



American Hipster: A Life of Herbert Huncke, The Times Square Hustler Who Inspired the Beat Movement

Hilary Holladay

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The first biography of the hustler/junkie/writer who turned the Beats on to the drugs, sex, and postwar counterculture that shaped their writing and radicalized American literature. *American Hipster: The Life of Herbert Huncke, The Times Square Hustler Who Inspired the Beat Movement* tells the tale of a New York sex worker and heroin addict whose unrepentant deviance caught the imagination of Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, and William S. Burroughs. Teetering between exhaustion and existential despair, Huncke (rhymes with “junkie”) often said, “I’m beat, man.” His line gave Kerouac the label for a down-at-the-heels generation seeking spiritual sustenance as well as “kicks” in post-war America. Recognizable portraits of Huncke appear in *Junky* (1953), Burroughs’s acerbic account of his own heroin addiction; “Howl” (1956), the long, sexually explicit poem that launched Ginsberg’s career; and *On the Road* (1957), Kerouac’s best-selling novel that immortalized the Beat Generation. But it wasn’t just Huncke the character that fascinated these writers: they loved his stories. Kerouac called him a “genius” of a storyteller and “a perfect writer.” His famous friends helped Huncke find publishers for his stories. Biographies of Kerouac and the others pay glancing tribute to Huncke’s role in shaping the Beat Movement, yet no one until now has told his entire life story. *American Hipster* explores Huncke’s youthful escapades in Chicago; his complicated alliances with the Beat writers and with sex researcher Alfred Kinsey; and his adventures on the road, at sea, and in prison. It also covers his tumultuous relationship with his partner Louis Cartwright, whose 1994 murder remains unsolved, and his idiosyncratic career as an author and pop-culture icon. Written by Hilary Holladay, a professor of American literature, the book offers a new way of looking at the whole Beat Movement. It draws on Holladay’s interviews with Huncke’s friends and associates, including representatives of the literary estates of Kerouac, Ginsberg, Burroughs, and Huncke; her examination of Huncke’s unpublished correspondence and journals at Columbia University; and her longtime study of the Beat Movement.

Advance Praise "It is impossible to write about the Beat Generation without paying keen attention to the life and legacy of Herbert Huncke. In *American Hipster* Hilary Holladay does a magnificent job of documenting Huncke's high-and-low cultural accomplishments. Everybody interested in post-war American literature needs to read this gritty journey of a conman extraordinaire and down-and-out muse who kicked the door-jams out of Cold War American conformity. An essential book!" —Douglas Brinkley, editor of *Windblown World: The Journals of Jack Kerouac*, and *Library of America's Jack Kerouac: Road Novels 1957-1960*. "I knew Herbert Huncke in the 1970's when I was a young would-be poet and kid beatnik--at least I thought I knew him. But you don't really know this Villon-like legendary genius until you read Hilary Holladay's absorbing, insightful, tender and wild biography." —Sam Kashner, author of *When I Was Cool: My Life at the Jack Kerouac School* and coauthor of *Furious Love: Elizabeth Taylor, Richard Burton, and the Marriage of the Century* "With intelligence, sensitivity, and meticulous research, Hilary Holliday revives Herbert Huncke, patron saint of the Beats and, with Neal Cassidy, one of its two unlikely muses. All *American Hipster* needs now to join the canon of Beat studies is a coffee-and-Benedrine stain and the fragrance of all-night smoking on its pages." —Regina Marler, author of *Bloomsbury Pie* and editor of *Queer Beats About the Author* Hilary Holladay is a scholar of American literature who lives in Charlottesville, Va., and teaches at James Madison University. Her writing focuses on the Beat Movement and modern and contemporary African American literature.

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