

William S. Burroughs



Photo: William Burroughs and Spencer Kansa at the Burroughs home in Lawrence, Kansas, 1993.

THE ROCK GOD

by Spencer Kansa

“Tell him I’ve been reading him and I believe every word he says.”

Bob Dylan to Allen Ginsberg on William Burroughs in 1965.

I remember sitting across from William Burroughs at the dining table in his modest, porch-fronted clapboard house in Kansas, trying to take it all in,

thinking this was the coolest thing I had ever done. As we sat sharing a joint - small “bomber” variety - Burroughs clocked the emblem on my baseball cap and asked in his drawling cowboy voice what the symbol meant. “Ah, it means I’m a Public Enemy” I replied. Burroughs smiled knowingly; as ever, he understood. As perhaps one of the most important literary influences on modern music and pop culture, William Burroughs’

nightmarish dystopian visions and anti-authoritarian world view has infused and informed the work and ideas of a pantheon of rockers: Bowie, Dylan, Jagger, Lou, Iggy, Patti, Zappa, Kurt, Sonic Youth etc.

The cut-up technique he made famous has had a precursory impact on the fragmented sonic canvas of hip-hop, and was the catalyst behind the scrambled images of U2's *ZOO TV*. His cosmic yobs, hipster jargon, drug induced visions and novel titles have been inspiration to a slew of bands and films: Soft Machine, Steely Dan, Bladerunner, Dead Fingers Talk, Wild Boys, Interzone, The Mugwumps, Johnny Yen, Nova Mob, Thin White Rope et al. Burroughs' grey, spectral presence graces the iconic cover of *Sgt Pepper's*, and even Duran Duran paid their own rather dubious homage to El Hombre Invisible when they based their promo-video *Wild Boys* on Burroughs' futuristic story of a savage band of adolescent guerrillas. Yet, the "heavy metal" guru - Steppenwolf purloined the phrase for their rock anthem *Born To Be Wild* from Burroughs' sci-fi novel *The Soft Machine*, in turn giving name to a whole sub-genre of rock - viewed such reverence with knowing bemusement. A teenager in the 1920s, Burroughs always preferred Leadbelly to Led Zeppelin. However, in an interview with Jimmy Page, Burroughs did concede that "Rock can be seen as one attempt to break out of this dead and soulless universe and reassert the universe of magic."

The cut-up technique in particular has carved a through-line in modern music and has resulted in Burroughs holding a subversive sway over pop culture for four decades. The cut-ups were discovered serendipitously by Burroughs' main gazane, the maverick Canadian painter Brion Gysin, while the two men were residing at the bohemian Beat Hotel in the Latin Quarter of Paris in September 1959.

While slicing through some boards with a Stanley knife to mount some of his drawings, Gysin noticed that he had cut through the layers of newspapers underneath and that when he peeled away the top layers he could read across the different pages - which combined stories from across the various columns - providing a new juxtaposition of words and images. Gysin had announced that "writing was fifty years behind painting" and the cut-up technique allowed the writer to borrow the painter's tool of montage.

Burroughs immediately saw the implications and potential of this discovery and began experimenting, taking a page of his own writing and cutting it into four separate parts, then rearranging the sections to form a new composition out of the text. For Burroughs, who felt restricted by the antiquated beginning, middle and end narrative structure of the Victorian novel, it was

a major artistic breakthrough and the perfect vehicle that he had been looking for. Significantly the cut-ups mirrored Burroughs' own fragmented, mainline existence and as he pointed out, they were also a far more honest representation of how the mind really works. Burroughs explained: "someone walks around a block and paints a canvas of what he has seen. Well he's seen someone cut in two by a car, reflections in shop windows, passing faces, a jumble of fragments. So the cut-ups are closer to the actual facts of human perception. LIFE IS A CUT-UP."

Although Mick Jagger had shown interest in starring in a mooted film version of *Naked Lunch* back in the late 60s and Lou Reed's smack-soaked sado-sex songs trawled similar subterranean territory - the Velvet even penned an ode to Burroughs, "Lonesome Cowboy Bill" on their *Loaded* album - the most vocal and visible disciple of Burroughs in rock was David Bowie. Although Bowie admitted to only to having a passing knowledge of Burroughs' work - he had just read *Nova Express* - when the two men were brought together for a joint interview by *Rolling Stone* magazine in 1973, by the time Bowie went to work on his next venture, the future-shocker *Diamond Dogs*, his own cut-up efforts had been put into action and helped set the fractured tone of that forbidding, Orwellian opus. During the following *Diamond Dogs* tour across America, Bowie was filmed by the BBC for the *Cracked Actor* documentary. With paper and scissors in hand, Bowie was filmed as he cut up and re-arranged a page of ideas: "I don't know if this is the way that Gysin or Burroughs do their cut-ups, but this is how I do mine," he explained, adding that the technique was "a western form of Tarot."

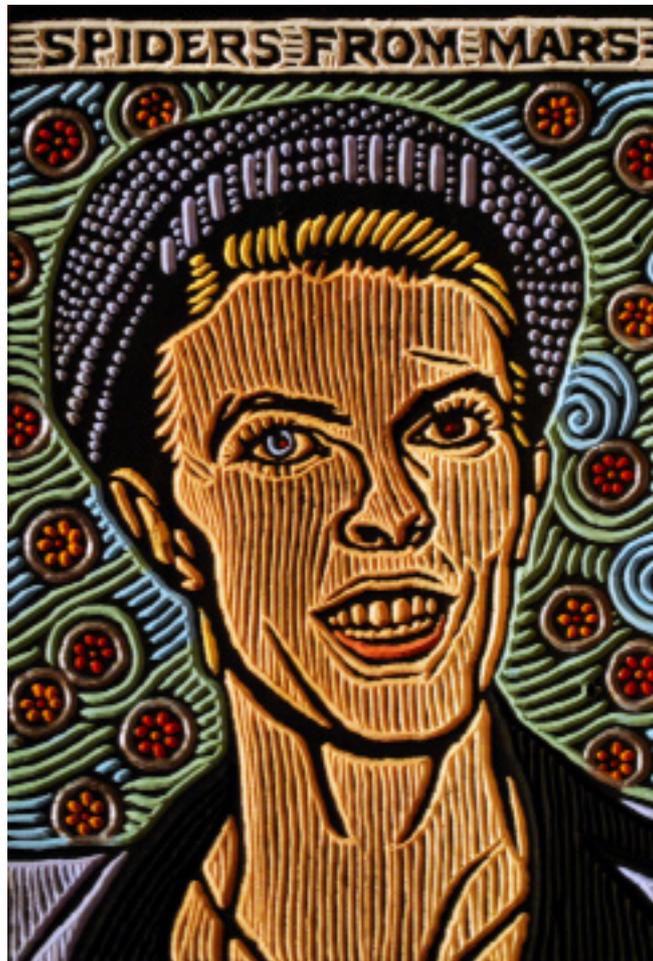
Throughout the rest of the 70s Bowie continued with the cut-up lyrics, particularly on the trio of albums he recorded with Brian Eno: *Low*, *Heroes* and *Lodger*. Bowie also incorporated Eno's own version of the cut-ups, a deck of playing cards called *Oblique Strategies*, on which were written a selection of musical instructions that they could randomly pick whenever they were stuck for a new idea, or looking for a new musical direction to take. The card commands helped create a series of "planned accidents" on tracks of those seminal albums. After a decade's hiatus Bowie returned to the cut-ups on his 1995 avant-rocker, *1. Outside*. This time, however, technology had caught up, and thanks to a computer programming pal, Bowie could now feed a whole stack of information into his Apple Mac and hit a randomiser button, which could cut-up and scramble the contents and spew the results back out to him. Talking on Canadian television that year Bowie paid tribute to Burroughs and the cut-ups saying:

“Burroughs particularly touched me. The way he cut-up the world and reassembled it. I felt more comfortable in that environment, that kind of chaos. That fragmentation for me felt a truer picture of reality.”

“He’s up there with the Pope”- Patti Smith on Burroughs.

His legend preceding him, Burroughs returned to New York in the mid-70s, landing smack (ahem) in the middle of the emerging CBGB’s punk scene. More arty and literate than their UK counterparts, Burroughs’ mystique and mythic reputation was idolised by many of the scenes’ leading lights, particularly punk’s own poet laureate Patti Smith, whose performances Burroughs admired and whose classic album, *Horses*, owed much to Burroughs own homo-erotic prose. Holding court at his famous “bunker on the Bowery,” Burroughs received a steady stream of rock n roll admirers, including Joe Strummer and Richard Hell. Though Burroughs understandably dismissed the “Godfather of Punk” tag that had been foisted upon him, he did send a telegram to The Sex Pistols supporting their anti-monarchist anthem *God Save the Queen*, declaring: “I’ve always said that England doesn’t stand a chance until you have 20,000 people saying ‘Bugger the Queen!’...This is a necessary criticism of a country which is bankrupt.” A celebration of all things Burroughsian, entitled *The Nova Convention*, took place in New York in the winter of 1978 with a glittering galaxy of rock stars and counter-culture figures taking part. Frank Zappa read Burroughs’ *Talking Asshole* routine, Patti Smith covered for Keith Richards - who cancelled due to his drug bust in Canada - while Brion Gysin, Allen Ginsberg and Timothy Leary all participated in seminars. Music came courtesy of minimalists Phillip Glass and John Cage, while Laurie Anderson co-mastered the ceremonies.

Though Burroughs had disbanded cut-ups by the eighties they were kept in pop consciousness due



to the sterling work of industrial music pioneers, Throbbing Gristle, whose magus Genesis P Orridge released a collection of Burroughs’ audio cut-up experiments on the album *Nothing Here but the Recordings*. Recorded in London, Paris and Tangier throughout the 1960s, the album showcased Burroughs’ spooky, Dalek-like tone and introduced a generation to how the cut-ups *sounded*. Dubbing street noise from Tangier to London, cut in with garbled short wave radio, Jouvouka music, newspaper reports, and excerpts read from his own novels, these sonic collages were Burroughs’ own subversive brand of musique concrete. Even more than the novels, Genesis P Orridge was

interested in Burroughs’ concepts, in particular his idea of using these audio cut-ups as a political tool against hierarchies of control. Burroughs postulated that by selecting the appropriate random sounds, bastardized speeches, siren drones, animal noises and gun shots, a team of operators strategically placed with tape recorders could playback such recordings, inciting a riot at a demonstration, or a political rally.

In tandem the evolution of hip-hop from Bronx block parties to rebel rousing on wax was bearing all the hallmarks of a musical extension of the cut-ups. The way in which Burroughs would construct a new piece of writing by synthesizing two pieces of text and information presaged the way in which a DJ would mix between two records, fusing a third new soundtrack amalgamated from both decks, hence the DJ term “cutting.” Burroughs idea of weaving other authors’ work into his own writing anticipated the whole sampling process. So in the same way as Burroughs, through utilising the cut-up technique, broke down the old structures of the novel, creating a new literary landscape, rap, through musical cut-ups and manipulations of sound dismantled the old song structures, creating a revolutionary new sonic canvas in the process. Burroughs appreciated this new aural architecture and when pressed on the subject admitted

to me that “rap music has great potential.”

Throughout the last two decades of his life, Burroughs himself made many interesting forays onto vinyl. In the late eighties he topped the bill on the *Smack My Crack* and *Like a Girl I Want to Keep You Coming* Poetry Systems albums, put out by his Bunker buddy and fellow spoken word troubadour, John Giorno. Reading his *Words Of Advice For Young People* and *Just Say No To Drug Hysteria* routines respectively, Burroughs appeared alongside a who’s who of eighties cult figures, like Nick Cave, Diamanda Galas and Lydia Lunch, as well as more established names like Debbie Harry, David Byrne and Tom Waits.

In 1990, Burroughs entered into a full fledged collaboration with Tom Waits when the grizzled singer scored the musical *The Black Rider*, based on Burroughs’ book of the same name. This Faustian fable was given its theatrical premiere in Hamburg to critical acclaim, and on the subsequent album Burroughs sung the old jaunty jazz number *T’aint no Sin*.

That same year, Island Records released a new Burroughs collection, *Dead City Radio*. With atmospheric accompaniment from the likes of John Cale, Donald Fagen and Sonic Youth, old time movie strings courtesy of producer Hal Wilner - who had previously provided background music for Burroughs when he made a memorable appearance on *Saturday Night Live*, reading his Titanic farce, *Twilight’s Last Gleamings* - the album’s highlights included Satanic Bill’s downright perverse rendering of *The Lord’s Prayer*, his anti-American tirade, *A Thanksgiving Prayer*, and best of all, his croaky, vodka sodden rendition of Marlene Dietrich’s swan song, *Falling In Love Again*.

In 1992, the concept album *The Western Lands* was released by renowned producer and Burroughs fan, Bill Laswell. Based around Burroughs’ novelistic investigations into the seven souls concept of the Ancient Egyptians, Laswell crafted an equally exotic and ambient soundgarden. That same year Burroughs collaborated with industrial noise meisters Ministry for the 12” *Just One Fix*. Over slabs of industrial beats Burroughs intoned an appropriate smack-it-up sermon, and also provided the abstract cover artwork *Curse on Drug Hysterics*.

The following year another more high profile collaboration rose to prominence fuelled by the untimely death of Kurt Cobain. *The Priest They Called Him* was an alternate version of Burroughs’ *The Junkies Christmas*, and pitted his yuletide yarn against swathes of Cobain feedback in a cute cash-in. Although recorded separately, a meeting was held between the two men at Burroughs’ home a year later.

Picking up on the troubled vibe of his houseguest, Burroughs later confided to his assistant: “there’s something wrong with that boy, he frowns for no good reason.”

Far more substantial was the collaboration released that same year between Burroughs and Michael Franti’s Disposable Heroes of Hiphoprisy rap group: *Spare Ass Annie and Other Tales*. Delivering his infamous *Dr Benway* and *Talking Asshole* routines against a funky backbeat, the album contained many precious moments, including MC Zulu’s amusing boxing style announcement introducing Burroughs in his thickest Jamaican patois: “Check dis out. From Lawrence, Kansas, reading from *Naked Lunch* and weighing slightly over 100 pounds, Uncle Bill.”

A few months later self proclaimed “Beatnik rapper” Justin Warfield paid his own Hip Hop tribute to the original drugstore cowboy, bigging up Burroughs for his “spiritual, musical and earthly inspiration” on his (B-Boys on acid soaked) debut LP, *My Field Trip To Planet 9*. This filmic album and his subsequent collaboration, *Bug Powder Dust* with Bomb the Bass supremo Tim Simenon, were littered with Burroughsian and Beat references, and speaking to me Warfield drew many parallels between the Be-Bop inspired Beat era to today’s generation of mic-slingers.

Justin Warfield told me,



The Beat writers got a lot of the rhythms of their speech from saxophone players, and a lot of white writers at the time, like Kerouac, adopted black culture, jazz and drug culture, into their work, but beyond that, Ginsberg said it was more to do with people who were just enamoured with each other. Ginsberg has a great rhythm to him because his poetry has a pulse to it, a bigger backbeat. He really flies off the handle, and it's pretty wild, but Burroughs has a special rhythm all his own, his literary style is a big influence on me as a hip hop lyricist. I don't think most people in the rap world are hip to the cut-ups, but if they checked out Burroughs and Gysin they'd certainly see the connections between the two.

Burroughs' post-apocalyptic dreamscapes also infiltrated the visual Arts and inspired celebrated New York graffiti artists like Keith Haring and Jean Michel Basquiat. Appreciating art-as-crime/crime-as-art, legend has it that Burroughs himself was once caught by a transit cop, aerosol can in hand, spray painting *AH POOK IS HERE* - the Mayan God of the dead - upon the walls of a New York subway station.

In the wake of Burroughs' death in 1997, Mercury Records released the 4 CD Box Set: *The Best of William Burroughs*. Unravelling in almost chronological order this sprawling spoken word box set spanned forty years of Burroughs' repertoire, and served as a perfect platform for his lacerating diatribes against the phoney war on drugs: "Our pioneer ancestors would piss in their graves at the thought of urine tests to decide whether a man is competent to do his job." Such assaults marked him out as a masterly satirist, back when that word meant something and the word *fuck* could not appear on a printed page. His deadpan wise-cracks ranked him up there with Will Rogers, Lenny Bruce and Bill Hicks as one of the all time great black humorists: "Doctor asks what the American flag means to me. I tell him soak it in heroin Doc and I'll suck it." A genuine cut-up in every sense.

With rock-n-roll credibility enshrined, it was perhaps only fitting that Burroughs last public appearance would be a cameo role in U2's promo video for their *Last Night on Earth* single. The sinister image of Burroughs wheeling a giant klieg lamp around in a shopping cart proved to be a perfectly symbolic one for a man whose life and work shone arcs of light with its darkness.



On May 30th, 2010, Peter Orlovsky died at the age of 76. He is best known as the long-time partner (and muse) of Allen Ginsberg, but he was also a great poet in his own right.

Biography

My biography was born July 1933

The first sentence of Orlovsky's biography in *New American Poetry 1945-1960*

Born into poverty, Orlovsky dropped out of high school to support his family by working in a mental hospital, and was drafted to fight in the Korean War in 1953 at age 19. After telling his commanding officer that, "An army with guns is an army against love," he was sent to work at an army hospital in San Francisco.

At 21 Orlovsky met Allen Ginsberg. It's part of Beat legend that Ginsberg fell in love with a painting of Orlovsky (who was then working as a model) just before meeting the man himself in the San Francisco studio of painter Robert LaVigne in December 1954. The couple moved into a North Beach apartment together and announced that they were "married." They spoke openly of their relationship, and were listed as "married" in Ginsberg's *Who's Who* entry in the years following his rise to fame.

They travelled around the world together - spending two years in India, learning about Eastern philosophies. Both men took great interest in Buddhism during their travels.

Peter Orlovsky became an important part of the Beat Generation, although he only began writing poetry at