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POP VIEW; From Beat Poet to Pop Chic

By KEN TUCKER;

NINE YEARS AGO, Allen Ginsberg wrote in the introduction to his "Collected Poems 1947-1980" that he was now creating work for "electronic laser TV generations that don't read Dostoyevsky." Certainly this description is even more true of the newly released "Holy Soul Jelly Roll: Songs and Poems (1948-1993)," an enthralling four-CD set.

The material here ranges from the first reading Mr. Ginsberg ever gave of his career-establishing poem, "Howl" (to a giggling, genially shocked Berkeley, Calif., audience in 1956), to the poet's catchy but dead-serious punk-rock ditty, "Birdbrain." In between, Mr. Ginsberg collaborates with Bob Dylan and yowls along with the English band the Clash.

With its release, "Holy Soul Jelly Roll" instantly places the 68-year-old Mr. Ginsberg, who is probably America's most famous living poet, at the center of the current trend in so-called spoken-word recordings by writers generally much younger than him. Spoken-word -- a pointlessly stiff term for poetry read aloud with stand-up-comic timing and aggression, frequently to the musical accompaniment of hip-hop, rock or jazz -- has recently yielded a number of major-label album releases. Most notable among them are Reg E. Gaines's "Please Don't Take My Air Jordans" and Maggie Estep's "No More Mr. Nice Girl," as well as a new anthology of writers participating in a poetry-reading competition, "Grand Slam! Best of the National Poetry Slam."

Publicly performed poetry is in the air these days; in this year's Lollapalooza alternative-rock festival, for instance, there was an attraction called "The Revival Tent of the Rev. Samuel Mudd's Little Spoken-Word Armageddon," with Ms. Estep and other poets bringing contemporary verse to devotees of Smashing Pumpkins and the Breeders. Earlier this year, MTV deployed its youth-culture power to make poetry chic by devoting one of its editions of its acoustic-only "Unplugged" show to spoken-word artists; Ms. Estep's jokey "The Stupid Jerk I'm Obsessed With" was considered the half-hour's highlight. Poetry prances across the Internet, which poet-hackers use as computerized coffeehouses to share their work.

And certainly it should be argued that much of the current inspiration for spoken-word readings derives from rap music's emphasis on rhyme over melody. While the audience for published poetry remains small, the sound of a human voice reciting conversational verse has an increasing appeal. At a time when culture and entertainment frequently seem overrun by computer-era technology and ironic self-consciousness, spoken-word performances radiate a sincerity, simplicity and directness that many listeners find refreshing.

Mr. Ginsberg comes to spoken-word from a different direction. As a young beat writer intent on making his poetry more accessible to a mass audience, he harked back to the ancient traditions of the pre-printing-press bards whose creations were preserved by word-of-mouth. His poetics have always been based on a physicality that lifts the poem off the page.

From the start, he wrote less for the way a poem would look when printed than for the way it might sound when read aloud; his first model was the exultant garrulousness of Walt Whitman, from whose example Mr. Ginsberg fashioned what he has termed "a long breath poetry that has a sort of ecstatic climax."

This approach, as it happens, is a perfect description of the two major recitations in "Holy Soul Jelly Roll": the "Howl" performance and a 1964 recording of "Kaddish (for Naomi Ginsberg 1894-1956)," Mr. Ginsberg's masterpiece about the insanity and death of his mother. Reading "Howl" before a rowdy crowd of well-wishers, Mr. Ginsberg, who was 30 at the time, begins in a quavering voice; he had not yet developed what he later came to call "his deep quiet heart tone."

Still, his voice picks up assurance and power as his hour-plus poem builds in intensity, as does his audience's reaction to the poem's vehement condemnations of society's hypocrisy and guilt. By the time Atlantic Records recorded Mr. Ginsberg's Brandeis University reading of "Kaddish," the author was a commanding reader. The sorrow in his voice as

he hymns his mother's passing for more than half an hour ("I know where you've gone -- it's good") is tremendously moving.

The "Holy Soul" project was overseen by the producer Hal Willner, who helped Mr. Ginsberg choose from hundreds of hours of taped performances. It is to Mr. Willner's credit that he did not take the usual technician's approach and make his selections based on sonic quality; no matter how poorly recorded a reading might have been, he went with the one that contained the most passion and cleaned up its sound as best he could.

"Holy Soul" comes with a thick booklet in which Mr. Ginsberg comments on every cut, explaining the origins of the composition and recording in acute and often self-deprecating phrases. Of his early 70's musical versions of William Blake's "Songs of Innocence and Experience," for example, he notes wryly, "I stayed up three nights setting two dozen Blake songs to one chord before I discovered a second chord."

Mr. Ginsberg is not the only contemporary poet to place an emphasis on the oral tradition, of course. Gregory Corso and Michael McClure became strikingly effective poet-performers. The slightly younger John Giorno pioneered all current spoken-word projects, first with his "Dial-a-Poem" concept and then the Giorno Poetry Systems recordings over the past 15 years, offering vibrant readings from writers as disparate as William Burroughs and John Ashbery.

Patti Smith, Lenny Kaye and Jim Carroll all began their careers as poets and ended up rockers on major-record labels; the poet Anne Waldman turned a hortatory poem into music and recorded a great lost post-punk single in the 80's, "Uh-Oh, Plutonium."

And as it turns out, one of the most underrated of the beat-era writers has proven to be LeRoi Jones, today known as Amiri Baraka. Mr. Baraka combined the informal vocabulary of the New York School poets with whom he was briefly allied (including Mr. Ashbery, Frank O'Hara and Kenneth Koch) with metrical rhythms derived from the jazz he loved, to create a pungent, discursive style. A clear line of influence can be traced from his methods in the late 60's and early 70's through versifiers-turned-musicians like the Last Poets and Gil Scott-Heron and on to any number of rappers, from "old school" Kool Moe Dee to the fluid rookie Warren G.

Mr. Gaines absorbs this tradition on "Please Don't Take My Air Jordans," an airy, skillful collection of animatedly hip-hopped poems. At a time when academic poets far more conservative than Mr. Ginsberg are calling for a return to conventional rhyme, meter and form, the ivory tower would do well to appreciate Mr. Gaines's impeccable couplets and precise diction.

ALTHOUGH MS. ESTEP seems to fancy herself a churlish rebel, she is a shrewd writer well aware of the debt her work owes to an earlier generation; she studied at Mr. Ginsberg's Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics in Boulder, Colo., and shares Mr. Ginsberg's fondness for equating the personal with the political.

Still, with her all-too-ordinary rants against sexism ("Hey Baby") and, of all things, television ("Vegetable Omelet"), there is something cramped and limited about the scope of Ms. Estep's work, especially when compared with the capacious creations of other women like the poet-turned-rocker Patti Smith or ascending musicians like Polly Jane Harvey and Liz Phair.

Ms. Estep herself said recently that the rock singer Courtney Love told her, "This poet stuff was a sorry excuse for being a rock star," and one is inclined to agree with Ms. Love. Yet there's no denying that Ms. Estep's popularity has already exceeded that of most of her colleagues; these days, you can tune in MTV to see Ms. Estep paid the ultimate pop-cultural compliment: a video of her poem "Hey Baby" being ridiculed by Beavis and Butt-head.

Another example of high-profile poetry is the current fashion for "slams" -- revved-up group readings in which poets are judged and awarded prizes. Poetry slams have proven crowd pleasers everywhere from San Francisco to Chicago to New York, where the Nuyorican Poets Cafe reigns as the place where Mr. Ginsberg is as likely to be spotted as the next up-and-coming sonnet-slinger.

The 16 cuts of "Grand Slam!" suggest that competition may not be the best way to encourage the creation of good poetry; too often, the artist overremotes shamelessly to wring applause from the crowd and votes from the judges. But there's talent here, too, in Lisa Buscani's carefully detailed "A Prayer" and Sean McNally's deadpan-hilarious reading of his "Plane Goes Down."

Whether poetry slams and the mass marketing of poetry CD's prove to be more than a passing fad remains to be seen. Mr. Ginsberg's "Holy Soul Jelly Roll," however, is already more than a clever way to introduce a new generation to a vital, aging poet; it is an immensely enjoyable time capsule of the way poetry and pop culture have interacted for half a century.

POETRY WRITTEN TO BE spoken takes on the dramatic force of a performance. Here are three excerpts. "Please Don't Take My Air Jordans" by Reg E. Gaines And i got no job no money at all

But it's easy to steal fresh gear from the mall

Parents say i shouldn't but i know i should

Gots ta do what i can to make sure i look good.

'Sex Goddess From the Western Hemisphere" by Maggie Estep my being a sex goddess

it isn't a sexual thing

it's a political thing

I don't actually have sex, no

I'm too busy taking care of

important sex goddess business,

yeah,

I gotta go on the Charlie Rose Show

and MTV and become a parody

of myself and make

buckets of money off my own inane brand

of self-righteous pop psychology.

"Capitol Air" by Allen Ginsberg: I don't like Communist censorship of my books

I don't like Marxists complaining about my looks

I don't like Castro insulting members of my sex

Leftists insisting we got the mystic fix

I don't like Capitalists selling me gasoline Coke

Multinationals burning Amazon trees to smoke

Big corporation takeover media mind

I don't like the top bananas that're robbing Guatemala banks

blind.

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