

The Very Short Introductions Podcast

Episode 73: The Beats

The VSI Podcast Intro 00:07

Welcome back to The Very Short Introductions Podcast. From public health to Buddhist ethics, soft matters to classics, and art history to globalization, we'll showcase a concise and original introduction to a wide range of subjects, for wherever your curiosity may take you. So here is today's very short introduction.

David Sterritt 00:26

My name is David Sterritt. I'm a film professor at the Maryland Institute College of Art, editor in chief of the Quarterly Review of Film and Video, and for many years, almost 40 years, I was film critic and cultural correspondent for The Christian Science Monitor. And I've taught courses on the Beat Generation at Columbia University where I used to teach and elsewhere. And the title of my book is The Beats: A Very Short Introduction. And it is about a group of people, who emerged in the late 1950s and early 1960s, that was when they flourished, who were known as the Beat Generation. And they were basically a small group of writers, and what they were interested in doing was in challenging so many of the conventional wisdoms of not only America, but of the world and of modern industrialized society.

David Sterritt 01:17

I first got interested in the Beat Generation back when, in the 1950s and 1960s, when I was growing up and coming of age, and they just fascinated me because they struck me as a very iconoclastic group who are interested in rebelling against a lot of the same things that I think a lot of young people are interested in rebelling against. What made them different was that they took things very seriously, and they embarked on all kinds of personal and cultural experiments in their writing, primarily, which captured the imagination of an enormous number of people. They were very, very well known back in the 1950s and 1960s.

David Sterritt 01:56

They were sometimes known as "beatniks," which was a kind of a pejorative term that was developed for them, it was first introduced by a newspaper columnist and people used to talk sometimes with a sneer or a scowl about "those dirty beatniks." But there were other

The Very Short Introductions Podcast

Episode 73: The Beats

people who really respected what they were trying to do and who became fascinated with their literature, and their influence, I think, lingers on today. So again, who were the Beats? Who were the members of the Beat Generation? Well, there were a lot of them because that was a label that anybody who wanted to could take on.

David Sterritt 02:29

But for me, there were three core members, three key members of the Beat Generation group, three writers: Jack Kerouac, and he was mainly a novelist, although he also wrote a good deal of poetry, and his most famous novel is called *On the Road*, which kind of captures the restlessness and ruthlessness that the Beat Generation often felt; Allen Ginsberg, who was mainly a poet, and his most famous work is a long poem called *Howl*, which is a kind of howl of rage at what he saw as the hypocrisies and taboos of the era; and William S. Burroughs. His most famous novel is *Naked Lunch*; he was mainly a novelist. And he was the most radical and most experimental of the bunch. Among other things, he developed what he called the "cut-up method" of writing, which is where he would write a portion of a novel, such as *Naked Lunch*, and then cut it up into bits and pieces and paste it together into a new and almost random order, and then rewrite something out of that so it made a little bit of sense, and create something which would be revolutionary in terms of language as well as in terms of content.

David Sterritt 03:36

So I think those three people, Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, and William S. Burroughs, were the core members of the group, although there were others. And I want to mention a few of their names. Some poets, Gregory Corso, Gary Snyder, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, who also ran the famous City Lights Bookstore in San Francisco. Some hipsters who weren't so much writers, just sort of members of the scene: Neal Cassady was one of those. And there were a few women: Diane DiPrima; Carolyn Cassady; a few others; Anne Waldman; very important poets and very important writers; and the great scholar of the culture, Ann Charters, who did a lot to illuminate the work of the Beats for the scholarly world and for the world at large. So there were some women on the scene as well.

David Sterritt 04:23

The Very Short Introductions Podcast

Episode 73: The Beats

They lived and were based in various places at various times. They are very often associated with Greenwich Village in the lower part of Manhattan in New York City. And, definitely, that was a big part of the Beat scene. But they also had a very important base of operations in San Francisco, and by "base of operations," I don't mean anything formal, but they hung out there and they lived there at various times. And then, sometimes, they ranged outside the United States, largely to Mexico, which they sort of had an idealized vision of as a wild place where anything goes, and they had travels in western Europe and in northern Africa as well. So they were, to some extent, peripatetic, although they were mainly based in the United States, and especially in New York City and San Francisco. And the subjects that interested them included drugs, music, sexuality, spirituality, anything that they hoped would help them find what the artist Lawrence Ferlinghetti called, in one of his greatest poems, "A new rebirth of wonder in a jaded world." That's what they were looking for. They wanted to get outside the structured, ordinary ways of thinking, and somehow come upon a new sense of wonder and spirituality in the world.

David Sterritt 05:39

I also want to mention that there were a few black members of the group, not many, again, it was mainly a white male scene, but Bob Kaufman was there; Amiri Baraka, who later changed his name to LeRoi Jones, was very much a part of the scene for a while, as a poet, a playwright, a publisher, and other things. So it was mainly a white male scene, but there were others who managed to be part of the group as well. And, again, the group was the group, the core members, Ginsberg, Kerouac, and Burroughs, and then a larger circle of writers that sort of circulated around them in literary ways, if not in physical ways. And then all the other people, here and there, who identified with the movement and just decided that they want it to be Beats, or beatniks, as well.

David Sterritt 06:23

And what they were mainly interested in doing was rebelling against, and rejecting, even radically rejecting, what they saw as the chief evils of the era after World War II in the United States: consumerism, materialism, conformity and regimentation. They wanted to get those things out of their lives and out of their art. And they hoped that that would inspire other people to purify their lives and souls as well. And in this way, they, in their values, anticipated a lot of subsequent protest movements, the most important one was

The Very Short Introductions Podcast

Episode 73: The Beats

the hippies. And by the time you get into about the middle of the 1960s, the hippies are really overtaking the Beat Generation. They're kind of an outgrowth. They're much more interested in drugs and psychedelics, and that sort of thing. But they definitely were a kind of extension of the Beat movement, and they replaced the Beat movement. And then there was also the anti-Vietnam War crusade that crested in the 1970s, and even the Occupy Wall Street demonstrations that came along in the 2000s. All of these, either consciously, or in most cases, unconsciously, we're kind of echoing and extending the Beats themselves.

David Sterritt 07:32

What the Beats wanted to do was to remake consciousness on an individual basis. They were a profoundly inward-looking group. A phrase that Kerouac came up with, for what he wanted to tap into, was the "unspeakable visions of the individual." And what he meant by that was visions, well, the kind of intuitions and insights that you have deep within yourself, that it may take a lot of work to even access, but you can access if you try hard enough, and long enough, and they were unspeakable, because they were very hard to put into language. And they were also profoundly individual. The basic idea of the Beats was to revolutionize society by revolutionizing thought. They didn't have the idea that, well, first, we have to change everything in society, and then people will change. No. They felt the idea is to revolutionize your own thinking and then other people might be inspired to do the same, and of all of those individual efforts, you might get a revolution of society itself, not a political revolution, so much as a social and cultural revolution. So that was what they wanted to do.

David Sterritt 08:40

And as I mentioned, they knew that these things, these unspeakable visions of the individual, are very hard to put into language. And so that's why they were so rebellious and revolutionary in the ways they used language. And they had different means of going about that. I mentioned before Burroughs and the cut-up method, the idea of cutting up what you write and pasting it together, and then making something discontinuous and almost like a collage out of it, so that you thereby get away from what Burroughs regarded as the control system that is language itself. Burroughs was against all kinds of control systems, he saw them everywhere. And one of them was language, the language

The Very Short Introductions Podcast

Episode 73: The Beats

that we learn when we are growing up comes to control our way of thinking, and the idea of cutting up what you write, and putting it together in a new way, a new discontinuous way, was a way of getting outside of that control.

David Sterritt 09:32

Kerouac believed—they all believed to some extent, but Kerouac most of all—in improvisation. The idea that a writer should be like a jazz musician, that you sort of have certain patterns that you have in your head, but you give them free rein and you make things up as you go along. One of Kerouac's slogans, and it was originally dreamed up by Ginsberg, actually, but one of his slogans was "first thought, best thought." He was against revising anything, in the same way that a jazz musician, playing live in front of an audience, can be improvising and making it up in the moment to moment, spur of inspiration. That's the way Kerouac wanted writing to be. He didn't even believe in correcting typographical errors when he wrote. You just have to let it all stand the same way that a slightly off note might be part of a great, great, great jazz solo by a trumpeter or a saxophonist, or something. So he would, a total believer, Kerouac was, in improvisation and just living in the flow of the moment. That was crucial for him. And that was his way of getting outside the ordinary uses of language, just keeping things flowing, moment to moment, always changing, always new.

David Sterritt 10:40

And Ginsberg believed, also, in improvisation, although he was a very, very careful writer, also in his way. He brought all kinds of different kinds of sounds into his poetry. He would use the sound of the radio disc jockey, the sound of the jazz musician, the sound of the actor, all these different sounds and, and ways of thinking and speaking would be conjoined into his poetry. And again, his greatest, greatest poem is one called Howl, which begins with a famous line, "I have seen the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness," and he wanted to somehow get beyond that madness and use that madness in his own writing.

David Sterritt 11:19

Now, again, they were very much involved in, in sexual freedom. They believed in freedoms of all kinds, but sexual freedom was one of them. And there, this anticipates a

The Very Short Introductions Podcast

Episode 73: The Beats

lot of today's great interests, that two of the three Beat Generation core members were homosexuals. Ginsberg very much was one, and more and more as an out homosexual as things went along. And William S. Burroughs was also gay, although as a young man, they were very uneasy about that. And both Ginsberg and Burroughs tried more than once to be cured of their homosexuality. But when time came, as, as time moved along, they became more and more comfortable with that, and more and more open about that. And it began to be inside their literature more than ever. So the Beats were, were really pioneers in allowing a gay sensibility to get into their writing and be part of their public persona.

David Sterritt 12:12

They were also very much interested in drug experimentation. They saw drugs as a way to challenge the joy-killing values of square society. And they were mostly, in their earlier careers, into the sort of body drugs like heroin, and so forth, before the hippies picked up on the psychedelic mind drugs. But they were very interested in that as well. And, interestingly, Kerouac, actually, he was an alcoholic, actually, and that's what killed him at a fairly young age. But he actually saw his alcoholism as a way to detach himself from the world, which is very much part of his spiritual value. He was a very staunch Roman Catholic, Kerouac always was, but he was also a very staunch Buddhist, a Zen Buddhist, and Buddhism calls for us to be detached from the material world. And he saw his alcoholism as a way of accomplishing that. So it's maybe a sort of a strange idea, and maybe what we should not emulate, but it was an interesting way that he had of connecting this problem of his, this terrible alcoholism, with his, his religious aspirations. So they saw that somehow cultivating a spiritual sensibility would be again, a way of combating the alienation and the mechanization of today's industrialized society.

David Sterritt 13:27

Ginsberg became more involved in political activism as time went along. And by the time you get into the 60s, Ginsberg became a very, very energetic force in the hippie movement, and was very involved in anti-war protests and things like that. So there were political dimensions to this, although they weren't there at the beginning. Again, the main Beat period of the 50s and 60s was all about transforming your own individual consciousness, and, only later on, did Ginsberg, especially, get interested in political

The Very Short Introductions Podcast

Episode 73: The Beats

activism as well. So, I would say that neither the core Beats nor their followers ever resolved the basic contradiction in their philosophy. On the one side, they had this introverted drive to find aesthetic and spiritual purity within themselves; on the other hand, was this extroverted desire to influence culture and society, but they weren't bothered by that at that contradiction because they were very good at the art of holding two or more ideas, even incongruous ideas, in mind at the same time, and if somebody said, "Well, you're being inconsistent," some of them might say, "Well, hey, that's Zen-like transcendence. We're just getting outside of the ordinary patterns and ways of thinking in the world."

David Sterritt 14:41

So the Beats were, they influenced a lot of later people. They influenced a lot of later writers. such as Thomas Pynchon, and Ken Kesey, and Tom Robbins, but they were pretty much unique in their own time, and I really hope that people will be inspired by hearing about the Beats to read more about the Beats, especially read Kerouac's *On the Road* and Ginsberg's *Howl* and Burroughs' *Naked Lunch*, and you'll find a lot of writing, which even today seems quite transgressive, and interestingly transgressive, in its ideas and then its methodologies. I really hope that people keep the Beats in mind. They have a lot to teach us today.

The VSI Podcast Outro 15:16

Thank you for listening to The Very Short Introductions Podcast. You can subscribe to our podcast on your favorite app, such as Apple or Spotify, to receive all of our episodes directly in your feed. All of our episodes, new and old, can also be found on SoundCloud and YouTube at Oxford Academic. You can also access content from Very Short Introductions on the Oxford Academic platform through your institution.