

One Fast Move or I'm Gone: Kerouac's Big Sur. Dir. Curt Worden. Perfs. Joyce Johnson, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Carolyn Cassady, John Ventimiglia, Tom Waits, Sam Shepard, Patti Smith, Bill Morgan, Brenda Knight, and others. DVD. Kerouacfilms, 2008.
\$29.98

Reviewed by Tom Pynn

If you think Kerouac found salvation on the road . . . you don't know jack.

Since 1986 we've had a handful of films about Jack Kerouac and the "beat generation" that have appealed to a general audience. Documentaries such as John Antonelli's *Kerouac* (1986), Lerner and MacAdams' *What Happened to Kerouac?* (1986), and, more recently, Chuck Workman's *The Source* (2000), however, fail to get to the heart of the matter concerning the works themselves, but have instead tended to focus on the lives of the artists. This conceptual failure has tended to perpetuate the cult(s) of personality of particular members, mostly the men, while obscuring the deeper significance of the works and the place in American arts and letters of these important writers and artists. Beat Studies scholars have therefore faced difficult challenges in convincing the public and academia of the importance of the literature and elevating Kerouac et al. beyond mere fodder for Euro-American teenage male fantasy, which is especially true of the work of Jack Kerouac, the so-called "King of the Beats."

Curt Worden and Jim Sampas' *One Fast Move or I'm Gone*, therefore, is a welcome addition to the scholarship devoted to excavating the depth and richness of Kerouac's work. Unlike previous documentaries, this one focuses exclusively on what has sometimes been called his last great novel, *Big Sur* (1962). A documentary about a specific work of art is important for many reasons not least for showing the complexity of the work: the challenge to conventional notions about the novel form, the relationship between poetry and prose, the signature of the author, conceptions of gender, and the ways in which real life events inform the work of art and vice versa—all important elements of Kerouac's work as a writer.

The film opens with a side view of a scrolled manuscript, then the top view with "big sur" written in red and blue as Jay Farrar's (Uncle Tupelo, Son Volt) Chicago blues rock riff and driving beat of "breath our iodine" foreshadowing breakdown. The use of deep, rich earth tones is one of the striking features of the film—director of photography Richard Ruthkowski's saturated browns, blues, and greens. A beautiful film to look at contrasting and correlating with Robert Hunter's estimation of the novel: "This is an ugly, ugly book of ugly places in the mind, of sordid places in the psyche." Or Tom Waits': "*Big Sur* always reminded me of a chronicle of a man being eaten by ants, you know. It's a snail crawling across a straight razor." At the same time, the film develops what one commentator observes about *Big Sur*, that it is "actually a truer book than *On the Road*." It is the "truth" of the contradictory suffering and compassionate human condition expressed in *Big Sur* that *One Fast Move or I'm Gone* is concerned. It is the difficult truth of the fragility of human consciousness at the heart of Kerouac's work that previous documentaries have failed to explicate. Interestingly enough, it is also this failure to grasp-imagine the

tenderness and compassion and sincerity of his work that Kerouac most despaired about in the critical reviews of his work, particularly *Big Sur*.

Much will be made of the beauty of this film. The cinematography is luxuriant with deep colors, especially of the coastline at Big Sur, the rich blues and turquoise of the Pacific Ocean, the greens of the foliage and grasses, the sandy yellow-white of the shore. The camera often focuses on particular objects—clothespins on the line, a skull hanging from the cabin porch wall, a chair by the window, and my favorite: a spider's web oscillating in the wind and light. Each gives the impression of a still life, an indulgent attention to the uniqueness of things that is also a hallmark of Kerouac's writing. These images range from the strictly representational to the abstract, a cigarette burning in an ashtray to the sun vibrating through bamboo to candlelight reflected on the interior cabin wall. Then, of course, there are the various shots of the omnipresent BRIDGE that looms large in the documentary as it looms large in the novel. At daybreak, mid-day, dusk, in the fog, up close, mid-shot, long shot. Silent and unyieldingly present.

The structure of the documentary can be read as consisting of four segments: the context for the trip out west, the arrival of Kerouac in San Francisco, the trips to and from Bixby Canyon, and a looking back suggesting various ways that Kerouac and the novel are still alive and meaningful today. The setting of the context for the trip to California and Ferlinghetti's cabin is an interesting seven minute assemblage of black and white film footage of Kerouac in the village c. 1957, a famous b/w photo of Hettie Cohen and Joyce Glassman at the Artist's Club on March 10, 1960, taken by Fred W. McDarrah, commentary from Joyce Johnson and others about the release of *On the Road*, Gilbert Millstein's now famous review, Kerouac's subsequent inability to handle his celebrity status, and a jazz poem performance *a capella* by David Amram on stage at the Village Vanguard that closes this part of the documentary. It was, as Joyce Johnson remembers, "a big uncontrollable, exhausting scene." Yet it isn't until 1960 that Kerouac leaves Northport and travels west.

A letter to Ferlinghetti dated July 8, 1960, reveals the reasons why Kerouac wanted to leave:

. . . I'm at the end of my nerves especially now with Subterraneans movie opening in NY with big reviews and Tristessa out at the same time people starting to ring the doorbell for no good fucking reason in the human world. . . . What I need now is rest But seriously the other night I knew I was heading for a genuine, my first real mental breakdown if I didn't get away from everybody for at least 2 months. (*Selected Letters 1957-1969*, 296-7)

Kerouac writes that he also wanted to speak with Ferlinghetti about City Lights publishing *Book of Dreams* and planned on revising the work in the cabin. Neither the novel nor the documentary mentions this, but it is a minor omission, one that does not in any way detract from the film. The documentary traces the novel rather than the other working factors in Kerouac's mind. This is a strength of the film as it keeps a tight focus on *Big Sur*. Indeed, in the novel, Kerouac writes and John Ventimiglia narrates: "I had been driven mad for three years by endless telegrams, phonecalls, requests, mail, visitors, reporters, snoopers. . . . finally realizing I was surrounded and outnumbered and had to get away to solitude again or die--" (4-5).

The arrival of Kerouac in San Francisco and subsequent trips to and from the cabin in Bixby Canyon is the heart of the film and constitutes its sustained focus. This is the opening proper of the documentary

with title across the screen and the green countryside rolling by from train perspective and Benjamin Gibbard's (Death Cab for Cutie) tenor voice signing "California Zephyr," a bouncy, bright introduction even cautiously optimistic as the novel also opens. This section of the film explores the novel from an array of perspectives giving us an excellent reading of the novel and its context: Interspersed with b/w photos from that time period; readings from *Big Sur* by actors, musicians, and writers; interviews with "beat" notables such as Carolyn Cassady, Michael McClure, and Ferlinghetti; and an uncanny narration by Kerouac impersonator John Ventimiglia. Here is also where several of my own favorite moments occur: the alternating reading from "Sea" by Tom Waits and Sam Shepard, Robert Hunter's bebop styled "one fast move or I'm gone" so I blow \$8 on a cab to drive me down that coast," and his hyper recitation of the opening hangover scene: "That feeling when you wake up with the delirium tremens with the *fear* of eerie death . . . "(9,7, respectively). Or Dar Williams' sobbing reading of the book's hopeful and sad ending despite the previous 150 pages of terror and heartbreak: "I'll get my ticket and say goodbye on a flower day and leave all San Francisco behind and go back across autumn America and it'll all be like it was in the beginning—Simple golden eternity blessing all—" (216).

These superb renderings of Kerouac's words are a large part of the film's success. Worden and producer Jim Sampas have made some excellent casting, selecting people who clearly are great admirers of the novel and who convey a deep sympathy for the work, admiration for Kerouac's genius creativity, and poignant acknowledgement of the dark recesses of his alcoholism. There is no sugar coating of Jack's drinking in either the novel or the documentary, and this is as it should be. At the same time, however, many in the film indicate the irony that if Jack hadn't been suffering we wouldn't have *Big Sur*. For instance, Hunter's observation about "the Mars at 4th and Howard" hangover scene: "and we benefit from that hangover those of us who love this particular book." Actor Donal Logue (*Ghost Rider*, *LIFE*) says that "the sad thing is, is that it is also beautiful, that he had it and can share it. Do you want a psychologically healthy Jack Kerouac who doesn't write like that or do you want someone who burns and throws down that hard, you know, the way he liked life and music?" Aram Saroyan also points out that "pain and pleasure are both parts of the same mortal taste." Grief and joy is the antinomy of the human condition, irreducible beyond this existential point.

What the film tells us about the book is also a feature that scholars and other readers will find interesting. We learn, for instance, that Ferlinghetti contributed "Les poissons de la mer / parle Breton" to "Sea" (220), and Jack Hirschman's comment that the explosion of creativity in post war America was in large part fueled by ethnic minorities, artists of French, Italian, Austrian, Jewish extraction. "The changing panorama of American life" in this period opens up an avenue of research not well developed at this point, not even in sociological accounts of the period. Viewers will also be happily surprised at the inclusion, toward the end of the film, of Kerouac's sketch of the cabin, replete with overhanging tree branches wispy and almost sinister, and—is it the same sketch?—the lighter almost post-impressionistic creek running down to the sea.

For all of the strengths of the documentary, which make it superior to other the cinematic works on Kerouac, there are some weaknesses. First, the documentary lacks a female voice from the book other than that of Carolyn Cassady. To this end, the editors could have called upon Brenda Knight, given her editorship of *Women of the Beat Generation*, to present something more insightful about women and the novel. Secondly, why include Herb Gold? On film he says that he gave Kerouac a less than enthusiastic review of *Big Sur* when it came out. The director offers two brief clips of him making banal and obvious

comments about Kerouac — whom, by his own account, he disliked and avoided when he could because of Kerouac’s blatant anti-semitism. What would it have been like if the director had included Gold as a contradictory position in the film? Maybe a reprise of his review of *Big Sur*?

The film also suffers from too much pop psychologizing of Kerouac, especially from people who have little connection to his work other than being fans. Editing out some of these segments might have helped rescue Kerouac, at least to some extent, from youthful infatuation and romanticization. I do, however, find useful the dimension of having artists reflect on the novel’s influence as it shows aesthetic and emotional continuity.

On another note, more attention should have been paid to the poem “Sea,” which is appended to the novel. Not since Robert J. Flaherty’s *The Man of Aran* (1934), a fictional documentary on life on the Aran Islands off the western coast of Ireland, have we had such a stark and frighteningly beautiful response to the sublimity of the crashing surf against the unyielding rock face of the world, “Mien Mo.” Michael McClure contributes a valuable aesthetic insight when he recalls the moment when he and Kerouac were on the beach sitting on a 10-foot rock overlooking the sea and Kerouac read “Sea”; equally as wonderful are his insights about the resonance of reading voice sea poem and still sea speaking. What is also absent is development of the Buddhist dimension of the novel. Of course, if all the above were part of the film it would be four hours long.

A short word about the soundtrack. Some may be surprised that Jay Farrar’s original score was chosen for the film. It reflects the Americana sound Farrar has been developing in his career with both Uncle Tupelo and Son Volt and not necessarily the jazz traditions of bebop, hard bop and free jazz that was the musical mainstay of the circles within which Kerouac moved. The only specific jazz musician mentioned in *Big Sur* is Stan Getz, who, at the time of Kerouac’s composing of the novel was himself opening new pathways with his introduction of the Brazilian Bossa Nova style to American listeners. It’s true that there is a brief reference to the blues playing on the radio, not to mention Kerouac crooning Ron Blake’s “Sweet Sixteen,” and the mention of Wagner’s *Tristan und Isolde*. As Farrar himself writes in the soundtrack’s liner notes, “Jack Kerouac was synonymous with jazz. His improvisational, loosely structured prose often read like jazz on the written page.” This is an insight also mentioned by both Hunter and Waits in the documentary, but Farrar also adds that “[f]inding out that Jack actually accepted and appreciated folk music (as in the novel *Big Sur*) and the cowboy/folk of Ramblin’ Jack Elliott (as in *Book of Dreams*) brought about the convergence of purpose and idea into a rolling inspirational focus—to write songs for this project using lines from Jack’s poem.” As a result, when viewing/listening to the film, one doesn’t experience dissonance and dissociation between what Kerouac writes/ Ventimiglia narrates and what Farrar sings and plays. Kerouac is as Americana as Farrar—Farrar is as Americana as Kerouac.

Gibbard’s remark that Kerouac has “already given the most important part of his life, which are these books” is a lesson some have yet to learn. *One Fast Move or I’m Gone* reminds us of this and many more aspects of *Big Sur* the novel and place, of the many people involved with Kerouac in his living and in his writing, and of the lasting effect and influence of *Big Sur* in our lives. In the liner notes to the soundtrack, Patti Smith tells us that “[i]t took a long time for me to feel him on my own. In the end it was the scrolls that led me to the heart of him. The dead city scrolls. Unwound like the linen wrappings of an Egyptian princess. Containing an enraptured energy that could not be denied. Suddenly through the scrolls, the

Big Sur in particular, I found him and his word. He was not a perfect man, but he had moments of perfect clarity.” After the credits have rolled and Farrar has sung “Big Sur,” we are brought back to Smith who comments about the book’s last line: “There’s no need to say another word’. He doesn’t have a period after ‘word’. Which I think is so beautiful.” With marvelous expressive hand gestures, mudras of impermanence and emptiness, she adds: “There’s no need to say another word because it just dissipates into the flux. He doesn’t stop it. It just keeps going. It’s so nice.”

So, I went to my copy of *Big Sur*, the paperback issued by Penguin Books (1992), and find that there’s a period. Now, if we can just convince these “editors” who have been mauling Kerouac’s books for decades to let him speak as the folks that have brought us *One Fast Move or I’m Gone* have done. . . .

Works Cited

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