

## On the Road – There’s an App for That

**By George Cunningham**

When I was a kid, growing up on the west coast of Florida, I thought Jack Kerouac was the coolest cat going. I read “On the Road,” Kerouac’s famous book about traveling around the country after World War II, grabbing work here and there, drinking, and smoking pot, having casual sex, and meeting people on the fringes of society along the way. In the book, Kerouac was called Sal Paradise and his pal, Neal Cassady, was called Dean Moriarty.

I loved that book, not for its literary merit, but for its message. Shake off the chains of respectability – pretty easy to do when you’re a kid – screw school, screw work, go out and live life.

I wanted to be part of the “beat generation.” Apparently a lot of other folks did as well. Pretty soon, there were coffee houses sprouting up all over the country, where people sat around playing bongo drums, reading bad poetry, and wearing sunglasses in the middle of the night.

That didn’t exactly represent the beat philosophy that Kerouac wrote about in his book. It was a kind of wannabe interpretation of what it was probably like in the minds of the folks who went to those kinds of places. They were called beatniks.

I would have liked to be a beatnik myself – my brother Chuck even bought a used set of bongo drums that we would thump at with our fingers until our mom told us to knock it off. But I had to go to school, I had a couple of part-time jobs, I had little brothers to help take care of, and I had a mother who would have been disappointed with me if I had grown a goatee and started spouting poetry. I didn’t want to disappoint mom. I still don’t.

About a year ago, I bought a copy of “On the Road” to read it again, this time as an adult. I couldn’t make it through the whole book. It was pointless and boring. These guys wandered around, feeling superior to the wage-slave squares around them, living for the moment, and moving on as soon as things didn’t work out.

So what changed? I would like to think that my taste in literature matured as I got older, but I suspect that’s not the truth. When I was a kid, it seemed kind of cool to be unhappy and sad and full of angst at the futility of human existence. The truth is that I’ve gotten old. I am now what Kerouac was railing against more than half-a-century ago. And even more disgusting than that, I am happy.

Kerouac and Cassady never had to deal with getting old. Kerouac died in 1969 at 47 from complications of cirrhosis of the liver due to alcohol abuse. Translation: He



started coughing up massive amounts of blood and was unable to stop because his liver was shot and would not let his blood clot.

His pal Cassady died in Mexico in 1968 after he collapsed while walking along a railroad track following a wedding party. He had been ingesting Seconal at the party, it was cold and rainy, he was dressed in jeans and a t-shirt, and when they finally found him, he was in a coma. He was 42.

Live fast, love hard, and die young. That sounded real cool and kind of romantic when I was a kid. Not so much, anymore. When you are too old to die young, it just sounds silly.

Nonetheless, I would like to have known Kerouac and Cassady. They may have been tragic and lonely spirits, but the book that made them famous inspired a lot of young

### **iTunes Description Of 'On the Road' app**

*Pulsating with the rhythms of jazz, frenetic sex, illicit drugs, and the mystery and promise of the open road, this iconic novel defined what it meant to be "beat" and captured the impulses of a liberated underground America. Based on Jack Kerouac's adventures with Neal Cassady, On the Road tells the story of two friends crossing the country in search of a new kind of experience and authenticity that they could not find in mainstream culture. Expressing a quintessential American vision of freedom and longing, On the Road is a timeless tale that resonates with each new generation.*

people – including me – to think about life and what they wanted from it.

Now, today's Millennial Generation can reach across time and space to connect with the Beat Generation. Penguin Classics has come out with an iPad app of the book (\$16.99 at the iTunes store) that includes the complete text of the 1957 edition of the novel, plus photos, audio clips, original reviews, slideshows, footage of other beats talking about Kerouac, an interactive map of the trips that Kerouac wrote about, other writings by Kerouac and much, much more.

I don't know how the new generation – we like to call them young

people – feels about it, but I think that Kerouac would have probably preferred to let his book speak for itself. But I could be wrong.

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