



Ginsberg's World



Photo by Jim Mohs

Then and Now

By Morton Marcus

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San Jose has changed dramatically since Allen Ginsberg sojourned here for six weeks in the summer of 1954. Or has it?

The orderly miles of apricot, prune and pear orchards, surrounding a drowsy mission town, have been transformed into miles of regimented tract homes, stucco condominiums and cinder-block apartment complexes parading away from a gleaming city center of glass-and-concrete skyscrapers.

Ginsberg was 28 in 1954, clean-shaven and plump, with a

hairline beginning to recede and black-rimmed glasses circling his eyes. Unemployed, unknown and unfocused, he was visiting Neal and Carolyn Cassady, who were living in San Jose with their three kids. Ginsberg's stay was the prelude to his legendary years in San Francisco.

In the summer of 1954, the U.S., engulfed in the Cold War, was in the midst of the Communist witch hunts, despite the fact that Sen. Joseph McCarthy, having taken on the Army that spring, had finally met his match and received a senatorial censure. Also that spring, the French had lost the remote but essential outpost of Dien Bien Phu in Indochina, the eastern portion of their colonies and protectorates on the Southeast Asian peninsula, called by the revolutionaries Vietnam. The year-old Korean cease-fire, however, was holding.

In the U.S., meanwhile, there was a recession, but people, in growing numbers, continued to buy black-and-white TV sets with 12-inch screens, and to watch *I Love Lucy*, *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet*, *Mr. Peepers* and *Dragnet*. The population of San Jose was predominantly Anglo and Latino.

In the autumn of 1954, two events of long duration began. The first was the premiere on TV of *Father Knows Best*, a show that would run for 12 years and 203 episodes. The second was President Eisenhower's decision, after the French had withdrawn from Indochina, to send American ground troops as advisers to Vietnam, a show that would run for 21 years and innumerable episodes.

By that autumn, Ginsberg was ensconced in San Francisco, employed, making new friends and a year away from evolving the spontaneous, jazz-inspired poetry we've come to associate with his name, a poetry reminiscent of Whitman and the Old Testament prophets, its long lines like flooding rivers hurtling old tires and baby carriages downstream, along with telephone poles, overturned blue automobiles, jukeboxes and barn roofs like upside-down ship keels--those half-glimpsed images that careen by us like a hip newsreel in which we recognize drowned dreams in every object and drowned dreamers in every soggy sunflower and our own passing lives in every rigid stoplight shooting by.

That autumn, Ginsberg was a year away from writing "Howl."

In the autumn of 1992, Communism, the Cold War and some of the more ludicrous and tragic episodes that went with them, are nothing but memories in the minds of fewer and fewer Americans.

Officially, all American troops have returned from Vietnam, even most of the bodies of the 55,000 who lost their lives there.

The Korean cease-fire, after 29 years, continues to hold with no treaty in sight. In the U.S., meanwhile, there is a recession, but people, in growing numbers, continue to buy color TV sets with 27-inch screens and to watch *Roseanne*, *The Wonder Years*, *Brooklyn Bridge* and *Cops*.

The population of San Jose is still predominantly Anglo and Latino, but there has been a huge influx of immigrants from Vietnam who followed the returning American troops. It is into this milieu that Allen Ginsberg, now one of the country's most popular and controversial poets, considered by many the conscience of the age, returns to San Jose to read from his poems at San Jose State University on the night of Sept. 25.

Comparing the history of two time periods is arbitrary at best and dishonest at worst, especially if the choice of events is slanted. But such comparisons can also be revealing, no matter how slanted. They can put into perspective for us the course our lives have taken as individuals and as a nation. The facts from the eras examined here comment on each other ironically, at times even poignantly.

And using Ginsberg as the focus makes the comparison take on an added significance because it shows the sterility of the comparison by revealing what is missing from it, namely an as yet unmentioned element whose absence is so conspicuous that it reveals its presence like an unexplored territory on a map.

What has been presented here so far--the facts, the events, call them what you will--are all material, all informational, all data. What is missing from this picture, the emptiness on

the map, is the domain of the spirit, the inner life which should balance, even direct the outer on.

It is that inner life that Ginsberg has represented for us during the past 27 years. He was speaking directly of the emptiness in the American Dream in "Howl," and he has been speaking, lamenting and celebrating from the unexplored portion of our collective psyche ever since.

The proof of this statement is the way *Howl and Other Poems*, a pint-sized, 44-four page booklet, captured the popular imagination in 1956, elevating Ginsberg to the status of prophet, priest and cultural minion as well as poet, a status he has held in our minds to the present.

Today, as a new group of immigrants vigorously plies an American Dream still rooted in material concerns, and as we see the results of that materialism strewn like debris over the landscape of our failed economy, it is time to look to the Ginsbergs of America and to build the spiritual side of our national life.

For this reason, Ginsberg's reading should be attended by as many of you as possible. Not that you will necessarily agree with his ideas, but that you will be focused on the empty place, the territory that in this troubling election year needs to be explored by us all.

Poet and novelist Morton Marcus lives in Santa Cruz and teaches at Cabrillo College.

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