

Pictures Worth a Thousand Words

Poet Allen Ginsberg Resurrects Photos—and an Era—From His Past

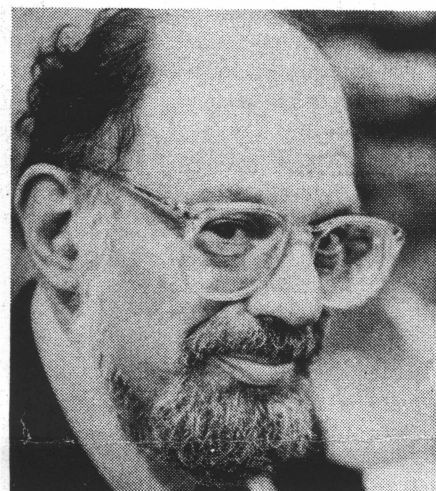
BY ADAM BLOCK

For most Americans, the name of Allen Ginsberg conjures up only an image: the beatnik poet and sandal-clad bard of '50s coffee shops or the flower-garlanded Hare Krishna-chanting youth guru of the '60s. Despite a staggering body of work and a complex, colorful history, America's best-known poet remains for many an indistinct icon of an earlier era.

But now, *Allen Ginsberg Photographs* (Twelvetees Press) stands to correct all that. With this handsome volume, Ginsberg illustrates his history: annotating snapshots and portraits, offering intimate images on a stunning scale, and penning generous biographies of all of his subjects. The book chronicles the poet's legendary lovers and fellow travelers from across the last four decades. There are shots of Jack Kerouac and Neal Cassady, the straight comrades Ginsberg seduced; William S. Burroughs, his gay mentor and onetime lover; Peter Orlovsky, with whom he shared a 30-year-long nonmonogamous "marriage"; and a slew of other renegade artists and spiritual pilgrims. Many from this circle of friends became key players in the beat movement.

"By 1953 I think that we all realized that we were sacred to each other," Ginsberg explains. "We also took it for granted that we'd be immortal—maybe not in the eyes of the world but in each other's eyes." And, for that matter, in the eye of Ginsberg's camera.

Ginsberg's readers know him as an outspoken homosexual. Sitting in his Lower East Side apartment on an unseasonably warm February evening, he talks about his first coming out. Was it tough, on that night back in 1945, for the then-18-year-old to tell Kerouac, his 22-year-old novelist friend, that he was a queer?



Allen Ginsberg
Images of renegade artists and friends

"It was as delicate and painless as plucking a hair from a bowl of milk," Ginsberg answers sweetly. "That is the famous Buddhist image for the transition from the living to the death states. Isn't that nice? Very easy. And it was like that with Kerouac—his tolerance was like milk."

Kerouac's compassion wasn't blind, though. "When I told him, he groaned," Ginsberg chuckles. "He knew it would be trouble between us, because I was in love with him—and with about four other people at the same time."

A decade later, Ginsberg came out publicly with his epic poem *Howl* (City Lights). It was a revelatory roar that shattered the silence of couth in American letters.

Fourteen years before Stonewall, Ginsberg sang of

The best minds of my generation . . . who let themselves be fucked in the ass by saintly motorcyclists, and screamed with joy, who blew and were blown by those human seraphim, the sailors, caresses of Atlantic and Caribbean love.

"It was a literary coming out," Ginsberg

says. "I'd never written so directly about gay sex before. But this time I was writing for my own pleasure. I didn't think of it as a poem, and I never expected it to be published. So I could say anything I wanted. With that came both the release of candor and the expansion of my poetic line to be much more exuberant and athletic."

Ginsberg knew that the "motorcyclists" stanza was special. "It arrived in the midst of that poem like a little mind bomb," he smiles. "The point was to take a situation, like the rape in *Deliverance*, that would give rise to horror in most conventional thought and to turn it around entirely: to make it a scream of joy, which is much more like it."

"I thought it was very funny—that twist—and when Kerouac heard it, he laughed. You come across that line and all of a sudden get the truth instead of another false stereotype."

It was a truth that the poem and poet would constantly trumpet—but not without risk. *Howl* was temporarily seized and banned, but it eventually went on to become one of the best-selling poems of the 20th century.

THE POET AS REBEL

Over the next 35 years, Ginsberg would continue to be both celebrated and censured as he stood and sang against the forces of prudery and repression. His candor and ebullience liberated, disarmed, and shocked listeners across the globe. Ginsberg would prove no Robert Frost "tending fences."

In 1965 Ginsberg was asked to visit and was then expelled from both Havana and Prague after his open homosexuality, protests against mistreatment of gays, and advocacy of marijuana rankled Communist authorities. In 1972 his lascivious celebration "Please Master" became a popular broadside at gay S/M bars. In 1976 Columbia Records refused to release an album of Ginsberg's work, produced by John Ham-

"If you present gay dick publicly, it should be done with a sense of calm.

mond, which featured the poet (backed by Bob Dylan) improvising the following lines on the country-blues number "Jimmy Berman":

18-year-old Jimmy, the boy is my delight.
18-year-old Jimmy, I love him day and night.
Drop your pants and I'll give you some good head.

In 1983 *Time* magazine attacked the North American Man/Boy Love Association (NAMBLA) as "a group involved in the systematic exploitation of the weak and immature by the powerful and disturbed." Ginsberg wrote *Time* that the description "struck me on first reading as a precise characterization of *Time's* own assault on the mind and body politic. . . . I am a member of NAMBLA because I love boys. Everybody does who has a little humanity."

Ginsberg is by turns cranky and carefree, rabbinical and Rabelaisian. When it is suggested that he has been a courageous gay rebel, though, he demurs.

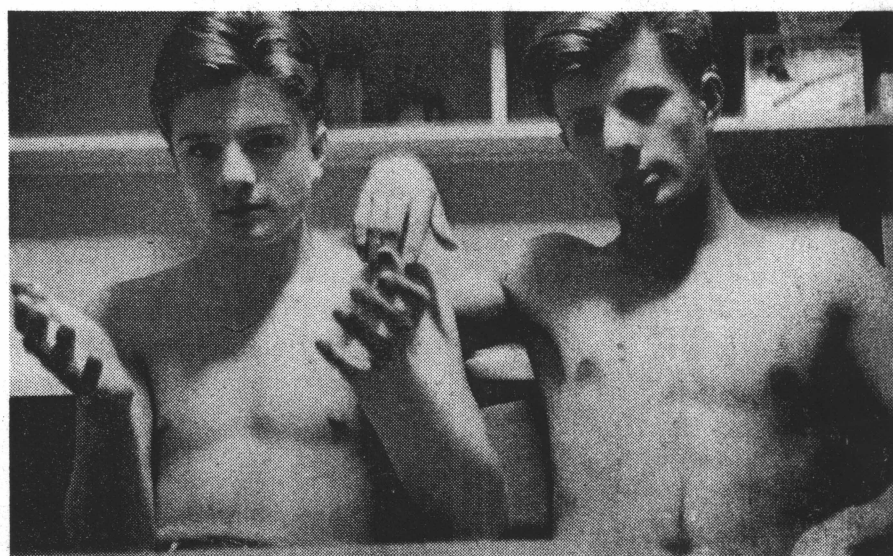
"I see it a little differently," he explains. "My poetry reports on actual feelings, confusions, and desires. I'm not putting out opinions like 'Gay is good' or 'Gay is better.' I'm just putting out information: that I get a hard-on when I see Neal Cassady or something."

"I never had feelings of bravery or rebellion," he continues. "I always had a feeling of just pushing through to be accurate, while everybody else was trying to shush it up or soften things or avoid the issue. I didn't feel I had to avoid the issue or to be aggressive. I felt that other people were aggressing on me. So there was no need to be aggressive—just stay with the truth."

"Frankly, I wouldn't have survived to this age of 64 years if I'd taken all the shit that was laid on me seriously. If I'd gotten hooked in or fought it like a monster, then it would've worn me out."

Ginsberg is appreciative of the new gay activism, particularly by the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power. "Its aggression is poised, accurate, and spontaneous," he says. But the poet warns against "gestures that escalate the hysteria. I don't think that does any good."

"I think that if you present some gay dick



Lafcadio Orlovsky (left) with his older brother Peter
"I would like to take more pictures of naked young men," says Ginsberg.

or gay ass publicly, it should be done with a sense of calm—not with the fear or anxiety that you're going to embarrass somebody or embarrass yourself. It should be with a majestic attitude of proclamation—not as an apology or a challenge."

THE POET AS PHOTOGRAPHER

While Ginsberg's poetry arises from the spontaneous transcription of his own thoughts, he is a painstaking editor of his archives and history. The photography book has been five years in the making. In 1984 Ginsberg hired the young editor Raymond Foye (who had been Kerouac's paperboy at age 8) to sort through the chaos of old photographs stored at Columbia University. Foye discovered a trove of unexpected treasures—scores of negatives that had never been printed.

"I was amazed," Ginsberg recalls. "There were images I'd never seen—hadn't recalled taking. It was like suddenly looking through a time telescope, being able to travel back 30 years."

Ginsberg's chronicling had been haphazard and discontinuous, though. From 1964 to 1984, he didn't own a camera. In 1984 he got himself a new one and "became a shutterbug"—cadging tips from Robert Frank and Bernice Abbott. By 1985 he had 200 images and a book contract.

Foye and Twelvetees publisher Jack Woody helped Ginsberg cull the 91 photos that he individually annotated (a project Dylan had originally offered to undertake).

Ginsberg next took ardent pains over an appendix, crafting well-researched entries for every person photographed. "I needed to provide the bibliographical glamour to readers of a whole other generation who may not know the histories of what I think of as these sacred personages. I want a kid in India encountering a picture of Gregory Corso to be able to discover him as a great poet—a kid in China to discover William Burroughs as a novelist and painter."

There is inevitably a homoerotic subtext to the book. It is there in the early shots of the men Ginsberg hero-worshiped: Cassady in 1955 under a marquee for *The Wild One*; young Kerouac by the docks, where he and Ginsberg would wander and jack off together. It is there with Burroughs, grandly dispensing camp wisdom to Kerouac on a beat-up sofa, and in a luminous picture of the shirtless Orlovsky brothers. Peter, who at 22 had already been Ginsberg's lover for a year, is seated next to 15-year-old Lafcadio.

"I'd never printed that one, and suddenly there it was—with that chiaroscuro out of Caravaggio," Ginsberg marvels, "and Lafcadio's hands raised like some

"Howl is something the authorities can neither spit out nor swallow."



The beat pack (left to right): Bob Donlon, Neal Cassady, Ginsberg, Robert LaVigne, and Lawrence Ferlinghetti
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Renaissance jester."

For the current issue of *Aperture*, Ginsberg wrote an essay in defense of young male nude photography and admits that he wished that this book were more of an erotic celebration. "I wish I had pictures of the angelic, young Gregory Corso—from when we first met. I wish I had nudes of the young Neal Cassady. I would like to take more pictures of naked young men," he smiles. "I have some but couldn't secure releases to print them. There is one in the book: of Patrick Warner, which I like. He is very chaste, straight, and was kind enough to let me include it."

And how is the poet's sex life now that he has reached age 64?

"Great sex for me is getting it up," Ginsberg smiles ruefully. "I learned this week that my testosterone level is depressed."

"You know," he reflects, "when I was young, I was prejudiced against older people—sexually. But I've found in the last decade as I've gotten completely unappetizing," he grins, "that there are a variety of

people with other tastes. Right now I have this 19-year-old boy with a big phallus—almost always hard—and he keeps telling me he finds me attractive."

Ginsberg's voice has risen in delight and wonderment. He pauses and shrugs, "This is just an old queen talking—a story you can probably hear from many old queens—but it does seem to come around."

Still, as old as he may feel, the poet remains very much in the fray. In January, Ginsberg was in court challenging a 1988 law banning all "indecent" material from the airwaves. A proposed broadcast of *Howl* on Pacifica Radio in Los Angeles had been canceled because of the Jesse Helms-inspired legislation. Ginsberg notes approvingly that the poem—now widely anthologized in school texts—has proved to be "something the authoritarians still can neither spit out nor swallow."

This May, the opera *Hydrogen Jukebox* (featuring 20 of Ginsberg's poems, scored as songs by Phillip Glass) will have its American premiere at the Brooklyn Academy of

Music before embarking on a ten-city national tour.

And on June 3, Ginsberg will celebrate his 65th birthday, doing a poetry reading with his brother, Eugene, at Walt Whitman's birthplace. "We'll be giving awards to grade-school kids for their poetry," the poet smiles, "a little NAMBLA in action—celebrating the love of children."

Ginsberg also has three big books in the works: a volume of journals from the '50s, one of selected letters, and a third of literary essays. "And maybe an extra book of interviews," he adds, "and a literary history of the beats. That one is already on tape. What I want to do is finish those things and then go on some kind of withdrawal and meditation retreat," he sighs.

The question comes to mind "Would that involve celibacy?" One can almost smell Ginsberg's 19-year-old in the next room.

"I didn't say anything about celibacy," Ginsberg barks. "I'm sure you can jack off and fuck anybody you want—as long as you sit and meditate eight hours a day." ▼