Arts & Humanities

Columbians Ahead of the Beat

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Columbia's Beat writers, as many a local sophomore could tell you, frequented The West End, the legendary watering hole across Broadway from campus. On homecoming eve, October 1, as part of its closing weekend, Columbia 250 brought a capacity crowd to the now spiffed-up restaurant to celebrate Ginsberg, Kerouac, and the brainy, seedy company they kept.

While student and alumni poets recited their own work in a basement room, the stage was set on the main floor by Ann Douglas, Parr Professor in Columbia's Department of English and Comparative Literature. Standing where saxophonists and trumpeters had howled for decades, Douglas offered a short and lyrical reflection on the Beats. "They were Columbia's prodigal sons," she told the crowd, "and like most prodigals, also the most talented." Her remarks led right into the main event: a recitation in multiple voices of the emblematic Howl, written by Allen Ginsberg '48CC in 1955 and published the following year.

Visiting alumnus and Beat scholar Jonah Raskin '63CC described the poem's genesis and influence and then commenced with the famous lines: "I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by/madness, starving hysterical naked." Earlier in the day Raskin, a professor at Sonoma State College and author of American Scream: Allen Ginsberg's Howl and the Making of the Beat Generation, spoke on "Allen Ginsberg and Columbia," focusing on the troubled poet's complex relationship with Lionel Trilling. Barnard student poet Audra Noble '05BC and Gregory Ford '96CC, a member of the Ugly Duckling Press poetry- publishing collective, also recited. The audience, led by Douglas's undergraduate students, echoed her incantations of "Moloch!" as she took it down to a whisper just before the final lines and the exploding applause.

Also on hand were several other writers with a direct connection to the Beats, including Kerouac biographer Ann Charters and novelist Joyce Johnson. A half century after his turbulent student career (Ginsberg was once suspended for writing an obscenity in dust on the window of his dorm room), the countercultural icon has

found a place in an official University celebration.

“If you live long enough,” Raskin mused earlier in the day, “you become part of the establishment.”



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