

MAGAZINE  
**SECONDS**

**SECONDS #28, 1994 • interview by George Petros**

# **ALLEN GINSBERG**



**ALLEN GINSBERG is the Voice Of America, but please don't tell that to the average American. Ginsberg articulates the real deal — the dirt under the rug as well as the icing on the cake. He's the Heartbeat of America, but don't tell that to the cops because he blows the whistle on the absurdity of authority and censorship and everything else and he doesn't care who likes it. Sometimes his insights make a devastating mockery of official wisdom, changing the shape of the literature vs. government monster; at other times he is simply an eccentric outsider in a place where there is no real "inside" except in terms of the vagina, the mouth and, of course, the asshole.**

***“The Beat literary generation, to recap, was a new consciousness, friendship, non-judgmental friendships, fidelity, good citizenship among each other, experimentation with psychedelic drugs, sexual revolution, gay liberation, interracial inquisitiveness, Whites learning African-American culture and appreciating it, trying to find ways of dealing with American ecological disasters, a certain interest in rehabilitating the countryside — I guess those are the main themes.”***

**SECONDS:** *Poetically speaking, who and what were your influences?*

**GINSBERG:** Blake, Burroughs, Kerouac, Whitman, Rimbaud, Poe, Pound and Williams.

**SECONDS:** *What did they have in common?*

**GINSBERG:** Naked mind. Art for art's sake. Experimental form. Not experimental but self-invented forms. And some expansion of consciousness.

**SECONDS:** *How about John Dos Passos?*

**GINSBERG:** Well, only in passing. Somebody recommended reading *USA* with the time capsule-news-current events-panorama-stream-of-consciousness.

**SECONDS:** *When I read USA, I couldn't help but think of your stuff. Americana from the inside out.*

**GINSBERG:** Okay, but the Americana comes from the Americanists' preoccupation with William Carlos Williams, and the Modernists — Pound and Williams particularly; Marsden Hartley the painter-poet; musicians like Varèse, Ives, and Satie; Blues — Ma Rainey particularly, just for the Modernism of it and the contemporary aspect.

**SECONDS:** *There was also a self-conscious break with the past in all those folks.*

**GINSBERG:** An attempt to find a modern Twentieth Century idiom. Williams, Varèse and Satie were using modern thinking and that led to Cage and others, I think.

**SECONDS:** *What was it about America that they focused on?*

**GINSBERG:** The self-invented sounds, like the modern sounds of the klaxon and whatnot. For the other people I mentioned, it was a search for an American Twentieth Century vernacular idiom.

**SECONDS:** *Free of European —*

**GINSBERG:** No, you're emphasizing the negative. I'm saying the positive things they were trying to construct were a new measure of American poetry. The Nineteenth Century was a reductive simplification of

very complex Greek meters. What Pound and Williams were doing was trying to restore much more variety by examining the really classical Greek rhythms for poetry, or listening to the actual idiom spoken on the street and trying to construct rhythms and cadences out of that. Around the turn of the century, many of the Modernists, even those who went to Europe, came back to try and find an American art.

**SECONDS:** *Did they find it?*

**GINSBERG:** Yes they did. Williams did invent a new measure of poetry. He kept saying the government is of words and if we repeat the old words and old rhythms of England, we'll wind up with an English consciousness rather than a New World consciousness. So Williams tried to compose his poetry out of intense fragments spoken in enigmatic American-ese. That was the Americanist movement. A lot of painters and poets around that time were trying to rediscover America, like John Marin, Marsden Hartley, and Sherwood Anderson. That's the background. Then Kerouac and Burroughs went in like lightning bolts. Kerouac wrote as he spoke and Burroughs has many American voices. He's a fantastic mimic.

**SECONDS:** *When you say, "he wrote as he spoke," was Kerouac the first person who really played that up?*

**GINSBERG:** In prose I think he was the closest. Many tried, like Dos Passos. With Kerouac, first of all he was a speed typist. He could write almost as fast as he could speak, 120 words a minute. Kerouac could actually transcribe his mouth.

**SECONDS:** *You were friends with Kerouac and Burroughs —*

**GINSBERG:** In 1944, '45, '46 we all lived together in the same apartment. Then we were in contact for years. If you look at the published letters of William Burroughs, eighty percent of them are to me.

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**SECONDS:** *Was he infatuated with you?*

**GINSBERG:** Yes. He was trying to entertain me but he was his own man, a lot smarter than me. He's twelve years older and my guru.

**SECONDS:** *You were very young in '44.*

**GINSBERG:** Eighteen.

**SECONDS:** *That makes him thirty at the time.*

**GINSBERG:** We were just friends. We didn't get more involved until 1953.

**SECONDS:** *When you were young, who was your favorite writer?*

**GINSBERG:** Poe. Poe is the first big inspiration everybody gets when they move from the children's section of the library to the adult section. Everybody reads Poe when they're eleven, twelve, thirteen. Poe is the first person people read. Poe is translated universally. He's the first modern writer reflecting the end of the millennium or the end of the world.

**SECONDS:** *He took what, prior to that, would have been apocalyptic religions—*

**GINSBERG:** And made them scientific and rational, but imaginative.

**SECONDS:** *And personalized.*

**GINSBERG:** Personalized and looking for art for art's sake. An aesthetic. Pure beauty. He didn't have political intentions. He was going for the ivory tower — art for art's sake — pure beauty. In the course of that, he moved man's consciousness like LSD. Poe was a sort of literary LSD, in the sense of expanding awareness. Just as you're going through puberty, you read Poe and suddenly you killed those bugs, you stomped on those worms, you pulled the wings off that fly. I'm caught on a giant spider web of life. I just killed and buried my friend under the floorboard. I hear his heart beating. It's this Twentieth Century paranoia which is well-justified with the realization of what I've done to the planet. I don't know how we got on to Poe, but you were asking me my influences and I said as a kid I knew Poe and Kerouac knew Poe.

**SECONDS:** *Could you tell me about your vision of Blake in '48?*

**GINSBERG:** In 1948 I was living in East Harlem alone eating vegetables and was somewhat separated from my company of several years — Burroughs, Kerouac and Neal Cassady. I'd had a love affair with Cassady and he'd broken it off abruptly, temporarily a year or two after he got married. I was isolated and reading a lot of

Plato and St. John Of The Cross and Blake. I'd just finished jacking off and was wiping the cum off my hands and legs, lying on the couch of a sixth-floor Harlem apartment, a cold water flat with a bathtub in the kitchen, looking out the window at the roofs with a book of Blake on my lap and was reading his poem "Ah, Sunflower." So I had this hallucination in 3-D of a voice I assumed was Blake's. It sounded very ancient and old. I looked up and had an experience of vastness and ancientness. I focused on the complicated copperwork on the roofs of the apartment buildings in Harlem. It was an accumulated deposit of intelligence.

**SECONDS:** *Which nobody appreciates anymore.*

**GINSBERG:** Kerouac and I used to look at that a lot. Suddenly, at that moment, I saw the whole city as a vast-looking intelligent face representing centuries of learning craftsmanship and centuries of intense intelligent measuring activity, stonemasonry, eyeballing, placing things in order. Then above that, the sky, the sun, the clouds — and I realized what vast order had created that. I just had a sense of vastness and ancientness, and I thought, "This is what I was born to understand." At the same time, the hallucination was in 3-D, real stereo, of hearing a very old person with a deep voice reciting a poem.

**SECONDS:** *That's pretty cool.*

**GINSBERG:** I can't claim it was anything but a hallucination at this point. I wouldn't want to drive anyone nuts trying to imitate that. The first thing I thought when that happened was, "he who binds himself to joy, does the wind of life destroy." I realize that if I got preoccupied with trying to repeat this experience, or rationalized it, I would solidify it in a way which would be permanent insanity. I fell into a trap anyway for fifteen years trying to repeat the experience. Even the interest I had in psychedelics was testing it out to see if it approximated the natural experience, which was without any drugs, when I was a vegetarian, living a contemplative life and reading a lot.

**SECONDS:** *I know you're probably tired of talking about the Beats —*

**GINSBERG:** No, no. For your territory, it might be a good idea to give an explanation.

**SECONDS:** *Could you describe the Beat Generation to the Lollapalooza generation?*

**GINSBERG:** Well, basically, just a gang of

***“I like to screw, I like to be screwed, I like to blow,  
I like to be blown, I like to be touched gently all over.”***

friends who were very into being literate, and who were interested in art, and loved each other. Some gay, some straight — like Burroughs and I were gay, Kerouac was straight, Gregory Corso was straight, Orlovsky was mostly straight. On the other hand, Kerouac was willing to sleep with me occasionally. Neal Cassady was a ladies man totally except he loved me, so he made a big exception and we slept together quite a bit.

**SECONDS:** *Would you find that kind of interplay between gays and straights today?*

**GINSBERG:** Yes you would. I sleep with lots of straight young kids. I think it's much more open now than it was in those days. It's just that we were a curious and unique group because we held each other with great respect and felt a sacramental relationship. I think it's almost imaged far, far away in The Beatles. Everybody digs Ringo's particular awkwardness, Lennon's triangular smile and intelligence — they all dug each other. They dug each other's character. A little bit like in Dostoevsky where the characters rush up to each other, look in each others eyes and tell their whole life story.

**SECONDS:** *There would have been severe legal ramifications in those days for that type of behavior, right?*

**GINSBERG:** For sleeping together? It was against the law but it's still against the law in some states. Sodomy is illegal in Virginia, North Carolina, Arkansas — who knows?

**SECONDS:** *I guess it has to be illegal to keep it interesting.*

**GINSBERG:** It's illegal in The Army. I got kicked out of Columbia for being caught in bed with Kerouac even though I was a virgin and we hadn't done anything.

**SECONDS:** *Did that make the news?*

**GINSBERG:** No. I was just kicked out and told to get a letter from a psychiatrist a year later when “you can prove that you can take on the responsibilities of the academic community.” Kerouac just stayed over late and didn't want to go home. I had a roommate in the next room and the door was open. Kerouac was in my bed. Some assistant dean came in to complain about something else and saw us in bed and got really upset and assumed the worst. When I went downstairs I found a note in my box saying the dean wanted to see me. The dean said, “Mr. Ginsberg, I hope you've realized the enormity of what you've done.”

I suddenly realized I was trapped with a madman. He kicked me out and then I called my father, and he was weeping that his son had disgraced him at Columbia.

**SECONDS:** *How did your father take it?*

**GINSBERG:** He loved me. He was a little suspicious of Kerouac and Burroughs and my friends at Columbia because he said they were gay students experimenting with grass.

**SECONDS:** *Did he know you were gay?*

**GINSBERG:** I didn't tell him until 1948.

This is '46. I have a poem in *Collected Poems* called “Don't Grow Old” — an anecdote about telling my father I was gay.

**SECONDS:** *You loved each other very much.*

**GINSBERG:** We gave poetry readings together. Where did we get off on this tangent?

**SECONDS:** *The Beats in a nutshell.*

**GINSBERG:** Tolerance. Also some element of candor about gay liberation way before a formal movement. It was introduced by Burroughs and myself into poetry. It had already been a theme, but I think this is the first sort of cheerful ordinary proclamation without making a big deal out of it. So what was the Beat Generation? It was a literary movement of friends, very tolerant around each other, kind of a sacramental relationship, interested in new consciousness or some sort of new vision. We were reading Dostoevsky and Rimbaud and Spengler on the decline of the West, the fall of empires.

**SECONDS:** *Did you see yourself in the later days of the Roman Empire?*

**GINSBERG:** Exactly. That was Burroughs' realization. Particularly, at the time, this was being called the American Century and the central character is an advertising logo called the Man Of Distinction, which is a guy dressed in English Oxford grays with a brushed mustache, like the CIA or something, drinking whiskey. This is the opposite of what we took for our ideal.

**SECONDS:** *Rather than the regimentation of alcoholism that seemed to come with the American Century, y'all were looking for —*

**GINSBERG:** Something more spiritual. Grass and, as early as 1950, peyote. I did it a year later.

**SECONDS:** *What about absinthe? Was that part of the scene?*

**GINSBERG:** No. Only once. There's a guy named Jerry Newman who Kerouac knew from Horace Mann High School in the

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early 40s who had a record company called Esoteric Records. He used to go up to Harlem with Kerouac and record Charlie Christian and Monk and Gillespie, Roy Eldridge, Coleman Hawkins, all the musicians that were pre-Bop. So Kerouac was in on those years in Harlem. Jerry Newman was a very funny, interesting guy and ran this Esoteric Records studio and Greenwich Music House. One day we went over to his house and he had some Pernod and he had some wormwood and he put it in to make absinthe. We woke two days later. A terrible experience.

**SECONDS:** *So you weren't a big fan of the absinthe experience?*

**GINSBERG:** No, I never did drink. Wormwood is very awful. By '46 we were experimenting with grass. I picked up on it in the Merchant Marines. After I got kicked out of Columbia, I joined the Merchant Marines and I went to New Orleans on a coast run in an oil tanker. The Puerto Rican mess crew took me home to Harlem to 111th Street and sold me some grass. So I became a grass connection when it was pretty hard to get.

**SECONDS:** *How good was it?*

**GINSBERG:** Very good. Very cheap.

**SECONDS:** *Where was it from? Mexico?*

**GINSBERG:** Who knows? When were down in Mexico in the 50s it was all over there. Actually in '47, there was a period described in *On The Road* where Kerouac and I and Neal Cassady were in Denver and Burroughs was on a farm in Waverly, Texas growing grass. I hitchhiked down and I think Neal drove Burroughs back in a jeep with thirty, forty pounds of grass in the back.

**SECONDS:** *Back in those days that would have got you executed.*

**GINSBERG:** Not that bad. It's worse now with these War On Drugs laws. These mandatory sentences — it's much worse. Maybe it would have been quite a bit then but there was no death penalty on it.

**SECONDS:** *Marijuana is one of the most vilified substances. Why is that?*

**GINSBERG:** That's a whole other world. I've written on it at great length so I'll summarize my conclusions. Marijuana should be a cash crop for the failing family farm to rehabilitate the countryside. As it was in the 60s in California and Vermont, before the Feds got their helicopters and instituted this South American police state over the farms. Junkies should be sent to doctors

to be cured and if they can't be cured, they should be maintained and there should be some natural remedy like opium rather than these horrible synthetics, which are worse habits than the original. Psychedelics should be given back to priests, rabbis, swamis, dhals, llamas, and psychiatrists. Drug companies should be enjoined from dumping massive quantities of amphetamines in Mexico for resale into America. That would separate all these relatively benign drugs which relate to consciousness from the heavy drugs that make you paranoid and violent — like cocaine, crack, and heavy amphetamines. Once you separate out the government drug scam from the coke and crack and whatnot, you might be able to find a way of dealing with it. When they're all mixed up like that in a single war against drugs it becomes a monkey on the back of government and citizens, i.e. a twelve billion dollar drug bureaucracy lobby budget. And a corresponding lobby of people who are dependent on there being a problem for their living. The cops and the social workers and the courts and whatnot. Plus, the enormous swollen activity of the courts and the overcrowding of prisons, so now the fastest growing growth industry is the prison industry. There's more people in jail than any country in the world at this point in America.

**SECONDS:** *Most of them for drugs.*

**GINSBERG:** I saw some statistic by Nixon's narcotics adviser that eighty percent of the people in federal prisons are drug-related.

**SECONDS:** *Everything but alcohol.*

**GINSBERG:** Whereas the sponsors of a good deal of right wing political demagoguery are alcohol companies. Coors Beer funds the Heritage Foundation and cigarette lobbies help to fund Jesse Helms' censorship activities. The comparative statistics are twenty to thirty thousand deaths from illicit drugs. 100,000 a year die of alcohol, and cigarettes contribute to the death of 430,000 people a year, cancer, high blood pressure, hypertension, heart attacks. That's the comparative statistics of what poison drugs are. Alcohol and cigarettes have been, until recently, quite respectable, but they're the real killer drugs.

**SECONDS:** *They keep the medical industry in business.*

**GINSBERG:** And the more mild drugs that create a more sensitive consciousness are suppressed by the government for the

**“Obscene was anything that would make a person of moderate temperament excited sexually. So the judge showed the book to his friends and said they didn’t get a hard-on, so therefore it’s not obscene.”**

purpose of keeping the natives quiet and stultified. It’s a giant scam. It’s useful demagoguery for demagogues — “Soft on porn, soft on crime, soft on drugs.” So it’s created this huge jerrybuilt prison system and monstrous overcrowding of prisons, enriched the Mafia, created a giant black market for drugs and a giant economic nexus that perpetuates the drug crisis and spreads drug addiction.

A junkie has to recruit other people and score for other people in order to maintain his habit. In 1960, the New York Academy of Medicine issued a report saying, “The cash nexus is a main cause of the spread of addiction.” So for many years the narcotics department had a war on physicians who tried to treat addicts medically. It’s still illegal unless you’re licensed by the government and you have to do it with methadone, which is a worse habit than any. I have one song called “Don’t Smoke” which covers a lot of that. “Don’t smoke tobacco / don’t smoke / don’t smoke / it’s a nine-million-dollar capitalist communist joke.”

**SECONDS:** *The sales of American cigarettes overseas are increasing.*

**GINSBERG:** What’s interesting is that Jesse Helms is repeating the old history of the opium wars as a member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee — threatening to withdraw trade favoritism unless they accept American cigarettes and American cigarette advertising. It’s like the old opium wars where we forced opium on China. He’s supposed to be the arbiter of moral value. He claims to be an arbiter of ethics as to what could be heard by people on the radio. He introduced a bill in 1988 to ban all so-called indecent language off the air 24 hours a day. It affected the record industry and it also affected my own poetry which is now banned



off the air from 6AM to 8PM.

**SECONDS:** *So that children can’t hear it.*

**GINSBERG:** So that students who are studying *Howl*, *America*, *Sunflower*, *Kaddish* or other poems that have a few words that would be considered ban-able — can read it in textbooks but can’t hear it on the radio during the same school hours. Originally the ban was 24 hours a day and the PEN

Club — Poets, Essayists, Novelists, — the American Civil Liberties Union, Emergency Civil Liberties Committee, Burroughs, and myself got the Supreme Court to not restrict it 24 hours a day, but just from 6:00 A.M. to 8:00 P.M., and we’re still working on trying to reduce that. The excuse is to protect the ears of minors.

**SECONDS:** *What is the hysteria to protect children from so-called obscene stuff?*

**GINSBERG:** It’s a demagogic political issue that can be used to

divert attention from deeper corruptions like the S&L scandal or the rape of the planet by the post-industrial nations. Although we conquered literary censorship in books between ’58 and ’62 when, through a series of trials, Henry Miller, *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* by D.H. Lawrence, *Naked Lunch* and *Howl* were all cleared and declared to be protected by the Constitution. That same kind of censorship used on literature and film now only applies to the main marketplace of ideas, electronic broadcasting.

**SECONDS:** *I want to return to something —*

**GINSBERG:** All this began on the discussion on what were the values proposed by the Beat literary generation. To recap, it was a new consciousness, friendship, non-judgmental friendships, fidelity, good citizenship among each other, experimentation with psychedelic drugs, sexual revolution, Gay liberation, interracial

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inquisitiveness, Whites learning African-American culture and appreciating it, trying to find ways of dealing with American ecological disasters, a certain interest in rehabilitating the countryside — those are the main themes. In Kerouac's case, a rediscovery of the body of the land — going out over the country and actually seeing farmers, cowboys, mountains, Indians and Western places. In Burroughs' case, finding ways to deal with deconditioning from the police state mass media homogenization of ideas. All the themes have become more obvious and more important now and that's why I think there's a renaissance of interest in the literary history of the Beat Generation.

**SECONDS:** *The world's caught up to them.*

**GINSBERG:** Before it was outrageous to think that the sky should fall and now there's brimstone coming out of the sky and a hole in the ozone layer. You have a state which allows people to be homeless on the street in rags, lying in alleyways. It's the same desensitization which would allow the ozone layer to be pierced.

**SECONDS:** *Was your early work obscene as a challenge to a repressive government?*

**GINSBERG:** No, I wasn't interested in rebelling or challenging, I was interested in proposing my own life and being candid. In his 1855 preface to *Leaves Of Grass*, Whitman said he hoped American poets would be characterized in the future by candor. I just take that literally because for one thing we weren't writing for the public, we were writing for each other and for ourselves. I never expected *Howl* to be published, I didn't want my father to see it. Kerouac wrote *On The Road* and it was immediately rejected so he went on to write seven more novels, knowing they'd never be published. Now they're all published.

**SECONDS:** *What was the drug scene like?*

**GINSBERG:** In '45, '46, I was hanging around Times Square, which was a lot less crowded and a lot cleaner. There were all-night cafeterias — hustlers, druggies, people selling grass, petty thieves. Dr. Kinsey was there taking down statistics, and me and Burroughs were part of the Kinsey Report.

**SECONDS:** *What were you listening to?*

**GINSBERG:** Symphony Sid and Bebop. In high school, I listened to Ma Rainey, Billie Holiday, Bessie Smith, a lot of Leadbelly. Leadbelly was then broadcasting live on WNYC. He did a half hour every week and

I listened to him throughout high school. He was a great inspiration, particularly his version of "Black Girl" which I never heard anybody sing as beautifully. A few weeks ago, one of my students gave me a mixed tape of Kurt Cobain and there was a version of "Black Girl" of great artistry. Great vocal control and subtlety, it's almost as good as Leadbelly's.

**SECONDS:** *What was it like to be gay back then?*

**GINSBERG:** Well, I stayed in the closet till I was eighteen. The first person I told was Jack. He groaned because he knew I was going to have trouble. He thought I was going to fall in love with him and try and make out with him.

**SECONDS:** *That didn't occur till much later.*

**GINSBERG:** About two years later.

**SECONDS:** *Who's instigation was that?*

**GINSBERG:** Mine. He wasn't that interested. When he'd get drunk, he'd get horny like any red-blooded American.

**SECONDS:** *Tell us about the Howl obscenity trial in a nutshell.*

**GINSBERG:** I gave a reading of it at Berkeley in March 1956, the first complete reading of *Howl*, and it was recorded by several different people and is on this CD set. We have a bit of the audience's reaction to the introduction, so you get a little flavor of the times. *The Fall Of America* sounds like a stand-up comedy routine because it was so novel to say "Go fuck yourself with your atom bomb" or "I smoke marijuana every chance I get." *Howl* got very serious after a lot of hooting in the beginning when people didn't understand what it was about. Then Ferlinghetti printed it in England, 500 copies, with the dirty words dotted out. We thought it was a little purple velvet book of poems a few cognoscenti would read. The book was seized by Customs and the American Civil Liberties Union intervened in 1956. Customs unhanding it and it was on sale for a couple months. Meanwhile I'd gone to Europe with Peter Orlovsky. Kerouac went to Tangiers to help Burroughs work on the manuscript that became *Naked Lunch* because Kerouac is a speed typist. So Peter and I went to Tangiers and we were all collaborating on this next big project, which was *Naked Lunch*. *On The Road* had been published, then the next thing we hear from Ferlinghetti was the police had raided City Lights Books. A policeman from the juvenile

## **“A common mistake of Rock & Roll artists is thinking they have to transcend their mortal bounds.”**

vice squad had bought a copy of *Howl* and then later arrested Ferlinghetti, the owner of City Lights, and the clerk who sold it. There was a big trial coming up and I said, “Do I have to come back?” and he said, “No, the ACLU has picked up on it.” I wrote him saying I was engaged in something really important, which was helping work on *Naked Lunch*. He said he didn’t need me. It’s just as well I didn’t have to take the stand. So they had a long trial and for the first time in history, literary merit was admitted as evidence by expert testimonies of professors and poets to show that the work had social commentary and artisanship. Those two criteria were given as Constitutional protections against censorship. The previous major decision was James Joyce’s *Ulysses* in ’33. Obscene was anything that would make a person of moderate temperament excited sexually. So the judge showed the book to his friends and said they didn’t get a hard-on, so therefore it’s not obscene. *Howl* was a landmark decision that affected the social climate. The next big cases were Henry Miller and *Lady Chatterly’s Lover*. Grove Press did a heroic job publishing these books and defending them at great legal expense from ’58 on all the way up to the final big trial of *Naked Lunch*. That broke the back of censorship in America. Then the next thing was to liberate movies from the Hayes Office and various production codes imposed by the industry. The villains always died, no nudity on screen, no tits, no sex, no love. Grove Press again had the same lawyer, Ed DeGrazia. With the film *I Am Curious (Yellow)*, Grove Press and DeGrazia broke the back of movie censorship. That allowed the rise of underground improvisatory film in the late 60s like Warhol’s *Chelsea Girls*. The underground films were more frank and real than the corporate films. So finally Marlon Brando could take margarine to his buttocks. Now it’s only the central marketplace of ideas, television, that’s censored. That’s the

Sweet Boy, Gimme Yr Ass

lemme kiss your face,  
lick your neck  
touch your lips,  
tongue tickle tongue end  
nose to nose,  
quiet questions  
ever slept with a man before?  
hand stroking your back slowly  
down to the cheeks’ moist hair  
soft asshole  
eyes to eyes blur,  
a tear strained from seeing  
—(1974)

next big battle for the liberation of American consciousness.

**SECONDS:** *What other forms of censorship are there?*

**GINSBERG:** The tax laws force publishers to shred books so that they are not repeated on the inventory and taxes don’t have to be paid year after year on the same unsold five hundred novels. Warehouses have to be emptied every year of excessive inventory. It’s the same with record companies. There’s commercial censorship, which is market censorship. If you want to call it censorship, the subsidies for the arts which are common in Europe are not common here. The subsidies for arts on the cutting edge, including erotic art, are under political attack here. The viewpoint of the right-wing, televangelist, neo-conservative was being imposed on government arts endowment funds. In the 80s the attack began in the Heritage Foundation newsletter with a two-part analysis denouncing National Endowment of the Arts grants to poets because they had dirty words. That was the beginning of the

real political correctness campaign — right-wing political correctness.

**SECONDS:** *There’s political correctness on both sides?*

**GINSBERG:** The phrase “political correctness” was a joke phrase the left used to criticize itself and was seized by the right wing in order to convince people the left was politically incorrect. But the right wing was the one that imposed the real censorship.

**SECONDS:** *Why do they want to censor things? Why don’t they want people to become sexually excited?*

**GINSBERG:** As Plato pointed out, “When the mode of music changes, the walls of the city shake.” So when you have modern free speech in idiomatic language that people can understand and are interested in, immediately it becomes a political issue. Demagogues want to hush it up because people get to know too much. If you can get



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people by the balls you control their most deep-seated emotions, which are erotic. Once you control that you control all the other emotions. You take emotional control, blank out the eros, and substitute a lot of violence.

**SECONDS:** *Wouldn't you think a sane government would want people to be happy and fulfilled?*

**GINSBERG:** But I think all governments are insane, and maybe the very state and the government itself. A solidified state has to repress everybody else's independence and imagination.

**SECONDS:** *So your public career was born in the controversy of the Howl trial.*

**GINSBERG:** That seemed to make me famous and I have to thank the police for that.

**SECONDS:** They were your PR people.

**GINSBERG:** If you've got a work of genuine art, censorship magnifies its intention, like it did Mapplethorpe. Mapplethorpe was known as an esoteric photographer but once Helms starting attacking him he became very popular. Everybody wanted to see it and a jury in Cincinnati decided it wasn't obscene.

**SECONDS:** *How did you get hooked up with Eastern spiritualism?*

**GINSBERG:** Remember back in '55 people were already practicing Buddhist meditation and studying Chinese and Japanese. Kerouac actually introduced me to basic Buddhist ideas. All the constituents that exist are transitory and there's no permanent self. First I thought he was kidding me that existence contained suffering. I thought he was making fun of me as a Jewish intellectual. I realized he was onto something. I went to India with Gary Snyder. We went on a Buddhist pilgrimage, worked at the Kyoto monastery. I came back, farted around a lot, but finally met a good teacher, Muktamamda Darahamsi. Then I ran into Rinpoche Chögyam Trungpa, a poet and a calligrapher, painter, master of meditation. I ran into him and we fell in love so he started teaching me Tibetan Buddhist meditation and I've been with that since 1972.

**SECONDS:** *Was any of this a reaction to your Judaic roots?*

**GINSBERG:** More of an extension. I'd always had some spiritual inclination, particularly since that 1948 breakthrough, but I hadn't found a way of focusing my mind or stimulating my mind or meditating properly. Instead, I was subsisting on the habit of memory rather than opening up

my mind every day. I found the meditation practice useful.

**SECONDS:** *What happened to the Beat Generation? Did it expire or did it transform into something?*

**GINSBERG:** I would say the main writers are still alive and more powerful and productive than ever. Burroughs is an enormous influence on Punk and post-modern music, from David Byrne on to Soft Machine and Steely Dan. Kurt Cobain finished an album with him before he died. Giorno Records Systems has been featuring Burroughs for years. Burroughs' influence on Generation X is enormous. Even U2 count themselves as fans of Burroughs. Kerouac is known around on the world and is a big influence on younger kids and has been all along since Abbie Hoffman went south to get the vote for Black people with a copy of *On The Road* in his pocket in 1963. Kerouac is more famous than ever now. All of his old works are being re-printed and selling and new works are coming out posthumously. Gary Snyder is the most famous ecological poet. McClure is running around with Ray Manzarek of The Doors and giving concerts everywhere.

**SECONDS:** *It sounds like the movement was very successful.*

**GINSBERG:** A lot of the basic ideas from diet to gay liberation to sexual liberation to multi-racial workability are at least officially taken up by the mass medium of popular culture. Distrust of the government in the specifics of bullshit on the War On Drugs, and war itself is more common than before. Poe-like paranoia about the CIA and the secret police. The fortunate thing about the Beats is they didn't get into Marxist dead-ends like many of the politicians of the Hippie movement, the SDS. Burroughs always knew from his own experience, and Kerouac did too, that the Stalinist-Marxist thing was a big drag. And I was kicked out of Cuba in 1965 for protesting Castro's treatment of gays and then kicked out of Prague by the Marxists for being a pot-smoker and fag. I was charged with corrupting the youth. I'm still being charged with that by local Neanderthals — well, local neo-conservatives.

**SECONDS:** *In the 60s, what happened that created an atmosphere where Hippies and "flower power" flourished?*

**GINSBERG:** Well, the Vietnam War. The

***“I saw in Time Magazine an attack on NAMBLA saying it was a group involved in ‘the systematic exploitation of the weak and immature by the powerful and disturbed.’ At first reading, it struck me as a precise characterization of Time’s own assault on the American mind.”***

war, from '63 on, became more of a violent vortex that absorbed people's energy and politicized people. It politicized them in a Marxist way that

distracted them from the spiritual openings the Beats had established. By spiritual I mean a stanchion of consciousness and a realization of one's own anger, that if you want to conquer violence you have to first conquer your own violence. I don't think the Hippies realized that so they were screaming "Fuck the pigs" or they let a lot of

double agents from the FBI get in the middle of them and say "Bring the war home, fuck the pigs, kill your parents." In a way, I think the politicization of the Hippies didn't quite succeed in stopping the war as they intended. It may have, along with the military, prolonged the war by confusing the middle class.

**SECONDS:** *It turned people against one another who didn't really have a beef with each other.*

**GINSBERG:** My father and I argued about it until he realized in '68, '69 that the war was a mistake. A lot of people think J. Edgar Hoover was a closet queen transvestite who was blackmailed by the Mafia to distract attention from organized crime and make a crusade against Communists and the labor union. That created McCarthyism and also gutted the labor unions of the original pinko leadership that had formed them. The Labor party and the Socialist party were discouraged by the FBI. When that was purged the Mafia got into the union business when they kicked out all the lefties. Hoover was denying there was organized crime all that time. He instead worried about child porn and comics or Public Enemy Number



***Jean Genet, William Burroughs, Allen Ginsberg, Democratic National Convention, Chicago 1968 photo by Jill Krementz***

One, which was just a publicity stunt. Cooperating with McCarthy in the 50s, he gutted the State Department of anyone that

knew about China and Vietnam so that the CIA thought it was a monolithic Communism they had to have a containment policy for, not realizing that Vietnam and China had always been enemies and all we'd have to do was pay off Ho Chi Minh to wall in the Chinese. As soon as we got out of there the Chinese and Vietnamese had a war. The whole

Vietnam War was a big simplistic era and people still haven't got that through their heads, and instead we made believe we won the war with Rambo and John Wayne. The younger generation doesn't realize this history of gigantic dumkopf among the right-wing of America.

**SECONDS:** *How did your poetry change as the 60s wore on?*

**GINSBERG:** Not much. My poetry has always been a picture of my mind moving. My subject is my own mind, not the world. The mind reflects the world, so the subjects change and the war becomes a subject between cocksucking in tears or love affairs or the death of my father. So there's themes of eros, family, war, politics — like anybody else's mind. What goes through my mind is a period of American civilization to the decline of the Empire. Which as the Roman Empire did, it over-extended itself and created chaos from the center.

**SECONDS:** *You also worked with Rock entities like The Fugs.*

**GINSBERG:** When I was in India in '63, Ed Sanders wrote me saying he had a magazine called *Fuck You: A Journal Of The Arts* and all the poets joined in and sent stuff

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in to him because it was the most lively thing happening. Olson, Creeley, Snyder — everybody sent in poems. That was the beginning of the mimeograph revolution. So when I got back from India I was singing mantras quite a bit. On the second Fugs album I did a cut of “Hare Krishna.” I also wrote liner notes for the first or second Fugs album.

**SECONDS:** *Is Rock music the repository of the poetic impulse?*

**GINSBERG:** It’s a repository in this century, certainly. It’s grows out of the greatest body of lyric poetry we have in this century, which is Black Blues from Ma Rainey, Robert Johnson and Charlie Patton.

**SECONDS:** *You had problems with LSD and it seemed your association with Buddhism helped you with it. Is that the case?*

**GINSBERG:** Yes. I’d had that Blake experience and I was looking to LSD to reproduce it. That’s sort of asking for trouble. I was thinking in terms of getting back to Godhead. Failing to do that I’d think, “Maybe I don’t deserve, maybe I’m the Devil, maybe I’m in Hell.” and I’d have a bum trip thinking I was the lowest worm on the lowest spiderweb in Hell and start vomiting. I never got over that until I went to India and talked with Dudjom, head of the Nyingma, the old school of Tibetan Buddhism, who sucked in his breath saying, “Well, some of our monks go through those fearful experiences. But the thing to remember is: if you see something horrible, don’t cling to it — if you see something beautiful, don’t cling to it.” That cut the Gordian knot out of looking for Heaven and seeing I was in Hell. By 1967, a few years later, I’d gotten over that constant fear that I have to bring death into my life in order to get a visionary experience. A common mistake of Rock & Roll artists is thinking they have to transcend their mortal bounds. It wasn’t until I centered myself with meditation that I was able to finally write a poem on LSD that was a union of transcendental experience and the everyday practical world.

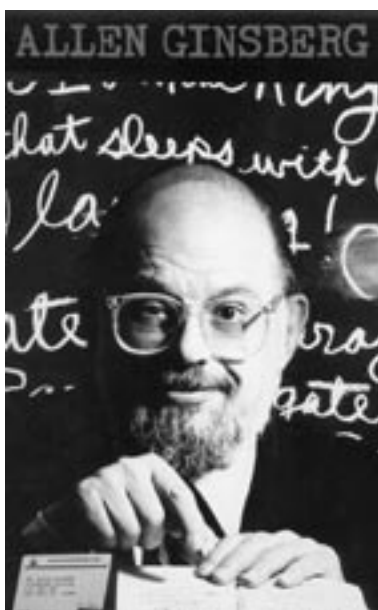
It’s called “Whales Visitation.” The poem is about breath. It’s a meditation practice centering on the breath that brings you back from getting your mind tangled in your own projections and fantasies and visions and brings you back to your body and the place where you really are.

**SECONDS:** *As it goes with the LSD trip, so it goes with the soul.*

**GINSBERG:** As it goes with your breath, your centering, so that you don’t go into a headtrip and imagine you’re in the mouth of God or the asshole of the Devil or get entangled in your ideas and dreams and lose track of where you are. You take off your clothes and get in front of traffic and say, “Stop the machines, they’re killing the world.”

**SECONDS:** *What happened to psychedelia?*

**GINSBERG:** I think it’s more widespread than ever in high schools and colleges. But there’s so much Granny wisdom that people don’t talk about it publicly like we did. They no longer trust the common sense of politicians and the police to come around to the wisdom aspect of the whole situation. It’s still in the hands of the Army. You can’t do any scientific psychological experimentation unless you do it at a Veterans’ Hospital. It was introduced to America originally by the



CIA under the mistaken idea that the Russians had ordered 50 million doses. These Swiss spies got their decimal points all wrong so the CIA ordered 100 million doses or whatever and started project MK-Ultra, introducing it to university professors for experimentation. So it spread in America immediately. The CIA introduced it and it’s the Army that’s got control over the supply now. You can’t do any experimentation without military permission. It’s still considered a war weapon rather than an educational tool. I think the use of mushrooms, acid, ecstasy —

the other psychedelics — is more widespread than it was in the 60s.

**SECONDS:** *As you say, psychedelia didn’t end but it kind of dissipated?*

**GINSBERG:** It was a catalyst to the entire

## ***“I don’t want to be interpreted as encouraging kids to try heroin.”***

anti-war movement. I don’t think it wound itself down. It’s still an active catalyst in schools but the people are smart enough not to tell the police and the newspapers. The raves are psychedelic. I asked in a college where I was teaching how many people took acid or tried some sort psychedelic and I think half the class raised their hand and looked around furtively to see if it was safe to say yes.

**SECONDS:** *After Psychedelia flourished, was the next thing the sexual revolution?*

**GINSBERG:** I think that was simultaneous. What years are you talking about?

**SECONDS:** *I see Psychedelia as ending around ’72.*

**GINSBERG:** Popular Psychedelia? Maybe so. But it was still going on as much. People shut up because they knew it was dangerous to talk about. There was the War on Drugs while the government was simultaneously peddling coke to the Contras. In ’71, the proceeds of the opium traffic in Indo-China helped support the war as outlined in Alfred McCoy’s book *The Politics Of Heroin*. We conceived that book together on May Day 1970 at the Panther rally at Yale that was tear-gassed by the cops. I did a lot of research in 1970-1971 while he was preparing the book and I have a piece of my own called “The Politics Of Drugs” and that’s in a book called *Allen Verbatim*.

**SECONDS:** *Do you like heroin?*

**GINSBERG:** I’ve tried it a number of times but I am a workaholic, not an alcoholic or heroin maniac. I think it’s a terrible thing like alcoholism or any drug addiction which changes the metabolism and leaves you with an unbalanced craving for something to stem depression. Automatic depression is brought on by the change of metabolism caused by the drug whether it’s alcohol, cocaine or heroin. Alcohol is worst, cocaine is second and heroin third. If you have a legal supply where there’s no stress, it’s just a medicine like insulin. You don’t throw people in jail for alcoholism. The only cure is a voluntary cure. But I think alcohol is much more violent and dangerous. In certain cases, I think alcoholics would be better off with a heroin habit than a legal alcohol habit, which is destructive.

**SECONDS:** *But the government promotes that stuff left and right.*

**GINSBERG:** Yes. Hard drugs, meaning alcohol and tobacco. The killer drugs. I don’t want to be interpreted as encouraging kids

to try heroin. I’m just pointing out that public policy is creating a black market which spreads among kids and makes it illicit in a way that attracts people that want to spite their parents. I’d recommend to anyone that before they try anything, learn some non-theistic centering meditation so you don’t get entangled in your own angers, resentments and fantasies. Like Kerouac has a line, “Anger doesn’t like to be reminded of fits.” The way you deal with anger is, when you find yourself angry you recognize it. You don’t have to do anything about it, you just have to look at it and be aware of it and it dissolves like a soap bubble. Eighty percent of anger is hot air. Everybody has that experience.

**SECONDS:** *You said the sexual revolution ran parallel to Psychedelia.*

**GINSBERG:** I think they were mutually influenced by each other, even though sex is older and more basic. The sexual revolution in the sense that everybody’s got a big dong or big pussy and everybody’s tastes are different. Some straight men like ladies to tickle their anus. Some men like to put something up it while they’re screwing girls. Some girls like it from the rear, some like it in the missionary position, some like cunnilingus or fellatio, muff diving or cocksucking.

**SECONDS:** *Do you have a favorite?*

**GINSBERG:** I like everything. I like to screw, I like to be screwed, I like to blow, I like to be blown, I like to be touched gently all over.

**SECONDS:** *Is there a good drug for sex?*

**GINSBERG:** I haven’t found one. I think ecstasy — it may be, I’ve never had enough. In certain respects, ecstasy and even acid makes your skin feel rubbery and unreal.

**SECONDS:** *Marijuana’s not a bad one.*

**GINSBERG:** It lessens the time. Because I’m so much involved in the politics of marijuana, when I get high I say, “I’m high and the police know.” I feel most relaxed when I’m not on anything now. Maybe I was always more interested in resisting the police state in this area than actually getting high. Though I must credit getting high for a lot of information and a lot of perception.

**SECONDS:** *How has gay culture changed in America over the years?*

**GINSBERG:** Well it seems that the transvestites have finally won their war to be recognized as regular fellas. They were the initiators of Stonewall and featured by

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RuPaul and the discos and whatnot. I guess there's this frontier of the North American Man Boy Love Association — that's misunderstood as an assignation society rather than a debating and discussion society.

**SECONDS:** *Is there a place for NAMBLA in the world?*

**GINSBERG:** If you just take a walk through the Vatican, you could say everybody loves the slightly erotic emanation of nude prepubescent bodies. You just walk through the Vatican and see all these boys and girls twelve to eighteen. You walk through the Metropolitan Museum of Art and see all these naked young Greek statues of gods, nymphs and preteen girls and boys. Caravaggio's sixteen-year-old Bacchus, drunk and naked. All of sudden people make a big deal out of it as if it's something new. I think the age of consent in New Mexico is fourteen.

**SECONDS:** *But in most of America it's eighteen.*

**GINSBERG:** I don't know actually. It's just a forgotten humanity. Don't you know that there's an old tradition that a mature woman of thirty-five might seduce a young boy of sixteen and seventeen and that's considered honorific in French movies and plays. So what about the reverse? A man will seduce a girl of that age and it's considered more predatory. When I was young, young girls of thirteen would be married to older men in Tennessee. Girls are very aggressive at that age. So you never can tell what goes on. You can't make one law that would cover every case accurately. "One law for the lion & ox is oppression" — that's from Blake's *Marriage Of Heaven And Hell*.

**SECONDS:** *Is there a similar organization for men and young girls?*

**GINSBERG:** Not that I know of. Except the Lolita Society, if there is one. That's the subject of joke and amusement, not a big scandal. There's a great deal of abuse by the police in these child porn cases where they try and turn the kid against his mentor with whom he's had a sexual relationship, even sometimes in cases where the relationship becomes friendship where the kid gets married and sees the old guy as the uncle, as in my case, though I've never made it with anyone under fifteen. There's a lot of younger people I've made it with that I've known for twenty, thirty years and are still old friends.

**SECONDS:** *So that flies in the face of the police logic on that issue.*

**GINSBERG:** The police abuse the kids, trying to get them to turn state's evidence, threatening them with jail and beating if they don't.

**SECONDS:** *They're going to wind up in a youth detention center where they'll be made into the most lecherous, horrible creatures imaginable.*

**GINSBERG:** The interesting thing is that all this rises from Meese porn commission. The Johnson porn commission said there was no relationship between pornography and violence — actually pornography may siphon out some of the violence by people jacking off and losing their impulse. The Meese Commission was set up by Reagan to prove that pornography and violence were linked. The most homophobic members of it were two special guys. One was Father Ritter, who was always denouncing fairies. He was the head of Covenant House who was busted for making out with little boys. He was the most vociferous anti-gay loudmouth. The other was Charles Keating, the head of the Lincoln Savings & Loan who was sent to jail for robbing the taxpayers of two-billion dollars. What's interesting about Keating was that he founded a group years ago called Citizens For Decency In Literature in Cincinnati and supposedly cleaned up Cincinnati and drove all the porn shops out of town and created the atmosphere where the local police raided the Mapplethorpe museum show. It was Charles Keating who created the grounds for that abuse of art. It's interesting that the main homophobes in America — Roy Cohn, J. Edgar Hoover, Keating, Ritter, that gang of hot air bullshitters — were all closet queens or obsessed with homosexuality. The main person most obsessed with homosexuality and waving dirty pictures at everybody is Senator Jesse Helms. He wants to humiliate fairies. He wants them to kneel at his feet and be humiliated. He's the top man in this arrangement, psychologically at any rate. He definitely has an abnormal obsession with the subject.

**SECONDS:** *What is the impulse of gay people to hate their own?*

**GINSBERG:** I had a conversation with someone in the White House in '91 asking if the people in the White House were following the revelations of J. Edgar Hoover being gay and a transvestite. They said yes, they couldn't figure out why a man was acting in such a split schizophrenic way. I didn't have

***“If you’ve got a work of genuine art,  
censorship magnifies its intention.”***

an answer and said maybe you have to read Freud. Then I called up Burroughs, I figured he’d have an answer. Burroughs said, “Why it’s obvious. Plain basic animal behavior ...” It was like how an octopus puts forth a lot of ink to protect itself. So if you were gay and head of the police you had to have a lot of protection. You had to have a gigantic FBI behind you making a smoke screen.

**SECONDS:** *I wonder what they’ll find out about Helms after he’s gone.*

**GINSBERG:** God knows. He’d be a good candidate because he’s so obsessed with it, but everybody says it’s just pure demagoguery and not to take it seriously — that he’s just looking for votes and money.

**SECONDS:** *Is there any activity that should be forbidden?*

**GINSBERG:** I’m not in the business of making laws like that. I don’t know exactly how to define what’s underage and what’s intimidation. Kids have to be protected and I sympathize with those who want to write a law. I’m just saying you have to control the bureaucracy and be extremely careful about demagoguery. At the moment, there’s too much demagogic hysteria for people to be thinking sensibly about it.

**SECONDS:** *Does it help government get further into people’s houses?*

**GINSBERG:** Another pretext for extension

of police apparatuses. Another excuse for the government desire to be able to snoop in on any electronic conversation. It’s a useful thing to get votes. I’d say where force and violence are involved, where mental violence is involved, there’s a fine line. What about some thirteen-year-old kid whose parents have beat him up and rejected him and is out on the street looking for love, hungry, taken in by some pederast who treats him nicely, gives him an education, sleeps with him — what are you gonna do? What humanely should be done? How are you going to make the distinction? The cops don’t make the distinction. The law doesn’t make the distinction. NAMBLA’s good for making public discussion on this issue, discussing what should be the right

laws. People want to scapegoat the discussion. They’re willing to talk about it publicly and bust people but sensible discussion seems to be out of the question. I’ve been accused of being a child rapist simply because I went on the air and said I was a member of NAMBLA. Ten years ago, I saw in *Time Magazine* an attack on NAMBLA saying it was a group involved in “the systematic exploitation of the weak and immature by the powerful and disturbed.” At first reading, it struck me as a precise characterization of *Time*’s own assault on the American mind. ●●●

