

Allen Ginsberg

America's Beat

laureate repackages his past and foresees our future

In 1957 you were called "a poet of revolt if there ever was one." Are you still?

I never have been a poet of revolt. Never, never, never. That's saying you want to become wiser by becoming dumber, you want to become peaceful by getting angry. I don't mind anybody else having a revolution. My interest is in alteration of consciousness; that phrase "new vision and new consciousness" goes back to my 1945 conversations with Kerouac

How did Beat writings affect the '60s?

My idea is that the origin of Beat writings was in some kind of spiritual liberation. This spiritual liberation led to the liberation of the word, the liberation of movie and picture, the liberation of sex, which led to gay lib, women's lib, black lib. At the same time, the poetry inspired a lot of poets from Jim Morrison to Bob Dylan, who was turned on by Kerouac's *Mexico City Blues*. And to some extent, Dylan always found me an inspiration, so he said.

How do you feel about the way you, Jack Kerouac, and William Burroughs were portrayed in the film *Naked Lunch*?

Well, I wasn't portrayed. There's some guy named Martin who had eyeglasses and was supposed to look like me, and he seems to be somewhat of a wimp and I'm a wimp. I don't mind that, but I didn't think the actor could read very well. I thought the guy who was supposed to be like Kerouac wasn't anywhere near as good-looking as Kerouac or as well-spoken.

But they weren't poets. They were actors.

Kerouac was a better actor. And actors are supposed to have better voices. Hearing Burroughs read "The Talking Asshole" was absolutely uproarious. He is a man of a thousand voices. With a good microphone he sounds like God. The guy who was playing Burroughs apparently was playing it in some dead-pan monotone voice. You don't get it.

Is the mind a sixth sense?

Well, traditionally in the Buddhist categories of the senses it is: sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, and mind. That is to say, all the different colors of the other senses are reflected in the mind and recombined.

What's the color of the wind?

I think Lafcadio Orlovsky gave the answer: the same color as the sky.

Your parents were Jewish. Why is Buddha more reassuring?

Buddha's less reassuring. The Jewish thing is very reassuring. You've got a Jehovah, you've got a Nobodaddy upstairs taking care of things. It's William Blake's term, Nobodaddy. Nobody, no daddy in heaven. The Buddhist view is that there is no central personage, no central intelligence agency in the universe.

What have you learned by taking that point of view?

That by not having a god figure as a constant reference point, things are symbols of themselves, not symbols of something else, namely a creator.

And the effect it's had on your life?

Sympathy for things as they are rather than as representatives of somebody else. That leads to compassion toward oneself and others, and a realization of the vast, tender sadness of being alone. It unblocks a lot of emotion and it removes a veil of ideology from the mind and puts me into more direct contact with trees and people and automobiles. It allows me to sit in the midst of my own confusion rather than acting out, reacting every time I get angry, confused, attached, or lusting after somebody's ass, or angry at somebody's slight, or terrified of some job. And I'm able to endure the chaos. In fact, the final teaching is that continuous change—what seems to be chaos—is the very nature of phenomena.

And meditation helps you to . . .

Detach from the constant panic without freaking out.

Is there a link between this and your drug experiences?

Drugs are all different kinds of things. Psychedelic drugs like marijuana or Ecstasy or LSD or mescaline or yage or peyote were investigations into areas of open consciousness. Meditation is also related to widening the area of consciousness.

You're a musician, too.

An amateur.

What will be on your Rhino Records release [out in early 1993]?

It'll be my top ten songs and poems, and a 1956 recording of *Howl* and a 1961 recording of *Kaddish*. Rare recordings, produced and distributed, but in rare editions. Plus some big things, like *Blake Songs* from MGM Records and "First Blues" from Hammond Records.

Have you always been very open about being gay?

Since I was seventeen or eighteen.

Plato wrote something to the effect that homosexual love is ideal. I'm straight, so do you think I'm missing out?

Love of any kind is ideal. Any way that doesn't harm anybody, that keeps people happy, or gives pleasure or communicates some sense of joy, is all right.

How have you been active in the fight for gay rights?

I don't believe in fighting. You could say campaigning for, or promoting, or augmenting, publicizing, supporting, working for, playing with, playing for, but why fighting for? Anyway, with all the conservatives and fundamentalists insisting on political correctness as far as sexuality or literature, it'd be better to expose them for what they are. "Exposing" for gay rights. There's one interesting thing to consider about Senator Helms. First, he's obsessed with gay matters. Second, his attitude

is aggressive and sadistic. He gets his kicks, politically, and his rocks off by attacking homosexuals, especially by humiliating them. And there's something pathological about that.

What do you admire about my generation?

There are a lot of brilliant radical whiz kids that are totally literate and totally appreciative of many generations of work including their own, down to grunge and down to Sonic Youth and below Sonic Youth to whatever is left. Also, they seem more sexually open than others.

What do you detest about my generation?

Our apathy?

No, I don't think there's apathy. There's apathy in the White House. There's apathy in Congress about CIA dope dealing. But I think younger people are more aware than the older—more outraged.

They haven't been given any choice of any presidential candidate except maybe Jerry Brown who could talk turkey.

Do you think a poet could ever be elected president of the U.S.?

Just as likely as Ross Perot or Governor Brown or any other category of jerks.

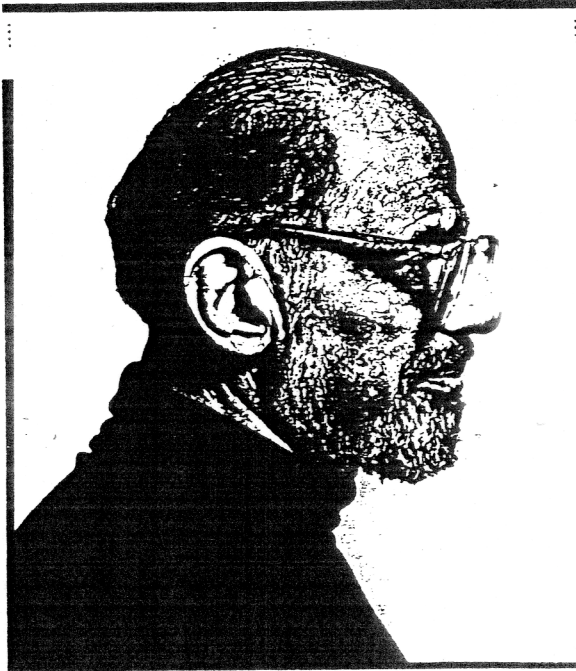
Do you think "President Quayle" has a musical ring to it?

(pauses) No answer.

No answer?

One thing I dislike about your generation is a question like that. It's a cynicism, and an indifference to what's right and wrong and clearly heartfelt and not heartfelt, and a tendency to treat stupid-

believe anything they say and I don't believe *The New York Times* either. I look at TV about half an hour a week. Sometimes when there's big news, like a presidential speech, I generally don't listen because typically it's so surrounded by bullshit. I get a lot of information, like the very simple fact that Schwarzkopf's father originally screwed up Iran, out of *Lies of Our Times*. He began as the head of the New Jersey police who screwed up the Lindbergh kidnapping. You know about that?



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ity and cruelty with an ambivalent attitude like that question. Quayle, everybody knows, is not quite a jerk, but is a smart operator. It's not just that he's a simp and you can say, "Does 'President Quayle' have a musical sound?" It's a manneristic view of things that reflects alienation and disillusionment. That cynicism gets transformed into sound bites because you're so influenced by television that you think by imitating and mocking it you'll get out of the television consciousness, but it just perpetuates it.

Do you watch TV? Do you believe the news?

No. I don't watch television and I don't

I know what the Lindbergh kidnapping was.

I mean, Schwarzkopf has got a karma that goes back to the creation of the horror scene we're dealing with now. Schwarzkopf's father trained the shah's dreaded secret police. They were so horrible that it brought on the extremist ayatollah. The ayatollah was so horrible that he brought on our having to support Saddam Hussein up to the very end. So what we're doing is bombing our own karma. We hail General Schwarzkopf as some heroic country bumpkin rather than remembering that his father, Colonel H. Norman Schwarzkopf Sr., created the whole karma knot.

Do you think things on planet Earth will improve?

My inkling is the planet has another couple hundred years before we lose it. And then the end of humanity?

Just lose the planet to a giant gridlock: overpopulation, overpollution. More diseases like AIDS, more disasters, more ozone layer depletion, more bad air, more fossil fuel oxidation, more pollution like Mexico City. So I think things will get harder and harder until it gets to be kind of like molasses. Not

with a bang but a whimper. **If the earth becomes some kind of "molasses" we just can't fix, what is going to happen to human culture?**

It'll go down with the rest. So the point of poetry at this point is: To what extent can it alleviate suffering by helping people come to some nonresentful understanding of the situation—not putting blame and horror on others, not flailing around with more pain than there already is in an attempt to diminish the suffering?

Is that what you try to do in your poetry?

Yeah. That's the whole point. It always has been the point of any human activity to alleviate the suffering of existence.

When did you write your first poem?

Well, my father was a poet, so it's a family business. The first poem I wrote when I was eight or nine, maybe seven, went: "Once upon a window sill / A sparrow hopped and then stood still. / I asked him why he did the latter, / He said to me it doesn't matter. / Men kill a cow to make mutton pie / So why / should I / Confide in you my woe?"

How would you make a living if you couldn't write poetry?

Well, I did make a good living as a market researcher and as a sailor; less when I was a dishwasher.

Let's say you were a farmer. What vegetable would you grow?

Well, asparagus is good. I'd try to grow a little grass on the side. I think marijuana would be the ideal cash crop for the small family farm, but I'd probably wind up trying to grow artichokes and vegetables I like to eat. I actually did have a farm once. I grew a lot of peas