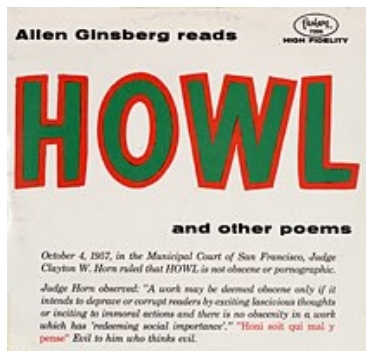


“Howl”--Allen Ginsberg (1959)

Added to the National Registry: 2006

Essay by Cary O'Dell



Original album



Original label



Allen Ginsberg

“I thought I wouldn’t write a poem, but just write what I wanted to without fear, let my imagination go, open secrecy, and scribble magic lines from my real mind—sum up my life—something I wouldn’t be able to show anybody, write for my own soul’s ear and a few other golden ears.”

--Allen Ginsberg, 1959

Poet Allen Ginsberg’s stunning, controversial, epic and once-considered “obscene” three-part poem “Howl” was composed in the summer of 1955. It was first published in 1956. The poem’s radical language and incendiary images has since transcended poetry circles and academia. And its sentiments—perhaps put forth most directly in its famous opening line, “I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness, starving hysterical naked,…”-- have come to summarize a decade and to speak for a generation.

The 1959 recitation of “Howl” named to the National Registry in 2006 was not the work’s first oral presentation, nor even its first recorded one. The piece was first read aloud by its author in a San Francisco gallery in October of 1955. And its first, though aborted, recording was made in March of 1956 at Reed College in Portland, Oregon; at that time, Ginsberg performed only part one of the poem however before pleading fatigue and stopping.

This ‘59 version--arguably the definitive rendition by its writer—came to be staged and recorded in Chicago at a benefit for the recently-launched literary magazine “Big Table.”

“Big Table” was founded by defectors from the well-established and well-respected “Chicago Review” magazine over what many saw as undue influence and censorship of the periodical by its parent, the University of Chicago. UC had recently ordered works by Burroughs, Kerouac and Dahlberg excised from the “Review’s” proposed Winter 1959 edition, leading to a firestorm of controversy and a round of resignations. The exodus from the “Review” included its editor-in-chief Irving Rosenthal and its poetry editor Paul Carroll as well as four other staffers who immediately formulated the idea of a new publication that would not be afraid to publish even the most cutting-edge of new literature.

Coined “Big Table” by no less of a wordsmith than Jack Kerouac, the new journal was incorporated in January of 1959. From the beginning, poet Allen Ginsberg was a patron saint of the new press, even going so far as to set up editor Rosenthal in a Windy City apartment in order for him to do his work. Funding for “Big Table” came via selling ad space to major New York publishers and from monetary donations from various benefactors. Additional monies—and

major publicity—was obtained via a benefit reading featuring Ginsberg, Gregory Corso and Peter Orlovsky that was held on January 29, 1959 at Chicago's Sherman Hotel. The event was sponsored by the city's Shaw Society, a theatrical group devoted to the works of George Bernard Shaw and to Shaw's long-standing crusade against literary censorship.

It was at this public, well-attended reading that this Ginsberg/"Howl" recording was made. It would be released in 1959, on the album "'Howl' and Other Poems," over the Fantasy record label. Ginsberg would comment later, "Though the tapes were coarse.... I tried recording 'Howl' under better mechanical conditions in the studio but the spirit wasn't in me by then. I'm not in control."

Allegedly originally conceived as a spoken-word piece, "Howl's" repetitive effects lends itself well to oratory and live performance, a place where many other poems' more subtle effects, word play and structure can easily get lost or be overlooked. Though "Howl" is long—over 100 lines—and dense, its dependence on a few heavily repeated words and phrases ("Who" in part one; "Moloch!" in part two; and the refrain of "I'm with you in Rockland" in part three) gives it both a metronome-like rhythm and a reverberating power. Ginsberg said, "I depended upon the word 'who' [in part one] to keep the beat, a base to keep measure, return to and take off again onto another streak of invention."

The poet's delivery in this recording, Ginsberg's most famous reading of his most famous work, is, at least in the beginning, surprisingly detached, almost robotic in nature. His flat recitation stands in stark contrast to the often graphic and violent images and carefully metered-out, jolting four-letter words that the poem sometimes traffics in. It is only with the piling on of its seemingly random but evocative images that Ginsberg, poet and reader, grows impassioned, eventually building his delivery to a near shout in part two before regaining his and the poem's equilibrium in part three.

Throughout, though, momentum in the piece is maintained by Ginsberg's rapid pace—he hardly breaths between lines and there's only the most momentary pause even between the poem's major parts. Taking into account the long duration of the piece, all in all, Ginsberg's stamina and sustained tension during the reading is considerable, even remarkable.

Despite the poem's less-than-ideal recording methods and environ (i.e. not in a studio), Ginsberg's "Howl" from the Sherman Hotel in 1959 is a well-captured document. The poet's voice is as clear as his images and the presence of an audience imbues energy without being unnecessarily intrusive--though there is an audible chuckle at Ginsberg's most bourgeois-baiting line, "who ... gave up and were forced to open antique stores where they thought they were growing old." And, of course, there is a rapturous spate of applause upon the poem's exhausted but triumphant conclusion.

The importance of the existence of this recording, or ones like it, should not be undervalued. The majority of our poetic history and heritage is silent--even if they were created to be performed live. Only a few poems, a fraction, have been assigned, permanently, to recorded media. Lesser still are the number of extant recordings of poets themselves reading their own work. To have Ginsberg's "Howl," as read by Ginsberg, committed as it was originally to vinyl is to document forever a seminal work and a particular epoch in American history.

"My poetry...has nothing to do with dull materialistic vagaries.... The secrets of individual imagination ... are not for sale to this consciousness, are no use to this world, except perhaps to make it shut its trap and listen to the music of the Spheres."

--Allen Ginsberg, 1959

Cary O'Dell is with the Motion Picture, Broadcast and Recorded Sound division of the Library of Congress. He is the author of the books "June Cleaver Was a Feminist!" (2014) and "Women Pioneers in Television" (1997). He also served as assistant editor of "The Concise Encyclopedia of American Radio" (2009) and "The Biographical Encyclopedia of American Radio" (2010).