

Extending the Age of Spontaneity to a New Era: Post-Beat Poets in America

by

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PREFACE

I'd like to begin by saying that I'm speaking from the perspective of a poet and editor, not a scholar. A considerable amount of this discussion of Post-Beat writers comes from my observations as a writer who reads the literary magazines in which his work appears, and from editing *Selected Poems by Post-Beat Poets*, an anthology that introduced me to a number of exciting poets whose work, I believe, deserves more attention than it's received.

INTRODUCTION

The years following the end of World War Two launched an Age of Spontaneity that transformed American culture so markedly that a person living in 1950 would barely recognize the United States of 1970. Charlie Parker's fleet-fingered improvisations on "Ornithology" replaced the somnolence of Glenn Miller's "Moonlight Serenade." Jackson Pollock's improvisational techniques produced the abstract expressionistic paintings that shocked an art world accustomed to visual representation. Elvis Presley's raucous renditions of rhythm and blues replaced Frank Sinatra's relaxed stylings as the dominant tone of popular music. And a handful of writers known as the Beat Generation authored a body of poetry and fiction that elevated the importance of spontaneity in literature, transformed the lives of young adults in the mid-fifties and launched the "rucksack revolution" of the 1960's.

If the Age of Spontaneity has passed from the public eye, its spirit remains alive in the generations of artists that have succeeded the innovators of the era. Rap has nearly replaced Rock as the popular music of young, rebellious people. While bop adheres to conventions established by Parker and his colleagues a half-century earlier, the umbrella term "jazz" now covers, in addition to bop, the new and continuing developments within free improvisation and jazz-rock, as well as the eclectic fusions of musical idioms that happen

regularly. Literature has incorporated idioms such as Magic Realism, Language Poetry, Slam Poetry and Visual Poetry into a multi-cultural canon that is still forming. If the Age of Spontaneity has passed, a Culture of Spontaneity continues despite a lack of critical and public attention. One of the groups that explores the artistic terrain of the new era acknowledges its debt to the exploratory spirit of the Beats. Although most of its writers eschew labels, a number of them use a descriptive shorthand that acknowledges their past influences while pointing toward the next cutting edge. They call themselves “Post-Beat.”

IMPACT OF BEATS ON AMERICAN CULTURE

If you were to conduct a “Man in the Street” interview today about the Beat Generation, the person you stopped would very likely dismiss it as a 1950's phenomenon. The Beats generated remarkable controversy when *On the Road's* exuberant chronicle of living outside the cultural norms appeared to challenge the *Ozzie and Harriet* values of mid-fifties America. In their search for kicks and beatitude, Kerouac and the other Beats captured the undercurrent of alienation and discontent that existed in America after the end of World War Two. Much of what people considered shocking at the time the Beats made it public we take for granted today. Consequently, we can focus on the Beats' accomplishments instead of their notoriety.

The Beats continued a centuries-old literature of human discontent aspiring toward transcendence, continued an alternative American literary tradition, opened the subject matter of literature to previously forbidden lifestyles and contributed to mixed-media experimentation in the arts. They drew insight and inspiration from a tradition of underground writers living in other countries and other times, including Celine, Rimbaud, Dostoevsky and Blake. In addition, they were a homegrown product that Lawrence Ferlinghetti once described as “a continuing tradition in American writing, going back to Walt Whitman and Poe and Jack London, beyond the Beats, who were only one phase of this literature, continuing today in new outsiders.”¹ A number of these new outsiders are Post-Beat writers.

While continuing the traditions of underground writing, Kerouac, Ginsberg and Burroughs extended the range of subject matter acceptable in literature. In launching the rucksack revolution he later disavowed, Kerouac launched a generation of writers whose roots, like his own, lay outside America's ethnic, cultural and financial aristocracy. Their writing reflected their origins as well as their lives in the counterculture that developed as an alternative to the American mainstream. The graphic homosexual content of “Howl” helped to bring a formerly taboo subject out of the closet, in life and literature. Burroughs' outlaw lifestyle tapped the veins of restlessness and rebellion in younger generations of writers and readers, and shot them up with visions of more exhilarating lifestyles and techniques for portraying them. Opening the range of acceptable literary subject matter

opened a corresponding range of forms, which both widened and narrowed the options for the generations of writers that came after them.

As a group, the Beats revived poetry and fiction as oral forms, often reciting their work in a mixed-media context. Jack Kerouac's reading his prose to jazz accompaniment with a musician's timing represented an early form of the performance art that has evolved since the 1960's. Reading poetry to jazz, while not a Beat invention, has become a legitimate component of Beat and Post-Beat expression. Late in his life, William Burroughs's Spoken Word recordings became popular among a younger generation. Ginsberg premiered "Howl" at the "Six at the Six" reading that launched his career and brought wider attention to San Francisco Poets. The Poetry Slam competitions that emerged in the late 1970s continued the Beats' revival of the oral tradition and increased public awareness of poetry. The Slams are, at least in part, a Post-Beat development.

In the Age of Spontaneity, the Beats weren't the only artists drawing lines in the cultural sand. In the early 1940s, jazz aficionado Kerouac frequented Monroe's Uptown House and other clubs where Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie and other innovators improvised the then-revolutionary music known as bop. The pulse and phrasing of bop later became the basis of Kerouac's Spontaneous Bop Prosody. The Beats' coast-to-coast shuttles brought them into contact with Michael McClure, Philip Whalen, Gary Snyder, Lawrence Ferlinghetti and Lew Welch, West Coast poets who shared the Beats' poetic, spiritual and environmental concerns. Black Mountain poets such as Robert Creeley and Charles Olson socialized with the Beats. In Manhattan, the Beats spent time at the Cedar Tavern on University Place, also a gathering place for the New York School of poets and avant-garde painters such as Pollock and de Kooning. Talk of artistic change charged the air, fueled by the camaraderie among some groups and the tension between others. The Beats' exposure to artists working in other disciplines enabled them to incorporate extra-literary elements into their works. The extra-literary elements contributed to the Post-Beat modes of expression that developed in the 1960's and continue developing today.

FRAGMENTATION AND CONGLOMERATION: A GENERATION OF TRANSITION

By 1961, the media had reduced the Beats to a phenomenon perceived as passe while kept on life support by "beatniks" playing bongos and folk guitars on college campuses, on television shows and in humor magazines. The times, to paraphrase Bob Dylan, were changing. As the cultural cocktail of Rock and LSD opened the doors of bohemian perception to the young adults of the 1960's, the media replaced the Beats with

the Hippies.

While the literary bohemians coming of age in the sixties developed their craft, commercial forces developed that would hinder their attempts to bring their work to the public. When Rock became the medium through which the younger generation voiced its personal and social concerns, journalists who previously would have sought John Updike's opinion on Civil Rights or the Vietnam War were more likely to seek Jim Morrison's. In the American marketplace, the writer became a devalued currency.

In the early 1970's, conglomerate corporations purchased book publishers and changed the nature of publishing. Before the takeovers, independent publishers would risk losing money on literary works they considered culturally important. Since the takeovers, corporate-owned book publishers have risked less money on titles that might have cultural significance because sales of prospective bestsellers don't always earn back the multi-million dollar advances given to the authors. For related reasons, literary magazines such as the ones that introduced sophisticated readers to new and innovative authors in the 1950s and early 1960s seldom appear on bookstore shelves.

The nature of marketing books also changed. If the work of the Beats helped increase awareness of Gay Rights, Feminism and other social issues, the corporate publishers developed a "niche market" for any special interest capable of generating a profit. University-based literary developments such as metafiction, surfiction and avant-pop fiction created their own academic niche markets, which fragmented the younger generation of authors whose work built upon the "black humor" of Thomas Pynchon, John Barth, Joseph Heller and Burroughs, narrowing their audience while targeting it. Even the Beats became a lucrative niche market.

In a literary world composed largely of a commercial mainstream and numerous niche markets, a number of authors who might be considered Post-Beat have published in areas that aren't considered Post-Beat. A gay Post-Beat writer might write strictly for a gay niche market, whereas Ginsberg's work integrated his sexual orientation with the rest of his life and his concerns with the world around him. A Post-Beat feminist would face a similarly restrictive publishing option. The fragmentation of the literary world diminished the likelihood that Post-Beat writers could find outlets for their work because the major publishers focus on popular poets or public figures who write poetry. The less-celebrated poets sought publication in the university presses, the small presses or, more recently, the micropress with vary degrees of success.

Despite the fragmentation, Post-Beat writing didn't develop in isolation. Some Post-Beats partied, read and published with their literary influences. Those closest in age to the original Beats published in Beat journals while the others published their own magazines, eventually, with the help of the youngest Post-Beats, using computer technology to publish their work in cyberspace.

The evolution from Beat to Post-Beat includes a number of transitional figures, most notably Allen Ginsberg and Anne Waldman. Ginsberg shared his knowledge generously with younger poets. His continuing interest in innovation often led him to explore the same

artistic terrain as his Post-Beat successors. He co-founded the Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics with Anne Waldman at Naropa University, perhaps the closest thing to an institution that supports and advances the work of Post-Beat Poets.

Anne Waldman has affinities with several literary “camps.” Her association with Beat writers and her role as Director and co-founder of the Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics place her solidly but not simply in the Beat camp. As the former Director of the Poetry Project at St. Mark’s Church, she could be considered a member of the New York School. Yet her chronological age qualifies her as a Post-Beat. The scope of her work attests to her ability to incorporate the varieties of literature reflected in her experience into a singularly powerful mode of expression. At Naropa, she has supported writing that extends beyond the Beats to the varieties of literature that have developed in recent decades. Two poets whose work appears in *Selected Poems by Post-Beat Poets* have studied at Naropa.

DEFINING POST-BEAT: A PROCESS IN PROCESS

Defining Post-Beat poses a challenge similar to Wittgenstein’s discussion in *Philosophical Investigations* about the difficulties inherent in defining a game. Wittgenstein said, “We do not know the boundaries because none have been drawn.”³

The boundaries of Post-Beat literature have never been drawn.

Unlike the Beats, the Post-Beats never existed as a literary movement, or even a closely-knit network. They aren’t so much a movement as a presence that emerged spontaneously throughout the United States after the Beats had stamped their imprint on American culture. They’re a diffuse and diverse group that numbers in the hundreds, perhaps even the thousands. Although they don’t exist in a formal network, they encounter each other far more frequently than the customary six degrees of separation would allow. Many of them came of age in the 1960’s, some are a decade younger than the original Beats, and others a decade or two younger than the Baby Boomers. Some Post-Beats are in their mid-twenties. While many live in the major urban areas, just as many live in smaller cities across the United States, anywhere a trace of alterative culture exists. Their geographic diffuseness and their lack of an advocate such as Allen Ginsberg has exacerbated their attempts to find places for themselves in today’s publishing industry.

The Post-Beats are an extension of Beat philosophy and writing into new generations. As Post-Beat poet and fiction writer Kirpal Gordon wrote in a recent e-mail concerning the Post-Beats, “they are carrying it further rather than carrying it on.” The Post-Beats consider the original Beats their inspiration, and, in some cases, their mentors. Insofar as the Post-Beats don’t seek to imitate work of the Beats but to advance it, they continue the underground literary traditions of Europe and the United States as the latest

literary voices outside the socio-cultural mainstream.

Writers in the alternative culture's literary circles began to use the term "Post-Beat" around 1980. Steve Dalachinsky's 1980 poem, "*Post - Beat - Poets (We Are Credo #2)*" portrays the differences between the Beats and the Post-Beats:

Post - Beat - Poets (We Are Credo #2)

- "*Now's the Time*" - Charlie Parker

we are the post beat poets we are the t.v. generation
we are the true light of dope sex & profanity
we are the afterthoughts of post war experimentation
we are the results of a nation in turmoil & change
we are the ultimate over 30 crowd
spoiled seasoned & prejudiced
we are the Atom bomb Anathemas & the LSD Corruptors
we made pot a household word
and caused our parents to rebel
we have tried to make clear
all the knowledge that has been put down before us

we are the post-beat poets
inspired by tigers
queers
wife killers
yage eaters
bookshop owners
freedom fighters
junkies
priests & jazz.

we tried the coast on advice of holy word
and read the holy zen scripture
on lonely beaches
with wine and music
in lonely forests
awake on pills
& settled back slowly into city lights
where hearts have always seemed
to once again return.

some of us have families
& work hard
while some take it easy the hard way

some of us lived in the open like Jack
& now spend hours in front of the tube
angry & anti our former liberal selves
but we all still write our words their words all words
for our SELF & everyone

we get crazy drunk like Corso yet sweeter flowers never grew
& holier-than-thou like Ginsberg
we get satirically surreal like Burroughs
adding up time like so many star ship stereo ghosts
we shot it too
& watched it too
drawing those demons in the chelsea hotel
we've become chroniclers of each others' lives
sifting styles & stealing moonbeams
as we sit with mother earth between our toes
swooning

we go off to monasteries to worship the fat man
& write the haiku
we never forget our friends

occasionally one of us disappears
into the karmic mists of forever
never to return
& others just remain silent & musical
growing more profound every year

we are the post beat poets
becoming more certain & proud of our immediate heritage
while discovering the cool night eyes of the honey-colored cat
lying lazy on the carpet near the color t.v.

hip & classless
very primitive 20th century
very well informed
we all have our specialties
our meanings
our personal styles
our beliefs
always changing & always the same

we all have our time & our time has come.

Dalachinsky's poem describes the affinity of the Post-Beat poets with their Beat ancestors, then takes the reader through the social upheavals of the sixties ("we are the ultimate over 30 crowd") to the present day, where the Post-Beats live diverse lifestyles, some as edgy as the original Beats, others "discovering the cool night eyes of the honey-colored cat/lying lazy on the carpet near the color t.v."

The Post-Beats differ from the Beats because the America they inhabit has changed as dramatically as it did during the 1950s and 1960s. If the Beats listened to jazz, the Post-Beats listen to bop, free jazz, Rock, Punk, and the crossovers and permutations that have evolved within the musical idioms. Their writing retains the questing spirit of the Beats, but reflects the influence of other writers, other art forms, new technologies and the times themselves. As an example, the picture poems of Kenneth Patchen, along with the Concrete Poetry that originated in the 1950s, have evolved into Visual Poetry using animation and other devices that can only be created and viewed on the computer. Unlike the Beats, with the exception of Burroughs, much Post-Beat writing reflects the hard-edged view of people who watched a cultural revolution fail in the 1960s and currently survive under a right-wing administration whose practices threaten to restrict their freedom of expression.

Whereas the Beats lived in bohemian fashion for much of their lives, many Post-Beats enjoy financially secure lifestyles. While many of them have lived on Manhattan's Lower East Side, traveled the country, and partied in after-hours joints, the cost of living in today's world makes the Beat lifestyle of the 1950s and 1960s virtually impossible to maintain for an extended period. Nevertheless, the American Dream remains more nightmare than idyll to the Post-Beats, who enjoy the exotic culture and cuisine of millennial America's coopted Bohemia but resist the complacency ascribed by Ann Powers to the generation she portrays as *Bobos in Paradise*.⁴

Nevertheless, many Post-Beats maintain more than a casual interest in spiritual development. Some meditate in Buddhist monasteries or take classes that fuse Eastern disciplines with Western psychology. A significant number, on the other hand, have immersed themselves in the post-Huncke world of kicks, an area of Post-Beat life and literature shaped in part by the belated emergence of Charles Bukowski, a major influence on many Post-Beat writers.

Bukowski, early in his career, turned down an invitation to appear in a Beat anthology. From the early 1970's on, however, his work influenced a number of Post-Beats. A hard-drinking loner who worked at dead-end jobs in factories and mail rooms, spent days at the racetrack betting on horses, and slept with women as dissolute as he was, he portrayed his freewheeling trek through the furnished rooms of Los Angeles in a non-sense style that appealed to many Post-Beats, especially those working at similar jobs or in the service sector. Whereas Kerouac emerged from his blue-collar background in certain respects, Bukowski immersed himself in his. Bukowski's influence extended the range of Post-Beat poetry and prose to include a more direct style of writing and a range of subject matter that rarely found expression in any generation's Bohemia.

Bukowski's influence, along with the Beats', informs the Poetry Slams that gained popularity in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Poetry Slams offer reading venues for a variety of poets, some of them Post-Beat. The poems tend to be autobiographical and the recitations frequently include an element of performance. Some slam venues, such as the Nuyorican Poets Café in Manhattan, feature poetry with strong urban grit.

Post-Beat writing, like Beat writing, can immerse itself in the urban underbelly of the American Dream, seek Dionysian release or mystical understanding, or all three at the same time. Barry Wallenstein's "My Understudy" faces contemporary urban reality head-on:

The young man, shot twice
and painfully,
had been on earth long enough

(not too long sway the flowers)
to know the difference
between lambswool and polyester,
pain and an upward stare into nowhere.

He'd choose the former
in both cases ordinarily,
but on this day,
out of a wilding world,
there came two missiles, errant
hot strangers to his shape,
tearing into his back and side.

Bleeding in public
and fighting sleep, he fell awake
as into a state of babyhood,
where each moment swells
to yards of cushioned time and desired speech;
but the sharp burning holes
kept him croaking in his speech.

Besides, from where I stood
I could hardly hear
above the shrill mill of gawkers.
Did he say "no, wait" or "it's late"?
He seemed embarrassed
as if his accident
were a finger pointing at us.

And then the crowd came closer;
the police cars whirred and stopped.
Increasingly, there was less to see
or feel. Alone,
I pulled the feelings home,
as if on a weighted leash.

Wallenstein places us at the urban core of Post-Beat America, a world in which shootings border on the commonplace. "Wilding," a term used to describe assaults that took place in Manhattan's Central Park in the late 1980's, becomes a metaphor for today's world, whose violence seems more explosive and gratuitous than what Norman Mailer's *White Negro* experienced in 1957.

Yet Post-Beat retains the Beats' urge toward transcendence, as in Layne Russell's "Death in the Meadow":

light light light

surrender
light
consumed
light
energy of being
light
no one
light

how long
suspended sky time
how long
the white
how long
the lifeless body lying
no I
only is

is

Russell's poem seeks the mystical understanding that occurs when being surrenders itself to non-being. Her quest as non-quest occurs with a tranquility seldom found in Ginsberg's

visionary works, in which immersion in the *via negativa* of American life leads to oneness with ecstasy.

In "Putting in a Few Appearances," Kirpal Gordon, aware of the *via negativa*, experiences the spiritual with one streetwise eye turned toward apocalypse:

At the threshold of enfleshment no one need remind us
how Dionysus got torn apart by strange desires in his wild forest den.
Nevertheless we're putting in a few appearances
at least before it all goes up in smoke
swirling in the whirlwind called *participation mystique*
shaking down the Great Round
seeking out the rickety rattle of bones
our rock-scissors-stone of alchemical alteration

His vision, darkly humorous, represents a kind of playful dancing on his own grave, a reinterpretation of Kenneth Patchen's title phrase "Hallelujah Anyway!" One could describe Gordon's mix of irony and mysticism as Post-Beat because of its existing awareness of a vision's realistic underpinnings, as well as the Beat awareness of the visionary state itself.

In Post-Beat America, urban living involves greater risk than in past eras. If the level of material comfort level is significantly higher for many people, it is dangerously lower for many others. Comfort doesn't guarantee security. As Wallenstein's poem indicates, continued exposure to violence alters one's sensibility from a Romantic-era lament for the loss of an innocent soul to a feeling of loss tempered by a "shit happens" resignation. Gordon's seeking conveys a sense of knowing his quest has existed before him, and that he's part of an eternal replay.

Gordon's and Russell's work reflect the use of the poetic line as a visual entity, employing "composition by field," a tool used by a number of Beats, as well as Charles Olson and his Black Mountain colleagues, to enhance the meaning of language by placing words in a specific location on the page instead of running them from left margin to right.

Although a number of Post-Beats employ composition by field, many also adhere to left-margin writing, an indication of Bukowski's influence. The following poem, which I wrote, reflects the left-margin style of Bukowski and offers a sample of the kind of subject matter found in the work of his Post-Beat successors:

The Sex Queen Of The Berlin Turnpike

"coulda been
Little Miss Rich Bitch layin' on my yacht"

but claimed her father left
his inheritance behind
when the Mob's hitmen climbed

his trail. So,
she's the doe-eyed darling of the clipjoints

on the Strip. She flashes
her tits for tips from bikers
& lonely old men

in glasses
steamed with dreams of what never was.

Her nectarine nipples
tease me, her buns swing the breeze
that sucks up my buck

on her wake
of chestnut hair. She feeds my fantasies

the way I feed her lost
wealth---what I can afford to give.
But she still lives bitter,
broke, strung out
on coke in neon turnpike motels

& runs out on the rent.
While I listen to her story
to escape from my own

she pays back
the memories of her father.

The language of the poem reflects the environment it portrays. It's Beat in the sense of "beaten down" instead of "beatific." The poem also reflects the resignation that one

encounters more frequently in Post-Beat writing than in Beat writing. The beatific visions of the 1950s that led to the optimism of the 1960s have become devalued currency in today's American social economy.

Yet the Post-Beats aren't devoid of hope. Their experience of a failed cultural revolution and the emergence of an oppressive political administration has tempered their questing sensibilities, but hasn't stopped them. The Post-Beats' use of language represents a form of questing in itself. In the following passage from his poem "Double Vision," Schuyler Hoffman splashes words on the page in a manner reminiscent of Jackson Pollock:

SEE DOUBLE RED BLUE IN THE LIGHT OF ANOTHER YELLOW GREEN REFLECTION

ROCK PAPER SCISSORS

BLUE RED

LOST WORLD

PARALLEL LINES THE BALL BOUNCES BACK AND FORTH

LOOK AT THE MOON

PURPLE CAROM VIOLET BLUE THE WAVELETS OFF THE WALL

TWO FIGURES RUN ACROSS A FIELD

CLEAR GREEN YELLOW OUTLINE GOLD SHARP SHARD

ONE IS THE SHADOW OF THE OTHER

EVERYDAY OCHRE BROWN RUSSET AS DEFINED

A HAWK SWEEPS CLOSE TO EARTH

ORANGE RED BLURRY ROSE DEFORMED

STRIVES TO JOIN THE OTHER IMAGE

FUZZY MERGE PINK VIOLET CERULEAN SOFT AND COLORFUL

ROCK PAPER SCISSORS

LOOK AT THE MOON

ULTRAMARINE READ AQUA OLIVE FOREST

ROOTED

THE SIGNS THE WORDS

LOST VIRIDIAN

APPARENCIES

The words splashing the page like paint achieve a cumulative effect as their colors overlay each other until they create an exalted reality.

Some Post-Beat poets have extended the Beats' explorations of Language into the seemingly arcane realms of Language Poetry, as evidenced by proto-Language Poet Clark Coolidge's work and some of my own. Kerouac's Spontaneous Bop Prosody informs such Coolidge works as *The Rova Improvisations*, a series of poems written while listening to recordings of the avant-garde Rova Saxophone Quartet.

In poem "II" of my *IMPROVISATIONS* series, I've used Jack Kerouac's Spontaneous Bop Prosody to explore improvisation as a tool of composition, foregoing literal meaning for the flavor and flow of language itself:

Octavian leaps	across triads of former ingenuity	& temper (dis)
	scaling wisteria with columnar cries	
leaps hysteria ties	his stereo bleeps	its area steeps
strategies of systems	incremental cryonic	tonalities its wisdom,
histrionic intent to	weeds risen grounded	doubt imprisoned
viscera, songs of hob-	long guts nailed-down	in bursts of certainty
nailed keys to fingers	booty bopping senses	flailed against airy
plumbing pummeled	leap all minds en-	tonalities clustered
ears inventing nuance	dowed with media	dense with evidence
bionic increments leap	enchantments of	deep in its tangents
to full intensity, flour-	Medea's remedial	of myriad focus

ish or perish sour fools
clinging to nose rings
of media'd minds en-

spell soars cherished
in the Euro sings its
ancient cradles en-

median stripped of
roads clinging to
horses labeled en-

meat products of the mind
fleshed in measured burst
triumphant in the iguanas

tranced, chanted, hanced

mind the products of meat
bursting in measured flesh
iguanas in the triumphant

polytonal appliances electric
songs of the co-dependent id
embittered on native roots, the soiled
assumptions grated

If Kerouac's improvisational approach to writing was rooted in bop and the single-note lines of Charlie Parker, my improvisational approach has evolved toward the multi-textural layering of free jazz, an idiom Kerouac admired but never recited with. The poem challenges the traditional assumptions of how one should read the page.

I've placed the words on the page in columns so that the reader can perceive them as multiphonics, i.e., multiple notes played simultaneously on a single instrument, or as lines of polytonal counterpoint that flow between consonance and dissonance as they build toward an expression of glossolalic ecstasy.

The musicality of Post-Beat language finds further expression in the fusion of poetry with jazz. Often dismissed as passe, the fusion of jazz and poetry has experienced a resurgence in recent years, in large part because of Post-Beat poets. Although the Beats received credit for the fusion, it emerged decades earlier, when Langston Hughes and Kenneth Rexroth performed it. Kerouac synchronized the rhythms of the American vernacular with the rhythms of bop in masterly fashion. Yet bop's tightly-structured compositions have inhibited the expression of poets who weren't rhythmically equipped to fuse their language with the flow of the music around them. Post-Beat poets such as Barry Wallenstein, Steve Dalachinsky and I have performed and recorded with members of the jazz avant-garde, whose open-ended music allows poets to exercise more freedom in their linguistic expression.

Although Post-Beats such as Wallenstein pioneered reciting to the newer forms of jazz, Allen Ginsberg worked in the same area late in his career. In spring, 1988, I released *Sex Queen of the Berlin Turnpike*, an album of jazz poetry featuring several respected

players in Manhattan's downtown music scene. Within a year, Island Records released Ginsberg's *The Lion for Real*, whose musicians were part of the same contingent.

Wallenstein, one of the few Post-Beat poets ever published by a major publisher, ranks as one of the very best at fusing poetry with jazz. He began reciting his poetry to jazz as a teenager in the 1950's and continues to record and to perform with first-rate jazz musicians in Manhattan. His incisive poetry brings a hipster's sensibility to the phrasing of the written word. His choice of avant-garde musicians such as the late saxophonist Charles Tyler identifies him as a Post-Beat practitioner of the form.

Today, a number of poets routinely perform with bands, including Janine Pommy Vega, Wanda Phipps, Gabrielle Zane and Tracey Morris. Not all of them write in a Post-Beat vein, but their fusion of music with poetry advances the tradition that began with an earlier generation of bohemian poets and continued through the Beats to the present day. Moreover, the Post-Beat poets haven't restricted themselves to working in the jazz idiom. Zane and sixties icon John Sinclair regularly read their poetry to a rock band's accompaniment.

Other Post-Beat poets have advanced the work of the Beats into areas the Beats never explored. Mikhail Horowitz, for example, doubles as a poet and stand-up comic, sometimes wilfully blurring the distinction between the two, as in his hip-hop parody of Homer's *The Odyssey*. He combines the word-drunk enthusiasm of Allen Ginsberg with the laugh-a-second humor of a latter-day Lord Buckley. Bob Holman's "We Are the Dinosaur," which appears in *Selected Poems of Post-Beat Poets*, employs the rhymes and rhythms of hip-hop to engage contemporary readers.

Kirpal Gordon's poetry and prose reflect a dedicated extension of the Beat vision. His poetry embraces the spiritual concerns of the Beats while addressing contemporary issues such as homelessness, sometimes using composition by field in a manner that hints at John Donne. His richly imaginative fiction fuses the conceptual sophistication and extended realities of Magical Realism with jazz dialect and rhythm.

Since *Selected Poems by Post-Beat Poets* offers a representative range of poets, not a comprehensive compilation, I'd like to mention one poet whose important contributions point toward a working definition of Post-Beat: Michael Rothenberg. A close friend of Philip Whalen, Rothenberg edited *Overtime*, Whalen's *Selected Poems*, and Joanne Kyger's *Selected Poems*. A longtime resident of the Bay area, he knows many of the San Francisco Beats personally. He is one of the few poets to experiment with using the journal as a poetic form, inspired by Ginsberg and Kyger to some degree. His most recent books include *The Paris Journals* and *Unhurried Visions*. He has performed and recorded with musicians. He edits *Big Bridge*, an online magazine that publishes the original Beats, the Post-Beats and other innovative writers in a fascinating, eclectic mix. In today's fragmented literary world, he is a master of networking who expands publishing opportunities for writers.

In attempting to define the boundaries that distinguish Post-Beat from Beat, I've attempted to draw distinctions between the two, while recognizing that overlaps exist in

many areas. Nevertheless, changing times and changing art forms have given the Post-Beats new concepts and new material to work with. Since the Post-Beats continue the line of underground writing that has existed for centuries into a new era, they continue to express the concerns of their predecessors while advancing the forms of expression emerging in their times. Nevertheless, defining Post-Beat remains as knotty as any attempt to challenge Wittgenstein's statement about boundaries that haven't been drawn.

Although the boundaries of Post-Beat haven't been drawn, they appear to be expanding.

THE FUTURE OF POST-BEAT POETRY

In 1998, when Professor Wen Chu-an of Sichuan University interviewed me on the subject of Post-Beat writers for *Contemporary Foreign Literature*, I was less than hopeful that Post-Beat writers would receive recognition for their accomplishments, even though a number of them have compiled bodies of work that warrant critical consideration.

Lacking the support of major publishers or university-based literary magazines with substantial circulations and adequate operating budgets, the Post-Beat writers have struggled in much the same way that the Beats did before *On the Road* made them visible to the American reading public.

In the 1950's the Beats published magazines like *Yugen*, *Kulchur* and many others. Excerpts from Burroughs' *Naked Lunch* first appeared in *Big Table*, which broke off from an academic publication because of the controversy surrounding Burroughs' work. In the 1960's the term "mimeo revolution" described the proliferation of literary magazines that occurred when photocopy machines and other inexpensive printing devices enabled writers to publish work that more conservative magazines would reject. Many of these publications were Beat or early post-Beat, such as Ed Sanders' *Fuck You/ a Magazine of the Arts* and *Entrails: the Magazine of Happy Obscenity*, which published writers who were at the cutting edge of literary experimentation in the mid-1960s.

In the 1980s and 1990s, the "desktop publishing revolution," which coincided with the proliferation of Creative Writing Programs in American universities, further reduced the cost of publication, enabling writers and editors to produce professional-quality books and magazines at out-of-pocket prices. But lack of venues for sale and distribution of the work compelled them to issue smaller print runs than the Beats did. The smaller runs, sometimes under 100 copies, gave rise to the term "micropress," in comparison with the small presses of the 1950s and 1960s, many of which had the financial backing and distribution to print runs of 1,000 or more copies.

From the 1970s to the early 1990s, a number of print magazines throughout the world published Post-Beat writing. In the 1980s, Jef Bierkens published *Tempus Fugit*, a diverse collection of post-Beat poetry and fiction, in Belgium. *Tempus Fugit* published the innovative poet Michael Basinski, whose work ranges from Post-Beat to Language and Visual Poetry. In the 1980's Yusuke Keida published *Blue Jacket*, a post-Beat publication, in Japan. I believe he still publishes the magazine on an irregular basis, under the title *Blue Beat Jacket*. *The Café Review* in Portland, Maine and *Heeltap* in St. Paul, Minnesota, are also excellent post-Beat publications. A number of other quality magazines publish Post-Beat literature. Almost all of them operate out of the publisher's pocket, which limits the amount of material and the number of copies that can be published.

An increasing number of Post-Beat writers have turned to self-publishing because they have no other outlet for their work. In the late 1970's, Kathy Acker, whose fiction bears the stamp of William Burroughs, self-published several of her novels. Grove Press re-published them and published her later work. Many contemporary poets self-publish their own books with no hope of a university or commercial press republishing them. Despite the stigma currently attached to self-publishing, a roster of self-publishing authors reads like a Literary Hall of Fame: Mark Twain, Walt Whitman, Gertrude Stein and James Joyce self-published their work at one time, or most of the time. Lawrence Ferlinghetti's *Pictures of the Gone World* was a self-published work, issued under his City Lights imprint.

The Post-Beat poets who fuse jazz and poetry have seldom seen their recordings released on an established record label. In the music business, however, self-producing work carries less of a stigma than in the literary world. Since the mid-1950s, innovative jazz musicians such as Sun Ra have produced their own recordings. A number of them eventually achieved recognition, even stardom, for their work. For self-producing jazz poets, distribution remains the largest barrier to public recognition.

The problems of sales and distribution have limited the ability of Post-Beat writers to present their work to more than a marginal audience. Given the entrenchment of niche marketing and demographic audience targeting, they aren't likely to break through the profit barrier that blocks them from Publishers Row and the chain bookstores. In this respect, the Beats gained an opportunity that remains inaccessible to most Post-Beats.

Despite these barriers, a source of hope exists, one whose importance I underestimated even at the same time that I was using it: the Internet.

The emergence of the Internet has enabled writers from many schools to find audiences for their work. Since the mid-1990s, electronic publishing has fostered a growing alternative literary culture that thrives outside the world of commercial publishers and chain bookstores. A number of Post-Beat magazines, such as *Literary Kicks*, *Jack Magazine* and Rothenberg's *Big Bridge* have become online publishers of an encyclopedic range of Post-Beat authors and styles. Their online magazines and chapbooks reach many more readers than a magazine or book with a print run of 100 copies. The younger generations of Post-

Beats, who are more computer-savvy than those who came of age in the 1960s, add new magazines to the internet on what seems like a daily basis.

Editors such as Rothenberg recognize the importance of electronic literature as an alternative to the print outlets that have proved inaccessible to the Post-Beats. Discussions of how to make e-books more available and attractive to readers are taking place daily. In addition, Post-Beat Poets working in the jazz-poetry fusion can place their recordings on the internet through MP3 and other new recording techniques.

Electronic publishing gives the Post-Beats their best opportunity to reach the audience that needs and craves exposure to the independent voices that express human discontent and the quest for spiritual advancement in the face of social and political repression. A growing online presence might one day motivate publishers to issue print books by Post-Beat writers.

POST-SCRIPT: A POST-BEAT METHODOLOGY

Selected Poems by Post-Beat Poets, while a printed work, owes its existence to the internet. In fact, it's an example of the ways in which the internet can advance the work of the Post-Beats and other writers working outside the cultural and commercial mainstream.

When I met Professor Wen Chu-an of Sichuan University at Lowell Celebrates Kerouac in Lowell, Massachusetts, in 1997, we spoke for at least an hour, discussing his work, the first Chinese translation of *On the Road*, and my books and recordings. Staying in touch by e-mail, our continuing discussions led to "Beneath the Underground: Post-Beat Writing in America," his interview with me which *Contemporary Foreign Literature* published several years ago. We conducted the interview by e-mail over a period of several months, contacting each other on a daily basis when necessary.

A year after its publication, Zhang Ziqing, the editor of *Contemporary Foreign Literature*, expressed an interest in publishing an anthology of Post-Beat poetry to Wen Chu-an. Wen Chu-an suggested the idea to me and I agreed to it. I e-mailed the best poets working in a Post-Beat vein that I knew from my own reading, contacted other poets they recommended, and requested submissions for the anthology. Only scratching the surface of Post-Beat writing in America, I received more first-rate poetry than the anthology could contain. Once I compiled the manuscript, I e-mailed it to Wen Chu-an, who translated the work. The entire process of editing, translating and preparing the book for publication was conducted by e-mail.

Wen Chu-an and I don't know if this is the first time a book has been put together by people e-mailing from opposite sides of the planet. At the time, we felt that we might be the first people to use the internet to bridge the cultural gap that exists between the United

States and China, so that we can increase our understanding of each other. We recognized the technology as an integral part of the times we live in. And given the rise of Post-Beat literature on the internet, we might say that Wen Chu-an and I produced the anthology using the methodology most likely to bring recognition to Post-Beat writers.

FOOTNOTES

¹ Madden, Andrew P. *Beat Writers at Work*. New York: Modern Library, 1999. P. 334.

² Morgan, Ted. *Literary Outlaw*. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1988. Pp.309-313.

³ Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Philosophical Investigations*. New York: The MacMillan Company, 1953. P. 33.

⁴ Powers, Ann. *Bobos in Paradise*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000.