William S. Burroughs
(1914-1997)

BY LEWIS MACADAMS

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Of all the Beat Generation writers, William S. Burroughs, who died on August 2, 1997, at the age of eighty-three, was the most dangerous. Not only was he the dark tutor of the young Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac, but his entire life’s work maintained a sustained, vitriolic—and hilarious—attack on the values held dear by mainstream society. In his trademark suit and snap-brim fedora, he was anarchy’s double agent, an implacable enemy of conformity and of all agencies of control—from governments to opiates.

The publication of his novel Naked Lunch in the United States, 1962, and the ensuing obscenity trial led to a landmark court victory in the battle to end censorship in this country. In 1973, Burroughs returned to the United States after two decades of self-imposed exile and continued in his renegade’s role. He wrote books (Nova Express, Exterminator!), acted in movies (Drugstore Cowboy, My Own Private Idaho) and created his riotously deadpan stage presence in readings and performances. He collaborated with U2, Kurt Cobain and Tom Waits. Burroughs came to embody a Luciferian spirit to generations of musicians, from Lou Reed to David Bowie to Patti Smith to Trent Reznor. Bands like Steely Dan and the Soft Machine named themselves after his images. Though in his later years he lived a mostly quiet life with his three cats in a small house in Lawrence, Kansas, Burroughs’s presence at a public event, in a music video, even a Nike ad, stamped it with genuine and undeniable hipness.

William Burroughs was born on February 5, 1914, into a respectable St. Louis family. Although much has been made of the fact that his paternal grandfather was the inventor of the first accurate adding machine, by 1929 the family had sold all of its stock in the Burroughs Adding Machine Corporation, and young Bill grew up in a slightly straitened upper-middle-class existence. His parents made ends meet by running a genteel suburban gift shop called Cobblestone Gardens.

Burroughs was not a popular child. “That boy smells like a sheep—killin’ dog,” a parent of one of his childhood friends said of him. At age eight, Burroughs wrote his first work, a ten-page opus called Autobiography of a Wolf: “You mean biography, don’t you?” his family suggested. No, Burroughs insisted. Burroughs’s older brother, Mort, was the “good” son. He went to Princeton, became an architect and spent his entire career at General Electric. William was bred to a harder calling. He dropped out of Los Alamos Ranch school just two months before graduation, depressed over being rejected by a boy in his class with whom he was infatuated. He managed, though, to get himself admitted to Harvard and graduate in 1936 without honors—known principally among his peers for the live ferret he kept in his room.

For the next fifteen years, Burroughs’s life seemed to unravel as he drifted slowly downhill, a washout from his class and from his sex. He studied psychiatry at a Viennese medical school and took a series of dead-end jobs. He moved to
Chicago at the beginning of 1939 to attend a series of lectures by Count Alfred Korzybski, the author of *The Theory of General Semantics*, a work that takes issue with Aristotelian notions of duality. Burroughs worked as an exterminator, lived in a boardinghouse on the near North Side, hung out with lowlifes and masterminded great crimes in his imagination. In 1942 he was drafted into the army but was quickly rejected when it came to light that he’d spent a month in New York’s Bellevue and Payne-Whitney hospitals after slicing the last joint off the little finger of his left hand to impress a wayward boyfriend.

In the summer of 1943, Burroughs moved to New York, where a friend from St. Louis, Lucien Carr, had enrolled at Columbia. It was Carr who introduced him to future Beat writers Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg. In the summer of 1945, the three moved into an apartment at 419 West 115th Street, along with Kerouac’s girlfriend, Edie Parker, and Joan Vollmer, a suburban rebel from upstate New York who would become Burroughs’s common-law wife and with whom he would eventually have a son, William Burroughs II.

One cold January night in 1946, Burroughs, hoping to unload a sawed-off shotgun and a batch of stolen morphine Syrettes, knocked at the door of a railroad apartment with yellow-and-black walls under the Manhattan Bridge. The late Herbert Huncke, junkie, thief and mesmerizing raconteur, answered, and the Beat Generation was born. Burroughs introduced Ginsberg and Kerouac to Huncke, Times Square, heroin and Benzedrine. Burroughs shepherded the young men on a tour of the dark side, picking up a fifteen-year addiction to heroin, a habit so powerful that in 1954 he sold his typewriter in London and wrote in longhand.

Burroughs wrote thirteen novels, the best known of which is one of his earlier works, *Naked Lunch*. Throughout his career he remained an adamant outsider, but he lived long enough to garner literature’s most coveted accolades, to hear himself praised by Norman Mailer as “the only American novelist living today who may conceivably be possessed by genius.” In 1983, Burroughs was inducted into the American Academy of Arts and Letters, an honor he accepted with characteristic suspicion. In his biography of Burroughs, *Literary Outlaw*, author Ted Morgan recorded Burroughs’s reaction: “Twenty years ago, they were saying I belonged in jail. Now they’re saying I belong in their club. I didn’t listen to them then, and I don’t listen to them now.”

Besides the singularity of his vision, what is thrilling about Burroughs’s work is his certainty in the power of language. “I do definitely mean what I say to be taken literally, yes,” Burroughs told an interviewer in 1970, “to make people aware of the true criminality of our times, to wise up the marks.” His words, he wrote, were weapons “against those who are bent—by stupidity or design—on blowing up this planet.”

One day in 1951, Burroughs was in an apartment in Mexico City, drinking whiskey with Joan Vollmer and several other American expatriates while waiting for a man to whom he was hoping to sell a used handgun. Seemingly out of the blue, Burroughs announced to Vollmer that it was time for their “William Tell act.” As he took the .380 automatic out of his overnight bag, she balanced her glass of gin and *limonada* on her head, giggling, according to one party guest: “I can’t watch this—you know I can’t stand the sight of blood.” The gun shot low, and she was killed instantly. Not until 1984, in the preface to his novel *Queer*, was Burroughs able to write directly about the incident. Vollmer’s death, he explained, “brought me in contact with the invader, the Ugly Spirit, and maneuvered me into a lifelong struggle, in which I have had no choice except to write my way out.”
His family bought his way out of prison, and he spent the next twenty-two years as an expatriate. It's no coincidence that his breakthrough work, Naked Lunch, was typed in Tangier, an international colony governed, in effect by no one—a place he called Interzone. "To speak is to lie," he wrote. "To live is to collaborate." With his longtime creative partner, Brion Gysin, he discovered a technique for forging new connections: the cut-up method, which involved the arbitrary recombination of pieces of syntax. Burroughs's goal in using cut-ups was never anything less than a "breakthrough in the gray room," he said, a rethinking of the human mind.

Not long after returning to this country from London, in 1973, Burroughs met James Grauerholz. At first a lover, Grauerholz soon became Burroughs's manager and helped to set the writer on a course that brought him not only fame but also a decent income. Burroughs, with Grauerholz's guidance, embarked on a series of reading tours, flogging his vitriol and his outrageous characters such as Naked Lunch's mad surgeon, Dr. Benway, and the gay gunslinger Kim Carson, from The Place of Dead Roads and The Western Lands, to a growing public. The drawling, acerbic humor that had always been a part of Burroughs's work started to seep into the mainstream. By 1981, Lauren Hutton would introduce Burroughs to millions of Saturday Night Live viewers as America's greatest living writer. His genius had begun to shape the culture, to influence people who had never read a single page of his work.

In his later years, in movies like Gus Van Sant's Drugstore Cowboy, Burroughs came to represent the man who called bullshit on the culture because, as he wrote, he "didn't want to be caught short in a gray-flannel suit when the shit-house went up." In What Happened to Kerouac?, a film I codirected in 1989, Burroughs approvingly quotes Kerouac: "I am a spy in someone else's body, and all my credentials—from my birth certificate to everything I've written—is just completely unreal." From that point of view, Burroughs himself may well have been his own most inspiring creation.
Remembering
Burroughs
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We would cut up these speeches by Eisenhower and works by Rimbaud and Shakespeare, and we'd combine them. He taught me it would work if the eye catches something. It was pure magic. Burroughs was one of the most beautiful and intelligent men I met in my life. I was so lucky to know him—it was like meeting Appolonius of Tyre or Pythagoras. Of the Beat Generation, Burroughs was kind of the captain of the ship. Ginsberg would've been the radio operator; Kerouac, the first mate; and I would have been a passenger. But there was Burroughs, steering in a great cargo.

—GREGORY CORSO

Before I met Burroughs, I was already a beatnik, living that life. I had always assumed James Dean and I kind of started it, emulating Marlon Brando, but that's how the Beats touched everything, how Burroughs's influence was. Burroughs took everybody back onto the street, into the realm of the senses to write about those inner dark places. He broke barriers, opened paths.

—DENNIS HOPPER

William Burroughs was the person who broke the door down. When I read Burroughs, it changed my vision of what you could write about, how you could write. He broadened people's conception of what makes humanity. In that way, he really was an American hero, a hero writer, and also just a great man. I am sad not to have him writing anymore.

—LOU REED

Burroughs is the true godfather of outlaw artists. He was always hovering in the shadows, always suspicious of human nature and authority. Burroughs made us look for what masks the truth. He was always suspicious about movies, saying the truth can't possibly be found in twenty-four frames a second. In the greatest sense, Burroughs made me think about what's supposedly permissible in art.

—JIM JARMUSCH
William had a fine taste for handguns, and later in life he became very good with them. I remember shooting with him one afternoon at his range on the outskirts of Lawrence. He had five or six well-oiled old revolvers laid out on a wooden table, covered with a white linen cloth, and he used whichever one he was in the mood for at the moment. The S&W .45 was his favorite. "This is my finisher," he said lovingly, and then he went into a crouch and put five out of six shots through the chest of a human-silhouette target about twenty-five yards away.

Hot damn, I thought, we are in the presence of a serious Shootist. Nicole had been filming it all with the Hi8, but I took the camera and told her to walk out about ten yards in front of us and put an apple on her head.

William smiled wanly and waved her off. "Never mind, my dear," he said to her. "We'll pass on that trick." Then he picked up the .454 Casul Magnum I'd brought with me. "But I will try this one," he said. "I like the looks of it."

The .454 Casul is the most powerful handgun in the world. It is twice as strong as a .44 Magnum, with a huge scope and recoil so brutal that I was reluctant to let an eighty-year-old man shoot it. This thing will snap back and crack your skull if you don't hold it properly.

But William persisted. The first shot lifted him two or three inches off the ground, but the bullet hit the throat of the target, two inches high. "Good shot," I said. "Try a little lower and a click to the right." He nodded and braced again.

His next shot punctured the stomach and left nasty red welts on his palms. Nicole shuddered visibly behind the camera, but I told her we'd only been kidding about the apple. Then, William emptied the cylinder, hitting once in the groin and twice just under the heart. I reached out to shake his hand as he limped back to the table, but he jerked it away and asked for some ice for his palms. "Well," he said, "this is a very nasty piece of machinery. I like it."

I put the huge silver brute in its case and gave it to him. "It's yours," I said. "You deserve it."

Which was true. William was a Shootist. He shot like he wrote—with extreme precision and no fear. He would have fired an M-60 from the hip that day, if I'd brought one with me. He would shoot anything, and he feared nothing.

—HUNTER S. THOMPSON