

Getting Off The Road

Beats & A Sub-Culture of Resistance

I.M. Beat (Peter Werbe)

1977

a review of

On the Road, Jack Kerouac. Penguin Modern Classics, London, 1976

Naked Angels, The Lives and Literature of the Beat Generation, John Tytell. McGraw Hill, New York, 1977

Don't let no one bullshit you—the '50s were a terrible time to live through. On TV it's just the Fonz and all of his friends having "Happy Days," but the reality frame was the American empire at its zenith. It was a world dominated by Eisenhower, Nixon, John Foster Dulles and other spokesmen for the American Century—the dominance of American military might abroad, and white, middle class culture at home—a time without rioting blacks, demonstrating students or Vietnamese in revolt to threaten the image.

Certainly there were wildcat strikes, Elvis, James Dean and Charlie Starkweather (who killed 11 people for "kicks"), but rebellion was easily contained because there was no "outside" at that time. Rebels were criminals, cranks or madmen—"Rebels Without A Cause" or, in the words of one of the j.d.'s (juvenile delinquents) in "Blackboard Jungle" when asked why he made so much trouble, "Like, I dunno, man."

Like, I didn't know either; I just knew I felt real uncomfortable in the world that I found, but could never put my finger on the reason why: I mostly believed them when they said something was wrong with me. After years of tortured run-ins with everyone in authority from my parents to the school and the police, I read *On the Road* in 1959.

A Suffocating Society

The message, as I read it at that time, hit me with the power of a religious conversion. It wasn't me after all, but a society that suffocated people, choked and reined them in at every step of the way, made them, in C. Wright Mills' phrase, "cheerful robots."

None of this was directly said, but the actions of the characters made it all obvious. Where the American '50s put its demand on moderation, Kerouac's central character, Dean Moriarty, and the rest were excessive at everything; where the '50s dictated stability, Dean and his friends were always in motion. In fact, motion becomes the key to it all in *On the Road*—motion comes to represent life and rebellion against stultification.

Dean and Sal Paradise speed across the U.S.—East to West and back, North to South and back—innumerable times. "I wasn't frightened at all that night; it was perfectly legitimate to go 110 and talk and have all the Nebraska towns—Ogallala, Gothenburg, Kearney, Grand Island, Columbus—unreel with dreamlike rapidity as we roared ahead and talked." (p. 216). Driving naked; the rush of conversation; sitting cross-legged on the bed facing each other talking all night trying to figure out what it was; the excitement of digging everything—and everybody—"What a crazy cat that was, whoo! Did I dig him!" Dean yells. Listening to bop jazz—"Out we jumped in the warm,

mad night, hearing a wild tenorman bawling horn across the way, going 'ee-yah! ee-yah!' and hands clapping to the beat and folks yelling, 'Go, go, go!' Dean was already racing across the street with his thumb in the air, yelling, 'Blow, man, blow!'" (p. 185).

Style reflects content

Even the style of the narrative itself almost leaves you out of breath. In *Naked Angels* John Tytell relates that zen maniac Kerouac, finally grasping both his message and his method, sat down and wrote *On the Road* in two straight weeks on one continuous roll of Japanese rice paper raging through the typewriter in one paragraph with almost no punctuation.

Kerouac had come to believe what the Beat authors had asserted, particularly William Burroughs, that all revisions and re-writes diminish the emotions felt at the time of writing and that all editing is simply done in terms of contemporary values and writing conventions. Written in 1951, the book was not published until six years later with its style altered to quite normal standards of fiction. Yet its energy is maintained.

The impact the book had on me and my Motor City friends was electrifying. We were bored to tears with endless evenings languishing on the corner of Dexter and Davison broken by equally dull daytime jaunts to Kensington Park to sun and swim. The idea of breaking out and finding real adventure thrilled us all and we became possessed with planning and finally executing travels to New York City, California, Mexico, South America and on. It gave us a frame of reference that stated quite emphatically that this, the society of the '50s couldn't give us what we needed and that it was up to us to fashion something different.

Upon a second reading of the book 18 years later, I'm not so sure everything we saw in the book was actually there. The same sense of motion and energy is there, but this time it seems more frantic, and "holy" Dean more like a 1,000 speed freaks we've all run into over the years, who, for all of their enthusiasm, could never "dig all the gone" this-or-that for more than ten minutes at a time. Any more than that and the dreadful feeling of boredom and purposelessness returned.

At the end of *On the Road* Dean is defeated; he just couldn't keep up the breakneck pace of all the riding and all the relationships. The character with all the vitality, "ragged in a moth-eaten overcoat he brought specially for the freezing temperatures of the East, walked off alone..."

Race With Ourselves

It was much in the manner of the White Rabbit in *Alice in Wonderland* who had to run twice as fast just to stay in the same place. All of these years—through the New Left and counter-culture—we may have just been trying to outrun ourselves and suddenly there's just no longer any place to go in this society. For the project that the Beats unknowingly started in the '50s and what blossomed in the '60s as genuine attempts to base human association around new ways of relating, just ran out of space. This society was much more resilient than we had suspected (we really thought that rock and roll, reefer and a few demonstrations would topple it) and the way we lived turned out to be much more marketable than we had realized.

We had gotten to the far wall of what Reich called "The Trap" and either for lack of numbers or lack of will (or both), the final assault was delayed and finally replaced by a wholesale retreat into the social forms of two decades previously. New Leftists and hippies toppled over one another trying to make peace with the society they once contested, often all the while continuing the rhetoric of rebellion. Others have effected a total capitulation and mouth the rationalizations of a society they once scorned.

The net result of the process is the diminishing ability of all of us who choose to live on the margins of Capital and contest it as much as possible, to continue to function without ourselves being re-absorbed. For what was once seen as a sub-culture of resistance now has its major recognition in the media and commodities, with the remaining practitioners quickly being relegated to the categories of the '50s, as criminals, cranks and misfits.

The almost total absorption of the artifacts and life styles of what we felt made us different from the rest of this society has narrowed our options considerably. It makes all of our activities and projects that much more crucial in a period of quiescence as capital's vortex moves to silence our attempts at remaining human and make our activity part of its own. A sub-culture of resistance is no longer a matter of choice, as in the '60s ("Wanna go, to the Grande Ballroom after the anti-war rally?"), but a matter of our survival.



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