

Beatific Beats

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In Jack Kerouac's novel *On The Road*, the author is cruising merrily down the highway with his friends when their car is pulled over by the cops for speeding. The officer asks the driver "Are you boys going someplace in such a hurry, or just going?" Jack said he wasn't exactly sure what the cop was asking, but later realized it was a very good question.

I revisited and re-read *On The Road* this spring, only vaguely remembering *The Dharma Bums* and Kerouac's other titles from high school when they were an obligatory rite of passage. I even did my share of hitchhiking back then, including the hippie trail to India. Mostly I was a lost soul in my misspent youth. I had dropped out of Harvard for a year and decided to travel not exactly searching for anything because I wasn't sure what I was looking for, but definitely feeling like a misfit in the Ivy League. So there I was, with my thumb out, headed East, toward the land of Hare Krishna and who knew what else. I recall skimming through *Naked Lunch* at some point on that trip, but there wasn't any real plan to my reading, just like there wasn't much of a Trip-Tik to guide my wandering. To answer the question the cop asked Jack, I wasn't going anyplace in particular, just going.

As I've gotten older, however, I've noticed that motion in any direction can often give the illusion of purpose. Sheer velocity offers a convincing sensation of getting there fast, regardless of where "there" might be. And I think that's the situation that many Americans found themselves in during the 1950's, when I was born, during those post-war years when everything was booming. The economy was booming. Babies were booming. Churches were booming. Hydrogen bombs were booming. Life was accelerating, getting faster and faster with big tail fins and a brand new interstate highway system that could deliver you rapidly from one side of the continent to the other in a land where every motel and strip development was starting to look pretty much like every other. People were in a rush, to make up lost time, years forfeited in the war and

the Great Depression. But there wasn't much introspection as to where all this progress might be headed or what was being lost along the way.

Some however suspected there was a down side to it all. And I think that's probably why Jack Kerouac decided to drop out of Columbia and dump the Ivy League, rather like I did. He'd been raised in Lowell, Massachusetts, a working class mill town that even then had seen better days but where the French Canadians (called Canucks or peasoupers) were always considered low rent. Jean-Louis Kerouac, as he was christened, didn't learn English till he was six and the football scholarship he won to college could have given him a ticket out of the ethnic ghetto he called home. He was on the ladder up. Success beckoned. But he quit the football team and left Columbia after an argument with the coach in his sophomore year, probably for the same reason that he'd quit the Navy. During drill in basic training while marching in formation Jack simply put down his rifle and went off to the library to read. He chose books over bullets. He was sent to the shrinks, where after being diagnosed as too sane for military service (not really; they found some labels to stick on him) he was given a discharge for possessing an "indifferent character." These weren't political statements for Jack so much as shrugging resignation to being a cultural outsider, first by birth and then by choice. Being a varsity player or a big man on campus just wasn't his style. Nor was he cut out for spit-and-polish or taking orders from guys with no neck. That square world had him beaten, or left him feeling beat, at least it did in 1948 when he and a friend coined the term Beat Generation.

By then he'd already met Allen Ginsburg and William S. Burroughs and most of the other characters who would appear in his landmark novel. In their different ways, they were all out of step and out of sync. "Crazy" became a good word in beatnik slang (as in "that cat was blowing some crazy bebop") because almost all of them had some brush with madness. Jack lasted just ten days in boot camp before spending two months in a naval psychiatric ward. At the age of twenty-three, Ginsburg spent seven months in Columbia Presbyterian psychiatric, partly because he was a homosexual,

then regarded as a mental illness; one of the inmates he befriended there was the inspiration for his poem *Howl* with its unforgettable opening lines:

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

Published by City Lights, a new San Francisco bookstore that sold only pocket editions and paperbacks for the masses, *Howl* was banned as a dirty book until the Beats beat the rap in an historic ruling for free speech. Crazy, man. William Burroughs, another author whose work was deemed obscene, was institutionalized after chopping off his finger, while his wife, Joan Volmer, spent time in Bellevue for benzedrine-induced psychosis. Poet Gregory Corso who was in that same hospital suggested that one reason there were so few women in the Beat movement was because most were in asylums. Behave like these guys and, if you were female in the fifties, you'd either get locked up or get a lobotomy.

But crazy was not all bad, remember. In *A Coney Island of the Mind*, Lawrence Ferlinghetti rhapsodized:

Christ Climbed down
from His bare Tree
this year
and ran away to where
there were no rootless Christmas trees
hung with candycanes and breakable stars ...

Christ climbed down and ran away to where there were no pink plastic Christmas trees and no clever cornball relatives or caroling Adirondack reindeer with German names or phoney North Pole saints bears sacks of humble gifts from Saks Fifth Avenue, ran off to the quiet of everyone's anonymous soul to await the very craziest of Second Comings.

But the craziest of all, if not the most Christ-like, was Neal Cassady, or as his fictional persona was known, Dean Moriarty, hero of *On The Road*. He's pictured in the novel as totally manic, or maybe just hyper compulsive. I'm no clinician, but the guy can't stop fidgeting, can't stop twitching, can't stop muttering, "yes, yes, yes," or "wow, wow," or "go, go, go." Kerouac calls him a "Holy Goof." Neal's monologues, some lifted directly from Cassady's letters, are virtually nonsensical stream-of-consciousness jabbering. Which makes him a sort of psychological Rorschach. You can see in him whatever you want. But he is a perpetual motion machine, he loves fast cars and wherever he goes, others follow. The West Coast and Frisco lure these hipsters like a dream, but by the 1950's the frontier was long gone. The open range had been subdivided and sold off by the acre. So instead the beats looked to sociological frontiers. They haunted the shooting galleries and drug dens, the juke joints and jazz clubs, the gay bars and flophouses. What are they looking for there? Kerouac calls it "the ragged and ecstatic joy of pure being." Not looking for a philosophy of life. Not looking for a theory to explain everything. Just looking for the unadulterated, unsanitized, unmediated experience of being alive. Which could sometimes be a bummer.

Oh the world is a beautiful place to be born into
If you don't mind a few dead minds in higher places
Or a bomb or two now and then in your upturned faces

Yes, the world was a fine place, as Ferlinghetti observed, but messier and more complicated than portrayed on "Leave It To Beaver." There was so much that the Beave and Wally never even mentioned. The novelist Tom Wolfe in his book *The Right Stuff* likened the media in those days to a proper Victorian gentleman. The press were self-regulating, he said, and prim and proper. If it wasn't fit for the pages of *Life Magazine*, it wasn't fit to print. It had no public reality. It was invisible, the way Ralph Ellison described being black in America in *The Invisible Man*. There was a lot to life that *Life* left out. And the beats were determined to find it.

There's plenty of tedium *On The Road*. But one of the more tender passages occurs when Jack hooks up with a young Mexican American mom, a single mother estranged from her husband as lost and broke as he is. Together they look for work in the migrant camps. Jack finds solace kneeling in the dirt, bending over the rows, initially romanticizing the labor, but then humiliated to find that his girlfriend's seven year old son can pick cotton quicker and do a better job supporting the family than he can. The Okies in the camp look askance, suspecting Jack might be Mexican and Jack agrees that indeed he might be mixed race. But there's no hint of this being a morality tale or some uplifting parable, the way you might find it written in Steinbeck, for instance. It's just a simple love story, with a sad ending that leaves you feeling kind of incomplete because that's how it is. The whole affair is perhaps fifteen pages in a three hundred page book. But it's real, it's genuine and probably helped get Kerouac's improbable 140 foot long typewritten scroll actually get published.

After that, he was a star. The New York Times called the book's appearance "an historic occasion." Invited onto the Steve Allen Show as a guest, Kerouac was asked what it meant to be beat. His answer was, "probably just being sympathetic." Being sympathetic, open-hearted to all kinds and conditions of humanity, the bums, the petty crooks, the junkies, the queers, the outcasts and outsiders, the misfits and migrants and the star-crossed lovers..

That was likely what drew so many of the Beats to Buddhism before Buddhism was cool, the central teaching of compassion. Ginsberg penned a *Sunflower Sutra* while Jack put his hand to an Buddhist inspired collection called the *Scripture of Golden Eternity*. But few delved as deeply as Gary Snyder, who was part of the famous Gallery Six reading in San Francisco where *Howl* first premiered in 1956. Snyder left for Kyoto, Japan, soon after, where he would spend most of the next decade immersed in the practice of Zen. But that night, he read one of his own poems, *A Berry Feast*, an ode praising the Native American trickster deity Coyote which in its course traces the destruction of a forest to provide lumber to build a suburban home, "a box to catch the biped in," Coyote says, the whole poem permeated with the concept of impermanence

and predicting a time when humanity itself will have been erased, “people gone, death no disaster,” and ending with Coyote surveying the landscape with its desolate streets where nature still bloomed: “Dead city in dry summer, where berries grow.”

So who were the Beats? They were environmentalists and eco-prophets fifteen years before the first Earth Day. They were out and gay and not going away a generation before Stonewall. Many, like Ferlinghetti who skippered a boat at Normandy on D-Day but then did duty in Nagasaki shortly after it was obliterated, were pacifists and anarchists in the sense of pledging allegiance to a shared humanity that superseded any loyalty to a single state or nation. And they were also, above all, artists and poets, not preachers or propagandists, which saved their work from any shred of sanctimony or self-righteousness.

Being beat for them was associated not only with compassion and solidarity with one’s fellow earthlings. It also conjured up beauty. Maybe it was another sign of their madness, or their naivete, that they believed poetry could really change things, create a crack in the collective consciousness where the light might sneak in. But then poets and novelists have always been considered dangerous by the powers-that-be, like Pablo Neruda, or Solzhenitsyn, forced into exile by their governments. Maybe that’s why J. Edgar Hoover, in 1960, declared that the three greatest threats facing America at that time were communists, eggheads, and beatniks. (Wise words indeed from our nation’s chief law enforcement transvestite.)

And maybe the Beats were threats and remain a menace, even after all these years. They were eventually domesticated to a degree. Almost all achieved mainstream recognition. Gary Snyder’s *Turtle Island* won the Pulitzer Prize. William Burroughs was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Letters. Ginsberg and Ferlinghetti received prizes and honors too numerous to mention. And yet all these writers and artists remain high voltage to some extent, with a capacity to energize and shock. Consider: It’s hard to imagine Ken Burns, who’s just documented the literary life of

Hemingway, filming four hours on Jack Kerouac or the other beats because they're simply not dead enough. They're still too hot, not entirely cold yet.

With Ferlinghetti's passing this spring, they're fading. But I hope they don't go quietly or become classic authors we can safely ignore because we still need them. The twenty-first century may be a less repressed than the world of the fifties, but I doubt it's any kinder. The decades of progress have brought us closer than ever to the brink. We've managed to put a drone on Mars, but seem to have forgotten how to cherish the ground beneath our feet. Yet for all that, it remains a beautiful world, one worth saving. We need the poets to see that and remind us. We could use a little beatness right now.