Birth of the Sixties: When the Beats Became Hippies

A BLUE HAND: The Beats in India
By Deborah Baker
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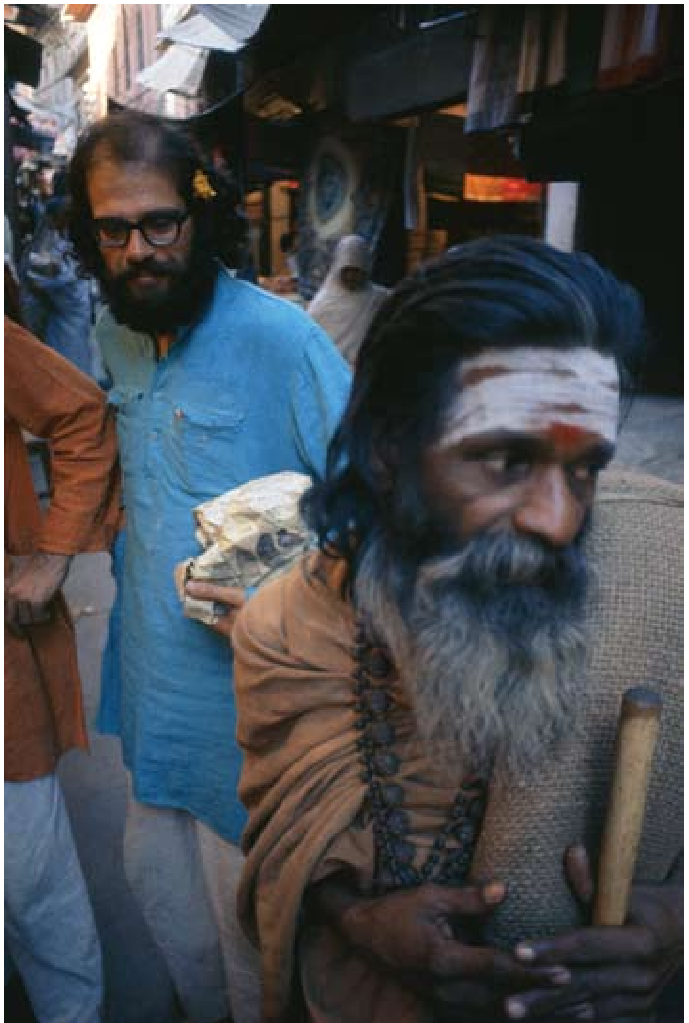
REVIEWED BY STEVE SILBERMAN

ONE AFTERNOON IN 1962, the Dalai Lama and his translator chatted for an hour with four young American poets who had arrived in Dharamsala, India, in search of spiritual guidance and a world they'd never seen. Two of the travelers—Allen Ginsberg and Gary Snyder—were already well-known back in the States, propelled to fame by the controversy over Ginsberg's breakthrough poem "Howl," and by their appearances in Jack Kerouac's seminal Beat Generation novels *On The Road* and *The Dharma Bums*. Also in the traveling party were Ginsberg's lifelong companion, Peter Orlovsky, and Snyder's first wife, Joanne Kyger, a lively and subtle poet in her own right.

Even by His Holiness' standards, it must have been an unusual conversation. The top item on Ginsberg's agenda seems to have been convincing the 27-year-old head of the Gelugpa lineage to sample psychedelics. "If you take LSD," the young Dalai Lama asked playfully, "can you see what's in that briefcase?" He cautioned his visitors that while drugs might be useful for obtaining glimpses into hidden areas of mind, it would be better to adopt practices designed to alter the structure of the personality in accord with these insights. He offered, however, that he would be willing to try psilocybin, which Ginsberg promised to send him through a friend at Harvard named Timothy Leary.

Snyder, who had already been practicing Zen in Japan for six years, spent the hour asking practical questions about meditation. Kyger, who found sitting in full-lotus position uncomfortable, wondered if it might be possible to develop a more casual posture for Westerners. Snyder was impressed by His Holiness's answer: "It's not a matter of national custom."



Allen Ginsberg and a Hindu saddhu on the streets of Benares in 1963.

PHOTO BY PETE TURNER/GETTY IMAGES

Dharamsala was just one stop on the four poets' ambitious itinerary, which ranged from the cave temples of Ellora to a café in Kolkata that was the gathering place for an inspired group of Bengali poets known as the Hungry Generation. The Magical Mystery Tour *en masse* that would eventually bring throngs of longhaired seekers to India—including the Beatles—was still a few years off.

This pregnant moment in cultural history is the subject of a provocative new book by Deborah Baker called *A Blue Hand: The Beats in India*. India is familiar territory for Baker, who splits her time between Kolkata, Goa, and Brooklyn, and is married to the author and critic Amitav Ghosh. Her previous book, a biography of the poet and short story writer Laura Riding, was shortlisted for the Pulitzer prize. To research *A Blue Hand*, Baker drew on the poets' published and unpublished journals and correspondence, as well as on interviews with the surviving contacts the Beats made on their travels.

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In incisive and elegant prose, the book casts light on those who ended up as only minor characters in Ginsberg's and Snyder's versions of events, including Kyger herself, the Bengali poets Sunil Ganguly and Buddhadev Bose, and a mysterious young woman named Hope Savage who was an elusive muse for fellow Beat Gregory Corso. By triangulating and supplementing the accounts in Ginsberg's *Indian Journals,* Snyder's *Passage Through India*, and Kyger's *Strange Big Moon*, Baker offers a panoramic vision of the Beats' journey to the East.

Baker portrays the Beats with their ragged edges intact, from Ginsberg's and Orlovsky's enthusiasm for opium dens to the pressures that Kyger felt from Snyder to conform to a pre-feminist model of womanhood. Baker writes, "When she got cranky, her husband expressed his disappointment. This naturally made her more so and became further grist for instruction. She needed to learn to take criticism. To learn humility. To sit cross-legged for hours."

Weaving a coherent tale out of the poets' fragmentary narratives has its risks, as when Baker quotes the Dalai Lama bragging to his visitors, "I never meditate. I don't have to." She then goes on to say that Ginsberg was "thrilled with this answer." But Ginsberg never mentioned the meeting in his *Indian Journals*, and Snyder's detailed account in *Passage Through India* does not contain this exchange. Baker's source for this quote, she told me in an e-mail, was one of Kyger's letters. It's unlikely, however, that Kyger's recollection was accurate. Even now, at age 72, His Holiness follows a rigorous daily practice regimen that includes hours of meditation, prostrations, and mantra chanting, as Pico Iyer tells us in his new biography, *The Open Road: The Global Journey of the Fourteenth Dalai Lama.*

Baker's book is also somewhat limited by her choice to treat the Beats as colorful pop-culture figures, rather than to closely examine the effects of the trip on their writing and later careers. This deprives the book of its widest possible context: the absorption of Hindu and Buddhist ideas and practices into the West via a generation of American poets for whom these represented not merely fascinating exotica but a workable foundation for daily life.

Of all the poets in the traveling party, Ginsberg was the one most transformed by the journey. Then at the height of his fame, he found himself already regarded as a guru in America. But much of his writing in the wake of "Howl" and "Kaddish" was floundering and unfocused, mere metaphysical speculations under the effects of various drugs, such as the poem "Mescaline" that ends, "No point writing when the spirit doth not lead." Ginsberg went to India to find answers from a culture that took spiritual questions seriously. As the poets toured ashrams and pilgrimage sites (trailed by an *Esquire* reporter and skeptical Indian government officials), Ginsberg cadged dharmic insights from everyone he met, from naked ascetics to big-league holy men such

as Swami Shivananda, who taught him to chant "Om."

One of the experiences that made the deepest impression on Ginsberg was spending hours at the burning ghats in Varanasi, smoking *ganja* with sadhus and mindfully observing the corpses as they turned to ash on the pyres that smoldered all night. Deciding that "the present is sufficient subject," he revitalized his writing by turning his attention away from his cosmic obsessions and toward the humanity around him in the swarming streets of Kolkata and Varanasi. Precisely observed journal entries such as "Describe: The Rain on Dasaswamedh Ghat" became the model for Ginsberg's later work, which replaced the earlier overheated philosophizing with cinematic rendering of a suffering world:

> Today on a balcony in shorts leaning on iron rail I watched the leper who sat hidden behind a bicycle
>
> emerge dragging his buttocks on the gray rainy ground by the glove-bandaged stumps of hands,
>
> one foot chopped off below knee, round stump-knob wrapped with black rubber
>
> pushing a tin can shiny size of his head with left hand (from which only a thumb emerged from leprous swathings)
>
> behind him, lifting it with both rag-bound palms down the curb into the puddled road…

From the tenderness and generosity shown to him by his impoverished Indian hosts, Ginsberg also learned that what makes universal suffering bearable is the possibility of compassion. As Baker writes, "What held Allen Ginsberg and would hold him for the rest of his life was the sweetness and sympathy he found in the company of India's sadhus, charlatans, poets, and saints. They sang to him, and they held his hand. They reached out to his lover, and touched his feet; they sucked their teeth in sympathy when Ginsberg confessed his fears of demons, childlessness, old age, abandonment, and death."

By auspicious coincidence, one of the monks that Ginsberg met at the Young Lamas Home School in Dalhousie would later become his own guru: Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche. After converging on the same taxicab in Manhattan in the early 1970s, Ginsberg helped Trungpa Rinpoche launch Naropa University in Colorado, where Kyger and Orlovsky would also teach in the Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics.

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Each of the poets brought home his or her own distinctive lessons from India, which flowed into the Sixties counterculture that they profoundly influenced. To Snyder, India represented "the spectacle of a high civilization that accomplished art, literature, and ceremony without imposing a narrow version of itself on every tribe and village. Civilization without centralization or monoculture," he wrote in 1983. For Kyger, the trip was more personal: "the emotions in our rooms on trains, the level of feelings for & against each other & the hangups."

These lessons stayed with them for the rest of their lives. A few days before his death in 1997, Ginsberg wrote in his journal for the last time. His final poem, "Things I'll Not Do (Nostalgias)," recalled some of the happiest moments of his time on Earth, which included bathing in the Ganges, sitting beside Orlovsky at the Manikarnika ghat, and "Chai with older Sunil & the young coffeehouse poets."

The poet knew where he was headed—into the transforming fire. "Not myself except in an urn of ashes," he wrote, and closed the book. ♦