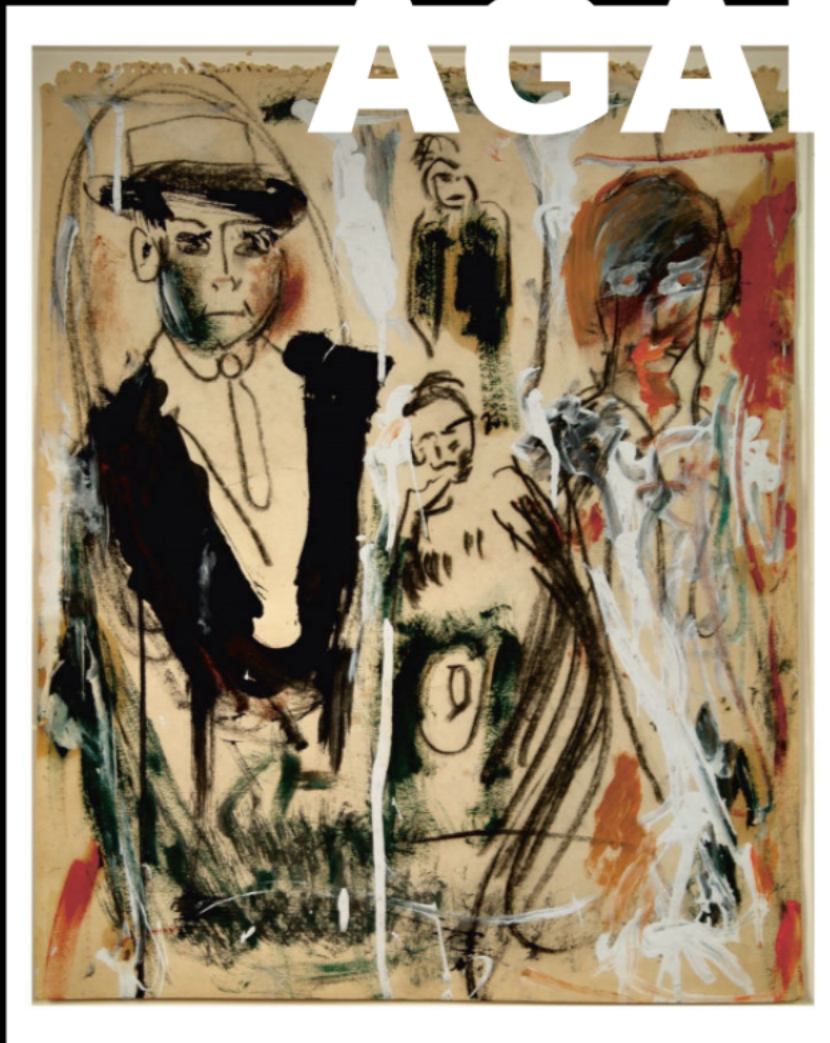


# RAGE AGAINST THE MAINSTREAM



BY AMANDA SMITH

*For those who saw through the sham of the 'golden age' and the 'you never had it so good' messages coming through the television, there was only ever the "next crazy venture beneath the skies"*

It was a time marked by war, stringent religious upbringings, the rise of the suburbs, and the 'golden age of capitalism'. Society was shaking off the frugality of the Great Depression and World War II. The prosperous economy and the bright lights of the TV promised riches for everyday people.

One collective of writers, however, saw a different reality.

Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, William Burroughs, Herbert Huncke and Lucien Carr met at Columbia University in 1948 and communed in the bohemian neighborhood of Greenwich Village. These unpublished scribes shared the view that something was missing in society; that the status quo stifled life. Brimming with post-war malaise, the group pushed back against society's capitalist hypnosis.

It was Kerouac who coined the phrase "Beat Generation" to characterize a perceived anti-conformist, anti-capitalism youth movement in New York. Huncke further iterated, using "beat" in a discussion to describe a street hustler. Kerouac added his meaning: "upbeat", "beatific", and "on the beat". And what began as an intellectual interrogation of culture and rigid writing styles became the social and literary movement that defined the counterculture of the '60s.

**"AMERICA, I'VE GIVEN YOU ALL AND NOW I'M NOTHING"**

Their circle became known as the Beat Poets and "Beatniks". They simultaneously rejected conventional society and alienated themselves from it, while inspiring a sub-culture with new ways of thinking and living. And they did it purely through the medium of literature.

These literary explorations were ahead of their time. *Howl*, Ginsberg's celebrated poem about exploitation, repression, subjugation, and sexual liberty, was published in 1956, over a decade before the Stonewall Uprising of 1969. The poem represented the disillusion of the

time, freedom of speech, and a fascination with those on the fringes of society. The famous opening line offers Ginsberg's take: "I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness, starving hysterical naked, dragging themselves through the negro streets at dawn looking for an angry fix".

While his poetry advocated for individual freedom, especially relating to love, Kerouac's *On The Road* and Burroughs' *Naked Lunch* are also works born out of this revolution. Beat Generation literature was fascinated by sexual liberation, psychedelic drugs, Buddhism, Daoism, poverty, travel, and a heightened sense of awareness – all while rejecting materialism and the mainstream, making it both a renaissance and an awakening of a new consciousness. Truth and tragedy were no longer taboo, giving themselves permission to counter the mainstream, making way for a more spontaneous style of literature.

**"EXTERMINATE ALL RATIONAL THOUGHT"**

Just as Ginsberg, Kerouac, and Burroughs pushed up against the constraints of society, their writing also belonged outside conventions. Gary Snyder, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, and Gregory Corso also belonged in this group. Not that a Beat would ever admit to being anything, of course. They were undefinable. Ginsberg once said: "There is no beat poetry, or a beat novel, or a beat painting. Beat is a poetic conception, an attitude toward the world."

The stories about casual sex, drug addiction, traversing the country on freight trains, hitchhiking, and the absence of status didn't fit within the borders of traditional literature. Stylistically, Beat writing and poetry was spontaneous, experimental, a stream of consciousness, and rhythmic – taking great inspiration from jazz. As Kerouac noted: "Man, wow, there's so many things to do, so many things to write! How to even begin to get it all down and without modified restraints and

all hung-up on like literary inhibitions and grammatical fears..."

It was, as it should be, all about the story rather than how that story was communicated. Life isn't perfect; why should literature be?

All Beat writers, the self-proclaimed "mad ones", shared the sentiment that the meaning of life came from living. It is magnificently messy. It's about letting go, feeling free, even with no money. It's the journey, not the jobs; that we can only truly learn about life through experience and "not someone's distorted point of view."

**"NOTHING BEHIND ME, EVERYTHING AHEAD OF ME, AS IS EVER SO ON THE ROAD"**

The Beat Generation bit deep into the cultural nerve. They paved the way for greater acceptance of unconventional voices, and a decade later, the anti-establishment counterculture movement.

While it's best known today as a social and literary movement, The Beat Generation expanded our collective consciousness to inspire some of the best music of all time, making a prolific impression on Bob Dylan, Jim Morrison, and The Beatles – so much so that these artists might not have become what they did without it. Punk rockers, and socialist foot soldiers, The Clash, included a Ginsberg spoken word track, *Ghetto Defiant*, on their album *Combat Rock*.

While society was spellbound by television and the message of affluence it conveyed, Beat poets and writers saw through the illusion. Ginsberg, Kerouac, Burroughs, and the Beatniks rejected the notion of being 'put together' – conforming to nothing, and instead exploring the complexities of the human condition: life informed prose, and prose informed life. The Beat Generation was the genesis for social progress that followed: the counterculture movement, civil rights, women's liberation, and LGBT liberties. The Beats remind us that progress can be made, and live on, on the page.