



Gang of Souls: A Generation of Beat Poets

Director: Maria Betty

Cast: Gregory Corso, John Giorno, Diane di Palma, Ann Waldman, Jim Carroll, Marianne Faithfull, Richard Hell, Henry Rollins, William Burroughs, Lydia Lunch, Allen Ginsberg, Ed Sanders

(1989) Rated: Unrated

US DVD release date: 18 March 2008 (Bleu Production / MVD)

by [Marc Calderaro](#)

Early in *Gang of Souls: A Generation of Beat Poets*, Allen Ginsberg tells us that the invention of LSD was as important, if not more so, than the invention of the atomic bomb. Conflicting definitions of "important" aside, Ginsberg makes his case for the expansion of consciousness and how it has changed society more than the bomb ever will. The bomb is life-changing, but the "mind bomb" is humanity-inspiring.

I would say most of the other interviewees in this 1989 Maria Betty documentary would agree to this ordering of influence. None of these minds would dare doubt the power of continually expanding your consciousness – minds like beat staples William Burroughs, Diane di Palma and Gregory Corso; performance/cyber-punk poets John Giorno, Ann Waldman and Jim Carroll; '70s and '80s music icons Marianne Faithfull, Richard Hell, Henry Rollins, and Ed Sanders; and Lydia Lunch. Quite the range of artists, the interviewees' common thread is participation in, or influence by, the Beat movement. *Gang of Souls* attempts to focus their manic, stream-of-consciousness energy into defining art, life and everything in between.

The results of this valiant attempt are tenuous. Bottling any movement into a 60-minute-long, interview-style documentary is unlikely – especially with a movement so entrenched in improvisation and an inspired belief in the written word. The seemingly correct medium for such an untenable goal should be the other side of a "Play" button for substitute art teachers, but Beatty strives for more. She allows her subjects to talk at length about whatever they'd like, then surgically edits the footage into a miscellany of words, subdivided into the broadest of categories. The effect is a higher brow documentary than classroom fodder, but the intellectual stimulation isn't quite there in order for the documentary to become profound. Sadly, it's the ever-present, jagged editing to blame for the documentary's lack of coherence.

The late '80s, one-huge-montage editing dominates the documentary's presentation as well as the interviewees. Jostling back and forth between speakers every few seconds, then repeating choice phrases ad nauseam, creates nothing more than sound bites, something I've come to despise, and something I feel the Beats would have always rejected. The intended effect is to resonate key lines, but quite the opposite occurs. When Ginsberg's phrase "majesty and rhythm" is looped for emphasis, the cavalcade of images and sounds distorts any such rhythm or majesty. This example isn't isolated; throughout the documentary, the editing undercuts its own intentions.

The saddest instance is at the end of a montage of Burroughs' praise. Each quote builds towards a cacophonous climax, overlapping and twisting towards a zenith, expounding the genius of Burroughs, to which he dryly replies "I don't know." A perfect ending to the sequence, but then, without reason, the phrase is looped. Not only does this cut the majestic rhythm, but also emphasizes the fact that Burroughs' "...I don't know," was actually part of a larger sentence and that the quote was yanked out of context. This realization pulls the whole sequence down.

Though there are some incredible lines throughout these interviews – lines like Gregory Corso saying the Beat movement worked, "oh yeah it worked. That fucker worked; sure did" – it's hard to take anything substantial home with you, even though every single person has something substantial to say.

Most people, when forced to speak about art, do not come off well. Even seasoned, gifted artists seldom express anything relevant and appear either foolish or pretentious. The editing of *Gang of Souls* compounds this idea ten-fold as we can't seem to get a tangible grip on any of these brilliant people. The few talking heads we receive positively are William Burroughs, because he says things like, "Everything I have to say, I say in my books," and those people whose best work is done in sound bites.

Lydia Lunch, particularly, seems born to be edited, saying things like, "I

don't like to call it music when I record with musical instruments on an album; that's your terminology, not mine." (I guess "positively" is the wrong term to describe how Lunch come off, perhaps "aptly" is better.) And though I'm not an expert on this movement, it feels counterintuitive to treat the Beats with such sound bites.

The rambling musings of Kerouac, the elegiac repetition of Ginsberg, and the extended, chapter-length metaphors of Burroughs all reject the three-second, quip treatment. Cobbling together smart people doesn't mean the product will look smart, and though flashes of insight reflect at different times in the film, these moments can be counted on one hand. Mostly, the film seems as if a "Kerouac School for Disembodied Poetics" alum gathered old professors in a room and asked them about things they've been asked a million times before. Ginsberg's particularly poignant on that: "How many times [do I] go downtown and stare into a TV camera and tell my tale, like Ahab, or the old buffoon who started 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner'?"

The movie is coherent, but largely inconsequential. And the DVD extras are simply updated bios of the interviewees, which are ripped, sometimes word-for-word, from Wikipedia.

If you'd like to learn some of the bare-bones ideas of the Beat generation and a few minds from two generations ago who tangentially agree with the Kerouac, *Gang of Souls* will help you. There truly are some incredible quotes and sound clips to latch onto, especially coming from the ridiculous mouth of Lydia Lunch. But the film optimistically strives to be the mind bomb, and isn't much more than a 20-year-old educational film with the lead singer of Television playing a keyboard tie.

RATING:  4
EXTRAS:  1

— 28 May 2008

[advertising](#) | [about](#) | [contributors](#) | [submissions](#)

© 1999-2008 PopMatters.com. All rights reserved.

PopMatters.com™ and PopMatters™ are trademarks of PopMatters Media, Inc. and PopMatters Magazine.