

***Text and Drugs and Rock 'n' Roll: The Beats and Rock Culture.* By Simon Warner. London: Bloomsbury, 2013. Xix + 521 pp. ISBN 978-0-8264-1664-3**

The two texts at the heart of the Beat canon – Allen Ginsberg’s ‘Howl’ (1956) and Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road* (1957) – are inflected with the rhythms of jazz and chronicle a period before the emergence of Rock ‘n’ Roll as soundtrack to the nascent youth culture of the later twentieth century. While Ginsberg, Neal Cassady and many of the other original Beats would later embrace various forms of rock, Kerouac maintained more of a distance and tended, especially toward the end of his life, to manifest nothing but disdain for the counterculture of the 1960s. Nevertheless, as Simon Warner makes clear in his immensely wide-ranging study of the ways in which rock musicians on both sides of the Atlantic have embraced Beat over the past half-century, the influence of Kerouac, Ginsberg, William Burroughs and others continues to feature in a remarkably disparate catalogue, ranging from Bob Dylan, through the Beatles, Patti Smith, Joni Mitchell, to the Clash and Genesis P-Orridge and beyond. While Beat literary production is clearly important here – Kerouac’s legacy as a vital component of Dylan’s iconic albums of the mid-1960s, Burroughs and Brion Gysin’s cut-up techniques as inspiration for a host of artists, etc. –, Warner stresses that the physical presence of Ginsberg alongside Dylan, Paul McCartney, the Clash and others, or Michael McClure working with Ray Manzarek, or Burroughs as the ‘Godfather of Punk’ has been of equal importance.

There is something of a cut-up quality to Warner’s book: it is comprised of conventional chapters, interspersed with interviews (those with David Meltzer and Bill Nelson are especially illuminating), obituaries, book and album reviews. On the plus side, this does enable Warner to approach his theme from a wide variety of angles. It is also refreshing to encounter a writer so unself-conscious about receiving put-downs from first-generation figures such as McClure regarding his reading of Beat. On the other hand, the approach does lead to a great deal of repetition: I was never sure whether Warner intended this to be a monograph, to be read from start to finish, or whether it was a book to be dipped into selectively. My sense is that Warner is also undecided about this, since he slips from the conventional, if rather bland, ‘in this chapter’ through ‘this paper’ (346) and ‘this piece’ (374). Whilst there is clearly a logical desire to reprint some material, such as interviews and obituaries, in its original form, a more thorough editing of the frame chapters would have avoided the repetition as well as making these stand-alone sections feel more significant.

Text and Drugs and Rock 'n' Roll is self-evidently not a book *about* Beat Generation literature. Whether because Warner assumes that readers will already be familiar with the Beat canon or because his interests lie elsewhere, there is very little close-reading and nothing that challenges received critical opinion. He is, of course, focussed primarily upon how rock musicians have responded to the Beats, so it would be a mistake to expect too much attention to this material. Nevertheless, I would have liked to see some direct engagement with the primary sources: what was it that attracted succeeding generations to Kerouac, Ginsberg, Burroughs and others beyond the generalised appreciation for their desire to transgress? Far too often, Warner relies on secondary, critical comment as a substitute for his own analysis, a problem that is further exacerbated in the chapter on 'Howl' and the American landscape of the 1950s by the repeated and unquestioning citation of Marcus Cunliffe, Malcolm Bradbury, Eric Mottram and other first-generation UK-based American Studies scholars, whose work has been challenged repeatedly and convincingly by more recent, revisionist academics. At one point, David Meltzer makes the cutting observation that 'it's not the books that matter, it's the looks' (306) in recent (and not so recent) commodified versions of Beatdom and there are times when the lack of attention to literary sources steers Warner dangerously close to this line.

There is only one moment when Warner seems to stray from his core argument, yet this moment leads to one of the strangest and least convincing chapters in the book. In a detailed look at *Sgt. Pepper*, Warner questions the truism that the Beatles' seminal album captured the spirit of 1967's 'Summer of Love', querying whether the record was a 'catalyst, a mirror or merely a coincidental gathering of material' (263). This is an important question (though not one that obviously relates to the Beats), but Warner's argument depends upon a somewhat preconceived notion of what a soundtrack to the period *should* sound like, which immediately disqualifies elements such as the Beatles' appropriation of orchestral arrangements, English music hall and circus, enabling him to conclude that the album 'was not genuinely able to embody the energy and excitement of the time' (280). Of course, orchestral arrangements had already been used by Buddy Holly and were of growing interest to Frank Zappa and others, while the circus was fundamental to the kinds of performance being developed by the Diggers and from the end of 1967, the Yippies. More importantly, writers such as Todd Gitlin recall *Sgt. Pepper* as playing at every gathering that summer, while the cover of the title track by Jimi Hendrix and Joe Cocker's iconic Woodstock

performance of 'With a Little Help From My Friends' indicate the degree to which the album was central to shaping its time.

Otherwise, *Text and Drugs and Rock 'n' Roll* remains very much focussed on its topic, beginning, unsurprisingly, with Dylan's presence at the 'last Gathering of the Beats' at City Lights Bookstore in 1965 and concluding with an invaluable appendix on 'Kerouac and Ginsberg on record' and an extensive bibliography. While, inevitably, there are omissions, such as the scant attention paid to Richard Brautigan and Alexander Trocchi (the 'Scottish Beat'), both of whom have been significant influences on a range of musicians, the Transatlantic approach enables Warner to explore not only the overlaps but also the discontinuities between US and British responses to the Beats. There are various minor errors – is it accurate to call Pete Townshend the 'front-man' of The Who, even if he is their principal songwriter (249)? When were novels, poems and plays a 'strictly high art form' (19)? Why is Empire associated solely with England, rather than Britain? (218) – but very few major ones. I do have one quibble with the book's subtitle, since the 'Rock Culture' engaged with by Warner is almost exclusively that of artists, rather than their audience. It would have been fascinating to learn the extent of audience understanding of the significance of the Beat legacy at different moments and within different genres of the music.

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