

## THE ROOTS OF THE SIXTIES: APPRENTICE TO THE BEATS

December 2, 2010

By Michael Erlewine ([Michael@Erlewine.net](mailto:Michael@Erlewine.net))

Today I have been thinking about all of this while the snow accumulates outside my window. How does one communicate experience to another? I find myself tending to abstract everything, intellectualize it, boil it down so I don't have to relive all the details in my own mind. It becomes more like a classroom than a one-to-one conversation. I need to slow down. That being said, the only true way is for me is to tell you what happened and let you abstract from that. To do this means I have to give personal details, stories, and actually describe what happened to me back then, that sort of thing. Now, just to contradict myself, in this blog I will give you an overall (abstract) view going in, but I will digress (or progress) into the scene as I lived it. I hope you don't mind. No one is forcing you to read this.

And what was it that I learned from the Beats? What was that lifestyle actually like? For one, I can start out by saying that the beats as I came to know them were very, very serious. Or was that me? They had none of the wild dancing that came along with the Avalon Ballroom and Fillmore Auditorium in the mid-Sixties. No way. Slow dancing, sure. Light shows and strobes? No. And it was a different kind of drug scene as well.

First, the beats drank wine, not beer. Hard stuff, some, but it was not promoted. No, what we drank as beats was wine, and wine with cigarettes or whatever else we might be smoking. And it was dark out too. The beats did not celebrate the sunshine or the daytime as did the later hippies. They were creatures of the dark that only really came to life at night. Sure we shuffled along the streets in the daytime wearing our old olive-drab army jackets and surplus clothing. I never wore a beret, but some actually did. I would have felt self-conscious in one. And remember, I was not a 'beat', but only wanted to be. I was too young. I searched for them, but they already were getting old. Even my naïve youth and enthusiasm for their existence could not revive them.

And it was nighttime that was bohemian, and I mean all night or at least until the wee hours of the morning. I can remember when the album "My Favorite Things" by John Coltrane was released in March of 1961. I stayed up all night listening to it at Harvey Armstrong's wonderful second-floor apartment down on Packard Street. I only had one room at the time. I seem to remember I had some Dexedrine (speed), so sleep was not an option. It was coffee, cigarettes, and Coltrane, and the heartbeat was fast. What an album that was (and is). Next to the Miles Davis "Kind of Blue," "My Favorite Things" is probably my most listened-to jazz album. And I particularly love the piano of McCoy Tyner on the title tune. It is just the best. If you have not heard it, really listened, by all means do yourself a favor!

So what does the apprentice beatnik do? Well, I quickly established that he or she is well read in literature and poetry. Ginsberg and Kerouac showed me that. Familiarity with the Existentialist

philosophers like Sartre, Camus, and the like is also suggested, and probably required. Kierkegaard? Yes, him too. Classical music (at least some of it) is mandatory, and the more the better.

My first home away from home was a tiny single room at 335 Packard Street in Ann Arbor. This was after I came back from California. There was a bed, a chair, a side table, a hotplate (which was not allowed, next to which was my jar of instant coffee), and a cheap record player, one of those kinds that had a hinged top that closed so you could carry the whole thing as a suitcase. For records I had Mozart and Bach. Mozart's "The Marriage of Figaro" was one of the few records I owned and the Brandenburg Concertos of Bach. I might have borrowed a few of my parent's records too. I can't remember.

And the good 'beat' was familiar with art, at least the French Impressionists. So there you have the general idea. I believe I mentioned that beats only come out at night and stay up to (or near) dawn. Did I also mention how serious life was back then? I did. So, no sunshine, laughing, or day tripping. And a strict diet of Ingmar Bergman films and the darker European shtick was preferable to any of the more entertaining American flicks. Those were uncool.

We would see the foreign films at the university-sponsored Cinema Guild in the old Art and Architecture building or at the Campus Theater down on South University Street, the only other theater that showed these films. As I look back on that time I can't believe I bought into that dark, depressed, alcoholic and nicotine-flavored world view. I really tried to enjoy it. Back then I would not be entertained. Humor was not a highlight in my life. We would take in a dark film and then spend the rest of the night smoking, drinking coffee, and talking about it. Today those films seem more like horror films to me. I know, I have no taste.

And jazz. Forget about rock n' roll; I dropped that for a time. As mentioned earlier, it was mostly jazz that we listened to, in particular Miles, Coltrane, bop, and most of all that 'cool' jazz. Beats were above all cool. It was kind of hard for me to be cool. I was excitable and too much of an enthusiast and that was simply 'not' cool. And then there was the "just sitting around."

We did a lot of sitting around with serious talking, and often I would find myself watching a friend shoot up heroin. I never went there but I was familiar with all the dope paraphernalia, the little bent spoons, the tourniquet, the flame, the 'works'. I most remember my friend Frank Tron who was really steeped in the beats and a kind of model beatnik for me. He had a little upstairs apartment way out on South State Street. I would hike down there very late at night hoping his light would still be on so I could dare go up and knock. It usually was and he was friendly to me. How wonderful that any older person could even see me! To myself, there was still nothing to see.

I am sure we talked (probably he talked) about all kinds of philosophy and life matters, but mostly what I remember is Frank shooting up and me watching. Just watching him shoot up was an inoculation against my ever doing it. It was not pretty or rather: pretty scary. Later I heard that Tron was killed when his car ran off the road on the Pennsylvania Turnpike while driving

back from New York City. I can only imagine his state of mind. Just like that, he was gone from my life. Impermanence.

And the beats lived 'down'. As a rule my beat friends had no interest in working a straight job and tended to do just barely (or less) than enough to get by. And they were likely to live in the poorest parts of town, where rents were cheap and no one cared how they looked or lived. Theirs was a life of the mind. For the most part they were dedicated intellectuals and aesthetes.

In reality, much of the Beat movement for me amounted to my just trying to get in the door, to be accepted, and to be like them. Reality is seldom what we hope for or expect. My dreams of the Beat movement were perhaps more interesting than the final reality. I never really became an insider because by 1960 that movement had already mostly dried up and grown old. There was no inside to 'become', but only the diminishing remains of what Kerouac and Ginsberg wrote of.

Perhaps that was why all the beats looked so old to me, because I was young. It was like hourglass sand. I tried to grasp it, but it was already gone, slipping through the fingers of time. There was only a taste left. With the beats gone or going, soon there were just a bunch of latecomers like myself remaining, going through the motions, but that train had already left the station or was trying to turn commercial. But we did have some Kerouac times of our own.

I can remember (back in 1960) an all-night car ride from L.A. to San Francisco, packed into the vehicle, penniless, and probably high on something, hurtling through the night on highway 101, all squashed together like that. When we finally reached North Beach, San Francisco (which was then the heart of the bohemian culture in that city), the first thing we did was to pull into an outdoor vending area and pile out of that cramped car into the cool night air. One of our group pried open a cigarette machine and made off with what coins they could find.

And then we stood before dawn outside a bakery on one of San Francisco's steep narrow streets waiting for the workers to throw out the day-old baguettes and feasted on those. Someone would lift a sausage or some cheese from an all-night store and we would have that. And cigarettes. Somehow we always had cigarettes. Usually wine appeared along the way as well; that and marijuana were the common denominators back then.

I am trying to paint you the flavor and I could go on, but I write this just to give you a sense of what it was like, where I was coming from, and what I was trying to do and be. I should also mention that I was living at the Gas House, the notorious art gallery and gathering place at 1501 Ocean Front Walk on Venice Beach. It held sway for three years from 1959 through 1961 and was one of the main centers of the Beat movement. There I met icons like Lawrence Lipton, Eric "Big Daddy" Nord, Mad March, the poet Taylor Mead, and Tamboo. Everyone came there, including Kerouac, and later Ken Kesey, after I left, folks like Janice Joplin, Peter, Paul and Mary, and so on, also came. I remember drinking whisky with Joplin one night (she drank the whiskey), but that was later on at the Grande Ballroom in Detroit around 1966.

This was still 1960 and I lived in an old walk-in freezer (a non-functioning one) in the basement

of the Gas House. It was not large, but made of beautiful natural woods inside, and of course there were the racks. At that time I was an artist, a painter in oils and, of course, a poet. Everyone was. I spent my days... or more likely nights painting, drawing, and writing poems, deep poems of longing. By that time I was not only yearning for a beat life, but since misery loves company, I was also searching for a partner, a woman to love, one that would love me just as I was. Imagine that! I had no money and lived on what I could find or fall into, picking up old cigarette butts on the long wide sidewalk that ran up and down Venice beach along the ocean. I had nothing, but I was in California and I was living with the beats. That was something!

And then there was my friend found hanging from a rafter in his upstairs flat, an artist like me who decided to commit suicide, why I never knew. He was much more gifted than I. And I am sorry to say I was suffering from a case of the clap that I had picked up while learning to whore in Mexico. Hitchhiking out along Route 66 to California we were picked up by a man in a late-model sedan. He seemed as wild as we were and he was headed for the Mexican border and Juarez. Did we want to go?

Well of course we wanted to go and we did. I will spare you the blow by blow details, but suffice to say that in Juarez I could drink tequila at a bar, and before I knew it I was drunker than a skunk. The tequila led to a whore house and the rest followed the natural order of things. I woke up back in the U.S. in a cheap motel along Route 66 with a hangover, but that was not all. Every cent I had was gone. That man had shown us a good time, waited until we passed out, taken whatever valuables we had (and they were few), and then was on down the road. I was left only with some experience I had never had before, not to mention (later on) the clap.

We hitchhiked on to Santa Monica with some monies my parents wired me through Western Union. Can I ever thank my parents enough for being who they were? I doubt it, but back to the story. I was already discovering the difference between expectations and reality. But hey, what good beatnik has not been with a Mexican whore? Worse, I had no medicine to cure it. What a mess. It really was no fun. I finally went to some public health clinic (such as they were back then), waited and waded through that, and was administered sulfur pills, a very slow cure indeed. No antibiotics. My traveling friend John went back home; I can't remember why. I was alone.

Very early on when I had first arrived in Venice I remember going to a party along the beach in a little house of a friend or at least someone I had heard of, perhaps it was Tamboo, the conga player. I had with me half a gallon of cheap wine. I must have been nineteen years old at the time.

When I came through the door of the house where the party was being held, there were two federal narcotic agents waiting. They were frisking each person as they came in, looking for dope, and paid no attention to my wine or the fact that I was underage. They didn't even check my ID. I was directed to sit down along a wall with a string of other folks who already had gone through the same routine. So there I sat while the feds continued to welcome each new person as they came in. Needless to say, I was very nervous.

In my nervousness I opened the wine and started to take a sip or two. Well, before I knew it I had drunk the entire half gallon all by myself. Later, free and outside once again, I puked my guts out for hours. Nothing makes you sicker than a wine drunk, especially sweet wine.

The whole trip was a bohemian phantasmagoria and I had been wanting something like that for a very long time. But life there was also very sketchy, like riding the edge of a vortex from which I could see deep within. And while I was thrilled by what I saw, in the last analysis I didn't want to be swept away in it. LSD would soon take care of that a few years later. Plagued by my persistent gonorrhea, it was time to go home to Ann Arbor and back to mommy and dad.

I took a bus to Barstow, California and hitched out from there with all my worldly belongings in a bag and my sketchbook under my arm. I was trying to get back to Ann Arbor. I finally caught a ride with a truly insane driver who held me captive for two days after asking me to put my precious belongings in his trunk and locking them there. He made me drive and, when the pieces of cardboard taped to the muffler gave out, he forced me to crawl under the car on my back amidst the overheated muffler and pipes and somehow put things back in place. I had to get away from the man, but my sketches and poems were all that I had to show that I was living the beatnik life, and I was loathe to abandon them simply to escape with my old ordinary life.

And I was dead tired. I had been up for two days driving. Then somewhere near Gary Indiana, after perhaps 54 hours on the road and tired as tired as can be, the man dashed into a rest stop to take a leak and mistakenly left his keys in the car. In a flash, I had my things out of his trunk and was standing in the café close by other people when he came out of the restroom. My hands were shaking but I was clutching my sketchbook to my heart. He gave me one fierce glare and went out to his car and drove off. Otherwise, I would have been headed for New York City and who knows what else. I hitchhiked on up to Ann Arbor.

As for drugs, all that is interesting about them came later in the 1960s. Back at the beginning it was only about pot and speed: Benzedrine, Dexedrine, and Methedrine. And also codeine, when you could find it. There was some codeine to be found back then in non-prescription cough syrups, the kind you had to sign for. The problem was that there was not much codeine in a bottle of the stuff, so you had to get a lot of bottles to get high, not to mention that it tasted horrible. You had to drink it. The clinker was that drug stores were allowed to sell you only one bottle of the stuff at a time, and you had to register for that.

To get enough bottles, you had to move fast, before your registration got through the system and around to other stores. There were no computers back then. I am not sure how it worked, but I do know that we had to drive (and quickly) from town to town hitting up drugstores for cough syrup. And it was the same kind of story with the Valo inhaler, which had an amphetamine base. We would tear open the inhaler, eat the cloth-soaked stuff inside, throw up, and get high on speed. I really hated getting high that way. It tasted terrible and the whole feeling and taste of speed in my system gives me shivers to think about to this day. But what is an aspiring beatnik to do?

We were terribly dedicated back then, but all of this slowly gave way to a different kind of life as the Sixties came into focus. I guess that all of us 'beats' finally realized that the real beatniks were gone (if they ever existed) and the beat movement silenced. If all that was left was just we lookers-on, we latecomers, what kind of movement is that? We knew nothing. If Kerouac and most of the headliners had checked out or clocked out, that just left my generation of wannabes and there was nothing to be learned there. They were no better than me. The death grip I had on being a beatnik gradually failed and I sadly let it go. But it was still too early to shepherd the hippies. There was a gap between the end of the beats and the beginning of the hippies, at least for me. What was I to do until my future came along?

I will try to tackle that in the next blog, when I can get to it. I hope this is not offending anyone. I 'am' being somewhat candid.

