

where have all the poets gone?

by Vince
Darcangelo

Boulder's poetic
legacy lives
on in new locales

The Reverend Friendly steps to the mic, his rugged gray beard and tufts of fine, silver hair betraying his more than 70 years on the planet. Despite his age, the long-time street poet speaks with the enthusiasm of a first-semester fine arts student as he recites his spiritual-minded poems, filling Camille's Sidewalk Café with a commanding, saliva-filled rasp.

"The world is perishable, but the spirit is not," rails the Reverend.

As he speaks, you can feel the city growing, breathing, expanding. Historic buildings are leveled, reincarnated as fashion-focused cafes, trendy shoe stores and upscale restaurants. The corner of 18th and Pearl is reborn. A bike shop resides where Penny Lane served up caffeine and culture just a summer ago, where you could find as many people scribbling in journals as you could pounding away at laptops.

For nearly two decades Penny Lane was ground zero for grassroots poetry in Boulder, led by Tom Peters' Monday night readings and made legend by a who's who of 20th-century authors—Anne Waldman, Allen Ginsberg, Spalding Gray—who graced the Penny Lane stage and sanctified the café as hallowed ground. When



Penny Lane became the latest bastion of "Old Pearl" to shut its doors last July, many feared the venue's famed poetry community would close up shop as well.

"Penny Lane was such an important nexus and the bohemian site in town. You wonder if the town will lose its soul if there's nothing replacing it," says Waldman, seminal Beat poet and co-founder of Naropa University's Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics. "I certainly hope something keeps going."

In a post-Penny Lane world, that is the challenge confronting Boulder's poetry community. Recently, new venues like The Laughing Goat and The Cellar have taken the baton. Along with old favorites like Naropa and the Many Mountains Moving literary salon, they are continuing the legacy of spoken word in Boulder—and spawning new traditions in the city that Ginsberg built.

On stage at Camille's, the Reverend Friendly stumbles on a phrase, struggles to recall the next line, laughs, then starts over.

"Rejoice in the truth that your spirit never dies," he says finally, remembering. "Know that your spirit is and cease from sorrow."

He repeats with emphatic optimism: "Cease from

by Tyler Wilcox

Poetry in motion

Boulder filmmaker brings Ginsberg to DVD

In the summer of 1968, Jerry Aaronson, a young photojournalist, was covering the notoriously tumultuous Democratic National Convention in Chicago. The streets of the Windy City were overrun with hippies, Yippies, Black Panthers, Weathermen and every other sort of activist imaginable. There were also thousands of cops, decked out in full riot gear, licensed and prepared to use force should any of the protesters "step out of line." Step out of line they did, and chaos quickly broke out. In the midst of a tear gas-ridden clash between young radicals and police, Aaronson found himself about to be clubbed by an indiscriminating cop. As the baton came at his head, a strange sound came blasting from an unseen loudspeaker.

"OMMMMMMMMMMMMMMM!"

The cop froze, baffled. It came again, louder this time.

"OMMMMMMMMMMMMMMM!"

Aaronson scrambled out from under the baton and went searching for the source of this oddly soothing sound amidst the madness. In a few moments, he found it: A man with piercing eyes, black-rimmed glasses and a long, dark beard, calmly intoning a Buddhist mantra into a microphone. Aaronson approached him.

"Hey, who are you?" he asked.

"I'm Allen Ginsberg," the man responded.

Aaronson shook his hand. "You just saved my head, man!"

From that day on, Aaronson swore he'd find a way to repay Ginsberg somehow. He didn't realize that doing so would take nearly 40 years.

Aaronson, who today teaches documentary filmmaking at CU-Boulder, is currently putting the finishing touches on the DVD version of *The Life and Times of Allen Ginsberg*, the film he refers to as "my tribute to Allen."

Allen, of course, was one of the 20th century's greatest poets, who first came to prominence in the 1950s as one of the primary architects of the so-called "Beat Generation," along with Jack Kerouac and William Burroughs, among others. His two major works of that decade, "Howl" and "Kaddish" changed the face of poetry forever with their jazz-inspired cadences and unflinchingly personal subject matter. But Ginsberg was more than just a poet—he was a tireless political agitator and activist, an enthusiastic espouser of Buddhist beliefs before Buddhism became fashionable, and an amateurish, but highly effective musician. He was also openly gay at a time when most homosexuals were deep in the closet. Finally, in 1974

Ginsberg co-founded Naropa University's Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics here in Boulder with fellow poet Anne Waldman and returned every summer to teach poetry at the school's esteemed writing program. As his hero Walt Whitman wrote: "I contain multitudes." It's a sentiment Ginsberg made his life's credo.

Getting all aspects of this larger-than-life personality into a 90-minute film proved challenging for Aaronson. He began working on the film in the early '80s with Ginsberg's blessing. He then spent the bulk of the decade poring over source material—childhood home movies, the poet's extensive archive of correspondence and journals, countless television appearances, newsreel footage, audio recordings—all the evidence of an extremely well-documented life. Aaronson also conducted dozens of interviews with Ginsberg's family members, fellow poets, associates and admirers. In the end, he had accumulated more than 120 hours of film on the poet.

"It became quite an undertaking," Aaronson admits. "I just kept coming across more and more great material."

The Life and Times of Allen Ginsberg debuted at the Sundance Film Festival in 1993 and was met with immediate acclaim, winning the International Documentary Association award and being nominated for the Grand Jury Prize at Sundance. This was all nice for Aaronson, but the approval he was most concerned about was from his subject.

"I finished the film, and I decided that [Allen] had to see the film," Aaronson says. "So I said to him, 'You have to see the film.' He said, 'Are you sure?' And I told him, 'Yes, I'm not going to release it if you don't like it.' And he was reluctant: 'Oh, I'm sure I'd like it.' But finally I convinced him to come over to my house and watch the film.

So he's watching the film and it was the weirdest thing, man: For the whole 82 minutes, he was sitting there cross-legged on the couch, calmly watching, not saying a word, with no expression whatsoever. I'm sitting there having four panic attacks all at once. Because at that point, it was only like 10 years of my life, and here I am being judged by the guy who it's about! It was really scary. Finally, the film was over and I looked at him. He still didn't say anything! And he was

really good at these pregnant, dramatic pauses. And finally he turns and looks at me and says: 'Hmmm. So that was Allen Ginsberg.' And I said, 'Yeah?' And he said, very simply, 'OK.'"

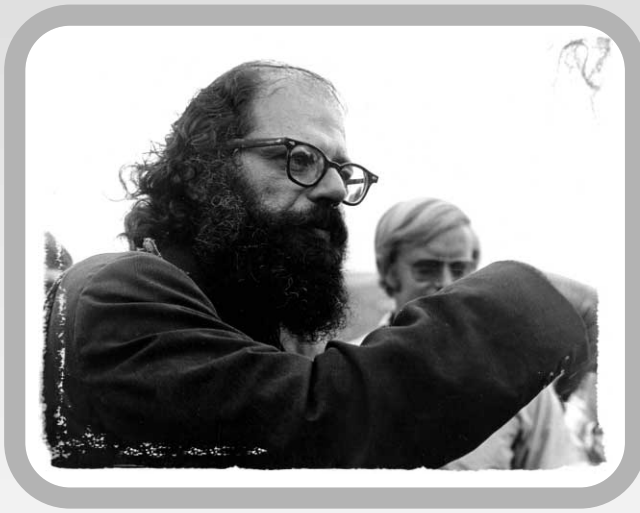
With the advent of DVD, Aaronson found himself with the opportunity to use some of the footage he had to discard from the original film, as well as to cover Ginsberg's final years. The forthcoming two-disc set is chock full of extras, including touching testimonies and remembrances from musicians like Bono, Patti Smith and Paul McCartney, colleagues like Norman Mailer, William Burroughs and Hunter

S. Thompson, and admirers like Johnny Depp, Yoko Ono and Timothy Leary. There's also a wealth of new footage, including amazing clips with Bob Dylan, Neal Cassady and Stan Brakhage, as well as film from Ginsberg's fittingly unconventional memorial service in 1997. All in all, there's more than six hours of extras.

"I was really happy to have finished the film, but the DVD has given me a chance to really finish it," Aaronson says. "All of the people I interviewed, once they heard the name 'Ginsberg' they agreed to be in the film. It just goes to show how respected and loved he was, by people from all different spectrums."

For more information on *The Life and Times of Allen Ginsberg*, visit www.newyorkerfilms.com.

Jerry Aaronson



sorrow.”

Being and becoming

Downtown Boulder is not the only part of the city to undergo major expansion in the past 32 years. Naropa University has experienced a remarkable growth spurt of its own, long ago outgrowing its cozy plot of land at 21st and Arapahoe. Now the once-tiny Buddhist school boasts three campuses in Boulder. This academic year, Naropa’s seminal Summer Writing Program underwent a similar swell, introducing a new series of off-season programming during the fall and spring semesters. The core of the off-season program is Lit, a poetics and publishing salon series open to the community.

“There are so many people in Boulder who write, either professionally or just in their spare time,” says Corrina Lesser, special events coordinator for the Summer Writing Program. “It seemed like a really great opportunity to give another place for them to connect with the people who are doing it in a more formal way.”

The Lit at Lunch series, started in the fall of 2005, brings accomplished members of the literary community—writers, publishers, agents, etc.—to campus for a free noontime discussion typically involving a reading and Q&A session. On March 13, the spring semester’s first Lit at Lunch event featured Cambodian poet U Sam Oeur, who read from his memoir, *Crossing Three Wildernesses*. As he talked about his life as an American scholar and a Cambodian prisoner during Pol Pot’s Khmer Rouge, an intimate crowd gathered around Oeur inside Naropa’s Lincoln Studio. It was a unique venue in which to hear about the atrocities of slave labor camps in southeast Asia. Then again, Naropa has always chosen to serve as a host to voices that typically go unheard in the mainstream.

“Naropa fills a particular literary niche. It’s very avant-

garde,” says Lesser. “We get calls from publishers saying, ‘Our writer wants to come and visit with your students.’ Naropa students have a reputation as being committed and progressive writers.”

While Naropa, like the city, is very aware of its past, Lesser says that its present batch of poets are creating a legacy of their own.

“One of the most exciting things about being in Boulder and also being a part of the Naropa community is that it seems to me a place that knows so well its lineage and identity and in the same moment is so able to think about evolving,” she says. “I think that’s a really exciting moment to be a part of.”

“There are lots of people committed to this, and this is a venue worth checking out,” she adds. “There’s a lot more going on at Naropa than maybe people would assume.”

Poets with attitude

“Mello Poets,” shouts the girl on stage.

“Don’cha knowit,” the crowd responds, as if at a rock concert rather than a poetry reading.

“Mello Poets.”

“Don’cha knowit.”

Poetry has admittedly lacked a certain passion in recent decades—and along with that a hipness it once enjoyed outside of literary circles. This is changing thanks to the advent of poetry slams. Unlike traditional readings, slams feature an aggressive and accessible form of spoken word, rhythmical and sharp, often rhyming, with more in common with hip-hop music than the jazz that so inspired the Beats. At times rowdy, and always interactive, slams typically attract a younger crowd seeking poetry with an edge—and the slam format delivers.

Tonight is no exception.

The Cellar, a small, hideaway on University Hill, is

filled near capacity. A crowd of mostly students—typically representing the cultures of hip-hop and punk and maybe an anarchist or two—huddles together in the basement nightclub, responding wildly to the performers on stage. Neal, clad in a White Sox cap and a black Bad Brains hoodie, lights ’em up with a rapid-fire rant concerning insanity, racism, peace, love, war, starfucking and “the cum on Britney’s tits.” As Neal hates on the numbing nature of psychotropic drugs, the audience whoops and cheers, with “word” call-outs flying back toward the stage.

Like Neal, most of the poets at The Cellar’s Monday night Poetry Slam address political and social issues with their performances, most often with no-bullshit, straightforward language uncommon to traditional poetry. Says Yuzo Nieto—who organizes The Cellar’s poetry events and is a member of the Mello Poets, a Boulder poetry slam team—this gritty, street-conscious approach is merely the zeitgeist at work.

“A lot of movements—especially jazz or hip-hop—have evolved out of a tension in the political climate of said society or time period,” he says. “Right now we’re in a situation where people are very polarized. That has brought a need to vent frustration, to find artistic means and more intellectual means of conveying these frustrations.”

While many of the frustrations vented at The Cellar are national in scope, there are also a number of jabs taken at local culture. The occurrence of the poetry slam itself could be considered a form of protest against the homogenization of Boulder’s University Hill district in recent years and the loss of historic cultural sites such as Penny Lane.

“With the closure of places like Penny Lane, it’s been a big dent in the poetic community and literary community of Boulder,” says Nieto. “There were book stores, CD stores, a lot of stuff on the Hill that has

by John Freeman

How to publish a revolution

Lawrence Ferlinghetti speaks on the state of American poetry

It’s hard to have a revolution when the counterculture of the past has become the mainstream. As William S. Burroughs put in his poem, “Remembering Jack Kerouac”: “Kerouac opened a million coffee bars and sold a million pairs of Levis to both sexes. Woodstock rises from his pages.”

No one understands the ironies of this truth better than poet Lawrence Ferlinghetti. Back in the days when paperbacks could only be found at dime stores on spiral racks, Ferlinghetti’s San Francisco bookshop, City Lights, became the intellectual watering hole for beatniks like Kerouac and Burroughs. The store was open late, encouraged browsing, and delivered good books at a cheap cost.

Now this formula sounds suspiciously like a precursor to what has made chain stores so successful. “They’re copying us!” jokes the tall, eternally hip poet during a recent trip to New York. Still, at 86 years old, Ferlinghetti won’t lose any sleep over waiting for some credit. He’s too busy publishing his own poetry, as he told me on the evening of accepting a lifetime achievement award at the National Book Awards.

The lineage of Boulder’s poetry scene can be traced back to Ferlinghetti and his book shop on Columbus Avenue in San Francisco, where Boulder’s future icons hocked their wares and drank next door at the legendary Vesuvio. After all these years he reflects back on the Beats and talks about the current state of poetry.

Boulder Weekly: Ever since City Lights published “Howl,” landing you in an obscenity

trial, you have been associated with the Beats. Does the shadow over grow too large?

Lawrence Ferlinghetti: Well, it put us on the map, courtesy of the San Francisco police department. It’s hard to get that kind of publicity. But I predate the Beats. When I arrived in San Francisco, I was still wearing my French beret. The Beats hadn’t arrived yet. I was seven years older than Ginsberg, and Kerouac, all of them except Burroughs. And I became associated with the Beats by later publishing them.

BW: Well, and you appear in several of Kerouac’s novels—in *Big Sur* especially.

LF: That novel was sad. He lost all his gusto. If you compare the limp prose in that to some of his early short stories, like “October in the Railroad Earth,” it’s just busting with energy and *joie de vivre*. By the time he wrote *Big Sur* in the ’60s, he was an alcoholic and he came to my cabin to dry out. Of course, he didn’t dry out because Neal Cassady kept dropping in. He got wetter.

BW: Your best-known work, *Coney Island of the Mind*, sold 1 million copies in your lifetime. Are you ever surprised by its reach?

LF: Yeah, if I give a poetry reading at a university these days, some middle-aged woman will come and say, ‘I was 14 and I read your book *Coney Island of the Mind* when I was in junior high school in Des Moines,’ or whatever. ‘It changed my life.’ And I always say, ‘Oh, oh. What is it, a good change? Or was it bad?’”

But people should remember it took a long time for the New Directions edition of *Coney*

Island to take off. There were no reviews when it came out. It was one of the early paperbacks published by New Directions in 1958. Publishing a book of poetry is still like dropping it off a bridge somewhere and waiting for a splash. Usually you don’t hear anything.

BW: You have a new volume out called *Americus*, which is written in such a different voice. Why has your style changed so much over the years?

LF: My style has changed a lot. I’ve tried but I can’t write poems like I wrote in *Coney Island of the Mind*. It’s just not there anymore. I wrote [those poems] in a few months—at least the 29 of them in the part that’s really *Coney Island*. They just came out of nowhere, it’s like a mysterious hand wrote them. That hand doesn’t exist anymore.

BW: Your earlier poetry to me feels very much influenced by jazz, whereas the first line of this new book is “To Summarize the Past by Theft and Allusion.” What are you stealing from these days?

LF: Well, if you look in the footnotes, you’ll see who I’m stealing from. I’m horribly conscious of this because of the plagiarism trials. It’s been in newspapers. I’ve never not been able to track down where that first line comes from—it’s somewhere in the past. If you find it, would you



let me know? I think it’s in T.S. Eliot. I was hoping some outraged reader would write in and say, ‘You numbskull, that’s not from Eliot that’s from Ezra Pound,’ or whatever. I’d like to know.

BW: Do you subscribe to that notion of Ezra Pound’s that the Chinese written character was an ideal medium for

poetry? In other words, do you think the language in which we write determines the velocity of prose?

LF: Yes, he was right on when he used that metaphor—but he meant it more as a figure of speech for poetry. That language could be condensed much like a Chinese written character. That’s a really solid basis for any writer. If you can condense a metaphor to such clarity, it’s just like an ideogram.

BW: In recent years, City Lights has moved away from poetry somewhat and is publishing more fiction and nonfiction, often in translation. Is there a reason why?

LF: It seems to me and my co-editor Nancy Peters the most interesting writing today is coming from either women authors or from third-world authors. It’d be great to publish a new revolutionary American poet, but actually you can’t publish a revolution when there isn’t any happening. ■



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become 10 sandwich shops, all these not-diverse places. It's the same store over and over again. I feel that the same thing has been happening with Pearl Street. That's a big reason why I started this [poetry slam]. I felt like the city of Boulder was saying, 'We don't care about art, even though we have this history.' I'm trying to bring it back."

Nieto and his crew are doing it with grassroots flare, accommodating The Cellar's guests with plastic lawn furniture, futons, bean bags and a coffee maker.

There is no cover charge, but a collection plate is passed around, with the pooled cash given as a prize to whoever wins the slam. The slams have been going on for four weeks now, and Nieto says they've been growing in attendance almost entirely by word of mouth.

"I feel like we're impacting the community slowly but surely," he says. "This is just gaining more recognition. Anyone who comes and sees it will come out of it with at least a somewhat different perspective of Boulder in general and how a community functions."

Life after the Lane

"Eternity and here and now are the same thing."

So wrote Jack Kerouac in *Desolation Angels*.

So reads a young girl on the stage of The Laughing Goat café at the 19th annual Jack Kerouac birthday reading.

Since November 1987, Tom Peters, a poet and owner of the Beat Book Store on Pearl Street, has hosted Boulder's legendary Monday night Open Poetry readings. The readings originally started at the long-gone Art and Auction Gallery and have also been held, on a temporary basis, at Camille's and the West End Tavern over the years. But the readings are most closely associated with Penny Lane, which Peters called home for his poetry night from March 1988 until the coffee shop shut its doors in July 2005.

The tradition continues at The Laughing Goat, a few-weeks-old café on the renovated East End of Pearl Street, a few doors down from the old Penny Lane site. With the new location—which sports a nice stage and lighting, a generous back room and fancy décor—Peters hopes to not only honor the old tradition but begin a new one.

"It was sad that Penny Lane closed. I was as sad as anyone else. But this place here..." he says, sweeping an arm across

the bustling café. "It's a good room, and I really feel hopeful about the future. I have a lot of good things planned and featured poets scheduled every other week for the rest of the year already."

"I hope for it to be a whole new history that people will be talking about in 10 or 20 years—about the exciting beginning of The Laughing Goat," he adds. "I really feel hopeful."

Peters' open reading is nearing its 20th anniversary, and has hosted more than 7,000 readers, from folks like Allen

Ginsberg to

youngsters reading in front of an audience for the very first time. After two decades, Peters' motivation for hosting the event remains the same: pure love of the written—and spoken—word.

"I want a place in my neighborhood to read and for other people to read," he says. "I think there will always be something great that comes out of it."

Next week, the

open reading portion of the event resumes, and an old tradition continues in a locale still in its infancy. As it is Jack Kerouac's birthday—and this is his birthday party—I ask Peters to select a Kerouac passage that best sums up the Monday night Open Reading. He pauses a moment, rubs his goatee, and offers this.

"There's this great quote in *Dharma Bums* where he talks about colleges and the outskirts of colleges where people are all watching the same TV shows and there are rows of perfectly tree-lined houses, whereas the Japhy writers of the world are searching for the ecstasies of the stars," he says.

Peters considers his selection for a moment.

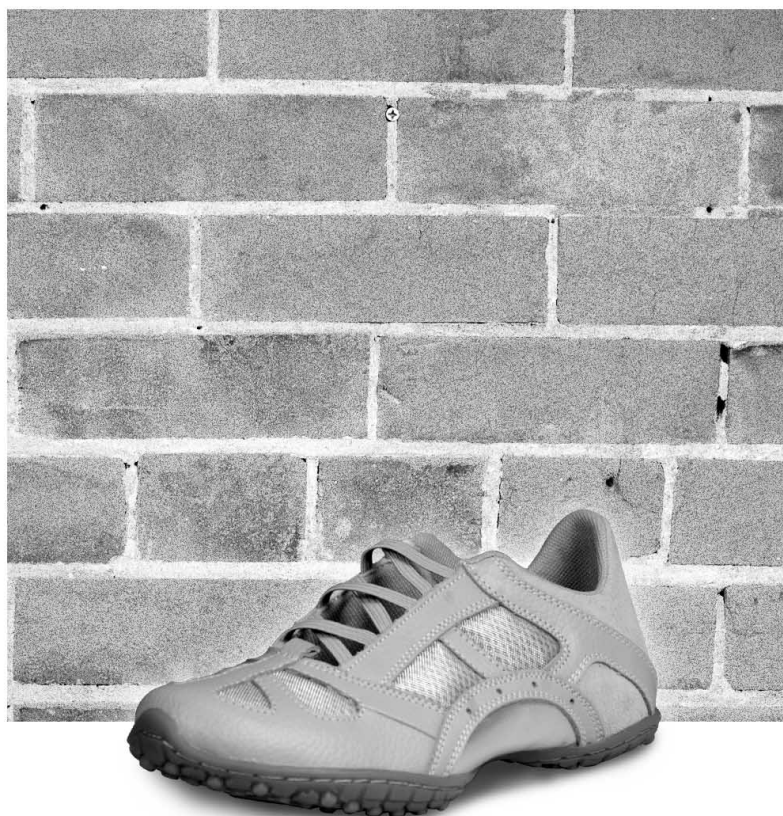
"Hopefully in all college towns there are some real original thinkers that are looking toward some future that we don't even know about, and maybe scribbling notes about it," he says. "Hopefully those people wander in here and share their thoughts with us." ■

For more information on Naropa University's Summer Writing Program and Lit at Lunch series, visit www.naropa.edu/swp.

For more information on the Monday night Poetry Slam, contact The Cellar, 1209 13th St., Boulder, 303-444-2101.

For more information on the Mello Poets, contact Yuzo Nieto through [il.lit.er.ate] magazine at www.illiter-ate.com.

For more information on the Monday night Open Reading, visit The Laughing Goat, 1709 Pearl St., Boulder.



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