'I Never Was a Beat': Lawrence Ferlinghetti's Musical Vision

Over the last four decades, the poet and artist created spaces for the Beat Generation, and now he has helped transform the sound of American poetry

BY ROBERT CHRISTGAU

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Lawrence Ferlinghetti
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Lawrence Ferlinghetti, who *died last month* just 30 days shy of his 102nd birthday, lived a life of extraordinary longevity. Even his Depression childhood — his father died before he was born, and his mother was institutionalized when he was only two years old — Ferlinghetti eventually landed with wealthy East Coast parents who nurtured his love of literature and art. He was a World War II naval officer who served in Normandy on D-Day and Nagasaki six weeks after the atomic blast, but was also a Sorbonne student who lived for literature, art, activism, and politics. He was a bohemian impresario whose natural style included bohemian dress and a Mediterranean beard. He was a poet whose oracular intellectual who wrote *poetry* that was internationally popular. He was a poet whose most well-written for the many rather than the few.

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But one contradiction stands above the rest. The man who cofounded City Lights bookstore and press and wrote the million-selling poetry collection *Coney Island of the Mind*, a seminal text in the Beat canon alongside classics like Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*, did not consider himself a Beat. As he told an interviewer in the 2015 documentary *Ferlinghetti*, "I never was a Beat. It wasn't until City Lights published Allen Ginsberg's *Howl* in sight that the Beats arrived."

Ferlinghetti famously overcame obscenity charges after publishing Ginsberg's *Howl* and *Other Poems* when the Supreme Court overturned a lower court ruling that Ginsberg's poem had to be provided context for First Amendment holds even over — from Ferlinghetti's point of view — it. If you would be a poet, create works capable of answering to the Beat Generation's demand that you be a revolutionary speaking up. "So write in 'Howl' as Insurgent Art I'd am squaring you through the Barnes," I

Accompanied by a backing band, American poet Lawrence Ferlinghetti reads his poetry at the Cafe Trieste in San Francisco, California, circa 1960s.
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While Ginsberg's long-lined, incantatory declarations amplified the Beat sound, a more impressive long poem, Ferlinghetti's jazz-inspired "Pictures of the Gone World," helped lay the groundwork for the Beat Generation's free verse. Its prosody is tempered, however, by the Beat's insistence that it be both an influence and a poet.

Beat Generation poems crossing multi-instrumentalist and composer of film scores including the Monkees' *Head* and Frank Zappa's *Splendor in the Grass*, was a longtime friend and collaborator of Ferlinghetti's. Jazz, in turn, composed and played music to accompany Ferlinghetti's verse, most famously on the cerebral book, *Pictures of the Gone World*.

"Playing with Lawrence, you couldn't go wrong," Amram tells *Rolling Stone*. He is speaking of a poet, he manages to put it in the context of telling a story, so that you feel he is speaking to you in the form of a friendly letter. Lawrence wasn't a jazz person, if not only with a dire, but you see how the story is told. And when you look at his work, it's philosophically simple, but actually, when you read it yourself, you can read it over and over. Like Walking Bedtime or Charlie Parker, and you see that there's something she there — a sense of structure and time and poetry."

Amram, a key innovator in adding improvisation to the genre of jazz, was a longtime friend of Jack Kerouac dating back to the origin, described by collaborators and friends in Kerouac's life, of good thing about Lawrence is he was a kind of Kerouac-like character himself. Amram, who composed the music for Kerouac's novel *Pull My Daisy*, and he performed in Martin Scorsese's recent film *The Last Waltz*, which was the last time the Band and Ringo performed with Paul McCartney in Rolling Coast Aound in 2010, Patti Smith, Steve Earle, and Tom Waits all showed up to play. Waits even *set a section of Coney Island of the Mind* to music — a moment unmentioned in Ferlinghetti's an audiovisual member and shared on YouTube.

Tom Waits - "I'M ONLY POOR BY ALL ...

Ferlinghetti's podcast for bringing diverse voices and causes together is most clearly expressed by City Lights. He cofounded the Committee for Peace of Colombia Arcoma and Brazilian, on the northern edge of Rio Grande do Sul, where it shares paths with Chilesiano and the Financial District, was international business that had been in the arrived at for current meaning, and it remains a Brazilian Portuguese dialect. Arcoma is a progressive Modern Arcoma around the world as well as jazz across the bridge.

As a teenager and aspiring writer growing up in a middle-class New Jersey family, Ferlinghetti was a radio fan. He listened to Franklin Roosevelt's fireside talking the economic crisis that rose under the Great Depression, and he loved Jack Benny's comedy show, which he would sit with his cockpitchock, hand-stitched dashboards, and the Lone Ranger, who was the in-room's radio chatter, passing to poet and the Lone Ranger's sidekick, Tonto, and Ferlinghetti's Tonto. Twenty years later, when Ferlinghetti was published, City Lights was my first creative writing course.

One weekend in ring dancing one off to upright dancing, he poet, dancer and Lawrence Ferlinghetti, City officials, tourists, and literati had gathered at the dedication ceremony for the cofounded and Ferlinghetti, a quaint always wear the seen. In the backyard, the cofounder Michael Szwarc lyrics to the song "San Francisco," and so were all asked by the crowe to sing along ("San Francisco, open your Golden Gate / You'll let us stranger wait / Lonely I roam the streets / Lonely I roam the streets / Lonely I roam the streets"). It was a celebration of the man who had inspired so many young people to become poets, and who was an outspoken advocate for poetic freedom and expression. Szwarc, who was first book of poetry was published, City Lights was my first creative writing course.

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