

# The Starving, Hysterical, Naked Mind of Allen Ginsberg

A schizophrenic mother, a burgeoning  
FBI file, and the shaping of America's  
most important poet

BY RANSOM RIGGS

# Depending on whom you ask,

Allen Ginsberg was a songwriter, a photographer, a political gadfly, a gay rights advocate, or the founding poet of the Beat Generation. He was also

one of the most divisive figures of the 1960s, described as either an “ambassador for tolerance” or, as his FBI file reads, a “politically dangerous subversive.” But whether you see him as a force for good or evil, he was—unequivocally—a force that changed American literature forever.

## THE FAMILY BUSINESS

IRWIN ALLEN GINSBERG WAS BORN JUNE 3, 1926 in working-class Newark, New Jersey. His parents were both Jewish immigrants of Russian stock, but they were a study in contrasts. His father Louis was a levelheaded high school teacher, while his mother Naomi was an avid nudist, a radical Communist, and a paranoid schizophrenic. Each made a profound impression on young Allen, whose disposition fell somewhere between their polar extremes. He inherited a love of literature from his father, who was a poet in his own right. (Allen would later call writing “the family business.”) His mother, on the other hand, exposed him to a darker, more painful side of life. But if great suffering truly begets great writing, then the madness of Mrs. Ginsberg may deserve more credit for Allen’s success than his father’s fireside poetry readings. After all, his most influential works—including *Howl*, *Kaddish*, and *White Shroud*—focused on mothers and madness.

At age 9, Ginsberg began caring for his ailing mother while his father worked. In and out of mental hospitals for

most of her adult life, Naomi Ginsberg was so gripped by paranoia that she raved about the FBI implanting mind-control devices in her brain and sometimes refused to believe that Allen was her son. At age 21, he took a psychiatrist’s advice and signed papers authorizing a lobotomy for his mother—a decision he said he “always felt enormous guilt and uncertainty about.” She passed away years later in 1956, but her memory haunted Ginsberg and his work for the rest of his life.

Despite these early traumas, Allen seemed by all accounts a relatively normal and happy kid. A model student, he earned good grades, stayed out of trouble, and was elected president of his high school debate club. And when he was accepted to Columbia University in 1943, his no-nonsense father proudly announced that his son was going to become a lawyer.

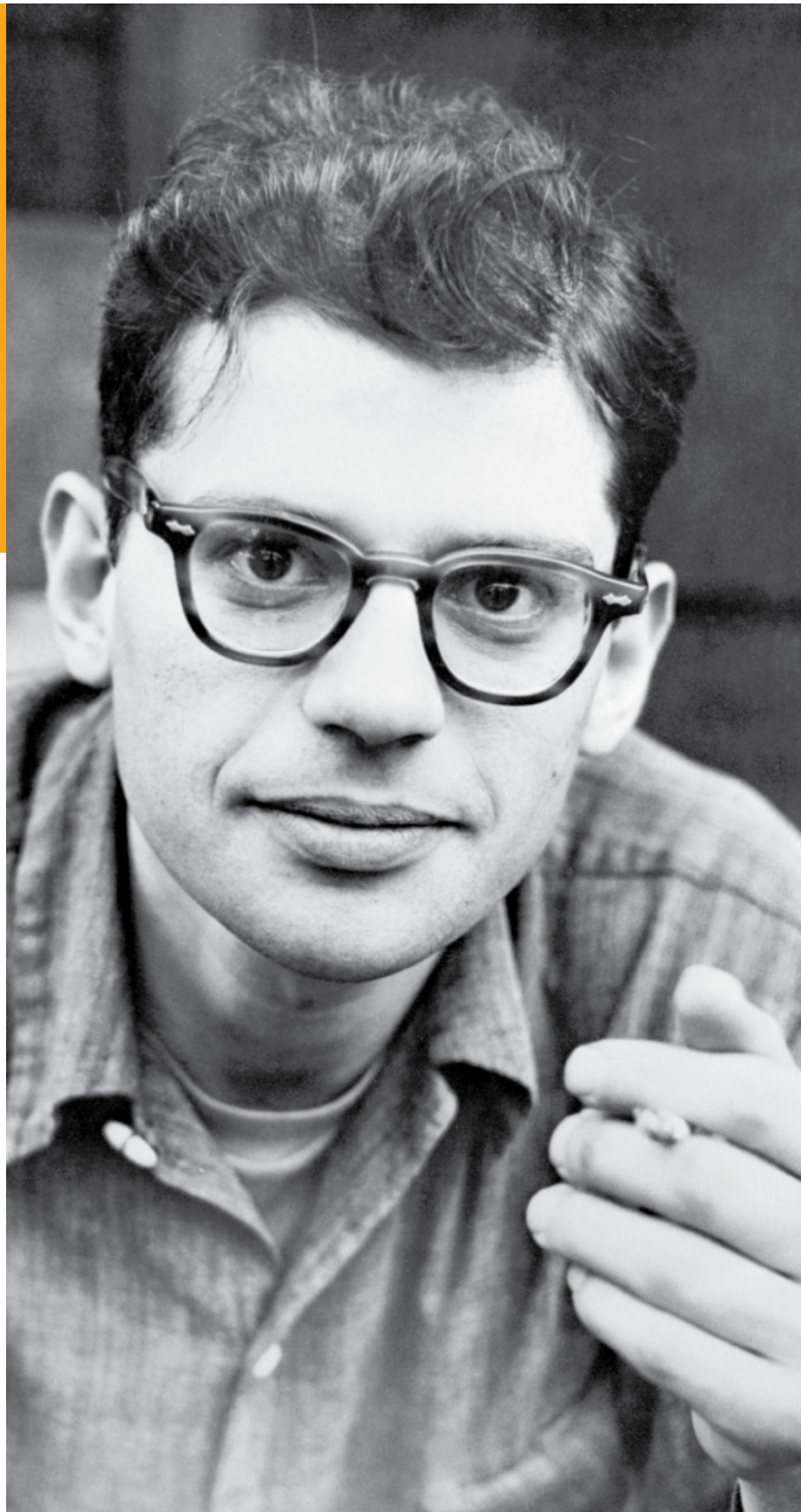
**In 1965,  
Ginsberg  
was ejected  
from both  
Czechoslovakia  
and Cuba—  
the latter  
for allegedly  
hitting on Che  
Guevara.**

### ALLEN MEETS THE BEATS

SHORTLY AFTER ARRIVING AT COLUMBIA, Ginsberg met Jack Kerouac and William Burroughs, who would become his lifelong friends and greatest influences. Both were older than him (Kerouac by four years and Burroughs by 12), and they introduced young Allen to the fast-paced New York nightlife. During the next few years, Ginsberg developed a love for jazz, experimented with drugs, and became openly homosexual. He also became passionate about writing poetry—dashing his father's hopes for law school to pursue the artistic life, now known as Beat.

If you were expecting this to be the part where Ginsberg gets famous, then you're thinking of the wrong literary movement. The Beat lifestyle promised adventure and artistic wanderlust, not pop stardom. Ginsberg finally graduated from Columbia in 1948 (six years after he started), but the dead-end jobs he cycled through afterward didn't signal much professional promise. His love life around that time wasn't any better. Abortive love affairs with the likes of Burroughs and Beat icon Neal Cassady eventually drove Ginsberg into the Merchant Marines in an attempt to escape a persistent melancholy.

Then things hit rock bottom. Caught with a car full of stolen goods belonging to his roommate, Ginsberg was court-ordered to spend eight months in a psychiatric ward. In true Ginsbergian style, however, he managed to turn institutional lemons into lemonade. He met Carl Solomon, a fellow





## A Shout in the Dark EVERYTHING YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT *HOWL*

In both style and substance, *Howl* is an exuberant rejection of 1950s American values. Breaking with traditional patterns of rhyme and meter, Ginsberg created a groundbreaking free verse that owed more to the wild rhythms of jazz than to the Western literary canon. In a direct challenge to America's prudish moral standards, Ginsberg made references to sex and drugs graphic enough to make June Cleaver faint.

But just as importantly, *Howl* is a lament for the "angel-headed hipster." Ginsberg saw his friends self-destructing around him. Part I of the poem famously begins, "I saw the best minds of my generation, destroyed by madness, starving hysterical naked." It then goes on to detail examples of such madness—all in one breathless, uninterrupted, free-verse sentence. Part II, however, is more of a furious rant. In it, Ginsberg likens America to the Old Testament god Moloch. The Canaanites blindly worshipped Moloch, and mothers offered their children in sacrifice to him. Penned years before the Vietnam War, these verses solidified Ginsberg's reputation as a "prophetic" poet. Finally, Part III is addressed directly to Carl Solomon, his friend from his days in the mental institution. Ginsberg later admitted to using Solomon as a stand-in for his feelings about his mother. Despite broader political and social concerns, *Howl* is really Ginsberg's first attempt to wrestle with the personal shame he felt about his own mother—something he wouldn't find the courage to write about directly for several more years.

inmate and kindred spirit, to whom he later dedicated *Howl*. Together, they roamed the halls with freedom and teased the guards by pretending to be truly insane. More importantly, though, Ginsberg took the opportunity to read a lot and work on his writing.

After his release in the spring of 1950, Ginsberg redoubled his poetic efforts. He sought out a mentorship with poet William Carlos Williams, but Williams' initial feedback was discouraging.

The old master felt Ginsberg's slavish devotion to fixed rhyme and meter had hampered his creativity. Consequently, Allen became obsessed with reinventing his writing style. Though it took many more years for Ginsberg to find success (or any real confidence) as a poet, he would always credit Williams with "freeing his voice."

### A LONG, STRANGE TRIP

AT 29, GINSBERG HAD WRITTEN PLENTY OF POEMS but had published almost none. Poisonously envious of his successful friends, he spent six months soul-searching in Mexico before winding up in San Francisco. There, things began to turn around. He fell deeply in love with a younger man named Peter Orlovsky, who would be his on-again, off-again partner for the next 40 years. And on the advice of a psychologist, he quit a well-paying market-research job to collect unemployment and focus on his writing. The gamble paid off. He soon embarked on a project that would change both his life and the landscape of American poetry.

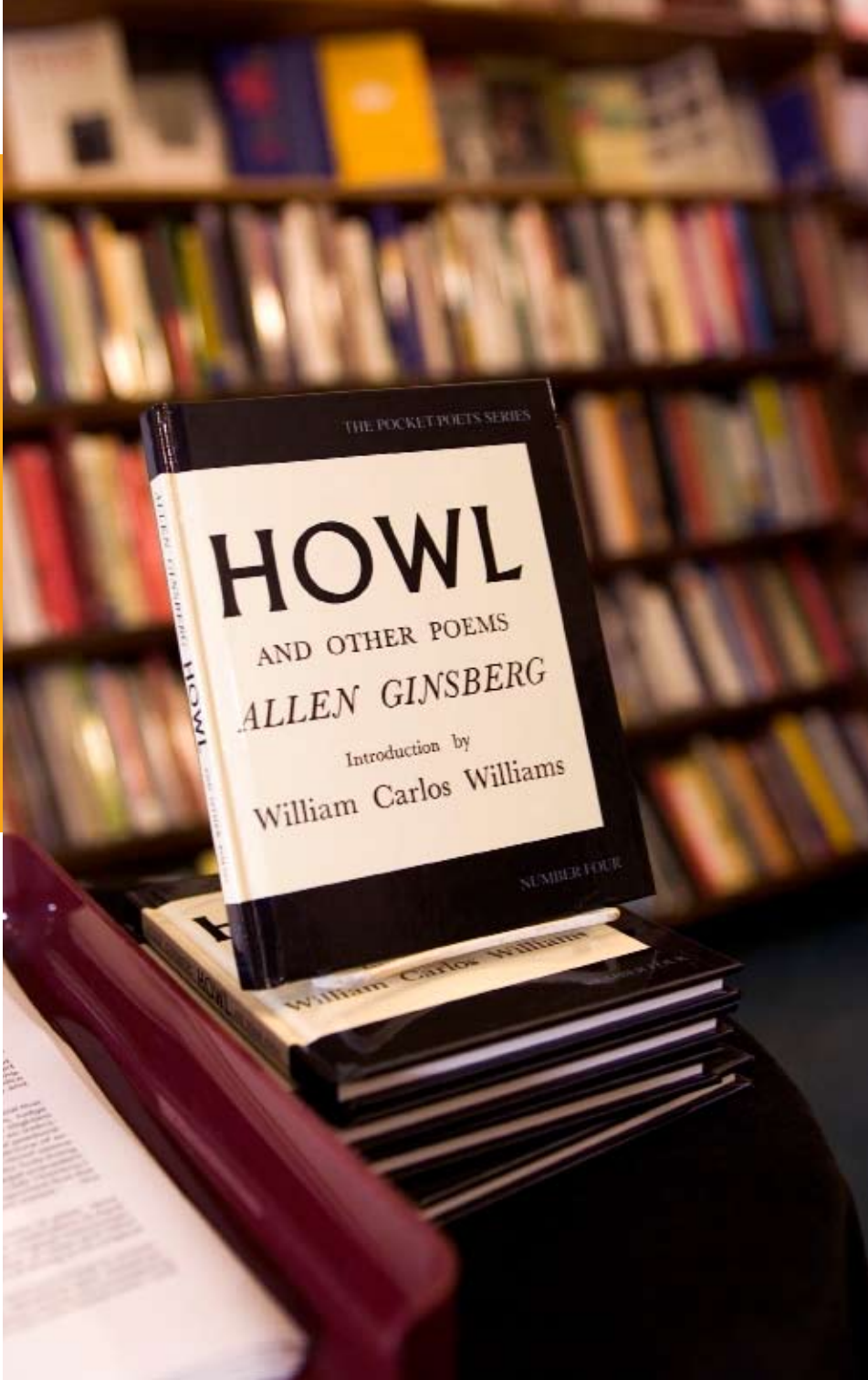
By his own admission, *Howl* wasn't something Ginsberg meant to publish. As soon as it began to flow from his typewriter, he knew it contained too much "dirty stuff" for his father to see. Initially, he regarded it as just an exercise, but then he read it aloud at a small gallery space in a rough section of town. He felt hesitant at first, but by the time he finished reading,

**Caught with a car full of stolen goods belonging to his roommate, Ginsberg was court-ordered to spend six months in a psychiatric ward.**

the applause was so deafening that he wept. The next day, poet Lawrence Ferlinghetti sent Ginsberg a prophetic telegram, paraphrasing a letter sent by Ralph Waldo Emerson to a young Walt Whitman: "I greet you at the beginning of a great career."

Ferlinghetti, the manager of the now-legendary Beat bookstore City Lights, proudly published Ginsberg's poem. Unfortunately, enough people found *Howl* offensive that it landed both of them in court on obscenity charges. Nine literary experts and the ACLU came to *Howl*'s defense, and in the end, the judge surprised everyone by ruling that it was of "redeeming social importance." Better still, the national media coverage of the trial put sales of *Howl* through the roof and made Allen Ginsberg famous.

Ginsberg received so much fan mail during the next few years that it detracted from his work. ("I want to write poems, not letters," he told a friend.) Also, he was constantly in demand for public readings, which often made him so nervous he'd vomit beforehand. Nevertheless, fame suited him. He traveled the world almost nonstop and produced some of his best work. In 1961, City Lights came out with Ginsberg's



## THE BEAT GOES ON

Legendary musicians Allen Ginsberg has rocked with

### BOB DYLAN

Dylan was the poet of rock stars, and Ginsberg was the rock star of poets. So naturally, the pair made fast friends. After a cameo in Dylan's rockumentary *Don't Look Back*, Ginsberg accompanied him on the 1975 "Rolling Thunder" tour.

### PHILIP GLASS

Minimalist maestro Philip Glass often collaborated with Ginsberg, twice orchestrating music to accompany his poems.

### PAUL MCCARTNEY

They were close friends. Paul played guitar on a plugged-in rendition of Ginsberg's "The Ballad of the Skeletons."



### THE CLASH

Allen helped The Clash with some of their lyrics and, in return, they let him sing with them at a 1981 concert. Afterward, he wrote to a friend, "I can die happy!"

### U2

After attending a sold-out poetry reading, Bono asked Ginsberg if he would perform a few songs on a 1997 television special Bono was organizing.

### BECK

They hit it off, but Ginsberg passed away before they could perform together.

second book, *Kaddish and Other Poems*. Named after the Jewish prayer of mourning, "Kaddish" dealt directly with Naomi Ginsberg's death and her long struggle against insanity. The ultimate expression of anguish, the poem is often considered Ginsberg's literary masterpiece.

## FROM HIPSTER TO HIPPIE

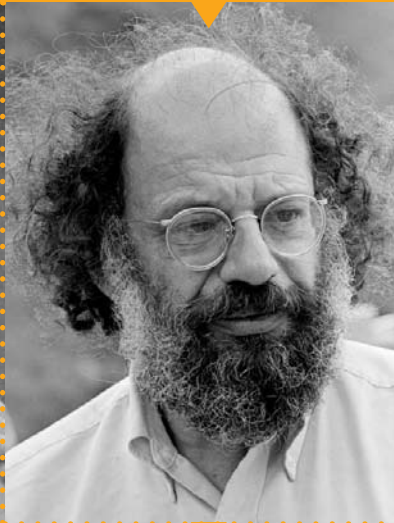
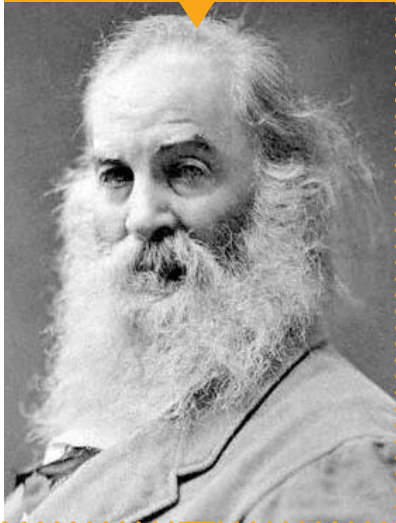
THE 1960S AND ALLEN GINSBERG got along famously. Even though he was well into his forties by the height of the "flower power" revolution (a term Ginsberg is credited with

coining), he was still a counterculture hero. After the *Howl* trial, Ginsberg became a champion of free speech, advocating world peace, gay rights, and drug legalization. The more radical his activism became, the more news reporters tapped him as a source of reliably sensational quotes.

Gradually, Ginsberg's politics and poetry became indistinguishable. His largest and most enthusiastic audiences were at demonstrations, where thousands of young people sat enthralled by his politically charged poems, such as "Pentagon Exorcism." And

# Separated at Birth?

## WALT WHITMAN & ALAN GINSBERG



Heavily bearded in the 1860s and 1870s, less so in the 1850s

Lived in Brooklyn

A homosexual who became a hero of the gay rights movement 100 years after he died with poems such as “We Two Boys Together Clinging.”

Had a great career as a newspaper editor and journalist, and even founded his own paper, *The Long Islander*, which continues today.

Had an insane brother, who spent time in asylums.

His most famous book, *Leaves of Grass*, was banned.

Formerly controversial, his works are now required reading in many high schools across the country.

Heavily bearded in the 1960s and 1970s, less so in the 1950s

Lived in Manhattan

A homosexual who campaigned vigorously for gay rights and who claimed four degrees of sexual separation from Walt Whitman.

Was an office boy for the *New Jersey Labor Herald* ... until he was fired for incompetence.

Had an insane mother, who died in an asylum.

His most famous book, *Howl and Other Poems*, was banned.

Formerly controversial, his works are now required reading in many high schools across the country.

when tensions ran high between cops and kids at Chicago’s notorious Democratic National Convention in 1968, Ginsberg chanted “Om” through a bullhorn for seven hours straight to pacify the crowd. This sort of activity made him the subject of enormous interest—not only to hippies and poetry fans, but also to the FBI. The agency kept a voluminous dossier on him that spanned decades. And it wasn’t just the American government that regarded him with suspicion. In 1965, Ginsberg was ejected from both Czechoslovakia and Cuba—the latter for allegedly hitting on Che Guevara. He was one of the rare dissidents who could inspire fear in both Communist and capitalist countries alike.

### A MORE MELLOW GINSBERG

ALMOST WITHOUT TRYING, Ginsberg had created another career for himself as an activist—but he didn’t stop there. At an age when most men start slowing down, Ginsberg began hanging out with Bob Dylan and The Beatles and recording his own albums. And while his warbly voice and strange musical renditions of William Blake poems were received with little enthusiasm, his career was hardly hitting a rough patch. A few years later, his poetry collection *The Fall of America* won the 1974 National Book Award. And in the mid-1980s, hundreds of photographs he’d taken of his Beat friends resurfaced, to much enthusiasm. His snapshots were exhibited around the world and later published in book form.

Despite the furious activity of his golden years, Ginsberg had mellowed by the late 1970s. The poet’s guru, a charismatic Tibetan lama named Chogyam Trungpa, inspired him to give up drugs and devote himself to meditation and yoga. Still, Ginsberg remained both politically and poetically active until the end of his life. By the time he succumbed to liver cancer in 1997 at age 70, he’d become a living legend. His era-defining *Howl* had been reprinted more than 50 times, and he was being touted as one of the greatest poets of the 20th century. By wielding poetry as a tool for social change, Allen Ginsberg expanded the definition of what America—and American poets—could be.