Hettie Jones (left) and Joyce Glassman (later Johnson) at the Artist's Club, New York City, March 10, 1960

FRED W. McDARRAH
Babes in Boyland

BY HETTIE JONES

In 1994, at the first New York University conference on the Beats, a question was addressed to me after a panel on “Women and the Beats.” “In an earlier discussion,” came a male voice from the back of the room, “someone said your role was actually insignificant, that you were just the typist. Can you address this?”

In the silence that followed, I struggled to get past my astonishment. The very idea, I went on to explain, assumed that Yugen, the magazine I published with LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka), had appeared in bookstores and on library shelves on the wings of song. Whereas, to the contrary, without the typist there’d have been no magazine at all, since the early issues of Yugen, as well as some of our Totem Press books, were, well, hand jobs. Put together on the kitchen table. And indeed I did the typing. In those pre-computer days, on a rickety, erratic IBM with “proportional spacing” — which meant typing a piece repeatedly until it approximated print. Centering Michael McClure’s capitalized verses, organizing Hubert Selby’s dense prose into justified lines. Besides typing I also handled the “press type”—peel-off display lettering you could buy on a sheet and then lay onto an original for photo offset. Yugen was subtitled a new consciousness in arts and letters, and, as I wrote in my memoir How I Became Hettie Jones, my consciousness was definitely raised by press-typing—and squaring over a makeshift light box—every letter of those words.

Insignificant?

I think the real—and unasked—question was, Why was the typist there? Why was she involved? Why, if her specific interests, as we know them today, were represented only marginally among the Beats if at all? Why was I willing to do all this work after eight hours on my day job? Why was I willing to buy paper, pay the offset printer and the rent on the typewriter? Arrange for distribution, fill orders, solicit ads and then throw a party for the people who came to do the collating?

Why were most of us babes even in that Boyland?

Sex of course—let’s start with this and get it out of the way. Most, though not all, of the guys wanted us there for sex. And we ourselves were expecting it. Like some young women in every generation, some of us did have sex in the Fifties. You could have sex anywhere then—basement, backseat, haystack—as long as you remained silent about it, didn’t live as if it were part of your life and didn’t get caught or pregnant. With the Beats, though, we had escaped to a place where women could admit, or at least take for granted, their desires. Sort of. Sometimes. Here’s a poem of mine from the Seventies, “Homage to Frank O’Hara’s Personal Poem”:  

Over and over the mind returns
to the bent shoulders of the young woman
who types, over and over, the poem
until it is perfectly placed
on the page, the name
of her husband, the name
of her lover
the guilty thrill
of juxtaposition as
each gives
to the poet
what he keeps
in his pocket
in her arms she holds them
over and over.

But you had to have more than sex to keep
you in Boyland with your pride intact. You had
to be brave and resourceful. It had to be worse
where you came from. As the narrator in one of
my short stories says, “We women had all left
bloodstains.” You had to believe, as a woman, that
stirring things up in general would eventually
define a new life for you in particular. You had to
believe in the transformative power of art, in the
word, and you had to believe yourself part of that
process.

This is not exactly how we’ve been remem-
bered. Early on in the current revival of interest
in the Beats, a college student came to interview
me. Clearly anxious for some instant reassurance,
she blurted out her first question—“You weren’t
just Beat chicks, were you?”—and was much
relieved to learn that we’d been more than black
stockings on spread legs. That we’d danced,
painted, acted, and, yes, there were writers among
us. And some who weren’t writing—or if writ-
ing not publishing—did eventually write and
publish. And others remained in the business of
publishing, continuing a love of literature that
had, in the first place, brought them to the scene.

The Beat Scene. The heat was great, I’ll admit,
but for me the core was the work. It was chal-
lenging, a lot of it was good, and I simply assumed
that the best of what we published would eventu-
ally be recognized for its literary value. Making
sure of that was another job for the typist. From
1957 to 1961 I was the girl [sic] in the office of
the Partisan Review. Partisan’s distributor, Bernhard
DeBoer—one of only a few distributors for the
handful of literary magazines around in those
years—agreed (because he liked us) to send Yugen
across the country. Piggybacked on the old guard,
it made its way onto midwest campuses and into

West Coast bookstores. Despite its far-out focus
and its few little offset pages stapled at the spine,
despite the fact that it looked nothing like Partisan
or Kenyon or even Dissent, it went to places like
Brown and Purdue and Northwestern and Idaho
State.

As Joyce Johnson tells it, Jack Kerouac
grew up the next day famous. Similarly, to that Fifties
Affluent Society, the Beat Generation seemed
a pop-up surprise, an overnight, tailor-made
threat. How hidden and feared were the worlds
exposed in Ginsberg, Burroughs, Kerouac, Selby.
And just as feared, I soon learned, by those who
held tight to American letters. The Spring 1958
issue of Partisan featured “The Know-Nothing
Bohemians,” a review of On the Road by Norman
Podhoretz, who trashed the book and what it cel-
brated: “The spirit of hipsterism and the Beat
Generation,” he wrote, “strikes me as the same
spirit which animates the young savages in leather
jackets who have been running amok in the last
few years with their switchblades and zip guns.”

That quote has staying power. Consider what
might have happened had we not been in that
spirit at that time.

But how do we speak to this time?

In the fall of 1995, when the Whitney
Museum in New York presented “Beat Culture
and the New America,” like many I was skeptical
at first about such an exhibit. But then I looked at
the display of Yugen and other self-published
magazines and broadsides, and felt not only senti-
ment but respect. Taking up where the Whitney
left off, the New York Public Library in 1998
mounted “A Secret Location on the Lower East
Side: Adventures in Writing, 1960–1980,” cele-
brating some four hundred of these informal
publications and crediting Yugen as one of the
progenitors of an indie movement that has con-
tinued to influence American literature, poetry in
particular.
Forty years before, bent over my drawing board cutting and pasting, I’d longed to make pretty books, like those from Auerhahn Press and City Lights, with real print that would honor the work. But Yugen and its equally funky contemporaries had done that, I realized, and were as worthy as any outsider art that exists because of the will of its creator, and not because of any immediate prospect of recognition or reward.

Nevertheless, that was then. The point, now, is not only to ensure that the spirit that moved us keeps its forward motion, but also that it survives to find its own future. Today, as then, established presses publish established writers (“presses” being an obsolete reference when what’s meant is “corporation”). The NEA, created in the Sixties, is continually threatened in the Nineties, state-level lending hands are tied, and the recent Supreme Court “decency” decision has tightened the rope. It’s discouraging to watch things come full circle, especially since, at the same time, interest in poetry and diverse voices seems to have grown. And since there are always talented new writers—as a teacher I collect evidence—I wonder, given the price of paper and the daunting task of distribution, whether what we did is at all possible or whether the Internet, with its incredible reach but ephemeral nature, is all there will be.

I am of two minds about this. The idea of reaching so many people is awesome to someone like me who dealt in such small numbers. Still, remembering those beautiful objects at the Whitney, I remain convinced that here today is not necessarily gone tomorrow if you are a magazine or a book or even a stapled-together collection of pages. Not long ago I came across these words on a poster: “The material record of the past in the form of objects, art and text continues to shape our identity,” yet “this record is a mystery . . . transient, changing with each generation.” One can only hope to be understood by the future. But as part of that material record, you’ll at least stand a chance to be there, in each object complete with its humanity—not only the writers and the cover artist and the editor and the typist, but everyone at the collating party, the music in their ears and the very dark horse they rode in on.

In this regard, I think it’s best to urge respect for the original texts before they get lost in the impulse to explain decades in sound bites. A review of the CD-ROM “The Beat Experience” described it as an “elegant, if incomplete, multimedia tour of the period,” and after looking long and hard at the illustration of the Beatpad, and noting the couch and the rug, I decided it all seemed upscale to me, nostalgia wearing off the hard edge. Although we frequently had a wonderful time, arrests for obscenity and other scares were not pleasant. We also made a lot of passionate mistakes, and wrote plenty of bad poems. If I were a young person genuinely curious about the era, I’d want the whole story, not someone’s version of the “experience.”

Nor should anyone be fooled into thinking, simply because women have now established their presence among the Beats, that it was all too terrific to be the typist. Many, myself included, wanted far more of ourselves than we ever produced. I’ve been asked how women in that group got published, and the answer, with some notable exceptions, is “if men wanted to include them.” It’s true that there weren’t too many demanding, since most of us were still at home, petting our washing machines or pretending to. The real lives of women, like the real lives of those “savages in leather jackets,” were nowhere near the official story. Only a few of us knew how bad off we were. When I went back to original sources to research my memoir, the repression we’d resisted amazed me, and it was a relief to understand that, given where I’d come from, I’d summoned whatever consciousness I could.

To my suggestion that readers go to the original texts I’d add that the body of work of these
writers be considered. This is especially important regarding women, not only because much of our contribution came later, but because our position in that outsider life remains equivocal: from "Women and the Beats" in 1994 we progressed to *Women of the Beat Generation* (Conari Press, 1996) to *A Different Beat* (Serpent's Tail/High Risk, 1997). Beware: If you're going to suggest Beat Women, you'll have to accept that redundancy, Beat Men.

Though in many ways now is not then, it's still easy to draw parallels between that moment at mid-century and now, at its end. We're still debating women's roles, and again in fear of art that points fingers. "What does not change / is the will to change," wrote Charles Olson. That will keeps alive the necessity for change. It seems as important as ever to hang in and encourage our children—and there certainly are a lot of them by now—hippies, punks, even the new little wannaBeats, who have been handed a world of real trouble along with their cyberspace. But at least, now, everyone is typing.