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THE BEAT GENERATION: THEY WERE HIPSTERS NOT BEATNIKS

By Diane Huddleston

The Second World War ended with an atomic blast and ushered in the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union. The fear of communism spread and Joseph McCarthy stepped into the role of “Grand Inquisitor” for the House Committee on Un-American Activities. Americans wanted to take up life where it had left off before the war years with secure jobs, happy marriages, nice families, well-deserved retirement and a wide variety of consumer goods. The young generation was expected to go to school, get jobs, live moral lives, marry and have children, then take the torch of a prepackaged-life from their parents and pass it onto their progeny. Conformity was safe and the Establishment’s prerequisite for being a good citizen. However, some felt that security and safety were a façade that could be destroyed at any moment. Most Americans tried not to think of their vulnerability even though the world was still reeling from the aftershocks of six million Jews murdered in Third Reich gas chambers, the rape of Europe and the nuclear aftermath of Little Boy and Fat Man killing hundreds of thousands of Japanese.

Out of this silent “escapist” society rose a group of nonconformists--hipsters--who rejected what they felt were unauthentic, prepackaged lives. They sought spiritual meaning in life instead of going along with America’s newfound affluence and quest for materialism. Their lifestyle was scandalous to conservatives who called them radical, dangerous and bums. Many people of the older generation who had lived through the

Depression could not understand young people not wanting to work, especially when there were plenty of good-paying jobs available. Those who grew up struggling to survive could not understand the disloyalty of these radicals and their rejection of the new abundance that was available in America. These radicals were the Beat Generation.

The Beat Movement was a triumph and a tragedy. Its leaders experienced triumph due to their creative contributions to American culture and because of the seeds of nonconformity they sowed. Soon another generation would reap their fields in the 1960s and protest against social injustice and war. Either out of ignorance or on purpose, the tragedy was that the Beats were misunderstood and misrepresented by the media. The media, in trying to explain what the Beats were about, got it wrong. Instead the media spread a simplified, inaccurate stereotype that obscured the Beat message of restoring the human community to spirituality and authenticity. The media transformed the Beats into cartoon characters called beatniks. These beatniks became a commodity and their image was used to promote coffee houses, cellar nightclubs and help sell newspapers, records, clothing and other accessories. Ironically advertisers sold them to posers who half-heartedly tried to emulate the beatnik life. Gradually the old guard Beats were replaced by teenaged wannabes. Beatniks became a juvenile fad, somewhat distilling the Establishment's original alarm of epidemic violence and juvenile delinquency.

This study is an example of how the impact and meaning of a social movement like the Beat Generation may not be understood until the passage of many years. This essay will sample some of the perceptions historians and others had of the original Beats

during and after (roughly 1957 to the early 1960s) their time in the spotlight, as it dimmed and then faded away.

THE BEGINNING

In 1944 Allen Ginsberg met Jack Kerouac at Columbia University where they were considered outcasts. Ginsberg had been temporarily suspended as a result of a disciplinary action and Kerouac had dropped out. They were eventually introduced to William Burroughs who lived in Greenwich Village. Burroughs was a graduate from Harvard and a few years older. He thought about going to medical school in Vienna, but he never made it there. His family, which owned the Burroughs Corporation, was rich, having made their fortune manufacturing business machines. Burroughs lived on a trust fund allowance and did not have to work, but he took odd jobs to gain life experience for his writing. Ginsberg and Kerouac came from middle-class backgrounds. These men, perhaps the most famous of the soon-to-be movement, were the original Beats.

For the remainder of the 1940s, they explored the Village, wrote poetry and novels, talked about philosophy and contemplated the meaning of life. They met other writers, became jazz aficionados, experimented with drugs, usually marijuana and Benzedrine; sometimes heroin, became bohemians with sexual conquests and no steady employment and sought spiritual enlightenment through Buddhism. The Beats revered people considered weird and out of the mainstream as innovators. During this time, Kerouac and his friend, Neal Cassidy, took a road trip that would become the basis of Kerouac's breakthrough book, *On The Road*.

BREAKTHROUGH

In the early 1950s Ginsberg and Kerouac left the Village in New York and headed for San Francisco. At that time, San Francisco was the center of the avant-garde poetic renaissance and had been since the 1940s (headed by Kenneth Rexroth). It was a haven for artists and writers and would become a famous Beat enclave. On October 13, 1955 Ginsberg gave his famous groundbreaking reading of *Howl* at the 6 Gallery, a rundown experimental art gallery in the Black section of San Francisco. In 1957, *Howl* and *On The Road* were published. In May 1957, San Francisco police raided bookstores and confiscated copies of *Howl*, and other books considered to be obscene. Lawrence Ferlinghetti, the owner of the City Lights Bookstore, was arrested for obscenity charges because his store sold these books. His trial ended up being a landmark case for American literary history when Judge W. J. Clayton Horn ruled that *Howl* was not obscene and stated, “. . . An author should be real in treating his subject and be allowed to express his thoughts and ideas in his own words.”¹ The publicity of the trial sparked the interest of the media, which then broadcast the Beat phenomenon to the attention of the mainstream public.²

One of the first things that people wanted to know was what “Beat” meant. Kerouac came up with Beat in 1948, but it originally had a negative connotation because it was a slang word with a history of association with drug culture. Jazz musicians also used the word after World War II, meaning “poor” or “exhausted.” Kerouac reinvented it

¹Milton Viorst, *Fire In the Streets: America in the 1960s*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1979), 85.

²Allen J. Matusow, *The Unraveling of America: A History of Liberalism in the 1960s*, New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1984), 283. “*Howl* sold 100,000 copies in ten years, making it perhaps the most popular serious poem of the century.”

to incorporate spirituality by describing those who did not adhere to the prevailing tide of materialism and personal ambition.³ The Beats used other slang words used by jazz musicians, which could have several meanings depending on the inflection of the voice or body language. Their language, philosophy, lifestyle and dress separated them from the mainstream, and they pronounced themselves “hip” and conformists “square.” In referring to themselves as “hipsters,” people did not understand what this word meant.

During 1957, Norman Mailer, a writer sympathetic to the Beats and linked to other alienationist writers, wrote an article called “The White Negro.”⁴ This article described the original hipsters as being marginalized African-Americans who were usually jazz musicians and often lived a bohemian and sometimes violent lifestyle. They were promiscuous, smoked marijuana and spoke their own language. These Black hipsters were constantly in fear of arrest or even sudden death, usually at the hands of white supremacists. Mailer explains how the Beat poets tried to emulate that unencumbered, free lifestyle, “spirit,” and attitude of Black jazz musicians of the 1930s and 1940s. Blacks in general seemed to live more authentic lives in the face of instability and constant danger of being framed and imprisoned or killed by racists. This paralleled the chaotic world that the Beats felt they lived in. They feared sudden death by the bomb, or worse, the slow demise through conformity. This propelled their quest to seek as many experiences as life had available and then write about them. So in effect, the Beats who emulated Black hipsters became the white version, or the “white negro.”

Literary critic Herbert Gold (writing for *Playboy* in February 1958) expounded on the violence of hipsters mentioned by Mailer, but additionally portrayed them as being

³David Halberstam, *The Fifties*, (New York: Villard Books, 1993), 301.

⁴Norman Mailer, “The White Negro: Superficial Reflections on the Hipster,” *Dissent*, 1957.

motorcycle thugs, bohemians and drug addicts with no responsibilities to anyone, including wives, children, work or political involvement. Writer John Clellon Holmes saw hipsters as being less violent, more spiritual and affirming personal individuality.⁵ Douglas T. Miller and Marion Nowak stated that the middle-class was worried that the Beats would inspire out-of-control violence, juvenile delinquency and rebellion.⁶ Kerouac countered negative and violent depictions of hipsters by asserting that the Beats were mystics on a spiritual quest, having nothing in common with juvenile delinquents who he considered to be sinful and indifferent.

More controversy surrounding the Beats arose at the end of the 1950s when more people began reading their fiction and poems. Miller and Marion wrote, “The Beats made the establishment afraid because they were a genuine bunch of dissenters; they were humanitarian, attractively hedonistic, very vaguely left wing, and most of all, popular. That gave them dangerous power.”⁷

In 1959, Eugene Burdick wrote that there was no such thing as a Beat Generation as hipsters consisted of a small group of people, and it was unlikely that their philosophy would become a significant movement.⁸ Burdick did not seem very impressed by the Beat lifestyle or their writing. However, in 2001, Ann Charters, Kerouac’s biographer, stated that the Beats were perceived as belonging to a different generation because of the impact they made on thousands of readers.⁹ Charters saw the Beats very favorably

⁵Stephen Petrus, “Rumblings of Discontent: American Popular Culture and Its Response to the Beat Generation, 1957-1960,” *Studies in Popular Culture*, 1997.

⁶Douglas T. Miller and Marion Nowak, *The Fifties: The Way We Really Were*, (Garden City: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1977), 280-87.

⁷Miller and Nowak, *The Fifties*, 386.

⁸Eugene Burdick, “The Politics of the Beat Generation,” *The Western Political Quarterly*, vol. 12, no. 2 June 1959), 553, 555.

⁹Ann Charters, *Beat Down to Your Soul: What Was the Beat Generation?* (New York: Penguin Books, 2001), xxxv.

because she was present in the movement and had been very influenced by it. She also became Kerouac's biographer and spent a lot of time with him. Burdick was right that the hipster philosophy and lifestyle would not take hold, but in the years to come, the Beats would be examples to people asserting their dissatisfaction and desire for change.

David Halberstam, a historian who wrote about the 1950s, devoted a chapter to the Beats in his text. He gave a fairly objective historical account of them, even leaning to the favorable side. In it he recorded how the Beats esteemed those who were different, even prison inmates, because they thought inmates embodied the essence of freedom from the system.¹⁰ Considering that belief today, it seems extremely naïve, because prisoners in the system today are not experiencing freedom from the system, but are entangled, trapped and exploited by it. How times have changed! Halberstam also stated that many social critics during the 1950s were irritated by the generally quiescent attitude of the "silent generation" and their boundless appetite for consumerism. Some people were uncomfortable with the conformity, questioned the purpose of life and worried that people were becoming too attached to material things. The Beats were the first to come out and take a stand, protesting conformity and the lack of the social and cultural purpose of the middle-class.

Allen Matusow, a historian who wrote about the 1960s, looked back to the Beats as the forerunners of the Hippie Movement. He stated the Beats had deviant tastes in literature, music, language, drugs and religion. They were alienated from American values because they rejected materialism, hygiene, sexual repression and lived in voluntary poverty. The hippies did the same types of things, but they drew even more

¹⁰ David Halberstam, *The Fifties*, (New York: Villard Books, 1993), 300.

publicity.¹¹ The subversive acts of the Beats even came under the scrutiny of the FBI. At the 1960 Republican Convention, J. Edgar Hoover named “beatniks” one of the three menaces to the United States. The other two were communism and eggheads, i.e., intellectuals.¹² According to Miller and Nowak, the establishment wanted to shut this movement down and attempted to do it by belittling it and using “McCarthyist” tactics.¹³ Howard Prothero, in 1991, wrote an article commending the Beats as literary innovators in addition to being spiritual protesters who should be viewed as minor characters in the drama of American religion.¹⁴

Richard Hofstadter, another historian, criticized *beatniks* for their cult of alienation and moral nihilism. From his perspective in 1963, he called them adolescent, romantic anarchists with an infantile disorder--a symptom of the current cultural malaise.¹⁵ He also stated they had produced very little good writing. Hofstadter does not appear to have differentiated between Beats and *beatniks*--and there was a difference. He seems to have lumped the original Beats together with beatniks; however, the Beats were older and more mature (born between 1914 and mid-1920s), and actually tried to distance themselves from the adolescent imitators that became part of the beatnik fad of the early 1960s. The Beats were literary. Beatniks were an adolescent fad.

David McReynolds wrote in 1970 that the Beat Generation was a natural expression for the times, deeply rooted in the chaos of American society.¹⁶ In 1982

¹¹Matusow, *The Unraveling of America*, 287.

¹² Steven Watson, *The Birth of the Beat Generation: Visionaries, Rebels, and Hipsters, 1944-1960*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1995), 260.

¹³ Miller and Nowak, *The Fifties*, 386.

¹⁴Stephen Prothero, “On the Holy Road: The Beat Movement as Spiritual Protest,” *The Harvard Theological Review*, vol. 84, no. 2 (Apr. 1991), 208.

¹⁵Richard Hofstadter, *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1963), 420, 422.

¹⁶Marty Jezer, *The Dark Ages: Life in the United States 1945-1960*, (Boston: South End Press, 1982), 253.

Marty Jezer observed that their rebellion was expressed by art instead of politics because of the repression of the Cold War.¹⁷ Jezer also stated that commentators at the time disparaged the movement as a passing fad or aberration made up of outcasts and misfits. He also commented that Norman Mailer was one of the few to see their withdrawal from conformity as a positive rebellion.¹⁸ Theodore Roszak, author of *The Making of a Counterculture* (1969), was disappointed, however, that the Beats were not political.

Some literary critics, like Norman Podhoretz¹⁹ (along with historian, Hofstadter) claimed the Beats were anti-intellectuals and/or not intellectuals at all; however, that opinion overlooks that Kerouac, Burroughs and Ginsberg attended either Harvard or Columbia University and studied literature. Podhoretz stated the primitivism of the Beats was used as a cover for anti-intellectualism so bitter that it made American hatred of eggheads seem benign.²⁰ When Burroughs' book, *The Naked Lunch*, was published in 1959, Norman Mailer, twice Pulitzer Prize winner and National Book Award winner in 1955, commented that he thought Burroughs was "the only American writer who may be conceivably possessed by genius." *Rolling Stone* praised Burroughs' restored text version of *The Naked Lunch*, "Of all the Beat Generation writers, William S. Burroughs was the most dangerous . . . He's anarchy's double agent, an impeccable enemy of

¹⁷Jezer, *The Dark Ages*, 259.

¹⁸Viorst, *Fire In the Streets*, 255.

¹⁹Charters, *Beat Down to Your Soul*, 488. Podhoretz was a student at Columbia during the time Kerouac and Ginsberg were there. Charters quotes a 1958 article written by Podhoretz "The Know Nothing Bohemians" in *Partisan Review*. "The plain truth is that the primitivism of the Beat Generation serves first of all as a cover for an anti-intellectualism so bitter that it makes the ordinary American's hatred of eggheads seem positively benign. Kerouac and his friends like to think of themselves as intellectuals . . . but this is only a form of newspeak."

²⁰Hofstadter, *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life*, 421.

conformity and of all agents of control . . .”²¹ At the time of its original publication, Podhoretz stated that *The Naked Lunch* was “an endless novel which will drive everybody mad.”²² He also had disparaging comments about *On The Road*, even though it was on the bestseller list for several weeks. He was critical about Kerouac as being a spokesperson for the young generation when he was at least thirty-something years old.²³ Truman Capote made sarcastic remarks about the Beats’ writing style as unedited thoughts coming out of a typewriter and being called literature. *The New York Times* wrote that Ginsberg was a cultural hero to university students throughout the world and sometimes considered a prophet.

MARKETING THE BEATNIKS

The public was inundated with articles about the Beats and their lifestyle in newspapers and magazines like *Esquire*, *Life*, *Playboy* and *Readers’ Digest* in the late 1950s. The term “beatnik” was first used in 1958 by Herb Caen, a journalist for the *San Francisco Chronicle*. It was meant to be derogatory, conjuring a similarity to “Sputnik,” the Soviet satellite. Perhaps Caen was hoping that readers would connect it with America’s archenemy, the Soviet Union and communism. Paul O’Neil, wrote an article for *Life* in 1959, which included a photo layout with hired models and contrived sets with objects and furnishings depicting a typical slovenly beatnik pad, including a bare mattress, typewriter and bongo drums. Many television shows introduced beatnik

²¹William S. Burroughs, *The Naked Lunch: Restored Text*, Edited by James Grauerholz and Barry Miles, (New York: Grove Press, 2001). Both comments by Norman Mailer and *Rolling Stone* are listed in the very front of the book before the title page.

²²Charters, *Beat Down to Your Soul*, 481.

²³Charters, *Beat Down to Your Soul*, 482.

characters and Hollywood made exploitation films along with the other low-budget B science fiction and horror movies during that time.

This appears to be the beginning of the media deconstruction of the Beats, replacing them with the new stereotypical image of the beatnik, which caught on and remains to this day. The hipster-like characters portrayed by Marlon Brando and James Dean were replaced by characters like Maynard G. Krebs, played by Bob Denver in the television sitcom “The Many Loves of Dobie Gillis” from 1959-1963. *Mad Magazine* even did a spoof about a beatnik, called “Wild Harry.” Part of the confusion was that the hipster and beatnik personas overlapped in some areas. Both listened to jazz, wrote poetry and did not hold jobs; however, the stereotype of the unthreatening, silly guy wearing sandals, playing bongo drums and sporting a goatee replaced the “dangerous,” virile, cool cat. The press failed to understand or forgot that the Beats were serious, dedicated writers. Ginsberg struggled to separate the Beat image from these “cultural defectors.”

Beatniks were still considered counter-culture, but they were now considered more of a benign, adolescent fad. The Establishment could breathe easier and even laugh at their antics. O’Neil observed that with the dissent of the beatnik came the emergence of a fad and a “cultural protest transformed into a commodity.”²⁴ Many tried to make money off this new fad and went as far as selling beatnik kits. One photographer ran ads offering to rent a beatnik. With commercialization, Kerouac was afraid the spiritual message he was trying to convey was being lost. Ginsberg was explicitly direct with those who misrepresented the Beats. He called them instruments of the devil, liars, war-

²⁴Petrus, “Rumblings of Discontent,” 1997.

creating Whores of Babylon, among other things.²⁵ John Maynard, a historian writing in 1991, stated that the Beats were a reproach to consumer society and it would be a mistake to dismiss their influence.²⁶

POTENTIAL RESEARCH

When looking at the older scholarship on the Beats, there is a significant amount of negativity. Many literary critics of the 1950s, such as Podhoretz, had nothing but negative things to say about their writing. These sources seem to demand an adherence to the traditional writing styles in the literary classics. On the other hand, Norman Mailer was very positive about their work even to the point of being a defense witness when obscenity hearings were conducted for *The Naked Lunch* in the early 1960s. There is some mention in the scholarship about the Beat Movement being reminiscent of the “Lost Generation” writers (and artists) who expatriated to Paris in the 1920s and 1930s (many were from the United States). Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Gertrude Stein, Pablo Picasso and Salvador Dali were just a few of the writers and artists in this group. The Lost Generation also tested the boundaries and conventions of writing and art, and they were considered to be bohemians because of their lifestyle. Many of them fled the United States because they felt that Paris had a more accepting and cosmopolitan atmosphere where they could create without censorship. The Beats were also testing creative boundaries, but instead of expatriating to another country, they found small enclaves in the United States and lived amongst other like-minded individuals who chose not to go along with the conformity of mainstream society. This reference to the Paris

²⁵Petrus, “Rumblings of Discontent,” 1997.

²⁶John Arthur Maynard, *Venice West: The Beat Generation in Southern California*, (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1991), 5.

“Lost Generation” writers should be further explored to compare the similarities in the political, cultural and social dissatisfaction of the times, and restrictions on creativity experienced by the Beats.

Historians Miller and Nowak describe “McCarthyist” tactics that were used to discredit the Beats. Such tactics criticized the deviant lifestyle and nonconformity of the Beats, but also maligned them for leaning toward Marxist beliefs, despite the fact that they were not a political movement. At that time, the Establishment was fiercely suspicious and McCarthy’s committee persecuted many intellectuals, accusing them of being communists. J. Edgar Hoover mentioned that “beatniks” were one of the three menaces to the United States. One would assume that if he thought enough to mention that, he might have thought there was some potential danger of the Establishment losing control of its young people. Conspiracy theories aside, it would be interesting to determine if Hoover ever had the Beats surveilled, and if so, to what extent. For years now the American public has heard about ways governmental agencies leak true or false information to the media, and how information is used to discredit their foes. Was the media watering down the Beat message on purpose? Was the resultant marketing of the “beatnik” fad planned or a byproduct of publicity which capitalists saw as a great opportunity to make a few bucks? There might not be anything sinister at all, but once the beatnik stereotype hype caught on, the Beats seemed to be pushed to the background.

CONCLUSION

The Beat Generation started in the 1940s, gained mainstream notice and popularity in 1957, and faded away in the early 1960s. Their rebellious voices questioned the values and meaning of American culture and the Establishment’s

prescribed way of life. They enriched pop culture by introducing it to jazz music, which later influenced rock and roll music. They spurred interest in Eastern mysticism and Buddhism. They were instrumental in liberating writers from censorship and bringing about public awareness and respect for indigenous people.

The Beat message was watered down by the media and turned into a beatnik fad. Critics triumphed over the Beats' early demise, which was a tragedy to genuine Beat fans. In 1962, James F. Scott wrote that the Beat Movement in American literature was about to expire and "we can do little more than wish the Beats embalmed and interred with all deliberate speed."²⁷ He also stated that the Beats were failures as literary artists. This opinion has been proved wrong by the *Times* "All-Time 100 Novels List."²⁸ This is a list of the 100 best English language books since *Time* started publication in 1923. On *The Road* (Kerouac), *The Naked Lunch* (Burroughs), and *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (Kesey) made this list in October 2005. These books are still being sold in bookstores today. Ginsberg's *Howl* has sold tens of thousands of copies.

The Beats had mixed reviews during their time when American culture was predominantly conservative. The United States had established itself as a superpower after World War II and the Great Depression was long gone. Eisenhower was president and Joseph McCarthy was on his communist witch-hunt. Maybe it was easier for Americans to conform, not attract scrutiny and be left alone, because the Establishment knew what was best anyway. Besides, Americans were given an example of what the

²⁷James F. Scott, "Beat Literature and the American Teen Cult," *American Quarterly*, Vol. 14, No. 2, Part 1 (Summer 1962), 130.

²⁸*Time Entertainment*, "All-Time 100 Novels," 10/16/05.

government could do to those perceived to be disloyal and dangerous when Julius and Ethel Rosenberg were condemned for treason and executed.

In the end, the Beat Movement triumphed as the next generation of readers and critics began appreciating their writings and message. The movement had prepped the soil of change that grew into the Hippy Movement and the New Left of the 1960s. These groups gave added momentum to the existing fight for Black civil rights, revamped the women's movement, protested against Vietnam and the arms race, and brought about an ecological consciousness. Their writings inspired new artists and musicians. According to Ann Charters, the Beats inspired generations of writers and the phenomenon of the Beat Generation became a part of the fabric of cultural life in the United States.²⁹

After the Beat Movement, Ginsberg and Burroughs successfully made the transition into the 1960s. Ginsberg became very active in the Peace Movement. He and Burroughs were embraced by contemporary artists and musicians until their deaths in 1997. Kerouac died an untimely death in 1969 at the young age of 47 due to cirrhosis of the liver. The American culture of the 1950s valued economic society and materialism. People were not willing to exchange their routine and stable lives to exist like Kerouac's character, Dean Moriarty, in *On The Road*. However, the seeds of nonconformity sown by the early hipsters inspired the next restless and disenchanting (beat) generation to protest the intolerance of the Establishment, injustice and war.

²⁹Charters, *Beat Down to Your Soul*, xxxvi, xxxvii.

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