**Timpane, John. "Reading, Looking at Allen Ginsberg: The Beat Generation Poet Wrote and Did Many Things; Journals, Poems and Biography Offer Insight." Editorial. *The Philadelphia Inquirer* 26 Nov. 2006: n. pag. *Student Research Center*.McClatchy Tribune Information Services.Web. 29 Apr. 2014.**

By John Timpane

``The Book of Martyrdom and Artifice: First Journals and Poems, 1937-1952'' by **Allen** **Ginsberg**, edited by Juanita Lieberman-Plimpton and Bill Morgan; Da Capo ($27.50)

``Collected Poems, 1947-1997'' by **Allen** **Ginsberg**; HarperCollins ($39.95)

``Howl: Original Draft Facsimile, Transcript, and Variant Versions'' by **Allen** **Ginsberg**; HarperPerennial ($18.95)

``I Celebrate Myself: The Somewhat Private Life of **Allen** **Ginsberg**'' by Bill Morgan; Viking ($29.95)

\_\_\_

Sooner or later, anyone interested in American poetry must embrace **Allen** **Ginsberg**.

He would have liked that.

For the last year, the poetry world has been observing the 50th anniversary of the first public reading of "Howl'' at the Six Gallery in San Francisco on Oct. 7, 1955. It was published the next year by Lawrence Ferlinghetti's City Lights Bookstore.

"Howl'' is huge today as it was in 1956. Some have argued that it ended modernism and began, well, a lot of things. At one blow, it certainly did begin the Beat Generation of poets; the countercultural era in American art and politics; a new era of unprecedentedly open expression regarding sexuality (especially gay sexualities); the era of performance poetry, still going very strong in the hip-hop, rap and international slam scenes ... and, not least of all, **Ginsberg's** own career as a world-leading poet, social activist, intellect and celebrity.

A self-appointed pioneer for his generation, **Ginsberg** emerged with Elvis and just before Dylan (whom he came to befriend and revere); without him, you wouldn't have John Lennon. He did many things, traveled the world, knew almost everyone worth meeting, championed hundreds of poets and dozens of causes, and personally tried every new sexual and drug-related practice that became available.

He shouldered the task of personally living through the traumas facing his whole society. He suffered through discovering and accepting that he was gay; he tried to (and just about did) survive on the returns from his poetry; he demonstrated as hard as he could against American foreign policy for 30 years. Long-haired before almost anyone else, he was chanting Buddhist mantras before most Americans had ever heard of Buddhism; he was demonstrating against the Vietnam War well before most Americans knew there was a Vietnam. There is a lot of his poetry, and a lot of **Allen** **Ginsberg**.

"The Book of Martyrdom and Artifice'' offers us his youthful journals, most written while he was a candescent, naive, tortured undergraduate at Columbia University. In those years, he met Jack Kerouac and William Burroughs, the two living writers who influenced him most; Neal Cassady, love god for so many artists and artistes in the 1950s and early 1960s; and such major minds as Lionel and Diana Trilling and Mark Van Doren. The main theme of his life was the all-combusting desire to be highly regarded: "I'll be a genius of some kind or other, probably in literature."

A poignant contradiction: The artist wishes to be original and a leader \_ while killing himself to conform to a preexisting sociocultural type (i.e., "genius"). He rejects the cliched and readymade ... and all the while, he runs into its arms. **Ginsberg** never stopped trying to be a genius, and once people told him he was, never stopped playing that readymade role.

His early poetry is sometimes all right. Occasionally a line flares out at us that foretells the poet to come ("I feel as if I am at a dead/ end and so I am finished"), and the marvelous 1949 poem "Paterson" has something like the full-voiced bardic roll we associate with high **Ginsberg**. We follow him as he contends with a range of different influences: Rimbaud; Auden; Eliot; Stevens;**Ginsberg's** own father, Louis; and his two permanent muses, Walt Whitman and William Blake. His prose journals embody his agon (never finished) with his sexuality; his visionary take on belief and religion, and his incredible ability to bring people together.

Indeed, even if he never wrote a line, **Ginsberg** could be considered the most important cultural networker of the American 20th century. As Bill Morgan writes: "What was the Beat Generation anyway if not **Ginsberg's** friends?" He met everyone and introduced him or her to everyone else. He helped found foundations and schools \_ notably, Naropa University, the Buddhist poetic institute in Boulder, Colo., that he helped squire through its growing years. When Warhol, Dylan, the Beatles, the San Francisco Summer of Love, Timothy Leary, and much else took off, **Ginsberg** was somewhere nearby.

Morgan evidently is the man with the **Allen** **Ginsberg** franchise these days. "I Celebrate Myself'' is an absorbing, maddening book, telling **Ginsberg's** life pretty much directly from his journals, with some (but not extremely overmuch) outside consultation. And it shows. There is next to no discussion of the poetry. And the life is presented very much from **Ginsberg's** viewpoint, with very little context. We get on the **Ginsberg** train and ride, with plenty of great stories, but not much attempt to say what they mean. You can tell Morgan is working his way through **Ginsberg's** notes one note at a time. Almost everything is given the exact same importance: He had a headache, and then the Vietnam War happened, and they got a new cat ...

Morgan often neglects to set things up before they hit us, so, for example, when **Ginsberg's** father begins to die from cancer, we don't find out until he's pretty far gone. When Jack Kerouac, one of the great loves and influences in **Ginsberg's** life, dies horribly from alcoholism, it's pretty much a phone call and on to the next thing. People are referred to mainly by first names, affable enough, but it makes it hard to keep track \_ and renders an index more or less useless.

(Morgan does one thing I really loved: In a series of insets throughout the book, he cross-references poems with the moment of their inspiration or composition. A suggestion: Read Morgan with the "Collected Poems'' at your elbow. It's a great way to experience the poems in a privileged context.)

In another, perhaps unintentional way, maybe this slapdashery suits the life, compulsive indeed, lurching from one enthusiasm to another, staggering exhausted from one party, conference, personal catastrophe, hypochondria, true health crisis, financial crisis, sexual crisis, or social crisis to another. This was an obsessive man, so amazed by LSD and other drugs that, for almost his entire adult life, he wanted to talk about them (or about sex) to everyone \_ including, hilariously, luminaries such as Eleanor Roosevelt and Martin Buber.

Now for the poetry. **Ginsberg** wrote enough good verse to ensure a permanent place in the American anthology. True, too many of his poems are simply journal entries, and, as poetry, about as good as that. (One exception is "The Change: Kyoto-Tokyo Express" of 1963, which documents an important epiphany.) Granted, he was a crucial innovator in opening up sexuality as an arena of free expression; he has been crucial for poets of all orientations. Still, for me, his treatment of sexuality is, in the end, neurotic rather than celebratory. (Here he is different from Whitman.) Although he dwells overmuch (famously so) on the details and the names, there was something in his sexuality he never faced, never got over, never knew how, at least as a poet.

One surprise, in reading these poems, is the wonder of his travelogue poems. His was an era, let us remember, when John Steinbeck, Paul Simon, and many others were crisscrossing the land, "looking for America." None more than **Ginsberg**, always in someone's van or car, always writing down images from the road. Laid next to one another, poems such as "Wichita Vortex Sutra," "Kansas City to Saint Louis," and the wonderful "Iron Horse" present a panorama seen through eyes like none other.

**Ginsberg** was the kind of poet who needed to get rolling, to feel the vatic, ecstatic surge of image and inspiration buoy him up. He is one of the few poets who is better the longer he writes. Thus we come to "Howl", a world unto itself. The 50th anniversary draft facsimile, with notes, essays, and photos, shows he worked hard on it \_ much may have to **Ginsberg** in from one to four big bursts, but it was not "first thought, best thought." Terrific, terrifying, mesmerizing lines, the witness to an era \_ and it should be experienced aloud. The "Footnote," which proclaims all existence "Holy!", still provokes tears of grateful, painful assent.

His single best poem, for me, is "Kaddish,'' written out of love and grief over his mother. **Ginsberg**himself had signed the papers to allow her to be lobotomized, and his remorse was permanent. Little confessional verse ever went as far, and few moments are as lonely, as piercing, as the prayerful, bitter end of "Hymmnn," in which crows and the divine inhabit the same ambiguous reality: "Lord LordLord caw cawcaw Lord LordLord caw caw Lord."

**Ginsberg**, for me, is not much of a lyric poet in the traditional sense. But he did manage to write one of the best love poems of his century, "Song'' of 1954: " ... we carry the weight / wearily, / and so must rest / in the arms of love / at last,/ must rest in the arms / of love." One other startling, gentle lyric is "Who Be Kind To" of 1965. And do read "Pastel Sentences" of 1995.

Add to these the pieces that are so familiar: "America," "Sunflower Sutra," "A Supermarket in California," and so on.

Having read his life and poetry, I call them a record of the times, a record to be embraced. Indeed, sooner or later, we must come to **Ginsberg** and rest with him. And he would like that very much.

\_\_\_

(c) 2006, The Philadelphia Inquirer.

Visit Philadelphia Online, the Inquirer's World Wide Web site, at http://www.philly.com/

Distributed by McClatchy-Tribune Information Services.

\_\_\_\_\_

ARCHIVE PHOTOS on MCT Direct (from MCT Photo Service, 202-383-6099): **Allen** **Ginsberg**

For reprints, email tmsreprints@permissionsgroup.com, call 800-374-7985 or 847-635-6550, send a fax to 847-635-6968, or write to The Permissions Group Inc., 1247 Milwaukee Ave., Suite 303, Glenview, IL 60025, USA.

Copyright of **Philadelphia Inquirer, The (PA)** is the property of Philadelphia Inquirer, The (PA). The copyright in an individual article may be maintained by the author in certain cases. Content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.  
**Source:**Philadelphia Inquirer, The (PA), Nov 24, 2006  
**Item:**2W63865394276

"American Masters: Allen Ginsberg." *PBS.org*. PBS, n.d. Web. 29 Apr. 2014.

Allen Ginsberg, the visionary poet and founding father of the Beat generation inspired the American counterculture of the second half of the 20th century with groundbreaking poems such as "Howl" and "Kaddish." Among the avant-garde he was considered a spiritual and sexually liberated ambassador for tolerance and enlightenment. With an energetic and loving personality, Ginsberg used poetry for both personal expression and in his fight for a more interesting and open society.

Allen Ginsberg was born in Newark, New Jersey on June 3, 1926. As a boy he was a close witness to his mother’s mental illness, as she lived both in and out of institutions. His father, Louis Ginsberg was a well-known traditional poet. After graduating from high school, Ginsberg attended Columbia University, where he planned to study law. There he became friends with Jack Kerouac and William Burroughs. Together the three would change the face of American writing forever.

Ginsberg

Allen Ginsberg comments on "Allen Ginsberg." (1:10)

With an interest in the street life of the city, Kerouac, Ginsberg and Burroughs found inspiration in jazz music and the culture that surrounded it. They encouraged a break from traditional values, supporting drug-use as a means of enlightenment. To many, their shabby dress and "hip" language seemed irresponsible, but in their actions could be found the seeds of a revolution that was meant to cast off the shackles of the calm and boring social life of the post-war era. While a nation tried desperately to keep from rocking the boat, Allen Ginsberg and the Beats saw the need for a more vibrant and daring society.

One of the primary first works of the Beats was Ginsberg’s long poem "Howl." In an age plagued by intolerance, "Howl" (1956) was both a desperate plea for humanity and a song of liberation from that intolerant society. Ginsberg’s use of a gritty vernacular and an improvisational rhythmical style created a poetry which seemed haphazard and amateur to many of the traditional poets of the time. In "Howl" and his other poems, however, one could hear a true voice of the time, unencumbered by what the Beats saw as outdated forms and meaningless grammatical rules.

For its frank embrace of such taboo topics as homosexuality and drug use, "Howl" drew a great deal of criticism. Published by City Lights, the San Francisco based publisher of many of the Beats, the book was the subject of an obscenity trial. Eventually acquitted of the charges, City Lights came out with Ginsberg’s second book in 1961. "Kaddish, And Other Poems," often considered Ginsberg’s greatest work, dealt again with a deep despair and addressed Ginsberg’s closeness with his mother while she was hospitalized and fighting insanity. The raw nature of the subject matter and Ginsberg’s desperate emotions found a perfect home in his poem "Kaddish." Of "Kaddish," Ginsberg wrote "I saw my self my own mother and my very nation trapped desolate...and receiving decades of life while chanting Kaddish the names of Death in many mind-worlds the self seeking key to life found at last our self."

Throughout the 1960s, Ginsberg experimented with a number of different drugs, believing that under the influence he could create a new kind of poetry. Using LSD, peyote, marijuana and other drugs he attempted to expand his consciousness and wrote a number of books under the influence including the "Yage Letters" with William Burroughs. For much of the youth of the day, Ginsberg’s embrace of illegal drugs and unrestrained sexuality made him a central figure in the rebelling movements of the time. More than any other American poet of the 20th century, Ginsberg used his popularity for social change. Coining the phrase "flower power," Ginsberg encouraged protesters of the 1960s to embrace a non-violent rebellion. By the 1970s, his fame had grown enormously, and though he cast aside drug use for an interest in Buddhism and yogic practices, he remained important to newly-formed youth movements.

By the 1980s, Ginsberg was the most famous living American poet. As a writer he continued to publish challenging and personal verse and as a celebrity he maintained an international presence as a spokesperson for peace and tolerance—working often as a teacher and lecturer . In the last decade of his life, Ginsberg wrote and performed at the prolific rate of his youth. He had sold millions of books and had often expanded into other genres. Among the collaborators of his final years were members of the bands Sonic Youth and U2. He died on April 5, 1997 at the age of seventy. At the time of his death, "Howl" had been reprinted more than fifty times, and the words of William Carlos Williams’ introduction still rang true—"This poet sees through and all around the horrors he partakes of in the very intimate details of his poem. He avoids nothing but experiences it to the hilt. He contains it. Claims it as his own—and, we believe, laughs at it and has the time and affrontery to love a fellow of his choice and record that love in a well-made poem."

**Sullivan, James. "Allen Ginsberg's Life." *Modern American Poetry*.University of Illinois, n.d. Web. 29 Apr. 2014.**

Ginsberg, Allen (3 June 1926-6 Apr. 1997), poet, was born in Newark, New Jersey, the younger son of Louis Ginsberg, a high school English teacher and poet, and Naomi Levy Ginsberg. Ginsberg grew up with his older brother Eugene in a household shadowed by his mother's mental illness; she suffered from recurrent epileptic seizures and paranoia. An active member of the Communist Party-USA, Naomi Ginsberg took her sons to meetings of the radical left dedicated to the cause of international Communism during the Great Depression of the 1930s.

In the winter of 1941, when Allen was a junior in high school, his mother insisted that he take her to a therapist at a Lakewood,

New Jersey, rest home, a disruptive bus journey he described in his long autobiographical poem "Kaddish." Naomi Ginsberg spent most of the next fifteen years in mental hospitals, enduring the effects of electroshock treatments and a lobotomy before

her death at Pilgrim State Hospital in 1956. Witnessing his mother's mental illness had a traumatic effect on Ginsberg, who wrote poetry about her unstable condition for the rest of his life.

Graduating from Newark's East Side High School in 1943, Ginsberg later recalled that his most memorable school day was the afternoon his English teacher Frances Durbin read aloud from Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself" in a voice "so enthusiastic and joyous . . . so confident and lifted with laughter" that he never forgot the image of "her black-dressed bulk seated squat behind an English class desk, her embroidered collar, her voice powerful and high" (quoted in Schumacher, p. 17). Despite his passionate response to Whitman's poetry, Ginsberg listed government or legal work as his choice of future occupation in the high school yearbook.

Attending the college of Columbia University on a scholarship, Ginsberg considered his favorite course the required freshman

great books seminar taught by Lionel Trilling. Later Ginsberg also cited the renowned literary critics and biographers Mark

Van Doren and Raymond Weaver as influential professors at Columbia. But Ginsberg's friends at Columbia were an even greater influence than his professors on his decision to become a poet. As a freshman he met undergraduate Lucien Carr, who introduced him to William S. Burroughs and Jack Kerouac, part of a diverse (and now legendary) circle of friends that grew to include the Times Square heroin addict Herbert Huncke, the young novelist John Clellon Holmes, and a handsome young drifter and car thief from Denver named Neal Cassady, with whom Ginsberg fell in love. Kerouac described the intense encounter between Ginsberg and Cassady in the opening chapter of his novel On the Road (1957).

These friends became the nucleus of a group that named themselves the "Beat Generation" writers. The term was coined by Kerouac in the fall of 1948 during a conversation with Holmes in New York City. The word "beat" referred loosely to their shared sense of spiritual exhaustion and diffuse feelings of rebellion against what they experienced as the general conformity, hypocrisy, and materialism of the larger society around them caught up in the unprecedented prosperity of postwar America.

In the summer of 1948, in his senior year at Columbia, Ginsberg had dedicated himself to becoming a poet after hearing in a vision the voice of William Blake reciting the poem "Ah Sunflower." Experimenting with drugs like marijuana and nitrous oxide to induce further visions, or what Ginsberg later described as "an exalted state of mind," he felt that the poet's duty was to bring

a visionary consciousness of reality to his readers. He was dissatisfied with the poetry he was writing at this time, traditional work modeled on English poets like Sir Thomas Wyatt or Andrew Marvell whom he had studied at Columbia.

In June 1949 Ginsberg was arrested as an accessory to crimes carried out by Huncke and his friends, who had stored stolen

goods in Ginsberg's apartment. As an alternative to a jail sentence, Ginsberg's professors Van Doren and Trilling arranged with the Columbia dean for a plea of psychological disability, on condition that Ginsberg was admitted to the Columbia Presbyterian Psychiatric Institute. Spending eight months in the mental institution, Ginsberg became close friends with the young writer Carl Solomon, who was treated there for depression with insulin shock.

In December 1953 Ginsberg left New York City on a trip to Mexico to explore Indian ruins in Yucatan and experiment with various drugs. He settled in San Francisco, where he fell in love with a young artist's model, Peter Orlovsky; he took a job in market research, thinking that he might enroll in the graduate English program at the University of California in Berkeley. In August 1955, inspired by the manuscript of a long jazz poem titled "Mexico City Blues" that Kerouac had recently written in Mexico City, Ginsberg found the courage to begin to type what he called his most personal "imaginative sympathies" in the long poem "Howl for Carl Solomon" (Original Draft Facsimile Howl, p. xii). As his biographer Bill Morgan stated, in the poem "Allen finally accepted his homosexuality and stopped trying to become 'straight'" (Allen Ginsberg and Friends, p. 31).

In October 1955 Ginsberg read the first part of his new poem in public for the first time to tumultuous applause at the Six

Gallery reading in San Francisco with the local poets Kenneth Rexroth, Gary Snyder, Michael McClure, Philip Whalen, and Philip LaMantia. Journalists were quick to herald the reading as a landmark event in American poetry, the birth of what they labeled the San Francisco Poetry Renaissance. Lawrence Ferlinghetti, who ran the City Lights Book Store and the City Lights publishing house in North Beach, sent Ginsberg a telegram echoing Ralph Waldo Emerson's response to Walt Whitman's Leaves of Grass: "I greet you at the beginning of a great career. When do I get the manuscript?" Later Ginsberg wrote that "in publishing 'Howl,' I was curious to leave behind after my generation an emotional time bomb that would continue exploding in U.S. consciousness in case our military-industrial-nationalist complex solidified into a repressive police bureaucracy" (Original Draft Facsimile Howl, p. xii).

Early in the following year Howl and Other Poems was published with an introduction by William Carlos Williams as number four in the City Lights Pocket Poets Series. In May 1956 copies of the small black-and-white stapled paperback were seized by the San Francisco police, who arrested Ferlinghetti and Shigeyoshi Murao, his shop manager, and charged them with publishing and selling an obscene and indecent book. The American Civil Liberties Union took up the defense of Ginsberg's poem in a highly publicized obscenity trial in San Francisco, which concluded in October 1957 when Judge Clayton Horn ruled that Howl had redeeming social value.

During the furor of the trial, Ginsberg left California and settled in Paris with Orlovsky, who was to remain his companion

for the next forty years. Living on Ginsberg's royalties from Howl and Orlovsky's disability checks as a Korean War veteran,

they traveled to Tangier to stay with Burroughs and help him assemble the manuscript later published as his novel Naked Lunch (1959). In 1958 Ginsberg returned to New York City, still troubled by his mother's death in the mental hospital two years before, haunted by the thought that he had never properly said goodbye to her. Using various drugs to explore his painful memories of their life together and confront his complex feelings about his mother, Ginsberg wrote his greatest poem, "Kaddish for Naomi Ginsberg," modeling his elegy on the traditional Jewish memorial service for the dead.

Continuing to experiment with various psychedelic stimulants to create visionary poetry, Ginsberg traveled to South America,

Europe, Morocco, and India with Orlovsky in 1962. It was the most important trip of his life. Staying in India for nearly

two years, he met with holy men in an effort to find someone who could teach him a method of meditation that would help him

deal with his egotism and serve as a vehicle for heightened spiritual awareness. On a train in Japan, Ginsberg recorded in his poem "The Change" his realization that meditation, not drugs, could assist his enlightenment. He returned to North America in the fall of 1963 to attend the Vancouver Poetry Conference with Charles Olson, Robert Duncan, Robert Creeley, Denise Levertov, and many other poets who felt that they formed a community of nonacademic experimental writers.

In 1968 Ginsberg received wide coverage on television during the Democratic National Convention when he and the members of the National Mobilization Committee who were against U.S. participation in the war in Vietnam confronted the police in Chicago's Grant Park. The poet stayed on an impromptu stage and chanted "Om" in an attempt to calm the crowds being brutally attacked by tear gas and billy clubs. Ginsberg's courage, his humanitarian political views and support of homosexuality, his engagement in Eastern meditation practices, and his charismatic personality made him one of the favorite spokesmen chosen by a younger generation of radicalized Americans known as "hippies" during the end of this turbulent decade.

In the early 1970s Ginsberg's serious, bearded image with black-rimmed glasses, a tweed jacket, and an "Uncle Sam" paper top hat became a ubiquitous poster protesting the Vietnam War. In 1971 Ginsberg met ChogyamTrungpa Rinpoche, who became his meditation teacher at the Naropa Institute, a Buddhist college in Boulder, Colorado. Three years later, Ginsberg, assisted by the young poet Anne Waldman, founded a creative writing program called the Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics at Naropa. Ginsberg taught summer poetry workshops there and lectured during the academic year

at Brooklyn College as a tenured distinguished professor until the end of his life.

In his remaining years, publishing steadily and traveling tirelessly despite increasing health problems with diabetes and the aftereffects of a stroke, Ginsberg gave readings in Russia, China, Europe, and the South Pacific. In the bardic tradition of William Blake, who played a pump organ when he read his poetry, Ginsberg often accompanied himself on a portable harmonium bought in Benares for fifty dollars. He was the archetypal Beat Generation writer to countless poetry audiences and to the general public. Unlike Kerouac, who died in 1969, Ginsberg remained a radical poet, the embodiment of the ideals of personal freedom, nonconformity, and the search for enlightenment. As a member of the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters, he unabashedly used his prestige to champion the work of his friends. Two months short of his seventy-first birthday, he died of liver cancer at his home in the East Village, New York City.

Bibliography

Along with Ginsberg's many awards and honors, his list of publications encompasses hundreds of items. Most notably, in addition to those mentioned above, they include the collections Reality Sandwiches, 1953-1960 (1963); Planet News, 1961-1967 (1968); Indian Journals: March 1962-May 1963 (1970); The Fall of America: Poems of These States, 1965-1971 (1972), which won the National Book Award; Gordon Ball, ed., Allen Verbatim: Lectures on Poetry, Politics, Consciousness (1974); Mind Breaths: Poems, 1972-1977 (1978); Plutonium Ode: Poems, 1977-1980 (1982); Collected Poems: 1947-1980 (1985); Barry Miles, ed., Howl: Original Draft Facsimile, Transcript & Variant Versions, Fully Annotated by Author, with Contemporaneous Correspondence, Account of First Public Reading, Legal Skirmishes, Precursor Texts & Bibliography (1986); White Shroud: Poems, 1980-85 (1986); Cosmopolitan Greetings: Poems, 1986-1992 (1994); Selected Poems, 1947-1995 (1996), and Death and Fame: Last Poems, 1993-1997 (1999). The front dust wrapper of this last book is a color photograph of the poet standing in his apartment next to a portrait of Walt Whitman, both white-bearded. The list of the forty most important Ginsberg titles in his posthumously published Death and Fame was gathered by his editors Bob Rosenthal, Peter Hale, and Bill Morgan into the categories of Poetry, Prose, Photography, and Vocal Words and Music. Bill Morgan compiled the 456-page descriptive Ginsberg bibliography, The Works of Allen Ginsberg, 1941-1994 (1995). J. W. Ehrlich edited Howl of the Censor (1961), an account of the 1957 San Francisco trial investigating obcenity in Ginsberg's poem. Jane Kramer, Allen Ginsberg in America, was an early biography, followed by two full-length biographies: Barry Miles, Ginsberg (1989), and Michael Schumacher, Dharma Lion: A Critical Biography of Allen Ginsberg (1992). Bill Morgan, archivist for the estate of Allen Ginsberg, prepared the biographical text in Allen Ginsberg and Friends (New York: Sotheby's Catalog for Sale 7351, Oct. 7, 1999). An obituary is in the New York Times, 7 Apr. 1997.

Source: http://www.anb.org/articles/16/16-03394.html; American National Biography Online June 2000 Update. Access Date: Sun Mar 18 11:32:26 2001 Copyright (c) 2000 American Council of Learned Societies. Published by Oxford University Press. All rights reserved.

Thomas Gladysz

Allen Ginsberg was born June 3, 1926 and grew up in Paterson, New Jersey. His father, Louis, was a high school teacher and an accomplished lyric poet. His mother, Naomi, a Communist during the Depression, suffered from psychotic delusions. At times, she insisted there were wires in her head with which people could hear her thinking. Coming of age in a household of modest means, Ginsberg's early life seemed to steer him away from the conventional. He was from a family of Jewish Russian immigrants, his family had ties to the radical labor movement, his mother was insane, and he was a homosexual: four prescriptions in the conventional1940's and 1950's for a sense of deep alienation.

Inspired by Naomi's "mad idealism" to defend the underpriviliged, Ginsberg entered Columbia University as a pre-law student. He later changed his major to literature, and studied under Mark Van Doren and Lionel Trilling. However, more influential in Ginsberg's artistic and personal development was the off-campus circle of friends with whom he became involved. At its center was Jack Kerouac, a former Columbia student, and the older William S. Burroughs, a sophisticated cosmopolitan hipster who introduced his younger colleagues to Manhattan's varied subcultures. Ginsberg's other friends and acquintances from the time included the writers Herbert Hunke, John Clellon Holmes and Lucien Carr (father of bestselling author Caleb Carr) as well as the charasmatic Neal Cassady. Each would emerge as key figures in the Beat movement of a decade later.

In 1945, for reasons now clouded in legend, Ginsberg was expelled from Columbia. Reinstated in 1946, he received his bachelor's degree two years later. However, nineteen forty-eight was significant for an experience central to Ginsberg's life as a poet. Living in an East Harlem tenement, Ginsberg heard the voice of William Blake intoning "Ah! Sunflower." Staring out the window

. . . I began noticing in every corner where I looked evidences of a living hand, even in the bricks, in the arrangement of each brick, Some hand placed them there - that some hand had placed the whole universe in front of me . . . . Or that God was in front of my eyes - existence itself was God . . . . what I was seeing was a visionary thing, it was a lightness in my body . . . my body suddenly felt light, and a sense of cosmic consciousness, vibrations, understanding, awe, and wonder and surprise. And it was a sudden awakening into a totally deeper real universe that I'd been existing in.

(Paris Review interview)

The search for a "totally deeper real universe" continued for Ginsberg. He remained in New York City until 1953, writing (largely conventional) poetry and supporting himself by working as a book reviewer, market researcher, etc . . . . Deciding to follow Neal Cassady (with whom he had fallen in love) to San Francisco, Ginsberg travelled to Cuba, Mexico and eventually arrived on the West Coast - home to a vibrant, bohemian literary community. (For more on the beginnings of Beat, check out "How Beat Happened," a superb introduction to Beat Culture by Steve Silberman,)

Bearing a letter of introduction from the poet (and fellow Paterson resident) William Carlos Williams, Ginsberg met Kenneth Rexroth, a distinguished man-of-letters and center of what was then known as the San Francisco Poetry Renaissance . Presided over by Rexroth, this active Bay Area poetry community included Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Michael McClure, Gary Synder, Philip Whalen, Robert Duncan, Jack Spicer, Josephine Miles, James Broughton, Philip Lamantia and other writers, artists, filmmakers and avant-gardists. In October 1955, Rexroth hosted a reading at the Six Gallery in San Francisco: the poets who read that evening included Synder, Whalen, McClure, Lamantia and Ginsberg in what would be his poetry-reading debut. Cheered on by Kerouac, Ginsberg gave an inspired, first ever reading of "Howl."

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,

angelheaded hipsters, burning for the ancient heavenly connection to the starry dynamo in the

machinery of night

who poverty and tatters and hollow-eyed and . . . .

So begins "Howl," one of the most widely read poems of the century. Ginsberg composed it in what he calls his "Hebraic-Melvillianbardic breath," a free-verse form whose sources include the poets and writers Christopher Smart, Percy Shelley, Guillaume Apollinaire, Kurt Schwitters, Vladimir Mayakovsky, Antonin Artaud, Federico Garcia Lorca, Hart Crane and William Carlos Williams. In the 1950's (and into the 1960's), Ginsberg also used drugs as a means of inducing visionary awareness, such as his Blake experience had provided. Thus, exposed to new influences and literary friends in California - Ginsberg achieved the open-form poetry which sets his work apart from the largely traditional verse of the time.

After the Gallery Six reading - Lawrence Ferlinghetti offered to publish Howl and Other Poems (1956) as part of his City Lights Books Pocket Poet series. In 1957, United States Custom officers and San Francisco police seized the edition, and Ferlinghetti was charged with publishing an obscene book. The trial, in which well known establishment writers like Rexroth, Mark Shorer, Walter Van Tilburg Clark and others testified for the defense, drew local banner headlines and nation-wide attention. By the time Judge Clayton W. Horn delivered the verdict that "Howl" was not obscene, the Beat movement had been given a manifesto of-sorts and Allen Ginsberg was famous.

On the road for the next decade - sometimes with Kerouac, Burroughs, Corso and his longtime companion, Peter Orlovsky - Ginsberg roamed the country and the world. Beginning in the early 1950's, Ginsberg would venture to the Yucatan (where he helped discover a notable Mayan archeological site), to Tangier's (where he would visit the expatriot community centered around Paul Bowles) and to Europe (where he would live for a while in Paris). Sea voyages as a member of the merchant marine took him to Africa and the Artic. In 1960 he would spend half a year in Chile, Peru, Bolivia and the Amazon region.

Most importantly during this time, Ginsberg exorcised some of his internal demons by writing 'Kaddish,' a brilliant long poem about his mother's insanity and death. Published in book form in 1961, "Kaddish" is a prayer and lament for Naomi Ginsberg. It is also widely regarded as his finest work. The poem gives a seemingly factual account of his mother's tragic journey through life, from that of a frightened Russian child to a young women in America and onward "toward education, marriage, nervous breakdown, operation, teaching school, and learning to be mad." A bittersweet epilogue to "Kaddish," called "White Shroud," was published twenty five years later.

Throughout 1962 and 1963, Ginsberg and Orlovsky toured the Far East. There, Ginsberg came into direct contact with the traditions of Zen Buddhism. His interest in Buddhism and Asian literature had been sparked by his Bay Area friendships with Synder, Whalen and Rexroth. Ginsberg's interest, which would shape the development of his poetry, has continued to the present.

In 1965, Ginsberg went to Cuba as a correspondent for the Evergreen Review but was deported when he spoke against the government's persecution of homosexuals at Havana University. He then journeyed to the Soviet Union, Poland and Czechoslovakia, where he was again deported after more than 100,000 people in Prague crowned him King of May in 1965. Back in the United States, the F.B.I. placed him on their Dangerous Security List.

Throughout the 1960's, Ginsberg took an active role in the growing anti-war and counter-culture movements. In 1965 he coined the term "flower power." He was also a moving spirit (along with Synder, McClure and Timothy Leary) behind the first of the hippie mass gatherings, the 1967 Gathering of the Tribes for a Human Be-In held in nearby Golden Gate Park. Later the same year he was arrested with Dr. Benjamin Spock and others for his part in a New York City antiwar demonstration. During the 1968 Democratic Convention, Ginsberg was tear-gassed while trying to induce calm and chanting "Om" at the Yippie Life Festival. At the trial of the demonstration leaders - known as the Chicago Seven, Ginsberg testified for the defense.

Ginsberg's literary efforts during the 1960's and early 1970's were many and varied. At the time, poetry was chiefly the written art of academic craftsman. Ginsberg took it out of the study and classroom and onto the podium, becoming a skilled public performer of his poems. His books from this period include Reality Sandwiches (1963), The Yage Letters (with William S. Burroughs) (1963), Indian Journals (1970) and The Fall of America (1972) - for which he was awarded National Book Award. Planet News (1968) constitutes a poetic record of his travels in Eastern Europe, the Indian subcontinent and other parts of Asia as well as the United States. Included in this latter collection is "Wichita Vortex Sutra," one of the poet's most accomplished and well known works. It is also one of Ginsberg's most political works.

. . . Kansas! Kansas! Shuddering at last!

PERSON appearing in Kansas!

angry telephone calls to the University!

Police dumbfounded leaning on

theirradiocar hoods . . .

In 1974, Ginsberg helped found the Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics at the Naropa Institute, the first accredited Buddhist college in the Western world. Earlier, Ginsberg had met ChogyamTrungpa, a Tibetan Buddhist who had recently arrived in the United States. Trungpa taught full acceptance of sensual experience as the route to enlightenment and "the sacredness of immediate experience, sexual candor, and absence of censoriousnes." These Buddhist believes echo many notions found in various Beat writings.

With the end of the war in Vietnam, Ginsberg refocussed his political energies on efforts to expose alleged CIA subsidization of drug trafficking; in attempts to reform American drug laws (including testifying before Congress); and in the antinuclear, environmental and gay liberation movements. He has also spoken out against covert action by the United States government, including domestic harassment of the counterculture.

Following a pattern set early in his career, Ginsberg has continued to produce and publish work in many fields. The last two decades have seen numerous books and small press editions, including Journals: Early Fifties, Early Sixties (1977), Mind Breaths (1978), Plutonian Ode (1982), Collected Poems (1984), White Shroud (1986), Cosmopolitan Greetings (1994) and Journals Mid-Fifties 1954 - 1958. These last four titles were published by Harper, and mark Ginsberg's first publishing agreement with a major publisher.

During the 1970's and 1980's, Ginsberg recorded and occasionally toured with Bob Dylan, John Hammond, Sr. and the Clash. In 1994, Rhino Records released Holy Soul Jelly Roll: Poems and Songs 1949 - 1993, a four-disc compilation of the poet's many spoken word recordings. This multiset disc and its accompanying booklet serve as a kid of "selected works" of Ginsberg's spoken word recordings. Other recent CD releases have included The Lion For Real (1989) and The Ballad of the Skeletons (1996), as well as collaborative efforts with Philip Glass, Hydrogen Jukebox (1993), and the Kronos Quartet, Howl U.S.A. (1996).

In 1960's, Ginsberg appeared in some of the most famous experimental films of the decade, including the well known Pull My Daisy. His longtime interest in the visual arts - especially photography, a practice encouraged by his longtime friend Robert Frank - have now been collected in two books, Photographs (1991) and Snapshot Poetics (1993). Ginsberg's photographs were also represented in a groundbreaking exhibit organized by the Whitney Museum of Art, "Beat Culture and the New America: 1950 - 1965."

Since 1974, Ginsberg has also been a member of the American Institute of Arts and Letters - the highest official recognition he has received. Ginsberg has also been named a Guggenheim fellow, and is currently a Distinguished Professor at Brooklyn College. To date, "Howl" has been translated into some 23 languages, including Chinese, Japanese, Czech, Hebrew, Macedonian, Norwegian and Polish. The just published Selected Poems, 1947 - 1995, chosen by Ginsberg from throughout his long career, collects many of the poet's well known works - and in the words of Ginsberg, "isolates & points attention to work less known, more subtle, rhetorically wild, beyond 'Beat Generation' literary stereotypes."

Online Source