



REVIEW | Text and Drugs and Rock 'n' Roll: The Beats and Rock Culture

Simon Warner

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Ian Collinson
Macquarie University
ian.collinson@mq.edu.au

Simon Warner explores the creative, political and social connections between the Beats authors and generations of rock performers, which include both their near contemporaries in the 1960s and those who came later. Through their interconnection, suggests Warner, the Beats and their rock 'n' roll counter-parts challenged "the traditional divide between that mass cultural form called popular music and the realm of the literary, a world that would have, conventionally aimed its output at an elite rather than a mainstream reader" (xv). Warner argues there is much to gain from examining, "how musical expressions and written ones, in tandem, might share a relationship with a historical period. How does one area of practice stimulate, inspire or even change the other?" (xvii).

In demonstrating the permeable nature of what cultural gatekeepers might have imagined were impermeable and even antithetical artworlds, Warner is able to explore the interactions between the Beats and rock 'n' roll in cultural, historical and geographical contexts. The Beats' anti-establishment attitude provided an inspiration for 1960s rock musicians and generations of subsequent musicians. Some connections seem obvious, such as the influence of the Beats on Bob Dylan, the Beatles, Jim Morrison, David Bowie, and Tom Waits, but there are other influences that might be less well known to a non-specialised reader: for example William Burrough's significance for Genesis P. Orridge and Throbbing

Gristle, especially during the early 1980s. Moreover, as the publications of the Beats and the world of rock share a seemingly overwhelming masculinism, it is good to see Warner dedicate a chapter – “Muse, Moll, Maid, Mistress? Beat Women and their Legacy” – to the influence of “Beat Women”, including poets such as Diane di Prima and the “beat-shade” of musicians including Joni Mitchell, Patti Smith and more recently Ani DiFranco.

Rather than offer a narrative or developing a sequential argument the structure of the book leans towards tapestry, as it shifts between different genres (academic exposition, interview, review, Q & A, obituary, and so on) in an attempt to follow the weave of interaction and influence between the two different artworlds. So for example, Chapter 4 begins with a conventional academic treatment of Allen Ginsberg’s 1965 trip to Liverpool, followed by a Q & A with British Beat Michael Horovitz, an interview with Larry Keenan who photographed “The Last Gathering of the Beats” in 1965, and Peter Orlovsky’s obituary, before closing with an “interlude” consisting of an interview with Mark Bliesener, the founder of Neal Cassady’s memorial day in Denver. You might argue that the complexity of the relationship between the Beats and rock is such that it warrants this sort of approach. Certainly, if a demonstration of interconnectivity was Warner’s aim then he has certainly succeeded. But while the book’s different genres offer numerous different perspectives alongside those of the cultural historian, this polyvocality can also translate into a lack of cohesion. Although the book is exhaustively researched it would also need to be more systematic in its approach and perhaps more selective in its discussions. Doing so would have allowed the overall shape of the relationship between the Beats and rock music to be more readily mapped.

Nonetheless, despite these criticisms, those with an interest in the relationship between the Beats and rock, or between the world of words and the world music more generally, are certain to find this a useful publication.