

Beat Generation



“I remember being awed by him and amazed by him.”

Allen Ginsberg

“What are writers trying to do? They are trying to create a universe in which they have lived or would like to live. To write they must go there and submit to conditions which they may not have bargained for. Sometimes, as in the case of Kerouac, the effect produced by a writer is immediate, as if a generation were waiting to be written.”

William S. Burroughs

“Kerouac came roaring down each new highway like a man possessed... Moving on not from a sense of disenchantment, but with a voracious and insatiable hunger for experience.”

Lester Bangs

“I read *On the Road* in maybe 1959. It changed my life like it changed everyone else’s.”

Bob Dylan

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Beat Generation

Jack Kerouac



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Contents

<i>Introduction by A.M. Homes</i>	1
Beat Generation	1
<i>Note on the Text and Illustrations</i>	83
<i>Notes</i>	83
Extra Material	85
<i>Jack Kerouac's Life</i>	87
<i>Jack Kerouac's Works</i>	97
<i>Adaptations</i>	103
<i>Select Bibliography</i>	103

Introduction by A.M. Homes

IN ORDER TO TALK ABOUT IT you have to put it into some sort of a cultural context – it was 1957, Dwight D. Eisenhower was president, Richard M. Nixon vice-president, the Pulitzer Prize in drama went to Eugene O’Neill’s *Long Day’s Journey into Night* – no fiction award was given. *West Side Story* opened on Broadway, *Leave It to Beaver* premiered on television, and if you were going to the movies, chances are it was to see *The Bridge on the River Kwai*, *Twelve Angry Men* or *Peyton Place*. On the home front there was still a struggle to integrate the schools, while the Russians launched Sputnik I and the space age began. It was 1957, and Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road* was published – other books that year included Bernard Malamud’s *The Assistant*, James Agee’s *A Death in the Family* and Noam Chomsky’s *Syntactic Structures*.

At this point, Kerouac and his band of scribes were all about embracing and celebrating this “beat” life. Kerouac himself had already coined the term, according to some accounts as early as 1948, suggesting societal conventions were “beat”, “tired”, “worn out”. Many have suggested that Kerouac’s use of the term “Beat Generation” evolved from being a post-war reference to Hemingway’s “Lost Generation” to a more positive label: the beats were enlightened, “beatific” ones – a nice confluence of the Buddhist and Catholic philosophies that were so important to Kerouac.

In 1957, Kerouac wasn’t yet what he is today – a figure as or more dominant in contemporary culture as the faces on Mount Rushmore. In 1957, he still had the benefit of a certain anonymity – he was still, for the moment, the purest version of Jack Kerouac, not a personality, not a celebrity.

Unlike the World War II vets who came home, got married, moved to suburbia and fully embraced the American dream and the blossoming culture of more, more, more, keeping up with the Joneses and then some, the beat life was lived on the edges. Beats had nothing to lose and not far to fall. Holy men, mediators, anti-materialists, they were the exact opposite of “company men”. Kerouac and his experimental fraternity aspired to something else – a kind of freedom. They wanted to soar, to fly, to move through time and space unfettered. They wanted to find spirituality and deliverance among the dispossessed. And they wanted to have a good time, win a few bucks on the horses, have some drinks and get laid. Compared to the average Joe they were wild – awe-inspiring and threatening.

Kerouac’s style was not just philosophically bold; it was linguistic guerrilla warfare – a literary atom bomb smashing everything. On one side of him were the hyper-intellectual Beckett and Joyce. On the other, the anti-academic: Hemingway, Anderson and Dos Passos. Kerouac absorbed it all and went beyond.

In order to make sense of this play you have to keep it in perspective. It’s now 2005, a line of Jack Kerouac clothing is about to be released, the manuscript of *On the Road* is on tour across America. A few months ago in a New Jersey warehouse this “new” play by Kerouac was discovered – three acts, written in 1957, and typed up by Kerouac’s ever-loving mother, Gabrielle, also known as “Mémère”.

The play was never produced – at the time there was a lot of interest but no action. In a letter Kerouac wrote he described his interest in theatre and film in this way:

What I wanta do is redo the theatre and the cinema in America, give it a spontaneous dash, remove preconceptions of “situation” and let people rave on as they do in real life. That’s what the play is: no plot in particular, no “meaning” in particular, just the way people are. Everything I write I do in the spirit where I imagine myself an angel returned to earth seeing it with sad eyes as it is.

The play *Beat Generation* marks a wonderful addition to the Kerouac oeuvre. It will be great fun to see what happens with it – I can easily

imagine it being performed and each staging being incredibly different from the last – it’s all about what you bring to it.

It is a play of its time – which is why context is important. In bits and pieces it is reminiscent of Tennessee Williams, Clifford Odets and a bit of Arthur Miller. But by comparison to those playwrights whose work is formal and well defined, this play is loose, unfettered; it is about juxtaposition, relation, words and ideas bouncing off one another, riffing in a bebop scatter.

Beat Generation opens in the early morning in an apartment near the Bowery, with drinking – the reverie of the first glass. It is a man’s world – these are working men, brakemen for the railroad, drinking men, who spend their day off betting on horses, men who swear by saying “durnit”, men who have a girl waiting on them, warming their coffee – women’s liberation never made it into Kerouac’s world. It is set in a disappeared New York City, with the smoky scent of cigarettes hanging over all, men playing chess, the racket of the elevated subways, the feel of life lived underground, everything a little bit beat. And *Beat Generation* is pervaded by the music of conversation.

Working in spurts, Kerouac spewed this “spontaneous bop prosody”, or “jazz poetry”. The play (and the novels) are everything and the kitchen sink too. It is a kind of demolition-derby pile-up, a jazzy musical of words picking up speed and hurling themselves forwards – in a bumper-car version of dialogue. *Beat Generation* is about talking and friendship and shooting the shit, it is about the biggest question of all – existence. Kerouac and his rough-hewn characters – just this side of hobos – want to know how and why we exist and then in some spontaneous combustion they come to know that in the end there are no answers, there is just the moment we are in, and the people around us.

Here is the romance of the road, rebirth and karma – Kerouac’s peculiar and deeply personal combination of the working man discussing astral bodies, karmic debt, past lives and the selling of Jesus. Here is the power of ideas and the difficulty of escaping belief. And here is the love of God and the fear of God – despite Kerouac’s interest in the alternative, his exploration of Buddhism and eastern philosophies, he could never escape his Catholic upbringing.

Yet the play has a masculine swagger, a brand of bravado. Language and characters careen off each other in a kind of doped deliciousness,

in which one feels the heat of an afternoon, the smell of hay and shit and beer at the race track, the greasy squeal of brakes, and the kind of down-and-dirty that never really washes off.

Kerouac was the man who allowed writers to enter the world of flow – different from stream-of-consciousness, his philosophy was about being in the current, open to possibility, allowing creativity to move through you, and you to be one with both process and content. It was about embracing experience rather than resisting; it is in fact the very Roman candle Kerouac writes about in *On the Road*.

On a more personal note – without Kerouac, without Jimi Hendrix, without Mark Rothko, there would be no me. I used to think Jack Kerouac was my father (sometimes literally) and Susan Sontag was my mother. I could diagram out one hell of a family tree, with Henry Miller and Eugene O’Neill as my uncles and so on. Kerouac raised me spiritually, psychologically, creatively – he gave me permission to exist.

In the end, *Beat Generation* is a treat, a sweet found under a sofa cushion. For those of us who never had enough Kerouac, now there is more.

– A.M. Homes, 2005

Beat Generation

Act One

(Scene is early morning in New York near the Bowery, standing in the kitchen, cheap kitchen, are a coloured guy called JULE and a white guy called BUCK, and they're both raising glasses of wine to each other in little glasses, and BUCK'S saying:)

BUCK: All right Jule, let's have one.

JULE: I wonder what the vintner buys, one half so precious as what he sells...

BUCK: Wow!... Give us another one... Hey you drink fast!

JULE: Drink! For tomorrow you may be one with yesterday's 7,000 years...

BUCK: But that's not right, you didn't get the whole thing there. Ain't you got any others?

JULE: Not now... sit, man.

BUCK: All right Jule... Here I am sitting in Julius Chauncey's kitchen in a clear cool morning in October 1955, the freshness of the day's first jug, ugh... You know Jule, there's nothing, there's no way to recreate the effect of that first glass which you get in the morning when you wake up, yet, all over the world drinkers will gobble gobble and bulp... they want more more more of what they can't have, because it can only happen once... isn't that right?... Let's have another quote, Jule.

BEAT GENERATION

JULE: No I'm tired.

BUCK: Well here we go, let's have another one... *(drinking)*
I wonder where Milo is.

(The door opens and in walks MILO, who is a medium-height, dark-haired fellow in a full brakeman's uniform, hat, cap, the blue uniform, the racing form in one pocket, the Bible and other books in another pocket, and a few flutes sticking out of his pocket, followed by another brakeman – but he's six foot six, fully cleanly dressed and shaved, in full conductor uniform, followed by a little tiny four-foot-eleven not-quite-midget in a full suit with vest, hatless... they are MILO, SLIM and TOMMY.)

BUCK: Hey there you are, I knew you'd get here... Well well well, look at all these brakemen's uniforms here... Winos and brakemen getting together early in the morning, hey?

TOMMY: Hey there Buck, what you say, boy?... Say can I sit at the table, Vicki? *(as a girl, white girl, comes in from the other room, having heard the visitors arrive)* Can I sit at the table and dope out these horses? Today I've got a couple horses running at Jamaica – I'd give my left arm if I could go out and play them at the track but there's a little matter of a job at Riker's at two o'clock, durnit.

MILO: All right Tommy... you move over the end there Tommy m'boy, that's right, Buck sits on the floor so's me and old long tall Slim Summerville here can resume our best four-out-of-seven series championship chips

ACT ONE

chess game of the world... (*looking at Vicki*) Ah, just what I like to see in the morning, boys and girls. You got any coffee Vicki?

VICKI: Yes I have some, I'll warm it up here.

MILO: Just a little bit of sugar in that coffee Vicki, m'dear.

VICKI: Yes *sir*.

MILO: Well now listen here, old buddy Buck (*taking out the chessboard and pieces*), so it's true as you do say, that God *is* us, is just us, right here, now, exactly as you say, we don't have to run to God because we're already there, yet Buck, really, now face it old buddy that sonumbitch trail to heaven is a *long* trail—

BUCK: Wal, that's just words...

MILO: Boy, we start out in our astral bodies, man, and you know the way a ghost go when headin' out there to that bright blank night go in a straight line, that, and then, as he wanders, just astral-born and new to the game he gets to wigglin' and a-goin' from side to side, that is, to explore, much as H.G. Wells says about a maid sweepin' out a hall from side to side, the way migrations advance?...

VICKI: What are you *talkin'* about again?

MILO: And so astral, he'll go migrate out there to the next or martian level where he bumps into all them

BEAT GENERATION

levels you see, but with that spectral astral special interpretation... how do you pronounce that, interpe-ne-tration speed.

BUCK: Words.

MILO: True... true... but then after... now lay out these things Slim, I'll take the... I'll tell you what we'll do, I'll take the black, you take the white, I'm going to give you a chance today so now listen Buck, here was a guy who had such a bad aura of traitorship around him, in fact he was a later entity of Judas, he'd, or people'd sense him, sense him and turn in the street and say, "Who's that *betray*er just went by?" – all of his life suffering from some curse people had of him, which was that karmic debt he had to pay for selling Jesus for a handful of silver—

BUCK: Words... I keep saying "words". Milo and I really mean it, I'm trying to get you to say "God is Words" ... It's *still* all words, ain't it?

MILO: No no no no no no no no no no... When that astral body gets to Saturn certain conditions there may seek... might get to change him into a rock and so on, you gotta watch out boy, you want him to turn into a rock?

BUCK: Tell me seriously Milo, doesn't the entity go to God in heaven?

MILO: That it does, after a long trail and trial, you see...
hmm. (*lighting a cigarette suavely*)

ACT ONE

BUCK: Ah words.

MILO: Words as you will.

BUCK: Or birds...

MILO: Till finally, purified and so spotless to be like the garment that was never rented, the entity *does* arrive in heaven and back to God, so is why I say we're not there now.

BUCK: How can we help not being there now? We can't be anywhere else... the world, or heaven, is what form is... We can't avoid our reward... heaven so sure, Milo.

MILO: Ahh... All right Slim your move, you're white.

TOMMY: Hey Milo you wanta look at the sheets I worked out?

MILO: No, I don't have to look at anything, I tell you I've got it made.

JULE: The horses?... You've got the horses made, how you got it made?

MILO: Sit down here Slim, and we'll take out these, ah... we'll take out a fielding lance at each other's hide... Pawn to king four? By God I know how to answer you, I'll lay my Bible here beside me in case I got something to quote to old Buck there sittin' on the floor, that unbeliever... Vicki you got that coffee ready yet? Just a little bit of sugar, you know, nothin' fancy, unless Buck wants to run out and buy pork

BEAT GENERATION

chops with that w-i-n-e money he's about to run out with and buy wine.

BUCK: No no no, you look over all the form charts for the day, find only horses that have won thirty-three per cent of their races, and especially run within the last eight days dropping weight *and* running their favourite distance, several other items...

MILO: Pawn to king four, hey?... Well, we'll try knight here, we'll try knight here.

SLIM: Knight to bishop five.

BUCK: How many times Milo have I told you you can't beat the horses – my father lost his *business* doin' it, man... 'Course years later he kept sayin' that he lost his business on account of some flood or other but... it was that old mutuel flood, boy.

MILO: Yass yass yass, your move big buddy.

TOMMY: Running a mile and a sixteenth in 1:43 flat comes to a mile and an eighth today, I don't know, I don't know if he can stand another... another half a furlong.

BUCK: Bearing impost of seventeen hundred thousand million pounds he will find sumpin'...

MILO: Lazy Charley, Lazy Charley, why you, man, don't you realize they found that guy dead on the racetrack with forty thousand dollars worth of uncashed tickets in

ACT ONE

his pocket, he had 'em so figured out – now wait a minute now man, now look here – honey that's right, just a little bit of sugar, that's right, fine.

VICKI: Eggs?

MILO: Eggs, eggs... fine, fine, fine, FINE... hmm, it's better than Chinatown.

VICKI: Anybody else?

MILO: Sunny side up and a bit of hot strong coffee to go with it, you know, make some more coffee, and I like it pipin' hot.

JULE: (*singing bop*) Swap swapa diddleya deel do.

TOMMY: There oughta be a hole in there for him to sneak through, you know?

JULE: Did you find my pussy last night Tommy, huh Tommy did you find a nice little old broad lyin' on the sidewalk and take her to you know, you know, your pad?

TOMMY: Not last night Jule, I was – I just had a few beers in the Pink Angel and there was a couple of old gals there but they didn't appeal to me too much, too drunk.

JULE: Did you make it with any big old broads last night Tommy? Did you did you did you did you *did* you?

VICKI: Oh Jule!

BEAT GENERATION

JULE: Swing, somebody, swing!

BUCK: Yeah.

JULE: Yeah.

MILO: Well now old Lazy Charley see...

SLIM: ...all right I'll move this bishop...

MILO: ...he gets up there in the club lounge you know, and he's comin' post time, he's standin' there by the fifty-dollar window and the warning buzzer rings, Old Charley takes one casual look to see who's third choice and lays the money *down*... That's why I wanta go to the racetrack today because man I tell *you* – and don't you see really it's all really worked out for us in advance and all we gotta do is pile right on... that's why I say I wanta go to that racetrack today, I gotta win that money back, and besides – the money I lost, you know – and there's something I want you to know, how many times have I gone to that bettin' window and asked the man for number five because somebody just then said “number five” and the ticket I'd originally wanted was number two, and I'm standin' there you know, and I'm lookin' around, and instead of buyin' my number two, which goes accordin' to Lazy Charley's system, I buy number five.

BUCK: Why don't you just say, “Give me number two instead of number five, I made a mistake” – wouldn't he give it back to you? The guy that sells the tickets there?