INTERVIEW: ALLEN GINSBERG

Allen Ginsberg, Guggenheim Fellow and member of the American Institute of Arts end Letters, is the author of *Howl, Kaddish, Planet News, The Fall of America, Mind Breaths, and Plutonian Ode: Poems 1977-1980,* among other books. In recent years, Mr. Ginsberg has explored the poetics of meditation and pop music. He has sung with Bob Dylan and the Clash, and recorded Blake's Songs, as well as a double album, *First Blues* for John Hammond Records. He is a meditation student of Chogyam Trungpa, Rinpoche. In 1975 he co-founded the poetics program at Naropa Institute and has since taught there as a Core Faculty member. A major participant in the San Francisco Renaissance and Beat Generation literary communities, his public readings and performances, tireless work for humanitarian concerns, and generosity as teacher and friend are legendary.

Daniel Ritkes, Associate Editor of *Blue Window*, met up with Allen Ginsberg at Naropa Institute, in Boulder, Colorado, and on June 22, 1986, had the following conversation.

RITKES: You were co-founder of the poetics department here at Naropa Institute, a Buddhist college formed by Zen Masters. What attracted your interest in Naropa?

GINSBERG: This was basically a contemplative college, in the sense that the basis was wisdom search and search into consciousness. It was founded by Buddhists, who were trained in classical Himilayan wisdom teachings, but there had been quite a bit of background to that in the fifties in San Francisco (Kerouac's *Dharma Bums*, Gary Snyder and Phillip Whalen). The practical, mind-expansion element, running parallel with psychedelic drugs, was a dominant theme in the fifties around the San Francisco poetry Renaissance. So this was a magic opportunity to put it all together in the '70s- or as Kerouac said "Walking on water wasn't built in a day."

RITKES: Does meditation influence your writing?

GINSBERG: Yes. But writing is meditation, and always has been, in the twentieth century. Remember Kerouac's notion of spontaneous mind, spontaneous prose, spontaneous bop-prosidy-meaning write your mind; just as meditation is observing your mind.

RITKES: What prompted you to write "Howl?"

GINSBERG: I had been reading Williams for a long time and there was a line of his that stuck in my mind. I may not have thought of it that day, but it was my philosophy of the moment, which was "unworldly love." It's from his poem called "Rain." Unworldy love that has no hope in the world and that cannot change the world to its delight. In other words, what we hold in our hearts, that we don't think is practical, but still remains with us as desire or fantasy or imagination--I saw no reason to suppress it or feel it was worthless because after all it was my heart and my own imagination. So I thought, well, I'll just write down what I really think, instead of writing poetry.

RITKES: Was that difficult for you to do?

GINSBERG: [In 1955] I felt that I had failed as a poet, and that I really hadn't accomplished anything, so what was the purpose of trying to write poetry? Why not just write what I thought? At that time I was also very much under Williams' influence in his later poems, "Paterson" and "Pictures from Breughel."

"Poetry is in a great situation at the moment. There are a lot of great poets living in America."

RITKES: Was there a particuiar subject matter that you set out to address when you began "Howl?"

GINSBERG: I think it was sort of a narrative account of all the fuck-ups I've run into in my life. People who died or people who had funny destinies or people who did outrageously strange things or had visions. Actually, my mother, who was in the "bug house," was behind it. When I visited her, she didn't even recognize me after her lobotomy.... So, the emotion was towards my mother; so I still had the feeling of mother-involved fidelity, and it was the only thing that was practical. It was the only other thing that was still there, so it was an expression of that kind of feeling of something deep still there, although it seems lost to the world. So: worldly love that had no hope in the world and cannot change the world to its delight.

RITKES: How long did it take you to write "Howl?"

GINSBERG: First part, the original draft was one afternoon, and that contains about as much and a little more material than was in the final draft. The "Moloch" section I wrote about a month later in San Francisco.

RITKES: Did you have any idea at the time you were writing the poem it would become historically significant?"

GINSBERG: No. That's why it's good. Because it's inadvertent. If I knew it was going to be historical, I would have heen worried about what I was saying.

RITKES: When you finished writing it, what did you think?

GINSBERG: I thought it was good writing, and that Kerouac would like it, so I sent it to him. But I didn't want to send it to my family or anything like that. I thought my family would be upset by the sex parts, that they'd think I was boasting about getting fucked in the ass or something. And I didn't want to wave it in my father's nose.

RITKES: Did you feel you could have gotten away publishing it without him knowing?

GINSBERG: I had no intentions of publishing it. It was just a piece of writing, quite literally, it was not a poem. It's very ordinary, you see. It's important that you understand that or that it be clearly said here so that people won't think you have to get into some kind of special or magical state to write.

RITKES: Well, what about your state of mind when you wrote it?

GINSBERG: Just ordinary everyday pleasure in expressing my exuberance.

RITKES: Were you loaded when you wrote it?

GINSBERG: I wasn't loaded. Please, Dan, the problem is you are missing something that I'm truly trying to say quite earnestly. It's a very simple fact that when I wrote part one of "Howl," [it was] just an ordinary afternoon. The more ordinary you understand it to be, the more possibility there is that people will be able to get into doing something for themselves.

RITKES: Well, you know, there's the romantic image of the poet...

GINSBERG: Well, let's get back to reality.

RITKES: Was there a point in time when you realized what you and Kerouac were doing was

more than fleeting, but something of historical...

GINSBERG: Yes, there was. In 1958 or 1959. I remember when I got back from Paris, I was laying in my bed and I'd been getting calls from *Life Magazine* and they were doing a story, and a bit on television. I suddenly realized, "How come all these people are interested in poetry?" Something must be going on here. And I realized that what we were saying was so different from normal-minded America, that I got a little scared, realizing the responsibility. We were actually onto something that was very basic, that the entire nation was ignoring the hard-heartedness under the military, and the hyper-industrialization, and hyper-mechanization homogenizing people so that they were losing their sense of their own worth and value. They were becoming intimidated, trying to act like each other in a conformist way, and were not really living their own lives. And I suddenly realized that maybe we were involved in reviving that individual understanding in the spirit of Thoreau and Whitman.

RITKES: Do you think that *Life Magazine* understood that?

GINSBERG: Oh, no. They were like a moth to the flame. But I realized that we had a certain flame that was permanent and was real, emotionally more real than they were. We were displaying that poetry was more real than the attitudes and emotions that were current as part of the culture. In fact, emotions that were somewhat neglected and pushed to the back, by the "official culture" the official media. And I suddenly realized with a kind of shudder what we were in for -- heading to save America.

"Maybe poetry is only read by poets...But television isn't going to last forever, and even if it does, it'll probably have to get to poetry in order to keep people interested."

RITKES: And what did you do with that responsibility you said you felt?

GINSBERG: Renounced it immediately. It was too self-conscious a situation. And since [creativity] happens when we are following our own nature spontaneously, I said well, I'll continue to follow my nature spontaneously and not get serous.

RITKES: You felt O.K. about that?

GINSBERG: Basic Buddhist teaching: you have an idea and an insight -- it's there and if you solidify it into a concept, you lose the original preface of the insight.

RITKES: But you believe in the concept don't you?

GINSBERG: You have an experience that is a deep experience. There's not a question of believing it or not believing it. It leaves an impression, it alters your nature somewhat, but you don't have to recite it to yourself like the Boy Scouts or anything.

RITKES: Well, do you think that there is any responsibility that a poet or any artist has to address social issues of the day?

GINSBERG: Absolutely none, and if he tries to do it as a responsibility, he'll only mess it up and intrude his shallow, rational mind on his whole awareness which is partly a dream, partly imagination, partly intuition, but is not just the common sense rational mind.

RITKES: But isn't one aspect of consciousness a concept of a social order?

GINSBERG: A very small part. Tiny part. Hardly important. I think that the minute poets see it as a social responsibility, they short circuit the inspiration that might lead to social change, to a social statement of importance, because they're just thinking with part of their conceptual mind, rather than with the whole mind, body.... And poets have to use the whole mind, not just the conceptual aspect. They have to use rhythm, have to use melody, have to use pictures, have to use imagination and have to use their conceptual reason. But their conceptual reason is only a quarter of the enchilada. And if they get hung up on trying to make a social statement and think of it as a responsibility, they cut the enchilada in four parts. Then all they've got is the dry intellect part, the dry concept.

RITKES: That holds true not only with social commentary, but personal commentary, as well.

GINSBERG: It holds true with your relations to your wife. I mean, the first thing a husband learns, I guess, once he has kids, is that any conception they had of what they though they were going to do goes by the wayside. Because you've got a living being there, which is not a conception, it's a living being with its own needs. So a poem is like a living baby, in the sense that it springs from your imagination and your heart and your feelings and your rhythms and your ass, and your head and your reason all at once, and it's like--it's it own....

RITKES: And if a poet decides that nuclear war is evil, and only the conceptual part of his mind....

GINSBERG: Then he'll probably write bad poetry and he'll maybe contribute to the nuclear holocaust, by solidifying a notion of evil, which makes a situation into a problem, at which point it becomes insoluble.

RITKES: Do you have any advice....?

GINSBERG: I think that kind of thinking about absolute evil doesn't allow the mind any opening at all. It doesn't allow the imagination any opening to find a way to solve the problem. You're just stuck with your problem and that's it. Period. You have already determined that your problem is absolute evil and that's all there is to it and there's no way out—Bam! O.K., you won. Absolute evil was your word. Absolute evil means it will take over. Understand, and that's the end.

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RITKES: O.K., what would you recommend to poets who....

GINSBERG: Well, you have other thoughts than that, don't you?

RITKES: Yes.

GINSBERG: ...on the subject of the bomb and nuclear war, you have many different thoughts not just that one of absolute evil. And I'm sure you've seen pictures of it, it's quite beautiful. And you also thought it was awesome, and you also thought it was wonderful in some strange way and you though it was evil—that's one thought among many thoughts. But it's like you're trying to restrict yourself to only one thought. Whereas, your imagination and your mind have many thoughts. You have to approach the subject with as many insights as you have, not just one of them. Tell the truth. What do you really think? Not what you think you are supposed to think. Not what you decide is the best of the thoughts, but what *are* the thoughts that *actually* come through. That's what I mean, and that's real easy. It's actually accepting your own self. It's accepting your own power. And working with your power.

RITKES: But then there's your audience....

GINSBERG: I would say forget about your audience and write for your own intelligence and your friends. As I say, if you begin thinking that you have to deliver a message Western Union, you get so you have to deliver a message that will restrict the amplitude of your awareness, and your thoughts and your intelligence. And particularly if you think the

audience is too dumb to understand how smart you are, so that you better go down and make yourself as dumb as the audience, then it makes the poem limited and who's interested? Because it's just like you're talking to some imaginary idea of who you think is listening, which would only be a projection of what you think is the dumbest around. So who wants to be someone that addresses the dumbest people around?

"(Poets) do that every hundred years. When the language gets tired and begins getting literary and you're not writing the way you talk. Then you have to update and write the way you talk and the way you think."

RITKES: Does it bother you at all that mediocre lyrics in a lot of rock and roll, folk or even country music result in money, exposure and respectability for musicians, whereas poets, who might be writing more interesting things....

GINSBERG: How do I feel about it or does it bother me?

RITKES: Does it bother you?

GINSBERG: No. It doesn't bother me. I've got my own work to do. I'm bothered when within the world of academic poetry grants, awards and so forth that a number of great poets, because they are working in this open forum in the tradition of Pound and Williams, are neglected or ignored by an establishment that is primarily interested in closed forums or traditional light poetry. So there are a number of geniuses like Gregory Corso, or John Wiener, who are living at one time or another from hand to mouth.

RITKES: Well that bothers me....

GINSBERG: Well, I say that bothers me, but not rock and roll. Your question was particularly rock and roll....As a matter of fact, it not only not bothers me, it's alright because the best of the rock and roll people have learned from my poetry and are very respectful. Like Dylan or John Lennon or Jagger or Joe Strummer or Sting. I mean they're all people I've been acquainted with at one time or another.

RITKES: I've seen you perform "Father Death," and that's a very moving piece. To me it's more of a song than a poem.

GINSBERG: Well, it is a song—I sing it. It was composed note for note with the words, simultaneously with a harmonium, on an airplane.

RITKES: Do you think that poetry is more lyrical than it is visual?

GINSBERG: No. There's a traditional division made by Pound into visual or lyrical or melodic, and the intellect, intelligence or witty parts. A poem can be pictorial, musical and intellectual. And they are all equally interesting. Probably the pictorial element is enough for Williams or Reznikof's poetry and the melodic is enough for someone like Dylan Thomas or Hart Crane. So there is a mixture of intelligence in both of them and the intellectual part is sort of enough for the academic poets or some brilliant poets like Shakespeare. Shakespeare generally has music and wit.

RITKES: Well, poetry comes from a spoken tradition.

GINSBERG: It always has been, before the invention of the printing press. Homer was sung or spoken. The first Greek Western poetry was spoken or sung. The Psalms in the Bible were chanted. So there's always been together poetry/music. Lyric means lyre, from the lyre, L-Y-R-E. People have forgotten that. They think that lyrics just mean the words, rather than words *for* music.

RITKES: Poetry is in a bad situation when nobody is reading it or buying it.

GINSBERG: I don't think so. Culture is in a bad situation. Poetry is in a great situation at the moment. There are a lot of great poets living in America.

RITKES: But none of them get recognition or mass....

GINSBERG: Many get recognition. Creeley has a very good job and is widely appreciated as a poet. Corso....

RITKES: But they are only read by poets.

GINSBERG: Well, that's the problem. Maybe poetry is only read by poets. I mean people even stopped reading Shakespeare and Dostoyevsky to look at television. But television isn't going to last forever, and even if it does, it'll probably have to get to poetry in order to keep people interested. At the moment it is just dealing with bad poetry.

RITKES: Nobody buys poetry, period.

GINSBERG: Most poetry is not that interesting.Most great or classical poetry is interesting enough. And when it comes along in the public ear, like Bob Dylan, then it has more understanders and readers than anything.

RITKES: But that's music, not poetry.

GINSBERG: Oh, please! Poetry began as music. With music, like Sappho. Like I'm saying, Dylan has returned it to its origins. This is true poetry. But I think [Dylan] is high poetry, and it is classical style in the sense that it's with music, it's classical lyric poetry. Like you were talking about—lyrics. It's staring you in the face. And it has billions of people that listen and hundreds of millions that analyze every phrase. And you are not recognizing it as poetry and you're still bewailing that nobody is picking it up, but you're not picking it up. It is you that is not picking it up and the fact is it's already there in front of you.

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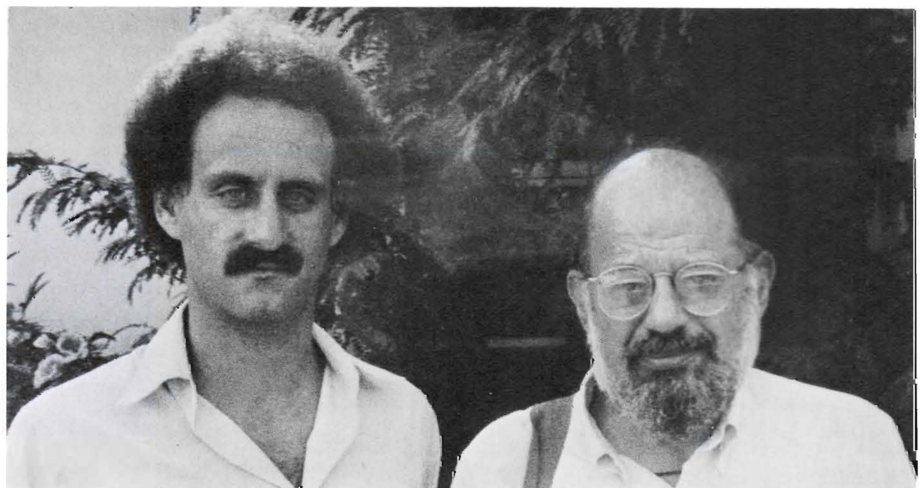

RITKES: Maybe I should sing what I write.

GINSBERG: No, I'm just talking about it being out there. It is out there. And it wouldn't do you any harm to go into music. Plato and Confucious both said that learning the lute was part of the education of the whole man.

RITKES: What problems do you find among inexperienced poets?

GINSBERG: They don't trust their own real minds in the sense that we were talking before. They don't write their minds. They write some idea that they think they are supposed to have—on a basis of a fixed idea of what the poem is supposed to be like. So they miss the whole thing and don't tell anybody what they are really like and what they really think and how it really is with them. You know, it's like trying to...it's synthetic, plastic. And not finding a form or way of poetry where they can include all their mind.

RITKES: Do you have any views about form *per se*?

GINSBERG: You have to remember that there are all kinds of forms. When people speak of forms, they generally mean sonnet, or iambic pentameter, or stress verse with a metronomic count, like a lyric. For song, a certain kind of rhythmic rhyme is appropriate, because the melody returns on itself, like the rhyme. For chanted or spoken poetry, the observation of the breaths itself can be a great aid in determining the length of a line. Using the breath stop as a way of figuring where the line ends, the verse line. Actually, the nomenclature "verse" is a line of poetry.

RITKES: So when you read poetry, you are thinking in terms of the breath stop?

GINSBERG: Modern poetry that's written on that basis. Remember reading your Shakespeare in terms of the sonnet? But there's a whole new set of forms evolved out of all the centuries' experience too, like the Bible, like blues—

RITKES: Blues music?

GINSBERG: Yes, blues songs, blues words, blues lyrics, that are not considered part of the cannon of academic form, but are definite forms. Haiku is another form.

RITKES: What about things like meter, rhyme, rhythm and things like that?

GINSBERG: Well you can write poems with lots of rhythm, or cadence, but it actually doesn't have to go into the stress meter. You can have rhythms like in "Howl" or "Kaddish" that are not like the 19th Century English rhythm. But remember that the things that you are talking about are basically the 19th Century solidifications and they don't really represent aliterative verse....

RITKES: When you go to poetry readings and hear other poets, what are your impressions?

GINSBERG: I'm interested in whether they have some original measure for their verse, besides accent, besides stress. And I'm interested in whether they've got something to say. I'm interested in whether they understand the history of poetry and prosidy and forms and whether they are advancing the forms or following a tradition that's a more open form where you have to invent your own measure. Whitman started inventing his own measure to the line. And he's our greatest poet. So, it's like saying, "Well how come Whitman doesn't write in forms?" Well, of course Whitman writes in forms, he's just got his own kind of forms. His forms.

RITKES: Do you see anything happening at the present in the way of new forms or even old forms?

GINSBERG: A lot of the best poetry I see is somewhere between prose and poetry, even though it's impersonalized. The best I've seen so far is Gregory Corso, whose method is—has some element of the old Shakespearean, but is sort of a dissonance measure and is measured by the ideas and the phrasing and the rhythmic phrasing, rather than by the accent of quantity of cadence syllables.

"I would say forget about your audience and write for your own intelligence and your friends."

RITKES: And what about Allen Ginsberg? What are you doing these days?

GINSBERG: Lately, I've been exploring an interesting area of dreams where I developed a talent for naturalistic description. But applying that talent which I learned from Williams say or Kerouac to the transcription of dreams in 14 syllable lines. When I wake up in the morning, write out a dream that has a beginning, a middle and an end, like a story. Like my poem "White Shroud," I seem to be able to transcribe it at first into verse lines, something between 13 and 16 syllables. And so that's kind of a narrative line—it's good for the narration of dreams. But the dream provides a kind of imaginative visionary recombination of a naturalistic detail, as a dream.

RITKES: Poets always seem to be trying to write in the language that people speak...

GINSBERG: Yes, they do that every hundred years. When the language gets tired and begins getting literary and you're not writing the way you talk. Then you have to update and write the way you talk and think. If you write different from the way you think and the way you talk, naturally it gets worn out, boring, and you're just imitating somebody else's poems and not writing your mind. Do you know what I mean "writing your own mind?"

RITKES: Well, writing in language that is conversational, or more the way language is really spoken.

GINSBERG: That also goes for the understanding—the most vivid of conversational and of ordinary mind. Those parts of the ordinary mind and talk within the field of ordinary mind that are memorable and vivid and recollectable.

RITKES: It's interesting that language becomes worn out when people aren't writing the way they are thinking.

GINSBERG: The language then is a rehash of other people's poems.

RITKES: So, you write the way your really think and the way you really talk.

GINSBERG: Right. Exactly. Now you not only have taken the words out of my mouth, you're putting them in.

RITKES: Well, you put them out and I stole them.

GINSBERG: Well, no, you summarize very nicely. And it should seem to be simple. It involves some sense of one's own dignity and acceptance of one's own mouth, speech. Self-acceptance rather than thinking you're not good enough.

Next Issue: Daniel Ritkes interviews one of the leaders of the Black Mountain movement, American poet Robert Creeley.