**A Little Bit of Background…**

**What is the “Beat Generation”?**

“Beat Generation” refers to a group of writers who hit their creative stride in the 1940s-1960s. They didn’t share a writing style, but were part of a social group, holding certain interests, aims, or beliefs in common.

Jack Kerouac, in conversation with the writer John Clellon Holmes, coined the term “Beat Generation” in 1948; he was thinking of “beat” in the sense of “weariness” or “worn down,” and of “beatific.”

Four years earlier, in 1944 the three original Beat writers (though of course they weren’t known as Beats until later), Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, and William S. Burroughs became friends while at New York’s Columbia University. They shared a vision for a new type of literature, which escaped the boundaries of academia and used a more natural language and form similar to that used in speech. They were interested in experimentation not only with language – but also with art, drugs, sexuality, spirituality and lifestyles in the interest of finding greater meaning in life. The Beat Generation movement was a rebellion against the status quo of American life, and an exploration of meaningful self-expression.

Later, others joined and became friends with Kerouac, Ginsberg and Burroughs and the loosely-formed group expanded. As the original group traveled to the West Coast – particularly San Francisco – they met and formed friendships other poets and artists who eventually also became known as members of the Beat Generation. They are sometimes referred to as the “West Coast Beats.”

**OK, so what’s a Beatnik?**

The Beat Generation writers were not “beatniks.” But the “beatnik” phenomena sprung from a stereotyped, often derogatory image of some of the things associated with them.

“Beatnik” is a word coined by Herb Caen of the San Francisco Chronicle in April of 1958, in the midst of the new media attention given the Beat Generation. He fused together “Beat” from the “Beat Generation” and, inspired by the satellite Sputnik, the Russian “-nik” suffix. He meant it in a disparaging way. (And given that “-nik” is Russian, he may have meant to equate beatniks with communists.)

When the media latched onto the Beat Generation, it became a phenomenon, spawning a raft of products aimed at those who admired the “Beats” and their perceived (but not actual) lifestyle. To outsiders, the Beats had an aura of hipness, of cool – even though the Beats never really sought to be any of those things. The Beats were looking for real meaning, authenticity and a deeply personal self-expression in their lives and work, not conformity in a black turtleneck and a cheesy beret.

Companies and the media quickly picked up on the term “beatnik” as a marketing tool, and then it was everywhere – books, movies, television, in the press, and on commercial products.

“Beatnik” became the word to describe the stereotype of the actual Beat Generation creatives – shallow, goateed, anti-materialistic, slang-using, black beret-wearing, bongo-playing, jazz-listening hipsters reciting nearly unintelligible poetry in dark coffee-houses. They were often portrayed as violent or lacking morals. This “beatnik” image didn’t reflect the lives or reality of any of the Beat writers.

The truth of it is that certain details associated with the Beat Generation writers were picked up, twisted, and amplified, almost beyond recognition and wildly embellished by the media and the marketing departments, into the the “beatnik” stereotype.

**The reality**

Sure, coffee houses and poetry readings were popular during the era when the Beat Generation became popular; some of the Beats even occasionally read in such venues. Some used slang. And yes, jazz was certainly popular with the Beats. But they didn’t look or act like cartoons. They didn’t care about fashion, or expectations. They were individuals, and each rejected conformity in favor of finding their own voice and their own path.

And yes, some people embraced aspects of this perception of what “Beat” was, in their own lives. Absolutely they did.

In the late 1950s and early 1960s, there was a growing subculture that was looking for answers, and ways of life that just weren’t being found in mainstream America. Some of these folks hung out in coffeehouses, listened to jazz, dressed in the “hipster” clothing of the time, read the Beat writers and the works of other authors and thinkers, expressed themselves artistically, protested aggression, or rejected commonly accepted ways of thinking or living.

You could some of them “beatniks” if you like. But painting people with such broad strokes often means missing a lot of important detail.