

THE ROOTS OF THE SIXTIES: THE BEAT MOVEMENT

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I am not a researcher or scholar in all of this, and don't want to become one. My approach is experiential and the point of these blogs for me is to understand the framework in which my life experiences fit, and perhaps to discuss it with some of you. Right off I can see that there are many different flavors or ways of viewing not only the beat generation, but how that generation segued into what we call the Sixties. While I made it a point back then to spend time in what were probably the main beat centers in America (Greenwich Village, Venice West, and North Beach), I came from and went back to my life in Ann Arbor. In other words, your experience and views may differ. And, while yesterday I offered up a lot of experiential comments for examples, today (for my own clarity) I want to work on the general framework or "view." This will be more abstract folks, so take note.

It was the Beat Movement that empowered the Sixties with their chief stereotype, the "hippie," taken from the beat slang "hip" and "hipster," so to grasp the Sixties it helps to understand something about the (earlier) beat movement in America, which IMO finds many of its roots in Europe. The whole concept of a "bohemian" was born in 19th Century Europe to describe the marginal and unorthodox existence of writers, artists, and aesthetes. The word "beat" originally meant literally beaten down or down-trodden, defeated. These disenfranchised beats were also originally known as "The Lost Generation," which later became known (and better remembered) as the "Beat Generation." Either way, "beat" or "lost" are words with a clear meaning.

Furthermore, that interpretation was later expanded to infer that you get beat down so far that some kind of enlightenment or new vision is attained, but that connotation seems like hyperbole and "add-on" to me.

The actual term "Beat Generation" was introduced by Kerouac as early as 1948 and poet Alan Ginsberg fueled the fire with ample prose like his poem Howl:

"Angel-headed hipsters burning for the ancient heavenly connection to the starry dynamo..."

When the Sixties began, the beat movement had mostly devolved into commercial stereotypes replete with bongos, black turtlenecks, books, berets, sunglasses for guys and black leotards, no makeup, and long black hair hanging straight down the back for gals. By that time Elvis had already left the building if he had ever been there in the first place. Since I personally never really found the quintessential beatnik, perhaps it was more an ideal than a fact.

Stranded between the beat generation and the Sixties generation were people like myself, kids that were too young for the beat wave and too old to be typical hippies, a kind of limbo existence. We became the natural guides and step-fathers to the hippies.

The beats were often tagged by the conservative 1950s culture as communist, but what they instead were was anti-capitalist, happy to seek out the simplest means of living for the sake of having the time to pursue their own literary and inner journeys. Beats coexisted with the inhabitants of the poorest sections of town, the ghettos and slums. For the most part they shunned the workplace and did as little work as possible, quite content to just survive and get by. Not bound by the conventional work schedules they drifted toward the night and found their

home in the late hours.

The beats were (above all) anti-materialistic, and also anti-racist and pro-African American. Unlike the hippies, the beats were markedly non-political. They were intellectuals (or wanted to be) in a very real sense that amounted to a literary movement. And they liked to talk. Speed, coffee, wine (or whatever) was enough to fuel almost endless conversations.

Ginsberg: "... who talked continuously seventy hours from park to pad to bar to Bellevue to museum to the Brooklyn Bridge." – from "Howl."

It was a life of the mind and not of the body. The hippies celebrated the life of the body, but that day was yet to dawn. While the beat movement was not monolithic, in my personal experience the true inheritance of the Beat Generation was more of a European legacy than an American one. What may be peculiarly American is the beats infatuation with the "Continent." Yes, Kerouac and Ginsberg were American, but many of the authors, music, poets, etc. that they were most fascinated and influenced by were largely European. It took the hippies to drop the European references, and reset the pointer to this country. The hippies Americanized their experiences. Acid will do that.

Around 1960 one of the European mindsets that particularly fascinated the Beats (at least around Ann Arbor) were the Existentialist philosophies, writers like Jean-Paul Sartre and his book "Being and Nothingness" and Albert Camus' novel "L'Étranger," which translates "The Stranger." The beats were estranged from conventional society and, having myself grown up in the 1950s, I don't blame them. There was a sterility there that couldn't help provoke a reaction like the beats and eventually the Sixties.

Beneath the intellectual concerns of the beats, in my experience, was an ennui, a restlessness and lack of interest in 1950's society. For my part, I would add to this (at least in my case) a spiritual longing or yearning, which is most clearly defined in the book by Henri Alan-Fornier, "The Wanderer." At least this is how I received it living in Ann Arbor.

The underground artistic and anti-materialistic lifestyle of the beats was a direct pull from earlier European traditions. And while much is made of the fact that the beat generation turned to eastern philosophies, which in the end was only somewhat true, they pulled even more (at least early on) from the darker side of the European world view after two world wars. If the hippie movement can be seen as an upper, then the beat movement must be viewed as a downer.

The beats music of choice was jazz and classical music, and their drugs were wine, pot, speed, hallucinogens, and on downward from there. Hippies, like the beats before them, also rejected capitalism, the establishment, and middle-class values. They were anti-war and anti-nuclear, but pro sexual freedom, vegetarianism, and the environment. Hippies never learned the European literary tradition so valued by the beats and simply leap-frogged that to embrace all kinds of Eastern philosophies. What was important to the Sixties children was peace, love, and individual freedom.

Hippies were not creatures of the night as had been the beats, but of the day and sunshine. Take your clothes off and dance. Street theater, rock and folk music were embraced, with extended psychedelic forms of rock music as their anthem. And everybody was invited. The line between audience and performers became blurred; everyone was welcome to exist and express themselves. Get up and dance!

A Time Magazine article published in 1967, the July 7th edition ran a cover story "The Hippies: The Philosophy of a Subculture," in which it laid down what in their opinion was the hippie code:

"Do your own thing, wherever you have to do it and whenever you want. Drop out. Leave society as you have known it. Leave it utterly. Blow the mind of every straight person you can reach. Turn them on, if not to drugs, then to beauty, love, honesty, fun."

It has been estimated that in 1967, the "Summer of Love," some 100,000 hippies traveled to San Francisco to celebrate. I was one of those people there.

If this interests anyone, let's discuss. If not, that fine. I am writing this because I want to.

