

The Beats and Sixties Counterculture

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The 1960s are associated with what Frank calls 'the big change, the birthplace of our own culture, the homeland of hip', a period of various shifts that have shaped our current society¹. This hints at an underlying consensus that the 1960s were a time of high artistic endeavour, the centre of countercultural resistance, and some of the cultural ripples that are still being felt today.

What factors influenced this period of time for this decade to be so prominent? The cluster of significant events that occurred in the late Sixties has led Gitlin to compare this time to 'a cyclone in a wind tunnel'², and Rabinowitz argues that 'the 1960s confound representation – or rather narrative – because words fail; image and sound [...] are what remain'³; events and figures that 'stand out' in these ways are those that are likely to receive the most attention. These two arguments enhance the point that, because there are many narratives of the Sixties, each one places emphasis on different aspects of the decade.

When one considers the notion of the Beat generation's ideas of the Fifties contributing to aspects of the following decade's culture, art and politics, it can be easy to focus solely on the prominent figures and events, and link them together. When this happens, an inevitable decision is being made: what is worthy of being called Beat, what is worthy of being called Sixties culture, and where such culture lies geographically as well as historically.

A linear narrative where there are, in Negus' words, 'distinct breaks involving beginnings and endings or births and deaths'⁴ generates problems. This approach generally fails to acknowledge other perspectives, to account for the voices of people excluded from the narrative. A Vattimo argues, it is only from the 'victors' of history

¹ Thomas Frank, *The Conquest of Cool: Business Culture, Counterculture, and the Rise of Hip Consumerism* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1997), p.1.

² Todd Gitlin, *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage* (New York; London: Bantam, 1993), p.242.

³ Paula Rabinowitz, 'Medium Uncool: Women Shoot Back; Feminism, Film and 1968 – A Curious Documentary', *Science & Society*, 65(1) (2001), 72-98, p.73.

⁴ Keith Negus, *Popular Music Theory* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996), p.136-7.

'that history is a unitary process in which there is consequentiality and rationality'⁵ . What I would like to do in this essay is consider the notion put forward by Laibman, that 'there was not one 1960s; there were many'⁶. This is not to say that the Beats did not influence anything, and I do not wish to undermine or trivialise their work and its importance. It is also impossible to go into detail about every aspect of Beat culture. However, by looking generally at some of the areas where the Beats' influence occurred, what it influenced, and to what extent, this will expose other voices and locations, which I hope will better inform the argument I wish to make.

It is important to consider the social contexts of the Fifties to be able to understand why the Beats' work was considered to be so significant. One of the central themes in historical narratives of the Beats is a description of a prevailing climate of conformity in post-war America. Following the end of World War II, the ideas and ideologies that were driving factors during the conflict were seemingly discredited. Woods argues that, in America, intellectuals began to focus their attention onto 'the roots of totalitarianism, dissecting evolving notions of democracy and republicanism'⁷. What resulted from this was a more scientific, calculated approach of looking at how society should operate. Herman argues that

planners and policy makers had been convinced by their experiences during World War II that human beings could act very irrationally, because of a teaming, raw, unpredictable emotionality. The chaos that lived at the base of human personality could infect social institutions to the point where society itself would become sick.⁸

It was therefore perceived necessary for American society, if it wished to avoid a repeat of the horrors of the war, to be controlled and contained to some extent from the factors that could lead to such chaos. In the late Forties and early Fifties, the US Congress' House Un-American Activities Committee held hearings that, as Holton describes, were 'aimed at persecuting those who did not agree with a narrow definition of political reality'⁹: the most famous instance resulted in scores of Hollywood actors, directors, producers and screenwriters being 'blacklisted' from employment for alleged

⁵ Gianni Vattimo, 'Dialectica, differenza, pensiero debole', in G. Vattimo and P. A. Rovatti (eds), *Il pensiero debole* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1983), in Iain Chambers, 'Maps for the Metropolis: A Possible Guide to the Present', *Cultural Studies* 1(1) (1987), 1-21, p.19.

⁶ David Laibman, 'Editorial Perspectives: An Intense and Many-Textured Movement', *Science & Society*, *ibid.*, 3-4, p.3.

⁷ Randall Bennett Woods, *Quest for Identity: America Since 1945* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p.151.

⁸ Ellen Herman, in *The Century of the Self* (dir. Adam Curtis), episode 2, broadcast 30.4.2002, BBC4.

⁹ Robert Holton, 'Beat Culture and the Folds of Heterogeneity', in Jennie Skerl (ed.), *Reconstructing the Beats* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), pp.11-26, p.12.

'subversive' activities. What emerges from this climate is what Marcuse describes as 'a pattern of one-dimensional thought', whereby 'ideas, aspirations and objectives that [...] transcend the established universe of discourse and action are either repelled or reduced to terms of this universe'¹⁰. This manifests itself through the pressure on individuals to behave as part of larger groups, to avoid any particular 'individuality'. Riesman et al's 1950 publication *The Lonely Crowd* describes the rise of the 'other-directed man'¹¹, a new figure, entirely the product of America's rising managerial class and prosperous post-war economy¹²; a replacement of 'the traditional "inner-directed", self made American'. The other-directed man 'suppressed his individuality, spurned conflict, and sought guidance and approval from the environment around him'¹³. This sort of figure was an ideal target for advertisers using the new medium of television¹⁴, which contributed to a large shift in the way people bought goods. Towards the end of the 1950s, the US economy had shifted from a 'production economy', based around meeting basic human needs, to a market-orientated, consumer economy¹⁵, which emphasised status over class¹⁶. This was a phenomenon that inspired Bell to proclaim in 1960 that Western society had reached 'the end of ideology'¹⁷, that 'ideology, which was once a road to action, has come to a dead end'¹⁸.

Allen Ginsberg's famous poem *Howl* made its debut at a poetry reading in 1955, and, Holton argues, 'seemed to offer the means to break out of the cultural enclosure [...] and into a dimension unrecognized in Marcuse's analysis'¹⁹. Much has been written about this long poem, but the general consensus has been that *Howl* expressed a vocal frustration at a stifling, corporate, conforming America, with unrestrained fury and anger. Gitlin argues that *Howl* was 'the first time in the American twentieth century' that 'poetry read aloud became a public act that changed lives'²⁰. In 1957, a year after publication, the work was the focus of an obscenity trial. Debates about the alleged 'obscenity' of the text in court helped to bring the poem to wider prominence among those who were outside of Ginsberg's literary circle. The same year, Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* was published, and the two works 'vaulted from anonymity'²¹ a small group of bohemians who would become known as the Beat Generation.

¹⁰ Herbert Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man* (Boston, MA: Beacon, 1964), p.12.

¹¹ David Riesman, Nathan Glazer and Reul Denney, *The Lonely Crowd* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1950), p.17.

¹² Woods, p.134.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid, p.127.

¹⁵ Ibid., p.123.

¹⁶ Ibid, p.151.

¹⁷ Daniel Bell, *The End of Ideology: On the Exhaustion of Political Ideas in the Fifties* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000 [1960]).

¹⁸ Ibid, p.393.

¹⁹ Holton, p.17.

²⁰ Gitlin, p.45.

²¹ Holton, p.11.

Why so? Gitlin argues that 'if the true-blue Fifties was affluence, the Beats' counter-Fifties was voluntary poverty'²². This mindset is best displayed in Norman Mailer's influential 1959 essay 'The White Negro'. Here, Mailer holds up a new kind of figure as a solution to the 'bleak scene' of society²³: 'the American existentialist – the hipster', who 'exists in the present, in that enormous present which is without past or future, memory or planned intention, the life where a man must go until he is beat'²⁴. In this new world, there are only two options available: rebellion or conformity. 'One is Hip or one is Square', he argues, 'one is a frontiersmen in the Wild West of American night life, or else a Square cell, trapped in the totalitarian tissues of American society'²⁵. If one is white (and one must be, to be able to have the choice), the appeal of being hip lies in its existentialist appeal, in its abandonment of a traditional family-centred lifestyle, and the adoption of social mores from a dangerous, excluded Other: 'the Negro'. This, in Mailer's view, is where the source of hip lies, in Negro music ('jazz'), Negro life choices ('a life of constant humility or ever-threatening danger'), and Negro philosophy ('he kept for his survival the art of the primitive, he lived in the enormous present'). Therefore the hipster is 'a white Negro', having 'absorbed the existentialist synapses of the Negro'²⁶.

Although grossly laden with racial stereotypes of a pre-Civil rights era America, Frank argues that 'The White Negro' 'managed to predict the basic dialectic around which the cultural politics of the next thirty-five years would be structured'²⁷. However, there is a difference between two different kinds of 'Beat' sensibilities that have been established: the literary type epitomised by Ginsberg and Kerouac on one side, and the 'hipster'/'beatnik' on the other. This is not to say that the 'literary' Beats did not have any of the 'hipster' qualities – far from it. Rather, as Starr argues, contemporary critics tended to argue that 'true' Beats such as Ginsberg and Kerouac made 'literary creativity a focal point of their lives', whereas others, who would qualify as 'hipsters' or 'Beatniks', merely attended jazz clubs and visited coffeehouses, and were insignificant²⁸. Furthermore, the prominent Beat figures, with a few exceptions (such as Bob Kaufman and Amiri Baraka), were white, and were overwhelmingly from middle-class families.

Consequently, Beats have generally been portrayed as a minority of generally white, literary articulate intellectuals; scholars 'understand the Beat Generation in terms of a

²² Gitlin, p.46.

²³ Norman Mailer, 'The White Negro: Superficial Reflections on the Hipster', in Mailer (ed.), *Advertisements for Myself* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992) pp.337-359, p.339.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid., p.341.

²⁷ Frank, p.246.

²⁸ Clinton R. Starr, "I Want to Be with My Own Kind": Individual Resistance and Collective Action in the Beat Counterculture', in *Reconstructing the Beats*, pp.41-54, p.41.

literary avant-garde and evaluate its historical significance accordingly'²⁹. The others – the Beatniks – were from differing socio-cultural and racial backgrounds³⁰, and were considerably larger in number than the 'literary' Beats. As Beat poet Diane di Prima recalls, that around the time of *Howl's* publication, 'there were only a small handful of us'. The traditional argument described by Starr – that Beats were 'a small group of cultural radicals' – generates a situation where 'the broader parameters of the Beat Generation' become ignored³¹.

When considering the notion of 'Beat ideas', it is important to consider the ideas of those from outside the pantheon of literary figures. Although Ginsberg, Kerouac and the like were obviously important to the Beatniks, which should not be underestimated, it is also the case that the Beatniks were equally important as the literary figures in connecting notions of Beat ideas with others from outside the scene. Starr notes that repeated police visits of coffeehouses in New York, San Francisco and Los Angeles and allegations of police bribery against owners, had resulted in marches, pickets and sit-ins against police harassment during the late 1950s through to the early 1960s³². As the Beats mobilized to defend themselves from police harassment, they 'forged alliances with community leaders and civil liberties groups to defend their position within the urban landscape'³³ in the process. It could be argued that the ideas expressed in literary form by the Beat authors were in turn acted on by a wider circle of many groups, whose significance is crucial to the Beats' continuing cultural standing. As these people gathered together in urban areas, 'enclaves' of Beat social networks began to be created, comprised of people with similar tastes and values.

The existence of a Beat enclave in North Beach, San Francisco, and a few years later, the large hippie community of Haight-Ashbury, can be constructed as a physical, direct line of influence from the Beats to the hippies – and therefore a demonstration of Beat influence on 1960s culture. I would argue that the Beats were influential in the culture of the Sixties, but their influence was predominantly on the construction of the 'counterculture'. What the counterculture entails is complex: it is, in Marwick's view, a term used 'to refer to the many and varied activities and values which contrasted with, or were critical of, the conventional values and modes of established society'³⁴; however, 'counterculture' also means different things to different people, and as Marwick argues, 'there was no unified, integrated counter-culture, totally and consistently in opposition

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid., p.47

³¹ Ibid., p.43.

³² Ibid., p.50.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Arthur Marwick, *The Sixties: Cultural Revolution in Britain, France, Italy and the United States, c.1958-c.1974* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p.12.

to mainstream culture'³⁵. In addition, Marwick cites the first instance of the term in 1968 in the highbrow publication *The Nation*³⁶, whereas contemporary writer Thomas Albright uses 'underground' in a 1968 *Rolling Stone* article³⁷. What I mean by 'counterculture' is a rough amalgam of alternative ways of living, literary works, art, music and politics, but not a definable movement with a firm link to any ideology or political persuasion. Its origins lie in the Beat enclaves that were created by people moving to towns such as San Francisco and New York, where the Beat writers lived and worked. Certain areas, such as North Beach in San Francisco, Greenwich Village in New York, and Venice in Los Angeles, were home to an infrastructure of coffeehouses, theatres, bars and spaces founded and frequented by these people, who all resided there in pursuance of 'alternative' life choices, separated from the all-encompassing 'mainstream' culture.

The hippie scene, which began in San Francisco and is almost universally portrayed as the 'image' of the counterculture (if not the Sixties), can be considered to be heavily influenced by the Beats primarily for geographic reasons. As Puterbaugh notes, when Beatniks began to move to San Francisco, the housing of choice was the old Victorian mansions of the Haight-Ashbury area, which were available for low rent³⁸. The Beat poet Michael McClure notes that the geographic proximity of the Haight-Ashbury area to North Beach meant that there were 'people overlapping each other from what had been a number of separate existences', creating a 'huge, fluid scene' of people with similar tastes and interests³⁹. As Shank notes, such scenes can be an outlet for creativity to move beyond 'locally significant cultural values' towards 'an interrogation of dominant structures of identification, and potential cultural transformation', through the exploration of new identities and collective involvement⁴⁰. In this case, the large number of people moving to San Francisco in the 1960s made it possible for resident Beats, Beatniks and their values to mingle with those who were new to the counterculture scene and city. Albright argues that 'certain major strands' of Beat values became infused in the development of the new scene: the Beats' self-conscious ethos of 'dropping out' of a perceived establishment lifestyle; the 'intense and programmatic' alienation of Beats from mainstream notions of society; a focus on Orientalism, Eastern mysticism and European existentialism; recreational drug use in pursuit of a 'total experience'; a 'worship of Art, in true romantic tradition'; and the elevation of music to

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid., p.11.

³⁷ Thomas Albright, 'Visuals: How the Beats Begat the Freaks', originally published in *Rolling Stone*, 9, April 27, 1968, in Holly George-Warren (ed.), *The Rolling Stone Book of the Beats: The Beat Generation and the Counterculture* (London: Bloomsbury, 1999), pp.351-356, p.351.

³⁸ Parke Puterbaugh, 'The Beats and the Birth of the Counterculture', in *The Rolling Stone Book of the Beats*, pp.357-363, p.357.

³⁹ Michael McClure, ref. in Puterbaugh, p.362.

⁴⁰ Barry Shank, *Dissonant Identities: The Rock'n'Roll Scene in Austin, Texas* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1994), p.122.

an art form (jazz for the Beats, rock in the counterculture scene)⁴¹. These bohemian enclaves established by the Beats ensured that a sense of community was able to exist.

As Cohen notes, some of the factors which unite people in the ongoing development of a music scene are 'age and gender, webs of interlinking social networks and a gossip grapevine'⁴², all of which could be found in these enclaves. The San Francisco scene allowed musical developments such as acid rock to develop: a type of music spawned partly from Ken Kesey's 'Acid Tests', where LSD-spiked Kool-Aid was freely distributed to people, often without their knowledge. (A direct beat connection lies in the fact that Kesey and his 'Merry Pranksters' travelled around the US on a 'magic bus', driven by Neal Cassady, the real life Dean Moriarty in Kerouac's *On the Road*). Gitlin notes that 'the Acid Tests evolved into Trips Festivals and scheduled concerts, with a new sound – spacy, unbounded whorls, not discrete songs: acid rock'⁴³. Acid rock bands that rose from this scene include the Grateful Dead, Quicksilver Messenger Service and others, all based in San Francisco. Fertile artistic grounds were also present in New York: three of the four Mamas and Papas met in Greenwich Village in the 1960s, and Bob Dylan resided there. However, the problem with reading the counterculture as Sixties culture is that its prime geographical locations and most fertile grounds were in these enclaves, in New York, San Francisco, Los Angeles and others; in the United States, in the Western hemisphere. 'Sixties culture' has various connotations depending on where one looks. A cultural 'revolution' in America is something very different to the Cultural Revolution that took place in China during the 1960s, where millions of people died. Even if one only looks at America, there are large differences in the late 1960s between the various areas of the country. The Civil Rights movement, with its figurehead Martin Luther King, fought against corrupt politicians, police and racists in the struggle for racial equality. There were no Beat enclaves in the Southern states of America, with segregation existing until (and even beyond) the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which outlawed it. Instead, to pursue a freer lifestyle, people were to travel away from the South, to escape to these other places, else be excluded from having a choice. The consequence has been that the influence of the Beats upon wider areas of society in America is actually quite varied. In particular, the extent to which Beats were politically active is of interest.

In 1952, Beat poet John Clellon Holmes wrote of the hipster, 'there is no desire to shatter the 'square' society in which he lives, only to elude it. To get on a soapbox or write a manifesto would seem to him absurd'⁴⁴. Later, however, some Beats became more radicalised. Starr notes how Chester Anderson, editor of the Beat magazines *Beatitude*

⁴¹ Albright, p.352-5.

⁴² Sara Cohen, 'Scenes', in Bruce Horner and Thomas Swiss (eds.), *Key Terms in Popular Music and Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), pp.239-250, p.241.

⁴³ Gitlin, p.207.

⁴⁴ John Clellon Holmes, 'This is the Beat Generation', *New York Times Magazine*, November 16th, 1952, ref. in Gitlin, p.51.

and *Underhound*, addressed a rally against police maltreatment in North Beach in 1960, advising the crowd to 'sue' the police and to 'fight back in every legal way' if treated unfairly⁴⁵. John Haag, owner of the Venice West Café in Los Angeles, was heavily involved with the Civil Rights movement in the mid-1960s, including the Congress of Racial Equality, the American Civil Liberties Union, and organizations fighting police harassment⁴⁶. However, it seems that because the enclaves were to some extent 'removed' from what could be considered the 'mainstream' of society, not all Beats actively pursued political involvement. The actual extent to which Beat ideas were able to shape aspects of society through politics was very much dependent on the individuals involved, and whether or not these ideas were taken up by others.

In the 1960s, student-led political organizations, comprised of people including Beats, were formed. These included the Student Non-Violent Co-ordinating Committee, founded in 1960, and Students for a Democratic Society (SDS)⁴⁷. It is possible that as these organizations grew, those Beatniks that were most politically inclined became more involved with these and other such groups. As the Vietnam War escalated from the mid-1960s, the SDS attracted new members. Sale describes these people as

non-Jewish, nonintellectual, nonurban, from a nonprofessional class, and often without any family tradition of political involvement, much less radicalism. They tended to be not only ignorant of the history of the left and its current half-life in New York City, but downright uninterested.⁴⁸

I do not wish to argue that SDS was ineffectual or apathetic, but as Miller argues, 'many recruits were drawn to SDS not by left-wing ideology but by their opposition to the war and the draft [...] and their attraction to the counterculture'⁴⁹. This is interesting, because one of the criticisms of the counterculture, as Frank argues, is that it 'is said to have worked a revolution through lifestyle rather than politics [...] through pleasure rather than power'⁵⁰. An example of such an argument is Puterbaugh's claim that the Grateful Dead were 'largely responsible for the spread of the counterculture and its perpetuation over time'⁵¹. Why? Because they were 'primarily associated with Ken Kesey and the Merry Pranksters, having provided an acid-blues soundtrack as the house

⁴⁵ Ibid, p.51.

⁴⁶ Starr, p.52.

⁴⁷ Jo Freeman, 'On the Origins of Social Movements', in Jo Freeman and Victoria Johnson (eds.), *Waves of Protest: Social Movements since the Sixties* (Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield, 1999), pp.7-24, p.8.

⁴⁸ Kirkpatrick Sale, *SDS* (New York: Random House, 1973), p.204-5.

⁴⁹ Frederick D. Miller, 'SDS and Weatherman', in *Waves of Protest: Social Movements since the Sixties*, pp.303-324, p.313.

⁵⁰ Frank, p.15.

⁵¹ Puterbaugh, p.360.

band for the anarchic Acid Tests'⁵². It can be deduced that the counterculture was primarily an artistic outlet: a leisure-based lifestyle choice. This is queried by Harrington, who 1972 wonders if 'the mass counterculture may not be a reflection of the very hyped and video-taped world it professes to despise'⁵³. The counterculture ultimately became a ready-made market for advertisers: the central countercultural notion of 'hip' was the capital most sought after in connection with a brand. Perhaps the most notorious example was Columbia Records' advertisement in a 1968 edition of *Rolling Stone*: its slogan was 'The Man Can't Bust Our Music'⁵⁴: some distance away from the Beat venerations of existentialism, voluntary poverty, personal and spiritual release.

Miller notes that, by 1967, liberal-leaning politicians 'were giving friendly speeches at antiwar rallies, defining moderate opposition as an acceptable part of the political spectrum'⁵⁵. When the new capitalist incarnation of 'hip consumerism'⁵⁶, Harrington argues that 'bohemia could not survive the passing of its polar opposite and precondition, middle class morality'. Once this had disappeared, 'bohemia was deprived of the stifling atmosphere without which it could not breathe'⁵⁷.

However, what is important to consider is that the influence of Beat ideas, at the most basic level, offered an alternative way of living in American post-war conventionality, stemming from a time, Jameson argues, where 'no society has ever been so standardized'⁵⁸. As Starr notes, the Beat communities, through the utilization of public space in urban, bohemian enclaves, had challenged racial segregation, homophobia and 'created a vibrant counterculture which facilitated individual liberation and collective political action'⁵⁹. These achievements have been built upon by countless activists who have progressively challenged such discrimination from the Fifties, through the Sixties to the present. The Beats' valuation of personal freedom through artistic expression resulted in the founding of enclaves and artistic scenes where this expression could be explored at a remove from the more 'mainstream' ways of living. This legacy has influenced not just the Sixties, but those wishing to pursue alternative ways of living through to the present day.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Michael Harrington, 'We Few, We Happy Few, We Bohemians', *Esquire*, August 1972, p.164.

⁵⁴ See < <http://www.ibiblio.org/pub/electronic-publications/stay-free/archives/15/timeline2.html>> [accessed 7th May 2009].

⁵⁵ Miller, p.312.

⁵⁶ Frank, p.26.

⁵⁷ Harrington, p.99.

⁵⁸ Frederic Jameson, *The Seeds of Time* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), p.17.

⁵⁹ Starr, p.53.

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