



Allen Ginsberg

Born: Newark, New Jersey, 1926

Allen Ginsberg, the visionary poet and founding father of the Beat generation inspired the American counterculture of the second half of the 20th century with groundbreaking poems such as "Howl" and "Kaddish." Among the avant-garde, Ginsberg used poetry for both personal expression and in his fight for a more interesting and open society.

Allen Ginsberg was born in Newark, New Jersey on June 3, 1926. As a boy he was a close witness to his mother's mental illness, as she lived both in and out of institutions. His father, Louis Ginsberg was a well-known traditional poet. After graduating from high school, Ginsberg attended Columbia University, where he planned to study law. There he became friends with Jack Kerouac and William Burroughs. Together the three would change the face of American writing forever.

With an interest in the street life of the city, Kerouac, Ginsberg and Burroughs found inspiration in jazz music and the culture that surrounded it. They encouraged a break from traditional values, supporting drug-use as a means of enlightenment. To many, their shabby dress and "hip" language seemed irresponsible, but in their actions could be found the seeds of a revolution that was meant to cast off the shackles of the calm and boring social life of the post-war era. While a nation tried desperately to keep from rocking the boat, Allen Ginsberg and the Beats saw the need for a more vibrant and daring society.

One of the primary first works of the Beats was Ginsberg's long poem "Howl." In an age plagued by intolerance, "Howl" (1956) was both a desperate plea for humanity and a song of liberation from that intolerant society. Ginsberg's use of a gritty vernacular and an improvisational rhythmical style created poetry that seemed haphazard and amateur to many of the traditional poets of the time. In "Howl" and his other poems, however, one could hear a true voice of the time, unencumbered by what the Beats saw as outdated forms and meaningless grammatical rules.

For its frank embrace of such taboo topics as homosexuality and drug use, "Howl" drew a great deal of criticism. Published by City Lights, the San Francisco based publisher of many of the Beats, the book was the subject of an obscenity trial. Eventually acquitted of the charges, City Lights came out with Ginsberg's second book in 1961. "Kaddish, And Other Poems," often considered Ginsberg's greatest work, dealt again with a deep despair and addressed Ginsberg's closeness with his mother while she was hospitalized and fighting insanity. The raw nature of the subject matter and Ginsberg's desperate emotions found a perfect home in his poem "Kaddish." Of "Kaddish," Ginsberg wrote "I saw my self my own mother and my very nation trapped desolate...and receiving decades of life while chanting Kaddish the names of Death in many mind-worlds the self seeking key to life found at last our self."

After the death of his mother, Ginsberg signed onto a ship sailing to the Arctic Circle. It marked the beginning of his travels both at home and abroad. From the position of Beat Generation spokesman, Ginsberg continued as one of the central characters of the counter-culture in the 1960s. He lectured at universities, opposed the Vietnam War, marched against the C.I.A. and the Shah of Iran, and was arrested in the riots during the 1968 Democratic Convention in Chicago.



GEMINI G.E.L. AT JONI MOISANT WEYL

By the 1980s, Ginsberg was the most famous living American poet. As a writer he continued to publish challenging and personal verse and as a celebrity he maintained an international presence as a spokesperson for peace and tolerance—working often as a teacher and lecturer. In the last decade of his life, Ginsberg wrote and performed at the prolific rate of his youth. He had sold millions of books and had often expanded into other genres. Among the collaborators of his final years were members of the bands Sonic Youth and U2. He died on April 5, 1997 at the age of seventy.

Shortly before his death, Ginsberg published a series of 6 limited edition prints with Gemini G.E.L., some of which include Ginsberg's original poetry as well as collaborations with other artists. Additionally, for the print *Ballad of the Skeletons*, there was a corresponding video and music compact disk made in which prominent musicians such as Paul McCartney and Philip Glass play music while Ginsberg reads his poetry.