The first time I saw Allen Ginsberg, he was at a party standing over by the fireplace, and nobody was talking to him. This was after “Howl” but before his big pinnacle. And this woman went over to him and said, “I can’t talk to you; you’re a legend.” And he said, “Yeah, but I’m a friendly legend.”

He was able to make peace in ways that no one else could, except John Lennon who had the quality of bringing peace wherever he went. I have three memories of Ginsberg really using these powers.

Back in ’65, we took the bus up to Berkeley for Vietnam Day. The day before the big rally, the Hell’s Angels said they were going to protest Vietnam Day by pounding the shit out of the protesters. Since we kind of knew the Angels, we went over to Oakland, to [Angels leader] Sonny Barger’s house. Ginsberg went with us, right into the lion’s mouth with his little finger cymbals. Ching, ching, ching. And he just kept talking and being his usual absorbing self. Finally they said, “Okay, okay. We’re not going to beat up the protesters.” When he left, one of the Angels, Terry the Tramp, says, “That queer little kike ought to ride a bike.” From then on, he had a pass around the Angels. They had let all the other Angels know “he’s a dude worth helping out.” They were absolutely impressed by his courage.

About fifteen years ago, we had a poetry festival at the University of Oregon, which we held on their basketball court; we invited big names to be headliners at the evening event. During the day, aspiring headliners performed outside to see if they’d make it into the show. As the day went on, people began to drift in. At the end of the day, we had about three thousand people on the court, and no one had bought a ticket. Ginsberg said, “Let me get them.” And he took his little harmonium. And he om’d, and pretty soon everybody was going “om, om, om.” At the height of the om, he just gestured for the door, and all three thousand people stood up and walked out so we could charge them five bucks to walk back through the door. Power.

And the third thing was a time when we were driving around. Ginsberg and some others were in the back [of the bus] on a mattress, and we got pulled over by a cop for a tail light or something. The cop looked in the back, and there was Ginsberg on top of this, well, boy, really. And the cop looked in and said, “What’s going on?” “Sir,” Allen said, “this boy is having an epileptic seizure. I have to hold him down.” That was it. Phew.

Three examples of his courage and his humor. As this stuff comes up, I get all of these images of Ginsberg. I remember there was this picture of him in the newspaper, he’d been at a peace rally, and the cops beat him up. They were carrying him out on a stretcher, all pummeled, and he began flashing the V sign for the reporters taking pictures. Pretty soon, he had everyone laughing, even the cops. But he wasn’t trying to inflame people. There was a time when if you weren’t trying to inflame people, you were almost subversive.

I can’t help but feel privileged to have really known Ginsberg, Timothy Leary and Jerry Gar-
cia. These are three revolutionary heavies, and as
time goes by and all this hysteria about drugs
wears off, these guys will be re-evaluated in terms
of their work and their effect on society. All three
were real revolutionary leaders—like Benjamin
Franklin or Thomas Jefferson—and it’s the same
revolution, the revolution of consciousness, with-
out which the nation will not survive. We’ve got
to be mature enough to incorporate everyone
into this revolution. Its basis is mercy and justice
and mercy before justice.

—KEN KESY

A few months ago we were on the roof
terrace of the Soho Grand, in New
York, in the snow, and he sat down in the deck
chairs and, for laughs, joking and taking the piss
out of himself, put a hat and a blanket around
himself. He looked like some old guy you’d see
transplanted from Miami. And he recited the
lyrics from “Miami,” a song of ours, for this TV
special we did, and it blew us all away. He gave it
the full Ginsberg treatment:

Big girl with the sweet tooth
Watches the skinny girl in the photo shoot
Her eyes all swimmin’ pool blue
And she tastes of chlorine

It’s on film, and for some eerie reason it’s in the
same tempo as the song, so they cut it in—it’s
something. “Miami” sounded great coming out
of his lips, sounded a lot better than it is, probably,
as a lyric. I think to make other men poets is a
gift, indeed.

The last I saw him was in his new place down
in the East Village—his whole world was in
boxes. And they were all numbered. And he had
everything filed, every photograph he’d ever
taken. He had some very smart people working
for him. It was almost like he’d tidied everything
up. I don’t know if he knew then; he didn’t tell us.

We were trying to buy him an Irish-tweed
suit—because I knew he likes them, but he
wouldn’t let me. He said, “No, no, don’t do that;
I’ll catch you in Ireland.”

I wasn’t a great friend of his or anything, just
a fan, and he was good to me as a fan. When I left
his apartment the other week, he just piled me
up, a whole pile of rare editions of his books and
the last one he gave me was his father’s book of
poetry.

Allen was extraordinary. There’s a much more
minimal style, sort of post-Carver sense for liter-
ature right now. But that drunk language still sur-
vives. If you think about it, the headiness of the
Sixties and the dizziness of it all, I think his posi-
tion is safe.

—BONO

The people in the Beat movement—
myself, Gregory Corso, Allen, Jack Ker-
ouac—we were quite different artistically. But we
were together in the simple concept of openness
and expanding awareness. Before anyone had
begun to make a real breakthrough, there was
Allen leading these outspoken readings in front
of fraternity boys at Columbia. They were the
people you’d expect to be the least receptive and
most hostile to that kind of message, but he
didn’t seem to encounter much direct confron-
tation. He won them over with his absolute
sincerity, his openness. There was that courage.
Very definitely, he extended the area of artistic
expression; he extended the area of what was
artistic.

I admired very much the calm and dignity
with which he met his death. The doctors
told him two to four months, and he said, “I
think much less.” It was, of course, much less. He
tsaid to me, “I thought I’d be terrified when I
heard that diagnosis. I’m not terrified at all. I’m
exhilarated.”

—WILLIAM S. BURROUGHS
I had just gotten out of Clinton prison at Dannemora, in New York, in November of ’49, where I had been for robbery, and was spending time in the Village. I used to hang out at this lesbian bar, the Pony Stable, where a friend of mine did caricatures. One night this young man comes in. He had these eyes: deep black pools of light. I didn’t know that he was gay then, that he was out cruising. But he was looking at me, so I went up and hustled a beer out of him. We started talking and poetry came up. I mean, I didn’t know anybody like Allen. I’d been in prison. I had my prison poems with me and showed them to him. That was how we got to know each other. Then he introduced me to Kerouac and Burroughs; he said to them, “Look who I have found.” That man became my brother, my Jewish grandmother, my teacher, my PR man. He pushed me like he pushed everybody. In the end, I guess he didn’t teach me how to live too well. But he did teach me how to die. He let go so beautifully. The last thing he said to me: “Toodle-oo.”

I think of him as the captain of a ship who brought in a great cargo, and deposited it here. He was the Beat Generation. He was a great, spirited man, a great, lifelong friend. I will miss him, dear Allen.

—GREGORY CORSO

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He first reading of “Howl,” in October 1955, was part of a very outspoken evening. There were between one hundred and two hundred people there: woman professors in old fox coats, anarchists, carpenters, workers from the docks, young poets. Jack [Kerouac] was there that night, making collections for jugs of wine, tapping on the jugs in time with us, yelling, “Go, go, go.” What we all wanted to do with the Six Gallery reading was take the poetry off the page and deliver it to the ear and body and consciousness of the person there listening. What we were saying wouldn’t be published, the kind of things we were saying had no publishers. So we did it right out loud. What we discovered was the people in the audience were there to hear exactly what we were doing. We were speaking for them. And Allen drew the line with “Howl.” People left after that completely blown away. It was very immediately a revelation.

—MICHAEL McCLURE

I remember walking away from the Six Gallery, in San Francisco, after Allen’s first reading of “Howl,” saying, “Poetry will never be the same. This is going to change everything.” Everyone who attended was set back. It was the power of “Howl.” He got right into the quandaries and complexities of the Eisenhower era, the personal lives of those who were marginalized and often in pain, and brought those voices forward. It was the beginning of the Beat Generation and, in a sense, the defining moment in all of our literary careers.

—GARY SNYDER

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llen Ginsberg, John Cage and La Monte Young were the first three figures of the New York avant-garde I met when I arrived in the city in 1963. The last time I saw him was during last month’s Tibet House benefit concert at Carnegie Hall. Lenny Kaye and I played while Allen sang “Don’t Smoke” with his wonderfully infectious, dribbly lilt mixed in with the melodic rhythm of the cantor.

In the period between the two events, Allen was the conscience of the underground/avant-garde to whom we all deferred.

—JOHN CALE

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llen was a pretty far-out cat. He was a highly intellectual guy who had a lot of bright ideas. And as he became older, he never stopped having them. He found a way to keep going, and to be at peace with himself. Once,
Allen had organized this recording session, where he'd be reciting the poetry of William Blake. He was a Blake scholar. We were all crowded into this small studio in Greenwich Village. He had Charlie Mingus, Larry Coryell and myself, and Allen was playing some kind of Middle Eastern double-reed instrument. We got to know each other very well when there were problems with the time signature for the cadence of the poetry. So I wrote out a chart for him with the time signature and gave him the cadence. He showed me that chart, like thirty years later: "This is what you wrote out for me!" I had written it out on a paper bag. He kept it all that time. So that's how we got to be good friends.

—ELVIN JONES

Allen and I first met in London, in '67. Through the years, whenever our paths crossed, he never ceased to impress me with his wisdom and sense of fun.

Allen was sexy in a way a mountain sometimes could be. He was gentle in a way a true friend could be. And he was intelligent in a way that influenced a whole generation. It's hard to believe that he's gone. In fact, I would like to think that I might still meet him somewhere.

—YOKO ONO

I can still see Allen oning through the tear gas in New Haven, in the early Seventies, when everybody was starting to freak out. Next thing you know, the tear gas was gone; everybody kept oning. That was courage. A lot of people don't realize that aside from writing good poetry, he pulled the covers down on the mean and the nasties. He'd bust them. And he never lost his great sense of humor. He was always more of a chuckler than a guffawer; he had a very intelligent wit. It was just such a pleasure to be around him.

—WAVY GRAVY

Allen got me to lecture at the Naropa Institute for a lyric-writing class and I got to watch him lecture about poetry. He taught Walt Whitman and knew about every reference in every poem. He was a brilliant lecturer (and I'm a connoisseur because my father was a lecturer and taught Dante) and Allen was erudite and totally serious but also very funny. He made scholarly sort of jokes that you'd have to be very clever to understand. Also, Allen was everyone's sort of very own Jewish mother. He made me countless dinners over the years, and he loved it; he was a great cook—and a terrible nag. Once I'd had a bit too much to drink and the next day he really let me have it. Oh, I was furious. But he was a very warm man; he had a great gift for friendship.

—MARIANNE FAITHFULL

His poetry was so American and so straightforward, so astute, and he had such a recognizable voice. Modern rock lyrics would be inconceivable without the work of Allen Ginsberg. It opened them up from the really mediocre thing they'd been to something more interesting and relevant. He was very brave, and he was also very honest—a no-bullshit person.

In the Fifties, Sixties, Seventies, Eighties, Nineties, Allen was everywhere; he was a part of everything, everybody's life. From the very beginning of the Velvet Underground, when people were saying how shocking we were, Allen was there dancing, playing Tibetan bells. The world's diminished now. But his spirit goes on though people and their work. And his poems will stand the test of time. He was a very inspiring guy, and on top of that, he was really nice. What a striking combination.

—LOU REED
FOUR • BEAT'S POET LAUREATE

The first time I met Allen was, I think, the winter of 1963–64, when I was nineteen years old. I'd driven into New York to pick up Gregory Corso and bring him back down to Princeton to do a poetry reading. When I got to his apartment, Corso told me his wife had just given birth to their first child that morning. He'd been up, so could he bring along another poet to read? Out of the next room stepped Allen Ginsberg, just back from India. As soon as the reading started, Gregory went off to a corner of the stage and fell asleep, and Allen did the entire gig. It was right when the Vietnam War was starting to get nasty, when he and Bob Dylan were starting to hook up. Allen seemed larger than life to me then—as he seems larger than death to me right now. Before he went onstage, he said he was cold, so I loaned him my sweater. After he gave it back, I wore it everyday for weeks because it had Allen's smell.

One hot July, ten years later, I was passing through Naropa Institute and stayed in the faculty apartments. Late one night I was rolling around in bed with a friend of mine when she went and woke up Allen, whose room was down the hall, and he came back naked and crawled into bed with us. I wasn't into it, so I climbed into a sleeping bag. As Allen and my friend caressed each other, Allen reached over and touched me on the forehead, and I came instantly. I thought of that the day after he died when I heard his poem "Death and Fame," in which Allen described his vision of his own funeral, a great public one at St. Patrick's Cathedral or St. Mark's Church or the largest synagogue in Manhattan, in which five decades of ex-lovers would testify that he gave great head.

"Old Courage-Teacher"—that's what Ginsberg called Walt Whitman. That's what Allen was for so many people. "He immortalized tenderness," Peter Leavitt, a poet-friend, said to me.

At the same time, Allen was a man of towering wrath—usually followed by anguished guilt. You couldn't write a poem like his "Pentagon Exorcism" without being able to focus your anger to a diamondlike intensity. When you think about the Fifties now, you think about Allen Ginsberg quicker than you think about Dwight David Eisenhower.

—LEWIS MACADAMS

Allen Ginsberg and I traveled at various times with Bob Dylan's Rolling Thunder Revue mid-Seventies, loosely dubbed "poets-in-residence." I was hired to contribute ideas to the movie (Renaldo and Clara)—the brothel scene filmed in Quebec City one of them, a visit to the Shakers another (never panned out, the Shakers were considered too old). Allen was in heaven with the energy of the scene, but yearned to be included onstage, always the frustrated rock & roller (close to death, he was hoping to complete an MTV Unplugged). I'd gone back to Boulder, Colorado, to teach/run our burgeoning Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics at the Naropa Institute that Allen and I had cofounded in 1974, but was lured to Fort Collins for the filming of the show that became the Hard Rain TV special. It was pouring. The musicians and roadies were grumpy and nervous about being electrocuted. Dylan had been promising Allen the moon. Yes, he'd be invited to read onstage, etc., etc. But when? During a long break I got my nerve up and marched into Bob's dressing room demanding, "Let the poet read in the rain!" A flurry of consultation. Okay. Allen took the stage, ever modest but commanding. A mere seven-line poem, "On Neal's Ashes." Allen held the crowd in thrall, his voice ringing out prophetic, clear, passionate for a rare transmuted tantric moment: "Delicate eyes that blinked blue Rockies all ash / Nipples, Ribs I touch w/my thumb are ash... asshole anneal'd to silken skin all ashes, all ashes again." And I thought more power at times in that lone naked human hungry voice than all the electrified amps in the world.

—ANNE WALDMAN

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Allen and I got into the American Academy of Arts and Letters, in 1973—at the same time—and a guy from *Newsweek* called me and said, “So what does it feel like for a couple of outsiders like you to suddenly get taken into the establishment?” and I said—and Allen agreed with me—“If we aren’t the establishment, then who is?” I was always very fond of Allen, always very glad to see him. His love was uncritical and utterly open and irresistible. He was a saint and he was the only politically effective poet of my lifetime.

—KURT VONNEGUT

In late ’77, I was hired on as Allen’s temporary secretary and then kept on. I started working out of Allen’s apartment. It was amazing we got any work done at all: There would be people visiting all day. There were open house rules at Ginsberg’s: You could eat anything in the refrigerator, especially if you were willing to replace it. Always use the towel on the wall under the peg with your name on it. That’s how it was. I worked for him nineteen and a half years, and I never once lost respect for him as a person. Of all the time I spent with him, my favorite moments were when we’d have a few hours together driving in a car that didn’t have a telephone. We could just talk. About literature, ideas, anything. His first name was Irwin, Irwin Allen Ginsberg, and I always called those moments time with Irwin.

—BOB ROSENTHAL

When most people think of Allen Ginsberg, they think of his effect on the Beat Generation. What many people don’t realize is that he has also had a tremendous effect on kids today. I think Allen is not so much a symbol of intelligence but of love. I hope that his works will become more and more integrated into the curriculum of American high schools so that he can continue to challenge and inspire future generations. To Allen, I say this: May you reincarnate as the tightest-assed, broadest-shouldered hulk in the universe!

—SEAN ONO LENNON

I knew Allen in so many ways. But what’s most memorable to me are the times we performed together onstage. The passion and conviction of his performances were contagious. The day after he died, I had a concert in Chicago, it had all been arranged months before, and I didn’t want to cancel. On the program I was to play “Hydrogen Jukebox,” a piece we did together. I almost didn’t play it, but I decided that I if didn’t play it that night, I never would. The first twenty seconds were difficult, then I began to hear the voice, Allen’s voice. I’ve incorporated him into my own being, both physically and consciously. It’s not when I’m playing that I miss him, but when I’m not.

—PHILIP GLASS

The last evening I spent with Allen Ginsberg was over a year ago at the Naropa Institute, in Boulder, Colorado. As we talked Buddhism and listened to music, Allen kept snapping photos as if his camera was a musical instrument.

He led an exemplary public life, blending Old Testament prophecy with Buddhist centering, creating a monumental body of creative work while still finding time to teach the next generations (like my kid Vanessa, a writing student of his).

I called Allen last summer to invite him to a reunion of the survivors of the 1968 Democratic National Convention we were holding in Chicago during the 1996 Democratic convention. He wanted badly to come, but said his health was failing, and he needed the rest. During the convention he did appear on live hookup
with several of us on Larry King Live. With great wit and delivery, he recited “The Ballad of the Skeletons,” which I think ranks with “Howl” as a final, witty denunciation of the official and universal hypocrisy to which Allen never succumbed.

—Tom Hayden

He was a man with an immense number of sides, really a leader. In the early Sixties Allen and I were asked to appear on a television show to talk about the Beat Revolution. Allen was naturally brought up first, and then I was to speak. I had been on a few shows at that point, but this was Allen’s first. He said to me, “Gee, I really feel out to sea. How should I behave?” I gave him what I thought was my acquired wisdom. Then the show started, and I said to myself that’s the last time I’m ever going to give Allen Ginsberg advice. He just took over. He was everything. The interviewer was in a state of delight; he’d rarely had so good a guest; unexpected, startling, sensible, serious. Allen had instincts when it came to presenting himself in public with his ideas. Six months before the Democratic National Convention in Chicago in ’68, we were having a drink together, and he asked if I was going to go to the convention. I told him I thought so, and he said he was going to go, too. He said, “There’s going to be terrible trouble. I really have a very bad feeling about how bad it’s going to be.” When Chicago did come, there was Allen in the very center of it. He knew that it could blow up in his face. He had real guts that way. In the end, he was one of the four or five real leaders of all that went on there.

—Norman Mailer

Who else played such a high-profile, dynamic and germinal role across the Beat presence, the Haight’s heyday and the present generation? He was equally at home with the roles of wise man and fool. His writing philoso-

—Robert Hunter

I owe Allen Ginsberg a lot. He set me free. When I was a hick kid of fifteen and read “Howl,” I found in it permission, even encouragement, to live an outsider’s life. He described me to myself. I realized that I was not alone as one of those “angelheaded hipsters burning for the ancient heavenly connection to the starry dynamo in the machinery of night,” and that I could now consider such aspirations a virtue rather than a sin. And so, with his distant midwifery, I became who I am.

Like Leary, Allen did not want to punctuate his passionate life with whimpering horror and resolved instead to gather his friends about him and die in a civilized fashion, as people died when death was still domesticated, before science made it wild.

—John Perry Barlow

When I first read Ginsberg in my teens, I remember very specifically feeling things open up and thinking about the life ahead of me as being a lot more open than growing up to be a refrigerator repairman in Akron, Ohio—not that that’s a bad thing. But “Howl” and “Kaddish,” they just gave me a sense of possibility. It’s one of those magic things when you’re a kid in Akron: You read William S. Burroughs, you read Allen Ginsberg and you listen to Ornette Coleman. You come to New York, and you end up meeting those guys—it was amazing. I was in awe the first time I met Ginsberg. I guess I’m still in awe.

—Jim Jarmusch
Allen always stayed in touch with culture, with what was going on. He came to the first show I did with my band Pen Pal, a few years ago. It was just around the time when Larry Clark was filming Kids, and all these skateboard kids from the movie showed up, and there was Allen sitting there in the middle, attentively listening. Between songs, he would say, "You should enunciate more." He always pushed you to get the words out, to do the best you could.

—David Greenberg

His ability to keep his sense of humor made him a very attractive person. He was always laughing. He had a terrific warmth and happiness that he held onto until the day he died.

—Deborah Harry

I first met Allen Ginsberg at an art opening. Ginsberg took my picture and asked me if I was gay and what was I doing that night. I said, "No, I’m not gay; I like girls." To switch topics I asked him if he’d ever heard of KRS-One, a hip-hop MC who reminded me of some of his poetry. He said no, but that he’d like to hear some of this hip-hop stuff. I told him I’d send him one of my mixed tapes. I never did find out what he thought of KRS-One, but I still like his poetry. I don’t think that Ginsberg was the type to think of death as an occasion for mourning—I kind of think he would see it like loops, like beats transforming and being remixed. Some old "myth of the eternal return" type shit. Shit that would kind of challenge people’s minds to open the fuck up.

“Howl!” on.

—DJ Spooky

I usually met Allen at some event. The last one was at Dan Berrigan’s seventy-fifth birthday party last May. About a thousand people came: Catholics and Protestants, Jews and Muslims, probably some Marxists, and people who had no name for their philosophy. Allen recited a poem, and I got the crowd singing, "Where Have All the Flowers Gone." Afterward, Allen came up and gave me some new verses he’d written to be sung to "Amazing Grace." We always knew we were on the same side. We both were part of the anti-war effort, and I was strengthened by his courageous independence. Everybody was strengthened by his courageous independence. "Look what Allen’s doing. Well, by gosh, more people should do that." Walt Whitman would have been delighted.

—Pete Seeger

One year ago Allen invited me to play back-up guitar at a Princeton University reading. Although we had practiced beforehand in his hotel room, by the time of the performance I was distracted enough by the enormous crowd to forget how the first song went. I sat down next to Allen onstage, leaned over and told him, "maybe I should sit out the first song because I have forgotten it."

“Oh," Allen said calmly in front of the anticipating students, "well here, I’ll teach it to you again, this is how it goes," and with the patience of a great teacher teaching the one student who was a little behind, he instructed me, "Da-da-da, da-da-da-dum. Da-da-da, da-da-da-dum." The three thousand now amused students were humming along as Allen repeated the phrasing, "Da-da-da, da-da-da-dum." Shaking my head that I was ready, we proceeded, and it really rocked the audience. The song was "The Ballad of the Skeletons."

—Gus Van Sant
Working with Allen was a great joy: He was inspirational in his quest for excitement. The crazier we got playing, the more he liked it. At the sessions for "The Ballad of the Skeletons," he taught me and the other musicians the Buddhist walk—as you place your feet down, you feel the curvature of the earth. I always hope to remember that walk that he taught me and how it's done, and to keep on walking myself in those footsteps.

—LenNY KAYE

Some artists are very generous; they oblige us by having three selves. This way when they die, we've only lost their public and private face, and the work is left to us forever; left in a way that memory—which can serve us badly—can never do as well. And now that Allen's wonderfully public, clamorous self: artistic, antagonistic, pessimistic, optimistic, hedonistic, realistic, naturalistic... is gone, along with his private face: brilliant and goofy, sweet and grasping, loving and grating, aggressive and shy, gentle and rough... so much person. I wave. So long pal! It's been good to know ya. So generous to have left us so much.

—ALFRED LESLIE

Lion in your state—of the world—in chains. I did not know you well but whenever we met I could tell—who you were—a forest of fire barely breaking the surface every now-and-then—you were gone. We all want to be remembered and I will always hear you—in other words—goodbye—dear Allen.

—GRAHAM NASH