

We've Got The BEATS

Although their brightest lights have faded, the creative legacy of the Beat Generation remains alive and well in California.

By Andy Jones

The clock is ticking on the Beat Generation. Most of their brightest lights have faded or burned out, and the first generation of readers who discovered "On the Road" and "The Dharma Bums" as teenagers is reaching retirement. Perhaps that's why, while most of the major players are no longer with us, the Beat industry is still going strong: baby boomers with time and money are commodifying their nostalgia at conferences and in art galleries, joining like-minded enthusiasts at conferences and openings to celebrate the surviving artists and authors as they might have done three or four decades previously. As we commemorate the 50th anniversaries of this aesthetic freedom movement's foundational documents (the first reading of "Howl" last year, the publication of "Howl" this year, and the publication of "On the Road" in 2007), the music and poetry of once penniless bohemians are being heard once again in cafes, restaurants and galleries, as well as college classrooms and academic conferences.

Although Allen Ginsberg was born and died on the East Coast, and Jack Kerouac spent most of his life in Lowell, Massachusetts, and Orlando and St. Petersburg, Florida, fans of the Beats are turning their gaze westward. Gary Snyder has a retreat in the Sierra Nevada Mountains while poets Michael McClure, Diane Di Prima, and Lawrence Ferlinghetti all still live in the San Francisco Bay area. One finds Ferlinghetti's City Lights Bookstore (City Landmark Number 228) on all the tourist maps of San Francisco, for what the North Beach Chamber of Commerce calls "Little Italy and the Home of the Beat Generation" is still a magnet for those wishing to explore remnants of counterculture. As Nancy J. Peters notes in "The Beat Generation and San Francisco's Culture of Dissent," fad-chasing tourists descended upon North Beach in the late '50s and '60s to see what San Francisco columnist Herb Caen called "Beatniks," even though Ginsberg, Kerouac and William S. Burroughs had all left San Francisco by 1956.



"HAPPY FELLOW"
2006
Lawrence Ferlinghetti
OIL ON CARDBOARD
35" x 25"

