

42. Jack Kerouac

Jack Kerouac *About the Beat Generation* (1957)

Rebellion 171

In 1948, Jack Kerouac was the first one to use the words 'Beat Generation'. The name came up in conversation with J.C. Holmes, a close friend, who published an early Beat Generation novel titled *Go* (1952).

- 'The Beat Generation, that was a vision that we had, John Clellon Holmes and I, and Allen Ginsberg in an even wilder way, in the late forties, of a generation of crazy, illuminated hipsters suddenly rising and roaming America, serious, bumming and hitchhiking everywhere, ragged,
- 5 beatific, beautiful in an ugly graceful new way – a vision gleaned¹ from the way we had heard the word 'beat' spoken on street corners on Times Square and in the Village, in other cities in the downtown city night of postwar America – beat, meaning down and out but full of intense conviction – ...
- 10 We had our mystic heroes and wrote, nay sung² novels about them, erected long poems celebrating the new 'angels' of the American underground – In actuality there was only a handful of real hip swinging cats and what there was vanished mightily swiftly during the Korean War when (and after) a sinister new kind of efficiency appeared in America,
- 15 maybe it was the result of the universalization of Television and nothing else (the Polite Total Police Control of Dragnet's 'peace' officers³) but the beat characters after 1950 vanished into jails and madhouses, or were shamed into silent conformity, the generation itself was short-lived and small in number.'

(From *Aftermath: The Philosophy of the Beat Generation*, in *Esquire Magazine*, March 1958)

1. **gleaned:** resulting
2. **sung:** sang
3. **the Polite Total Police Control of Dragnet's 'peace' officers:** Dragnet was a very popular TV series in the 1950s.

Jack Kerouac *On the Road* (1957)

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Jack Kerouac's writing method took inspiration from the rhythm of breath, which was given great importance by both Jazz musicians and Buddhist meditation breathing. The following passage shows how relevant jazz rhythm is in the novel.

... one night we suddenly went mad together again; we went to see Slim Gaillard in a little Frisco nightclub. Slim Gaillard is a tall, thin Negro with big sad eyes who's always saying 'Right-orooni¹' and 'How' bout a little bourbon-arooni. In Frisco great eager crowds of young semi-intellectuals sat at his feet and listened to him on the piano,
 5 guitar and bongo drums. When he gets warmed up he takes off his undershirt and really goes. He does and says anything that comes into his head. He'll sing 'Cement Mixer, Put-ti Put-ti' and suddenly slow down the beat and brood over his bongos with fingertips barely tapping the skin as everybody leans forward breathlessly to hear; you think he'll do this for a minute or so, but he goes right on, for as long as an hour,
 10 making an imperceptible little noise with the tips of his fingernails, smaller and smaller all the time till you can't hear it any more and sounds of traffic come in the open door. Then he slowly gets up and takes the mike and says, very slowly, 'Great-orooni... fine-ovauti... hello-orooni... bourbon-orooni... all-orooni... how are the boys in the front row making out with their girls-orooni... orooni... vauti... oroonirooni...' He keeps
 15 this up for fifteen minutes, his voice getting softer and softer till you can't hear. His great sad eyes scan the audience.
 Dean stands in the back, saying, 'God! Yes!' – and clasping his hands in prayer and sweating. 'Sal, Slim knows time, he knows time.' Slim sits down at the piano and hits two notes, two C's², then two more, then one, then two, and suddenly the big burly³
 20 bass-player wakes up from a reverie and realizes Slim is playing 'C-Jam Blues' and he slugs⁴ in his big forefinger on the string and the big booming beat begins and everybody starts rocking and Slim looks just as sad as ever, and they blow jazz for half an hour, and then Slim goes mad and grabs the bongos and plays tremendous rapid Cubana beats and yells⁵ crazy things in Spanish, in Arabic, in Peruvian dialect, in Egyptian, in every
 25 language he knows, and he knows innumerable languages. Finally the set is over; each set takes two hours. Slim Gaillard goes and stands against a post, looking sadly over everybody's head as people come to talk to him. A bourbon⁶ is slipped into his hand. 'Bourbon-orooni – thank-you-ovauti...' Nobody knows where Slim Gaillard is. Dean once had a dream that he was having a baby and his belly was all bloated up⁷ blue as he
 30 lay on the grass of a California hospital. Under a tree, with a group of colored men, sat Slim Gaillard. Dean turned despairing eyes of a mother to him. Slim said, 'There you

1. **orooni**: all the words ending *-orooni* were created by Slim Gaillard himself who called his new hipster slang 'Vout'
 2. **C's**: musical note; it. *do*
 3. **burly**: sturdy, strong

4. **slugs**: hits
 5. **yells**: screams
 6. **bourbon**: a type of whisky
 7. **bloated up**: swollen

go-orooni.' Now Dean approached
him, he approached his God; he
thought Slim was God; he shuffled
35 and bowed in front of him and asked
him to join us. 'Right-orooni,' says
Slim; he'll join anybody but won't
guarantee to be there with you in
spirit. Dean got a table, bought
40 drinks, and sat stiffly⁸ in front of
Slim. Slim dreamed over his head.
Every time Slim said, 'Orooni,' Dean
said 'Yes!' I sat there with these two
madmen. Nothing happened. To
45 Slim Gaillard the whole world was
just one big orooni.



8. **stiffly:** sternly