

Adversary - The Birth of the Beats

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Also Known as "The Genesis of a Counterculture".



Published on
Booksie

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It would be false, indeed absurd, to suggest that the Counterculture of the 1960s was a unique historical event devoid of precedents and precursors. In fact, it was merely the latest in a long line of alternative societies that can be traced at least as far back as the 18th Century. In other words, by the time of the Hippie revolution, much of the groundwork had already been done, not least during the two immediate post-war decades.

During this brief 20-year period, the Existentialists, Lettrists and Beats became international icons of revolt...Britain's first major youth cult surfaced in the shape of the Edwardians or Teddy Boys...a cinema of youthful discontent flourished as never before, fuelling a desire among many young people to be identified as rebels and wild ones...and Rock and Roll took over the world with Elvis Presley as its first true superstar. But it was the Beats who were the true precursors of the Hippies.

Few today are aware of the existence of the Lettrists, that scandalous band of avant garde agitators who thrived in post-war Paris under the leadership of Isidore Isou, but their contemporaries, the Beats, continue to enjoy an exceptionally high profile. This may be the result of Paris ceding her time-honoured role as the world epicentre of the avant garde to New York City in the late 1940s, but whatever the truth, the Lettrists have been all but forgotten while the Beats have never been hotter.

It had been earlier in the decade...around 1943, in fact...that a disparate group of would-be poets and authors of Bohemian inclination had coalesced around a brilliant angel-faced young Columbia University undergraduate by the name of Lucien Carr.

The first to gravitate towards Carr was a fellow Columbia student from nearby New Jersey by the name of Allen Ginsberg. Through Carr, Ginsberg was introduced to Arthur Rimbaud, the quintessential post-Romantic bad boy poet whose terrible yet beautiful visionary verse and frenzied rebellious rage has exerted an influence on the development of the adversary culture of the post-Romantic West that is second to none or close to it. Rimbaud went on to significantly inform the evolution of Ginsberg's own poetic vision.

Also through Carr, the bookish-looking poet met the boyfriend of future Beat biographer Edie Parker, who was another of Carr's Columbia friends. This was Jean-Jacques Kerouac, known as Jack. Until recently, Kerouac, the self-styled *shy Canuck* from a close-knit French Canadian family from Lowell, Massachusetts, had been a Football player of enormous promise, but soon after gaining a scholarship to Columbia, things had started to go awry for him. First, he cracked his tibia during a game, and then repeatedly clashed with the coach Lou Little whom he accused of benching him to excess.

The upshot was that he left Columbia in his sophomore year, and ended up drifting in New York City, where he met the two men - both through Lucien Carr - with whom he went on to form the nucleus of the Beat Generation, these being the aforesaid Ginsberg, and a friend of Carr's from St Louis, the patrician William Seward Burroughs.

In 1957, Kerouac emerged as the movement's undisputed leader with the publication of his second novel *On the Road*, a fictionalised account of the cross-country wanderings he undertook between 1947 and 1950 with his close friend Neil Cassady...famously named Dean Moriarty in the novel.

Cassady, who bore a striking resemblance to the iconic movie star Paul Newman, was the son of an alcoholic whose early life had included the early loss of his mother, a childhood spent on Denver's skid row, a spell in reform school, and eleven months imprisonment for theft. Little wonder, therefore, that he served as muse to Kerouac who - from such a stable loving background himself - was the genius behind Beat's defining work, while Cassady provided the inspiration as the Beat par excellence.

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Oddly perhaps, Lucien Carr himself never went on to write anything of note, preferring to father a family and pursue a long career with the venerable news agency United Press International. It fell to his son Caleb, author of *The Alienist*, *The Angel of Darkness*, *Casing the Promised Land*, *Killing Time* and *The Italian Secretary* among other works to be the novelist of the family—but his place in literary history is secure. As Allen Ginsberg once put it, "Lou was the glue of the entire Beat Generation, itself the most significant avant garde movement of the 20th Century, as the primary impulse behind the '60s Counterculture.

It was in about '64, in fact, that Beat started to shift imperceptibly into the Hippie movement.

'64 was also the year the Beatles conquered America. But away from the mainstream, a certain Colorado farmer's son and former Stanford University student called Ken Kesey set off on a cross-country trip from California to New York on a psychedelic school bus he named Furthur in the company of a motley band of counterculture pioneers, writers, artists, students and ne'er do wells known as the Merrie Pranksters...with one Neil Cassady doing most of the driving.

Once in the Big Apple, the Pranksters met up with the New York Beats, including Jack Kerouac, who, deeply patriotic and a devout Catholic at heart, was allegedly repelled by their outlandish dress and appearance, and took no part in the coming psychedelic revolution, unlike Allen Ginsberg, who embraced it wholeheartedly.

The first of the infamous Acid Tests occurred a short time later in 1965, and during these LSD-fuelled events, there'd be slide and/or light shows and experiments with cutting edge sound technology, and bands such as the Warlocks - later the Grateful Dead - or Kesey's own Psychedelic Symphonette would regale the crowds with proto-psychedelic Rock.

Two years later, the Hippie, wild child of the Beat Generation, became an international media obsession, before setting about the piecemeal penetration of the mainstream. This slow co-option by the mainstream of the one-time values of the adversary culture could be said to be the ultimate triumph of the Beat Generation, and all the avant gardes that preceded her—but were Kerouac alive today—you can't help but think he might be weeping at the thought of it. *Pauvre Ti Jean!*

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