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The Beat

by [Levi Asher \(brooklyn\)](#) Sun, Mar 6 8:59 PM

Do the writers of the Beat era still matter in 2005?

I think they do. Scarred by commercialism and marred by cliché, the best authors of the 50's, 60's and 70's underground are still relevant. The literary experiments that beatnik authors were famous for -- loud poetry readings, collaborative works, marathon sessions of deranged composition -- are still considered avant-garde today. And the themes of the Cold War/Vietnam era -- modernity, ecology, violence, paranoia and war -- certainly resonate today.

Among the hundreds of writers and poets who could have been considered part of the Beat Generation or any of its offshoots, a tiny few are important enough to be considered timeless. I thought I'd spend today's column talking about new posthumous releases from two of them.

The popularity of Charles Bukowski today, a decade after his death, is a wonderful enigma. No market research in the world could have ever chosen him as an American idol. He was an ugly, middle-aged former post office employee when he began writing newspaper columns in the late 60's. His writing style was flat and artless, but he had boundless charm, and his columns always told the truth.

Like Gregory Corso, Charles Bukowski had one big advantage as a writer: a strange kind of charisma that permeated his every word. But where Corso filigreed his works with baroque poetics, Bukowski remains feral, plain, uncorrupted by social norms. Charles Bukowski evokes an animal sense of being, and this is why he has become a symbol of freedom for everyone who has ever felt oppressed in our modern age.

A brand new DVD, *Bukowski in Bellevue*, is a rare document of

Poetry Wanted

LitKicks Action Poetry is [back](#). Past poetry pages can be found [here](#)

The Book

After a year in production, *Action Poetry* has hit the shelves.



We're incredibly proud of this book, the first anthology of LitKicks writings -- including selections from our poetry and fiction boards. The book has been listed as a top [poetry pick for 2004](#) by about.com. Bob Holman states that LitKicks has "found a new way to make an anthology open, free, and eternally interesting."

this unique writer performing one of the first poetry readings of his career. It's the spring of 1970 at Bellevue Community College, and Bukowski sits nervously among a posse of college students who look like they're dressed up for Kent State. Bukowski's early poems are raw, aching, tentative, shy. 'My Father Was' is a stuttering list of free associations about the author's father, whereas 'Kaakaa and Other Immolations' reverses the stance, as the author relates a humorous bathroom conversation with his three year old daughter.

The film of this performance is low-quality black and white, but this doesn't bother me at all. In fact, the homespun production values are a welcome relief from the typical Blockbuster Video two-DVD-set fluff. This disk simply begins, and it's as if Charles Bukowski is sitting in my living room.

I was also very impressed by a new book of Jack Kerouac's artwork, *Departed Angels*, with notes by Ed Adler. I was beginning to wonder if there was anything new for the world to discover about Jack Kerouac, but this book proves the fountain is not yet dry.

Like his writing, Kerouac's paintings and sketches are deeply passionate, powerful, messy and painfully naive. As in his novels, I turn page after page and am blown away by the intensity of expression.

I can also see how much modern art meant to Jack Kerouac, because he puts his inspirations and influences front and center. His writings always broadcasted their influences loudly -- one book recalls Dostoevsky, another Joyce, another Melville, another Wolfe or Thoreau. Similarly, his paintings are completely derivative, but this fact reveals him to be well-educated and broadly interested rather than imitative, because his synthesis of the elements is perfectly original, and his talent for derivation is amazing. Turning the pages of this book is like walking through the Jack Kerouac Museum of Modern Art -- there's a Matisse, a Raoul Dufy, a Francis Bacon, a De Kooning, a Pollock, a Manet, a Toulouse-Lautrec. And, of course, a few Van Goghs.

Not surprisingly, religious imagery that combines Buddhism and Catholicism is the dominant theme in his artwork. Saints and Bodhisattvas congregate, especially in his later work from the mid-60's when he was considered dried up as a writer. Maybe so, but his artwork from that period manages to feel fresh. This book left me with a much greater respect for the all-around skills of this always-misunderstood American icon.

On a different side of the Beat spectrum, I wanted to mention a small but joyful publication, *Butcher's Block*, edited by David Greenspan of Rockaway, Queens. This is an affectionate, beautifully illustrated homemade journal that features many of the talented writers and personalities who are part of the broad family of "Beat survivors". I've met many of these

The best way to buy a copy is on [Amazon](#) or visit [this page](#) to buy the book directly from us and get info about how to get your local bookstore to carry it.

Start Something

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Thanks.

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authors and poets at New York City gatherings and openings and readings or on various online Beat discussion areas -- Danny Shot, Janine Pommy Vega, Ira Cohen, Charles Plymell, Marie Kazalia, Tony Mofeit, Herschel Silverman, Laki Vazakas, Steve Dalachinsky, Linda Lerner, Aaron Howard, S.A. Griffin. This publication promotes the spirit of togetherness and friendship between the large circle of personalities who populate all the Beat scenes from the 50's to today. *Butcher's Block* is so low-tech I can find no web presence for it at all, but you can buy a copy by sending ten bucks to Butcher's Shop Press, 529 Beach 132nd Street, Rockaway Beach NY 11694.

What place does the "Beat Generation" hold in your own literary canon these days?

Responses

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by Knip

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