

## The Ginsy Report: An Interview with America's Pre-eminent Poet

By Dan McCue

Calling to confirm the time and place of the interview that follows, I was a bit startled to hear a voice made familiar by several talk show appearances and documentaries, suddenly appearing at the other end of the telephone line from Brooklyn College.

Given my relative youthfulness, and his mixture of notoriety and stature, I immediately fell into a kind of stumbling formality.

"Hi, I'm calling to verify my appointment tomorrow with Mr. Ginsberg."

"This is Ginsy," he said.

"Ginsy?" I thought.

"Is four o'clock good for you?"

"Sure"

"I'll talk to you then."

Allen Ginsberg became a major figure in American literature with the publication of his poem "howl" in 1956, and has spent the balance of his life serving, in the words of Current Biography, as our "ecstatic poet," the one time "wild shaman of the Beat Generation" and later, "gentle guru of the 'flower people' of the 1960s.

Prior to that, Ginsberg, who was born in Newark, N.J. in 1926 and raised in nearby Patterson, lived a life marked with domestic trauma – his mother, Naomi Ginsberg, died during his childhood after a prolonged confinement in a psychiatric hospital -- and blessed associations, which nourished him.

He found Walt Whitman in the textbooks he read in public school, and met Jack Kerouac while attending Columbia University in New York. Although already a Columbia dropout by the time Ginsberg arrived there, the close vicinity of Kerouac's apartment to the university made it a regular haunt for the poet, as it was for William S. Burroughs, Herbert Huncke and others who formed the nucleus of the beat underground.

As Ginsberg would remember in his note for *The Jack Kerouac Collection*, a CD box set released by the Rhino label:

"Though I'm often credited with innovating American poetic vocalization, my own guru for savoring vowels and appreciating consonants and harking melodious ... is ... Jack Kerouac."

Since that time, and in addition to his writing, Ginsberg has immersed himself in the anti-war movement, flower power, the environmental movement, and been an outspoken advocate for greater freedom of sexual, political and artistic expression.

The brief bio recently circulated about the poet mentions that *Howl* overcame censorship and went on to be one of the most widely read poems of the century. It then jumps to 1965, when Ginsberg was crowned Prague May King, then promptly expelled by Czech police and simultaneously placed on the FBI's dangerous Security List.

Over the ensuing years, Ginsberg would pursue a quixotic life in academia, traveling and teaching in the People's Republic of China, the Soviet Union, Scandinavia and Eastern Europe.

He'd also go on to co-found the Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics at the Naropa Institute in Boulder, Colorado, the first accredited Buddhist college in the Western world.

And shot through it all there's been a near-constant connection to recorded sound.

Early on he recorded *Howl* on the Fantasy label, his *Kaddish* on Atlantic, and Blake's *Songs of Innocence and Songs of Experience*, with a musical score he himself composed, on MGM. More recently, there's been *First Blues*, recorded with John Hammond, Sr., and earlier this year, *The Lion for Real*, a project on which producer Hal Wilner matched him with an impressive cast of rock and contemporary jazz musicians.

The album is being release as part of Island Records Poetry into Music series, and shares its release date with Burroughs, whose own project is called Dead City Radio.

But committing words to vinyl hasn't been Ginsberg's only aural pursuit. Since touring with Bob Dylan's Rolling Thunder Review in 1974, he's written and recording with the Clash, sang with Leonard Cohen, and jammed with thrash bands on both coasts.

More recently he's been making music of an entirely different sort, creating a chamber opera with Phillip Glass called Hydrogen Jukebox. As this interview unfolds, Ginsberg holds the professional title of "distinguished professor at Brooklyn College, and has two recent anthologies to his credit, the *Collected Poems, 1947-1980*, and *White Shroud Poems, 1980-1985*. Both were published by Harper & row.

*Your work, obviously spans an era beginning with Be-Bop and extending through Dylan and the Beatles in to punk and hardcore; how has that music, particularly rock music, affected you as a poet?*

I'm tremendously affected by it, but by virtue of my cultural background, I'd say that originally the affect came from blues. When I was young, I grew up with Leadbelly and Ma Rainey in the air, on the radio and on records. I recorded a while album on the subject once; that was in 1984, and it was a double album that John Hammond, Sr. put out called *First Blues*.

I also have a book called *First Blues*, which was written somewhat under the inspiration of old-fashioned blues as well as the folk music of Dylan and Happy Traum and others, who were friends.

And, you know, I've been involved with and around the rock scene on and off – I traveled with Dylan's Rolling Thunder Review for several months and two weeks ago I did a concert with Don Was, who I

understand is now producing a Dylan record, at the L.A. Theatre Center. I sang back-up on one cut of Leonard Cohen's record, which Phil Spector was producing.

*Had you met Spector before?*

I've known Spector for a long time, since Christmas of '65 actually. I taught him the Hare Krishna, which he later used with [George] Harrison. I don't know how much effect my teaching had on him, but I know it was the first time [Spector] ever heard it. We jammed it together. I've met Mick Jagger a few times, sang on a Clash album, worked on their lyrics. I've performed with some thrash punk bands – the Job in San Francisco and the Stimulators, 10 years ago, here in New York.

*So would you say from that exposure that there are similarities between how you write and how a good rock lyricist, like Dylan, writes?*

In these poems [The Lion for Real], it may be that what I'm doing is just writing down what comes through my head, but what songwriters do, perhaps, is more influenced by how the musicians arrange the text, the music that accompanies the text that I'm reading.

*In terms of the creative process, do you perceive the act of writing poetry as a solitary moment that you then strive to put on public display?*

Things don't work quite that way. It's more complicated than what you're asking. What I'm interested in is candor, which is what Whitman was interested in. He said that American poets following him should specialize in candor, which is like, inadvertent frankness. You're not trying to force your truth on anybody. It's just that you are blurting something out.

So how do you do that? Well, you don't try and be candid; you just try to remember what you thought. In other words, you scan your mind, so to speak. It isn't that you look for stuff to be candid about, it's that you suddenly remember you thought something. You catch yourself thinking, dig?

So when you catch yourself thinking, are you thinking about communicating it to other people? It's a much more practical matter of trying to remember your mind. Now, behind that is the understanding that your mind is not so different from anybody else's – your thoughts are like anybody's thoughts, erotic or irreverent or relevant, straightforward or raw, everybody's primordial is the same. So if you can actually have that candor and remember what you were thinking about and not suppress it, not doctor it so that it looks better than it is, then it will attract other people.

And the reason is, as Kerouac said in the soundtrack to the 1959 film Pull My Daisy, in a scene where I'm showing my notebooks to Gregory Corso, "Everybody wants to see what's in their scribbled little scatological notebooks. That's the only thing anybody's interested in."

*So what you're saying is...*

One touch of nature makes the whole world kin. It isn't that you're framing it to be communicative; it's more a case of your being simultaneously aware and unaware of the communication, both at once. You

don't live in half a universe; I don't have half a universe where I'm just writing for myself and another where I'm writing for other people. I'm writing for reality, or trying to. But I'm defining reality as something very specific. Reality for me is not the "truth" or anything like that, It's "What did I just think a minute ago when I was not thinking about thinking. What did I catch myself thinking?" The slogans for that are to observe what's vivid, to notice what you notice, to realize that vividness is self-selecting, to catch yourself thinking, and that's it. It's very simple.

*By choosing to use the recording as a medium of expression, are you trying to reach an audience that might be resistant to books?*

Well, yes and no again. Poetry began as sound. The first poetry was never written down. It was an oral tradition. In America, among poets, from Whitman on, there's been a tradition of vocalization, particularly from Whitman through William Carlos Williams, who brought poetry back to actual speech, living speech.

That's the tradition I'm in; I'm writing classical poems with an updated vocabulary and syntax. And the primary marketplace and meeting place for that, these days, is on the air, through records.

*Do you think that tradition or the people who practice it, get a proper airing these days?*

Well, you know, it's an interesting situation. [Evangelist] Pat Robertson and Senator Jesse Helms and the lunatic fringe fundamentalists are trying to make regulations up for the FCC that would ban this kind of frank and candid speech from the air 24 hours a day. As a result, I fully expect that one of the major poems from the album would most certainly be banned because of the line, "When communist and capitalist assholes tangle, the just man is arrested and robbed and has his head cut off."

*I see...*

Like I said, it's an interesting situation. I mean, when a poem that's included in anthologies, like *Howl* or *Sunflower Sutra* or *America* or *King of May*, which is on the album, can be banned from the air... that's really something. Of course, legally, Constitutionally, I don't think that can be, because the First Amendment would protect them. But you never know what might happen in the courts these days.

Back in 1988, Helms sponsored a law, which Reagan signed, directing the FCC to ban all indecent language off the air, 24 hours a day, which has effectively frozen all of my poetry off the air.

Even if a college station wanted to play one of mine poems, they would have to face a long legal battle – which they would win – but at a cost of hundreds of thousands of dollars.

This all arises, of course, out of the use of and the whole method of, candor, and the use of living language and slang vocabulary in a living, spoken language. You use the language which you use every day and the language you use every day rarely gets on the air. It's a very interesting situation to be in.

I'm writing classical poems with an updated vocabulary and syntax, and having to confront the government... well, not the government... but the religious fundamentalists, with the proto-fascist, or Stalinist mentality here.

*So, let me ask you... what happened to the left, in your estimation?*

They've sort of been overwhelmed by PR. But you know, the problems that the liberals are talking about – homelessness, ecological destruction, over-militarization, the stupidity of the war on drugs, the extension of the police state, the government getting more and more on our backs, the bladder police, the loosening of the CIA and Army intelligence to do domestic surveillance, the greater difficulty people are having getting Freedom of Information Act materials, government involvement in dope dealing – all of these things are greater than ever – particularly the ecological crisis.

And these are all things that were brought up by the left – and are probably worse than ever. Now, to your question, obviously, the left is still out there, but people sort of don't see them... because of the hype from the other side.

In fact, if you ask young kids today about the left, they'll probably say the left has gone away because the Earth is going to be destroyed anyway, so what's the use of fighting.

*The poems that make up The Lion for Real were written over the course of many years. Had you always wanted to record them?*

They had been recorded many times, but without music. This album is a true collaboration where the musicians chose the text they wanted to set – they're all really good musicians and all of them literate – and what we did was pass out copies of my *Collected Poems*, the big Harper and Row book of 300 pages which covers 1947 to 1980, and also the following book, *White Shroud*, which covers 1980 to '85, and the musicians read through them and chose the text they thought that they could compose to... Afterwards we made a list of all of them and I went into the studio, and for about six hours I read everything with the musicians there so they could get the dynamics. We did it on DAT [Digital Audio Tape] and made a lot of copies so they could take it home.

They then wrote their lead sheets or full compositions and then we got together in the studio and did it all over again; I vocalized it again, so it was a live performance. So we build it step by step. They were given complete freedom to be composers. My role was lyricist and vocalist, and Hal Wilner's was that of umpire, because he knew all of us and knew how to keep things going and made suggestions. It was he who brought the whole thing together.

*You mentioned Jack Kerouac earlier. You had a hand in the rare recordings that were just released on Rhino...*

Yes. Rhino Records did a great job of putting them out. I wrote some stuff for it, background blurbs, and encouraged them. They're very great albums. I don't know if you've heard them yet or not; they were brought out by Hanover records back in '58, '50 and one, I believe, was produced by Steve Allen.

There are a few privately made recordings, but these are the only studio recordings of Kerouac and they're brilliant. They're the sort of thing that is historically important, but also, they're as good as Sinatra. It's mainly him reading his poetry. And there's one poetry and jazz album he did with Al Cohn and Zoot Sims called Blues and Haikus which I think, for its era, was the best poetry Jazz album ever because it's spontaneous and bright, and a very clear form.

Kerouac recites a haiku like, "In my medicine cabinet, the winter fly has died of old age." Then Zoot Sims blows a little haiku like, "Boodle, boop, boop, boop, do de." "Little girls running up the library steps with their shorts on." "Budda da bop bop, doodle-ee, doodle-ee do." The saxophone responses were very pretty and appropriate and just the size of a haiku. I tried that the other day with Don Cherry in San Francisco. It was fun. I'd say a line like, "Vividness is self-selecting." And he'd go "Boodle-ee, ee-oo, ee-oo."

*With all this "literature" coming out on a compact disc. I wonder how connected you feel with the recording industry...*

Well, I always produce my own records generally. The Lion in Winter is the first one, with the exception of the set that John Hammond did, that I didn't have to produce. Every other one I've paid for myself and never got my money back, including a \$15,000 bill for working at the Record Plant with Dylan and Happy Traum and Dave Amram once – it's alright, I made some money and paid it off – and I got three cuts out of it, which is not so bad.

*Any chance you'll be working with Dylan again anytime soon?*

Well, we've worked with each other. A year ago, I did a gig at McCabe's Guitar Shop, which is a folk club in Santa Monica, California, and he played back-up bass for me, and then, about three weeks ago. I was at the Los Angeles Theatre Center and he came by and played bass again. Iggy Pop and Leonard Cohen and Hal Wilner all showed up for the show and afterwards we went out with Iggy and Don Was asked for the text of a CIA dope calypso I have that covers Ollie North, Richard Secord, Noriega and Bush – the refrain is, "They discovered Noriega only yesterday, Nancy Reagan and the CIA." He kind of thought that'd be an interesting rap song.

We'll get together. if Wilner organizes it, or Was organizes it, I'm open. He's very intelligent, Don Was. Actually, I'm a photographer, part time, and he asked me to do a shoot for the Iggy Pop album he's producing, to see if it would work.

*How long have you been doing photography?*

Oh, for about 40 years. [Laughs] I just had a show in Los Angeles, and I have a show touring Germany, with a big catalog.

*Any plans to bring the show to New York?*

Photographers don't bring shows to New York. They have different shows, sooner or later. It isn't that you bring a "bring a show." You just make new prints and have a show. Painting isn't like rock and roll where you bring a show to New York. I've had one big exhibition here in the beginning of 1985.

The mayor of Prague is also a photographer; I was just hanging around with him. Incidentally, here's something very curious and unusual that you may not know. You know the whole revolution in Prague was sparked by rock and roll. The history of the whole thing is really very simple.

In the Sixties, there was a very interesting group called the Plastic People of the Universe. They were influenced by Frank Zappa and the Velvet Underground and Warhol. And they were singing political and sexual songs, so they got busted by the police and forbidden. And they went on trial.

Vaclav Havel [then a playwright and later president of the free, post-Soviet Czechoslovakia] went to their trial and that got him turned on to their new rock and roll Dadaism, and projects and pleasures. There were other groups known by such names as The Society for a Merrier Present. They went around in helmets, made out of melons and trench coats made out of salami and went around beating themselves up.

So that was the expression of the youth culture of the late '60s, early '70s. Havel went on from the trial to forming with other groups; and then wrote the human rights manifesto Charter 77, which brought him international fame and asked for more liberation and freedom from totalitarianism. Then he got into trouble and went to jail.

When Havel came here, one of his pilgrimages was to CBGB's with [filmmaker] Milos Forman. So the mayor of Prague was intimately acquainted with the mixture of revolution and poetry and rock and roll.

Although you may say that the loft scene has faded... the fruition of the '60s and '50s and '40s, you know, the beat era, seems to be taking place now in Eastern Europe, and will, sooner or later, roll onto America, bringing that glasnost sense of opening up here.

Basically, the dope, sex and fucking in the street, in a sense, was the gay sense of a lot of the people who over-threw the bureaucratic structure of Eastern Europe. Dungarees, rock and roll, a little grass and Eros, and some liberation of the spirit, like in America.

It wasn't the military that over-threw communism. It was rock and roll and poetry. Or at the very least, they contributed considerably.