden wisdom which people who live hard and go far possess, are assets and bear watching. And, anyway, the clear, challenging faces are worth it.

Literary Kicks

Lost, Beat and Hip

It's generally accepted that Jack Kerouac created the term 'Beat Generation' in a 1948 conversation with novelist John Clellon Holmes, who went on to write a New York Times article about it, 'This Is The Beat Generation.' This is true, but it doesn't explain what the term 'Beat' actually meant.

In fact the original word meant nothing more than 'bad' or 'ruined' or 'spent.' We all use the word this way. When somebody is trying to get one last hit out of a bowl of weed and there's nothing but ashes left, you say 'Don't bother, it's beat.' Or when you're tired: 'I'm beat.' There's beaten-down, beaten-up and beaten-out. The connotation is defeat, resignation, disappointment.

That kind of beatness is what Kerouac was describing in himself and his friends, bright young Americans who'd come of age during the Second World War but couldn't fit in as clean-cut soldiers or complacent young businessmen. They were 'beat' because they didn't

believe in straight jobs and had to struggle to survive, living in dirty apartments, selling drugs or committing crimes for food money, hitchhiking across the country because they couldn't stay still without getting bored. The phrase 'Beat Generation' was meant to echo Ernest Hemingway's description of his own crowd (which came of age during the First World War) as the 'Lost Generation,' a phrase Hemingway picked up from an off-hand remark made by Gertrude Stein.

But the term 'beat' has a second meaning: 'beatific' or sacred and holy. Kerouac, a devout Catholic, explained many times that by describing his generation as beat he was trying to capture the secret holiness of the downtrodden. In fact, this is probably the most central theme in Kerouac's work (think of the saintly hobos and lonely truck drivers of 'On The Road' and 'The Dharma Bums').

On April 2, 1958, after the 'Beat Craze' had influenced a flood of alienated young men and women to converge on the North Beach neighborhood of San Francisco, columnist Herb Caen of the San Francisco Chronicle wrote a column in which he created the term 'Beatnik.' The 'nik' suffix evoked Yiddish slang ("nudnik", etc.) but was actually borrowed from 'Sputnik,' a satellite that had just been launched by the Soviet Union, striking fear into the hearts of many Communist-fearing Americans.

'Beatnik' was a perjorative term, of course. Maynard Krebs on the 'Dobie Gillis Show' was a beatnik, but he was never Beat.

While 'Beat' connoted hobos and exhausted proletarians, the term 'Hip' came from 'Hipster,' which referred to the fancy-dressing, drug-and-drink-addled sex-fiend characters that hung around Times Square at night. Kerouac and Neal Cassady and William S. Burroughs were all fascinated with hipsters, and they even included a true degenerate hipster in their crowd, Burroughs' junkie friend Herbert Huncke, who appears as Hassel in 'On The Road' and Herman in 'Junky.' Allen Ginsberg tips his hat to 'angel-headed hipsters' in his poem 'Howl.' It seems there were two ways to be beat in this era: the country-mouse beatnik could be a hobo, hopping freight cars and sleeping in parks, but the city-mouse beatnik had to play the part of hipster to survive.

I don't know the derivation of the term 'Hipster' (hey, what am I, fucking William Safire over here?), but I could make a totally uninformed guess that it originally referred to hip flasks -- that is, that a 'hipster' carried liquor on his hip instead of hidden in his boot like a 'bootlegger.' I may be totally wrong here, though. I've also heard that 'hip' started with 'hep,' which would mean that my hip flask theory is wrong, and I have no idea where 'hep' came from. I've heard that Ken Kesey has a theory that the word came from Chinese opium smokers who reclined on their hips while they smoked. I've also heard that the word comes from West Africa via the Gullah dialect spoken in the Sea Islands off the coast of South Carolina. A *hipicat* denotes a person attuned to his environment, literally with 'eyes open.' Somebody else emailed me that it comes from the military-march utterance "Hup!" as in "Hup-two-three-four," but I don't get what the connection would be here.

In any case, 'hip' turned to 'hippie' just as 'beat' had turned to 'beatnik.' I'm sure there's a lot more to be said about these etymological matters -- please contribute any ideas or knowledge you may have.

-- brooklyn --



Jack Kerouac was born Jean-Louis Kerouac, a French-Canadian child on March 12, 1922 in working-class Lowell, Massachusetts. *Ti Jean* spoke a local dialect of French called *joual* before he learned English. The youngest of three children, he was heartbroken when his older brother Gerard died of rheumatic fever at the age of nine.

Ti Jean was an intense and serious child, devoted to *Memere* (his mother) and constantly forming important friendships with other boys, as he would continue to do throughout his life. He was driven to create stories from a young age, inspired first by the mysterious radio show 'The Shadow,' and later by the fervid novels of Thomas Wolfe, the writer he would model himself after.

Lowell had once thrived as the center of New England's textile industry, but by the time of Kerouac's birth it had begun to sink into poverty. Kerouac's father, a printer and well-known local businessman, began to suffer financial difficulties, and started gambling in the hope of restoring prosperity to the household. Young Jack hoped to save the family himself by winning a football scholarship to college and entering the insurance business. He was a star back on his high school team and won some miraculous victories, securing himself a scholarship to Columbia University in New York. His parents followed him there, settling in Ozone Park, Queens.

Things went wrong at Columbia. Kerouac fought with the football coach, who refused to let him play. His father lost his business and sank rapidly into alcoholic helplessness, and young Jack, disillusioned and confused, dropped out of Columbia, bitterly disappointing the father who had so recently disappointed him. He tried and failed to fit in with the military (World War II had begun) and ended up sailing with the Merchant Marine.

When he wasn't sailing, he was hanging around New York with a crowd his parents did not approve of: depraved young Columbia students Allen Ginsberg and Lucien Carr, a strange but brilliant older downtown friend named William S. Burroughs, and a joyful street cowboy from Denver named Neal Cassady.

Kerouac had already begun writing a novel, stylistically reminiscent of Thomas Wolfe, about the torments he was suffering as he tried to balance his wild city life with his old-world family values. His friends loved the manuscript, and Ginsberg asked his Columbia professors to help find a publisher for it. It would become Kerouac's first and most conventional novel, 'The Town and the City,' which earned him respect and some recognition as a writer, although it did not make him famous.

It would be a long time before he would be published again. He had taken some amazing cross-country trips with Neal Cassady while working on his novel, and in his attempt to write about these trips he had begun experimenting with freer forms of writing, partly inspired by the unpretentious, spontaneous prose he found in Neal Cassady's letters. He decided to write about his cross-country trips exactly as they had happened, without pausing to edit, fictionalize or even think. He presented the resulting manuscript to his editor on a single long roll of unbroken paper, but the editor did not share his enthusiasm and the relationship was broken. Kerouac would suffer seven years of rejection before 'On The Road' would be published.

He spent the early 1950's writing one unpublished novel after another, carrying them around in a rucksack as he roamed back and forth across the country. He followed Ginsberg and Cassady to Berkeley and San Francisco, where he became close friends with the young Zen poet Gary Snyder. He found enlightenment through the Buddhist religion and tried to follow Snyder's lead in communing with nature. His excellent novel 'The Dharma Bums' describes a joyous mountain climbing trip he and Snyder went on in Yosemite in 1955, and captures the tentative, sometimes comic steps he and his friends were taking towards spiritual realization.

His fellow starving writers were beginning to attract fame as the 'Beat Generation,' a label Kerouac had invented years earlier during a conversation with fellow novelist John Clellon Holmes. Ginsberg and Snyder became underground celebrities in 1955 after the Six Gallery poetry reading in San Francisco. Since they and many of their friends regularly referred to Kerouac as the most talented writer among them, publishers began to express interest in the forlorn, unwanted manuscripts he carried in his rucksack wherever he went. 'On The Road' was finally published in 1957, and when it became a tremendous popular success Kerouac did not know how to react. Embittered by years of rejection, he was suddenly expected to snap to and play the part of Young Beat Icon for the public. He was older and sadder than everyone expected him to be, and probably far more intelligent as well. Literary critics, objecting to the Beat 'fad,' refused to take Kerouac seriously as a writer and began to ridicule his work, hurting him tremendously. Certainly the Beat Generation was a fad, Kerouac knew, but his own writing was not.

His sudden celebrity was probably the worst thing that could have happened to him,

because his moral and spiritual decline in the next few years was shocking. Trying to live up to the wild image he'd presented in 'On The Road,' he developed a severe drinking habit that dimmed his natural brightness and aged him prematurely. His Buddhism failed him, or he failed it. He could not resist a drinking binge, and his friends began viewing him as needy and unstable. He published many books during these years, but most had been written earlier, during the early 50's when he could not find a publisher. He kept busy, appearing on TV shows, writing magazine articles and recording three spoken-word albums, but his momentum as a serious writer had been completely disrupted.

Like Kurt Cobain, another counter-culture celebrity who seemed to be truly (as opposed to fashionably) miserable, Kerouac expressed his unhappiness nakedly in his art and was not taken seriously. In 1961 he tried to break his drinking habit and rediscover his writing talents with a solitary nature retreat in Bixby Canyon, Big Sur. Instead, the vast nature around him creeped him out and he returned to San Francisco to drink himself into oblivion. He was cracking up, and he laid out the entire chilling experience in his last great novel, 'Big Sur.'

Defeated and lonesome, he left California to live with his mother in Long Island, and would not stray from his mother for the rest of his life. He would continue to publish, and remained mentally alert and aware (though always drunken). But his works after 'Big Sur' displayed a disconnected soul, a human being sadly lost in his own curmudgeonly illusions.

Despite the 'beatnik' stereotype, Kerouac was a political conservative, especially when under the influence of his Catholic mother. As the beatniks of the 1950's began to yield their spotlight to the hippies of the 1960's, Jack took pleasure in standing against everything the hippies stood for. He supported the Vietnam War and became friendly with William F. Buckley.

Living alone with his mother in Northport, Long Island, Kerouac developed a fascinating set of habits. He stayed in his house most of the time and carried on a lifelong game of 'baseball' with a deck of playing cards. His drink of choice was a jug of the kind of cheap, sweet wine, Tokay or Thunderbird, usually preferred by winos. He became increasingly devoted to Catholicism, but his unusual Buddhist-tinged brand of Catholicism would hardly have met with the approval of the Pope.

Through his first forty years Kerouac had failed to sustain a long-term romantic relationship with a woman, though he often fell in love. He'd married twice, to Edie Parker and Joan Haverty, but both marriages had ended within months. In the mid-1960's he married again, but this time to a materialistic and older childhood acquaintance from small-town Lowell, Stella Sampas, who he hoped would help around the house as his mother entered old age.

He moved back to Lowell with Stella and his mother, and then moved again with them to St. Petersburg, Florida. His health destroyed by drinking, he died at home on October 21, 1969. He was 47 years old.

On The Road

by Levi Asher *August 11, 1994 7:47 am*

Jack Kerouac's great Beat novel, a charming, honest and poignant story of a friendship and four trips across America, is in my opinion the best piece of writing to come out of the Beat Generation. Kerouac has sometimes been accused of leaving his talent back at the shop when he writes, but here his talent is undeniable. The writing is so good you start to hear fireworks going off like the Fourth of July by the time the book is over.

The narrator is Sal Paradise, a young novelist-to-be living with his aunt in Paterson, New Jersey. Sal has got a major Travelin' Jones. Most of his friends happen to be out west already. A college friend has invited Sal to live with him in San Francisco, and Sal also wants to visit Denver, the home of his crazy friend Dean Moriarty. Dean Moriarty is a fast-talking, womanizing product of Denver reform schools who came to New York, improbably enough, to learn to be a writer. Sal idolizes Dean for his cowboy style, his ease with women and his exuberant joy in living. (Dean Moriarty is Jack Kerouac's real-life crazy friend Neal Cassady, and almost everything in this book, as in all Kerouac's books, really happened.)

The First Trip -- New York To Denver to San Francisco to L.A.

Sal tries to hitch out west alone, but doesn't get very far in his first try (see excerpt that follows this article). He tries again, taking a bus to Chicago and hitching to Denver. The tales he tells of this first trip, with its flatboard-truck rides, innocent midwestern cornfield vistas and wild noisy truck stop luncheonette meals, make up one of the most beautiful portraits of America ever written.

Sal arrives in Denver, but discovers that his other friends have now ostracized Dean Moriarty for his wild ways. Sal has to choose between Dean and the rest of his old college crowd, and it's no contest: he runs off with Dean. The only other friend who'll still hang out with Dean is Carlo Marx, (in real life, Allen Ginsberg). Carlo and Sal and Dean clown around Denver for a while, until Sal takes off for San Francisco to stay with his friend Remi Bencoeur. Dean promises to join him soon after.

But Sal finds that Remi Bencoeur has a rotten job and a difficult girlfriend, and leaves for Southern California, where he meets Terry, a sweet-tempered Mexican girl, on a bus. He goes to work in the vineyards and cotton fields with Terry and her family for a while, and then returns to New York alone.

The Second Trip -- Virginia to NY to New Orleans to San Francisco

Sal is staying with relatives in Testament, Virginia when Dean shows up at his door. A girlfriend named Marylou and a friend named Ed Dunkel are waiting in Dean's car. Dean's in a tough spot -- he's traveling with Marylou, but the girl he's supposed to be with

is Camille, who's back in San Francisco getting ready to have his baby. Furthermore, Ed Dunkel left his nagging wife in Tuscon and has to pick her up at the home of Old Bull Lee (in real life, William S. Burroughs) in New Orleans.

Sal joins their joyride up to Paterson and New York and then down to New Orleans to stay with Old Bull Lee and his wife. Then they're off to San Francisco, where Dean decides to return to Camille and dispose of Marylou by setting her up with Sal. Dean seems to get a kick out of setting his male friends up with his girlfriends, and Sal and Marylou go along with the plan, but they both feel used and find themselves hungry and bored and unable to depend on Dean for anything. Sal decides to go back home:

At dawn I got my New York bus and said good-bye to Dean and Marylou. They wanted some of my sandwiches. I told them no. It was a sullen moment. We were all thinking we'd never see each other again and we didn't care.

The Third Trip -- New York to Denver to San Francisco and Back Again

Back in New York, Sal finds himself forgiving Dean, and even goes to Denver for no apparent reason except that he misses Dean. Finally he goes to San Francisco to find Dean at his house, and Dean recognizes the symbolic importance of this, saying: 'You've finally come to me!' Dean and Camille are having problems, and Sal's arrival is the catalyst that breaks up their impromptu homelife. Out on the street, Dean and Sal need a place to stay and go to Ed Dunkel's wife, only to receive a tongue-lashing, directed at Dean, that would wilt a houseplant. Everybody, it seems, is getting on Dean's case now. The whole crowd goes to hear some live jazz (see excerpt) and then Dean and Sal set off for the East Coast, planning to travel from there to Italy.

They hitch to Denver, where they find somebody who needs a Cadillac driven to Chicago. This is a big mistake for the owner of the Cadillac, because Dean and Sal push the car beyond its limits and make the trip to Chicago in seventeen hours, leaving the car in less than perfect condition. They hear some more live jazz in Chicago, then wander back to New York.

The Fourth Trip -- New York to Denver to Mexico

Sal's first novel has been published, but he's got the traveling bug again. He takes off for Denver by himself and Dean finds him there. They go off for one last bang-up ride down to Mexico, where they spend a riotous night in a small village with a roomful of prostitutes and an old Mexican grandma who sells marijuana from her backyard. Sal ends up getting extremely sick, and finds again that Dean is only good for the good times, because Dean leaves him there in his feverish state, rushing off on impulse to marry a new girlfriend in New York.

The Wrap-Up

In a short section at the end, Sal and Dean briefly find each other in New York City, but Sal is committed to attend a Duke Ellington concert that night at the Metropolitan Opera with Remi Bencoeur and his girlfriend. He would rather be with Dean, but Remi and his girlfriend don't like Dean, and in the end Sal drives off with his other friends, waving to Dean from the car window. That's about where the book ends.

The ending is wonderfully ambiguous in terms of its meaning. Just what are we to think of Dean Moriarty? He is the most magnetic character in the book, but everybody in the book gets sick of him at one point or another, and even the narrator is forced to realize that he can't depend on Dean to stick with him when he's sick and miserable in Mexico. We also see that the joyrides get a little less joyful as they progress. Is it possible that people really do need to grow up, that you can't ride on forever, going from adventure to the next? Luckily, this book doesn't even attempt to answer that question for us; it just lets us experience the sights and sounds along the way.

'On The Road' was published by Viking Press in 1957.

From 'On The Road' by Jack Kerouac

'It was my dream that screwed up'

(Here Sal Paradise (Kerouac) tries to make his first cross-country trip alone, and doesn't get very far.)

I'd been poring over maps of the United States in Paterson for months, even reading books about the pioneers and savoring names like Platte and Cimarron and so on, and on the road-map was one long red line called Route 6 that led from the tip of Cape Cod clear to Ely, Nevada, and there dipped down to Los Angeles. I'll just stay on all the way to Ely, I said to myself and confidently started. To get to 6 I had to go up to Bear Mountain. Filled with dreams of what I'd do in Chicago, in Denver, and then finally in San Fran, I took the Seventh Avenue Subway to the end of the line at 242nd Street, and there took a trolley into Yonkers; in downtown Yonkers I transferred to an outgoing trolley and went to the city limits on the east bank of the Hudson River. If you drop a rose in the Hudson River at its mysterious source in the Adirondacks, think of all the places it journeys as it goes to sea forever -- think of that wonderful Hudson Valley. I started hitching up the thing. Five scattered rides took me to the desired Bear Mountain Bridge, where Route 6 arched in from New England. It began to rain in torrents when I was let off there. It was mountainous. Route 6 came over the river, wound around a traffic circle, and disappeared into the wilderness. Not only was there no traffic but the rain come down in buckets and I had no shelter. I had to run under some pines to take cover; this did no good; I began crying and swearing and socking myself on the head for being such a damn fool. I was forty miles north of New York; all the way up I'd been worried about the fact that on this, my big opening day, I was only moving north instead of the so-longed for west. Now I was stuck on my northermost hangup. I ran a quarter-mile to an abandoned cute English-style filling station and stood under the dripping eaves. High up over my head the great hairy Bear Mountain sent down thunderclaps that put the fear of God in me. All I could

see were smoky trees and dismal wilderness rising to the skies. "What the hell am I doing up here?" I cursed, I cried for Chicago. "Even now they're all having a big time, they're doing this, I'm not there, when will I get there!" -- and so on. Finally a car stopped at the empty filling station; the man and the two women in it wanted to study a map. I stepped right up and gestured in the rain; they consulted; I looked like a maniac, of course, with my hair all wet, my shoes sopping. My shoes, damn fool that I am, were Mexican huaraches, plantlike sieves not fit for the rainy night of America and the raw road night. But the people let me in and rode me *back* to Newburgh, which I accepted as a better alternative than being trapped in the Bear Mountain wilderness all night. "Besides," said the man, "there's no traffic passes through 6. If you want to go to Chicago you'd be better going across the Holland Tunnel in New York and head for Pittsburgh," and I knew he was right. It was my dream that screwed up, the stupid hearthside idea that it would be wonderful to follow one great red line across America instead of trying various roads and routes.

In Newburgh it had stopped raining. I walked down to the river and I had to ride back to New York in a bus with a delegation of schoolteachers coming back from a weekend in the mountains -- chatter chatter blah-blah, and me swearing for all the time and money I'd wasted, and telling myself, I wanted to go west and here I'd been all day and into the night going up and down, north and south, like something that can't get started.

Allen Ginsberg

by Levi Asher July 24, 1994 2:00 pm



Louis Ginsberg was a published poet, a high school teacher and a moderate Jewish Socialist. His wife, Naomi, was a radical Communist and irrepressible nudist who went tragically insane in early adulthood. Somewhere between the two in temperament was the Ginsberg's second son, Irwin Allen, born on June 3, 1926.

A shy and complicated child growing up in [Paterson](#), New Jersey, Allen's home life was dominated by his mother's bizarre and frightening episodes. A severe paranoid, she often trusted young Allen when she was convinced the rest of the family and the world was plotting against her. As the sensitive boy tried to understand what was happening around

him, he also had to struggle to comprehend what was happening inside him, because he was consumed by lust for other boys his age.

He discovered the poetry of Walt Whitman (the original Beatnik) in high school, but despite his interest in poetry he followed his father's advice and began planning a career as a labor lawyer. This was what he had in mind when he began his freshman year at Columbia University, but he fell in with a crowd of wild souls there, including fellow students Lucien Carr and Jack Kerouac and non-student friends William S. Burroughs and Neal Cassady. These delinquent young philosophers were equally obsessed with drugs, crime, sex and literature. Ginsberg, the youngest and most innocent member of the circle, helped them develop their literary smarts, while they helped him in turn by utterly shattering his bookish naivete.

His new crowd was based at Columbia, but they did not encourage him in his studies, and he eventually got suspended from Columbia for various small offenses. He began consorting with Times Square junkies and thieves (mostly friends of Burroughs), experimenting with Benzedrine and marijuana, and cruising gay bars in Greenwich Village, all the time believing himself and his friends to be working towards some kind of uncertain great poetic vision, which he and Kerouac called the New Vision. He began a passionate (for him, anyway) sexual affair with the reluctant Neal Cassady, and visited Cassady in Denver and San Francisco, helping to set in motion the cross-country trend that would soon inspire Kerouac's 'On The Road' adventures. The joyful craziness of his city friends somehow became a symbolic counterpoint, for Ginsberg, to the real craziness of his mother, whose condition continued to worsen until she was hospitalized for life and finally lobotomized. Many people deal with insanity in the family by becoming exaggeratedly normal, but Ginsberg went in the opposite direction. Knowing himself to be basically sane, he embraced bizarreness as a style of life, as if seeking to find the edge his mother had fallen over. Reading William Blake in a Harlem apartment one summer day in 1948, the 26-year-old Allen Ginsberg had a tremendous mad vision in which Blake came to him in person. This was the great moment of his life, and he joyfully told his family and friends that he had found God.

The whole wild scene crashed, though, when the criminal activities of several of Ginsberg's friends (such as Burroughs and Herbert Huncke) resulted in his arrest and imprisonment. Ginsberg entered a 'straight' phase: he recouped Burroughs, immersed himself in psychoanalytic treatment, and even began dating a woman named Helen Parker. Now a self-declared heterosexual, he found a job as a marketing researcher. In an office in the Empire State Building, he helped develop an advertising campaign for Ipana Toothpaste (remember the 'Brush-a brush-a brush-a!' scene in the movie version of 'Grease'?)

This phase was not meant to last. He met a kindred spirit, Carl Solomon, in the waiting room of a psychiatric hospital. He introduced himself to the important New Jersey poet William Carlos Williams, whose epic visionary poem about the town of Paterson had impressed Ginsberg greatly. Bearing a letter of introduction from the poet Williams, Ginsberg travelled to San Francisco and met Kenneth Rexroth, ringmaster of an emerging

vibrant and youthful local poetry movement, which Ginsberg became a part of almost instantly.

At the age of 29, Ginsberg had written much poetry but published almost none. He worked hard to promote the works of Kerouac and Burroughs to publishers, neglecting to promote his own. Even so, he was the first Beat writer to gain popular notice when he delivered a thundering performance of his new poem 'Howl' at the now-legendary Six Gallery poetry reading in October 1955. This great poem, conveniently publicized by a bungled obscenity charge that made Allen a worldwide symbol of sexual depravity (as homosexuality was then perceived), was *the* great expression of Beat defiance, just as Kerouac's 'On The Road,' published two years later, would be the great expression of Beat yearnings.

Ginsberg followed 'Howl' with several other important new poems, such as 'Sunflower Sutra.' Now at a critical stage in his career, he was somehow able to avoid the 'fame burnout' that would soon engulf Kerouac. According to Bruce Cook in his book 'The Beat Generation,' Ginsberg even mellowed considerably during this period, after travelling the world, discovering Buddhism and falling in love with Peter Orlovsky, who would remain a constant companion (though their relationship was not monogamous) for thirty years. Perhaps most importantly, he exorcised some internal demons by writing 'Kaddish,' a brilliant and surprising poem about his mother's insanity and death.

His celebrity continued to grow as the 'Beat' concept evolved from an idea into a movement and then into a cliché. In the early sixties, Ginsberg threw himself into the hippie scene. He and Timothy Leary worked together to publicize Leary's new discovery, the psychedelic drug LSD, and Ginsberg attempted to turn on every famous cultural figure in his address book, including Willem De Kooning, Franz Kline, Dizzy Gillespie, Thelonius Monk, Robert Lowell and Jack Kerouac (whose cranky response sent Timothy Leary on his first bum trip).

As a famous American poet, Ginsberg was able to attain audiences with important political figures all over the world, and during the 60's he took advantage of this repeatedly. He pissed off one important official after another, causing furors in India, getting kicked out of Cuba and Prague, and annoying America's right wing to no end. He was a familiar bushy-bearded figure at protests against the Vietnam War, and his willingness to state his controversial views in public was an important factor in the development of the revolutionary state of mind that America developed during the 1960's.

The list of 60's events that Ginsberg played an important part in is almost unbelievably huge. He participated in Ken Kesey's Acid Test Festivals in San Francisco, and helped Kesey break the ice between the San Francisco hippies and the antagonistic Hell's Angels. In the summer of 1965 Ginsberg made a seminal trip to London with several other Beat figures. Their reading at the Royal Albert Hall signalled the beginning of the London underground scene, based at the UFO Club, from which bands like Pink Floyd and the Soft Machine would emerge. Bob Dylan often cited Ginsberg as one of the few

literary figures he could stand. Ginsberg can be seen standing in the alley in the background of Dylan's 1965 'Subterranean Homesick Blues' video, and would later play a major part in Dylan's 1977 film 'Renaldo and Clara.' Ginsberg, Gary Snyder and Michael McClure led the crowd in chanting 'OM' at the San Francisco Be-In in 1967. Ginsberg, Burroughs, Jean Genet and Terry Southern were key figures at the Chicago Democratic Convention antiwar protests in 1968. One of the only radical events of the Sixties that Ginsberg was *not* a part of was the Stonewall gay uprising, and Ginsberg showed up at the site the next day to offer his support.

In 1970 Ginsberg met the controversial Tibetan guru Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche. Ginsberg would soon accept Trungpa as his personal guru. He and poet Anne Waldman joined to create a poetry school, the Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics, at Trungpa's Naropa Institute in Boulder, Colorado.

In the early eighties, Ginsberg even joined the punk rock movement, appearing on the Clash's 'Combat Rock' album and performing with them on stage.

Ginsberg carried on an active social schedule until his death on April 5, 1997. He never moved away from his humble apartment in the poetry-rich streets of New York City's Lower East Side, and would constantly be seen at local readings and multicultural gatherings, either on a stage or in a crowd. He was one of my favorite living writers, and yet I personally grew so accustomed to seeing him sitting a few benches from me at readings that I stopped noticing. Now that he's dead these moments take on a broader dimension in my memory.

I spoke to him at length only once; you can read about it [here](#).

I also saw him read poetry countless times, but it never stopped being a unique experience. He was a truly and simply free soul on stage, clinking little finger cymbals and barking weirdly melodic chants with an impish smile behind his graying beard and thick glasses. I particularly remember seeing him at a Carnegie Hall benefit for Tibet House, where performers like Paul Simon and Philip Glass received polite applause from the well-dressed crowd. Ginsberg wandered out looking like a bearded *shetl* shoemaker and began croaking a weird and hilarious rant about meditation. The crowd loosened up for the first time, laughing at his Zen jokes, and they finally gave him the biggest applause of the night.

(One good way to experience this poet's utter weirdness today is to listen to his music. Songs like "Birdbrain" and "Gospel Noble Truths" are two of the more bizarrely rewarding. But don't play this stuff at a party unless you want everybody to go home.)

There is also now an official [Allen Ginsberg website](#).

The first great thing about Ginsberg was his refusal to be embarrassed or to deny himself. And the other great thing was his poetry, which spoke in so strong a voice that his talent could not be denied.

Let's end this with a [recitation from Blake](#), which is how Ginsberg used to end his poetry readings.

II The Hills Echoed

(I asked Stephen Scobie if he knew the name of the Blake poem Ginsberg often chanted at readings. This is what he sent me back. -- Levi Asher)

Interpolated from poems in "Songs of Innocence" and "Songs of Experience" by William Blake

"Nurse's Song"

*When the voices of children are heard on the green
And laughing is heard on the hill,
My heart is at rest within my breast
And everything else is still.*

*"Then come home, my children, the sun is gone down
And the dews of night arise;
Come, come, leave off play, and let us away
Till the morning appears in the skies."*

*"No, no, let us play, for it is yet day
And we cannot go to sleep;
Besides, in the sky the little birds fly
And the hills are all cover'd with sheep."*

*"Well, well, go & play till the light fades away
And then go home to bed."
The little ones leaped & shouted & laugh'd
And all the hills echoed.*

*When the voices of children are heard on the green
And whisp'rings are in the dale,
The days of my youth rise fresh in my mind,
My face turns green and pale.*

*Then come home, my children, the sun is gone down,
And the dews of night arise;
Your spring & your day are wasted in play,
And your winter and night in disguise.*

(Allen Ginsberg)

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