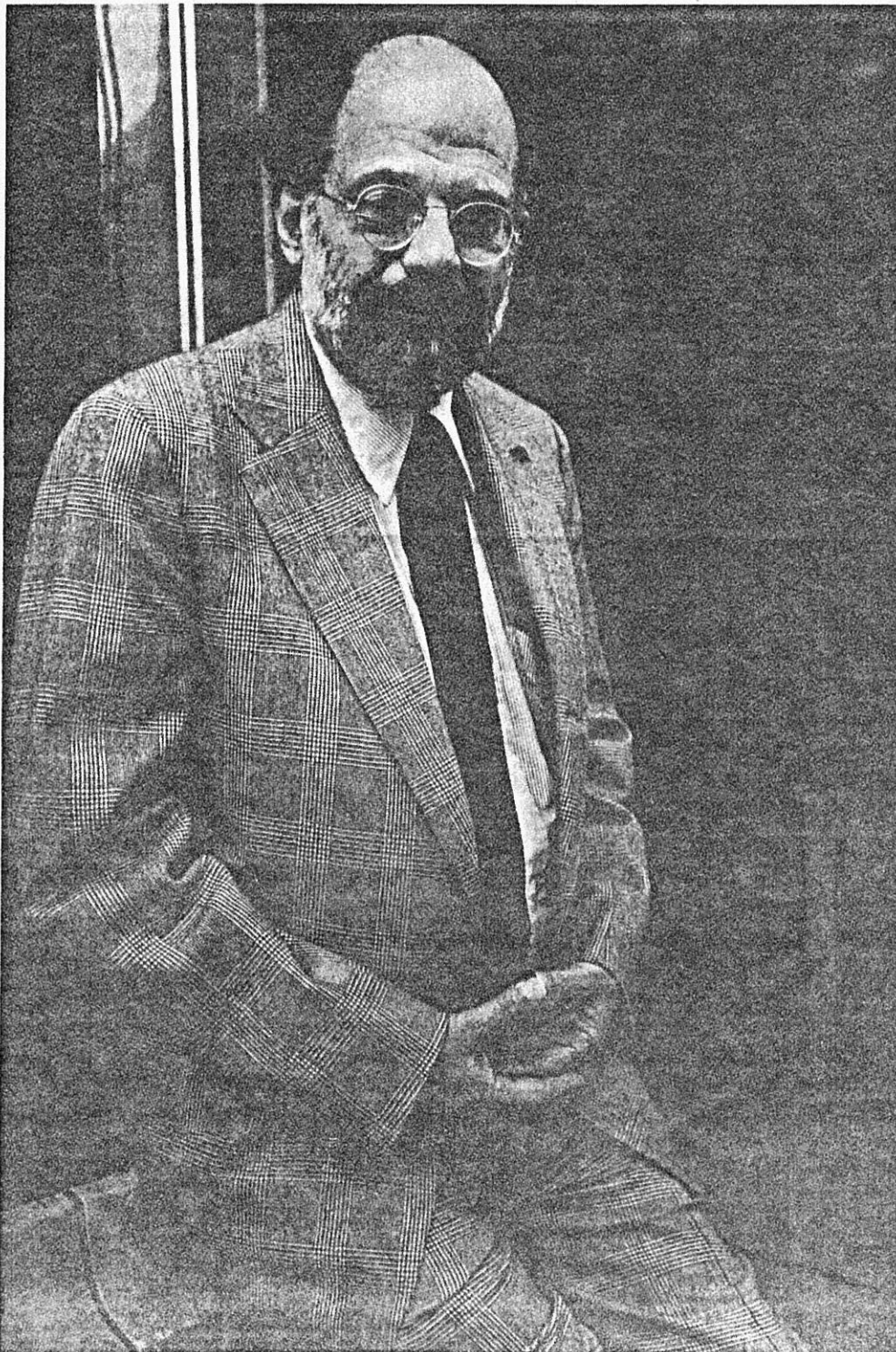


# Making our own miracles

## An interview with poet Allen Ginsberg

BY ARTHUR MAGIDA  
Assistant Editor



Cover Photo By Richard Bloom

**M**yths die hard. The one about poet Allen Ginsberg may be among the more persistent. In 1959, *Time* magazine called Ginsberg "the recognized leader of the pack of oddballs who celebrate booze, dope, sex, and despair and who go by the name of beatniks." That image, frozen almost 25 years ago, has hounded Ginsberg over the decades. No matter how old Ginsberg may be, and he is now 56, he suffers from an image of an Angry Young Man, railing against institutions, staid conventions, and the straight and narrow backbone of American life. It's a portrait of a chary, irascible, incensed poet, someone so irate, so wrathful, so punitively contrary that his anger can barely be contained.

The real Ginsberg — not the Ginsberg of myth or rumor — is one of the most gentle men around — quiet, soft-spoken, reflective. "Ghandiesque" has been used to describe him. And, fully contradictory to the enduring myth about him, he is ironically humorous, almost jesting. Anyone who can begin a poem with "Full moon over the shopping mall" has a keen sense of America — of its values, its aesthetics and its willingness to laugh at itself. It's a token of the poet — and the man — that he can crack loving jokes about the country that once made him "sick of your insane demands".

Ginsberg — and other luminaries of the "Beat Generation", Jack Kerouac, Gary Snyder, William Burroughs — acquired national prominence with the Poetry Renaissance in San Francisco in 1955. At a small art gallery, Ginsberg gave the first public reading of "Howl", his now-classic harangue on the spiritual desert of the America of the 1950's. A long, almost breathless poem, "Howl" has its stylistic roots in Hebraic rhythms, in Biblical incantations and imperatives. "Holy! Holy! Holy!..." Ginsberg recited. "The world is holy! The soul is holy!...Everything is holy!"

To the audience at the art gallery and to the press which soon discovered the poem and "beatniks", "Howl" was a sensation. Soon after the gallery reading, he wrote a friend, "When I read long poems, I get carried away and begin chanting like a cantor, almost to tears, mouthing the worst obscenities."

It was the obscenities and the fury on which the press focused. Ginsberg became a famous rebel. He was booted out of Castro's Cuba for allegedly saying that he found Che Guevara "irresistible"; he was expelled from Czechoslovakia for supposedly corrupting Czech youth. He was in the forefront of the movements to legalize marijuana, to end the war in Vietnam, and now, to ban nuclear weapons.

The penumbra of this public image, an image of recalcitrance, has masked the

soft, gentle side of Ginsberg. He is very much in the tradition of some of the finest mystical, visionary poets, especially William Blake and Walt Whitman. Writing, to him, is "a sacred art...like prayer." It can be used to "invent our lives, make our own miracles." Ginsberg does not seek puny miracles: he wants a decentralized world, powered through appropriate technology, such as wind and solar power; a non-bureaucratic world with more human-to-human encounters; a more spiritual world where man recognizes the "divine ground on which we all stand."

Ginsberg's spiritual quests have taken him to Israel to Jewish mystics Martin Buber and Gersholm Scholem, to India to study with gurus and mahatmas. Since 1974, he has been studying in Boulder, Colorado with Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche, a Tibetan meditation master. But he still spends the bulk of the year at his apartment on New York's Lower East Side, "one mile from where my mother moved when she immigrated from Russia in 1905." Both his mother, Naomi, a "communist-bohemian" who went insane and received a lobotomy, and his "poet-father", Louis, had a great influence on his writings. Their leftist politics infuse his work. Throughout, there is a constant reference to left-wing causes — to Sacco and Vanzetti in the 1920's, to the Scottsboro Boys and the Abraham Lincoln Brigade in the 1930's, to persecution for drugs and homosexuality.

Of his mother's paranoia, which created visions of spies, of Jews being killed with poisoned injections, Ginsberg has said, "Symbolically she was correct, but she did not have the skillful means to communicate her visions into practical terms." Her son, the poet, has the skill and the heart, the "tender heart", as he calls it, to speak to our sensibilities.

In an interview held during Ginsberg's recent appearances in the Baltimore and Washington area, he elaborated on the influence of Judaism and his parents on his work, on his spiritual quests and on the current state of democracy.

*JT:* Your generation — you, Jack Kerouac, Gary Snyder, William Burroughs — has proved to be among the most durable around, surely one of the most legendary. What accounts for your durability?

*Ginsberg:* Nature itself. We based our observations on nature. We followed nature's various gases and solids, observing the different manifestations of reality and the different appearances of phenomena, as and when they appear.

*JT:* For a basically urban fellow, how did you tune into nature so well?

*Ginsberg:* Bricks are part of nature. Smog is part of nature. Anger is part of human nature. Fear and greed are essential to human nature. My mother went crazy, so I had to cry a lot when I was a baby. So, therefore, I opened up to nature.

*JT:* One of your most famous lines in the opening of "Howl":

"I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness, starving hysterical naked..."

Was this a madness of the times?

*Ginsberg:* No, it's a funny line. It's supposed to be satirical. Originally, the line read, "starving mystical naked." But I thought that would make it too serious. So I said "starving hysterical naked."

*JT:* What do you represent or personify that resonates with your readers?

*Ginsberg:* Probably tender heart. At

readings, the poem "Father Death Blues" is probably basic to communication with the audience. I establish some sense of friendship to begin with and then explore my own diverse fantasies. And that gives other people a mirror for their own fantasies. They might not have the same ones I do. But if I'm frank about my fantasies, then they have a way of acknowledging the ones they go through.

*JT:* And tender heart is...?

*Ginsberg:* Ordinary mind. Tender heart is ordinary mind. It's what people actually feel when they're not defensively and neurotically covering up these feelings. We're all in bodies, we're all going to die. It's painful to die, painful to get sick and get older. But that pain and that suffering is in itself intelligence because it is an acknowledgement of the condition of existence. Rather than defending yourself from the pain and suffering, you acknowledge it and take it in. To acknowledge it and work with it makes your heart tender because you realize that everybody's in the same boat. So tender heart is basic to human nature.

*JT:* It appears from your current writings and your public readings that you have achieved a working balance between indignation and acceptance and hope; there is a much greater — or, maybe, a more obvious — use of gentle humor.

*Ginsberg:* I think "Howl" and "Kaddish" had that a long time ago. "Howl" had a funny kind of wrath and, at the same time, humor. In 1959, I wrote a little essay on "Howl", pointing out that the lines had a kind of awkward humor, intended like the end of Charlie Chaplin's "City Lights" where he's still the comedian, but he has a rose in his teeth. You don't know whether to laugh or cry: Whatever wrath I had was outrageous and right out front and then passed in a second and was replaced by humor. Look at "Howl's" text: "who plunged themselves under meat trucks looking for an egg". That's obviously funny. "Who jumped off the Brooklyn Bridge this actually happened and walked away unknown and forgotten into the ghostly daze of Chinatown soup alleyways & firetrucks, not even one free beer..." There's a lot of burlesque.

*JT:* Maybe the humor has just become more obvious or more sophisticated as your work has developed over the years.

*Ginsberg:* Maybe. "Kaddish" is a mixture of pure pain and grotesquerie, a laughing-through-tears comedy. I'm at a point where I'm describing my mother's paranoia: "She was afraid of Hitler, she saw his mustache in the sink." It's obviously funny. Humor isn't artificial or deliberate; it's something that arises from the juxtapositions of the mind naturally. Replacing one thought completely by another is the surrealist element in the natural mind.

*JT:* As a reader, I find it easier to latch on to your humor when you're actually reading.

*Ginsberg:* It depends on tone of voice. Once you establish tone of voice and it's recognized by the community, then they can pick up on it. I figure by the time I'm dead people will have understood what convention I'm within, which is old Jewish tone.

*JT:* I heard the "old Jewish tone" very clearly at last night's reading.

*Ginsberg:* In the poem to my father, "Don't Grow Old", it's very clear. And the style, by the way, of that poem is imitated

## From His Poems

*Straight and slender  
Youthful tender  
Love shows the way  
And never says nay*

*Light & gentle —  
Hearted mental  
Tones sing & play  
Guitar in bright day*

*Voicing always  
Melodies, please  
Sing sad, & say  
Whatever you may*

*Righteous honest  
Heart's forgiveness  
Drives woes away,  
Gives Love to cold clay.*

"Love Forgiven", 1979

*Strange now to think of you, gone without corsets & eyes, while I  
walk on the sunny pavement of Greenwich Village,  
downtown Manhattan, clear winter noon, and I've been up all  
night, talking, talking, reading the Kaddish aloud, listening  
to Ray Charles blues shout blind on the phonograph  
the rhythm the rhythm — and your memory in my head three years  
after — And read Adonais' last triumphant stanzas aloud —  
wept, realizing how we suffer —  
And how Death is that remedy all singers dream of, sing, remem-  
ber, prophesy as in the Hebrew Anthem, or the Buddhist  
Book of Answers — and my own imagination of a withered  
leaf — at dawn —  
Dreaming back thru life, Your time — and mine accelerating  
toward Apocalypse . . .*

From "Kaddish", 1959

*A year before visiting a handsome poet and my Tibetan guru,  
Guests after supper on the mountainside  
we admired the lights of Boulder spread glittering below through  
a giant glass window —  
After coffee, my father bantered wearily  
"Is life worth living? Depends on the liver —"  
The Lama smiled to his secretary —  
It was an old pun I'd heard in childhood.  
Then he fell silent, looking at the floor  
and sighed, head bent heavy  
talking to no one —  
"What can you do . . .?"*

From "Don't Grow Old", 1978

*I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness,  
starving hysterical naked,  
dragging themselves through the negro streets at dawn looking for  
an angry fix,  
angelheaded hipsters burning for the ancient heavenly connection  
to the starry dynamo in the machinery of night,  
who poverty and tatters and hollow-eyed and high sat up smoking  
in the supernatural darkness of cold-water flats floating  
across the tops of cities contemplating jazz,  
who bared their brains to Heaven under the El and saw Moham-  
medan angels staggering on tenement roofs illuminated,  
who passed through universities with radiant cool eyes halluci-  
nating Arkansas and Blake-light tragedy among the schol-  
ars of war,  
who were expelled from the academies for crazy & publishing  
obscene odes on the windows of the skull,  
who cowered in unshaven rooms in underwear, burning their  
money in wastebaskets and listening to the Terror through  
the wall . . .*

From "Howl", 1955-1956