

Watershed May 2008 Podcast: Allen Ginsberg, The Counterculture and May '68

"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, angel-headed hipsters burning for the ancient heavenly connection to the starry dynamo in the machinery of night."

So begins Allen Ginsberg's famous 1958 poem 'Howl', which described a new, young generation of people banging their heads against the wall of conformist 1950s America: discovering themselves, liberating their minds – sometimes too much – through music, culture and drugs.

Ginsberg gave form and voice to the emerging 1960s counterculture. Before they were political revolutionaries they were beats – beatniks – dropping out of mainstream society, tuning into bebop and tuning onto drugs. There were of course casualties, which 'Howl' so memorably describes. Indeed, Jack Kerouac famously renounced the work of the beats in the 1960s and ranted in a kind of hysterical neo-conservative way about the hippies his 'On The Road' had spawned.

William Burroughs, one of the other leading figures, withdrew from the beat central and created his own parallel universe, which he happily inhabited for the remainder of his long years.

Ginsberg, though, stuck true to his beat alternative mystic counter-culture and became a key galvanizing figure of the 1960s, and beyond. Lending poetic form, ideological resonance and an alternative gravitas to the revolutionary political fervor, which reached its apex in the events of 1968.

"New York on the stairway, the dumbed, white-faced junky pulls a knife and stares immobile – the victim gasps, "oh come off it" and a six-pack of coke bottles bounces down worn black steps, in Vietnam plastic fire streams down myriad phantom cheeks rayed over planet television – Adrenalin runs in the armpits from Los Angeles to Paris, Harlem and cans explode through plate-glass, Sunset Strip and Sorbonne are crowded with longhaired angels armed with gasmasks and acid."

From: 'Violence' - July 22 1968, 4am

As we mark the 40th anniversary of May '68, Watershed has approached the period through reflections on Ginsberg. And with the good offices of the television Unit at the British Film Institute, we have put together two programmes of archive material, which give insight into the period and Ginsberg.

The first programme on Sat 3 May features 'Wholly Communion', which is a document of the 'International Poetry incarnation' or happening, as they were known at the Royal Albert Hall in 1965. A line up of key beat figures including Gregory Corso, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, and Ginsberg joined with British equivalents, including Adrian Mitchell and Michael Horowitz.

It was these poetry events that acted as a catalyst in the 1960s for bringing together a range of disparate groups from the underground, to anarchists, to the political.

Also showing is a rare screening of the 'Anatomy of Violence', which records the spectrum of leftwing politics and personalities from Ginsberg to Herbert Marcuse at the Dialectics of Liberation conference in London.

To provide earlier context, included in the programme is the definitive beat film 'Pull My Daisy' – shot by photographer Robert Frank and based on a screenplay, heavy in quotes, by Kerouac.

The second programme, screened on Sat 10 May, features 'Underground', a television documentary from 1967 about the alternative newspaper International Times and its launch at Camden's roundhouse, which features appearances from, amongst others, Paul McCartney and Pink Floyd.

It was the ability of happenings like this to pull together the range of creative people across music and writing, as well as the political and agitational, which so marked the era.

The other two programmes are more contemporary portraits of Ginsberg: Jeremy Isaac's 'Face-to-Face' interview is a candid and expansive interview with Ginsberg from 1995; and he is the focus of a 1998 Channel 4 documentary on modern American poets.

If you want to find out more about Allen Ginsberg, then the best place to start would be: **allenginsberg.org**

For further information in general, visit: **watershed.co.uk**