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THE BEAT GOES ON

Author: *Janet Wiscombe / Staff writer*

Allen Ginsberg's voice crackles with fire and fun. He's talking about the qualities he most admires in some of the young artists he knows.

"People who are innovative, sensitive, courageous, not afraid of gay acquaintances, manly but not macho, meditative and literate and interested in experiencing their own consciousness rather than being restrictive and safe. Adventurous."

They aren't adjectives he'd necessarily lavish on himself. "No, I'm not courageous," says the consummate rebel, the founder of the Beat Generation and the country's best-known living poet. "I'm just a nice Jewish boy who stays out of trouble."

Yep. Just as Dan Quayle plays bongos and smokes weed.

On Saturday night, the ever rambunctious 68-year-old political dissident and cultural icon will be in Long Beach to present a performance of poetry and music at the Downtown Amphitheater. The event, sponsored by the Living Planet coffeehouse, is part of a Rhino Records tour celebrating the release this month of Ginsberg's "Holy Soul Jelly Roll: Poems and Songs (1949-1993)," a four-disc boxed set.

In what might be called the revival of the reviled, Allen Ginsberg and other senior no-holds-barred beats Jack Kerouac, William Burroughs, Gregory Corso and Neal Cassady among them are swiftly and steadily becoming friends, if not kissing cousins, of The Establishment. Ginsberg's name, for example, graced an advertisement for The Gap ("Allen Ginsberg wears khakis"). He performed "Howl" in January with the Kronos Quartet at Carnegie Hall. He was profiled in *Vanity Fair*.

College students clamor to hear him. "I'm thrilled he's coming," says Jane Watt, a 22-year-old college student who works as a clerk at the Living Planet.

"The Beat Generation carried a lot of spirit. The spirit was lost in the '80s high-tech plastic world. My generation is tired of the plastic madness. We want to tap into the ideals of the beats letting go and being yourself, not playing games of who you have to be, what you have to wear and think and do."

How does Ginsberg feel about all the warm and fuzzy attention? "It's better than insults or being called a fraud, a jerk and a sleaze," he said during a recent phone interview from his home in New York. "But most of my poetry is banned during daylight hours. My product is forbidden. People should be aware of that."

"I have not exactly been embraced. I have been outlawed."

Ginsberg, whose seminal poem "Howl" provoked an obscenity trial in the '50s (which he won), is referring to a 1988 Federal Communications Commission ban on indecent radio and television broadcasts. That action was spearheaded by congressional archconservatives like Sen. Jesse Helms, R-N.C., and effectively bans the airing of "Howl" between 6 a.m. and 8 p.m.

"It's thought control by neoconservative, theopolitical televangelists and their thought control cohorts who are allied with killer drugs like alcohol and tobacco," he declares. "The ban was formulated by the Heritage Foundation and funded by Coors and the tobacco companies. They come on as the moral arbiters. Yet they are the peddlers of all the drugs."

"It's alcohol and drugs against poetry."

And it's not a new war. For the past five decades, Ginsberg has been at the epicenter of controversy. He insisted on viewing life through his own lens, and it made people furious. He wrote about homosexual love. He experimented with hallucinogenic

drugs. He was arrested as a subversive in Czechoslovakia. He used unspeakable language to speak unthinkable thoughts.

He was a major national handful who expounded on self examination, nonconformity, human suffering, the environment, Eastern spirituality, peace and love.

He still does. He attributes the resurgence of interest in beat literature among young people today to diminished opportunities and expectations. He says people have become desensitized, a condition that has triggered a deep national malaise.

"People are not accountable," he says. "They are not connected with Mother and Father Earth. There is panic and fear. It's a problem of hyper-technology, mass plastic. People are told not to be sensitive. The thought is, 'I got mine.' It's Reagan/Bush/Darwinian social conflict.

"For 20 years, it was considered wimpy to be conscious of friendliness and compassion. It was like Maoist thinking. 'Just Say No.' It was acceptable to fink on your elders.

"George Bush was a psychological drag. Now the lid's off emotion. Now we have this pink-faced guy in office who didn't mind putting a joint between his lips."

Although the government today is less stingy in spirit, young people are aware we're reaching the end of the planet, Ginsberg says. "Before, it was all expansion. The limits are now apparent. The nation is hitting the bottom of the barrel. The auto-centered culture is tainted. Cars are dinosaur pump ghosts."

The question is not whether to despair or have hope. The question has more to do with how we treat one another along the way, he says. "Part of the task is to do what we can to clarify our own situation and relieve others' pain. Whether you are living with AIDs or dying of AIDs, you don't add to the garbage."

Ginsberg says growing old isn't all that much fun. His own health could be better. He has a bad back and says only 70 percent of his heart is working. But he recently met with some of his best beat buddies at the Naropa Institute in Boulder, Colo., where a library was just named after him. He's got a couple of books out including a new book of photography, the massive CD set to launch, trips to take, classes to teach, readings to perform ...

"I feel old, yeah," he says with more humor than complaint. "But I am still able to make love. I am still able to make love and get in and out of bed."

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