

PUBLIC LIVES

PUBLIC LIVES; He Writes, She Shoots, and the Beats Howl

By Joyce Wadler

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WE all have our issues, those little things that set us off, and it's kind of sweet, as John Tytell and his wife, Mellon, have just written a book on the Beat movement, that theirs is the term "middle class."

There's a howl (homage to Allen Ginsberg's best-known poem, that) from Mr. Tytell, a Queens College professor whose earlier book "Naked Angels" was one of the first serious literary appraisals of the Beats.

"We organized this building into a co-op in '71 because we anticipated we would have a life where we were traveling," says Mr. Tytell, 60, in their West Village floor-through.

"I was Ralph Lauren's first photographer and I quit to go to the Amazon," says Mellon, who is one of those first-name-only artists who prefers not to give her age. "I did stories on drugs in Thailand. In 1975, we trekked to Katmandu. The middle class doesn't live like that. O.K., I go to the Barneys sale, but that's being a New Yorker."

Their new book, "Paradise Outlaws: Remembering the Beats," will be published by William Morrow & Company next month. Part memoir, part critical essay and including 45 photos, it chronicles the writers and activists who made up the Beat generation or were its spiritual heirs: Allen Ginsberg, William Burroughs, Robert Creeley, Gregory Corso, Judith Malina. There are also personal commentaries by Mr. Tytell and Mellon, who over the years became friendly with some of their subjects.

This week the couple talked.

She is the "take charge" one. She has typed up a sheet of "talk points," but will tear it up if you ask. She suggests angles to a photographer. Stories spill into wonderful stories. She tries to be discreet and fails.

"I threw the I Ching this morning," Mellon says.

Oh, what did it say?

"That I should be cautious and reserved."

She's not doing so well.

"For me, I am."

Mr. Tytell, on the other hand, is no conversational slouch, with the crystallized speech of a fellow who took his Ph.D. in the polished prose of Henry James.

Why does Mr. Tytell care about the Beats?

"They represent the generational divide," he says. "They showed what was going to happen in the culture and began to resist it in their art, as well as their lives. I saw them as seismic registers of some major change. Ezra Pound said artists are the antennae of the race."

"OH, that's good," Mellon says. "Especially 'seismic.' With the earthquake in Turkey!"

Mellon -- whose given name is Mary Ellen -- grew up in Manhasset and Great Neck, N.Y., the stepdaughter of the illustrator Leon Gregoir. Precocious, brainy and rebellious, she was reading Ferlinghetti and Gide at 13.

Later, she would be thrown out of New York University for "subverting" the student body and become a photographer, doing fashion photography and reporting for magazines including Stern, Geo, Fortune and Time.

The one-name thing?

"I worked for Weegee; he was a famous photographer. He told me, 'Only use one name, Dearie.' Sometimes he would tell people I was a stripper and I had just come back from Vegas. He came up to me and said, 'I am Houdini and you have to work for me . . . ' "

Stop! Another time! Later for Weegee!

Mr. Tytell was a refugee kid from a family of diamond dealers in Antwerp, Belgium. He grew up on Manhattan's Upper West Side. His interest in writing, he believes, came from seeing his mother struggling to write plays; she worked in English, which was not her first language, and asked her son for help when he came home from school. To support his writing, Mr. Tytell pursued an academic career, working as a teaching assistant at N.Y.U.

Which is how, because of a Henry James class she had neglected to attend, he met Mellon. She came to his apartment to plead for academic clemency, arriving, as she was then wont to do, with a kitten on her shoulder.

"I fell in love with him at first sight," she says. "His arms were like Donatello's 'David.' "

They married in 1967.

The Tytells' personal association with the Beats began in 1973, after Mr. Tytell published an article in *The American Scholar*, the magazine of Phi Beta Kappa, on what he perceived was their considerable literary and political influence. Allen Ginsberg sent copies to William Burroughs and others, and it was the beginning of a friendship with Ginsberg.

"A very maternal presence," Mellon says. "Always cleaning. Like a Jewish grandmother."

Not so with Burroughs, who, in a violent and famous episode in Beat history, shot and killed his wife during a party in Mexico. Burroughs claimed that it was accidental. Mr. Tytell, the first man to interview Burroughs on the subject, found him unable to discuss it.

"Ginsberg I could kibitz with," Mr. Tytell says. "Burroughs, I remember talking to after he moved back to Lawrence, Kan., in '82 from the East Coast. I asked him if the move to the middle of the country had any effect on an artist's imagination and he said, in a voice of scorn, 'To us lone cats, all supermarkets look alike.' Who wants to say anything to a guy after that?"

Correction: Aug. 26, 1999

A Public Lives profile yesterday about John Tytell and his wife, Mellon, who have written a book on the Beat movement, misstated the surname of her stepfather. He is Leon Gregori, not Gregoir.

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