

TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE



Meeting the Ginsberg Good-Bloke Egg

Syd Harrex (transcribed by Michael X. Savvas and Olivia Savvas-Koopmans)

I was on the Writers' Week Committee at the time, and Ralph Elliot in those early days had very good contacts with the literati in Adelaide: the university there and Flinders University, so in those early days, when there were interesting people coming to Writers' Week, Ralph was very instrumental in getting his staff to meet these writers and do our best to bring them up to Flinders to do readings et cetera. So I was involved in that. Very much so.

In this case, with [Beatle friend] Allen Ginsberg, he had brought his squeezebox, and I was very keen that he should read 'Howl.' And my dream was that I'd get him into Matthew Flinders Theatre, and he would read 'Howl.' But he didn't want to do that, and I respected that. So what he wanted to do was sit out on the plaza with his squeezebox and read William Blake poems. And so that was how he did it when he was here. And he was a great success. I went around advertising it all the time. He was going to be performing in the morning. I think it was 11 o'clock or something. He said, 'I think I might need some beer on the stage when I'm there.' So I came out of the staff club and managed to get a couple of bottles of beer, and then Ralph introduced him on the stage, and we had a terrific audience. I remember he said, 'Well, thank

'Meeting Allen Ginsberg.' Syd Harrex, transcribed by Michael X. Savvas and Olivia Savvas-Koopmans. Transnational Literature Vol. 9 no. 1, December 2016. <http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/transnational/home.html>

you very much, Professor, for that great introduction. I must invite you to come along and deliver my funeral oration.'

It didn't matter to him whether anyone was interested in listening or not. People were curious. I'd been telling the first year students about how important he was because of 'Howl.' Well, other students as well, so we tried to get people along there. He was prepared to sit there for quite a while, and people came and went listening to him. He wasn't into the big deal sort of famous writer persona. Just relaxing.

Then I was invited to the East-West Center in Honolulu for six weeks with writers et cetera. And Janet Frame and Ken Arvidson were the two from New Zealand. And this was the first time that Janet Frame had ever read in public, because she was renowned for her reclusiveness. And Allen Ginsberg was there, and we had some very enjoyable times together. But he was being plagued by a guy whose name I won't mention, who was a bit of a menace. And Allen had to go to one of the Hawaiian Islands with him or something like that.

But Allen was one of those guys who impressed you immediately as having a very sincere relationship with anyone who was interested in talking about writing or did writing or anything like that. He had an enthusiastically open mind and was very supportive, and he was a good guy to talk with. My impression of Allen was okay, his fame became him, but it was something that he didn't think was very important if he was meeting new people and having interesting talks with him et cetera. So in a sense, one respected that, by not trying to do an unofficial interview with him and ask him questions about 'Howl' or anything like that. In other words, the idea was a mutual respect for creativity without preying on people's fame. And he always struck me as a guy who really enjoyed being natural: have a beer and a talk, and you felt free in his society. I'm sure that's the way he wanted people to feel ... unless they were pricks. He was a very communal person, and his values I think were very humanistic, living up to what his writing was all about. And he was such a nice person to be in his company. Allen was just an affable, agreeable person.

I was interested in talking to him about his American predecessors, like Walt Whitman. And I think I told him I'd met Conrad Aitken, too. But then when we met up again in Hawaii, he was excellent company. And he wanted just to meet the New Zealand writers and others, and Wole Soyinka was there. And I had confidently predicted to the University Council here [at Flinders University] that Wole Soyinka would win the Nobel Prize for literature. And somebody bet me that I wouldn't read a poem to Council when I was on Council. And I was invited to talk about my area, and I talked about new literatures and what that amounted to and I said, 'But oh, I'll read you a poem, by a man that I confidently predict will win the Nobel Prize for Literature. And it was 'Telephone Conversation' by Wole Soyinka. So I rest my case.

'The Ginsberg Good-Bloke Egg'
Syd Harrex

The bardic Beat
middleman, the prophetic
past and a post-modern
future, a neo-apocalypse.

And that's how I saw him
as he chanted and sang
Blake's songs accompanied by
his energetic pulling and pushing
of his squeeze box and its
finger-hovering metrical chords.

The next and last meeting,
wit and nirvana in cheerful
equipoise at the East-West Center
in Honolulu, abstaining from abstinence
as cheerfulness determined,
we shared jokes over a beer
and discussed why we were there,
and what might we not say
around the colloquium table
without offending our sense of humour
by repressing it nor a wicked
sense of absurdist foot-noting.

So continue to fare-thee-well
Mystic no-nonsense Aussie—
Compatible mate who never lost
it seemed his Songs of Innocence.

The editors would like to thank Michael X. Savvas and Olivia Savvas-Koopmans for their permission to reprint the anecdote and poem, which first appeared in their book about The Beatles' South Australian connections, One Dream Ago (Single X Publications, 2010).