

# Sunday Sundowners

Sex, drugs and rock 'n roll  
Part I: The Beat Poets – their writing: sex and drugs

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An icy damp afternoon in July – survival demands barley soup and cinnamon pancakes. Clutching the warm comfort of a ceramic mug, Kath reminisces about an unexpected snowfall in Jo'burg in 1963 that closed schools for a day or two. 'Ten minutes of snowball fights gave us frozen fingers and soggy clothes but rather than go home, we all crowded into the neighbourhood coffee bar – the "in" scene of the early sixties. Soup helped us defrost and we spent the afternoon listening to someone strumming a guitar and reciting obscure poetry.

'That's where I first heard the thoughts of Allen Ginsberg and William Burroughs and I really didn't understand much of the poetry he was reading but I was hooked by the atmosphere, the voice and the cute beard! I wonder who he was.' She sighs at the thought of a lost opportunity.

It turns out we all encountered the works of the Beat Generation about the same time. As naïve teens we were drawn by the exotic daring lifestyles that seemed to be the realisation of our own yearnings to be unique, different. Here in South Africa, Des and Dawn Lindberg in their caravan were our own nomadic folk singers, Keith Blundell and his family were touring and in coffee shops around the country, aspiring poets in leather sandals were teaching us about Kerouac and Cassidy. The Beat influence was powerful and pervasive then – does it have value now?

'I think that the surprising resilience of Kerouac's **On the Road** (Viking Press, 1951) and Hunter Thompson's **Fear and loathing in**

**Las Vegas** (Rolling Stone, 1971) is that each generation of teens and twenties reprises an eternal search for identity and purpose.' Elise P is an English teacher and can't help her didactic tones but she captivates her high school audiences with exhilarating 'slam poetry' sessions. She knows what intrigues young people, and these performances echo and update those coffee bar sessions of the Sixties.

The Beats had a focus on live performance, and many well-known Slam poets have claimed to be influenced by them. Saul Williams, primarily a musician and hip-hop singer, has two published collections of poetry (**The seventh octave**, Moore Black Press, 1998 and **She**, MTV/Pocketbooks, 1998) and acknowledges Allen Ginsberg and Bob Kaufman as major influences.

'The first book I read by torchlight while everyone else was asleep was **Forever amber** by Kathleen Winsor (MacDonald, 1944). It was still considered risqué even in the sixties and mum would have freaked if she caught her darling baby reading it,' confided Christine F.

'Oh yes, and do you remember **Angelique** by Sergeanne Golon (Heineman, 1959)? 'Ooh, wow - I haven't thought of her in years. Angelique was the world's first superwoman and survivalist, for sure!' Comments of those early forays into sexy reads put the changing mores and the media hype of EL James' formulaic **50 shades of grey** (Random House Struik, 2012) into perspective.

Kerouac's writings, though considered racy in the fifties, were relatively mild by today's norms. **On the road** mentions Neal Cassidy's bisexuality without comment, while **Visions of Cody** confronts it. Cassidy was enthusiastically promiscuous and provides matter for debate for the AIDS generation. Kerouac's novels also feature

an interracial love affair (**The subterraneans**) and group sex (**The Dharma bums**).

For the authorities of the time, among the contentious features of Ginsberg's poem *Howl* (1956) were lines about homosexual sex. William Burroughs' **The Naked lunch** (1959) is about drug use, but also contains sexual content and explicit descriptions of alternative sexual practices. Both works were prosecuted for obscenity. Victory by the publishers in both cases in effect marked the end of literary censorship in the United States.

A few novelists of the 1960s and 1970s were closely connected with Beat writers, most notably Ken Kesey who wrote **One flew over the cuckoo's nest**, (Methuen, 1962). Other writers who considered the Beats to be a major influence include Thomas Pynchon with **Gravity's rainbow**, (Cape, 1973) and Tom Robbins's **Even cowgirls get the blues**, (Transworld, 1977).

Claims that some drugs can enhance creativity, insight or productivity were quite common and became a key influence on the social events of the time. The original members of the Beat generation regularly used a number of different drugs, including alcohol, marijuana, morphine, and later, psychedelic drugs like mescaline, peyote and LSD. Much of this usage was said to be 'experimental' in that they were initially unfamiliar with the effects. They were reputedly inspired by intellectual interest, as well as simple hedonism. The actual results of this experimentation are debatable.

The sad horror of drug addiction that ruins so many lives in any generation, then and now, obscures the sixties' prevailing tolerance of the drug scene, the awkward equal beliefs of innocent exploration and world-weary escapism.

'You wonder that with all the sex and drugs and problems with the law, that any of them had time to write', muses Kath, unwilling to give up her romantic memories of youthful indiscretions. 'I remember going backstage on an adrenaline high after a Gene Rockwell concert and meeting the band. It was so exciting to meet creative artistic people. You always think their lives must be so much more fulfilling than your own ordinary life. And even though you read reports of problems and scandals, you never quite lose that "rosy" view.'

I don't think that common sense has a chance against the seduction, the irrepressible hope of being the first to break the mould. Despite the trail of human wreckage left by the lifestyle choices of the Beats, I have an abiding memory of soaring optimism in those years of my life. Perhaps that's why it's said that if you can recall the sixties, you really weren't there!

(To be continued in *Sex, drugs and rock 'n roll, part 2 – the Beat poets and their music: rock 'n roll*.)

