

Sunday Sundowners

Sex, drugs and rock 'n roll
Part 2: The Beat Poets – their influence on Rock 'n Roll

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My sundowner friends all have iPods or MP3s. My giant step into the 21st century this year was to add a CD player to a large HiFi music centre built around a record player. My vinyl collection is precious and eclectic and infinitely satisfying. (I am happy to confess that while I love the Beastie Boys, I've never heard a note sung by Bieber or Beyoncé.) And today the Sundowners have warily gathered for a retro musical feast. When we were together last month, I promised I would blow their minds with the best kind of 'acid trip' – the music inspired by the Beats and the musicians they influenced. 'For the experience to be true, vinyl is essential', I say firmly and they are too busy filling plates and glasses to argue. I am surrounded by philistines!

Rather than put the Sundowners to sleep with a lecture about the Beat legacy, I want them to feel it through the music. **On the road** is still one of the most popular books of all time, but it is the free thinking, always questioning credo for which the Beats will be remembered. If one person is still questioning an unfair rule or daring to create an original thought, that is where the spirit of the Beat generation lives on and that's what has kept me enthralled all these years.

'My goodness! *Please, please me!* I haven't heard the Beatles in ages', says Anita in puzzled tones. 'What have they to do with the Beats?' In fact, The Beatles spelled their name with an 'a', partly as a reference to the Beat Generation, and Lennon was a fan of Jack Kerouac. Alan Ginsberg met and became friends with

them, and Paul McCartney played guitar on Ginsberg's album **Ballad of the Skeletons**.

As we listen to the jaunty *Love, love me, do* of our school days, we remember *A hard day's night* and screaming insanely along with all the other tweeny boppers in the audience. Janie from Leeds in Yorkshire has the cachet of having experienced a real live Beatles performance in 1964.

The Beatles themselves, pop sensations in their time, were by comparison a gently sanitised example of the rebellious spirit of the Beats. In sequence, I offer my captive friends Nico with the Velvet Underground, Bob Dylan, Leonard Cohen and Jim Morrison, four voices who shaped my teen years.

'Oh wow, a suicide quartet', comments Garth with some truth. Disenchantment with society and death are ever-present themes, but the protests and rebellions are healthy, life-affirming and optimistic. The German chanteuse Nico has a compelling dark Gothic voice and is an acquired taste (**Marble Index**, 1968), but who has not suffered with the other three? Dylan's *Desolation Row* was inspired by Kerouac and at a 1997 concert in Canada the night after Ginsberg died, Dylan dedicated it to him as having been Ginsberg's favourite. It is reported that Steve Jobs, Apple's co-founder, listened to Dylan incessantly and somehow managed to combine his hippie inclinations with a sharp entrepreneurial mind. The Beats were all about reshaping and improving the world.

Ginsberg was such close friends with Bob Dylan that he toured with him on the Rolling Thunder Revue in 1975. Dylan cites Ginsberg and Kerouac as major influences and his lyrics confirm it.

By contrast, it is the gentle and shy atmosphere of folk ballads that dominates Leonard Cohen's body of musical work and proves him one of music's supreme poets. As we listen to **Songs of Leonard Cohen** (1967), drenched in infinite aching tenderness, barely whispered and discreetly arranged, our plates and glasses are forgotten. Cohen's unique style turns from social tragedies to individual tragedies, and continues to swim upstream, against prevailing attitudes, carving a niche for a kind of subdued, lo-fi, intimate, personal dirge. 'A dirge, maybe, but a spell-binding inspirational sort' is the verdict of a fellow Cohen fan. We're both breathlessly waiting for confirmation of the rumour that he'll be touring here next year. He may be over 80, but he's still 'the man'.

Jim Morrison credited Kerouac as one of his biggest influences, and fellow Doors member Ray Manzarek in his book **Light my fire: my life with The Doors** (Diane Pub Co, 1998) writes 'I suppose if Jack Kerouac had never written **On the road**, The Doors would never have existed'. Their name of course is a tribute to Aldous Huxley's **Doors of perception** (Chatto & Windus, 1956).

From the first album **The Doors** (1967) I play all the masterpieces: *Light my fire*, *Break on through*, *The crystal ship*, *Soul kitchen*, *End of the night*, and for me the most evocative song, *The end*. Jim Morrison is the one who defined the rock vocalist as an artist, not just a singer, and his poster still hangs in my office.

From Jimi Hendrix's **Are you experienced** (1967) and **Electric ladyland** (1968) through Pink Floyd's **Dark side of the moon** (1972), **Wish you were here** (1975) and **The wall** (1979) to some more accessible Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young, we listen, criticise and enthuse in equal measure. I know I've not converted them to loving the lengthy, intoxicating guitar-driven improvisations, whose heroes were Iron Butterfly, the band that released an album titled **Heavy** (1968) before the term 'heavy-metal' was coined, despite making them listen to an exciting, feverish blues-psychedelic jam, the title-track from **In-A-Gadda-Da-Vida** (1968).

So as a parting shot I let the Sundowners leave to the shouts of a group that are still encouraging aficionados to question authority - Beastie Boys' *Fight for your right* (2001):

*'You gotta fight for your right to party
Your pop caught you smoking, and he said, "No way!"
That hypocrite smokes two packs a day
Man, living at home is such a drag
Now your mom threw away your best porno mag.
You gotta fight for your right to party.'*

I wonder why the neighbours have put up a 'For Sale' sign outside my front door?

