

Brother-Souls: John Clellon Holmes, Jack Kerouac, and the Beat Generation

Ann Charters and Samuel Charters

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In February 1958, John Clellon Holmes wondered in his journal why he was not as widely known as Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg. In fact, he began to wonder why he seemed to be excluded from general consideration as one of the Beat writers. He was, after all, one of Kerouac's closest friends who had been the first person to read *On the Road* as a fresh roll of typescript, who had published the first Beat Generation novel, *Go*, in 1952, and who had thereafter been asked to explicate the Beat ethos in a widely-read *New York Times Magazine* essay. In the fall of 1961, University of California professor Thomas Parkinson published *A Casebook on the Beat* that included literary works by the now-expected cohort (Kerouac, Ginsberg, Gregory Corso, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, William Burroughs, etc.) and essays by the likes of Kenneth Rexroth, Norman Podhoretz, Warren Tallman, Herbert Gold, and others. Yet Parker included neither Holmes' literature nor his commentary.

As the Beat mystique grew in the years following Kerouac's death in 1969, Holmes was resurrected in the roles of observer and commentator, providing details in interviews and essays on a group of writers and confederates whose past was hazed over by alcohol and drugs, faulty memories, and the mythologizing consequences of legends told and retold. Holmes came to be seen as a less galvanizing writer than Kerouac had been, yet at the same time as a more reasonable chronicler of events. Some of the qualities that vitalized Kerouac as an enthralling book writer – his unrestrained and uninhibited literary manners – were the very qualities that made him unsuitable to serve the media as a spokesperson for his generation, let alone for his coterie of writers. Newspapers and magazines and soon biographers and scholars looked to Holmes for his reportage and his insights, since he had been an intimate part of the scene but did not seem to live the Beat lifestyle to the point that it rendered him incapable of producing considerate responses to their queries. Biographer Barry Miles declared that even in the late 1940s Holmes had been capable of navigating both the New York intelligentsia circles and the hipster world – and perhaps for that reason was never really fully integrated in either. Miles granted that Holmes possessed “a writer's eye for detail,” but concluded that Holmes was “ultimately square and professorial, as his later career showed” (122). The general tone had been sounded earlier by Dennis McNally, another Kerouac biographer who, as became the norm, looked to Holmes' observations and records in order to amplify Kerouac's background and personality, while giving Holmes rather short shrift. In McNally's view, Holmes in the late 1940s had been an “angular young man” who was “a cerebral, analytical Massachusetts Yankee, [who] was also a writer.” Not exactly the sort of description that brings the adoration of literature fans. Even Ann Charters' groundbreaking biography of Kerouac in 1973 portrayed a Holmes who was essentially a witness, not a catalyst, to the Beat scene.

John Clellon Holmes now gets a much fuller reckoning in Ann and Samuel Charter's full-length biography, *Brother-Souls: John Clellon Holmes, Jack Kerouac, and the Beat Generation*. In these pages Holmes emerges as an idealistic young man who spent the late 1940s shuffling

between cheap New York City apartments, haggling over love affairs, wrestling with his soul, and struggling to be a writer. The Charters reveal the surprisingly key role that Holmes played in the development of Beat literature that has heretofore gone uncharted. More importantly, Holmes emerges as an important novelist whose work radiates a rhythm and force that equal those found in all the top Beat writing.

Most of the twenty-four chapters of the book begin with an excerpt from Holmes' unpublished journals or letters, and the pages throughout are laced with abundant selections from these sources. The result is that readers receive a weaving of the objective narrative text along with Holmes' own private voice. The Charters smoothly blend their storyline with the close observations of Holmes and occasionally of others as well, including Jay Landesman. Readers are always kept aware of who is making the observation, and whether the observations are contemporary with the scenes they accompany or are later reminiscences. Scenes are not presented as gospel, but as reportage from specific sources, a careful attentiveness that is often lacking in biographies where later recountings and novelized versions are incorporated at face value. The authors' reliability allows them to build a strong case for Holmes' inclusion as a Beat writer of the first rank.

Before either Kerouac or Ginsberg had found an audience, Holmes published poems in respectable journals, including *Partisan Review*, *Poetry*, *Chicago Review*, *Saturday Review of Literature*, and *Harper's*. In fact, he touted Ginsberg to Delmore Schwartz at *Partisan Review* in 1950, certainly a nugget of the Beat past that most readers would never have known. Readers who have availed themselves of the various collections of letters certainly would have known of Holmes' support for Kerouac in the early days, especially as he encouraged him to focus on his road material. But their relationship was far more complex and Holmes' influence was far more convoluted and consequential. In the closing weeks of 1950, a few months before Kerouac began hammering on the typescript that would become *On the Road*, he received a letter from Neal Cassady, referred to ever after as the "Joan Anderson letter," that Kerouac claimed was an American literary masterpiece. Little did Kerouac know, according to the Charters, that Holmes had been carrying on his own correspondence with Cassady, and one month earlier had sent Cassady his "Fay Kenney letter," to which Cassady responded with "Woo—EEEE! A real whiz of a letter" (179). A boomerang effect followed. After running out of steam on a short letter of reply to Holmes, Cassady promised to continue the tale of his own parallel adventures in person, when he came back to New York City. Here the Charters take up the story: "Cassady's subsequent letter to Kerouac was written ten days later. The account of the 'Joan Anderson' hospital visit and the sexual exploits that followed read like a continuation of the letter Cassady had begun writing to Holmes" (179). When Kerouac showed Holmes the "Joan Anderson letter," Holmes recognized its debt to his own "Fay Kenney letter."

In addition to this and other cases for Holmes' influence, the biography also sheds light on Kerouac's famous twenty-day typing stint in April 1951, when he produced *On the Road*. Typically one imagines him sitting up all night, focused determinedly on his task. Holmes' journals make known a different scene: Kerouac's days passed apparently much like the days before and after the typing stint. Kerouac spent one long afternoon drinking with Holmes and went out for big drinking parties on at least several other occasions. That is, he remained social

in his fashion. The three weeks of typing culminated nonetheless in a style in which Kerouac, Holmes believed, had found his voice. One note here: The Charters quote Holmes' journal entry for April 9, 1951, inserting the editorial "[sic]" when Holmes' refers to the typescript as "a series of sixteen foot rolls of thin tracing paper" (192). They claim in their narrative of events that in fact the rolls of paper were ten feet long. It turns out, however, that Holmes was right, and the biographers are wrong.

This quibble is borne out by a prevalent structural device in the book. Although the full title of *Brother-Souls* suggests an equivalence of presentation between the two writers, readers are treated to a far more intimate perspective of Holmes than they are of Kerouac. Holmes' angst, motivations, and reactions are all abundantly illustrated with the immediacy of his journal entries and letters, and colored by the tints of his memoirs and reflections, all fully footnoted. Kerouac's life, on the other hand, is characterized by second- and third-hand summaries, without documentation. The result is a richer, fuller, treatment of Holmes. The two men's youthful lives are told in the initial stages of the book, and while their lives in some ways are on parallel arcs (they shared a birthday, four years apart, for one thing), the book threatens to bog down in a back-and-forth storyline. The pace and tone change considerably once the two men meet on a steamy July 4th weekend in 1948, but one might wonder whether Kerouac had been relied on to buoy Holmes' status, to maintain interest in the life of one who, as is the case for many others, is of interest to Kerouac readers because of his association with him. As the middle chapters unfold, this is clearly not the case, and Holmes' story captivates the reader without the obligation of Kerouac's erstwhile obligatory presence. Holmes comes forward as the principle subject, and Kerouac as an object of Holmes' perception.

One of the rewards of reading biographies, beyond exploring the life of the central figure, is that one is given the chance to discover the fascinating figures who are nonetheless tangential to that life, and here one is amply rewarded. Gershon Legman, the folklorist of eroticism, is without doubt among the most memorable of these characters. The description of a visit to his apartment is a masterpiece of evocation. So, too, are the characterizations of Jay and Fran Landesman and also, to a lesser extent, are those of Edward Stringham and Alan Harrington. Furthermore, readers are treated to an insider's view of jazz and the emergent be-bop trends. One of the true pleasures of this book is that the streets and taverns and jazz joints of New York City in the late 1940s and 1950s come to life with the rhythms and sounds of daily life of the young bohemians as they argued about love, music, ideology, and literature.

Brother-Souls surpasses the obligation of exploring Holmes' life and times. The book supplies much-welcomed critical analyses of Holmes' novels *Go* and *The Horn* with a subtlety and surety befitting two seasoned scholars of music, literature, and the Beat Generation. These critically sympathetic readings of each novel will surely attract new readers to their pages and send old readers back to their bookshelves. In fact, *Brother-Souls* makes an extravagant claim for the future of *The Horn*, which at this time is apparently out of print: "It is not too much to assume that Holmes' novel will finally be accepted, like Kerouac's *On the Road*, as a modern American classic" (290). This is not bluster; the book argues the case convincingly.

Another prophecy can be made. *Brother-Souls* relies on a deep, meticulously kept, untapped archive of boyhood diaries, journals, notebooks, manuscripts, and correspondence that are stored

in the Mugar Library at Boston University. It is time for John Clellon Holmes to have a rank of dedicated scholars who will see to the publication of and commentary on this rich reserve of American literature. And as this field develops and Holmes gets the recognition he deserves, this first-rate biography by Ann and Samuel Charters will be seen as the groundbreaking volume. Their book has been beautifully produced by the University Press of Mississippi in a high-quality binding, with extensive end notes, comprehensive bibliography, and thorough index. Superb research, clear, evocative writing, and professional packaging combine to distinguish John Clellon Holmes as a respected and important writer. *Brother-Souls* is a major work.

Works Cited

McNally, Dennis. *Desolate Angel: Jack Kerouac, the Beat Generation, and America*. New York: Random House, 1979.

Miles, Barry. *Jack Kerouac King of the Beats: A Portrait*. New York: Henry Holt, 1998.