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# THE BEAT GENERATION'S INFLUENCE ON ROCK AND ROLL

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Over the past decades, literature studies have increasingly paid attention to intersemiotic parallels between literature and music. Although correlations between experimental bebop and Beat Generation literature have been well documented and examined, little attention is paid to the Beat Generation's influence on rock and roll music. In contrast to a considerable amount of superficial documentation, barely any academic research explores the interaction between Beat literature and contemporary rock music. In this paper, I seek to redress this lacuna by discussing the extent of the Beat Generation's influence on rock and roll.

### 1.1 The Beat Generation

The Beat Generation was a literary movement that originated in the early 1950's, and is often portrayed as a disillusioned post-war generation. However, most American citizens did not share this disillusionment. On the contrary, the 1950's in the United States were marked by a great sense of self-satisfaction and optimism, following the triumph in WWII and the mounting economy. At the same time, the United States lived in continuous fear of a third world war, suffused by McCarthy's anti-communist paranoia. By coming up with a complot theory, stating that a communist conspiracy would take over the American government, McCarthy awakened a fear for any deviant behaviour (De Coster 2007). In this atmosphere, the United States in the 50's were a highly conformist society.

It is probably as a reaction to this conformism, rather than post-war disillusionment, that the Beat Generation emerged. The term 'Beat Generation' originates from a conversation between Jack Kerouac and John Clellon Holmes,

in which the former remarked: 'So I guess you might say we're a *beat* generation.' In 1952, John Clellon Holmes defined this generation in his article 'This Is the Beat Generation,' for the *New York Times Magazine*. In the article he described 'being beat' as 'a feeling of being reduced to the bedrock of consciousness' (Watson 1995).

In the broad sense, the term 'Beat Generation' refers to an entire 'generation,' a heterogeneous group of disillusioned youngsters and hipsters, experimenting with drugs, criminality and spiritualism, roaming the country in search of a new faith. As John Clellon Holmes denoted, this generation was not occupied with the loss of faith – like the Lost Generation – but rather 'with the need of it.' (1952) What seemed to start as a small group of anti-intellectualists quickly became an anti-establishmentarian movement. These youngsters were disillusioned in the corporate, conformist American culture and in their government. They had 'had enough of homelessness, valuelessness, faithlessness' and were convinced 'that the problem of modern life is essentially a spiritual problem' (Holmes 1952). They felt alienated and sought a form of community, a new philosophy or moral idea.

In the strict sense, the term 'Beat Generation' refers to a literary movement and its key writers: Allen Ginsberg, William Burroughs and Jack Kerouac. Often this term also incorporates Neal Cassady, the man who inspired the Beats, Gregory Corso, Peter Orlovsky, Carl Solomon, Joan Vollmer, John Clellon Holmes, Herbert Huncke, Lucien Carr and Lawrence Ferlinghetti (Watson 1995). In this dissertation, I will only refer to the Beat Generation in its strictest sense: the primary Beat authors. These authors emerged at the beginning of this cultural movement and were present at the open-society revolution. Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac and William Burroughs illustrate the typical non-conformism that marked their generation. Already in the 1940's, they started travelling across the United States and experimenting with drugs, bisexuality and the nightlife of jazz. However schooled at universities, all three of them had already 'seen the inside

of mental institutions and prisons by the age of thirty' (Campbell 2000) – hence the accusation that the Beat Generation was an immoral movement.

Jack Kerouac was probably the main driving force behind this literary movement. His writing style was inspired by the letters of Neal Cassady, who would later become the hero of his novel *On The Road*. In these letters Kerouac discovered a writing style corresponding to every-day speech. His goal was to transform this natural speech style into literature. Under the influence of natural speech and an interest in experimental jazz and the organic prosody of William Carlos Williams, he would come to define this style as 'Spontaneous Prose'. Later, Ginsberg and Burroughs asked him to formally explain his writing method, which resulted in his famous 'Belief and Technique on Modern prose' (1958), a list of thirty 'essentials,' and the more formal 'Essentials of Spontaneous Prose' (1959). These two lists of guidelines would become the manifesto of their literary style. Furthermore, Kerouac urged his two colleagues to continue their literary experiments and Ginsberg and Burroughs have been influenced by Kerouac's 'essentials'. Consequently – without neglecting individual differences – these three authors exhibit similar writing styles and poetics.

### 1.2 Its influence on rock and roll

Although this group was still marginalized at the time, its impact would extend far beyond its own time. This generation held the germs of the later counterculture movement and they are the forerunners of the 1960's hippie-movement, the anti-war movement and the open-society revolution. This generation initiated the cultural innovation that would alter the United States into a more open, critical society (De Coster 2007). It is in this cultural atmosphere of reaction and innovation that we discern the rise of rock and roll icons. These rock artists displayed the distinctive anti-establishmentarianism of their generation and spearheaded the counterculture movement. Moreover, these musicians have frequently been influenced by the Beat authors and their lyrics convey noticeable similarities with Beat literature.

In this dissertation I will provide evidence for this influence. I will first delineate the cultural and philosophical influence the Beat Generation had on prominent rock artists. By subsequently comparing certain thematic concerns of Beat literature and rock music, I will demonstrate rock music's philosophical indebtedness to the Beat Generation. Their values of spiritual and sexual liberation, demystification of drugs and anti-establishmentarianism are incorporated in the typical themes and contents of contemporary rock music. Furthermore, I will investigate to what extent the Beat Generation has been a stylistic inspiration for rock artists, supported by preceding analyses of typical features in the works of Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg and William Burroughs. As visible in, for example, Patti Smith's lyrics, their techniques and style have also affected rock and roll.

## 2. SURFACE CONNECTIONS BETWEEN ROCK AND THE BEATS

The connection between the Beat Generation and rock music is not coincidental. Poetry and music have always been interrelated, and the Beat writers were highly aware of this. Rhythm was given a central place in their literature, and they frequently connected poetry to music. This leads to an overt connection with rock and roll. Beat authors frequently befriended rock artists and many rock and roll musicians were inspired by Beat literature. As a result, the Beat authors perceived rock and roll as a form of poetry, and rock artists frequently alluded to the Beat Generation.

However superficial, these connections between the Beat Generation and rock artists already indicate the impact the Beats had on rock music. The mutual interest created the basis for deeper correlations, and especially the interest rock artists exhibited in Beat literature initiated their indebtedness to the Beats.

In this section I will discuss these surface-level connections, as the origin of rock and roll's indebtedness to the Beat Generation. First, I will delineate the importance of music to the Beat authors and their interest in blues and rock and roll. Then, I will outline the impact of Beat literature on rock and roll musicians and their various allusions to the Beat Generation.

### 2.1 The Beats and music

Allen Ginsberg frequently emphasized the connection between poetry and music. 'Who denies the music of the spheres denies poetry, denies man, and spits on Blake, Shelley, Christ and Buddha,' he wrote in his 'Notes Written on Finally

Recording *Howl* (1959). Consequently, music played a central part in Beat literature, and certainly in the development of their style. Jack Kerouac denoted the significance of jazz, and particularly experimental bebop in his 'Essentials of Spontaneous Prose' (1959, from here onwards 'Essentials') and 'Belief & Technique for Modern Prose' (1958, from here onwards 'Belief & Technique'). Jazz virtually became a guideline for literature, as Kerouac wrote: ' (...) sketching language is undisturbed flow from the mind of personal secret idea-words, *blowing* (as per jazz musician) on subject of image' (1959). As visible in this excerpt, jazz deeply influenced their literature; Kerouac's spontaneous prose regularly replicated the typical structure of jazz- and bebop improvisations (Paton, 2003).

In extension, rhythm was an important aspect as well, especially in their poetry. Rhythm and poetry have always been inseparable, but the Beat authors altered the role of rhythm in poetry. They strongly rejected classical prosody, as Ginsberg emphasized in his essay 'What way I write' (1960): 'classical systems of prosody are not workable in dealing with these natural rhythms.'

The preceding passage indicates that the Beat authors introduced 'natural rhythm' in poetry, following 'the spontaneous rhythm that Kerouac had discovered in his speech' (Ginsberg, 1961). Accordingly, Ginsberg's famous poem 'Howl' is infused by such 'natural' rhythmic structures. The first section of the poem presents the anaphora of 'who', because Ginsberg 'depended on the word 'who' to keep the beat'. The second part of the poem displays the rhythmic repetition of 'Moloch', and in the footnote to 'Howl' Ginsberg introduces the 'archetypical rhythm of 'Holy Holy Holy'' (Ginsberg, 1959).

Not only did the Beats exhibit an interest in rhythm and jazz, but also in blues. Especially Ginsberg exemplifies this interest, as he learned to play the guitar and wrote several blues songs, such as '4 AM Blues' and 'Vomit Express.' Thereupon, Ginsberg directed his attention to contemporary rock music as well. He associated rock and roll with poetry by arguing that through 'Lennon, Dylan and others (...) poetry has been returned through music back to the human body'

(1973). He even connected Lennon to Shakespeare and Blake, who wrote songs as well, and compared The Beatles' song 'A Day in the Life' to Apollinaire's 'Zone': 'As Apollinaire's "Zone" could be placed in an anthology of twentieth century poetry, so can "Day in the Life"' (1973)

## 2.2 Rock artists and the Beat Generation

However, this interest was not unilateral. Many prominent rock artists were acquainted with the Beats, and were even inspired by their literature. Bob Dylan befriended Ginsberg and he cited both Ginsberg and Kerouac as major influences. He even commented on *On The Road* that 'it changed [his] life just like it changed everyone else's' (Parkins 2005). Likewise, The Doors' keyboardist Ray Manzarek stated that 'if Jack Kerouac had never written *On the Road*, The Doors would never have existed' (Parkins 2005). Particularly Jim Morrison quoted Kerouac as a major influence, and the Doors' singer is known as a Beat poet himself. His poem 'The Opening of The Trunk ' resembles the distinctive Buddhist poetry of Jack Kerouac:

Moment of inner freedom / when the mind is opened and the / infinite  
universe revealed / & the soul is left to wander / dazed & confus'd  
searching / here & there for teachers & friends.

As a result, rock artists frequently alluded to the Beats. The 'a' in The Beatles, for example, is a reference to the Beat Generation. Additionally, Soft Machine was named after Burroughs's novel *The Soft Machine*, and the band Steely Dan was inspired by a phrase from the novel *Naked Lunch*: 'Steely Dan III from Yokohoma'<sup>1</sup>.

Furthermore, their lyrics are full of allusions as well. In his song 'Lust for Life', Iggy pop incorporates the phrase 'well, that's just like hypnotizing chickens' from

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<sup>1</sup> Information on allusions from: Worldlingo 2011. Source:  
[http://www.multilingualarchive.com/ma/enwiki/en/Beat\\_Generation](http://www.multilingualarchive.com/ma/enwiki/en/Beat_Generation)

Burroughs's novel *The Ticket that exploded* (*Search & Destroy* 1977). The Grateful Dead also frequently referred to the Beat Generation, like in the songs 'Cassidy' and 'That's it for the Other One', where they sing: 'here was Cowboy Neal at the wheel of the bus to never ever land', a clear reference to Neal Cassady in Kerouac's novel *On The Road*<sup>2</sup>. Tom Waits's song 'On the Road' overtly alludes to Cassady and the novel as well, as its lyrics portray a character roaming the roads of the United States:

I left New York in 1949 / To go across the country without a bad blame  
dime / Montana in the cold cold fall / Found my father in the gambling  
hall (...) Across to Mississippi, across to Tennessee / Across the Niagara,  
home I'll never be

Since music and poetry have always been closely related, the connection between the Beat Generation and rock artists almost presents itself. Considering the fundamental role music and rhythm played in the literature of the Beats, their interest in blues and rock and roll seems a natural result. On the other hand, rock artists exhibited a significant interest in Beat literature as well. The vast amount of allusions and references to the Beat Generation in the life and work of prominent rock artist indicates their indebtedness to the Beats. Many rock artists acknowledge to be inspired by Beat literature and many of their songs or even band names appear to be a tribute to the Beat Generation. Consequently, this inspiration affected their work as well. As the example of Tom Waits already implied, the impact of the Beat Generation on rock and roll did not remain superficial. Moreover, their lyrics have been profoundly influenced by Beat literature, as will be demonstrated in the following research.

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<sup>2</sup> Information on allusions from: Songmeanings 2012. Source:  
<http://www.songmeanings.net/songs/view/49262/>

### 3. THE BEAT GENERATION'S IDEALS IN ROCK MUSIC

On a philosophical scale, the Beat Generation has deeply marked the Western culture and many of their ideals remain prominent in the Western society. By questioning traditional values and promoting non-conformism the Beat Generation has vastly influenced the 1960's counterculture movement. In his 'A definition of the Beat Generation' (1982) Allen Ginsberg described some essential effects of the Beat Generation. These effects correspond to their ideals:

Spiritual liberation, sexual "revolution" or "liberation," i.e. gay liberation, somewhat catalyzing women's liberation (...) Demystification and/or decriminalization of some laws against marijuana and other drugs. (...) Opposition to the military-industrial machine civilization, (...)

This influence on the counterculture movement is most clearly visible in the work of contemporary rock artists. As I already indicated, many Beat authors befriended rock artists and even collaborated with them, like William Burroughs and Tom Waits on the musical 'The Black Rider' (Conti-Gemes 2004). Moreover, Beat literature inspired many prominent rock artists in their song writing. Consequently, rock music lyrics were often infused by the ideals of the Beat Generation.

In the following section, I will delineate this philosophical and cultural influence of the Beat Generation on contemporary rock music. I will do so by means of the above-mentioned ideals. By subsequently comparing Beat literature to rock lyrics, I will indicate the occurrence of typical Beat Generation ideals in the work of rock and roll musicians.

### 3.1 The demystification of drugs

Until the 1950's, drugs were little spoken of in public life. The Beat Generation attempted to break this taboo by openly discussing drugs, both in conversation and literature. William Burroughs's novel *Junky* demonstrates this demystification, as the story evolves around Burroughs's continuous drug addiction. Hence, 'junk' is the primary subject of the novel:

Morphine hits the backs of the legs first, then the back of the neck, a spreading wave of relaxation slackening the muscles away from the bones so that you seem to float without outlines, like lying in warm salt water.  
(p. 6, ll 11-14)

Not only did they write about drug use, the Beat authors even advocated drugs as a source of inspiration. This can be indicated by the following passage from an interview between Thomas Clarke and Allen Ginsberg in 1966:

So - summing up then - drugs were useful for exploring perception, sense perception, and exploring different possibilities and modes of consciousness, (...) and useful for composing, sometimes, while under the influence. (The Paris Review 2012)

Analogous to Beat literature, rock music attempted to demystify drugs as well. Rock artists frequently used drugs as a source of inspiration and did not withhold themselves to explicitly write about drugs. The oeuvre of the Beatles exhibits this, as Paul McCartney admitted in an interview that drugs frequently inspired their song writing:

He said the song Got To Get You Into My Life was "about pot - although everyone missed it at the time", and Day Tripper was "about acid". He added it was "pretty obvious" that Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds was inspired by LSD, and other songs made "subtle hints" about narcotics.  
(BBC News 2004)

Like many rock artists, Jimi Hendrix nearly cultivated his drug use and thus corresponded to the image of the 'beat' junky we find in Burroughs's novel. His song 'Purple Haze' explicitly describes the use of marihuana:

Purple haze all in my eyes / Don't know if it's day or night / You've got me  
blowin', blowin' my mind / Is it tomorrow or just the end of time?

### 3.2 Sexual liberation

Similar to drugs, sexuality was tabooed as well and particularly homosexuality was considered scandalous and shocking. Allen Ginsberg is perhaps one of the most prototypical homosexual authors who felt no shame to exhibit his homosexuality. He defended the North American Man/Boy Love Association in his essay 'Thought on NAMBLA' (1994) in which he declared that he 'joined NAMBLA in defence of free speech' (Pokharel 2011). Additionally, his poem 'Many Loves' (1956) rather bluntly portrays homosexual intercourse: 'Neal Cassady was my animal: he brought me to my knees and taught me the love of his cock and the secrets of his mind' (ll. 1-2)

Even though few prominent rock artists were openly homosexual, many of them were renowned for their defence of gay rights. A clear example is Joan Baez, as she performed for the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force's 'Fight the Right' fundraising event in San Francisco in 1994 (Levy 2008). Her song 'The Altar Boy and The Thief' expresses her view on homosexuality:

Holding each other as young lovers do / To me they will always remain /  
Unshamed, untamed, and unblamed / The altar boy and the thief /  
Grabbing themselves some relief.

As the phrase 'sex, drugs and rock and roll' already implies, sex and drugs were virtually imperative in rock music. The Doors' song 'Light My Fire' is a near embodiment of this conjunction as the lyrics simultaneously allude to both sex

and drugs:

You know that I would be a liar / If I was to say to you / Girl, we couldn't  
get much higher / Come on baby, light my fire

### 3.3 Spiritual liberation

In 'On the holy road: The beat movement as spiritual protest' (1991) Stephen Prothero describes and explains the origin of the Beat writers' interest in spiritualism and alternative religions:

(...) [T]he beats were wandering monks and mystical seers. They went on the road (...) because they could not find God in the churches and synagogues of postwar America. (...) [T]hey experimented with drugs, psychoanalysis, bisexuality, jazz, mantrachanting, Zen meditation, and new literary forms in an attempt to conjure the gods within.

This also affected the work of many Beat authors. Tony Trigilio examines the influence of Buddhism on Ginsberg's work. In his *Allen Ginsberg's Buddhist Poetics* (2007) he argues that 'Buddhism played a significant role in the poet's development of [his] "embodied poetics of possibility".' Especially his later works were highly influenced by his Buddhist tutors Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche and Gehlek Rinpoche. The poem 'Wichita Vortex Sutra' demonstrates Ginsberg's explorations of Buddhism in his poetry (Trigilio 2007):

Shambu Bharti Baba naked covered with ash / Khaki Baba fat-bellied mad  
with the dogs / Dehorahava Baba who moans Oh how wounded, How  
wounded. (ll. 69-71)

Not only was Ginsberg acquainted with The Beatles, but the famous rock artists also quoted him as a major influence, and just like Ginsberg, The Beatles were practitioners of Buddhism. Consequently, several of their songs are indebted to

Buddhism. 'Across the Universe', for example, incorporates the Buddhist chant 'Jai Guru Deva, om'<sup>3</sup>. Furthermore, the song 'Tomorrow Never Knows' evokes spiritualism as well:

Turn off your mind, relax / And float downstream / It is not dying / It is not dying / Lay down all thought / Surrender to the void / It is shining / It is shining / that you may see / The meaning of within / It is being / It is being.

### 3.4 The anti-war ideal

The Beat Generation was, as John Clellon Holmes put it, 'a postwar generation (...) in a world which seems to mark its cycles by its wars.' ('This is the Beat Generation', 1952) Therefore this generation persistently opposed war and what Ginsberg calls the 'military-industrial machine civilization' ('A definition of the Beat Generation'). Accordingly, Ginsberg was also an important author of anti-war poems such as 'Hum Bom!':

What do we do? / You bomb! You bomb them! / What do we do? / You Bomb! You bomb them / What do we do? / We bomb! We bomb you! (ll. 25-30)

Just as the anti-war poem, the anti-war protest song rapidly gained popularity in the counterculture movement. Here, we can observe a clear connection between Allen Ginsberg and Bob Dylan. Dylan was, just like The Beatles, friends with Ginsberg, and several of his songs are deeply infused by the anti-war ideal, as observable in the lyrics of 'Masters of War':

Come you masters of war / You that build all the guns / You that build the death planes / You that build the big bombs / You that hide behind walls / You that hide behind desks / I just want you to know / I can see through your masks.

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<sup>3</sup> Information from: The Buddha's Face 2010. Source: [http://thebuddhasface.blogspot.com/2010/11/blog-post\\_20.html](http://thebuddhasface.blogspot.com/2010/11/blog-post_20.html)

As I have illustrated, many rock artists were inspired by the beliefs of the Beat Generation. Not only friendships and acquaintances between rock artists and Beat authors give proof of these correlations, but also rock lyrics illustrate the extent of their indebtedness to the Beat Generation. Similar to Beat literature, rock artists rejected conformism and opened up the discussion for taboo subjects such as sexuality and drug use. Furthermore, artists like Bob Dylan and The Beatles carried forth the anti-war ideal visible in Ginsberg's poetry, and many rock artists exposed a similar interest in spiritualism and Asian thought. Their songs evoke the same sense of anti-establishmentarianism and non-conformism as the work of Beat authors. Consequently, rock lyrics often appear to function as a carrier for their ideals.

## 4. STYLISTIC INFLUENCE OF THE BEAT GENERATION ON ROCK MUSIC

The Beat Generation was a highly experimental and renewing movement. Not only in subject matter, but also in style they sought new boundaries, motivated by Ginsberg's statement that 'classical systems of prosody are not workable in dealing with these natural rhythms' (1960). In their search of what Kerouac indicated as 'wild form' (1952) or 'spontaneous prose', they broke away from traditional structure and developed an entirely new writing method. Consequently, they initiated a distinctive style, marked by the use of long lines, free association, fast succession of images and a breach from structural rules.

Considering that rock and roll artists were culturally and philosophically influenced by the Beats, it is likely that they mimicked their distinctive style as well. However, rock artists did not completely turn Beat literature into music. As Allen Ginsberg sensibly indicated, their 'poetic forms outwardly resemble antique verse including regular stanzas, refrains and rhymes' (1966). Unlike the Beats, rock artists were still bound to a constant, 'unnatural' rhythm and classical patterns of music. In this regard, rock and roll songs can structurally never entirely resemble Beat literature. Nonetheless, rock music was still visibly infused by the style of the Beats, and their lyrics feature several formal characteristics typical of Beat literature.

Hence, I will provide evidence that, although bound to classical song structure, rock artists exhibit a formal stylistic indebtedness to the Beats as well. I will do so against the background of their literary theory, mainly expressed by Kerouac in his 'Belief & Technique' and 'Essentials'. By subsequently comparing their theory and literature to rock lyrics, I will indicate the occurrence of the distinctive form and style of the Beats in rock and roll music.

#### 4.1 Free association and collage

In his 'Essentials' Kerouac writes: 'SCOPING. Not "selectivity" of expression but following free deviation (association) of mind into limitless blow-on-subject seas of thought (...).' Similarly, in his 'Belief & Technique' he states: '7: Blow as deep as you want to blow,' referring to jazz and experimental bebop, where artists like Charlie Parker would limitlessly improvise. These guidelines for spontaneous prose clearly imply the use of free association:

(...) O the horrors of the darkness and clouds, no people, around the stormy tempest of his rock is void – you look for waves – He walked in the waves with silver raiment feet, Peter was a fisherman but he never fished that deep – the Lord spoke to dark assemblies about gloomy fish – (...) (Kerouac, *Doctor Sax*, 1959)

Rock lyrics exhibit a similar use of free association, and just like the previous example, rock lyrics frequently appear to consist of dissociated data, rather evoking an atmosphere than truly conveying a narrative. This can be observed in the lyrics of 'Space Monkey' by Patti Smith:

Blood on the T.V., ten o'clock news. / Souls are invaded, heart in a groove. /  
Beatin' and beatin' so outta time. / What's the mad matter with the church  
chimes?

#### 4.2 Repetition and anaphora

Beat poetry, and specifically Ginsberg's poetry since Burroughs and Kerouac primarily focussed on prose, cultivated the use of repetitions and anaphora. As I have mentioned in the first section, 'Howl' was strongly based upon repetitions 'to keep the beat' and to carry the rhythm of the poem. Similarly, 'Kaddish, part IV' relies on the anaphora of 'with your eyes':

'with your eyes of Russia / with your eyes of no money / with your eyes of  
false China / with your eyes of Aunt Elanor in an oxygen tent' (ll. 25-28)

Ginsberg connected Beat poetry to rock music by recognizing Buddhist mantra chanting<sup>4</sup> in rock lyrics. In his 'Some Metamorphoses of Personal Prosody' (1966) he states that '[m]antra repetition (...) has entered Western consciousness and a new mantra-rock is formulated in the Byrds and Beatles.' Indeed, many rock songs display anaphora or repetitions, like The Doors' 'Not to Touch the Earth:

Run, run, run / Let's run / Let's run (...) Run with me / Run with me / Run  
with me / Let's run (...) Sun, sun, sun / Burn, burn, burn, / Soon, soon, soon, /  
Moon, moon, moon (...) Soon! / Soon! / Soon! (The Doors, 'Not To Touch The  
Earth')

#### 4.3 Long lines and Thought-units

Both Kerouac's prose and Allen Ginsberg's poetry, and in particular *Howl* and *Kaddish*, are marked by their distinctive use of long lines. As Ginsberg noted, the lines in his poetry represented 'thought-stops, breath stops, runs of inspiration, changes of mind, (...) ' (1966). As this quotation indicates, Beat authors did not restrict themselves to long lines. Often, they mixed 'long and short lines, single breath remaining the rule of measure.' (Ginsberg 1959) Thus, one line in their poetry, or one uninterrupted syntactic unit in their prose, represented one thought, regardless the length. Additionally, Kerouac even proposed not to

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<sup>4</sup> Mantra chanting is a Buddhist meditation practice in which a mantra – a single sound, word or small group of words – is continuously repeated.

disconnect these thoughts by traditional punctuation, but by the 'vigorous space dash' to separate 'rhetorical breathing' (1959):

Two o' clock – strange – thunder and the yellow walls of my mother's kitchen with the green electric clock, the round table in the middle, the stove, the great twenties castiron stove now only used to put things on next to the modern thirties green gas stover upon which so many succulent meals and flaky huge gentle apple pies have been hot, whee – (Sarah Avenue House). (*Doctor Sax*)

Although rock music is bound to traditional verse structure and thus rarely produces long lines, the use of separate lines as separate thoughts frequently occurs in rock and roll lyrics. This is observable in the previous examples of Patti Smith's 'Space Monkey' or The Doors' 'Riders On The Storm'. Nonetheless, long uninterrupted thought-units have still found entry in rock lyrics. Tom Waits's song 'Jack and Neal' narrates the adventures of Jack Kerouac and Neal Cassady as depicted in *On the Road*. Not only does he imitate the story, but he also mimics the narrative style:

'Jack was sittin' poker faced with bullets backed with bitches / Neal hunched at the wheel puttin' everyone in stitches / Braggin' 'bout some nurse he screwed while drivin' through Nebraska / And when she came she honked the horn and Neal just barely missed a truck / And then he asked her if she'd like to come like that to Californy.'

#### 4.4 Breach of structural rules

In her analysis of Kerouac's guidelines for spontaneous prose, Lien De Coster points out that 'the (...) imperative in line number 13, "Remove literary, grammatical and syntactical inhibition", is the most concrete guideline the text offers. Kerouac pleads for a breach of conventional structural rules when they tend to hinder the creative process' (2007). In this respect, Kerouac's writing, as well as Ginsberg's and Burroughs's, can be perceived as 'sketching (...) a definite image-object' (Kerouac, 1959). Beat literature often appears to be a collage of crude images in fast succession – like a painter 'sketching'. In this creative process of swiftly sketching 'the flow that already exists intact in mind' (Kerouac, 1958), traditional rules of syntax, grammar and narration are frequently neglected. This breach of structural rules is probably most clearly detectable in Burroughs's *Naked Lunch*, since the novel was composed of quick notes written while under the influence of drugs:

Down skid row to Market Street Museum shows ll kinds masturbation and self-abuse ... young boys need it special... They was ripe for the plucking forgot way back yonder in the corn hole (...) Read the metastasis with blind fingers. Fossil message of arthritis... (p. 182)

Allen Ginsberg detected a similar high-speed working method in rock music: 'Principle of composition here is (...) primarily spontaneous and improvised (in the studio if need be at the last minute' (1966). The Beatles' hit 'Twist and Shout' was such a spontaneous record; the song had to be recorded in a single take since their time was scarce and John Lennon's voice was already hoarse<sup>5</sup> (Songfacts 2012).

Additionally, rock and roll lyrics frequently ignore structural and grammatical rules as well. Tom Waits's song 'Drunk On The Moon', for example, consists of syntactically unconnected images:

Tight-slacked clad girls on the graveyard shift / 'Neath the cement stroll /

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<sup>5</sup> Information on 'Twist and Shout' from Songfacts 2012. Source: <http://www.songfacts.com/detail.php?id=14>

Catch the midnight drift / Cigar chewing Charlie /In that newspaper nest/  
Grifting hot horse tips / On who's running the best.

Even though rock and roll was still bound to the traditional structure of music and verse, the stylistic innovation of the Beats has affected their lyrics as well. Due to the close relationship between rock artists and Beat authors, many rock artists adapted the style of the Beats into their music. Consequently, typical stylistic features such as the use of free association and the use of repetition mark their lyrics. Analogous to Beat literature, their songs appear to consist of dissociated images, evoking a sense of detachment. Furthermore, they broke away from structural rules of grammar, syntax and literature and some artists even consciously imitated the distinctive style of the Beats, as exemplified by Tom Waits. As a result, rock and roll answers to Kerouac's vision of '*wild form, man, wild form*' (1952).

## 5. ALLEN GINSBERG'S 'HOWL' AND PATTI SMITH'S 'LAND'

### A COMPARISON

Patti Smith's music career started rather late, at age twenty-eight. Nonetheless, she would become one of the most influential rock artists, and she is often considered to be 'the godmother of punk'. Besides musician, she was an all-round artist. In the late 1960's she started working as a performance artist in Paris. Furthermore, she wrote several poems and a play, and also appeared in several plays of the New York underground scene. Correspondingly, her concerts often had the allure of a performance, incorporating poetry readings.<sup>6</sup> This indicates her interest in literature and also the Beat Generation. Smith befriended William Burroughs in the 1970's and cited him as a major influence. Burroughs even interviewed her for the magazine *Spin* (1988). Her revolutionary debut album *Horses* fused rock music with spoken poetry that strongly resembled Beat literature. Moreover, the album was a tribute to the Beat Generation and also highly influenced by its literature, both in content and style. More than any other rock, Patti Smith's music is an unmistakable reflection of Beat poetry.

In this concluding analysis, I will demonstrate Smith's lyrical indebtedness by comparing features both related to content and style in Allen Ginsberg's 'Howl' (from *Howl and other poems*, 1955) and Patti Smith's 'Land' from her debut album *Horses* (1975). First I will delineate some principal features of 'Howl,' after which I will indicate the occurrence of these features in Patti Smith's 'Land'.

### 5.1 'Howl'

Allen Ginsberg wrote 'Howl' in 1955. Along with Jack Kerouac's *On The Road* and William Burroughs' *Naked Lunch* it would become one of the definite highpoints of the Beat Generation. Jonah Raskin described 'Howl' as representing 'the clarion call of individual resistance that sent down the collective walls of Cold

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<sup>6</sup> Patti Smith Biography from:  
<http://web.archive.org/web/20080611145837/http://www.aristarec.com/psmith/smithbio.html>

War authority and consensus, leading to a new era of individual freedom of expression and postwar radicalism' (2004). This already signals the non-conformist nature of the poem. Its famous opening 'I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness (...)' ('Howl', ll. 1-2) immediately evokes the image of an apocalyptic wasteland. The poem introduces a disturbing vision of a society gone mad and evokes a sense of degeneration and decay, for instance in lines 18 to 20 (Jönsson):

who cowered in unshaven rooms in underwear, / burning their money in  
wastebaskets and listening / to the Terror through the wall.

In extension to degeneration, death is another frequent theme and is often entangled with other subjects, such as drugs and sex. This contributes to the global atmosphere of 'being beat':

Who ate fire in paint hotels or drank turpentine in / Paradise Alley, death,  
or purgatoried their / torsos night after night /  
with dreams, with drugs, with waking nightmares, / alcohol and cock and  
endless balls ( ll 23-27).

As visible in the preceding example, Ginsberg did not withhold himself in his search for honesty to explicitly refer to homosexuality. Phrases such as 'who let themselves be fucked in the ass by saintly motorcyclists, and screamed with joy' (ll. 98-99) and 'cocksman and Adonis of Denver-joy' (l. 128) are responsible for the renowned obscenity trial.

Furthermore, the poem swiftly flows from one image into another in fast succession, generating a sense of chaos:

Peyote solidities of halls, backyard green tree cemetery / dawns, wine drunkenness over the rooftops, / storefront boroughs of teahed joyride neon / blinking traffic light, sun and moon and tree (ll. 31-34).

The entire poem forms a continuous stream of images, suggesting disintegration, anxiety, insanity and a nightmarish vision of the modern world. In her analysis of 'Howl', Jönson observes that the poem expresses a desire to escape and it accurately portrays the American disillusionment, brought by a seemingly insane narrator.

Stylistically, rhythm is a crucial aspect of the poem. Ginsberg rejected traditional poetic structure and traditional rhythmic patterns. He sought an 'open, ecstatic expression of thoughts and feelings that were naturally poetic' (Miles 2001). This is comparable to Kerouac's conception of 'spontaneous prose,' where the rhythm reflects the natural flow of words, and caesuras are merely reminiscent of natural pauses and breaths. This is also observable in the line breaks, which are similarly determined by breath (Ginsberg 1959).

The poem's rhythm is also frequently propelled by repetitions, such as the repetition of 'Moloch' in the second part of 'Howl':

Moloch the vast stone of war! Moloch the stunned governments! / Moloch whose mind is pure machinery! Moloch whose / blood is running money!  
(ll 281-283)

This use of anaphora and repetition is typical in combination with Ginsberg's distinctive use of long lines:

I'm with you in Rockland / where fifty more shocks will never return your /  
soul to its body again from its pilgrimage to a / cross in the void. / I'm with  
you in Rockland where (...) (ll. 352-357).

Moreover, the use of repetition and free verse is a consequence of the search for a spontaneous form of poetry, related to Kerouac's spontaneous prose. As Ginsberg indicated 'the whole first section [was] typed out madly in one afternoon, a tragic custard-pie comedy of wild phrasing, meaningless images for the beauty of abstract poetry of mind running along making awkward combinations (...)' (1959). Hence, 'Howl' is constructed by free association, nearly composing a collage. This technique gives the impression that the poem is no more than the chaotic outburst of a madman, arbitrarily arranging words.

When we compare 'Howl' to Patti Smith's 'Land,' we will notice that all preceding features are retraceable in Smith's lyrics. In the following section, I will subsequently demonstrate the rock artist's indebtedness to Beat Generation literature.

## 5.2 'Land'

'Land' is the seventh track on Patti Smith's debut album *Horses*, and just like 'Howl' it consists of three parts: 'Horses,' 'Land of a Thousand Dances' and 'La mer (de).' Corresponding to 'Howl,' 'Land' also portrays a generation gone mad and conveys a strong sense of decay. The song's opening can be described as being 'about a teenaged locker-room attack that turns into a murder and homosexual rape that runs into horses breathing flames' (Rockwell, 1976). In other words, aberrant behaviour is continuously present in the song:

The boy took Johnny, he pushed him against the locker / He drove it in, he  
drove it home, he drove it deep in Johnny (...) [Johnny] started crashing

his head against the locker/ started laughing hysterically ('Land,' ll 8-13).

The apocalyptic sense it conveys, which was also evoked in 'Howl,' is again suffused by the omnipresent themes of death and disintegration: 'It was a black tube, he felt himself disintegrate' (l. 116).

Additionally, the theme of sexual liberation is also present in the song, as the narrator describes sex and love affairs, for example in the lines 55 and 56:

I was standing there with my legs spread like a sailor / (in a sea of possibilities) I felt his hand on my knee.

As Rockwell's description already indicated, the song consists of a continuous flow of chaotic images. Often these images appear to be merely nonsense, suggesting degeneration and thus constructing a disturbed and disconnected narrator:

Shined open coiled snakes white and shiny twirling and encircling / Our lives are now entwined, we will fall yes we're together twining (ll. 76-77).

The song appears to be a collage of images, rather than a linear story. Here, Patti Smith seems stylistically indebted to the techniques of 'spontaneous prose.' Her lyrics are an unmistakable result of free association:

He picked up the blade and he pressed it against his smooth throat / (the spoon) / and let it dip in / (the veins) / Dip in to the sea, to the sea of possibilities / It started hardening (ll. 61-67).

Another clear correlation between 'Howl' and 'Land' is the use of free verse. Just like Ginsberg rejected traditional poetic structure, Patti Smith breaks away from traditional song structure. There is no division between verses and chorus and

the entire song seems to be one prolonged verse without a fixed rhythmic pattern. Again, the rhythm is determined by natural speech-flow and natural pauses.

Although there is no thematic repetition of a chorus, the song is infused by repetitions that carry the rhythm. As in 'Howl,' these repetitions frequently coincide with long lines and appear to be the consequence of free association and the stream-of-consciousness technique:

He saw horses, horses, horses, horses, horses, horses, horses, horses. / Do you know how to pony like bony maroney / Do you know how to twist, well it goes like this, it goes like this (ll. 18-20)

The connection between the Beat Generation and Patti Smith is clear. When looking at her lyrics, we notice several features typical of Beat literature. Recurrent themes of death, sexuality, disintegration and insanity in Ginsberg's 'Howl' are similarly present in Patti Smith's 'Land'. This influence is not only observable in the content and themes, but it has also deeply marked Patti Smith's writing style. By denying traditional structure and using free verse, her song immediately gets the allure of a Beat poem. Furthermore, she replicates the techniques of Beat writers, such as Kerouac's guidelines for 'spontaneous prose' and free association. Consequently, the song conveys the same mood of non-conformism as 'Howl'. Given that Patti Smith was often considered a Beat poet, she forms a conclusive example of the Beat Generation's impact on rock music.

## 6. FINAL CONCLUSION

The Beat Generation has clearly left its marks on the 1960's counterculture movement. By questioning the conservative American society and rejecting conformism, Beat literature exhibits the early germs of this cultural evolution. As I have argued, their influence is observable in the work of contemporary rock artists. In the preceding chapters I have highlighted several aspects of this indebtedness, to provide evidence for the direct influence of Beat literature on rock and roll.

To begin with, rhythm and music always played a central part in the development of Beat literature. Thereupon the Beat authors also exposed an interest in blues and rock music. On the other hand, rock artists were interested in Beat literature as well. Many rock artists explicitly referred to Beat literature as a source of inspiration, and their work frequently alluded to the Beats. As several prominent rock artists befriended Beat authors and read their literature, the Beats have philosophically inspired them.

Consequently, this also affected their lyrics. The oeuvres of The Beatles, The Doors, Bob Dylan and many others incorporate the typical themes and ideals present in Beat literature. Just like the Beats, rock artists experimented with drugs and openly discussed tabooed subjects in their lyrics. Furthermore, they sought wisdom in Asian religion and strongly opposed to the military-industrial machine civilization.

Yet, perhaps more important is the stylistic influence Beat literature exercised on rock lyrics. The Beats broke away from traditional rules of story telling by introducing natural language, free association, an excessive use of repetitions and anaphora, and ultimately a breach of structural rules. Just like the Beats experimented with literature, rock artists experimented with song writing, and their lyrics portray those stylistic features typical of Beat literature.

Especially Patti Smith forms the most convincing example of this influence, as her songs fuse rock music and Beat poetry. Not only did she explicitly refer to the Beats as a source of inspiration, but her songs also formally and thematically resemble Beat literature and thus evoke a similar atmosphere as Ginsberg's poetry.

Although superficial similarities, such as the non-conformist attitude, could more likely be related to the cultural atmosphere surrounding these rock artists, their explicit reference to the Beats as a source of inspiration and their mimicking of Beat style affirm their direct indebtedness to the Beat Generation. As a result, rock lyrics portray the ideals and style visible in Beat literature, and carried forth the anti-establishmentarianism that suffused the counterculture movement.

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