

# Share your inner Beat

Tolovana Arts Colony hosts Beat poetry workshop and Cannon Beach Gallery welcomes one and all to open mic this weekend

The cultural landscape of 1950s America flourished amid a peculiar contrast.

While “Father Knows Best” — that perfect paean to the status quo — ran on television, the specter of nuclear annihilation hung over the head of every U.S. citizen.

While the country’s industrial production skyrocketed, the existential threat that technological “progress” presented to America’s way of life was difficult to ignore.

While clean-cut family men drove to work dressed in suits and fedoras to support their upwardly mobile middle-class lifestyles, a considerable number built bomb shelters, stocked up on ammunition and hoarded canned goods and jugs of water, just in case the Cold War with the Soviet Union stopped being cold.

“You had a lot of really scary stuff,” said Mark Mizell, an English teacher at Seaside High School.

Meanwhile, the writers of the Beat Generation gazed at this petri dish of misplaced values and said: *Are you all out of your minds?*

The Beats — including such luminaries as Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac and William S. Burroughs — beckoned the masses to “wake up and look at some of the stuff around us,” he said.

They also produced some of the finest, most original literature of the 20th century, many scholars have argued.

This weekend, Mizell will teach an inaugural two-part workshop called “The Beat Poets” at Tolovana Hall, to be held from 6 to 9 p.m. Friday, Feb. 13 and noon to 3 p.m. Saturday, Feb. 14. The cost is \$35 for both classes. Early sign-ups will receive a book about the Beat movement.

Then, from 7 to 10 p.m. Saturday, the Cannon Beach Gallery will host “The Beachnik Cafe,” an open mic for people to read their work (or someone else’s work), even people who didn’t attend the workshops. Bald Eagle Coffee House will donate coffee. The event is free and open to the public, but donations are accepted.

Lisa Kerr, program coordinator of the Tolovana Arts Colony, which is presenting both events, said the open mic is designed for people to read their work in a comfortable, nonjudg-



Submitted photo

Artwork by Stirling Gorsuch.

mental atmosphere.

“Just read what’s in your head,” she said. “That would be ideal.”

“That would be awesome,” Mizell added.

## Intellectual and revolutionary

Known for embracing Bohemian sensibilities while rejecting conformity, mindless consumerism and mainstream preferences in art, literature, fashion and sexuality, the Beatnik subculture encouraged people to “break out of the mold, because the mold was so tight after WWII,” Kerr said.

To the Beatniks — now associated with berets, sunglasses, goatees and bongos — there were the “squares” unconsciously trapped in a box, and then there were the “hip” folks who could see through it.

For Watt Childress, co-owner of Jupiter’s Rare & Used Books who will emcee the open mic, the Beat movement created “the sense of breaking free from the cage of institutional con-



Photo by Erick Bengel

Mark Mizell, left, an English teacher at Seaside High School, and Lisa Kerr, program coordinator of the Tolovana Arts Colony, discuss the Beat Generation over coffee at Bella Espresso. Mizell will teach a workshop on Beat poetry at the arts colony this weekend.

trol, moving outside the corporate boxes, being willing to explore.”

As a counterculture movement, the Beats may have been “smaller than the hippie movement” that grew out of it, but it was “more revolutionary,” Kerr said. “It was intellectual, too,” and “deeper in a lot of ways than what came afterwards.”

Kerr’s father actually turned her loose in Lower Manhattan’s Greenwich Village, the Beat movement’s East Coast birthplace, when she was a child.

“It was like walking into another world,” she said. “All I knew was that I wanted to be in that world more than anything.”

The Beat writers ushered in a “new freedom in language,” she said. “It was almost like their version of jazz, in a way.”

Beat literature “launched a new freshness into poetry. It really opened up a lot of things for a lot of people,” Mizell said. Musicians like Bob Dylan credit the Beat writers with raising their awareness of what was happening in the world and how art can illuminate it. “The Beats have influenced so many different people, it’s incredible,” Mizell added.

When Kerr hears the opening lines of Ginsberg’s 1955 poem “Howl,” with its unmeasured bursts of manic energy, “I get shivers,” Kerr said.

Similarly, Jack Kerouac’s 1957 novel “On the Road” — perhaps the defining work of Beat

literature — contains passages “that you feel along your spine,” Mizell said. “The grammar Nazi in me wants to edit it, to be frank, but I’ve never read anything in any literature that so captures the free feeling of being on the road, hitchhiking and just exploring with absolutely no schedule. I mean, he just totally nails it.”

## Live sharing

Beat poetry can be especially powerful when read aloud, Kerr said. “I like it read better than I like reading it, the sound of it.”

Public performance is integral to the Beat tradition, Childress said. “It’s like opening up the doors and windows between our rooms as individuals.”

“If all we did was write things down and pass notes back and forth between each other, that would be better than no communication at all,” he said. “But to get up in front of people and share, to give voice to those words — to me that’s even more basic ... That’s something that we as human beings have been doing before we were writing. There’s a root value to that ritual.”

Kerr hopes that the Tolovana Arts Colony can turn the workshop and open mic into annual events that branch out into other genres of poetry.

“There’s something kind of magical about a group of people sitting around celebrating language,” Mizell said.

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