

Developed new writing style in his novels

Kerouac was a chief philosopher for beats

By DAVID McCAUGHNA

Jack Kerouac died last week. His death certainly wasn't front page news or anything like that. Eight or ten years ago it would have been big news but now that he has been relegated to a relatively obscure position nobody seemed to care much. I was shocked and saddened when I read the news, for once I, like many others of my generation, felt a great affinity with Kerouac.

Once, when Kerouac's name was synonymous with the 'Beat Generation' his novels were being read by everyone. He was, you might say, the Hermann Hesse of the fifties. Kerouac's books were obligatory reading for every kid in the early stages of rebellion.

I remember plowing through *On The Road*, *Dharma Bums*, the *Subterraneans* when I was 14 and 15. How appealing to me then were the free-spirited characters in the novels, with their devil-may-care attitudes. The philosophy of the Beat Generation, which has been dished up as "Jazz-Junk-Pot-Poetry-Ideas-Orgasm-God!", was pretty attractive in those high school days.

Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg were the chief mentors of the Beat Generation. Kerouac wrote all his novels in an exhilarating, hurried style and filled them with characters like Duloz (himself), Neal Cassady, who roamed America restlessly. *On The Road* became the bible of the Beat Generation and the way of life it portrayed became the guidelines for the thousands of others who wanted to follow the Beats on the road to freedom, or whatever.

Allen Ginsberg's now-immortal poem *Howl* was as important to the Beats as was *On The Road*. Ginsberg dedicated it to his good friend Kerouac, among others. It reads:

"DEDICATION To Jack Kerouac, new Buddha of American prose, who spit forth intelligence into eleven books written in half the number of years (1951-1956) — *On The Road*, *Visions of Neal, Dr. Sax, Springtime Mary*, *The Subterraneans*, *San Francisco Blues*, *Some of the Dharma*, *Book of Dreams*, *Wake Up, Mexico City Blues*, and *Visions of Gerard* — creating a spontaneous bop prosody and original classic literature."

Later Kerouac commented on Ginsberg's work: "I never understand what he's driving at."

Sadly with the dying of the Beat generation in the late fifties and early sixties Jack Kerouac faded into obscurity. He still wrote and his books were published but nobody seemed to care much any more. He was a has-been at 40. Ginsberg, on the other hand, has remained in the forefront



Jack Kerouac

and today is certainly the most popular U.S. poet if not the most important.

Kerouac was of French-Canadian ancestry. He grew up in Lowell, Mass., where he was distinguished as the high school football star. He went to Columbia University in New York on an athletic scholarship.

The most important influence on Kerouac during his Columbia years were Thomas Wolfe, whose novels he devoured, and Allen Ginsberg, who was also a student there. During his Columbia stint he grew "black, broody and poetic." In his sophomore year he tired of his duties as a halfback and the grip of university life and dropped out. He entered the U.S. Navy but was quickly discharged as a "schizoid personality."

For the next ten years Kerouac wandered around the country and these wanderings were to become the subject of his best-known novels, including *On The Road*.

He held a vast array of jobs. He was a sportswriter, a merchant seaman, a gas station attendant, and a railroad brakeman. Between jobs he travelled the country with various companions. Among them was Beat saint Neal Cassady, who became Dean Moriarty, the hero of *On The Road*.

The Beat Generation evolved slowly. A number of people have attempted to define exactly what it was but few have come to any agreement. For Kerouac it was a religious experience more than anything else. "I went one afternoon to the church of my childhood (one of them), St. Jeanne d'Arc in Lowell," he said, "and suddenly

with tears in my eyes I had a vision of what I must have really meant with 'beat', anyhow when I heard the holy silence in the church."

The Beat Generation flourished in San Francisco's North Beach and Greenwich Village. *Life Magazine* did spreads on the bearded, sandaled people who inhabited these neighbourhoods. The beats were classified in newspapers and on TV shows as dirty, shaggy, fingerlicking, pot-smoking, free-loving degenerates. The Beatnik became a national joke and Kerouac and Ginsberg were the primary victims.

Kerouac became such an international figure that he was praised by the Minister of Culture of the Soviet Union for being the only novelist in the United States writing anti-capitalist novels. Of course the minister missed the point for the evil that Kerouac and his friends attacked wasn't as specific as capitalism but was anything that restricts or destroys the spontaneity and freedom of the individual soul.

When the Beat Generation was at its peak and public curiosity about it was running high, Kerouac wrote "The Origins of the Beat Generation" for *Playboy*. In it he defended the movement:

"But yet, but yet, woe, woe unto those who think that the Beat Generation means crime, delinquency, immorality, amorality . . . woe unto those who attack it on the ground that they simply don't understand history and the yearnings of human souls . . . Woe unto those . . . who deny the most important of the Ten Commandments . . . who don't believe in the unbelievable sweetness of sex love, woe unto those who are the standard bearers of death . . . who believe in conflict and horror and violence . . . woe in fact unto those who make evil movies about the Beat Generation where innocent housewives are raped by beatniks! Woe unto those who are the real dreary sinners that every God finds room to forgive . . . woe unto those who spit on the Beat Generation, the wind'll blow it back."

Kerouac developed his own method of writing, calling it both instant literature and spontaneous prose. It allowed him to gain great speed in his writing; indeed the method was so swift that he completed *On The Road* in three weeks.

Kerouac explained his technique as "a new way of writing about life, no fiction, no craft, no revision afterthoughts, the heart-breaking discipline of the veritable fire ordeal where you can't go back but have made the vow of 'Speak now or forever hold your tongue' and all of it innocent so-ahead confession, the discipline of making the mind the slave of the tongue with no chance to lie or re-elaborate."

Kerouac's style was the subject of a great

deal of literary bickering. Some critics hailed it as a literary innovation ranking near Joycean heights and others considered it a load of superficial garbage intended to camouflage a meagre talent.

Certainly no U.S. writer, not even Norman Mailer, has been the subject of as much ridicule and down-right venom as Kerouac. He was battered from critic to critic, only occasionally finding a friendly voice.

Normal Podhoretz, for example, in a very bitchy essay, "The Know-Nothing Bohemians", derides Kerouac: " . . . poverty of resources is apparent in those passages where Kerouac tries to handle a situation involving even slightly complicated feeling. His usual tactic is to run for cover behind cliché and vague signals to the reader. The worship of primitivism and spontaneity is more than a cover for hostility to intelligence; it arises from a pathetic poverty of feeling as well."

But Kerouac did have his champions and among them was, surely enough, Henry Miller. In his introduction to *The Subterraneans* Miller says: "Jack Kerouac has done something to our immaculate prose from which it may never recover. A passionate lover of language, he knows how to use it. Born virtuosos that he is, he takes pleasure in defying the laws and conventions of literary expression which cripple genuine, untrammelled communication between reader and writer."

The Beat Generation fizzled out soon enough. But Kerouac had abandoned it long before it went under. He became disillusioned with it all in the late 50s when the North Beach scene was at its zenith. In 1963 Kerouac published *Desolation Angels* and it chronicled his movement away from the Beat Generation.

Desolation Angels opens in 1956 when Kerouac first feels disappointment with Beat society and retreats to the woods to spend a month alone as a fire watcher. He returns to San Francisco to be with the gang but it is no good anymore; he goes to Mexico, and finally to Europe, ending up in Tangiers with William Burroughs (where Kerouac took the time to type up the manuscript of *Naked Lunch*). He eventually returns to the United States to his mother's house on Long Island.

It is a sad and forlorn book, the painful search of a man on his last journey. Kerouac's brief period of glory is over and soon the movement itself will fall out of fashion.

In *Desolation Angels* he says: "A peaceful sorrow at home is the beat I'll ever be able to offer the world, in the end, so I told my *Desolation Angels* goodbye. A new life for me."

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It is unfortunate that the Procol Harum won't be appearing at York Festival this weekend, and it is even sadder news that the finest baroque-rock group around are splitting up. But there is some compensation, for Johnny Winter will be appearing at York on Dec. 5-6. It hasn't been announced around York yet but it was advertised in last week's *After Four*. Winter, along with his brother, will give two shows each night. Tickets are \$4 each. The ad didn't mention where Winter will be playing but let's hope that it won't be in the abysmal Tait McKenzie gym.

Times Square book store, which recently opened its new premises on Yonge Street will attempt to bypass the ridiculous Ontario film Censors and bring Andy Warhol films to Toronto. The Times Square owners are setting up a sort of closed-circuit television movie house in the basement of their store that will not fall under the category of a regular movie house and will hopefully lie beyond the realm of the censor. Best of luck.

A group in San Francisco, affiliated with the Church of Universal Life, is planning to open the Temple of Cannabis on Halloween. The temple will be a religious sanctuary where devotees will be able to inhale the blessed Breath of Shiva (high quality Moroccan Hashish).

An interesting anecdote about the orgasmic French single "Je T'Aime" which has become such a big hit: the girl on the record, Jane Birkin, was one of the nymphets wrestling nude with David Hemmings in Antonioni's film *Blow Up*.

Macdonald College of McGill University, in St. Anne de Bellevue, Quebec will be holding its sixth annual folk festival on Nov. 14 and 15. They are inviting one entry from every college or University. The entry may be male or female, from one to four students. Anyone interested in participating may receive further information by writing: Don Locke, Brittain Hall, Macdonald College Quebec.

From a letter to the Sunday Times of London: "We decided after three years to have a child. I can remember the night exactly. I'd been doing a course with British Railways and I'd spent all day inspecting tunnels." — D.McC.