

# Western Words

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[PETER TAMONY, noted authority on American folk speech, discusses in this section various terms, phrases, and sayings that reflect the folklore and cultural history of the West.]

## BEAT GENERATION: BEAT: BEATNIKS

IN CONVERSATION with John Clellon Holmes in 1948, Jack Kerouac said, "You know, this is really a beat generation." Wrapping up his review of Holmes's novel, *Go*, in the *New York Times*, Gilbert Milstein writes: "Ultimately after Kathryn is seduced by Pasternak and Paul fails to seduce another girl, the two decide they're through with what the author calls the "beat generation."<sup>1</sup> A week later the arresting phrase was featured in the title of a section-cover article by Holmes in the *Times*: "'This is the Beat Generation.' Despite its excesses, a contemporary insists, it is moved by affirmative beliefs." Crediting coinage of the phrase to Kerouac, Holmes discourses on its philosophical implications:

It was John Kerouac . . . who finally came up with it. . . . Several years ago he said, "You know, this is really a beat generation." The origins of the word "beat" are obscure, but the meaning is only too clear to most Americans. More than mere weariness, it implies the feeling of having been used, of being raw. It invokes a sort of nakedness of mind, and ultimately of soul; a feeling of being reduced to the bedrock of consciousness. In short, it means being undramatically pushed up against the wall of oneself. A man is beat when he goes broke, and wagers the sum of his resources on a single number; and the young generation has done that from early youth.<sup>2</sup>

In 1957 Jack Kerouac's second novel, *On the Road*, was published by Viking Press. Written in 1951, the manuscript passed from editor to editor, becoming an explosive best seller when printed. In 1958, as a paperback, it was the hip-pocket bible of the *beat generation*, the bridge between the hipsters and the hippies. "They were like the man with the dungeon stone and the gloom, rising from the underground, the sordid hipsters of America, a beat generation that I was slowly joining" (p. 54). In "The Origins of the Beat Generation," which Kerouac contributed to *Playboy*, he recalls:

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<sup>1</sup> 9 Nov. 1952, sec. 7, p. 50, col. 5.

<sup>2</sup> 16 Nov., sec. 6, p. 10, cols. 3-4.

When I first saw the hipsters creeping around Times Square in 1944 I didn't like them either. One of them, Huncke of Chicago, came up to me and said "Man, I'm beat." I knew right away what he meant somehow. . . . Anyway, the hipsters, whose music was bop, they looked like criminals but they kept talking about the same things I liked, long outlines of personal experiences and vision . . . full of hope . . . rumblings of a new soul. . . . And so when Huncke appeared to us and said "I'm beat" with radiant light shining out of his despairing eyes . . . a word perhaps brought from some midwest carnival or junk cafeteria. It was a new language, actually spade (Negro) jargon but you soon learned it, like "hung up" couldn't be a more economical term to mean so many things.<sup>3</sup>

What Kerouac seems to be reporting here is *beat* in the sense of "tired, worn out," the state of the corpus usually associated with *beating the feet on the ground*, plodding on the prowl, aimlessly—the mystical overlay being induced partly by malnutrition and other irregularities of habit. This figure of speech is employed in *Beowulf*; in 1587 Turberville wrote, "And as enamored wights are wont, he gan the streets to beate"; one of Shakespeare's maids suggests, "fie, beat it hence!"; and in 1691, "They all beated it on the hoof to London."<sup>4</sup> Is it going too far to draw a parallel between the emerging self-centered personality structure of post-medieval England and the breakup indicated in the *go* and *on the road* crunches of current decades?

Berry and Van den Bark's *American Thesaurus of Slang* under *beat it* details an array of words and phrases expressing ways of faring. One of the more curious is *lam*, "headlong flight," usually in fear and to escape punishment for a crime. Allusion here is to *beat it*, to *lam* or *lambaste*, denoting "beating," "hitting." Allan Pinkerton reports this a pickpocket's usage in 1884. It was colloquial in New York at the turn of the century and pops up strong during Prohibition as *lamister* and *on the lam*.<sup>5</sup>

In a broad sense Americans have been *hitting the grit* since Plymouth Rock. Seventy years ago life *on the road* was described by writers such as Josiah Flynt and Jack London. Tramps and hoboes were portrayed in vaudeville skits and joke books, features of their apparently jaunty lives being verbalized in the cynical *hoboemia*. During the Depression millions *hit the bricks*, scuffling, the older *down to one's uppers* (of shoes)

<sup>3</sup> VI (June 1959), 6, 31, ff.; quotation from p. 42.

<sup>4</sup> See *OED*, s.v. "Beat," v. 3. trans. The Shakespeare quotation is from *Comedy of Errors*, II, i, 102; for the 1691 quotation, see *Forum* (Dec. 1930), p. 374.

<sup>5</sup> Pinkerton, *Thirty Years a Detective* (New York, 1884), p. 41; see also C. L. Cullen, *Six Ex-Tank Tales* (New York, 1902), p. 40.

becoming *beat to the socks*, "broke, worn out, hopeless." Such is the background of the usage Huncke voiced to Kerouac and what is generally construed as *beat*.

The use of *beat* began to appear in musical circles early in 1957. Circulars of The Poet's Follies of 1958 featured "Beat Music." As modern rock was not to trip over the dawn until the next decade, what was heard was music heretofore associated with Lu Watters, Turk Murphy, Bob Scobey, and the San Francisco stylization of New Orleans jazz.

While Kerouac describes "hipsters creeping around Times Square . . . beat . . .," the latter part of his statement reflects spiritual aspects of a plodding pilgrimage through life, "rumblings of a new soul . . . , radiant light shining out of despairing eyes." It is this juxtaposition of the feet on the ground aspect of the *beat generation* and the spirituality said to emanate above the thorax that still provokes controversy as to the allusion in the phrase and the pejoratives derived from it.

Stress on the beatific vision of the *beat generation* seems to stem principally from attention to the writings of Allen Ginsberg. The first line of his "Footnote to Howl," *Howl and Other Poems* (1956), is repetition of "Holy!" fifteen times, the same word occurring through the remainder of the piece, especially preceding the names Allen, Kerouac, Huncke, Burroughs, and Cassady. The publisher of *Howl* was tried in Superior Court, San Francisco. When work was found to have some redeeming social importance, Lawrence Ferlinghetti of City Lights Books was acquitted of selling obscene and indecent writing. A high put-on spreads itself on an after-title page: "All these books are published in heaven." Such antespace poetics confused the District Attorney. On Sunday nights from 1953 Alan W. Watts broadcast from KPFA, Berkeley, a listener-supported radio station, "Philosophy, East and West." These persuasive talks revived interest in Asian theology, particularly Zen.

Such was the milieu into which Kerouac's *On the Road* was projected and which induced an hegira to San Francisco of the young seeking to find what the new dispensation was stirring. Contemporaneously Kenneth Rexroth was voicing reviews of books on gnosticism and such esoterica on KPFA. It seems to me his "Mature Bohemians" in *The Nation*, with references to "the new anarchistic bohemianism," flashed the race to Grant Avenue and the Golden Gate.<sup>6</sup>

On May 9, 1959, *Beatitude*, No. 1, a mimeographed publication appeared. This was launched by several poets and issued first by John

<sup>6</sup> CLXXXIV:8 (23 Feb. 1957), 159-162.

Kelly. After the seventh number it emanated from the Bread and Wine Mission, where it was edited by the minister, Pierre Delattre, and poets Bill Margolis and Bob Kaufman, who were in with Allen Ginsberg. In all, eighteen or nineteen numbers appeared “weekly” and scattered countrywide. In 1960 City Lights Books published *Beatitude Anthology* containing selections from the first sixteen numbers.

Those who insist that the referent in *beat generation* alludes to exaltation and what Catholics term the Beatific Vision seem to reply principally on the tenor of Ginsberg’s words (“angelheaded hipsters”) and on the title *Beatitude* in which he had a hand. But it is curious that Bob Kaufman, the Black poet, is quoted in the Monterey, California, *Peninsula Spectator*: “ ‘And in *Beatitudes*—originally it was “Beat-attitudes.” I’m one of the 3 editors. Bill Margolis, Pierre Delattre of the Bread and Wine Mission, and myself get it out every so often.’ ”<sup>7</sup> *Beat-attitudes* may have been Kaufman’s suggestion. He is now occasionally around Grant Avenue but has no mind for or recall of events of a decade ago, nor have others, who feel Kaufman is mistaken. But the printed statement is out of his proletarian poetics at the period when the publication was eagerly followed.

Gertrude Stein’s remark to Ernest Hemingway, “You are all a lost generation,” recorded prefatorily in *The Sun Also Rises* (1926), the hornbook of modern fiction, seems to be the basis of *beat generation*. Damon Runyon’s column of November 17, 1942, is titled “Jive Generation Goes to War.”<sup>8</sup> Before *On the Road*, *generations* were taken more or less for granted, irradiations not proliferating until the late 1950’s.

*Beatnik* is a blend concocted by Herb Caen, columnist of the *San Francisco Chronicle*. *Sputnik* had blasted off in October, 1957. The Slavic —*nik* had been surfacing in Al Capp’s comic strips for several years: *nogudnik*, *McNooknik*, *Liddle Noodnik*. On May 4, 1958, Caen noted: “Novelist Jack ‘On the Road’ Kerouac, the voice of the Beatniks. . . .”<sup>9</sup> In a series of three articles the *San Francisco Examiner* surveyed Grant Avenue and the *beat generation*, May 4–6, 1958. The *Chronicle* followed, June 15 and 22, 1958, with “Life and Love Among the Beatniks.” San Francisco was a happening. Students hitch-hiked from all over the country, arriving busted and dust-crustured to glom the doin’s in the Co-Existence Bagel Shop, the Coffee Gallery, the Place, the Cellar, and the Anxious Asp.

<sup>7</sup> 2 Oct. 1959, p. 4, cols. 5–6.

<sup>8</sup> *San Francisco Examiner*, p. 15, cols. 6–8.

<sup>9</sup> P. 21, cols. 1–2.