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FILM

Howl at the moon

Solid documentary celebrates queer poet
and counterculture hero Allen Ginsberg

personality as colorful and powerful as Allen Ginsberg (1926-1997) might seem at first glance an ideal, easy subject for a filmmaker.

There are many obvious markers on which to hang an exciting narrative—the publication of his seminal poem “Howl” in 1955, his role as the merry prankster of the Beats, his unabashed advocacy of LSD before Congress, his assumption of the mantle of Walt Whitman as the poet laureate of homosexuality, his well-publicized nonviolent protests and his eventual canonization as the patron saint of freethinkers and a closet-free life. And unlike Whitman, there’s an enormous amount of filmed material available, from Ginsberg’s innovative 1950s poetry readings to quirky television appearances in the ‘60s and ‘70s.

But, as Jerry Aronson’s *The Life and Times of Allen Ginsberg* shows, Ginsberg was more complex than the popular image of a prankster and provocateur. (An updated director’s cut of the 1994 documentary is now playing at Hollywood Theatre.) Aronson spent 10 years working on the film, gaining the cooperation of Ginsberg’s family and friends and excavating a wealth of rare footage. His purpose was to remind us of Ginsberg’s importance as a poet and cultural figure. The film sometimes errs too much on that side, losing some of the wild man in the process of redeeming him. But that’s a minor complaint given what Aronson has accomplished overall.

The film is structured by decades—an appropriate decision given that Ginsberg seemed to reinvent himself every 10 years or so. It begins with a bittersweet portrait of his beginnings as the grandchild of Russian Jewish immigrants. Young Ginsberg is seen in photographs wearing a crown of leaves, an early hint of the eccentric self to come.

He was devoted to his parents, which must have been difficult in the case of his mother, Naomi, a paranoid who was institutionalized for much of her life. Ginsberg’s stepmother calls him a “cheerful” kid but adds, “Allen bore the brunt of his mother’s illness.” Yet Ginsberg was able to reconcile this tragedy decades later, making Naomi the centerpiece of his brilliant long poem “Kaddish.”

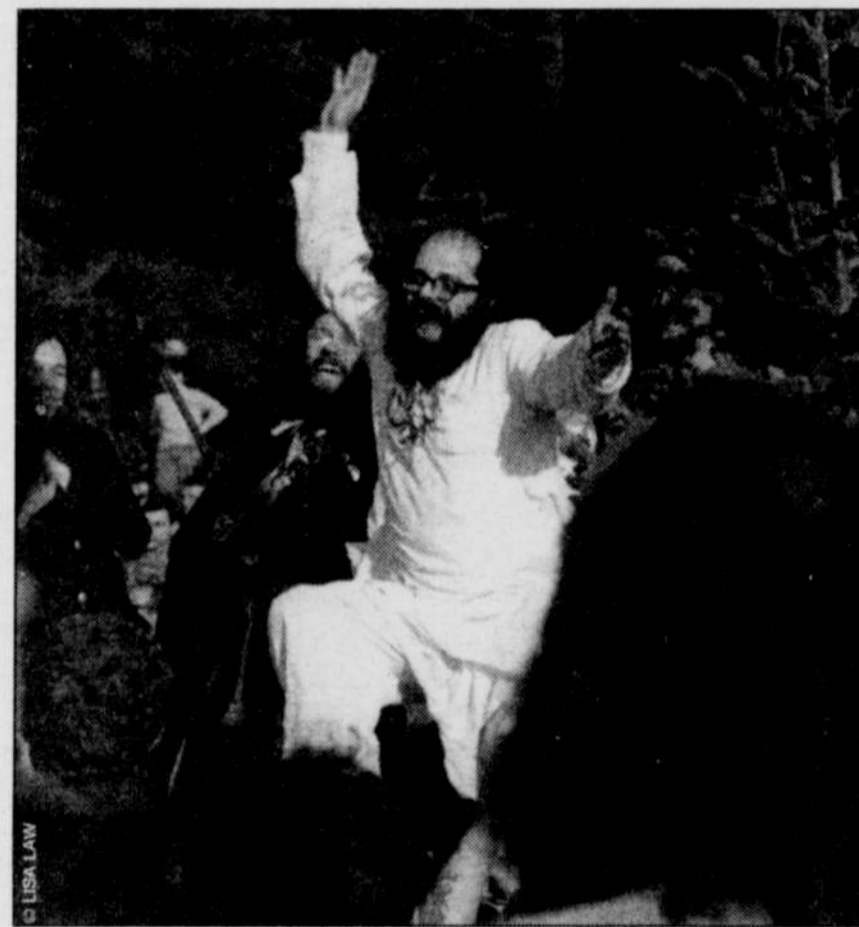
By the 1940s, Ginsberg found a group of simpatico souls with whom he formed a kind of second family: William Burroughs, Neal Casady, Jack Kerouac and the Beats. Ginsberg was still finding his way as a gay man, trapped in the closet and filled with a sense of solitude.

But not to worry—he ended up in bed with the decidedly hetero Casady, whom, he says mischievously, “gave me love.” Such were the times. Eventually he would find his lifelong lover among this group, the painter Peter Orlovsky, and begin to create his role as probably the most important pre-Stonewall gay liberationist.

Ginsberg became famous—and notorious—in the 1950s, hammering the sexual and philosophical status quo of that decade with his groundbreaking “Howl,” which the film

includes in a 1955 reading by the author. (Curiously, it doesn’t go into the banning of “Howl” and subsequent obscenity trial. With lines like “who let themselves be fucked in the ass by saintly motorcyclists, and screamed with joy,” the censorship was no surprise.) He was also well out of the closet by now, taking “a vow of celestial heavenly fidelity” with Orlovsky.

If the 1950s saw Ginsberg as Beat superstar, the 1960s brought him new fame as a counterculture guru. Rare footage shows him testifying



The patron saint of freethinkers and a closet-free life, Allen Ginsberg is remembered in an informative documentary now playing at Hollywood Theatre

before Congress about the salutary effects of LSD, inspiring Timothy Leary to tune in and drop out (Leary calls him “the cosmic public defender”) and deftly demolishing William Buckley’s curdled pose in an interview in which Ginsberg plays the harmonium and giddily describes writing poetry “under the influence.”

The ‘60s also sparked Ginsberg’s political consciousness, bringing him to protests in Prague, and most notably to the infamous 1968 Democratic National Convention in Chicago. Ginsberg was unwavering in advocating peaceful protest, refusing to march with the Yippies, who planned violent disruptions. He also reveals himself an astute political observer when he says that the left didn’t vote in 1968 “and Nixon squeaked in by half a million votes, and the war went on for another six years, with more murder and devastation than ever before.”

The film continues more or less chronologically, vividly highlighting Ginsberg’s tragedies and triumphs. Among the former are the death of his beloved father, Louis, and his attempts to deal with his lover’s alcoholism.

But Ginsberg’s last years appear to be good ones, filled with art, friendship and widespread acclaim as one of the leading postwar voices in poetry. He had gallery shows, published books of photographs, traveled and continued to write and read his poetry. His stepmother recalls that Louis “died a happy man,” and the film gives us every reason to believe that Allen did, too. □

GARY MORRIS is a Portland free-lance writer who recalls many a mad night sitting on Ginsberg’s...knee.