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GREG KOT

# William S. Burroughs: the beat author who became a rock star

By Greg Kot

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William S. Burroughs in 1990. The late author is the subject of a new book, “William S. Burroughs and the Cult of Rock ‘n’ Roll.” (AP)

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William S. Burroughs was not a musician and spent his life largely indifferent to contemporary music. But he was a rock star. The author — one of the founding fathers of the Beat movement that revolutionized literature in the 1950s — exerted a profound influence on the sound and attitude of rock and hip-hop over the last half-century.

In “William S. Burroughs and the Cult of Rock ‘n’ Roll” (University of Texas Press), author Casey Rae offers the most in-depth study yet of Burroughs’ influence on and Zelig-like ubiquity within contemporary music.

Burroughs, who died in 1997 at age 83, may have seemed an unlikely muse, with his gravelly voice and dour, undertaker’s bearing. But his

appeal was multi-faceted. He was perceived as an outsider and an outlaw: A gay, gun-wielding junkie who accidentally killed his wife in a drunken game of William Tell in the '40s. The tragedy scarred Burroughs and he vowed to “write his way out of it.” Over the next few decades he created a mountain of work that cast institutional authority of all varieties – governmental, religious, corporate – as corrupt and treacherous, an attack on human freedom.

In works such as “Junkie” (1953), “Naked Lunch” (1959) and “Nova Express” (1964), he distilled modern-age paranoia and the pernicious impact of technology. He also explicitly and unflinchingly described what had been viewed by mainstream society as “deviant” behavior without judging his cast of dope fiends and sexual libertines, even as he risked censure and persecution (“Naked Lunch” was initially banned in Boston and Los Angeles).

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**WILLIAM S. BURROUGHS  
AND THE CULT  
OF ROCK 'N' ROLL**

**CASEY RAE**

Burroughs’ experiments with “cut-up” writing, in which he merged seemingly unrelated sequences of words to create new, provocative shapes,



William S. Burroughs and David Bowie on the cover of the new book "William S. Burroughs and the Cult of Rock 'n' Roll," by Casey Rae. (University of Texas Press)

exploded through the works of artists such as Bob Dylan, David Bowie and Kurt Cobain, among others. "Cut-up" also became the language of hip-hop, with its mix-and-match appropriation and recontextualizing of sound and text, and of the internet itself.

He certainly wasn't the only author to help reshape the direction that rock and later hip-

hop took. His friends and fellow Beat icons, Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg, were also hugely influential. Kerouac's novel "On the Road" became like a sacred text for a host of music-makers. Its tale of blowing town into the unknown in pursuit of adventure resonated widely with a host of aspiring counter-culture music-makers, including the Grateful Dead and the Doors.

In her new biography of Janis Joplin, "Janis: Her Life and Music" (Simon & Schuster), Holly George-Warren writes that the "musical, defiantly anti-establishment prose" of "On the Road" fired the singer's wanderlust when she read it at age 14 and "would inform everything going forward."

Ginsberg's landmark poem "Howl" (first publically presented in 1955) caused a sensation with its heated wordplay, impassioned denunciation of authority and celebration of self-expression. Its influence resonated through the rock mainstream via the work of the Beatles and Patti Smith, among others. In the iconic video for Dylan's ground-breaking "Subterranean Homesick Blues," Ginsberg lurks in the margins of the frame, a bearded muse looking on approvingly as Dylan hurled word

bombs. Ginsberg's work, and that of his Beat-era contemporaries, also drew a line back to the French symbolist poets of the 19th Century – Paul Verlaine, Arthur Rimbaud – and later American modernists such as T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound.

For decades, literary references have seeped into the work of a wide swath of music-makers, including that of Dead Prez (whose “Animal in Man” draws from George Orwell’s dystopian masterpiece), Rush (disciples of Ayn Rand, in songs such as “Anthem” and the “2112” album), Led Zeppelin (Robert Plant’s love of J.R.R. Tolkien’s “The Lord of the Rings” is particularly apparent in “The Battle of Evermore”), Black Star (Toni Morrison’s “The Bluest Eye” begat “Thieves in the Night”), Bruce Springsteen (“The Ghost of Tom Joad,” inspired by John Steinbeck’s “The Grapes of Wrath”), Kate Bush (“Wuthering Heights” bowed to the Emily Bronte classic), the Velvet Underground (Lou Reed’s literary obsessions included Leopold von Sacher-Masoch’s 1870 novel “Venus in Furs”), Jefferson Airplane (with Grace Slick rewiring Lewis Carroll’s “Alice in Wonderland” on “White Rabbit”), the Strokes (whose “Soma” shadows Aldous Huxley’s “Brave New World”), the Roots (who named their 1999 breakthrough album after Chinua Achebe’s novel on colonialism, “Things Fall Apart”), the Fugs (whose early songs included lyrics co-credited to Ginsberg and William Blake) and Lana Del Rey (“Off to the Races” references Vladimir Nabokov’s “Lolita”).

But few of these authors held sway over such a cross-section of artists and musical generations as “Old Bull Lee” Burroughs. Though the author wasn’t particularly a fan of much contemporary music, he loved its subversive appeal, its ability to disrupt. His own writing merged the high-art aspirations of literature and the vulgarity of the street, and he saw much the same high-low mash-ups in counter-culture music, a conspiracy of impulses against the gray, dull middle, the agents of conformity and control.

Beyond Burroughs’ stylistic innovations and radical subject matter, he

embraced personal freedom, an attitude that appealed to generations of nonconformists. Little wonder he was recruited by his counter-culture disciples to contribute to a range of recordings, including those of Laurie Anderson, R.E.M., Bill Laswell's Material, Cobain, Sonic Youth, Ministry and the Disposable Heroes of Hiphoprisy.

Visitors to his New York City "bunker" and later his modest home in Lawrence, Kansas, included Bowie, Cobain, Smith, Mick Jagger, Iggy Pop, Jimmy Page, Blondie's Deborah Harry and Chris Stein, Frank Zappa, Madonna, the Clash's Joe Strummer, Tom Waits, Sonic Youth's Kim Gordon, R.E.M.'s Michael Stipe, Ministry's Al Jourgensen and countless others. When Burroughs visited London in the '60s, Paul McCartney set up the author in Ringo Starr's apartment for some recording sessions, and later included the author's image on the cover of the Beatles' iconic 1967 landmark "Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band."

Though the Beats inspired cutting-edge '60s music, Burroughs looked askance at the peace-love agenda of the hippies. He felt more at home with the punk vibe that emerged in the '70s at CBGB, only a few blocks from his New York apartment. In it, he heard the sound of a thousand misfits wielding their voices and guitars like knives cutting through sonic and social straitjackets.

"When you cut into the present," Old Bull Lee was fond of saying, "the future leaks out."

*Greg Kot is a Tribune critic.*

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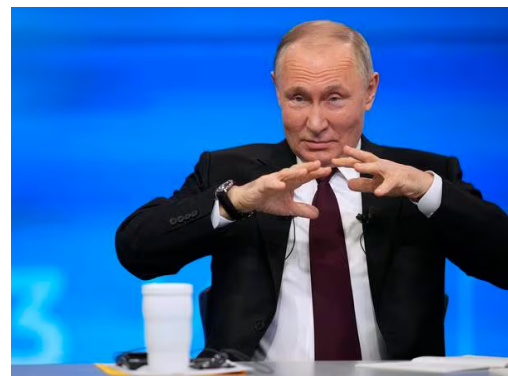
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