

## BEATITUDES

# Sweet Sad Jack, Where Are You Now?

**I**t was the second half of the 20th Century, the beginning of today. The rules were all new, the promises fulfilled, the future at once bright and uncertain. In many ways, you might say the mood of the 1950s in America is back again, Down Under.

Here, we have everything and are beginning to wonder if that's enough. Spiritualism is once more on the rise, cults thrive, self-help and fitness are the rage, the arts are reaching out to a tired Europe and a fickle United States. Australia begins to recognise herself as the country of the future, while people flock to her shores annually from virtually every land on the map. Yet, there's an uneasiness, the nagging doubt that living in a material world somehow isn't all it's touted to be. Australia has begun its own inward search and for some, that search manifests itself in a restless longing, a love of movement which is not so much an escape as a seeking after spiritual fulfillment.

In America, they called it the Beat Generation. Norman Mailer thought the term came from the hipsters, novelist John Clellon Holmes claimed it was born of the jazz age, but writer Jack Kerouac, the late friend and travelling companion of beat poet Allen Ginsberg, said it came from "beatitude". And it was Kerouac who finally summarised, in his novel *On The Road*, the relentless search of his '50s peers.

"The Beat Generation," he once said, "is basically a religious generation." In another interview, he elaborated: "This includes anyone from 15 to 55 who digs everything. We're not Bohemian, remember. Beat means beatitude, not beat up.

**He once was a living legend. Look out, he's a legend again.**  
By Steve Bunk

You feel this. You feel it in a beat, in jazz — real cool jazz or a good gutty rock number."

The US in the '50s must have been the safest, smuggest place and time in the world to born. America the goddamned beautiful had automated out of the war to end all wars as a superpower. One of her leaders was a general who was to be remembered as the Presidential keeper of the peace. That unfortunate "police action" in Korea, precursor to a "conflict" which was to kill more young men than both big wars, was regarded by many as an aberration in America's careless new isolationism.

Having things was vogue in the Age of Formica, the Linoleum Years. Well-chromed and on the go, complacent, confident, it was the Silent Generation, said *Time* magazine. But that tag didn't stick. It wasn't quite right, because this also was the dawning age of jazz and marijuana, when the few young people who were still alive went barreling through the flat bluegreen heartland in souped-up '57 Chevys with mags, slicks, tuck-and-roll. The poets all drank, the factories glowed like churches and the stars were famous once again every night in the infinite heavens.

Watch out for the engineer, to catch a

freight train was a trespass but the brakemen were always good for news of which one went to Cheyenne and which one was headed on down to Santa Fe. The King of the Hobos was a grubby deity, elected every year by his peers at a convention of wanderers, those mysterious men as corrugated as the iron sheets that supported the franks and beans bubbling in open cans over trackside pyres all along the romantic halls of the Northwest night; offerings to the muse of freedom from the have-nots of the richest air-conditioned people on God's green earth.

They were the first television generation, the first to live under the bomb's eternal threat, the first full-on consumers of polyester and psychoanalysis, Elvis the Pelvis, rebels without causes, and a manic-depressive uneasy nirvana brooded in the surfeit of exuberant cities, in the long golden breadbasket fields that spoke to the wealth of triumph over the forces of death camp darkness.

This is the way the poets and novelists wrote, in long, elegaic sentences full of sweetness and rage, drugs, sex, religious joy and always, the restless tracking after that elusive prey, beatitude, the beat. Finally, this longing quest was what the Beat Generation bequeathed to the peacenik '60s. Their message was overlooked by the Me Decade '70s but now, a second revival has begun. Kerouac's *On The Road* annually sells better than most other American classics and a handful of Kerouac biographies has appeared in recent years. Even the manic disjointed junkie brilliance of William Burroughs has gained popular favour as the ex-heroin addict and guilty gay at last becomes respectable in his 70s. Ginsberg, a big

When she said he would be a champion I thought she was joking. She wasn't.

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name now for a quarter century, is America's unofficial poet laureate.

For me, Ginsberg in the '60s was no less noteworthy than the now-dead trinity of Hendrix, Joplin and Morrison. I remember that era of run-on rhetoric as if it were now:

Ginsberg alights on Sacramento State, bastion of the middlebrow, a commuter university where black-and-white couples troll easy as fear, cool as doubt, on the flowered quad under the studious white northchance of takeaway racism. It's the late '60s, Eldridge Cleaver arrives de-iced in daylight at the packed football stadium in a phalanx of black limos, big Panther bodyguards shouldering up his mother-fucker madness magnified by the microphone while stay-pressed liberals in their armchair slacks file out decorously, feigning tolerance. Cleaver shouts, "Now that the motherfuckers who weren't going to listen anyway are gone, here's my message," which is pussypower, how black women direct their men, give them strength by refusing sexual favour until they show the proud separation to which the pre-reborn Cleaver cleaves. Pussy-power, the black women's caucus, is groupie-wet on the stadium's sour turf under the podium, cheering. We majority whites hold our legs together in the stands, guilty as nuns at a raffle, minor criminals in the flooding brown stream of consciousness rap, legacy of Whitman, Wolfe and Kerouac's Beat Generation.

Ginsberg hovers in the white gymnasium, leader of a Buddhist quarter hour, we liberals happily ohming, exorcising the devils of Christian immorality fronting the chubby poet's Lotus pose on stage in his flowing gown and serious beard, a monosyllabic lifelarge guru rumoured to have waived the speaking fee (what speech?) in lieu of his cunning pluck of consorts from the Gay Liberation Front. Prim as white before Ginsberg, an obvious suburban boy with a shaved head in an orange caftan chants, full of placid spite. How many of us envision with the same chronic cynical wonder of the era that unnatural act after the performance, Ginsberg grunting in carnal satiety? We draw in the sweet and acrid smoke of a passed-on mantra, ohmmm.

By the mid-'60s, both Ginsberg and Kerouac had so far overshot the original viliification with which their work had been met a decade earlier that they were staples of Contemporary American Literature courses. Kerouac's *On The Road*, a panegyric to anti-intellectualism with its tortuous sentences and lack of regard for the rules of punctuation, was dissected by hirsute young Harvard professors and devoured by students disaffected with the post-'50s worship of the good things in an increasingly questionable life. Critic Leslie Fielder, once the *enfant terrible* of academia, who



**Manic brilliance:** William Burroughs survived Kerouac, found favour.

already had become an institution himself — in the American way of lionising and thereby defanging its harshest nay-sayers — had written in 1964: "The beats have made no difference. The old order is basically unchanged; the colleges brim full and overflow; the curriculum is expanded to include Burroughs and Kerouac; what was shuddered at only yesterday is today anthologised and assigned... In a few decades, the 'pot' party will have replaced the cocktail party as a social obligation and a bore, beards will have become required or passe, and homosexuality will no longer seem an intolerable offense to even the most backward provincial. Only cleanliness will not have been replaced by dirtiness as next in rank to godliness; there is too much money invested in soap."

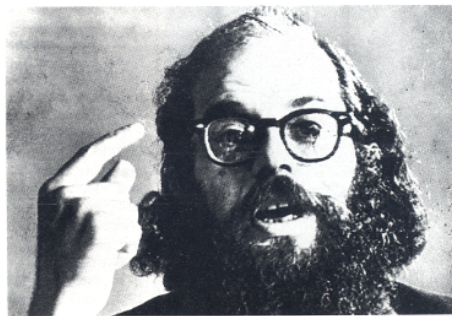
The imaginative social butterfly and unimaginative novelist Truman Capote's complaint that beat writing was nothing more than typing, and similar broadsides from such eminences as Lionel Trilling, who taught Ginsberg at Columbia University, had long since fallen into disfavour. *On The Road*, kept by convention from publication for five years before it finally appeared in 1957, had become the prose anthem for a new generation of restless, patriotic, protesting youth.

"The only people for me are the mad ones," Kerouac wrote in that book, "the ones who are mad to live, mad to talk, mad to be saved, desirous of everything at the same time, the ones who never yawn or say a commonplace thing, but burn, burn, burn, like fabulous yellow roman candles exploding like spiders across the stars and in the middle you see the blue centrelight pop and everybody goes 'Awww!'"

No wonder, with bombs bursting in air over poor jungles afar while young Americans burned their draft cards, escaped to Canada, chopped off their own toes for the precious 4-F classification, the triumphal mad clarity of Kerouac



**Pussy power:** Novel notion of Eldridge Cleaver.



**Allen Ginsberg:** Kerouac's travelling companion.

struck a chord once again. The hero of his novel, Dean Moriarty, was modelled on the darling of the beats, Neal Cassady, who oddly enough, was an indifferent writer himself but one of those rapid-fire talkers and visionaries you meet on rare occasion who mesmerise you with their zest and obsessive *joie de vivre*. Ginsberg, a homosexual, fell in love with Cassady, who was basically heterosexual but was willing for a time to trade his favours for what he could learn about writing from the poet.

Kerouac also dabbled in homosexuality, apparently as part of his own spiritual search which likewise led him to experiment with drugs, to study Eastern religions, to reject the trappings of capitalism and to wander America and the world in his attempts to find peace through a life lived in the holy Now. All this at a time when mainstream America was sexually conservative, monogamous, predictable, tidy, obsessed with ownership.

Born to Catholic French-Canadian parents in Lowell, Massachusetts, Kerouac's relationship with his mother, who still lived with him at his death, was heavily Freudian. His father, also an anti-intellectual and a reactionary, rarely spoke to young Jack, who nevertheless cut short one of his many travels to be with the elder Kerouac when he was dying. Jack was a one-time disciple of psychedelic pioneer Dr Timothy Leary, whom he called "coach", but whose fascination with LSD Kerouac later rejected.

Surprisingly, the personally pacifistic Kerouac also supported the war in Vietnam, reviled the hippie movement of the '60s which idolised his writing and was an admirer of communist witch-hunter Senator Joseph McCarthy. Kerouac once claimed, "McCarthy's got the real dope on the Jews and the fairies," even though he remained basically apolitical and close to both his Jewish and gay friends. This underscores a basic tenet of the beat movement, which was a fierce individuality that made it almost impossible to identify common beliefs, despite the radical ways of thought and

action that gave the movement its image.

A compulsive writer who produced an enormous range of prose, poetry and autobiography, Kerouac could type 100 words a minute and claimed that he blitzed through the 1750,000 words of *On The Road* in three weeks, feeding a 120-foot roll of teletype into his typewriter. Ken Kesey, who achieved fame as the author of *One Flew Over The Cuckoo's Nest* and *Sometimes A Great Notion* before retiring, like J.D. Salinger, into the obscurity of small town America, once wrote of Kerouac: "In spite of biographers who want to brand him as a boozy right-wing bigot, and ex-wives and girlfriends trying to label him a cad or a mama's baby, I have to go along with Ginsberg: sweet sad Jack has every right to be, in the most traditional Catholic sense, considered a candidate for canonisation. He not only manifested Grace, and Mercy, and Glory; he also in some beatific way died for our scenes. Aint that what it takes to be a saint?"

In an introduction to Kerouac's one book of philosophy, *The Scripture of the Golden Eternity*, Eric Mottram wrote in 1970, "His was not the search for the ecstasy of the mystic or psychedelic or Artaud-mad. He sought a recognition in philosophy of his early sense that his body participated in the universal forms of energy with a quality of exuberance — that 'serious exuberance' which he so accurately called jazz."

Hence, Kerouac's *Scripture* was rife with such now-pedestrian blurbs as: "This world is the movie of what everything is, it is one movie, made of the same stuff throughout, belonging to nobody, which is what everything is."

Hmm. Were these people really writers of note or, as their teachers and establishment critics claimed, is art not that simple and easy? Wrote Ginsberg in 1972 of Kerouac's novel, *Visions of Cody*: "Art lies in the consciousness of doing the thing, in the attention to the happening, in the sacramentalization of everyday reality, the God-worship in the present conversation, no matter what... The book was a dirge

... for the American Hope that Jack (& his hero Neal) carried valiantly through the land after Whitman — an America of pioneers and generosity... but the great betrayal of that manly America was made by the pseudo-heroic pseudo-responsible masculines of Army and Industry and Advertising and Construction and Transports and toilets and War."

In *Lonesome Traveler*, one of Kerouac's two autobiographies, he wrote: "I looked around. I had been looking around for half an hour, at parked cars, dark corners, holes of sheds, door holes, niches, crypts of Egypt, waterfront rat holes, crapule doorholes, and beer-can clouts, midmast booms and fishing eagles — bah, nowhere, the heroes were nowhere to be seen."

Like the rock music rebels of the '60s, their beat movement predecessors had a hard time making it to old age.

Ginsberg and Burroughs managed to survive but Cassady was found naked by a railroad track, dead at 41 of a booze and downer overdose, and the drink got to Kerouac in 1969. Disillusioned and bloated, he died at home one morning with a drink in hand, watching a TV harbinger of yuppie-dom called "The Galloping Gourmet". At the time, he was living with his third wife and his mother. He was 47.

Their wild adventurous travels done, narrator Sal says at the end of *On The Road*, "Don't you know that God is Pooh Bear? The evening star must be drooping and shedding her sparkler dims on the prairie, which is just before the coming of complete night that blesses the earth, darkens all rivers, cups the peaks and folds the final shore in, and nobody, nobody knows what's going to happen to anybody besides the forlorn rags of growing old."

Whether that's great writing or not, it moves, and it teaches. If Australia really is embarking on a similar quest, perhaps for once a history lesson can be well-learned, and the sad courage of America's Beat Generation may bequeath its wisdom to our still-innocent shores.