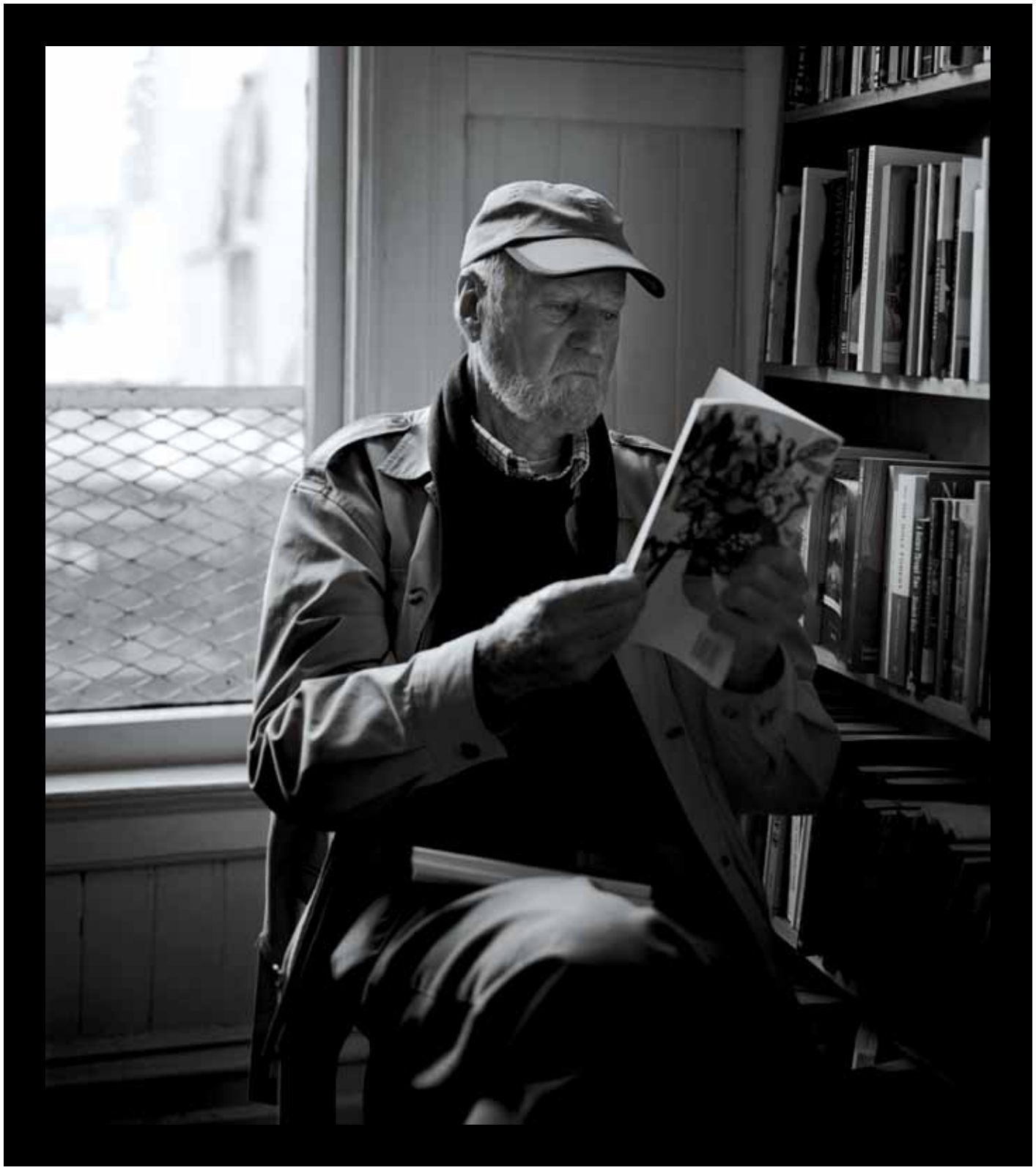


Lawrence FERLINGHETTI

By CHRISTOPHER BOLLEN
Photography GRANT DELIN

AT AGE 93, THE LEGENDARY POET, PUBLISHER, ACTIVIST, AND BEAT ICON ISN'T DONE RESHAPING THE NATION'S LITERARY LANDSCAPE—AND TRYING TO SAVE AMERICA FROM ITSELF

LAWRENCE FERLINGHETTI IN SAN FRANCISCO, AUGUST 2012. *ALL CLOTHING: FERLINGHETTI'S OWN.*

Our heroes tend not to own stores. But there is an exception—poet Lawrence Ferlinghetti, who I've always imagined standing a bit like George Washington in the famous painting by Emanuel Gottlieb Leutze, crossing the Delaware. Except Ferlinghetti would be on a boat in the San Francisco Bay instead of an eastern river, and instead of Revolutionary War soldiers along with him, there would be all of the revolutionary writers and poets—Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac, and Frank O'Hara, among them—who he has helped in his career as founder and publisher of San Francisco's City Lights bookstore and press.

City Lights, which opened in 1953, still remains in its original North Beach corner building and has become the literary equivalent of the Four Corners Monument—a landmark where visitors can stand so as to be in many different states all at once. City Lights is where Ferlinghetti began his Pocket Poets Series, which included the brave choice of publishing Ginsberg's "Howl," and the equally brave nonchoice of facing obscenity charges in a case that went to trial in 1957 (Ferlinghetti was found not guilty and the bellwether verdict has proved instrumental in the continuing First Amendment protection of artistic freedom).

Ferlinghetti has also been, in different periods, a World War II Navy man, a Fidelista, a Sandinista, a Zapatista, an antiwar activist, an environmentalist, a translator, and an expressionist painter (a passion that takes up much of his time). But at age 93, and still a die-hard San Franciscan, the man is foremost a poet. His 1958 collection *A Coney Island of the Mind* is one of the best-selling books of poetry in America (only in the genre of poetry is an ultimate best seller also an aesthetic masterpiece), and his 1979 poem "Two Scavengers in a Truck, Two Beautiful People in a Mercedes" is, in my mind, the single best poem dealing with the American class struggle. All of the nation's dreams and frustrations reside in that poem, tossed in

those seductive, straightforward lines: "And both scavengers gazing down / as from a great distance / at the cool couple / as if they were watching some odorless TV ad / in which everything is always possible." The poem ends on "the high seas of this democracy," and Ferlinghetti has never stopped steering his boat right through those storm-driven waves. His latest collection, *Time of Useful Consciousness* (New Directions), came out in October, a sequel to his earlier book, *Americus*, from 2004. Ferlinghetti refers to Ginsberg as "the Whitman of our age," but *Time of Useful Consciousness* has that epic, galvanizing, country-hopping voice of a latter-day Good Gray as Ferlinghetti recreates the pioneer spirit of racing west for gold, for freedom, for art, for land, for the hell of it, for life—as well as all the messy stops along the way. He evokes many of his Beat conspirators, but there is a larger elegy in these caffeinated verses, a sense of a certain loss of the spirited American animal that Ferlinghetti so admires, and a maniacal, self-interested, climate-killing new republic that doesn't seem deserving of the characters who brought it burning to life.

Last August, in a small café in North Beach, I met Ferlinghetti for coffee. He looked nothing like George Washington, and nowhere near 93. (Is a life of poetry the secret to staying young forever?) Ferlinghetti has a busy season ahead (subsequent to this interview, I learned that a full-length documentary called *Ferlinghetti: A Rebirth of Wonder* is being released by First Run Features in February). But, like all great poets, he's thinking far beyond the next few months. He will always be, for me, one of our great national poets, and he is, to quote from his latest work, "the one who bears the great tradition / And breaks it."

CHRISTOPHER BOLLEN: The title of your new book of poetry is an aeronautical term, isn't it? "Time of useful consciousness" is a term for the time between when a pilot loses oxygen and the time they pass out. I'm interpreting that title as a warning for America right now.

LAWRENCE FERLINGHETTI: Yeah, it's when we are still conscious and have the time to do something to save ourselves. And everybody knows what should be done, but they don't do it. Congress, the corporate world . . .

BOLLEN: Why don't they? Because it's easier not to?

FERLINGHETTI: It's easier not to and the sales figures can better gratify their immediate needs. It's instant gratification. Everything is me, me, me, me; the social contract is forgotten and the younger generation doesn't even know what that term means.

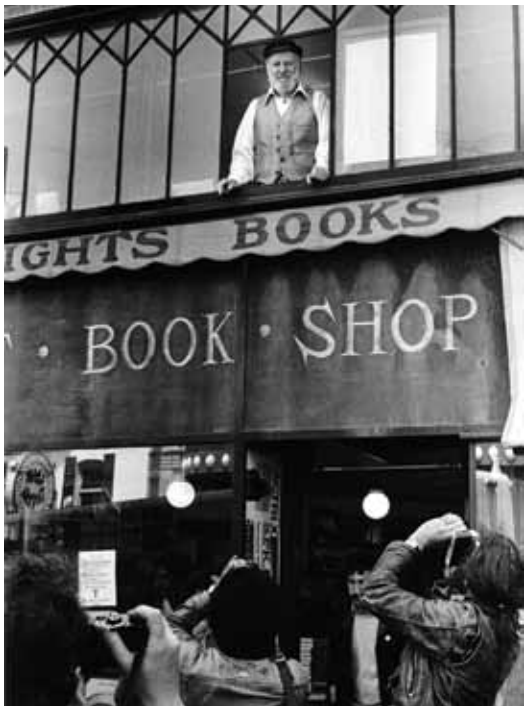
BOLLEN: The downside of our electoral cycle is that everyone is engineered to think of the future in four-year periods. And the best thing to do if you become president is nothing because anything risks reelection.

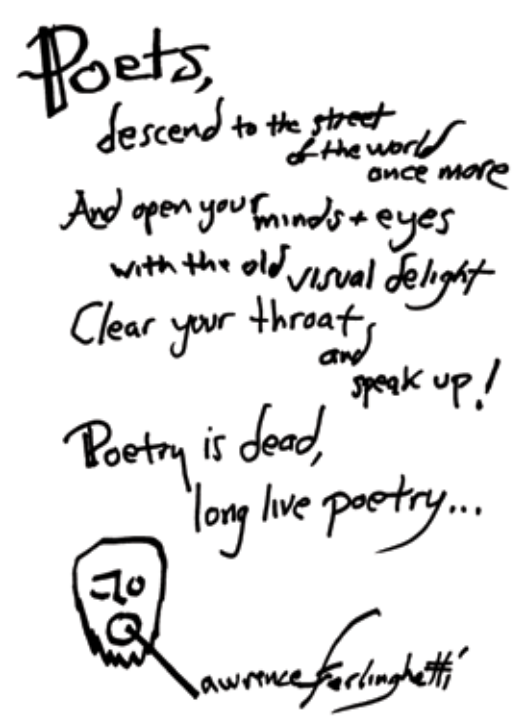
FERLINGHETTI: Everybody hopes that Obama in the second term will be like Franklin Roosevelt in his second term. But Franklin Roosevelt had to worry about being reelected for his third term. There wasn't a limitation back then. So it took courage for Roosevelt to act in his second term.

BOLLEN: Today happens to be the 67th anniversary of the atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima. You served in World War II and you actually visited Nagasaki right after the bomb was dropped there.

FERLINGHETTI: I was there seven weeks after the bomb was dropped. It was just like walking around in some landscape that wasn't on Earth. It was an unearthly feeling. The site had been cleaned up—somewhat—or they wouldn't have let us in. I was just off my Navy ship down in southern Kyushu, and we had a day off and went up by train to Nagasaki. It was pretty horrible to see. And that was just a toy bomb compared to the ones that are available today.

BOLLEN: Did that experience have anything to do with your deciding to become a poet? I imagine those images burned into your brain.





TOP: FERLINGHETTI OUTSIDE CITY LIGHTS BOOKSTORE, 1981. *PHOTO:* CHRISTOPHER FELVER, FROM *BEAT* (LAST GASP, 2007). *MIDDLE:* UNTITLED, 2007, BY LAWRENCE FERLINGHETTI, COURTESY OF CHRISTOPHER FELVER, FROM *BEAT* (LAST GASP, 2007). *BOTTOM:* ALLEN GINSBERG, FERLINGHETTI, AND NANCY PETERS, 1981. *PHOTO:* CHRISTOPHER FELVER, FROM *BEAT* (LAST GASP, 2007).

FERLINGHETTI: No, I was a poet long before. But I wasn't political before that. Besides, I was a good American boy. I was a Boy Scout in the suburbs of New York—trustworthy, loyal, friendly, courteous, kind, obedient, cheerful, thrifty, brave, clean, and reverent.

BOLLEN: And have you stuck to all of those principles?

FERLINGHETTI: Of course. [*laughs*] But it wasn't just going to Nagasaki; it was coming to San Francisco at a time when a new San Francisco was being born. I got here after coming back from the Sorbonne. I was a GI there. I arrived in San Francisco in January 1951. After the Second World War, the population was so uprooted. Soldiers came back home for brief periods and took off again. So the population was very fluid, and suddenly it was as if the continent tilted west. The whole population slid west. It took 10 years for America to coalesce into a new culture. And the new culture happened in San Francisco, not New York.

BOLLEN: I always wondered why the West became the cauldron of youth and not New York.

FERLINGHETTI: I was from New York and I tried to settle down there at the end of the war. I tried to get a job at publishers and newspapers, but everything was sewed up. Whereas in San Francisco, it was still wide open. It was still the last frontier in the '40s. It seemed like it was possible to do anything you wanted to out here. And when you think of what did happen, what started out here and went east—just like the electronic revolution that started in Silicon Valley.

BOLLEN: *Time of Useful Consciousness* is very much about the West—about the last frontier and the travelers along that road.

FERLINGHETTI: It's one of a two-book series. The first one started in Europe, moved to New York, and ended with the assassination of Kennedy. This book takes off from that point and moves west.

BOLLEN: And there are Beat figures scattered in these poems. I wonder now how you align yourself with the legacy of the Beat poets.

FERLINGHETTI: I don't mean to give them more weight than other poets. The bohemian generation is what they called people who didn't lead conventional lives before the Second World War. When I arrived in San Francisco, I was still wearing my French beret! And then the Beats like Ginsberg and Kerouac, they were a few years younger than me. They weren't old enough to be in the war. So there's a difference. My poetics were totally different than Allen Ginsberg's. We had the same political positions. Ginsberg's background was immigrant Russian, Jewish, radical, communist. Typical New York radical. Threw potato salad at etiquette picnics. Whereas I grew up in very staid Westchester County. Totally different background. It was only when I got to San Francisco that I started listening to the first free radio, KPFA [a community-supported radio station in Berkeley, California]. KPFA had just been founded in 1949, and it was a totally different station than it is today. It started out as a station that really had a wide cultural program for that time. Alan Watts was on there. And so was Kenneth Rexroth, the most important poet and critic in San Francisco. He was published by New Directions in New York, published in *The Nation*, things like that. And he had a program. He didn't just review books, he knew every possible field—geology, astronomy, philosophy, logic, classics. It was a total education listening to him. It was a radical position. I used to go to his soirees on Friday night. There were a lot of poets that would show up. He lived in the Fillmore District, which was black at that time. He lived at 250 Scott Street, above Jack's Record Cellar. Anyway, Friday night soirees at his house were old and young, but just poets. That's where I met Kerouac and [Neal] Cassady and Gregory Corso . . .

BOLLEN: You were older. You had been to war and they hadn't. That must have felt like a distinction or

separation between you in terms of life experience.
FERLINGHETTI: Definitely. I was already married. I was living the quiet life. I ended up being the one that stayed home and kept the shop. [*laughs*] I really became identified with the Beats by publishing them.
BOLLEN: Could you gauge the quality of their work before you published them? Did it seem exceptional at the time?
FERLINGHETTI: Oh, definitely. I started the Pocket Poets Series two years after we opened the bookstore. The bookstore opened in June 1953, and my original partner at the bookstore was Peter Martin, who was the son of Carlo Tresca. Do you know who Carlo Tresca was? He was an Italian anarchist that was assassinated on the streets of New York. So the original bias of City Lights was based on where Peter came from and my listening to KPFA and Kenneth Rexroth.
BOLLEN: So you were bent on creating some sort of poet revolution. Even the fact that it's Pocket Poets suggests something to carry like a manifesto.
FERLINGHETTI: Poetry had been very academic until then. Karl Shapiro was sort of king of the poetry mountain, and he led a very academic team as the editor of *Poetry* in Chicago. But after "Howl" was published, you didn't hear anymore from Karl Shapiro. [*laughs*] It was sort of like what happened with the rock revolution. Before that, in the 1950s, it was cool jazz. You went to a jazz club, it was really dark, everyone wearing dark glasses, sitting in the corner snapping their fingers—that was cool, man. And then when the rock revolution happened in the early '60s, you didn't hear anymore cool jazz. That's the same thing with Ginsberg's "Howl." It was a whole new ball game. No one had heard poetry like that before. Most literary figures in the United States before the war—the successful writers like Hemingway—were alkies. They were all straight, macho—well, not all macho, but mostly straight. Gay didn't get published much. Then the Beats came through and they weren't alkies. They were dopies. They were all smoking dope.
BOLLEN: How did you manage to keep yourself from becoming a dopie?
FERLINGHETTI: Well, I smoked some dope. But I was married at the time. I had two kids. The kids came later . . .
BOLLEN: I don't think smoking dope is all that self-destructive, but self-destruction seemed a major ingredient in some of the lives of the Beat poets.
FERLINGHETTI: I didn't think of it as self-destructive. The general feeling was this great liberation movement. I just think about what the '60s did for this country. But now, today, you wouldn't even know it happened. You see everyone in cafés on their computers. The feeling today is total materialism. Today is just as Ginsberg predicted. Moloch has taken over.
BOLLEN: Isn't it weird that the people we're mentioning—yourself included—have become such cultural icons, and yet their messages have become completely lost? I think on St. Marks Place right now you can be overcharged for a T-shirt with Ginsberg's or Kerouac's face on it.
FERLINGHETTI: Kerouac is still quoted a lot these days, but Ginsberg no. I see a lot of Kerouac's books. But Ginsberg's name doesn't show up much anymore.
BOLLEN: I read an interesting point suggested by Christopher Bram in his recent book *Eminent Outlaws* concerning the "Howl" trials—and it was you on trial for obscenity, not Ginsberg. The idea was that if the trial had been in front of a jury instead of a judge, the ruling might have gone the other way.
FERLINGHETTI: Well, it's possible. In fact, we thought it was unlucky that we had the judge we did have because he was known as very conservative.
BOLLEN: He was a Sunday school teacher, wasn't he?
FERLINGHETTI: Yeah, Judge Clayton Horn. But he'd been reading the U.S. [District] Court decision on James Joyce's *Ulysses*, and that really established the precedent in this case. One precedent that Horn established was that you couldn't call a book obscene if it had the slightest redeeming social importance. That was the case then and it held up all these years. And it allowed Grove Press, for instance, to publish Henry Miller and D.H. Lawrence. And they had all the court battles over it.
BOLLEN: Do you remember how you felt just before the verdict? Were you thinking, Oh, god, I'm going to be heading to jail now?
FERLINGHETTI: I thought I'd probably go to jail, but I was young and foolish, and I figured, Well, I won't be in there for more than a few months, and I'll get a lot of reading done. So I wasn't scared. I thought it was quite possible we would be judged guilty, going by the morals of the time.
BOLLEN: Did you ever see that judge again? Or send him a gift of thanks?
FERLINGHETTI: [*laughs*] No, but I used to have coffee with a judge in North Beach, and he turned out to be the one that recently annulled the California law against gays.
BOLLEN: Last night I was rereading *Big Sur*, and it's your cabin that serves as the backdrop for that book. Do you still own that cabin?
FERLINGHETTI: Yeah, I do. My son's going down there tomorrow.
BOLLEN: I think there's a consensus that Kerouac appreciated his status among American teenagers. But in the first chapter of *Big Sur*, his alter ego dreams of a six-foot-high fence around his yard to keep teenagers out.
FERLINGHETTI: He was a total alcoholic by then.
BOLLEN: But I wonder if fame isn't responsible for the undoing of many of these careers. Did the Beat Generation become too famous for its own good—too famous to be able to develop as writers?
FERLINGHETTI: They were all separate cases. After Kerouac published *On the Road* and became nationally famous, he cut out. He didn't go on the road with them anymore. He didn't hang out with them. He went home and took care of his mother. He lived in various parts of the country—Florida and Lowell, Massachusetts. Also, you could say it was alcohol that destroyed Kerouac's career, but he did publish an enormous amount (CONTINUED ON PAGE 155)

"POETRY MUST BE CAPABLE OF ANSWERING THE CHALLENGE OF APOCALYPTIC TIMES, EVEN IF THIS MEANS SOUNDING APOCALYPTIC."

TOP (FROM LEFT): MICHAEL MCCLURE, BOB DYLAN, ALLEN GINSBERG, JULIUS ORLOVSKI, AND FERLINGHETTI, BEHIND CITY LIGHTS BOOKSTORE, 1965. *PHOTO:* DALE SMITH. *ABOVE:* WILLIAM S. BURROUGHS AND FERLINGHETTI, 1981. *PHOTO:* CHRISTOPHER FELVER, FROM *BEAT* (LAST GASP, 2007).

CHRISTOPHER BOLLEN IS EDITOR AT LARGE FOR *INTERVIEW*. *SPECIAL THANKS:* CITY LIGHTS PUBLISHERS.
>*See more of* LAWRENCE FERLINGHETTI *on interviewmagazine.com*

in spite of how much he drank. So I don't think you can blame the fame. It wasn't the fame that destroyed him; it was the alcohol. And with Ginsberg, his career wasn't destroyed. Allen never took drugs to the point of letting the drugs take over completely. He was too focused on being famous and being the new Walt Whitman. And he was, in a lot of ways. He is the closest thing we have to a modern Walt Whitman. As early as the 1950s, Allen was "out of the closet endlessly rocking."

BOLLEN: I found *Time of Useful Consciousness* to be very Whitman-esque in the way you bundle together so many geographies and lives in an American rhythm. I also found a lot of echoes of T.S. Eliot.

FERLINGHETTI: T.S. Eliot's influence was enormous on my generation. Much more than Ezra Pound. I actually had to put T.S. Eliot books out of the house because my poetry was so influenced. Everything I wrote sounded like Eliot. [*laughs*] And you're right, there's still a lot of Eliot in the book.

BOLLEN: I noticed that you metabolized some of your earlier poems into the cantos of this one. For instance, there are lines from your great San Francisco poem "Two Scavengers." It's interesting to recycle older pieces and apply them to a different narrative.

FERLINGHETTI: You can publish a poem you think is a very important poem, and you don't hear a word from anyone. No one talks to me about it, no one writes to me about it, and yet thousands and thousands of copies of the book were printed. You can publish a book of poetry by dropping it off a cliff and waiting to hear an echo. Quite often, you'll never hear a thing. So doing that, using older work, puts it in a context, and that sort of forces the reader to realize what its importance is—if it has any. Everything needs a context. You're not going to recognize a poet unless you have a context. Ginsberg had a definite context and so did Kerouac. You have a perspective or a worldview of how to talk about them. I was lucky I had the bookstore.

BOLLEN: I wanted to ask you a little bit about Frank O'Hara. You published his *Lunch Poems* in 1964. What was it like working with him?

FERLINGHETTI: It was all by postcards. I don't think we ever had a conversation in person about it. I don't know what prompted me to write him. I think I'd read one poem he'd written in his lunch hour when he was working at MoMA. I said, "How about a book of lunch poems?" And he sent a postcard back to me with one word on it: "Yes." I waited six months to a year and I wrote, "How about lunch?" He wrote back, "It's cooking." And maybe another two years passed before he finally sent his poems to me.

BOLLEN: Did you feel, when you were starting City Lights, a real difference between what you were doing and what was already out there?

FERLINGHETTI: Oh, yeah. It was a whole new ball game out here. For one thing, bookstores across the country weren't open on weekends or at night. So we immediately opened from 10 A.M. until 2 A.M. That was a totally unheard of thing in bookstores. We also had a periodical rack. There were no such things at bookstores before that. We wanted to have the most radical publications from the left all the way to the most radical publications on the right. North Beach, at that time, was still very Italian, and very old-style bohemian. And there was an Italian bookstore right where City Lights is today. The Italian population of North Beach was divided between the Italian anarchists and the Mussolini followers.

BOLLEN: [*laughs*] So you fit right in?

FERLINGHETTI: We used to get some Italian anarchist newspapers direct from Italy. And the Italians on the garbage trucks would pull up in front of the store and rush in and get their copies. And, you know, the other idea for the bookstore was to have it function like a community center. I really tried to build that up because, considering what the electronic revolution has done to bookstores, it's more and more important for there to be community centers with real people talking to real people.

BOLLEN: In the '80s, you were a big supporter of the Sandinistas. In fact, you went to Nicaragua and met with [Daniel] Ortega. Do you think poetry and politics are natural bedfellows?

FERLINGHETTI: No, they don't naturally go together. We'd like to just write nothing but lyric poetry. The trouble is, the individual is going along intent on his own personal gratifications and love affairs and financial affairs and everything else. But loping alongside him is this fascist lout who keeps trying to take over. And if you keep ignoring him, he gets bigger and bigger, so every once in a while the free individual has to turn away from his private pursuits and give this fascist lout a few clouts, and beat him down to size.

BOLLEN: You were involved in more than a few radical protests in your time. Didn't you band together with other artists refusing to pay their taxes in protest of the Vietnam War?

FERLINGHETTI: I really admired Joan Baez, who did do that. I actually didn't follow through on withholding taxes. What I did do for a number of years was a symbolic protest, withholding just one dollar on my tax return and writing a letter to go with it, which some bureaucrat had to spend time going over and doing something with. It was a small symbolic protest saying, "This is one dollar I'm withholding from military spending by the government." But I think that's a pretty timid action.

BOLLEN: What about your support of Castro? In the height of the Cold War, it wasn't timid to support communism.

FERLINGHETTI: *Communism* wasn't a word that I thought of when I went to Cuba. The original Fidelistas were not Communists. They were graduate students at the university and law students. After the Fidelistas took over, they went to Washington and tried to get support from the U.S. government, which turned them down. They were in a desperate political and economic situation, so they took the offer from the Soviet Union. Communism was a matter of necessity. I remember I once read in a Nicaraguan newspaper an interview with Castro where he said, "I am not a follower of Moscow, but its victim." But that sort of thing never gets quoted in the American press. But I do think withholding one dollar of my taxes does make me a pretty timid dissident. You could say I was a tourist of revolutions. In the '50s and '60s, I was a Fidelista. Later I became a Sandinista, and then later a Zapatista. I'm still a Fidelista. And I'm still for the original Sandinista revolution, which, sadly, is long gone. Today the press has made *socialism* a dirty word. What's needed in this country today is a debate on whether it's possible to have a humanitarian socialism that's better than a welfare capitalism.

BOLLEN: There's a tension in *Time of Useful Consciousness* between the America today and those artist pioneers you elegize traveling across the country in the last century. Do you think that breed of Americans—from the gold-rush miners to Bob Dylan—was a different breed than Americans today?

FERLINGHETTI: It's really strange because you go to some public place today and you see everyone well-dressed, short hair, on their computers, and yet every one of these people came out of that old American settler population. And you wonder, "Where's the connection?" And most of those people don't even know where they came out of. They don't have consciousness of what their grandfathers went through for existence.

BOLLEN: The history is gone—which can be liberating, but it can also be horribly rootless.

FERLINGHETTI: It's like the book title by Gore Vidal, *The United States of Amnesia*. There's just an ignorance today. It's really astounding.

BOLLEN: There's a bit of the Beats in your emphasis on traveling—hitting the road—in these poems. Have you done much cross-country travel recently?

FERLINGHETTI: I haven't traveled by train in a long time. Not since the '70s.

BOLLEN: I just read in today's paper that environmentalists have saved the Donner Summit from becoming a development. Now it's slated to be a park. So there is some hope that there can be positive impact in preserving history and protecting nature.

FERLINGHETTI: Well, Governor Brown is doing his best. You know, in his first term as governor he was known as Governor Moonbeam. Moonbeam!

BOLLEN: When you worked as the editor of the Pocket Poets Series, were you heavily involved in the editing of the poems? Or was your approach more hands-off?

FERLINGHETTI: Oh, no. I was working very closely with the poet. I was Ginsberg's editor up until the last few years when he was bought by a big New York publisher. He finally had a big hard-cover of collected poems, but up until the last 10 years of his life, I was his editor. I had a lot to do with the final form of the poems. There is a whole section of the original "Howl"—full page, single-spaced, with its own Roman numeral—which I persuaded him to leave out. He never acknowledged that, even when he wrote a whole book on the creation of "Howl," annotating every single change. I also changed the title. The original title was "Howl for Carl Solomon," all on one line. That made it a very private poem. I persuaded him to put Carl Solomon on another page. So "Howl" by itself became the title. That made a huge difference.

BOLLEN: Are you still doing poetry readings?

FERLINGHETTI: No, I'm quitting. I do one every once in a while, but generally I'm trying not to anymore. I would rather concentrate on painting.

BOLLEN: I saw one a few years ago online where you accompanied your reading with tape-recorded nature music.

FERLINGHETTI: Was I playing an autoharp?

BOLLEN: No. It had the sound of dolphins or seagulls.

FERLINGHETTI: I was in *The Last Waltz* [1978]. Did you see that? They filmed that at the Winterland [Ballroom]. I read a variation of "The Lord's Prayer." They asked a lot of poets to come. None of them bothered to be on mic. I was the only one that was really on mic. It was a madhouse backstage, in the green room.

BOLLEN: You've said in the past that many poets do their best writing in their youth. Sort of the Rimbaud effect. You're writing poetry at age 93. Are there any advantages to age when writing?

FERLINGHETTI: Everyone is a poet at 16, but how many are poets at 50? Generally, people seem to get more conservative as they age, but in my case, I seem to have gotten more radical. Poetry must be capable of answering the challenge of apocalyptic times, even if this means sounding apocalyptic.