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REVIEW

DVD Review: *Gang Of Souls: A Generation Of Beat Poets*

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An artistic movement sprang up in France at the end of World War I in direct response to the horrors people witnessed. The surrealists — the Dadaist in particular — were critical and rejecting of the values and the society that had allowed such a thing to occur. The works they created were sometimes violent, often outrageous, and always a condemnation of what they saw as the failings of the world around them.

Something similar happened in the United States at the end of World War II, as a group of writers — poets primarily, but prose writers as well — challenged conventionality through the style of their writing and their subject matter. While the majority of Americans were jumping feet first into the post war economic boom period — celebrating materialism and the American Dream — the Beats, as they came to be known, were delving into the dark underbelly of the same beast. Their work looked at the emotional and spiritual costs incurred when a society barrels full steam ahead in search of profit, and they were the first to suggest an alternative was possible.

William S. Burroughs, Alan Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac, and Lawrence Ferlinghetti are perhaps the four best-known names from that first wave of experimental American writers in the post war period. Seminal works — like *Junkie* by Burroughs, *Howl* By Gingsberg, and *On The Road* by Kerouac — burst upon American literature with a force equivalent to an atomic bomb, and the fallout is still being felt by individuals today.

In 1989, American director [Maria Beatty](#) created a documentary movie on Beat poets and their writing. [Gang Of Souls](#) is a series of interviews with three generations of American writers from original beats Burroughs, Ginsberg, Gregory Corso, and John Giorno; their successors Ed Sanders, Anne Waldman, and Diane Di Prima; to today's next wave of Jim Carroll, Henry Rollins, Richard Hell, and Lydia Lunch. Marianne Faithful is also interviewed, but, as she freely admits, she isn't a poet; she's a lyricist. She seems to have been included as a way of showing the extent of the original generation's influence.

The original film has now been transferred to DVD for the first time and is being distributed by [MVD Video](#) with its original audio re-mastered in 5.1 surround sound to take full advantage of contemporary digital equipment.

Talking head documentaries — ones that consist solely of interviews with individuals — have the potential to be as dull as dishwater. The majority of those movies don't feature people quite as dynamic or exciting as those in this movie. Ms. Beatty has divided the movie up into chapters, and the first chapter allows the writers to briefly introduce themselves to the viewer and tell us a little about themselves and something of

international recognition. Ed Sanders had some commercial success as a pop singer, and Jim Carroll received critical acclaim for his book *The Basketball Diaries* - but they are hardly what you'd call household names.

When you listen to them as they talk about what they do, and you watch and hear them read or recite their work, they come alive like few others. It's especially true when they read their work. A fire seems to be lit within them that illuminates their beings and allows us an unprecedented opportunity to look into their souls. There is something about the written word that has called out to each one of them like a siren's song, and that motivates them to heights of creativity that few others have ever reached.

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