Kerouac is Back, Jack!

By Tom Leech

Director, The Press at the Palace of the Governors

Jack Kerouac’s original typewritten manuscript scroll for *On the Road*
Photograph courtesy of Christie’s, New York. © Estate of Anthony G. Sampatacacus and the Estate of Jan Kerouac.
It is June 1970, and Jack Kerouac has been in his grave since last fall. My friend Bill and I are on a road trip from our homes in Michigan to discover the West, and Kerouac (or one of his books, at least) is in the back seat.
We are eighteen and nineteen, heading for Colorado, New Mexico, Arizona, California, Oregon, and Washington. In the middle of the night we cross the Mississippi River, and by morning, somewhere in Iowa, our first of about a hundred hitchhikers bellows, “I can’t believe this!” He is reading my bright yellow-covered copy of *On the Road*, and he has just found himself in chapter three, hitchhiking with a couple of college kids in Iowa.

Fast-forward nearly forty years, and I can still place myself there and then, as Kerouac did, “halfway across America, at the dividing line between the East of my youth and the West of my future.” And it wasn’t just me and a hitchhiker finding ourselves in those pages, but successive waves of Beats and hippies, English majors, seekers, slackers, and lost souls who recognized themselves in that book.

*On the Road* is a mid twentieth-century ode to America, cast with cowboys and car salesmen, railroad workers, night

---

The *muse* that hovers over the highways of America is named *Kerouac*. Jack Kerouac filled scores of pocket-sized notebooks with literary ideas and sketches. In a back-porch apartment, he displays a selection to photographer Fred DeWitt. The Orlando, Florida, photographs were submitted to *Time Magazine*, which ran only one. The remaining images were unknown until recently. Photographed by Fred DeWitt, January 1958. Courtesy of the Orange County Regional History Center.
watchmen, migrant workers, merchant seamen, jazz musicians, hobos, poets, and anybody else just trying to get by. That it is also full of Kerouac's car-thieving, drunken, brawling, scamming, dope-fiend buddies constantly on the make takes a backseat to the raw energy and earnest passion of the story teller. And therein lies our tale.

The hippest book of all time couldn't have had a more unpromising beginning, and that it was published at all still comes as a surprise. Imagine this: yet another young man walks into an editor's office with the manuscript of yet another Great American Novel. But this manuscript is different—one hundred and twenty feet of different. This one is in the form of a scroll, an unbroken paragraph, 120,000 words long, single-spaced, typed edge to edge, its language crammed with bebop slang, penciled corrections, and whole sections crossed out with crayon. Oh, and one more thing: the last few feet of the story are missing. They were chewed off by a friend's dog. Really? How much of the scroll does the editor unroll before he says *thankyouverymuchgoodbye*?

The scene is repeated for years—plenty of time for a guy to take up drinking, which he does, and Buddhism, which he also does. His writing gets better. His drinking gets worse. But the words keep coming. He is proud of his work and undeterred by lack of recognition. Eleven more books—four of them scrolls—fly out of the typewriter before *On the Road*, and its author, Jack Kerouac, appear in the spotlight in October 1957. A rave first review in the *New York Times* sends the book into literary orbit and seals Kerouac's fame. Just as surely his demise is set in motion as well.

Fifty years later Kerouac's name is permanently stamped on twentieth-century culture. Since its publication, *On the Road* has never been out of print. Its first month saw three printings, and after nearly 150 paperback editions in more than thirty languages it is now listed in "Penguin's Great Books of the Twentieth Century.” Still, not everyone agrees that it is literature at all. The most famous criticism of the book came from Truman Capote, who quipped, “That's not writing—that's typing.” The result of all that typing, the legendary manuscript scroll itself, will be on display at the Palace of the Governors from April 13–May 28, 2007 in the exhibit *On the Road: Jack Kerouac and the Writer’s Life.*

How this unlikely masterpiece came to the Palace is a rags-to-riches story of its own. After the novel's publication the scroll knocked around in Kerouac's closet for years. He came close to giving it away, and according to some stories, it made at least a few appearances in New York City bars. After the death of Kerouac's widow, Stella Sampas, the family's estate contacted Christie's auction house to offer the work for sale. Attracting considerable interest, when the final gavel went down on item number 307, it brought the highest price ever paid for a literary manuscript.

Surprisingly, the scroll's new owner was not a staid institution, but Jim Irsay, owner of the Indianapolis Colts football team, whose admiration of Kerouac runs deep. “To have a typewriter and pen and to have changed the world that way is incredible,” he said at a press conference after the auction. A generous and unusual plan came next: to send the scroll on a tour that would share it with “the extraordinary number of people whose lives were affected by the book.” Irsay contacted the Lilly Library at Indiana University in Bloomington, renowned for its rare-book and -manuscript collection (Gutenberg, Shakespeare, Joyce), which agreed to house the scroll between bookings. It might be of interest to New Mexicans that, at the Lilly, Kerouac's scroll resides close to Lew Wallace's hand-written manuscript for *Ben Hur*, the most popular novel of the nineteenth century, the concluding parts of which were penned in the Palace of the Governors.

Far from being a novice writer at the time of his "discovery,” Kerouac had been determined to put words on paper since he was eleven years old. His father was a printer who published a theatrical weekly in Lowell, Massachusetts, and after school in his father's shop the young Kerouac produced his own newspaper with an old typewriter, metal type, and a hand press. He later recounted, “This early association with the printing and publishing business soon enough stained not only my blood but my hands and face with ink.”

As a teenage reader Kerouac consumed the works of Henry David Thoreau, Ernest Hemingway, Jack London, Thomas Wolfe, Herman Melville, and Walt Whitman. Kerouac wrote, “Whitman was my first real influence. It was on the spur of reading Whitman that I decided to cross the country.” By the age of eighteen he had literary ideas of his own and envisioned a way of writing in a spontaneous burst of passion, capturing “life as life is.” The thought never left him and, indeed, became the engine of his life's work. As Kerouac developed the technique, he conceived each of his books as a partial telling of a life, the total telling of which would com-
prise the whole of his lifetime of experiences, thoughts, and emotions. These episode books include *The Dharma Bums, Big Sur, Desolation Angels, Lonesome Traveler, Doctor Sax,* and *Visions of Cody.*

In *On the Road,* what many perceived as a crazed guide for living on the edge was really an “experimental” narrative that recorded in detail true-life relationships, road trips, and all-night conversations from the period of 1947 to 1950. The scroll was written during a nonstop outpouring from April 2 and April 22, 1951. It helped that Kerouac was an incredibly fast typist. Gallons of coffee helped, too. No matter how inspired and Herculean the creation of the scroll may have been, it was also a well-rehearsed performance. Kerouac had been struggling with the style, language, and characters of the book—even its title—for years. Pieces of it existed in scores of small notebooks, and in as many as five different drafts. He went as far as sketching a cover design for a potential publisher. It was a story he knew by heart, but how to express it perfectly and precisely eluded him until he received a long letter from Neal Cassady, who became Dean Moriarty, the book’s misfit hero. Cassady’s letter was in his own style of uninhibited, fast-talk philosophy that inspired the voice and energy for the cross-continent adventures of *On the Road.* In the novel, Dean is introduced as having been a recently released inmate from a New Mexico reform school (making him the state’s most famous juvenile delinquent since Billy the Kid). Kerouac wrote himself in as the narrator, Sal Paradise, and along for the ride were his friends Allen Ginsberg and William S. Burroughs as the characters Carlo Marx and Old Bull Lee. Viking Press, the publisher, required the use of fictional names out of fear of libel suits. For the sake of literary convention, by the time the text was released it underwent many transformations by staff editors, something Ginsberg found deplorable. Kerouac stated a wish that someday the real names of his characters would be restored in his collected writings.

The literary circle that, at its center, included Kerouac, Ginsberg, Burroughs, Cassady, and later, Gregory Corso, became known as the Beat Generation. Although there are various versions of the origin of the phrase, each leads back to Jack Kerouac. In a 1948 conversation with novelist John Clelon Holmes, Kerouac replied to a question about what to call their generation, as opposed to the Lost Generation of Hemingway’s era. “We’re a beat generation,” he answered, meaning the young, bewildered, and poor who had survived the Depression and the second world war. As Kerouac’s thinking deepened, the word took on religious tones in which “beat” referred to beatific and beatitude, as in saintly and blessed. Even my 1968 freshman dictionary lists Jack Kerouac as the source of the term. The witty but unfortunate term “beatnik,” conjuring images of berets and goatees, was a media distraction away from the serious work of shaking up the social order. It’s a meaningful coincidence that a subsequent revolution in popular culture was led by the Beatles: think “John, George, Paul, Ringo and JACK.”

By 1955 a cultural A-bomb was set to go off, and when the eastern Beats headed to San Francisco the big blast occurred. A packed poetry reading at Six Gallery featured young West Coast poets Gary Snyder, Michael McClure, Philip Whalen, and Philip Lamantia. They were joined that night by Allen Ginsberg and the reading is now regarded as a turning point in American literature. Kerouac was in the crowd, as was Lawrence Ferlinghetti, the poet-publisher of San Francisco’s City Lights Books. It was the first public reading of Ginsberg’s
The haunting first words of the poem are as stunning now as they were then:

“I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness, starving hysterical naked, dragging themselves through the negro streets at dawn looking for an angry fix, angelheaded hipsters burning for the ancient heavenly connection to the starry dynamo in the machinery of night.”

Talk about “shock and awe”! Ferlinghetti asked for and received permission to publish the poem. After printed copies were confiscated by US Customs and deemed obscene, the ensuing lawsuit became front-page news. Ginsberg and Ferlinghetti won the landmark case and the media was primed for anything Beat. Enter On the Road.

In The Dharma Bums (written before the publication of On the Road but released the following year), Kerouac’s alter ego, Ray Smith, under the wing of Japhy Ryder, modeled after Gary Snyder, splits from the highway and heads for the hills. There he spends a lonely summer atop a fire lookout in Washington state, writes haiku, and studies Buddhism in earnest.

He also plants the seeds of a healthy and (dare it be said) established counterculture. With a backpack full of books and a mountain to climb, a new image of youth with a purpose was born. The generation that came of age in the mid-twentieth century sought a new definition of America, and they found it in On the Road and The Dharma Bums. In discovering America for himself, Kerouac helped to change the cultural landscape of America. His descriptions of Small Town Nowhere sanctified “place,” making it cool to pass through Des Moines or Dalhart. The family tree of Cool, of Hip, of Now, from what we wear to what we call art or poetry or music—for some, even religion—in one way or another contains Beat DNA.

Ironically, the bridge to peace, love, and flower power that Kerouac inspired was one that he himself never crossed. It should come as no surprise that he wouldn’t (or couldn’t) follow a set script. A look at his life reveals a stew of contradiction and paradox. To the end he remained politically conservative. Admired by so many on the political left, he supported the government’s policy in Vietnam. A Roman Catholic and a
Buddhist, he found solace in drugs and alcohol. Though married, he insisted on living with his mother. A lover of classic literature, he turned contemporary literature on its ear. He was a proponent of spontaneous prose and “first thought, best thought” (Ginsberg’s recipe for truthful writing), but he nevertheless worked and reworked his stories. Where his novels ramble with sentences that twist and turn, he was also a master of the concise, three-line haiku. His work was described in one review as the “most extensive experiment in language and literary form undertaken by an American writer,” but growing up he spoke a French-Canadian dialect and didn’t learn English until he was six. He broke the rules, even when they were his own rules. His life reads as a cautionary tale: *Kids, don’t try this at home.*

Obviously, not everyone read a book by Kerouac. But someone you knew did: a friend, a brother, a sister, a parent. Someone who let their hair grow a little longer, bought hiking boots and a pair of Levis, read strange books or listened to weird music, took up a protest or studied meditation. It is by those associations, on one of those roads, that counterculture arrived at our doorstep. Michael McClure said, “the Beat poets were the literary arm of the environmental movement,” and Gary Snyder remains one of its clearest voices. Following Snyder straight out of *The Dharma Bums*, many young seekers looked to or headed for Asia on spiritual quests. Philip Whalen, who lived in Santa Fe for a few years, became a Zen monk. In the 1970s, the Naropa Institute, America’s first Buddhist university, opened in Boulder, Colorado, and it was there that Allen Ginsberg founded the Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics.

*On the Road* is an exuberant expression of youth that should be read in a youthful frame of mind. Rereading it can be troubling. Taken as a memoir, it often seems thin and disappointing. Women in the book are there to be “used”

---

The opening lines of Kerouac’s *On the Road* from the original manuscript. Photograph courtesy of Christie’s, New York. © Estate of Anthony G. Sampatcucus and the Estate of Jan Kerouac.
The most famous criticism of the book came from Truman Capote, who quipped, “That’s not writing—that’s typing.”

Kerouac’s scroll on its current world tour. Highly skilled in his field, Jim is also involved in the restoration of paper documents at the Tibetan Archives in Lhasa, Tibet. Jim and I met through a project (known, coincidentally, as Paper Road) to research and revive the craft of papermaking in that distant country. His book-lined path through life started when he read The Dharma Bums and hitchhiked to San Francisco.

And what of my friend Bill, last seen cruising across Iowa? His students know him as Professor Renwick, the Ph.D. chair of the geography department at a respected university. The textbooks he authored have become standards for watershed studies and environmental management. We still keep in touch, comparing notes on our lives, families and travels. During our summer on the road, Bill and I were transfixed by what we saw and transformed by what we did. Whether baking in the heat of the desert or diving into ice-melt lakes, pondering pueblo ruins or gazing out at ships in the Pacific—whether interpreting the world as a scientific observer, as Bill did, or through sketchbook doodles as I did—each of us found his own way to be in the world. Call it coming of age or ritual initiation, the spirit blessed by such sages as Whitman and Thoreau wisely beckons youth to hit the road, and the muse that hovers over the highways of America is named Kerouac.

The desire of Kerouac as an eighteen-year-old—to record life as it happens—proved to be a Pandora’s box for him. Life became convoluted—complicated by alcohol and notoriety. The world he tried to change changed around him too quickly. At the age of forty-seven Jack Kerouac finally missed the bus. He died in Saint Petersburg, Florida, a year after his friend Neal Cassady was found in a hypothermic coma next to a set of railroad tracks in Mexico. When asked to sum up the turbulent decade of the 1960s, fellow traveler Allen Ginsberg ended a spontaneous poem with the lines,

The 60s were—

The death of Neal Cassady
and Kerouac drinking himself to death
having left behind an angelic scroll.

EXHIBIT NOTE: On the Road: Jack Kerouac and the Writer’s Life celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of the publication of Kerouac’s groundbreaking novel. The 120-foot-long typewritten manuscript that Kerouac submitted to his editors at Viking Press was featured in this exhibit, along with books, selected text, and photographs of Kerouac and other Beat-era writers. The exhibit closed May 28, 2007.