

Safe in Heaven

Jack Kerouac obituary

Hank Malone

1969

I.

That old city-planner, Death, caught up with Jack Kerouac this October. Reportedly, it was an ugly death; drunk and despairing, his guts literally busting and bleeding inside the heavy lonely flesh. Kerouac had ruined his great good looks years before and now he had finally ruined his body, his brain, his life and perhaps his very spirit and karma. As Allen Ginsberg, his old friend, recently said, "he threw up his hands & wrote the universe don't exist & died to prove it."

Jack Kerouac dead in his mid-forties. Alcohol-suicide. The spectre of loneliness apparently burning his ears. The Witch of Lethe crushing his sad heart. In the end he was living with his wife and his mother. He once said: "I wish I was free of that slaving meat wheel and safe in heaven dead."

II

The tragedy of this great and frantic galactic wheel of Life is that too many people reading thus far in this tiny eulogy are saying: "Who is Jack Kerouac?" Barely ten years after his name was known by all as the "father of the Beat Generation," he has been largely forgotten, disremembered, unknown-ed and now someone asks: "Who is the Beat Generation?"

Who is anything, as Jack said, "in the void expelling human beings, pigs, turtles, frogs, insects, nits, mice, lizards, rats, roan racing horses, poxy bucolic pictics, horrible unnamable lice of vultures, and murderous attacking dog-armies of Africa..." Indeed, who is anything?

III

Like Rock and Roll, Jack Kerouac was part of our roots and origins. Like Woodie Guthrie, he became one of the few spiritual mainsprings of a generation or two growing up on his shirttails. Kids who never heard of him were (and still are) profoundly influenced by his philosophical (if not literary) impact on American culture.

Kerouac transcribed, perhaps best of anyone, the American odyssey of the frantic search for Good Times and Truth. In his life, as well as in his many novels, and apparently thousands of poems, he laid the groundwork for almost everything that was to come afterwards in the culture of young America.

Perhaps his greatest effort and achievement was the unleashing of the raw, crude, frequently terrifying and always beautiful Energy of America. No other writer before or since has so effectively embraced and idealized the wonder and sheer wildness of the new post-industrial American scene. Everything in America, all of its metal and

iron and fire and gold and oil and momentum were used by Kerouac as a means toward a profoundly spiritual and revolutionary perspective toward American society.

Kerouac was an anarchist who became, as time went on, increasingly religious. His revolutionary ideas were simple, and can perhaps be summed up in the Way of Tao: “avoid all authorities.”

Perhaps he never realized that living such a philosophy would become intensely and crushingly lonely. As years went on, as political activism became the national platform and format for the expression for so many of his ideas and feelings, Kerouac found himself more and more neglected, more and more reclusive, ultimately a forgotten Guru in the midst of millions of disciples.

IV

For the last few years he had seemed absolutely silent. No one spoke about him. Though his important novels (*On the Road* and *Dharma Bums*) were read quietly and regularly by a very large audience of young people (as evidenced by his paperback sales) Kerouac fell more and more distantly into the past, taking on virtually historical dimensions.

Kerouac’s odyssey is not over, for death means nothing: the odyssey has just really begun, for his was an ancient never-ending revolutionary odyssey seeking Love, Wonder, Truth, and Good Times. Now it is in the broken industrial heart of Americana. Nearly forgotten in the midst of the Moloch, he had almost single-handedly resurrected a spiritual program for the young America. Apparently crushed by it himself, others (like you, reader) have taken it up, carried it forward, raised the ante, and given it hope.

V

“So in America when the sun goes down and I sit on the old broken-down river pier watching the long, long skies over New Jersey and sense all that raw land that rolls in one unbelievable huge bulge over to the West Coast, and all that road going, all the people dreaming in the immensity of it, and in Iowa I know by now the children must be crying in the land where they let the children cry, and tonight the stars’ll be out, and don’t you know that God is Pooh Bear? the evening star must be drooping and shedding her sparkler dims on the prairie, which is just before the coming of complete night that blesses the earth, darkens all the rivers, cups the peaks and folds the final shore in, and nobody, nobody knows what’s going to happen to anybody...”

—Jack Kerouac, from *On the Road*

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Fifth Estate #92, November 13-26, 1969

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