

Jack Kerouac, Republican Party Hero

by Con Chapman

Despite the 'beatnik' stereotype, Kerouac was a political conservative and took pleasure in standing against everything the hippies stood for. He supported the Vietnam War and became friendly with William F. Buckley.

Levi Asher, beatmuseum.org

It's the third Thursday of the month, the night of the regularly scheduled meetings of local Republican Party committees across Massachusetts. I've been assigned the task of picking up Jack Kerouac and driving him from his mother's house to a little confab in my neighborhood, where he's promised to give a talk on "Supply Side Themes in the Poetry of Gregory Corso."



"I think Herman brought needed diversity to the party--and he always brought the pizza."

I pull up in front of his modest family home in Lowell, Mass. and ring the doorbell. There's a stirring inside and his mother comes to the door, an exasperated look on her face. "He hasn't moved since you dropped him off last month," she says. "Back in his room, playing cards as usual. You want to come in?"

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"No, we're running late, and we've got miles to go and promises to keep," I say, smiling at my lame attempt at a joke that she ignores.

"Ti Jean!" she yells once, then again, then a third time, before she gives up in disgust and goes to retrieve him. So much for the philosophy of personal responsibility.

"We won't be late ma," he says as he approaches, tucking in his shirt as he comes.

"You better not be drunk when you come home," she says, still trying at this late date--he's been dead for forty-two years--to impose some discipline on her wayward boy.



"Please welcome the next President of the United States--the only guy in the room with better hair than me--Willard 'Mitt' Romney!"

"I'm drunk now, so that would be an improvement," he cracks out of the side of his mouth, and it's clear his mother doesn't find this funny.

"I'll see that we're back early," I say. "These meetings are usually pretty uneventful."

"Make sure he eats some hors d'oeuvres," she says. "Otherwise the *tokay*--the cheap wine he favors--"goes straight to his head."

"I will, don't worry."

Jack is already in the car trying to find some jazz on the radio.

"There's nothing but crap on the air these days," and I have to agree with him, but point out something he's overlooked. "You can play records in your car now, Jack."

"You can?"

"Yep. First they made tapes, now we've got these little discs," I say as I pull out the live recordings Dean Benedetti made of Charlie Parker.



WILLIAM F. GOTTLIEB *The Golden Age of Jazz*

"Wow!" Jack says as Bird launches into "Donna Lee." "It's like having a hi-fi in your front seat!"

"You got that right," I say as I turn onto Interstate 495 headed south.

"Blow, man, blow!" Jack shouts. "The wild howl of the saxophone at the moon, with crystal rings around it like a woman's . . ."

"Hold it right there, Jack," I say, fearful of which female orifice he's going to use on the back end of the metaphor. "We're on something called the 'internet' now, and there could be impressionable young kids reading as we speak."

"Now J-J-Jack, tell me again why you think G-G-Gerald Ford was our greatest president."

"Cripes," Jack says. "I always have to stifle myself. Where we going again?"

"The MetroWest Republican Caucus," I say.

"MetroWest? What's that?"

"Well, we can't get enough people together for a quorum in just one town in the western suburbs of Boston, so three towns merged their committees."

"That's what's wrong with this country," he says, shaking his head as he looks out his window at the Burlington Mall. "God how I miss Bill Buckley!"

"You know, it's funny. I'd *like* to like the guy, but I never really warmed up to him."

"He had BALLS!" Jack fairly shouts, and when I turn his way he has a wild look in his eye. "He wasn't like your 'country club' conservatives, always afraid of 'offending' someone," he says with obvious distaste. "And his vocabulary! Do you have any idea what 'litotes' means?"

"A figure of speech in which an affirmation is expressed by negating its opposite, such as 'not unlikely.'"

"Hmph," Jack grunts, and I seem to detect a newfound respect in his tone. He stares out the window, his French-Canadian tendency to melancholy taking over, and says quietly "I feel so old."



"The GOP needs to come up with a positive message."

"You won't feel old in this crowd," I say as I turn onto 128 South. "Every time I walk into one of these little *soirees*, I lower the average age by two decades."

"Will there be wine there?" he asks hesitantly.

"You know what your mom said, right?"

"I know, but she'll be asleep."

"There'll be plenty of liquor. As a Jewish girlfriend of mine used to say, the difference between WASPs and Jews is that WASP parties have too much booze and not enough food, and Jewish parties have too much food and not enough booze."

"Ha! Glad I'm a Catholic."

"Although not any kind of Catholic a Pope would recognize."

"Granted, I got a little Buddhism mixed in there."



We make good time and soon are turning onto Route 30. The houses are few and the streets are dark.

"Nice neighborhood," Jack says.

"Yeah, you get a lot of land around here."

"You know what I hate? The hippies who camp out on my lawn to talk to me."

"The price of fame, I suppose."

"Well, it's not fair to my mom. She never wrote any wild and crazy novels."

We pull onto a gravel driveway and park the car, and enter an old Yankee home with a roaring fire inside. Thankfully the house has a fireplace, otherwise there'd be a serious risk of death or injury.

"Hello Mrs. Saybrook," I say, greeting a white-haired woman who has--as usual--messed up the rouge on her cheeks. Maybe she was "testing" the martini pitcher before guests arrived.

"Hello there, you rascal you!" our hostess Polly says, recalling our mutual favorite Louis Armstrong song. "Is this our distinguished guest?" she asks; I'm not absolutely sure, but I think she probably missed out on the Beat Generation the first time around.



Crazy, man!

"That it is." I introduce Jack all around, he admires the furnishings--"Great Eisenhower commemorative plate!" he gushes when he's close enough to the mantel to examine it carefully. "I've got the Hoover, and the Calvin Coolidge, but that is like totally cherry!"

A few men suppress coughs, but most people in the room are hard of hearing, so the minor *gaucherie* passes without notice.

"Well, I think we should get this little chivaree started. Most of this crowd is in bed right after Wheel of Fortune," Polly says.

I tap my wine glass with a spoon, and Polly does the honors, reading from a cheat sheet I faxed to her earlier in the day. "Mr. Kerouac is the author of 'On the Road,' 'Big Sur,' 'Doctor Sax' and numerous other works that defined the 'Beat Generation'--and he's the foremost drunken writer of his time to embrace conservatism. So please, let's give a warm welcome to Mr. Jack Kerouac!"

The crowds applauds more than politely, and Jack actually blushes, unless the tint on his cheeks I see is the residue of the best wine he's had in a long while.

"Thank you everybody, and thank you Mrs. Saybrook for that most generous introduction," Jack says, and suddenly he's the shy football

scholarship boy who walked on the campus of Columbia University some three score and ten years ago.

"You know, people in the press and academia like to portray conservatives as cold, cruel, hidebound defenders of the past," he begins, then pauses for effect. "But nothing could be further from the truth." He takes a sip of cold water and clears his throat. "No way, baby," and I seem to detect a new, antic note in his voice.

I hear a few murmurs of agreement from the group, and Jack continues.

"We are the mad ones, the bad ones, the crazy ones. We're the ones who look life insurance salesmen in the eye and say--'Whole life? Please. I can take the difference in premiums between your piece of crap policy and term insurance, invest it in the stock market and come out way ahead, baby!'"

"Yeah, man!" a balding man with a bow tie and a tartan blazer says from the edge of the room.

"We trade in our cars *when they hit 60,000 miles--'cause it's all downhill from there!*"

"Tell it, brother!"

"And we never buy used cars--you wanna know why?"

"BECAUSE YOU'RE JUST BUYING SOMEONE ELSE'S PROBLEMS!" several people in the crowd shout in unison.

I'm getting warm so I make my way out to the kitchen, hoping to find a cold beer in the fridge, and Polly comes up to me from behind and pinches me in the arm. "He's great--he really is," she says. "I'm so glad you brought him."

"Go, man, go!" someone shouts, a sure sign that Jack is riffing like a bebopper at a jam session.

"The business of the federal government is NATIONAL DEFENSE! Not a bunch of social do-gooder crap!"

The man in the bow tie comes in and rushes up to Polly. "Do you have a tape recorder?" he says breathlessly. "We're witnesses to history--we've got to preserve this for posterity!"

"I don't know," I say to the man. "Sometimes Jack freezes up when you put him on the spot like that. He totally clammed up on the Steve Allen show one night."

"I don't think it's necessary," Polly says reassuringly. "Seventy years from now, no one would ever believe that Jack Kerouac was a liberal."

