

The Santa Cruz Poetry Festival:

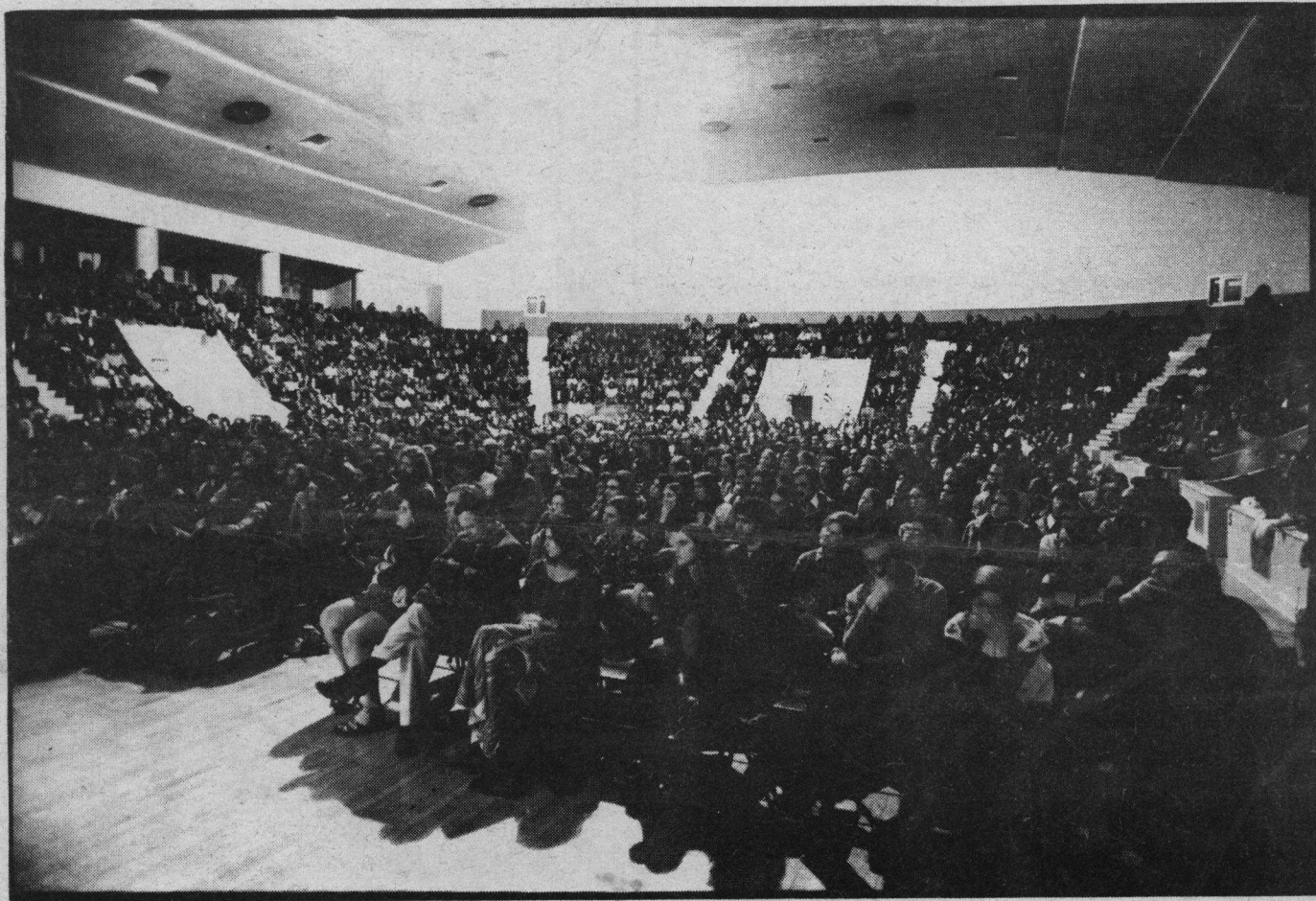
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A BRIEF LOOK BACK



BY JAMES DALESSANDRO

Twenty years ago this month, Santa Cruz became the literary capital of America when the first Santa Cruz Poetry Festival took place at the Civic Auditorium.



JERRY KAMSTRA ARCHIVES

In 1970, while a student and member of the anti-war Students for a Democratic Society at Ohio University in Athens, Ohio, my girlfriend handed me a copy of Allen Ginsberg's *HOWL*. I had wanted to be a writer since grade school, had written and published poems and short stories in university publications, but *HOWL* transformed me.

In rapid order I discovered Ferlinghetti, Snyder, Corso, Kerouac and the entire Beat-movement. When I arrived in Santa Cruz and San Francisco in November of 1971, I immediately wanted to know where the "Beats" were, and I was told that I was 10 years too late.

Then I read an inspiring excerpt from Jerry Kamstra's *The Frisco Kid* in the *Bay Guardian*, and soon befriended the author, who lived with his wife and children in Lawrence Ferlinghetti's house. Shortly thereafter, Chicano poet Tomas Fuentes took me to Oregon, where we spent four days on Ken Kesey's farm. Joanna Leary was there, trying to raise money for an appeal for her husband Timothy's eight-year sentence to Folsom prison for possession of two half-joints of marijuana.

Kesey's kitchen

The Santa Cruz Poetry Festival was conceived in Kesey's kitchen in the spring of 1974 as a benefit for Leary's defense fund. Its founders and organizers were Tomas Fuentes and myself.

With Kesey on board, then Kamstra, Ferlinghetti soon signed on. We got Paul Krassner to emcee, enlisted Berkeley novelist Floyd Salas and the great street poet Jack Micheline. We invited Pentagon Papers defendant Anthony Russo, who actually stole the Pentagon Papers (Daniel Ellsberg merely handed them to the press). Russo lived with me for a month prior to the festival, periodically lip-syncing cryptic conversations with phantom CIA agents he was convinced were trying to gas him.

I borrowed \$1,500 from a bearded IBM executive and off we blundered. The tickets were the wrong type, and UCSC wouldn't sell them. The poster was done on colored paper and had to be re-done because the printer couldn't shoot it. Nobody believed that our cast of counter-culture characters would actually be there.

One week before the festival, we had sold only 150 tickets and were facing disaster. Against university regulations, Tomas and I set up a table outside of a different UCSC cafeteria every night and sold 800 tickets. But the word caught on.

The storm

The night of the festival, the worst storm of the year hit the Bay Area. Kamstra, Ferlinghetti and Micheline were almost blown off the road several times and nearly returned to the city, convinced that no one would attend in such weather.

One hour before the reading, 1,800 people stood in the torrential rain outside the Santa Cruz Civic Auditorium in a line that wrapped around three blocks, a sight I will never forget.

Things didn't start off too well. Paul Krassner went onstage and, despite my repeated instructions to do only seven minutes, babbled on for 20. We yelled and threw things from the wings until the never-shy Kamstra walked out, lifted the diminutive Krassner a foot off the ground in a full nelson, and apologized to the audience for Krassner's attack of "diarrhea mouth," carrying him from the stage.

The next performer, cowboy singer-poet Kell Robertson strummed and sang an innocuous little ditty that went, "I shot faggot in the bathroom/And now, I ain't goin' to hillbill heaven," an alleged satire on country-western machismo that got him booed off the stage amid a hail of debris.

But Ferlinghetti wowed them, Kamstra read a marvelous section of the *Frisco Kid*, Kesey was at the height of his literary and prankish powers; Jack Micheline brought the house down. The locals — Morton Marcus, Tomas, Diane Ramsey and myself — showed that the "word" was alive and well in Santa Cruz. At midnight the still-packed house ended the show with thunderous applause. The spoken word had returned in force to the West Coast, more powerful and more popular than ever.

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JERRY KAMSTRA ARCHIVES

William Burroughs attended the 1980 poetry festival

Poetry

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Over the four years from 1974 to 1978, the festival grew from one to two nights each November, and became the nation's largest annual literary event, drawing press coverage in *The New York Times* and *Los Angeles Times*. It grew in scope and audacity, with jazz musicians, Balinese dancers, Indian tabla players, with poets and novelists of every strain from Pulitzer Prize and National Book Award winners to street poets, scats singers, and certified loonies. Poet and publisher George Hitchcock called it a counter-culture circus.

The second festival

The second year had probably the greatest bill assembled: Ferlinghetti, Gary Snyder, Allen Ginsberg, Charles Bukowski. I was close friends with jazz great Charles Lloyd and convinced him to perform surprise solos on his Chinese oboe at the middle and end of the show. His appearances there and at subsequent events rank among our most unforgettable moments.

But the second year will always be remembered as the year of the bomb scare. Two disgruntled Santa Cruz locals, angry over my "capitalist rip-off" for charging \$4 when "poetry belonged to the people," phoned in a bomb threat while Allen Ginsberg was reading. I tried to ignore the warning of police officers, certain it was a crank call, until a lieutenant ordered me to evacuate the 2,000 people in the audience for a search of the entire auditorium. When the search yielded nothing, 2,200 people reentered, filling the aisles. People were now breaking into a poetry festival.

Ten minutes later, when I took the stage for my own reading, I said:

"That's two tough acts to follow, Allen Ginsberg and a bomb scare." I had just published a collection of poems, *Canary in a Coal Mine*, and when I finished my final poem, "I'm Tired of Being a Whore in America," a social/satirical/surreal/speed rapping diatribe, I got a thunderous ovation. I looked behind me and Ginsberg was rocking forward frenetically in his chair, nodding his vigorous approval. That moment changed my life: It told me I might have a tiny chunk of that gift all writers dream of, to move and inspire people with the sheer power of the word.

Outlaw writer

But that night belonged to Charles Bukowski (rapidly becoming the great outlaw American writer), to Charles Lloyd and to the final act — the warm, mesmerizing Gary Snyder, who had just won the National Book Award for *Turtle Island*. It was the party afterward, however, that made the cover of the *Berkeley Barb*. A stark-naked, beer-bellied Bukowski shuffled through 300 scruffy intelligentsia crammed into Tomas's furnitureless Swift Street house, got a head lock on Allen Ginsberg and bellowed, "Go ahead, Allen, tell 'em you haven't written a decent poem since *HOWL*. Tell them you've been peddling bullshit all these years." Ginsberg grinned and hugged him.

At the third festival, Tomas Fuentez ousted me to go it alone, producing a marvelous festival highlighted by two dramatic events: the astonishing performance of famed Indian musician Ali Akbar Khan; and the re-emergence of the greatest Beat poet of them all, the man who inspired Herb Caen to coin the phrase 'beatnik,' Bob Kaufman.

The 'Black Rimbaud'

Called the 'Black Rimbaud' in Europe, where he is still a legend,

Kaufman has been committed to a mental institution for his wild and spontaneous actions, and given chemical and electrical shock therapy. He had wandered the streets of North Beach as a ragged mumbler for over 10 years when Tomas brought him to the festival.

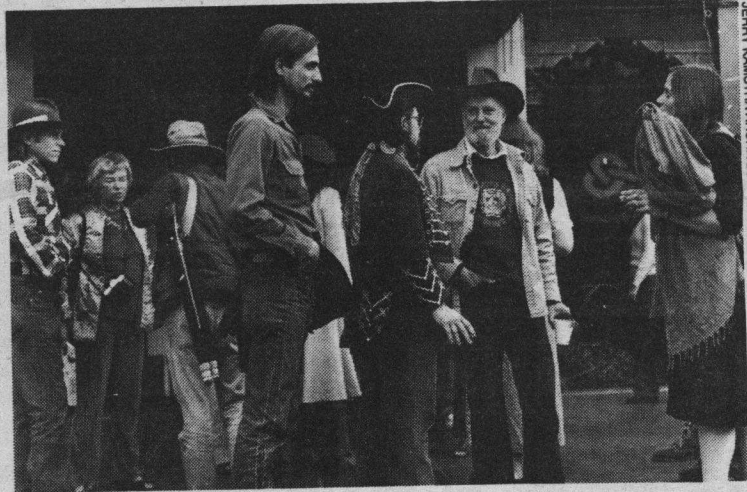
In a momentary burst of lucidity, Kaufman reached back and gave emotional, coherent readings of poems from "Golden Sardine" and "Solitudes Crowded with Loneliness," including one of my personal Kaufman favorites, "Hollywood, Artistic Cancer of the Universe." I saw tears in people's eyes when he staggered off.

I usurped the reins from Tomas Fuentez and produced the fourth and final festival in 1978 (I had nothing to do with the stunted revival years later). Once again, controversy erupted. A group of would-be poets with names like Koala Skyturtle stole the festival dates and tried to block my county grant by claiming to be the Santa Cruz Poetry Center and the "official" organ of poetry in the city. I signed an agreement to consult with them and get my dates back, whereupon their "consultation" became a demand to engage the bulk of readers and emcees from their weekly group. The "war" was fought in the newspa-

Klemmer, and Santa Cruz's great saxophonist Paul Contos; for the reappearance of Bukowski at his most outrageous; for another brilliant Ferlinghetti reading; and for the appearance of the immortal William Burroughs. I closed the show by reading with saxophonist Klemmer, knowing it was the swan song, and the emotion coursing through the crowd of 1,800 people was palpable all the way to the stage when Klemmer and I hugged each other at the end.

The Santa Cruz Poetry Festival still haunts me to this day. When I'm in town, I'll inevitably see one of the old posters, now collectors' items, on someone's wall. Ferlinghetti called it "the greatest event of its kind I've ever seen." Charles Lloyd recently told me, "The times I spent with you and Lawrence and Tomas at the poetry festivals were the highlights of my life." This came from the first jazz musician to play the Soviet Union, who played with Jimi Hendrix and Santana, Miles Davis and John Coltrane. I read with Ken Kesey in Fresno this summer at a festival organized by Tomas — and Kesey said the same.

Nelson Algren once said that in order to have great writers, you must have great audiences. Bonnie Raitt once attended one of my infamous



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Legendary characters Dan Stolpe, Virginia Gregory, Jesse Wolfe, Pablo Lacer and Lawrence Ferlinghetti stand in line at the poetry festival.

pers. I was verbally attacked daily on the Mall and a half-dozen fist fights ensued. But that wasn't the half of it.

Feminist fury

I had felt that the finest emerging poets in the country that year were women: Berkeley's Julia Vinograd and Maya Angelou, New York's Nikki Giovanni, 15-minute rave Patti Smith and Marge Piercy. Giovanni, my personal favorite, never returned my phone calls; Maya Angelou, as every year, was on lecture tour; Marge Piercy had once called T.S. Elliot a "macho pig" at a Santa Cruz reading and refused to attend; and Patti Smith's manager called her the greatest poet in America, demanding fees three times what I eventually paid William Burroughs. Vinograd won the Paul Krassner award by hogging the stage for 20 minutes, despite threats from wings.

Opening night, a local female poet burst onstage and tore up my poster, denouncing the fact that I had only seven women among the 19 readers. Chants of, "Kill yourself" were her chorus. I had never kept count by gender and regretted it.

Besides the fights and controversy, the fourth was memorable for jazz musicians Anthony Braxton, John

all-night parties on Seabright Avenue after a gig at the Catalyst. She told me, "Every musician wants to play here, because the audiences are the most knowledgeable and the most enthusiastic."

For poets, that was the key. Of the nearly 12,000 people who attended, some from as far away as New York and Berlin, 90 percent had never been to a poetry reading. Probably 10,000 of them came from Santa Cruz County, a tenth of the population at that time. There was no distance between seats and stage, no pretense, no exclusion of lofty academics, satirical country singers, skyturtles or poster-rippers. Santa Cruz may well have the best audiences to be found anywhere.

For a brief time, Santa Cruz was the literary capital of the English-speaking world. Long will the memories prevail.

James Dalessandro's San Francisco mystery novel, Bohemian Heart, was profiled on the front page of GOOD TIMES, Sept. 30 1993. The book has since been voted Mystery of the Year by the Armchair Detective, bible of the mystery world, and has been optioned by NYPD Blue renegade David Caruso.