



ele's editor welcomes a standing-room crowd to Naropa University's celebration of the 50th anniversary of *Howl*, Allen Ginsberg's landmark poem. Allen himself, at Rocky Flats—the nuclear plant his mass protests helped to close; Anne Waldman, co-founder (with Allen) of Naropa's Kerouac School. Allen with William F. Buckley, from *Life & Times of Allen Ginsberg*.

THE POET THAT CHANGED AMERICA

ALLEN GINSBERG—BEAT POET ACTIVIST QUEER AMERICAN BUDDHIST CO-FOUNDER OF NAROPA'S KEROUAC SCHOOL

Allen Ginsberg, via Jerry Aronson's documentary, *The Life & Times of Allen Ginsberg*: (singing) *Come along, come along, the end of Vietnam War, dirty smart bombs and napalms and US army whores. Come along, come along, hey baby, don't be late. Come along, come along, let's celebrate Watergate. Come along, come along...* [fades]

Dr. Tom Coburn, President of Naropa University: Good evening. It's my honor and privilege to welcome you to *50 Years of Howl*. But I would like to thank you for being here to celebrate something larger. I became President of Naropa nearly three years ago, and as a historian of religion I was fascinated with the way Naropa lay at the confluence of two rivers: one river flowing out of classical India and the Buddha's contemplative experience that has flowed across various cultures and countries, enriching all of them—and the liberal arts tradition that originated, almost at the same time, in the Mediterranean—and it's also had a transcultural, transcontinental career. And they have come together here at Naropa, since 1974.

Howl was written a good 18 years before the founding of Naropa. That started me thinking: "If Allen, who was instrumental in starting Naropa in 1974, was writing *Howl* in 1955-56, what was Naropa's founder, the Venerable Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, doing in 1956?" He was still in Tibet, working on the building of his famous monastery, Surmang. It would be another four years before he had to leave Tibet over the Himalayas for India. He subsequently went on to Great Britain and then, a dozen years after he left India, went on to North America. One of the first things he said when he came to North America was, "Take me to your poets." On the assumption that poetry would be a key ingredient in the introduction of Buddhism to North America. Allen Ginsberg and Rinpoche met in a famous episode in New York City, competing for the same taxicab in 1970. And in 1974 he, with Anne Waldman, was invited by Rinpoche to come here to start the *Jack Kerouac School*. We're here to celebrate this evening, 50 years of *Howl*. But it's also to celebrate the mystery of the way creativity works, the way genius reaches across cultural boundaries and solidifies in people like Trungpa and Allen Ginsberg, in poetry like *Howl*, and in institutions like Naropa. [Applause]

Waylon H. Lewis, for elephant: We were asked recently by Jane Rubenstein and some others if we'd help sponsor the *50th Anniversary of Howl*. Sponsoring basically means giving stuff away for free—and, as a free magazine, we already do enough of that. So generally we say "No." But this one? A huge honor.

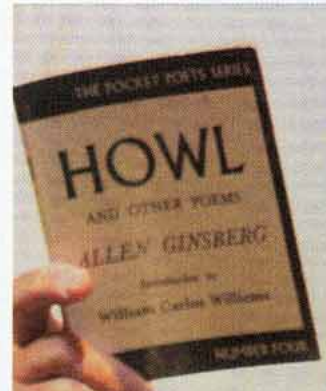
When I was a confused young man—now I'm a confused slightly older man—Kerouac was an inspiration. I grew up in Trungpa's world here in Boulder, but still managed to be confused enough

that Kerouac could enlighten me just about as much as the *Profound, Holy Dharma*. I knew Ginsberg a bit growing up, not as well as some young men... [tentative laughter] but—yeah, that was a joke—[laughter] my mom taught at Naropa, so I saw him around. He was a sort of father or grandfather to many people. He loved teaching. I still have his notes from classes [at Karme Chöling, in Vermont], in his handwriting. Stuff I've framed.

His co-founder is a child of the Beat generation, and a mother to the poets of this generation. She's a Buddhist, a feminist and, as I said when we were honored to interview her in *elephant*, she's a giant among men. [Laughter] So without further ado—a lady who needs no introduction—Anne Waldman. [Loud applause]

Anne Waldman: It's wonderful to see this room filled to...more than capacity. We want to welcome the community outside Naropa—both from this wonderful town that has supported this experiment for years, and also the Jack Kerouac School's *Summer Writing Program*. We have wonderful students here with our low-residency program, our core MFA program, our BA students, students from schools across the land, many folks have convened on this temporary autonomous zone of wild poetry mind. It's heartening. This event is co-sponsored by our wonderful *Archive Project* here on campus, which has digitized thousands of hours for your enjoyment. You can go to archive.org and hear 600 hours at this point. We've been fortunate to get support from the *National Endowment for the Arts*, *National Arts and Humanities*, *Save America's Treasures* and others that have seen the importance of this archive and Allen. It's a performance archive and a compendium of experimental, post-modern poetics coming out of *New American* poetry. So many of the figures of that movement are no longer with us. When we started this program in 1974 with Allen, Diane di Prima and John Cage in the room, Trungpa said it would be a 100-year project. And then, later, a 900-year project. [Laughter] So we have to keep on top of technology to make sure this treasury is there for generations to come.

Howl was first published in the fall of 1956, as *Number 4* in the *Pocket Poet's Series* from *City Lights Books*. When a second edition was printed, part of the shipment was seized by U.S. Customs on obscenity charges. Local police arrested publisher Lawrence Ferlinghetti and the *City Lights Bookstore* manager, charging them with publishing and selling obscene material. This





elephant's editor pulls a Forrest Gump, reading HOWL onstage with important people: Anne Waldman, President Coburn, Lisa Birman, Tom Peters... Joe Richey speaks... *Flogging Molly's* Robert Schmidt, Steven Taylor (with Ginsberg's harmonium) and Eirikur Baldursson perform William Blake's *Nurse's Song*...

famous censorship trial came out on poetry's side, with the judge ruling that the book was not obscene, nor without "the slightest redeeming social importance."

Allen was a major part of this community. He was here every summer from 1974 to 1996, 23 years, and 20 springs teaching a practicum. He lived on Bluff Street among other places, between 1980 and 1983, and was active in the demonstrations at Rocky Flats, and instrumental in bringing attention to that difficult site. He was extraordinarily generous to this vision of an alternative school based on the Buddhist backdrop of non-competitive energy and community, *sangha*, people on a similar poetic and spiritual path. Again, I want to thank the Archive Project, thank the Development office, our President Coburn's office, thank Waylon for being part of this event and supporting it and getting those posters around town. Jerry Aronson is here, the filmmaker who made the documentary *The Life and Times of Allen Ginsberg*. There's a new DVD with six extra hours coming out. He interviewed [Summer Writing Program] guests such as Ken Kesey, William Burroughs. I feel Allen's still with us, very much so.

Life & Times of Ginsberg: ...Czechoslovakia and wound up at the...Hotel visiting Dylan and meeting the Beatles for the first time and playing the first scene in *Don't Look Back*. This was a week before that filming of Dylan's first big tour to England and playing in...Hall. [Dylan playing]...Thankfully the conflict now is not between Left and Right and the rich and the poor or even the blacks and the whites, it's between the uptight and the turned on...unleashed the power of flowers. [Laughing] Lennon and Yoko chanting: "All we are saying is give peace a chance." [Naropa crowd clapping, hooting, singing] "I loved what Allen did. I couldn't get naked on somebody's front lawn, get myself arrested, it wasn't my style. But there was something wonderfully liberating about what he was. Allen could behave like a nut but he was serious about other people's lives. He was serious about ending the war on Vietnam, and at the same time he was colorful and crazy. And we need that."

William F. Buckley: Allen Ginsberg became a success internationally after publishing *Howl* and reached great critical acclaim with *Kaddish*, in 1960. We're here to talk

about the *avante garde*. I should like to begin by asking Mr. Ginsberg whether he considers that the hippies are an imitation of the New Order?

Ginsberg: Why don't I read a poem?

Buckley: Sure, go ahead.

Ginsberg: A legal poem. [Laughter]

Buckley: Do you have one? [Laughter]

Ginsberg: Yes, I have one. An interesting project, which is a poem, which I wrote on LSD. [Laughter. Reads poem, to Buckley and audience's approval] I think the primary hippie, and Beatnik originally, back in '56 Kerouac and Burroughs' perception was a recognition of that unity of being and a recognition of that great consciousness, which we're all identical with, see? That's the meaning of flower power and make love, not war. Ultimately, it's grounded in an understanding of the nature of the universe. The problem is seeing our unity: particularly black and white, square and hippie, police and student...and ah, faggot individualist [laughing]...

Buckley: You are a bit naïve. [laughing, laughter]

Randy Roark: I'm an example of the apprenticeship program that Allen ran here. It was a class that you could sign up for, you got credit for it, and met once a week for three hours. Some of the time was spent looking at your own work as a poet and giving you one-on-one there. And some of it was secretarial work: you actually were an apprentice, you did the work of a poet. This is not about sentimentality or nostalgia, something that happened in a circumscribed time and is no longer active. As Allen said in that William Buckley clip, it's grounded in a consciousness. And we learned how to ground it. I learned from him the way a baby bird learns from their parents how to fly. He showed me how to actively do things that I always knew were true but had never seen anyone actually live them out, practice them. He showed me how they actually work.

I came here in '79, a 25 year-old poet and became an apprentice. The problems that I had as a poet were basically three. One was I was more or less completely ignorant as a poet of my lineage and tradition. Unread. Two was my poetry was awful and, in addition, it was false, which made it even worse. Awful. And, three, I was




Randy Roark speaks... The live reading of the text of HOWL by audience of 400... Do try this at home. Read HOWL aloud, non-poetry lovers, you'll find yourself converted. Holy Holy!

socially inept. [Laughter] I was socially retarded in the way that someone is not at their chronological age, emotionally. The way Allen dealt with those three problems? The *first* was easy. He gave me assignments. He told me what I needed to read in order to be a poet. *Secondly*, the problem with my poetry was that I had fallen in love with William Butler Yeats: I thought he was the greatest poet—and still do—of all time. The problem was, I was a 25-year-old kid writing as if I was, you know, *William Butler Yeats*. [But] I didn't have the wealth of experience or depth of insight to pull it off. So [Allen] gave me assignments to write from *I: What do you remember? What did you see? What did you feel?* And when that wasn't working, he would make me face a white wall, then take a poem of mine and ask me: *what did you see? What was the color of the sky? Where were your hands when you thought this? What color dress was she wearing?* Precise details. His idea was that I needed to learn how to become my own dictationist, to learn how to transcribe my own sense impressions. *Third*, he sensed that I had a reservoir of emotions that I had frozen, I had squelched them in many ways, I was afraid of exposing them. I tended to be a body that carried my brain from room to room—I dealt with everything intellectually. So he began by asking me questions that I could only answer from my heart. And by that experience of answering out of that place over and over again, the actual, literal experience of doing that is what gave me my *self*. He gave me the gift of myself. Allen wasn't interested in creating little Allen Ginsbergs in the apprenticeship program. That was frightening to him. There's nothing worse than to be Allen Ginsberg surrounded by Allen Ginsberg wannabes. He wanted big Randy Roarks, big Joe Richeys, big Steven Taylors. He wanted to see how good we were, how deep! He would create situations that were high profile, challenging, like throwing you in to pitch in Yankee stadium against the Red Sox. *See what you can do, kid*. They were spontaneous, so you had no way of preparing for them. He was constantly pushing, pressing you to be better, to be *you*, to find out what resources you had inside.

The other side of the apprenticeship was the work part. I was an expert at that. That sort of made up for my social ineptness and ignorance. I could type really fast, work really hard, I never missed an appointment, or deadline. I was totally attentive to Allen. He put you on errands that he would do if he had the time. So you were occupied with a poet's errands, you did a poet's work. You went to the library, researched Milton, scanning his poetry: *what was the rhythm that Milton had? Had someone actually heard Blake sing his poems?* And social and political investigations, networking, phone calls, letter writing, the building of a community of poets. That's what you did as a poet. The benefit of that is I realized that I had it all wrong. I thought that to become a poet what you did was you created a significant body of work and then you were acknowledged for that and then people would talk to you as if you were a poet.

They would sort of give you that title. And that's how you made it. It became clear to me that it's completely opposite.

To become a poet, you are a poet in every moment of your life. This moment, right this second, is a becoming. It's not "make it new," like [Ezra] Pound said—it's *always* new. It's always now. The apprenticeship never ends. It's always just the latest manifestation. So as a poet, every moment, whether driving your car or at the supermarket, sitting next to your friends—whatever you are doing, you are the poet, grounded in a consciousness. Your being a poet is grounded in a consciousness and you take that with you and there's never an off switch. It never ends. You are a poet.

And *then*, you happen to write *poems*—a natural extension of *that experience*. Your poem is never more than your ability to experience whatever you experience. It *can't* be anything more than that. So you begin working on your ability to experience, something you do in every moment. And then when you come to the page, start to write your poem, that's the bear tracks in the woods, the evidence of what it was you were able to experience. What I've thought about the last couple of days is, the reason that Allen was so unafraid of public relations and getting the word out and being and manifesting as a poet was because he thought his poetry was medicine. Education. If you think of your work as manifestation, and medicine that people need, and education, a living example of what it is that they can be, then you want as many people as possible to experience that. And so any kind of self-consciousness about yourself disappears. And when I thought about the apprentices I've kept up with, in addition to all being accomplished poets, one is working with the Mississippi River to preserve the ecological habitat of the Mississippi River. One works for Disability Services at CU and runs a virtual *Museum of American Poets* on the web and is a blues guitarist. Joe is an investigative reporter, involved in local politics, an international emissary for poetry and politics, going to Central America, plays in a Buddhist-based rock band. One person writes children's books for gay and lesbian families. Another poet is teaching meditation in the prisons and translating Buddhist poetry from Korean and writing a biography of *Tilopa* in verse. And then whatever my interest in improvisation and recording oral wisdom traditions, ecological understanding and sensitivity, working with the disadvantaged and socially and culturally isolated, blues, preserving American poetical lineage, investigating the government, working in local government, interest in Buddhist rock-and-roll, teaching meditation, Buddhist poetry and oral traditions, improvisation... This sound like anybody we know? [Laughing] In many ways, Allen was a firebrand, a burning bush and when he died, little sparks of him went out everywhere and set these ground fires. When Allen died it was the last teaching that he gave to people who were paying attention because he was not afraid, not grasping. He was kind of relieved and relaxed when he got the news that he was terminally ill because the way he lived his life, there was no off switch. He lived his life fully. He checked every box. So then when it came time to die, it was like, *Okay, I did it*. It's an important teaching to think about your death and how to live the time between now and then. So blessings to everyone for coming here. Thanks for celebrating that poem and the poet and, ah, I wish you luck. 

Next issue: more Waldman, and Joe Richey on Ginsberg & his Howl!



*the mindful life



The NYC cityscape in the 50th Anniversary poster includes, via letterpress by Brad O'Sullivan, the entire text of HOWL.

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