ship with transcendence. To feel the blues is to feel both bad and good. N.W.A. captured this dark humor in couplets like “I’m expressing with my full capabilities / And now I’m living in correctional facilities.” Pulp, noir and gangsta rap all worked this split message, speaking out of both sides of the mouth. The voice is as serious as cancer, as the rapper Rakim says, but it is also a ride. Hip is not the ability to talk like Marlowe or Ice-T, or to sulk like Bogart. That’s what the gangs did in South Africa, missing half the message. Hip is the ability to hear both meanings in their voices, to catch the undertones complicating the plainest prose. In The Big Sleep, Marlowe muses,

What did it matter where you lay once you were dead? In a dirty sump or in a marble tower on top of a high hill? You were dead, you were sleeping the big sleep, you were not bothered by things like that. Oil and water were the same as wind and air to you. You just slept the big sleep, not caring about the nastiness of how you died or where you fell. Me, I was part of the nastiness now. . . .

To read this straight is to see that he has the blues, and it feels so bad. But to read it hip is to recognize the wink and humor. Like the N.W.A. lyric, the passage is both liberating and funny. The speakers have the blues, and it feels so free and good.

the golden age of hip, part 1

bebop, cool jazz and the cold war

The goslee, beret, and window-pane glasses were no accidents. . . . [They] pointed toward a way of thinking, an emotional and psychological resolution of some not so obscure social need or attitude. It was the beginning of the Negro’s fluency with some of the canons of formal Western nonconformity, which was an easy emotional analogy to the three hundred years of unintentional nonconformity his color constantly reaffirmed. —AMIRI BARAKA (LeRoi Jones)

Two dates from the golden age of hip: On a blustery night in the winter of 1948, Miles Davis took the El train up to the Argyle Show Bar on the north side of Chicago. He was 22, the son of a dentist, recently dropped out of Juilliard to play in Charlie Parker’s band. And he was broke. Parker arrived at the club in a condition that appeared contrary to one of his rare shared wisdoms: “Never take Seconals and play chromatics.” He spent the gig nodding off and lurching back in, catching the right key but the wrong tune. Miles smoldered; Max Roach, the drummer, laughed at the sputter of incoherence and brilliance. Parker staggered off the stage, so wasted that he urinated in a phone booth. The owner fired them without pay. Some months later, Parker and the band returned unruffled, impeccable, regal. This time when Bird walked off stage toward the phone booth, he knew what he was doing. Repeating his past indiscretion, he
sauntered back, zipping himself up as he went. It was a neat reversal of authority, with black genius asserting itself over white ownership. Parker raised his horn and blew the next day's news over the heads of the crowd.

And so we arrive at the golden age of hip, a Cold War convergence of art, image, dope, clothes, celebrity, intellectual arrogance and rebel grace. In the postnuclear, pre-Selma crush of the 1940s and 1950s, the complementary revolutions of bebop and the Beat generation provided a new answer to the question of what it meant to be an American. Parker, Dizzy Gillespie, Thelonious Monk and a small handful of peers transformed America's music, jazz, from a reflection of national aspirations to an unblinking critique of them. The players were flamboyant in their personal style, often self-destructive in their habits and meticulous in their art. A generation of white writers, led by Jack Kerouac, William S. Burroughs and Allen Ginsberg, could only clock in and follow in kind. The meeting point, Kerouac wrote, was one of defiant affirmation: “You'd see hundreds of heads nodding in the smoky dinness, nodding to the [bop] music, 'Yes, yes, yes.' . . . I saw a whole generation nodding yes.” These two self-marginalized groups staked out new ways for America to approach art, language, work, sex and identity. Against the chilly climate of the Eisenhower and McCarthy years, they created a model for the mass counterculture of the 1960s, in which rock and roll codified rebellion as personal style. This counterculture, in turn, would leave their revolution behind.

Specifically, the beboppers and the Beats changed the role of music and art in bohemia—and in the process, the relationship between bohemia and the marketplace. Rejecting the role of entertainer, the beboppers held themselves above the tastes of the public. Where American popular songs have celebrated the society that produced them, bebop presented itself as the opposition: smarter, harder, colder, purer. It was deliberately difficult for both listeners and players. In venues where audiences had come to expect happy rhythms or cathartic ballads, the musicians fostered a cult of rebellion that spread through the same distribution networks as their music and reputations. If the mainstream was unworthy of their regard, a hip subculture, black and white, could get on board by purchasing the right records or making the right scene.

For this small but virally influential group, the jazz hipster who emerged in the 1940s offered a vision of enlightened self-invention. Draped in high seriousness, quoting both the universities and the streets, he hinted at what America might become, a thing that inspired both fear and admiration. The poet and novelist Gilbert Sorrentino, describing the early bop years in New York, recalled the savor of intellectual superiority:

Be-bop cut us off completely, to our immense satisfaction. It was even more vehemently decried as 'nigger music,' but even to the tone-deaf it was apparent that it (the music) didn't care what the hell was thought of it . . . It was probably, more than at any other time in its history, including the present, absolutely non-popular; and its adherents formed a cult, which perhaps more than any other force in the intellectual life of our time, brought together young people who were tired of the spurious.

What they shared was an ethos of nonconformity in an era of steely gray. As the pianist Hampton Hawes (1928–1977) wrote, “We were the first generation to rebel, playing bebop, trying to be different, going through a lot of changes and getting strung out in the process. What those crazy niggers doin' playin' that crazy music? Wild. Out of the jungle. But so long as they’re not lootin' no stores or shootin' our asses, leave 'em be . . . Our rebellion was a form of survival.”

Charles “Yardbird” Parker (1920–1955) came out of Kansas City, Missouri, more prolific in his personal dissolution than his early playing. The son of an itinerant entertainer and doting mother, he dropped out of high school and was married at 15; he began using heroin and morphine regularly around that time. After an unpromising start, Parker began to hear music in his head that didn’t exist in the world around him. One day in December 1939, he discovered that by raising his solos into the higher intervals of a tune’s chord changes, he could free himself from the limits of the original tune. This discovery, and the torrents of deconstructed melody he poured forth, provided the foundation of bebop.

John Birks Gillespie (1917–1993) was born in Cheraw, South Carolina, the last of nine children in a poor, musical family. Dizzy grew up studying
earlier, while the fractured chords and leaping intervals of his right hand explored the unknown.

Kenneth Spearman Clarke, later known as Liaquat Ali Salaam (1914–1985), studied piano, trombone, drums, vibes and music theory as a high school student in Pittsburgh, and played with Gillespie in the big band led by the saxophonist Teddy Hill. Clarke's asymmetric accents, or "bombs," on the bass drum earned him the onomatopoeic nickname "Klook-mop" or "Klook," and got him fired from Hill's band. All four of these men were born in the flush of the Great Migration, had their childhoods interrupted by the Depression and came of age with the wave of black nationalism that swelled after World War II. By the time they met in New York in the early 1940s, joined by Bud Powell, Max Roach, Miles Davis and a group of fellow conspirators, they were distilling these experiences into something new—nonconformist in sound, look and attitude.

It is a dated word, nonconformity. In today's splintered pop culture, it is hard to imagine a norm that anyone might conform to; the very notion is unhappiness. This marks in part the triumph of hip as a national organizing principle, and in part the inevitable absorption of hip into market demographics. Yet in the 1940s, nonconformism still echoed Emerson and Thoreau. In his essay "Self-Reliance," Emerson prescribed creative individualism against the mediocrity of the masses. "Who so would be a man must be a nonconformist," he wrote. To Emerson, the approval of society was the stamp of the second-rate. "To be great," by contrast, "is to be misunderstood." This is nonconformism as a relinquishing of privilege, opting out of the state in order to shed responsibility for its actions.

The nonconformism of bebop, on the other hand, involved a symbolic reclamation of privilege. This was the nonconformism of the group, responding to collective disenfranchisement. Where the Harlem Renaissance had fed on the aspirations of the Great Migration, the fractured sounds of bebop reflected the frustrations that set in as these aspirations remained out of reach. For the bop generation, a new familiarity with white society bred contempt, or at least critique. As Amiri Baraka noted, "To understand that you are black in a society where black is an extreme liability is one thing, but to understand that it is the society that is lacking and is impossibly deformed because of this lack, and not yourself, isolates you even more from that society."

Thelonious Monk
These players rained musical, political, sartorial, chemical and attitudinal changes, in different proportions for everybody who encountered them. Gillespie saw bop as evolution, not revolution. Langston Hughes, who was introduced to the music by Ralph Ellison, heard it in the insult of a policeman’s nightstick on a black man’s head. “Bop comes out of them dark days,” he wrote. “That’s why real Bop is mad, wild, frantic, crazy—not to be dug unless you’ve seen dark days, too. Folks who ain’t suffered much cannot play Bop, neither appreciate it. They think Bop is nonsense—like you. They think it’s just crazy crazy. They do not know Bop is also MAD crazy, SAD crazy, FRANTIC WILD CRAZY—beat out of somebody’s head! That’s what Bop is.” For white hipsters, who often knew “them dark days” mainly as metaphor, bop posed an abstract test of society: Could America accommodate black expression at its least accommodating? In short, could it embrace its own prosecution? This test recurs throughout hip, attaching white affections to even separatist black culture, not just for the rebel romance but as moral investment. When white fans embrace, say, black nationalist hip-hop, they’re acknowledging both the rap and the context of racism that would silence it in their names. If this investment remains at the level of art (or FUBU sportswear), rather than black humanity, such are the limits of hip.

As in earlier hip convergences, there was defiance and rage here, but instead of hiding them behind a cool mask, the bop musicians showed their anger on the surface. Wearing the hauteur of a despised minority, they combined political theater with hustler’s put-on. The squares made easy game. Malcolm Little, a Harlem hustler known as Detroit Red, signaled the new day when he appeared at the draft board in 1943. Dressed in his flashiest zoot suit, yellow knob-toe shoes and wildly conked red hair, he confided to the shrink, “Daddy-o, now you and me, we’re from up North here, so don’t you tell nobody. . . . I want to get sent down South. Organize them nigger soldiers, you dig? Steal us some guns, and kill us crackers!” The draft board deferred him. Years later, when he spun similar riffs under the name Malcolm X, he turned white America’s paranoia into his own sport.

The image of the bebopper, like that of the Beat poet, inevitably reeks of cliche. The terms bebop and Beat turned to corn almost as soon as they were coined. As Max Roach explained, it was white critics who called the music bebop, after the name of a Gillespie tune. “It’s another one of those nicknames like boy, nigger and jazz,” he said. “In fact, the music which Dizzy, Bird, Monk and people like that created is very difficult to master technically and very difficult to play emotionally. . . . They’ve been nicknaming our music for a long time, and I resent terms such as jazz and bebop.” The jazz hipster was literally a cartoon as early as 1942, when the animator Bob Clampett, a regular at the clubs of Central Avenue in Los Angeles, celebrated jazzbo panache in The Hep Cat, the first color Looney Tunes short, now banished as racially insensitive.

Yet this capacity for cartoon or cliche is one way hip spreads its gospel. Though hip often hovers around the arts, it is not quite the same thing. Bebop’s musicians, like the Beats who followed closely in their wake, shook the country as much by their public lives as by their work. Jazz historians often try to separate the two, distinguishing the music from the pharmacological flights or jive talk. This does justice to their musical importance but slight their social impact, which was in many ways more profound. Popular culture leaves its truths through folklore and rumor as well as through higher aesthetic accomplishments. The chords and rhythms tell only part of the larger American story.

As a coded signal, hip communicates through the manners of its messengers as well as the contents of their messages. Some people get it, some simply don’t. Bop went over the heads of many listeners, and even many older players. Sometimes it talked in jive. Yet it was never simple gamesmanship. “There was a message in our music,” said Kenny Clarke, “Whatever you go into, go into it intelligently. As simple as that.” Though the music was complicated, and the musicians often strung out or high, the seriousness traveled with the music. The drummer Tony Williams, who later played with Miles Davis, was moved as much by bop’s demeanor as by its changes:

Miles and Max Roach were speaking like men, acting like men. I saw them and said, “That’s the life I want to live.” Miles showed you how to carry yourself. He inspired people to think beyond what they thought they were capable of. . . . This is before anyone knew about King or Muhammad Ali or Malcolm X. Miles was the person people of my generation looked to for those things. So when the sixties came, I didn’t need anybody to tell me, “We shall overcome.” I was already living it.
With the expansion of media after the war, including a strong jazz press, bop style spread into the culture. It signaled a break from the routine. Few could play the music, but many could dress or talk the part. Slim Gaillard, a singer who claimed to have coined the term groovy, invented a language he called "voutie," whose syllables flew around the brain: "Voutie oornyoo macvoosie ohfoosimo," and so on. In an era that punished political dissent and distrusted new ideas, a little haberdashery went a long way. Billy Eckstine, who hired both Parker and Gillespie in his bands, marketed his own Mr. B shirts with soft-roll collars; Babs Gonzales launched his own line of bow ties. Dizzy, with his beret and goatee, was such a style icon that wannabes used to copy his glasses using windowpane lenses; when he was once photographed unwittingly with his fly low, some hipsters adopted the half-mast look as the acme of correctness. For a price, Fox Bros. Tailors in Chicago offered a complete getup, including bop tie ($1.50), bop cap ($2.00) and a "leopard skin jacket as worn by Dizzy Gillespie" ($39.50). Ads beckoned aspiring cats to "Bop in here and let Fox build you a crazy box!" The come-ons had an inspired silliness:

OO PAPA, DA FOX BROS. suits are gone!
STAY ON IT, Daddy, you'll come on like the dawn.

At the same time, as Mailer said, hip reflected the horrors arising from World War II, both domestic and military. In the war, 900,000 African Americans joined the battle against Aryan racism in Europe, only to experience a local version at home and in the service. At home many responded with new resistance to racial discrimination; abroad there was destruction on a level previously reserved for God. While race riots flared in Harlem, Detroit and other cities, and the civil rights movement raised its formative noises, the bop generation restored the separateness that jazz had given up during the mainstreaming of 1930s swing. Bop demanded its own space; it did not try to represent the collective tastes of the public. Bop was the first jazz idiom in which it was not a commercial advantage to be white, and for which the black inventors enjoyed the spoils. They flaunted values that were opaque to the white mainstream and repugnant to many upwardly mobile blacks. It was one thing for previous jazz musicians to endure the clueless belittlements of the establishment, and quite another for the bop clique to take on the jazz faithful.

While hip in the 1940s assumed the silhouette of the bop iconoclast—say, Thelonious Monk, immaculate in goatee, glasses and angular bravado—it also revealed broader shifts in the society at large. It is a unique quality of hip that it appears both cool in the face of racial roll and agile in the face of racial intransigence—like a subatomic particle, moving and not moving. In the golden age of hip, this paradox of cool and kinesis captured the anxieties of a nation on a racial threshold. Bop was the soundtrack to these anxieties.

The underlying conditions of bop had been gathering since the 1930s. Blacks who came north, leaving behind a safety net of family and community, were often disillusioned with the fruits of white America. When the Depression hit, many found themselves with no property or kin in neighborhoods that were degenerating into slums. Northern poverty was less severe but more isolating than the despair of the South, where at least there was food in the fields and the support networks of church and neighbors. Northerners, by contrast, were surrounded by massive black unemployment and the white society that rejected them. They girded themselves with speed and abstraction: hipster slang, hustler fashion, ferociously novel music and dance. As Max Roach said, "We're not the kind of people who can sit back and say what happened a hundred years ago was great, because what was happening a hundred years ago was shit: slavery. . . . That's why every new generation of black people is obliged to try something new. Every new generation of black folks comes up with a new innovation because we're not satisfied with the way the system is economically, politically and sociologically."

At the same time, a broader trickle of African Americans was entering the middle class, producing what the black journalist Roi Ottley (1906–1960) called "Café au Lait Society," a class of black intellectuals and professionals who were politically more liberal and socially looser than the conservative black elite. This class included people like Miles Davis's father, a middle-class dentist, a Garveyite, an internationalist and a community pillar. Their children grew up with new expectations, re-
inforced by the media. A daily newspaper from the period might show violent racial strife on the front page, and in the arts pages, the new thing called swing, which captivated blacks and whites alike. These two stories, of social division and cultural crossover, evoke opposite sides of America’s drama of race. The hip of the 1940s would take both into account.

The massive industrial buildup to World War II increased both frictions and interdependence. Hitler’s aggression in Europe, under a banner of racial purification, sparked debate at home about the meaning of race and racism. In 1938, the Carnegie Corporation commissioned a Swedish economist named Gunnar Myrdal to conduct a broad study of the state of black America, ultimately published in 1944 as An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy. This marked a new level of white curiosity about black life, which is a step toward hip. While many industries refused to hire African Americans, even though they needed the labor, black activism was both visible and increasingly effective, with an invaluable ally in Eleanor Roosevelt, the first lady. In 1941, Asa Philip Randolph, whom Congressman Arthur Miller of Nebraska once dubbed “the most dangerous Negro in America,” threatened a march of 100,000 African Americans on Washington unless Franklin D. Roosevelt banned discrimination in the defense industries. Roosevelt yielded and passed the landmark Executive Order 9902, the first presidential effort since Reconstruction to include blacks in the American Dream. The victory inspired waves of activism that swept through the following decades. Membership in the NAACP multiplied tenfold during the war.

The media, in their role as nurses and aids of hip, provided pockets of integration—in the virtual world, if not the real one. Radio broadcasts of Joe Louis’s heavyweight fights were among the first media events that united the nation. Blacks and whites were glued to the same drama at the same time. The Brown Bomber naturally meant more to African-American communities, where people cried when he lost. But when he fought the German boxer Max Schmeling in 1936 and 1938, against a backdrop of Aryan aggression, the nation cheered a black man in a symbolic battle for racial supremacy. Black rage, once taboo, became a subject for polite literary conversation. By 1940, Richard Wright’s novel Native Son, in which a tormented protagonist named Bigger Thomas accidentally kills a white woman, was a Book of the Month Club selection. (Some taboos still held, though: the club censored passages describing the white woman’s sexual attraction to Bigger.) This minuet of attraction and revulsion, step and counterstep, presaged the fragmented momentum of bop.

Musically, the preamble to bebop involved a similar churn of race and money. The Depression closed many of the jazz clubs that had thrived in the 1920s, and the repeal of Prohibition in 1933 sunk the speakeasies, which had kept many jazz musicians fed. Record sales fell precipitously after the 1929 stock market crash, from more than 100 million in 1927 to just 6 million in 1932. At the same time, the new medium of radio brought music into people’s homes for free. The first commercial radio station, KDKA in Pittsburgh, began broadcasting in November 1920, and by the end of the decade annual sales of receivers topped $850 million. These shifts in economy and technology altered the working relationships among musicians. The scarcity of work depressed wages, making it cheap for bandleaders to put together large ensembles. Bigger bands, in turn, meant more juice for the arrangers, less for the soloists. Publishers, hurt by the declining record industry, made their money selling compositions and arrangements, not performances.

In this economy solos were secondary. The leash for improvisation shortened; the rhythms tightened around steady, danceable beats. Radio sponsors, who became gatekeepers to both money and fame, favored white bands performing in venues frequented by white dancers. The swing era, unofficially inaugurated with Benny Goodman’s August 21, 1935, date at the Palomar Ballroom in Los Angeles, created a playing field on which white bands could compete with black bands for an audience that expected only to be entertained. It is no small irony that Goodman won over the Palomar crowd when he stopped playing the bland pop expected of white bands, and unleashed the jazz charts of his black arranger, Fletcher Henderson.

Though often maligned by modernists, the swing era produced magnificent songwriting and crack ensemble work. Goodman, the biggest star of the era, dented barriers with his interracial bands. But for our purposes here, swing’s racial cast and eagerness to please worked against it as an incubator of hip. White bandleaders like Goodman and the less-talented Paul Whiteman overshadowed black acts. Swing coddled public preju-
The golden age of hip, part 1

We often think of hip as a reaction against the mundane, but even at its most out there, it is never totally above worldly concerns. At the tail end of the Depression, bop's inner circle came together as it did, and where it did, in part through the most ordinary of considerations: free food.

In 1938, Henry Minton, a former saxophonist and the first black delegate elected to the New York musicians' union Local 802, took over part of the dining area in the Hotel Cecil on West 118th Street in Harlem. He called the place Minton's Playhouse, and in the fall of 1940 hired the reedman and big band leader Teddy Hill to manage it and plan the musical program. The men had two bright ideas. First, they offered free food to musicians on Monday nights. And they opened the bandstand for jam sessions, providing a house combo and an open invitation to musicians from the touring bands encamped at the Savoy, the Apollo and other venues. It was good barter. The guest musicians ate for free, then they entertained for free all night long. Minton's was a scene. Inside, musicians dined on white linens and puzzled over the new math their peers were laying down. Outside, a pair of locals named Baby Laurence and Ground Hog tap-danced for heroin, echoing the 19th-century performers who used to dance for eels at the Catherine Market downtown. Like the musicians inside, Baby and Hog turned their isolation from the mainstream into art, but it was an art of humble ambitions.

The art on the bandstand was a different story. Hill's roots were in the swing era, but at Minton's he offered musicians a freedom they didn't have in their big bands. Though he had only recently fired Kenny Clarke from his band for messing with the foursquare beat, he now hired him to anchor the house band, and brought in Monk to hold down the piano. Clarke was already experimenting with freer rhythms, keeping time on the ride cymbal and saving the bass drum to push the music at odd angles. Monk was a bearish enigma who sometimes went days without talking. He became mentor to Earl "Bud" Powell (1924–1966), another New Yorker, who ultimately disappeared into drug abuse, mental illness and electroshock therapy. Passing few words, Monk and Powell sometimes held hands innocently in public. At Minton's, Monk broke the music into playful but difficult eccentricities. Soloists couldn't know when Monk was
going to push them off a cliff or show them up as passé. Nick Fenton and Joe Guy, more conventional support men, filled out the house band on bass and trumpet.

Though the primacy of Minton’s as the birthplace of bebop is overstated, the place was a steady home for invention and experiment. The regulars who gathered, including the guitarist Charlie Christian (1916–1942), developed their own private agenda. According to Gillespie, “there were always some cats showing up there who couldn’t blow at all but would take six or seven choruses to prove it. So on afternoons before a session, Thelonious Monk and I began to work out some complex variations on chords and the like, and we used them at night to scare away the no-talent guys. After a while, we got more and more interested in what we were doing as music, and, as we began to explore more and more, our music evolved.” In truth, Gillespie was rarely at Minton’s, and Clarke later denied setting out to embarrass lesser players. But like other cliques, the musicians pushed each other to greater extremes of speed, idiosyncrasy and dissonance. If a visitor to the bandstand couldn’t keep up, Monk might school him, “That’s not the way we play. We changed all that.”

As a vehicle of hip, bop steeped itself in the intellectual world beyond jazz and the hustle of making a living. Like their generation of African Americans as a whole, the bop clique were better educated, more widely read, and more urban than their predecessors. The anarchy onstage or in the musicians’ personal lives conspicuously signaled not sloppiness but intellectual curiosity, a rejection of limits. The players often compared their music to abstract expressionism and action painting, which grew around similar circles of artists exiling themselves from tradition, challenging each other to more abstract and difficult work. Like the musicians, the painters were also social and intellectual outsiders, mainly European émigrés driven from their homelands and into each other’s drunken company by the rise of Hitler. They, too, worked outside popular taste or institutions, even as they carried on in the public eye.

The bebop pioneers were the first generation of jazz musicians who grew up wholly in the age of jazz recordings, familiar at once with the entire breadth of the music. They were the first who could conceive jazz as commentary on jazz. They wore their enlightenment on the outside, sporting the uniform of French intellectuals. Kerouac saw them as 12th-century monks. Even song titles like “Klact-ovesseds-tene” or “Epistrophy” invited incomprehension. Hostile to elements of jazz tradition, they pored over contemporary classical theory and dissected their own work with the same seriousness. The pianist Randy Weston remembered hanging after hours at a Brooklyn luncheonette run by his father, where cats fed coins into a jukebox that played both Stravinsky and Bird. “We were like scientists of sound,” Miles Davis said. “If a door squeaked we could call out the exact pitch.” Their scientific experiments also ran to drugs, which will be discussed more fully in chapter 12.

The players had all developed their chops in big bands, but together they cultivated the hip of the small clique, using their manners as a buffer between themselves and outsiders. They saw their audience as tainted and their loyalties to each other as paramount. “I wanted to be accepted as a good musician and that didn’t call for no grinning, but just being able to play the horn good,” Miles Davis said in his autobiography. “Max and Monk felt like that, and J.J. [Johnson, the trombonist] and Bud Powell, too. So that’s what brought us close together, this attitude about ourselves and our music.” The musicians often declined to announce tunes; they sped the tempos too fast for dancers and expected audiences to listen attentively. Davis famously turned his back to his audience, which critics took as a gesture of arrogance, though he claimed it was just a way to hear his musicians. With some notable exceptions, the white musicians of the swing generation could not keep up with bebop; few older big band musicians, black or white, truly mastered the new idiom. Even after the music moved down to 52nd Street in the late war years, white audiences faced musicians who were self-possessed, inscrutable, wrapped in a dialect that did not include them. Bop was a secret from which it was easy to feel left out.

Gillespie and Parker, the good cop and bad cop of bebop, played this secret from opposite angles. Parker, as Stanley Crouch has written, waged war with the complicated fact that the Negro was inside and outside at the same time, central to American sensibility and culture but subjected to separate laws and depicted on stage and screen, and in the advertising emblems of the society, as a creature more teeth and popped eyes than man, more high-pitched laugh and wobbling flesh than woman.” The year before Hill and Clarke assembled the band at Minton’s, a head-
wrapped Butterfly McQueen attended to Miss Scarlett in the 1939 film *Gone with the Wind*—a stark reminder that the most lustrous projection of the American psyche, the movies, still saw race relations through the lens of minstrel comedy.

Parker simply blew through this image. In a life lasting just 34 years, he lived in a state of autonomous chaos, beholden for neither his accomplishments nor his spectacular downfalls. Both belonged to him alone. His music was complicated but viscerally communicative. Instead of pandering to audiences, Parker mastered the put-on, adopting a fake English accent and refusing to define his music, describing it only as “trying to play clean and looking for the pretty notes.” Peers described him as thoughtful and well read, yet on key dates he might show up not just late but incoherent. Dedicated to his art, he showed little regard for the needs of his audience, his employers or his colleagues. When he needed a fix, he might hock his horn before a gig or a recording session, or stiff the musicians in his band.

Parker scattered the mythologies of the minstrel show by setting standards no one could follow. The minstrel is a figure audiences feel comfortable with because, even in his duplicities, they know what he’s about. He’s circumscribed by their imagination. Parker, on the other hand, defied measure; personally, musically and chemically, he lived in the uncharted. Though plenty tried, no one could take as many drugs, play as many notes, court disaster as wholeheartedly and then rise from the wreckage with such pure, unpredictable music. It was easier to judge him by his failures—as a colleague, a professional, a husband and father—than to keep up with his accomplishments. Yet these barriers to empathy helped foster a rabid cult among his followers, white and black. If you could hear the man or the music without judgment, you could commend yourself as vicariously inside the loop, hip. This set you apart from the mainstream, which saw only his bad behavior. To accept him was to abandon what Emerson saw as the dull omniscience of the crowd for the enlightenment of the wayward prodigy.

By the time audiences caught up to his early 1940s breakthroughs, Parker had moved on, recording with strings and announcing his desire to study with Edgard Varése (in return, Parker would cook for the composer). Living on 10th Street and Avenue B in the East Village in the early 1950s, Parker listened mostly to classical music and delighted in TV Westerns. He spent his nights gabbing in Ukrainian bars. Like only a few jazz figures, including Armstrong and perhaps Ellington, Parker changed the way musicians approached every instrument. Yet he was detached from the people in his life. A chronic womanizer and absent father, he married four times, the first two times to black women, the last two to whites. In his richest period financially, his daughter Phee died while under the care of a public clinic because Parker did not send enough money for private treatment—in large part because he spent the money on drugs. When he died in 1955, just a few years after his finest recordings, most of the New York newspapers did not even run obituaries, and two papers identified him as Yardbird Parker, not even bothering to learn his age or his first name. The faithful simply kept the faith. The graffito “Bird Lives” began appearing around New York and other jazz towns. Charles Mingus (1922–1979) was among those who insisted that Parker wasn’t really dead, just “hiding out somewhere, and he’ll be back with some new shit that will scare everyone to death.”

Where Parker was personally remote, Gillespie was bop’s great communicator, schooling both his peers and the audience at large. Because he chose survival rather than glorious implosion, the Dizzy myth is much less romantic than Parker’s. Yet his music was every bit as uncompromising and original, and he pushed his peers to higher heights. “Bird was responsible for the actual playing of it and Dizzy put it down,” said Billy Eckstine, who hired both in his pivotal 1944 band. “And that’s a point a whole lot of people miss up on. They say, ‘Bird was it!’ or ‘Diz was it!’—but there were two distinct things.” Hip needs both of these types. With his affable showmanship and fierce professionalism, Gillespie did more than anyone to bring bop to the jazz public. He happily gave Parker the credit for bebop, but rarely worked with him because Bird was too erratic. Avoiding serious drug abuse, and married to the same woman for half a century, he worked a precarious paradox of his own: having invented the aesthetic that rejected jazz showmanship, he used his own abilities as a showman to sell that unsellable aesthetic. Yet his humor had an edge. It was unpredictable, sometimes sharp. Miles Davis, who criticized Gillespie’s stage antics in the same way that Gillespie criticized Armstrong’s, remembered that when they first met in New York, Dizzy would “be stick-
ing his tongue out at women on the streets and shit—at white women. I mean, I’m from St. Louis and he’s doing that to a white person, a white woman. . . . He used to love to ride elevators and make fun at everyone, act crazy, scare white people to death.”

His hipster-huckster look and jive brought him celebrity but little in the way of record sales. Gillespie maintained that he wore the beret simply because he could stuff it in his pocket, and the goatee because he didn’t like to shave around his lips. But as with Davis’s back-turning, mystique spoke louder than facts. Six decades after his first recordings, these two sartorial accidents remain the easiest way into an often difficult body of music.

Gillespie scattered the aura of the minstrel show by casting his music in global terms, with himself as funky ambassador. Early compositions like “A Night in Tunisia,” which he debuted with Parker in Earl “Fatha” Hines’s band in 1942, referred explicitly to Africa, not just in the title but in the intonations. In 1947, he formed a partnership with a Cuban percussionist named Luciano Pozo y González, better known as Chano Pozo, which ranks among the most visionary in jazz. Chano, who spoke no English, brought West African chants from his Cuban heman religion into Dizzy’s big band. When the band debuted the chants at Boston’s Symphony Hall in 1947, even African Americans were not yet ready for his lesson in Afrocentricity. “[T]he black people in the audience were embarrassed by it,” said George Russell, who composed “Cubana Be—Cubana Bop” for Pozo and the band. “The cultural snow job had worked so ruthlessly that for the black race in America at the time its native culture was severed from it completely. They were taught to be ashamed of it, and so the black people in the Boston audience were noticeable because they started to laugh when Chano came on stage in his native costume and began.” The following year Pozo was killed at the Rio Bar on Lenox Avenue and 111th Street after an argument about a bag of weed, but the Afro-Cuban rhythms he and Gillespie brought to jazz survive today in the syncopations of funk, rock, disco and much of modern jazz.

Gillespie’s Pan-African grooves brought a new metaphor to hip. Parker’s prolific whir mirrored the urban clamor of the war years; Monk and Miles, who hit their stride in the 1950s and 1960s, captured the nuclear jitters of the Cold War. Gillespie reflected the early stirrings of globalism, tweaking the language of race as presciently as he had the orthodoxies of jazz. Where European modernists like Picasso had evoked a mythic, primitive Africa, Gillespie restored the continent to the present tense. He aligned modern, urban black Americans with modern Africans, each caught in a political struggle for autonomy. His mercurial humor, sometimes self-effacing, sometimes cutting, can be read as global diplomacy from the African diaspora. This is the opposite of shucking from the plantation. Even in his clowning, Gillespie subtly recast race as a product of history, not biology. Minstrelsy could not work on this stage because its ahistoric notions of black and white did not hold. He was like the term bebop itself: a self-effacing, unserious term, in the shape of a minstrel mask, but doing little to hide the interpenetrate seriousness underneath the fun.
If hip is enlightenment, Gillespie’s globalism was as visionary as his percussive bop. While Americans tend to think of World War II’s aftermath as nuclear terror and the Cold War, in many ways this has proven a sideshow. The bigger story, as the historian David M. Kennedy argues, has been a realignment of global powers: the gradual triumph of nonwhite revolutionary movements throughout Asia, Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean; borderless trade and debt; the intercontinental transit of disease. By century’s end, Kennedy writes, “who can deny that globalization . . . was the signature and lasting international achievement of the postwar era, one likely to overshadow the Cold War in its long-term historical consequences?” In its intensification of both Third World rhythm and First World abstract modernism, Gillespie’s music prefigured this international free-for-all. The hip cat was both a player and a product for the coming global marketplace, talking a new Esperanto. Where Stravinsky met Bird, and “Klact-o-vees-eds-tene” was the word of the day—that was where the world was heading. Bop got there first.

Hip thrives on contradictions, and like other movements in this book, bop fed from conflicting traditions. Its complex polyrhythms and extended scales reclaimed a tie with Africa, and the musicians echoed the black nationalism in the streets and barbershops. But the bop crowd’s rejection of their elders, break with tradition and indifference to public tastes owed more to Western modernism. Bop had no interest in being folk art. It rejected African traditions of ancestor worship, functionality and community participation. Where African musics tend to close the gap between performer and audience, inviting everyone to add a line, bop exaggerated this distance. Amateurs were actively discouraged. Bop had it both ways. It was as restless with Africa as with Europe; its legacy was unsettled, dynamic, American.

This internal contradiction reflected the ambiguous interplay of race and jazz. For much of the bebop era, the most popular musician in jazz was not a Minton’s alum, but Benny Goodman. As a clarinetist, Goodman was peerless; as a popularizer, he cut just the right corners. As a bandleader, he was a bastard. But American celebrity responds as much to image as to music, and here Goodman led a split existence. For much of the public, he embodied a mint American archetype, the Urchin Who Made Good. One of 12 children born to poor Russian immigrant Jewish parents, he was ethnic, but not too ethnic; disadvantaged, but not victimized; well mannered but not Brahmin; smart but not donnish. He had rags, he had riches—sign him up. Then as political winds shifted, he came to embody another signature American fable, just as iconic: he was the White Boy Who Stole the Blues.

The story of the white boy who stole the blues is one of the central recurring folktales within hip’s history. It has featured many lead characters, going back to T’ain, Dan Emmett, Irving Berlin, Elvis, and on up through Keith Haring, Tom Waits and Eminem, to name just a few. The story—really a body of stories, some felicitous, some shameful—bears ugly testimony to the discrimination faced by black artists, even from a white public with a jones for their art. As it is generally told, it involves simple thievery, hapless imitation and a public too corrupt or ignorant to know the difference. The story assumes that popular culture begins with Platonic ideal forms, from which descend lesser knockoffs, the least of these being the white rip-off. Bop was in part a reaction to this degenerative process in the swing era, when white skin was an advantage in the marketplace. At Minton’s and elsewhere, the bop crowd called the white boy out. As the pianist Mary Lou Williams remembered, Monk told her he wanted “to create something that they can’t steal because they can’t play it.” Though Goodman played at Minton’s, and was treated respectfully by the musicians, many did not survive the treatment with their dignity intact. As the drummer and bandleader Art Blakey put it, “the only way the Caucasian musician can swing is from a rope.” Where white interlopers changed the music, it is taken for granted that what they added was water, diluting a vital black idiom.

But in practice the musicians, black and white, were more expansive than exclusionary. American music, like hip, resists purism; both thrive in the hybrid. Bop’s interests were wide-ranging from the start, European as well as African and Afro-Cuban, and as it evolved, the stew only became more complicated. In 1948, shortly after he left Charlie Parker’s band, Miles Davis joined a racially mixed crowd of musicians, composers and arrangers at the 55th Street apartment of a self-taught white Canadian named Gil Evans. Like the circle at Minton’s, they wanted to push beyond
the music that was playing in clubs, experimenting with different textures and instrumentation. With the older Evans (born Ian Ernest Gilmore Green, 1912–1988), Davis developed a rare empathy. "Here was this tall, thin, white guy from Canada who was hipper than hip," Miles remembered. "Here was Gil on fast 52nd Street with all these super hip black musicians wearing peg legs and zoot suits, and here he was dressed in a cap. Man, he was something else." The rotating nine-piece group that came together in Evans's one-room place was mixed in education and musical background, exploring the possibilities of intricate, precise chamber jazz. The music they came up with, released as 78s and ultimately collected as *Birth of the Cool*, polished the edges of bebop, simplifying the rhythms and slowing the tempos to allow lush spires of elaborate counterpoint. Though the records sold poorly, they gave a name and emotional temperature to a style that fulfilled many of bop's promises while closing some of its aesthetic doors. The school was cool.

In Robert Farris Thompson's study of the aesthetic of the cool, he notes that Africans use the cool mask to cover not just sadness but exuberance as well. Davis wore this as a mask of vigilance across the emotional spectrum, implying depths of feeling while showing none. The cool embodied in those sessions was watchful, expectant. The cool mask suited both the Cold War, which bred fear and secrecy, and the iconoclastic furtiveness of the heroin user, whose numbers, black and white, now filled the jazz world. Cool was both defiant and protective. In a famous photograph from 1957, you can see this mask on 15-year-old Elizabeth Eckford, one of nine black students who integrated Little Rock's Central High School, as she walked through an angry white mob armored only in her sunglasses and poise. "What bothered them," recalled Minnijean Brown Trickey, another of the Little Rock Nine, speaking of the white students, "was that we were as arrogant as they were."

Cool, though, came with unexpected consequences in the jazz world. Unlike bop's first circle, the cool crowd was largely white, including Gerry Mulligan, Lee Konitz, Stan Getz, Lenny Tristano, Dave Brubeck and Paul Desmond, among others. Where bop's radicals had made a virtue of their outsider status, these musicians—sometimes known as the West Coast school, though few actually lived there—had access to audiences and monies that eluded their black peers. The jazz press hyped an East Coast/West Coast rivalry, as the hip-hop press would do four decades later. Cool was complicated but not confrontational, flattering to the generation of men who flooded colleges through the GI Bill. Suiting the new managerial class who made their living with their brains, not their bodies, the music was more cerebral than visceral. By the time it reached the phonographs of the new suburbs, its signature trumpet player and crooner was a white *homme fatal* named Chet Baker (1929–1988), who seemed to use his prolific flaws to hide his talent, rather than the other way around. Cool players like Dave Brubeck, who made the cover of *Time* in 1954, enjoyed popular success that eclipsed Parker's, while bop's great pianists, Monk and Powell, struggled with the cabaret laws and mental illness, respectively. Davis's record company, noting this white boho market, graced the jacket of his 1957 *Miles Ahead* album with a blonde model, to which he responded, "Why'd you put that white bitch on there?" The new audience expected the music in its own likeness. As Miles saw things, "it was the same old story, black shit was being ripped off all over again."

But the story of the white boy who stole the blues is never as simple as his critics would have it. American pop culture begins in the mongrel, not the Platonic. This is hip's central story. What we call black or white styles are really hopelessly hybrid. The bebop of Minton's, for example, brought African and European impulses to a music that already traced its lineage to both continents. Even in the name of purity it was impure, and richer for it. By the same token Goodman, Twain, Berlin, Elvis and Eminem all stand out more for what is uniquely theirs, not the vehicle they borrowed. In a pluralistic cultural marketplace, it makes more sense to think of pop evolution as additive rather than derivative—every change adds something, even if just through the accidents of faulty copying.

In his autobiography, Miles attributes the *Birth of the Cool* sessions to pure black musical sources: "We were trying to sound like [the white bandleader] Claude Thornhill, but he had gotten his sh*t from Duke Ellington and Fletcher Henderson." But this is like saying a rock band has pure white sources because it borrows from the Rolling Stones. Ellington and Henderson themselves adapted ideas from European classical music and African musics as well as jazz. And so on. In American culture, there are no pure black or white sources to tap. When the West Coast musicians took on East Coast bop, they similarly put it through the filter of their
own influences and abilities, changing it in the process. If the results were less overtly tied to New Orleans, and more reflective of the car culture and television images of the late 1950s and early 1960s, this was less a dilution than an evolutionary mutation. Cool was the aloofness of bebop taken literally.

Significantly, it built on bebop's embrace of nonconformity as an ethos of success. Unlike Thoreau, the masters of cool and bop did not drop out of society, but practiced their art in places of public debate. They competed in jazz polls and led the sexual lives of royalty. The jazz press, which grew throughout the 1940s and 1950s, conferred success beyond the judgment of the marketplace, affirming the marginal as valuable art. To be out was to be original; to be original was a measure of success, even if you didn't necessarily get rich. Bop musicians, who held their own tastes above those of the public, insisted that this was the true success. As the commercial record business boomed around them, lifted by the postwar economy, theirs was a music of transition, relinquishing jazz's hold on the mainstream of American popular music. That mainstream, which swing had helped create, would soon move elsewhere. Jazz was becoming more like classical music, a taste for an elite minority. Cool told the story of this transition.

Hip would have to move elsewhere as well.

But without the broader mystique of the bop hipster, which trickled to parts of the culture that the music alone could never reach, its impact would have been limited to the jazz universe, which even then was shrinking. The triumph of hip requires these two operations working in tandem—the cultist and then the universal, each delivering the right drug to the right habit.

The bop musicians' cerebral music, hieroglyphic lingo and rambling habits all posed the argument that alienation could be a deliberate choice—a position of critical distance, not a condition imposed from above. Parker once said that bebop was not an extension of jazz tradition, but "something entirely separate and apart." Instead of explaining themselves to the mainstream, they cultivated its incomprehension. As the bassist Celeridge Goode recalled, "It was the bebop tradition to freeze out strangers." In the tradition of the Greenwich Village moderns, bop was a performance of countermobility, moving out, not up. To be marginal, or far out, was to claim the moral high ground.

The myth of Minton's, however oversimplified, has survived because it helps us understand where the music came from. It was local, elitist and artisanal—a proudly marginal culture developed against the postwar incipience of mass culture. But as radical as the changes were on the bandstand at Minton's, the audience was undergoing an even more sweeping transformation. Radio, which became indispensable during the war, brought jazz rhythm to more people than ever before, in a format that ran counter to the elitism of bebop. The transistor radio, invented in 1947 by Walter Brattain and Robert Gibney, made sets portable and cheap, well suited to the budding car culture. They let young people take their music away from the supervision of adults. Radio broadcasts served different needs than nightclubs. They had to entertain and stimulate audiences, not challenge them; to flatter, not provoke. These media craved repetition and novelty more than intricacy and ambiguity. Television's rise in the 1950s created the first true mass culture in America. Unlike the crowd at a nightclub or a local church, TV audiences were not differentiated by taste or background, and might have little in common with each other or the entertainers. They did not pay to get in, and so did not demand to get their money's worth; instead, they needed to be held, buttered up for the commercial messages.

This mass audience called for more elemental pleasures: simpler
rhythms, simpler sexuality, emotions that resonated throughout the population. Where bop moved toward baroque complexity, the growing audience beyond Minton's wanted a strong beat, some blues humor and an echo of its newfound mobility and wealth. Though the musicians continued to make important recordings throughout the 1960s, and Monk made the cover of *Time* magazine in 1964, two more dates stand out from the golden age of hip: On November 20, 1955, eight months after Charlie Parker died, a New York disc jockey named Tommy “Dr. Jive” Smalls brought his rhythm review, featuring Bo Diddley, LaVern Baker, the Five Keys and Willis “Gator Tail” Jackson, to *The Ed Sullivan Show*. They played strong, simple rhythms with an immediate sex appeal—just the sort of things bop had steered around. The idiom was perfect for television; it jumped off the screen. Nine months later came a Mississippi kid named Elvis Presley. He was the urchin who made good, the white boy who stole the blues, the purest practitioner of nonconformity as an ethos of gaudy success. He was all the stories wrapped up in one libidinal yearn. The other stuff didn't have a chance.

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**The golden age of hip, part 2**

**The beats**

[It's] a story of many restless travels and at the same time an imaginative survey of a new generation known as the “Hip” (The Knowing), with emphasis on their problems in the mid-century 50s and their historical relationship with preceding generations... This new generation has a conviction that it alone has known everything, or been “hip,” in the history of the world.  

—JACK KEROUAC

The critic Richard Meltzer lined up the affinities of postwar hip this way: Kerouac was Charlie Parker—the meteoric alpha soloist, a fuckup and ingrate, blowing chorus after chorus of his personal asymmetries into art that was neither happy nor sad, but contained excesses of both. Ginsberg was Dizzy Gillespie—the articulator of principles, self-promoter, persevering while his peers flamed out, deceptively brilliant underneath the showman's spiel. William Burroughs was the sphinxlike Thelonious Monk, deconstructing paragraphs rather than chords—opaque and uncompromising, wary of all group identity, cult or mass. Coming together in the same years as the bop musicians, the writers formed a parallel subculture that was just as self-mythologizing, exploratory and defiantly young, refusing the era's most insistent demand: that they grow up and out of such curiosities. Both groups made exile a lifestyle choice. These six writers and musicians are all gone.
now, many at an early age, but their life-affirming refusal has held sway ever since.

For the purposes of this book I've tried to distinguish hip from simple trendiness or consumer choice. Though the latter are often part of the bargain, hip and hepi preceded them, and tell us more about who we are or want to be. When people talk about "hip" hotels or restaurants, or how demolition derby or Mexican wrestling have become hip, this usage signals currency but not necessarily meaning. This currency is a boon to marketers and lifestyle magazines, which bathe it in the narcotic pleasures of buying and flaunting. But currency by itself can be exhausting, and produces mainly a lot of future trivia. Aficionados of the Von Dutch trucker hat or amateur burlesque, which were in vogue at the time of writing, should bear in mind that we know such quaint expressions as pet rock or dookie rope because somewhere, somehow, enough people once thought these were hip. Today's Red Bull cocktails are tomorrow's Rob Roy or sidecars.

For the bop and Beat generations, who have endured periodic bouts of trendiness, speed and transience served a more liberating function. Beyond its trend value, speed protects behavior or ideas from the public eye. It is a license to ill. For example, the language developed by antebellum slaves protected the speakers' meaning from nosy whites. The bohemians of Greenwich Village or the hipsters of the Harlem Renaissance used the speed of innovation to keep their critics a step behind. This protection, or grace, is a kind of forgiveness claimed in advance. Under its umbrella, hip becomes not sumptuary correctness—the right shoes or the right flip of the lip—but a state of forgiveness for being incorrect. The hipster, who is by nature out of step with the society that would judge him, lives within this grace; we admire him not for his perfection but for the blamelessness of his flaws. We should all have his or her capacity for error.

This connection between meaning and transience involves a perpetual redefinition of the now. It lives in the present. For the Wolof slaves who brought the word hip to America, the past provided sustenance but little autonomy. The future, in turn, was simply contingent. Instead of looking back in longing or forward to the justice of the next world, hip offered a way of rationing time into microfine slices of the present. Subsequent hipsters, from the major writers of the 1850s to the existentialists manqué of pulp, sought grace in the imperfections of the present. Walt Whitman, patron saint of the chapter at hand, saw this quest as an inevitable turn inward, opening the self to absorb the flaws and contradictions of the society around him. To live wholly in the present, he understood, was to be as bad as it was. Being better than your times is for saints and prissies, who live for future rewards. "I am not the poet of goodness only, I do not decline to be the poet of wickedness also," he wrote, adding, "Great is Wickedness—I find I often admire it, just as much as I admire goodness / Do you call that a paradox? It certainly is a great paradox." Though the paradox is always the same, at any instant hip requires that its terms be written anew.

From different angles, the musicians and writers of hip's golden age shared each other's isolation and intent. Not since the 1920s did a group of white writers and their peers identify the best of themselves in such specifically African-American terms. "It's all bop," Ginsberg wrote in a 1956 letter to his mentor, the Columbia professor Mark Van Doren, describing his recent work and that of his peers. "Unworried wild poetry, full of perception, that's the lillipop." For both groups, the Great Depression of their childhood crimped their use of the past tense, and the
atomic bomb made burlesque of the future. If the future could be erased
at the turn of a key, it didn't make sense to sacrifice the present for its
rewards. For the white hipsters of the Beat generation, no one seemed to
live more wholly in the present, with less regard for the past or future,
than their African-American counterparts. The pursuit of the present, as
Kerouac envisioned it in *On the Road* (1957), looked explicitly across
the gulf of race: "At lilac evening I walked with every muscle aching among
the lights of 27th and Whelton in the Denver colored section, wishing I
were a Negro, feeling that the best the white world had offered was not
enough for me, not enough life, joy, kicks, darkness, music, not enough
night."

In an era that saw the reasoned devastation of Hiroshima and Nagasaki,
the bebop musicians and Beat writers produced art that was un-
reasonable. Instead of rendering polished works, they celebrated the
jagged moment of experience, which is intuitive rather than rational; it
moves on as soon as reason catches up. This was the virtue of improvisa-
dition, distinct from the perfections of composition. Following the lead
of the musicians, who rejected swing's tight arrangements, the writers put
themselves in the same tense as their audience, working things out on the
fly—"wild, undisciplined, pure, coming in from under, crazier the better," as
Kerouac put it, releasing "unspeakable visions of the individual." Spitting
their words or notes headlong, they perfected an aesthetic of imper-
fection. For this they earned a mixture of public condemnation and
discipleship. The word *bebopper* became a code word for juvenile delin-
quent, and Herbert Hoover declared the Beat generation one of the three
most dangerous groups in America, along with communists and "egg-
heads." Within his lifetime, the six generational avatars named above each
saw his legacy reduced to a caricature and a commercial imitation; all but
Parker lived to see it expand to massive social upheaval, by which I mean
the extension of the now.

Encounters between the two groups were rarely substantive, but there
are at least two worth mentioning. In 1958, after a gig at the Five Spot on
St. Mark's Place, Ginsberg gave Monk a copy of *Howl*, the book that
thrust the Beats' raw proximity on the public ("Moloch! Solitude! Filth!
Ugliness! Ashcans and unobtainable dollars! Children screaming under
the stairways! Boys sobbing in armies! Old men weeping in the parks!").

The taciturn Monk nodded: "Makes sense." Two years later, after scoring
psilocybin from Timothy Leary, Ginsberg passed some to Gillespie and
Monk, hoping to start a revolution of the mind. Monk was unimpressed.
"Got anything stronger?" he asked.

Of these six innovators, all born between 1914 and 1926, none survived
to the new century. Parker never saw 35, and Kerouac never saw 50,
and in truth both men had diligently corroded their talents well before
their early deaths. Just 12 years after the publication of *On the Road* made
Kerouac an emblem for a generation, granting him a celebrity he found
unbearable, fewer than 300 people came to his funeral. Many of their
peers also raced toward early deaths. Jackson Pollock (1912–1956), who
splashed bop rhythms across his enormous canvases, silenced his demons
in a car accident on Long Island before he turned 45; James Dean
(1931–1955), bearer of the Beat shrug, lost control of his racing car at 24;
Lenny Bruce (1925–1966) OD'd at 41; Neal Cassady (1926–1968), Ker-
ouac's tour guide to the American night, surrendered to the elements at
age 41. (Early death, as a public romance, is the ultimate renunciation of
the future tense.) Had they lived, what turns they might have seen. Within
a generation of their deaths, their transgressions had fallen to greater outr-
grage; perpetrated not in back alleys but in big-money ad campaigns. Bur-
roughs in his lifetime made a commercial for Nike, while Kerouac and
James Dean, like Miles Davis and Chet Baker, appeared posthumously in
ads for the Gap. No longer controversial quasi-criminals, they became hip
avatars of casual Fridays. Except for Gillespie, all lived with depression,
adiction or other psychiatric disturbance, and this emotional weather—
this overbearing now—figured prominently in both their work and their
public image.

What the two groups left, besides their music and writing, were the
sands of their own era. Bebop marked the transitional spasm of jazz
as a popular music, replaced by the more elemental, marketable sounds
of rhythm and blues. The Beats, similarly, marked the last fling of poetry
as the chief delivery system for the poetic. When future bards wanted a
vehicle for sentiments like "Go fuck yourself with your atom bomb," an
icebreaker from Ginsberg's poem "America," they could turn to the more
elemental, marketable medium of rock and roll. Rock made absurdism
easy. A verbal non sequitur like Ginsberg's "hydrogen jukebox," which
begged heavy lifting on the page, simply kept the beat in a rock song, and provided material for late-night stoned discussion. (The aspiring poets who called themselves the Beatles, spelled I-think-you-know-why, were just one example.) It is impossible now to imagine an America enthralled and threatened by the habits of, say, Wynton Marsalis and the recent poet laureate Billy Collins, and not just because these two men go light on thrill and threat. As jazz and poetry have receded into publicly funded respectability, the lasting impact of hop and Beat now plays on a bigger, louder stage.

Ginsberg, who had a remarkable gift for embracing and blessing future movements, saw his generation's legacy as the invention of a new baseline. "[I]t went beyond anything we 'planned,' " he told the writer Bruce Cook. "It was a visionary experience in 1948, when we started. Now everybody sees and understands these things." The generations hop and Beat stood at the precipice of this 1960s counterculture, shaping its foundations and then falling back as the media phenomenon moved on without them. Though they were called the Beat generation, as Hettie Cohen once said, they could have all fit in her living room. They were radical individualists overtaken by a narrative of the collective. Their true heirs—let's say Muhammad Ali for Parker, Bob Dylan for Ginsberg—were those who could persuade the public that their narcissism was an instrument of generational catharsis, not private need.

Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg and William Burroughs converged at Columbia University in 1944, arriving by different paths. Jean-Louis Kerouac (1922–1969), a football star from the French-Canadian part of Lowell, Massachusetts, came to New York on an athletic scholarship to attend Horace Mann high school and then Columbia. English was his second language. He arrived in love with jazz and the movies, passions that even in his bitter years never deserted him. Kerouac was constitutionally the most conservative of the group, imprinted by his Catholic upbringing and blue-collar roots. He married early and enlisted in the Navy, but lacked the capacity for subordination that makes for success in war or marriage. After a series of petty rebellions, he told the Navy shrink that the only thing he believed in was “absolute personal freedom at all times.”

The service deemed him a schizoid personality with “angel tendencies” and granted an honorable discharge for indifferent character. Neither of his two marriages lasted much longer than his military career. The son of a printer, Kerouac returned to New York from the Navy with the intention he had expressed since the age of 10, to become a writer. By the time he met his future comrades, he had a novel under his belt (the still-unpublished “The Sea Is My Brother,” about his maritime adventures) and the seeds of a lasting and little-remarked friendship with a fellow Horace Mann alum named William F. Buckley, on whose television program he later denounced much of what the Beats held dear.

Irwin Allen Ginsberg (1926–1997), four years younger than Kerouac, arrived at Columbia from Paterson, New Jersey, in 1943, aided by a $200 scholarship from the union offices of the CIO in New Jersey. His father, Louis, was a modestly successful poet and high school English teacher. His mother, Naomi, a Russian immigrant, spent most of her adult life in and out of mental institutions, where she received insulin shock and other ungentle therapies. As a child, Allen often stayed home to read to her, seeking a bond that would offset the painful impressions of his mother, naked and raving. When she was in the hospital, he said later, he sometimes sought comfort beside his sleeping father, rubbing his erect penis against Louis in the night. Ginsberg went to Columbia with the idea of becoming a lawyer, not a poet. He met Kerouac in the spring of 1944 through a handsome mutual friend named Lucien Carr (later the father of Caleb Carr). Within a few hours, he was in love. The school expelled him the following year after he was discovered in his dorm bed with Kerouac (not sexually, as it happened) and for smudging an obscenity on his grimy window (a lovely metaphor for the career to come).

William Seward Burroughs II (1914–1997), the eldest of the group, carried the burden of two prominent American bloodlines. His mother descended from Robert E. Lee; his paternal grandfather built and perfected the modern adding machine, starting the company that still bears the family name. By the time of Bill’s delinquent youth, both family lines had diminished to middle class respectability in suburban St. Louis. At Columbia, he played literary mentor to his younger friends, encouraging them to devour the moderns and pushing them to read Oswald Spengler’s withering The Decline of the West (1926–1928), which described a
culture in its last days, mirroring the fall of classical Greece. Amiri Baraka, one of the few African Americans among the Beats, saw Spengler’s vision of decadence, in which artists no longer catered to mainstream society, as a unifying model for the generation. “Burroughs’s addicts, Kerouac’s mobile young voyeurs, my own Negroes, are literally not included in the mainstream of American life,” wrote Baraka, who published many of the Beats in the zines Nexus and the Floating Bear. “These characters are people whom Spengler called Fellaheen, people living on the ruins of a civilization. They are Americans no character in a John Updike novel would be happy to meet, but they are nonetheless Americans, formed out of the conspicuously tragic evolution of modern American life.”

Burroughs introduced the others to the criminal and queer byways of Times Square. His guide was the thief and raconteur Herbert Huncke (1915–1996), who had a complexion “the spectralized color of blue cheese” and an untutored literary voice that Ginsberg heard as the “sensitive vehicle for a veritable new consciousness.” Huncke initially helped Burroughs fence a stolen gun and some morphine styrettes. These two species of contraband, drugs and guns, became twin obsessions in Burroughs’s life and fiction, the former exerting totalitarian control over individuals, the latter a last defense against it. Burroughs was the bridge between the Ivy League and this other world, with a cold eye for either. He had a zoological detachment from the specimens that wandered through his writing: “Subway Mike had a large, pale face and long teeth. He looked like some specialized kind of underground animal that preys on the animals of the surface.” Where his friends were drunk with words, Burroughs understood language also as an instrument of state ideology, and eventually began cutting up and reassembling his manuscripts to interrupt any unbidden agenda sneaking into the lines.

Neal Cassady, a reformatory kid from Denver’s skid row, arrived in December 1946 after exchanging letters with Kerouac’s friend Hal Chase. Cassady, immortalized in On the Road as Dean Moriarty and as the title character of Kerouac’s more experimental Visions of Cody, was the straw that stirred the drink, all fast talk, hyperactive energy and cowboy myth—“a wild yea-saying overburst of American joy,” as the narrator, Sal Paradise, describes Dean in On the Road. By the time he turned 21, Neal said he had stolen 500 cars and spent 15 months in reform schools. He came to New York asking Kerouac to teach him to write. Prolifically unfaithful and irresponsible, unburdened by guilt, Cassady entranced his new friends. Ginsberg had an affair with Cassady; Kerouac had an open affair with Neal’s wife, Carolyn Cassady. “What got Kerouac and Ginsberg about Cassady was the energy of the archetypal West, the energy of the frontier, still coming down,” said the West Coast poet Gary Snyder, who appears as Japhy Ryder in Kerouac’s The Dharma Bums. “Cassady is the cowboy crashing.”

But more than that, Kerouac saw Cassady as the untamed primitive in a body that looked uncannily like his own. To the orderly Kerouac, who lived with his mother between adventures, Cassady stood for the freedom and failure that whirled just beyond his own capacity for disorder. He admired Neal and joined in his holy goofs, but always returned to “Memere” to write. Cassady wrote voluminous, hilarious, profane, stream-of-consciousness letters. In December 1950, Kerouac was struggling with a novel when he received a rambling 40-page letter from Cassady, stuffed with philosophical musings and erotic adventure. It was as if a mind had disgorged its contents all at once, uninhibited by propriety or the cavils
of form and grammar. For Kerouac, it was a light. "I have renounced fiction and fear," he wrote Cassady in response. "There is nothing to do but write the truth." Hooking his typewriter to a 120-foot roll of teletype paper, he banged out On the Road—one paragraph, single spaced—in three flourished weeks.

The assembled writers looked on an America in the throes of sweeping change. "The Cold War," as Ginsberg diagnosed it, "is the imposition of a vast mental barrier on everybody, a vast antinatural psyche. A hardening, a shutting off of the perception of desire and tenderness. . . . So let's say shyness. Fear. Fear of total feeling, really, total being is what it is." For all the gauzy nostalgia that engulfs it now, World War II sent men home complicit in a new level of civilized barbarity. "What kind of war do civilians suppose we fought, anyway?" asked the war correspondent Edgar Jones in the Atlantic Monthly. "We shot prisoners in cold blood, wiped out hospitals, strafed lifeboats, killed or mistreated enemy civilians, finished off the enemy wounded, tossed the dying into a hole with the dead, and in the Pacific boiled the flesh off enemy skulls to make table ornaments for sweethearts, or carved their bones into letter openers." American firebomb raids killed as many as 100,000 civilians in a night. The atomic bomb, dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki on August 6 and 9, 1945, gave human beings the destructive power of gods, which in turn elevated the rebellions of individuals to serious threats. The Cold War redefined the enemy not as a country but as a belief system, which could replicate anywhere. The reaction was Ginsberg's "vast mental barrier," a vigilant intolerance to new or different ideas.

The rational world, it seemed to the Beats, had turned on itself. As John Clellon Holmes, a Columbia peer who published the first recognized Beat novel, Go, in 1952, noted, "The burden of my generation was the knowledge that something rational had caused all this (the feeling that something had gotten dreadfully, dangerously out of hand . . . ) and that nothing rational could end it." At the same time, the prosperity that shaped the nation at peace was equally sweeping, providing unprecedented pleasures even as it made unprecedented demands. It defied perspective. Thanks to the industrial buildup before the country entered the war, America at the end had half the world's manufacturing capacity, two-thirds of its gold stocks and half its money. It produced twice as much oil as the rest of the world combined. This dynamism was less a respite from the war mentality than an extension of it. Examined in books like David Riesman's The Lonely Crowd (1950) and William H. Whyte's The Organization Man (1956), the corporate bonanza locked its winners in cycles of earning and spending that negated the liberties it was supposed to provide. For a small but growing part of the population, the antidote was radical individualism, a luxury afforded by the same economic forces that channelized most Americans the other way. The country's growth product was the middle class, which by 1960 included two-thirds of all Americans. The refugees from this class, stepping out on balconies they didn't have to earn, became the nodding multitudes of hip.

The adjective beat, used to describe a human condition, goes back more than a century. Ann Charters, quoting an 1888 book called Harlot's Walk and Coffee, traces it back at least to the Civil War, when it denoted "a lazy man or a shirk who would by hook or by crook get rid of all military or fatigue duty that he could." Herbert Huncke, who introduced the word to the group, used it in the sense of the drug underworld, as in beat down, ragged, whipped, outside the game. In the fall of 1948, Kerouac and John Clellon Holmes were comparing their postwar circle with the Lost Generation, which had come together out of similar dissatisfaction after the previous war. Gertrude Stein had christened the Lost Generation after watching the directionless men at an auto shop. As Holmes remembered, Kerouac saw as emblematic the wary hipsters in Times Square:

"It's a sort of furtiveness," [Kerouac] said. "Like we were a generation of furtives. You know, with an inner knowledge there's no use flaunting on that level, the level of the 'public,' a kind of beatness—I mean, being right down to it, to ourselves, because we all really know where we are—and a weariness with all the forms, all the conventions of the world. . . . It's something like that. So I guess you might say we're a beat generation," and he laughed a conspiratorial, the Shadow-knows kind of laugh at his own words and at the look on my face.

For a group of intellectuals who considered themselves a despised minority, or sellaheen, "beat" had many of the original connotations of
hepi or hip. It was the light at the bottom of the tunnel. Kerouac later said that the word's significance came to him in the church of St. Jeanne d'Arc in Lowell, where he prayed before a statue of the Virgin Mary and was answered with a vision of beat as beatific. Especially after Norman Mailer's "White Negro" essay connected the hipster with violent pathologies, Kerouac went out of his way to stress the gentle, pacifist leanings in beat. In The Dharma Bums, he quotes Japhy Ryder, the Gary Snyder character, climbing high on the granola mountaintop to declaim "a vision of a great rucksack revolution, thousands or even millions of young Americans wandering around with rucksacks, going up to mountains to pray, making children laugh and old men glad. . . ." (The rest of the book is not this fatuous, I promise.) After publishing Go in 1952, John Holmes wrote an essay for the New York Times titled "This Is the Beat Generation" that explained beat as a spiritual quest, a "will to believe," despite "the valueless abyss of modern life." Michael McClure, the San Francisco poet, placed the Beats in equally uncontroversial light, as the "literary wing of the environmental movement."

It didn't matter. One indisputable fact about the Beats is that they were a divisive force, and however benign or inoffensive the language they wrapped around themselves, the truth—"Go fuck yourself with your atom bomb!"—was more exciting, more threatening and more commercially viable. Through their writings, often about themselves, they promulgated the hip promise that society's margins held more of its life than the mainstream. They were the circus that some children ran away to join, others wished they had the nerve, and even more parents feared lest their children run next. Dislodging themselves from the complacency of the Eisenhower era, the Beats indulged the horror, sadism, sexuality or unbridled irresponsibility that lay just outside the average Joe's grasp.

"Ever see a hot shot hit, kid?" a doper raconteur asks a post-Ivy League patsy in Burroughs's 1959 novel Naked Lunch. "I saw the Gimp catch one in Philly. We rigged his room with a one-way whorehouse mirror and charged a sawski to watch it. He never got the needle out of his arm. They don't if the shot is right. That's the way they find them, dropper full of clotted blood hanging out of a blue arm. The look in his eyes when it hit—Kid, it was tasty. . . ."

In the Republican decorum of the 1950s the writers talked about cocks and drugs and negroes—negro cocks, even—in language that intimated that they knew whereof they spoke. How awful, how liberating. Drugs helped. The Beat poet Diane di Prima, one of the few women who held her own with the men, later explained to her daughter: "Honey, you see, we all thought experience itself was good. Any experience. That it could only be good to experience as much as possible. . . . Anything that took us outside—that gave us the dimensions of the box we were caught in, an aerial view, as it were—showed us the exact arrangement of the maze we were walking, was a blessing. A small satori. Because we knew we were caught. . . ." Processing this experience, the Beats broadcast their intimate secrets, defying an era that suspected secrets and intimacy more than anything. Though as a movement they were not overtly political, they combined what the feminist writer Barbara Ehrenreich identified as two deeper currents of American rebellion. In the Beats, she noted, "the two strands of male protest—one directed against the white-collar work world and the other against the suburbanized family life that work was supposed to support—come together into the first all-out critique of American consumer culture." In place of work and family, which link to the past and future, they chose the immediacy of pleasure and motion.

Their enlightenment, which they often saw in Buddhist terms, was not gentle. In the summer of 1948, Ginsberg had what he called "the only really genuine experience I feel I've had," shortly after the traumatic experience of authorizing a lobotomy of his mother (since his parents were divorced, Allen or his brother Eugene had to sign the papers). He was reading William Blake and masturbating in his apartment in Spanish Harlem when the voice of Blake entered the room, telling him to "cultivate the terror, get right into it." The following year, after being arrested in connection with one of Huncke's robbery schemes, he was committed to Columbia Presbyterian Psychiatric Institute for eight months. The two experiences enabled the breakthrough of "Howl" in 1955, a poem that had the long lines and messianic ambitions of Whitman, wearing all its emotional raw spots on the surface. When Ginsberg performed it for the first time at the Six Gallery in San Francisco that October, at a legendary reading that united the East Coast Beats with their West Coast counterparts, McClure recognized that "a human voice and body had been hurled against the harsh wall of America." The poem's dedication, "For
"Lady Be Good." Kerouac had similar aspirations: "I want to be considered a jazz poet blowing a long blues in an afternoon jam session on Sunday."

Kerouac's interest in jazz was long-standing and intimate. At Horace Mann high school, he hit the Harlem nightclubs with a classmate named Seymour Wyse, and started a jazz column in the school paper. Having lost his virginity to a midtown hooker, he took his teen pleasures with the prostitutes who worked the uptown jazz circuit. He saw himself as a soloist caring between these bandstands, improvising phrases on end: "Yes, jazz and bop," he told the poet Ted Berrigan, who interviewed him in 1968 for the Paris Review, "in a sense of a, say, a tenor man drawing a breath and blowing a phrase on his saxophone, till he runs out of breath, and when he does, his sentence, his statement's been made... That's how I therefore separate my sentences, as breath separations of the mind... Then there's the raciness and freedom and humor of jazz instead of all that dreary analysis..." His speed-writing aspired to bop improvisation, which he saw, naively, as an unfiltered gush of the musical subconscious.

Where the white intellectuals and hipsters of the Harlem Renaissance looked to blacks to regenerate the center of American culture, the Beats romanticized black life at the margins, imagining it as spontaneous and uncorrupted, liberated from both the war legacy and the economy. It was their ticket away from the center. To be beat in the full scope of the word, beat down and beatified, was to approach a primitive state of grace. In his Mexico City Blues, written shortly after Charlie Parker's death, Kerouac beseeched Bird's spirit to "lay the base, I off me, and everybody," as if Parker's marginal status was worth whatever hardships came with it. Needless to say, this is a distinctly white romance. As the Supreme Court struck down formal segregation in 1954, easing some of the barriers to black access, the Beats made a fetish of black disenfranchisement. The white negro, whether in Kerouac's sense or Mailer's, aspired to a life unburdened by aspiration—to be, as Sal Paradise dreams, "anything but what I was so drearily, a 'white man' disillusioned... wishing I could exchange worlds with the happy, true-hearted Negroes of America." Those African Americans who would have exchanged their "happy" poverty for the opportunities the Beats were so eager to renounce were unrecognized in Kerouac's cosmos.
The Beats’ racial romance served the writers’ needs better than their subjects. Like bronzing a child’s shoes, it exalted them but also treated them as trophies. Except for Mardou, the crush-his-soul love interest of The Subterraneans, black characters in Kerouac’s work appear mainly as footmen to the white protagonists’ liberation. They remain white fantasies of blackness. Kerouac’s fancies of improvisation, similarly, ignored the discipline that underlies the freest blowing. The poet Kenneth Rexroth, detecting the aroma of minstrelsy, said that Kerouac “has exactly the attitude toward the American Negro that any redneck gallsnapping Southern chauvinist has. . . . The Beat novelist just likes them that way. Mailer was right when he said that the hipster was a white Negro—but he neglected to point out that the Negro model the hipster imitates is the product of white imaginations.”

But at their least patronizing, the writers invoked the lacunae of jazz to suggest something beyond articulation, a momentary window of empathy:

Bird Parker who is only 18 year old has a crew cut of Africa looks impossible has perfect eyes and composure of a king when suddenly you stop and look at him in the subway and you can’t believe that bop is here to stay—that it is real, Negroes in America are just like us, we must look at them understanding the exact racial counterpart of what the man is—and figure it with histories and lost kings of immemorial tribes in jungle and Fellaheen town and otherwise. . . . And educated judges in horn-rimmed glasses reading the Amsterdam News.

Carl Hancock Rux, writing more recently about Eminem, notes that in the 21st century, “the new White Negro has not arrived at black culture. . . . he was born into it. He has arrived at white culture with an authentic performance of whiteness.” For Kerouac and company, this patrimony was still beyond reach. They were peering through cigarette haze across a racial divide, looking for equivalences and deliverance—seduced by the spectacle, as Robert Farris Thompson says, of people singing a sad song happy where some whites might sing it sad.

Response to the Beats followed in predictable symmetry. Government officials seized copies of Howl and Naked Lunch, unsuccessfully prosecuting their authors or distributors for obscenity—the nearest thing to a surefire marketing campaign, especially for such difficult, noncommercial texts. As if in counterpoint, tribes of correctly dressed bohemians began to appear in San Francisco and New York. Some were there before the Beats; others learned the way from their writing. The critic Robert Brustein pinned them as “conformists masquerading as rebels,” but it was Herb Caen, cranky columnist for the San Francisco Chronicle, who cut them down to “beatniks.” Beat became a catchall for anything vaguely black-turtleneck. Rexroth, who had championed the Beats at the Six Gallery reading, grew disaffected, in part because he believed Kerouac had brokered an affair between Rexroth’s wife, Marthe, and the poet Robert Creeley. After Life magazine ran a sensationalistic look at beatniks and their lifestyles, Rexroth dismissed the Beat phenomenon as an invention of the Lace magazine empire.

One of hip’s paradoxes is that even as it professes antipathy to the market, it takes the shape the economy needs it to. For all their critique of American consumer culture, the Beats filled a Darwinian market niche. Their popularity complemented the postwar buildup in production capacity. American industry was turning out new stuff; the Beats prescribed an ethos of lifestyle change. Malcolm Cowley, who championed and eventually edited On the Road, against Kerouac’s wishes, had observed this phenomenon among his own Lost Generation. Bohemianism, he remarked wryly, serves late capitalism by promoting a “consumption ethic.” Writing about an earlier bohemian moment, he noted that all of its individualist or anti-establishment tendencies were also grounds for spending: “[S]elf-expression and paganism encouraged a demand for all sorts of products—modern furniture, beach pajamas, cosmetics, colored bathrooms with toilet paper to match. Living for the moment meant buying an automobile, radio or house, using it now and paying for it tomorrow. Female equality”—not exactly a major Beat concern, but still—“was capable of doubling the consumption of products—cigarettes, for example—that had formerly been used by men alone.”

The consumer culture saw possibilities in the new huddled masses. If they rejected the old way of living, why not sell them a new one, with
accessories to match? Like bebop, the Beats suggested a whole range of product lines. *Playboy*, which launched in 1953 with its own version of the revolution, ran an ad offering swell goods: "Join the beat generation! Buy a beat generation tie anyway! A beat generation sweatshirt! A beat generation ring!" After the September 1957 publication of *On the Road*, Atlantic Records placed an ad in the *Village Voice* trumpeting, "Atlantic is the label in tune with the BEAT generation. We produce the music with the BEAT for you. Write for free catalogue." You might notice the absence of references to spiritual revelation in these ads (to say nothing of the delirium of black cocks). This is how hip moves from the inner circle to the masses, losing something of itself at each step.

The new tribes gathered in forsaken joints like the San Remo in Greenwich Village, which had a long boho history. Ronald Sukenick, who landed there from Midwood, Brooklyn, in 1948, wrote that for refugees of his generation, even those who only traveled by subway, "You were headed for the Remo, where you'd try to look old enough to be in an actual Village-Bohemian-literary-artist-underground-mafioso-pinko-revolutionary-subversive-intellectual-existentialist-anti-bourgeois café. Real life at last." The bar mixed cheap drinks and interesting people: writers and artists, gays, interracial couples, hoodlums, Italian toughs, wannabes, voyeurs. Among the patrons were Miles Davis, James Agee, Tennessee Williams, John Cage, Gore Vidal, Bob Dylan, Gregory Corso, James Baldwin, Kerouac and Maxwell Bodenheim. Judith Malina, co-founder of the Living Theatre, called the bar the Sans Remorse in her diaries. Kerouac fictionalized it in *The Subterraneans*, and Chandler Brossard wrote about it in his semi-Beat, pretty hip roman à clef *Who Walk in Darkness* (1952). Mary McCarthy memorialized it in the *New York Post*, attracting the attention of curiosity seekers and tourists. Until her 1950 article, according to Anatole Broyard, a regular, the place didn't have so much as a dirty word on the men's room walls; the gawkers who came subsequently to see picturesque squalor, he noted, did what regulars would not, decorating its surfaces with "the images of their disappointment."

For Kerouac, success and its handmaiden, fame, spoiled everything. He wrote 10 books in the time it took to get *On the Road* published, and by his lights they were all after the fall. Embittered by both celebrity and its limits—specifically the failed efforts to make a movie of *On the Road*—he vented his inner conservative on the unwashed tribes who claimed him as their tour guide. "In actuality," he wrote,

there was only a handful of real hip swinging cats and what there was vanished mighty swiftly during the Korean War when (and after) a sinister new kind of efficiency appeared in America, maybe it was the result of the universalization of Television and nothing else (the Pepte Total Police Control of Dragnet's "peace" officers) but the beat characters after 1950 vanished into jails and madhouses, or were shamed into silent conformity, the generation itself was shortlived and small in number.

By 1959, America's premier beatnik was the protagonist of *The Many Loves of Dobie Gillis*, played with goatee and bongos by Bob Denver.

The heretical truth is that in the broader public imagination, it was Maynard G. Krebs, not the by-then vanishing Kerouac, who led the revolution. Kerouac and Ginsberg made Krebs possible, but it was Krebs whose televised presence connected the isolated dissenters or grumblers, enabling the broad rebellions of the next decade.

Hip entails an acceptance of the imperfect—the low-fi, uncombed or unpolished. Such is the license of living in the present tense: you don't have to worry about mistakes, because their consequences are off in the future. At its most problematic, this devolves into hip's fetish for failure and self-destruction. Hip is imperfect in the sense of being incomplete, transitional. More than any movement in this history so far, the Beats trumpeted their imperfections, trying to redeem America's flaws after its virtues had led it so disastrously astray.

The enlightenment sought by the Beats—and this applies to their relationship with squares, each other, the economy and their mothers—involved an assumption of forgiveness. By this I mean not absolution but a hard acceptance of themselves as unacceptable. This is the innocence that Whitman claimed, more multitudinous than being without sin. Their unfiltered writings about themselves served both to validate their existence and to reconcile its flaws with the broad, ugly sweep of the culture.
Against the perfections of the nuclear bomb, the Nazi death camps and the corporate matrix, the Beats wore their flaws on the outside, offering them as strengths rather than weaknesses. They followed the improvisational license of bop. “Make a mistake,” Monk advised his peers. “Play what you want and let the public pick up.”

It is significant that the best minds of Ginsberg’s generation, though famously “destroyed by madness, starving hysterical naked / Dragging themselves through the negro streets at dawn looking for an angry fix,” remained nonetheless just that to the author—the best minds of all. “Howl” portrays a new priesthood educated by its injuries, not debilitated by them. The damage that overruns the next 126 long lines is part of their collective résumé. Its violence—“the absolute heart of the poem of life butchered out of their own bodies good to eat a thousand years”—is the beginning of enlightenment.

The embrace of unpolished, spontaneous writing meant that there were no best or wrong words, just what Kerouac called a “jewel center of interest in subject of image at moment of writing.” He had his own version of Monk’s advice: “no revisions.” (This commandment was somewhat disingenuous: he filled his notebooks with drafts of scenes for *On the Road* long before his three-week typing spree, and he continued to revise thereafter.) The Beats were prolifically inconsistent, leaving it up to readers to sort the stinkers. In their lives and work they related in detail their unsuitability to polite society. Kerouac envied Cassady the freedom of his unsupervised id, only hinting at the inner life that most readers missed altogether. As Carolyn Cassady said, readers took away a self-serving portrait of her husband: “[W]hatever it is that Neal represented for them, like freedom and fearless, Neal was fearless but he wasn’t free. Neal wanted to lose. So he was utterly fearless as far as chances went because he was asking for it all the time. I kept thinking that the imitators never knew and don’t know how miserable these men were, they think they were having marvelous times—joy, joy, joy—and they weren’t at all.” In February 1968, Cassady lay down beside a railroad track in San Miguel de Allende, Mexico, and froze to death. He was a few days shy of 42. Kerouac finished drinking a hole through himself the following year. He was 47.

The writers were as openly flawed in their personal lives as in their art, placing themselves not above criticism but beneath its pretensions. Ginsberg followed his mother into psychiatric confinement—“always trying to justify ma’s madness,” as Kerouac put it, “against the logical, sober but hateful society.” Both Kerouac and Burroughs abandoned their children. Burroughs vandalized his own texts, wielding scissors against his intentions; this from a man—a writer—who once lopped off the end joint of one finger with chicken shears. (He landed in a psychiatric hospital for a month.) His gun accident and junk addiction were always a part of his reptilian allure. Like Miles Davis, he embraced his persona as prince of darkness, asking only that others see themselves in the same unsparing light. In a mock review of *Naked Lunch*, he promised readers an engagement with their worst: “This book is a must for anyone who would understand the sick soul, sick unto death, of the atomic age.”

Buddhism provided a useful framework for both righteousness and imperfection. Ginsberg, Kerouac and Gary Snyder, among others, conceived their journeys as quests for satori, or awakening. Their acceptance of all experience or insight sometimes made for dopey literature—writers, after all, have to sort and filter and draw conclusions. But it also brought the writers into harmony with the flawed mainstream of Cold
War America, not above it but of it. Alan Watts, in an influential 1958 essay titled "Beat Zen, Square Zen, and Zen," quoted a saying from the Taoist scholar Chuang-tzu: "Those who would have good government without its correlative misrule, and right without its correlative wrong, do not understand the principles of the universe." The Beatles took this wisdom to heart, living it out in the public eye. As much as their literary accomplishments, their acceptance of misrule as a constructive force stands as their lasting contribution to the culture.

This creative misrule echoed Whitman's paradoxical claim of being "not the poet of goodness only," but "the poet of wickedness also." Ginsberg invoked Whitman as "the first great American poet to take action in recognizing his individuality, forgiving and accepting Him Self, and automatically extending that recognition and acceptance to all—and defining his Democracy as that. . . . Without this truth there is only the impersonal Moloch and self-hatred of others." The challenge for the Beatles and their peers was not to disengage from the impersonal Moloch, but to implicate themselves in it—to make it personal. In the same way, Whitman had taken upon himself the worst of America before the Civil War:

I am the poet of slaves, and of the masters of slaves. . . .
I am the poet of sin,
For I do not believe in sin.

When Whitman sang of containing multitudes, he did not mean they were all admirable.

Yet they were all implicitly forgiven. To live in the present tense is to claim forgiveness as you go, making peace with your flaws even as you erupt in new ones. It is to live outside of judgment—and to allow others the same grace. There are no wounds left by one's flaws, only new flaws to replace the old ones. In this forgiveness hip can be both noble and ennobling. This is a difference between hip and simple outlaw nihilism. The outlaw is a romantic figure because his violence puts him on the outside of society. He is cathartic but ultimately illusory: you can't get rid of evil so easily. The hipster as romantic figure—the angelheaded, ya-saying overburst of American joy—opens society's eyes, or hips it, to the violence within. Though hip is often belittled as adolescent rebellion, it is bigger than what critics like Robert Brustein say it opposes, and more free than rebellion. Hip works more broadly than simple opposition to someone else's agenda. It surrounds and envelops. Even if you never read past "Howl" and maybe "Kaddish," Allen Ginsberg probably shapes your life more than Dwight D. Eisenhower.

There is another way to look at the Beat avatars and their prototypes. As much as Kerouac was Charlie Parker, he was also Herman Melville, the restless seafarer who traded static clarity for the blur of the quest. The car was his ship, and Cassady his captain. Like Melville, he wrote the gospels in this century and died, if not in the gutter, in self-destructive bitterness, no longer speaking, as he once claimed, for the "solitary Bartlebies staring out the dead wall window of our civilization." When these Bartlebies did not thank him for showing them the road, Kerouac marinated in his disappointment. He wrote to Ginsberg: "I discovered a new Beat Generation a long time ago. I hitchhiked and starved, for art, and that makes me the Fool of the Beatniks with a crown of shit. Thanks, America."

Ginsberg was Walt Whitman, a curious patriot who endeavored to heal a ruptured society through the gape of his own vanity. "It occurs to me that I am America," Ginsberg wrote, and but for the disingenuousness of the first four words—It occurs to me—the line might have belonged to Whitman. And in his vigilance toward all systems of control, chemical and otherwise, Burroughs was a coruscating heir to Thoreau, living in voluntary exile, echoing Thoreau's sense of life as civil disobedience: "I quietly declare war with the State, after my fashion, though I will still make what use and get what advantage of her I can, as is usual in such cases." (That's Thoreau, by the way, not Burroughs.)

The critic George W. S. Trow has argued that the retrospective inevitability of the post-Beat counterculture, which is reckoned as meeting only cardboard resistance, hides the full magnitude of the Beats' disruption. The 1960s, Trow wrote,

are presented as mostly motivated by an urge to get Rosa Parks to the front of the bus, on the one hand, and to stop the Vietnam War, on the other. Missing from the story, primarily because the story's never been told from the top down, because that mode of storytelling had simply fallen into disrepute, was that death to the Eisenhower empire. This had
been prefigured in *Howl* by Ginsberg: “America, fuck you and your atom bomb [sic].” That effort was now taken to the streets, and this caesura was, first of all, very remarkable in that the Eisenhower empire was the empire. It was the control system that produced our money, our dominance, our unique position in the world, and it was remarkable how little it took to kill it.

By these lights the Beats and their bebop peers, in their echoes of Whitman and Thoreau, represent an enduring constant in the American fabric, not newer than the Eisenhower empire but older. It is always current. Each generation needs its Whitman; each Whitman redeems his peers by allowing them to forgive him. Hip’s revolutions begin each time in the humanizing promise with which Sal Paradise begins *On the Road*: “And this was really the way that my whole road experience began, and the things that were to come are too fantastic not to tell.” And they remain bound to Sal’s flash of enlightenment and absolution: “Somewhere along the line I knew there’d be girls, visions, everything; somewhere along the line the pearl would be handed to me.”

**the tricksters**

**signifying monkeys and other hip engines of progress**

The biggest difference between us and white people is that we know when we’re playing.

—ALBERTA ROBERTS, quoted in

*Drylongso: A Self-Portrait of Black America,*

by John Langston Gwaltney

In the 1960s, Dick Gregory used to tell a joke to mostly white audiences. “You know the definition of a Southern moderate?” he’d ask. “That’s a cat that’ll Lynch you from a low tree.” It was a joke about his audience and himself, and about the ways they were and were not connected. The line was absurd on its face—who could find humor in lynching? Yet it was more absurd in context. If anything divided Gregory from his white audience, blocking the empathy that is essential for humor, it was their relationships to the violence described in the joke. The audience could only be on one side of it, Gregory on the other. The joke depended on these positions; if a white person told it to a black audience, it would mean something entirely different. But the joke also picked at the positions, calling attention to their absurdity. The black comedian and white audience shared a laugh not despite the racial divide, but within it. The categories of white and black, which are inviolable within the joke, became muddled in its telling.