Remember The Beats?

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Abstract

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IN 1969, if you were looking for it, you might have found it in the old bars of Denver and New Orleans and North Beach, San Francisco. Men in their 40's grey and sad, ordering another beer and muttering, "Jack's dead." Younger kids in long hair and fringed jackets looking up from their wine and saying, "Jack who?" The older men snorting. One of them maybe saying, "He's your grandaddy and ya don't even know it."

The grandaddy the ragged beats were referring to was Jack Kerouac. In the 1950's, Jack Kerouac and his literary friends become the foremost examples of what came to be called the Beat Generation. The articulate members of the Beat Generation included Kerouac at the nucleus as chronicler of the movement, surrounded by authors, poets and bohemians such as Allen Ginsberg, Gregory Corso, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, William Burroughs, Gary Snyder and Neal Cassady.

Kerouac was the most vocal member of a postwar breed, the Beat Transcontinental American Generation, which roared around this and other countries with a speed, mad spirit, and fierce enthusiasm that left the majority of young American writers in the dust. A colorful embodiment of the beat generation philosophy was Neal Cassady (Dean Moriarity in Kerouac's best known book, On The Road), the jittery, neurotic, drug-taking, auto-racing, poetry chanting, jazz digging madman who shirked social responsibility, digging everything, convinced that if he went fast enough and had enough violent experiences, the great ultimate secret would be laid bare to him.

Cassady's love was driving. Picture Neal highballing a '46 Plymouth through the Rocky Mountains headed West,
only he isn’t looking at the road, the radio’s on and he’s whamming out the beat on the steering wheel and he’s turned, talking to whoever’s in the car, “Now you just dig them in front. They have worries, they’re counting the miles, thinking about where to sleep tonight, how much money for gas, the weather, how they’ll get there—and all the time they’ll get there anyway, you see.”

Kerouac and men like Neal Cassady were a historical part of an important segment of American literature and life style which John Sisk of Commonweal has called the “subversive tradition.” This is a literary tradition as old as the country itself, which focuses on the mistakes and corruptions of organized society. It started with people like Roger Williams and Anne Hutchinson, and sharpened with Emerson, Whitman and Thoreau. Says John Sisk, “If the beats were ‘way out,’ the transcendentalists were there ahead of them.”

The subversive tradition of dissatisfaction with the shape and aims of society continued through such writers as London, Dreiser, Eliot and Wolfe, and more recently, Hemingway, Steinbeck, Fitzgerald and others.

So the beats were just a chronological extension of this subversive tradition. The tradition exists today, of course.

In an overall sense, then, Kerouac is the most recent relative of today’s youthful rock generation, that foot-loose sub-culture preoccupied with music, drugs, Eastern philosophy and withdrawal from society. Do the kids know it? Nope. Ask them who Jack Kerouac was, and outside of a small cult of beat enthusiasts, you’ll draw blanks. Critics of the beat movement currently, as well as in the past, condemned the beat’s “worship of primitivism” and “childishness.” For example, there was a recent article in the Minneapolis Star: “Today’s Rock Generation Owes Little to the Beats.”

How little? What do the two generations have in common? Picture old Jack Kerouac, rucksack on his back, colored t-shirt and chinos, hitching across the country at a time when people didn’t necessarily think hitchhikers were thieves or sex criminals. Picture Kerouac and poet Gary Snyder sitting
in an apartment drinking wine and talking feverishly, wild ideas about a "rucksack revolution" where everyone would hike around the country and escape the madness of the cities. Kerouac had a vision of Snyder, in future years "stalking along with full rucksack, in suburban streets, passing the blue television windows of homes, alone, his thoughts the only thoughts not electrified to the Master Switch." The beats glorified coast to coast restlessness in a zooming car, and Jack and his friends were backpackin' around the country nine years before Ken Kesey and the Pranksters ever bought a school bus.

And when they weren't on the road, the beats were in the city, going full tilt and balls out in bars and jazz joints across America. Jazz played rock's role in the Beat era and was a major means of communication for them as well as for the present "subversive" rock generation. In *On The Road*, Kerouac describes a jazz band: "They writhed and twisted and blew. Every now and then a clear harmonic cry gave new suggestions of a tune that would someday be the only tune in the world and would raise men's souls to joy. They found it, they lost, they wrestled for it, they found it again, they laughed and moaned—and Dean Moriarity sweated at the table and told them to go, go, go."

Kerouac even used music in a literary manner, which the rock generation does not do. He *wrote* jazz, in the sense that his own spontaneous action prose read like a jazz jam. He said, "This prose is what I believe to be the prose of the future, from both the conscious top and the unconscious bottom of the mind, limited only by the limitations of time flying by as your mind flies by with it." A contemporary of Kerouac's, Seymour Krim, now at the Writer's Workshop in Iowa City, described Kerouac's literature as not unlike a jazz jam; totally improvised. When he used this style, Kerouac did not rewrite. *The Subterraneans*, which he wrote in three successive nights, begins with "Once I was young and had so much more orientation and could talk with nervous intelligence about everything and with clarity and without as much literary preambling as this; in other words this is the story of an unself-confident man, at the same
time an egomaniac, just to start at the beginning and let the truth seep out, that's what I'll do.” Kerouac could write like jazz. Can anybody write like rock?

There were other areas, that, when the rock generation penetrated what they thought was virgin territory, they found the restless footprints of the beats. In the ’60’s, after the beat flame had dimmed, drugs became as important as music in the hip sub-culture. It was certainly nothing new. Picture Jack Kerouac, in the jazz bars of the nation, sneaking backstage with the musicians to take peyote and sit in with the band. Or the ragged beats climbing the Pyramids of Teotihuacan outside Mexico City and “when we got to the top of the Pyramid I lit up a marijuana cigarette so we could all examine our instincts about the place.” Or Kerouac writing a book in Neal Cassady’s attic: “It rained every day, and I had wine, marijuana and once in a while his wife would sneak in.” No, the rock generation certainly didn’t invent drugs.

And they weren’t the first young Americans to turn Eastward in their search for a religious philosophy, either. American intellectuals have long been fascinated by Eastern religion, but the first large group to incorporate Zen ideas into their life style were Kerouac and the beats, under the influence of Gary Snyder. For awhile, they called themselves the Zen Lunatics, and Kerouac, Ginsberg, and Snyder would gather and write haikus and meditate and then race off to climb wilderness peaks, where Snyder would race up mountains stark naked in the cool thin air of the Sierra Nevadas. One of Kerouac’s books, The Dharma Bums, details the beat’s acceptance of at least some of the basics of Zen.

So the beats and the rock generation combined the same elements in molding their “subversive” life styles: mobility, music, drugs, and Eastern philosophy. Embracing these concepts, many of the members of both generations dropped out of formal society, mentally or physically. But what about the beats? They didn’t drop out in overwhelming numbers, as did the rock generation. And they didn’t set up communes, either, and even when they went somewhere, usually Mexico or Tangiers or France, they generally ended up right back in a city. So weren’t they a part of the society they condemned? But as Seymour Krim puts it, they dropped out and dropped in again, in a continuous cycle. Gary Sny-
der and Allen Ginsberg made frequent pilgrimages to Zen monastaries in Japan. Jack Kerouac spent two months alone on a mountaintop as a fire lookout. "And now, after the experience," he wrote, "... I now wanted a reproduction of that absolute peace in the world of society."

Even when they were a part of society, and many of them always were, they were, well, maybe not above society, but at least beyond it. They reveled in their chosen roles as outlaws right smack in the center of things, they didn't renounce revved-up cars and neon lights and frantic bars and records and radios and ice cream and wine.

In spite of all this, it's obvious that there is still a whale of difference between the two strangely similar generations. The 40-year old men in the bars in February, 1969, snorted at the "youngsters." So many connections and similarities and yet... "Shee-it," the old ragged former beats complained, "They're just punks that've gone and made up their minds about the world before they even found out anything about it. We were the legend, and they took it. And they Mother of God goddammit didn't earn it."

That's the way Kerouac felt in the last years of his life when he withdrew from writing and lived with his ailing mother in Florida. Shortly before his death at 47, he was still muttering unhappily and in the same breath about straight society and the young. "You can't fight city hall," he wrote, just before he died, "it just keeps changing its name."

How could these kids know? he must have thought. They hadn't slept in Chinatown alleys with wine in a paper sack, they hadn't taken tramp steamers to Tangiers, or been railroad brakemen, cottonpickers and forest fire lookouts...

Jack Kerouac just couldn't synch with the late '60's version of his earlier trip. Seymour Krim made a plea for him to come out again and show the kids how it was and how it oughtta be. Krim said, "I am almost certain he can turn on a new and greater sound if he hears the need in our ears and sees us parched for a new vision. He is too much a part of us not to look and listen to our mid-'60's plight..."

But Jack didn't, and the other beats haven't, and the old grey men sit in the bars and look at the kids...