

*Paul Hawkins*

**Charles Plymell : Benzadrine Highway**

Writer Charles Plymell (seen left with Neil Cassady) is a legendary figure. He was involved with a loose gang of experimental writers and outsider artists centred around Wichita, Kansas in post war 1950`s America. Plymell and the *Wichita Punks* had road tested speed, dropped LSD, held mescaline rituals and experimented with art and other creative forms. Were they *Beat* before the term had risen, been marketed and branded out of the San Francisco joss stick hippie scene?



The chronological order is important in understanding his work, as Charley makes clear in this interview. He has seen a lot since his birth on the Kansas high plains in 1935 and the early memories of the sound of the wind in the cab of an Reo Speedwagon truck. His father was a cowboy, his mother once a stunt car driver. He printed Robert Crumb`s first edition of the cult and famous Zap Comix in 1968. As part of the hip Wichita scene of the 1950`s he is also a contemporary of and, either a friend, collaborator or publisher of, some of the coolest and influential underground writers and artists to come out of the USA. He already had two volumes of poetry, *Neon Poems* and *Apocalypse Rose* out when in 1971 *City Lights* published his seminal novel, *Last of The Moccasins*. This novel grips, gleams and glistens with his hobohebian prose-style; spinning tales of his life in and around Wichita, his road trips to and from the West Coast along the Rt. 66 Benzadrine Highway and beyond, his crazy Hipster years and the boho life of his elder sister Betty. He has continued to walk his walk and talk his talk ever since and his writing has always displayed a vibrant and astute engagement with life and a heady, intoxicatingly descriptive allure. He condemned the National Endowment for the Arts and his sharp and intelligent analysis appeared in the *NY Times* and other print outlets. Because of this critique he was blacklisted and has never been awarded any funding, grant or financial support from any federal state or academic agency in the USA. He and

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his wife Pam run their own publishing house, CV Editions, which is a good place to start looking for more information on his novels, poetry and other writing.

Included in the interview are comments and thoughts on Charles Plymell from poet and life long friend Roxie Powell, writer Hammond Guthrie, film maker and educator Laki Vazakas, poet Ginger Killian Eades and musician Mike Watt.

### **What are you up to these days?**

I like nittin'....next to nittin'...nuttin'.

### **What do you remember about growing up in Kansas?**

Rattlesnakes, rattlesnakes winding in the dust while south winds sculpted fields of wheat, the hum of truck tires on warm asphalt back and forth to L.A. on RT66. Yucaipa (Green Valley) California to Plymell and Santana (Kiowa Chief) where my Grandfather ran a stagecoach down to Indian Territory (No Man's Land) now Oklahoma where President Cleveland deeded land to him. I remember sitting in the truck, an REO Speedwagon. I loved that truck. My Mom and Dad plowed the field into the space horizon. The wind in the cab played a hollow tune and I sang my favorite song from Hank William's radio show we listened to at home. *"I'm just a happy rovin' cowboy/herding the dark clouds out of the sky/deep in the heavens blue."*

### **That is simply beautiful Charley, what else?**

We had to run from the farmhouse to the cellar many times when tornados came. I saw them rolling across the prairie. My folks always knew their vector. No warnings, just nature's ozone smells. We didn't have electricity, so I was not exposed to circuitry, only earth's magnetic source that isn't enclosed. My mother cooked on the coal range, the beef my father cut from the herd. We had a battery radio for the news where I heard Roosevelt's voice announcing WWII. We rode horses everywhere. I still have my pony blanket and cinch my mother made. That was in the early years on the Great Plains. Later we moved into town. My dad had

bought a '39 Buick Century in Chicago that had tire mounts on each fender and a roll up window between backseat and front with a big straight eight motor and gearshift on the floor. He also had a baby blue '40 pre-war Packard Clipper. I could easily go a hundred mph in them. For running around he had a '41 Ford V8 coupe that could burn rubber in second gear and go over a hundred as well as a '42 Chevy coupe that my sister and I would steal and go spinning around.

*He was born 3 months before me, in a converted chicken coop (converted to successfully keep out the microdust from dust storms. Very effective as compared to the normal house in those days) and had a complete, nice neo-natalhood. Audrey, his mother, was the dearest lady you would ever want to meet. She was a tiny gnome who was as tough as the rawhide that bound up a bareback riggin'. I never knew she was part Indian, until CP wrote about it years later. Believe me, where we grew up during our youth, no one ever admitted to having Indian blood in them.*

**Roxie Powell**

**When you dropped out from school, what were the choices for you at that time?**

High School was not worth it for me. I went to Military School in San Antonio in my first year of high school and my father bought me a brand new 1952 Chevy coupe to get back to Wichita. I enrolled in North High there on the Arkansas River, an Indian Motif beautiful building. I soon realized that high school then and especially now are stupid unless one needs that structure. I didn't so I peeled out and got on the road and never looked back. Gasoline was only 15 cents a gallon. Why not go?

**I can see you have a big thing about cars, the freedom and speed of traveling. You are filmed driving by Laki in his short film as well.....**

I had a 34 Ford hot rod too to go to drive-inns and pick up chicks. That was one of the hottest Fords ever. That and a 32 were classic hot rods. I had both with V8 and gearshift on the floor. (Just the other day I was responding to HANK III's invite to do 4x4 mud rally and I emailed him a lyric: *I don't need no 4by4 / All I need is shift on the floor*).

**What impression did the music of that era have on you?**

I could get radio stations that played race music on my Chevy radio. I remember driving to Joplin, MO with Hank Ballard and the Midnighters singing *Work With Me Annie*. Ike Turner was on the radio selling appliances. Real Deal then. Of course I had been steeped in Hank Williams, Ernest Tubb and honky-tonk blues as a kid and then Rhythm & Blues came from race music and it wasn't long before we went across the tracks for all our music. We knew musicians who played in combos in clubs that came out of Kansas City and were left from Stan Kenton's guys from Wichita. Fats Domino drove up from New Orleans in his '49 Caddy with bass tied on top to play the Mambo Club across the tracks to a handful of people who could talk and smoke with him. Hard times for him, but good for us. Maybe a dollar cover/or two drink minimum. We were under age, but who's gonna come over the tracks?

*He met up with Jimmy Jammy and some other guys who hung out in a coupla places and they had a wild time. CP was always pretty cool. I met one guy from then, and even bought a car from him. His name was Johnny Mayes and he was older. I guess what these guys had in common was various forms of uppers and downers. Basically any thing they could find. For years and years Bob Branaman mostly, but later Charley, took them continuously it seemed. They drank Cosanyl cough syrup. Bob B. and often Charley walked around with a paper bag with a couple of dark glass bottles of Cosanyl which they bought at any drug store - always changing stores. They also did a lot of uppers. Although from my observation CP never really went hog wild on any substances. For instance, he really never drank booze. He'd maybe have a little wine. Never beer as his sister Betty was an alcoholic and often drank beer. After she died I remember the day CP went out and bought a six pack and after that he would drink some Elephant beer from Denmark, I think. But although he took LSD quite a number of times while we were at the Claymont Apartments on Clayton St in SF, I never saw him have a bad trip. Once he agreed to go with me to one of "my" places in downtown SF. It was called Extension 21, owned by same guy from Berlin, where you sat at a table and looked at the map on your napkin and then called a lady who was at the location with a telephone indicated on your napkin map. There was an operator who sat high up looking down on the melee*

*who, if the lady wanted to talk to you, would put you through. We stopped in during the afternoon when no one much was there. We were stoned on LSD. As we sat at a table with a little drink the operator had come in and she was checking all the phones. First one would ring behind us, then over to the left, then in front, then the next table and we thought it was the funniest thing we ever saw and started guffawing loudly until they told us to stop. Charley got up and walked over to the operator and started talking to her;. I thought we would be kicked out for sure. But as usual he worked his magic and the next thing I knew the operator was agreeing to have a drink with us when she finished testing the phones. All we did was laugh and when people asked us what was wrong with us that we were so giggly (like on grass, sometimes) we would say "Well, we've gone to Lysidia." No one suspected a thing and, in fact LSD was legal at the time.  
We got it from Sandoz. **Roxie Powell.***

**Charley, who else was around over the tracks?**

Bo Diddley, Chuck Willis and other big names in Texas & Kansas City Blues. In the other part of town we'd go out to the Cowboy Inn where Little Jimmy Dickens or someone would be opening for Roy Acuff and whatever band would have mason jars full of Dexedrine or bennies that would keep us awake days and all night long, maybe then to my friend's club with a jazz combo where Mickey Shaughnessy would m.c. and after the gig with the band, Mickey would tell jokes and talk all night and into the next day. We'd drive around on bennies and park on Main still talking philosophy or the latest about Howard Hughes. We waited outside the forum after Elvis played and picked up all the chicks who would get into the car with their panties still wet. We'd walk down Broadway and see Count Basie at coffee getting ready to play at the Orpheum and say "hey man" to greet him and go into the drug store and get special nose drops that only we knew about that would make you head feel prickly and stay high for days. School? School was for squares!

**In your novel, *The Last of The Moccasins*, first published by City Lights in 1971, you wrote a lot about the 50`s *Wichita Hipster* years. When was it apparent to you that a *Beat Scene* existed?**

My hipster years were mainly through the 1950's up to I'd say 1962, the beginning of my psychedelic years, when I met Neal Cassidy in North Beach at my girlfriend's pad and she told me he was the *On The Road* guy. I had heard of the beats a little before then, but I didn't get into them. I have never read *On The Road*, but Neal read me, in his high drama, the parts he was in, so I've listened to a lot of it and seen excerpts of it in journals. I was unaware of the Beats during my Hipster years and then I worked several jobs before I landed in San Francisco where my sister and aunt lived, though they didn't see each other.

**I guess you could say that you along with Roxie Powell, James H. Jammy, Barbitol Bob Branaman, Bruce, Spoley Oley, Fast Car, Richard Rodent, that whole crew of Kansas hipster punks were the originals and preceded the *Beats*. When you hit San Francisco and your *psychedelic years* how did you connect with that scene?**

I became aware of the Beats just before Allen Ginsberg and Peter Orlovsky came back from India in 1963 and met some of them when they came to my party with Ferlinghetti, McClure and Whalen, et al. Dave Haselwood who published my first book, *Apocalypse Rose*, had introduced me to other poets and their work he had published prior to my meeting those beats. He had published Lamantia, McClure and Connors who he went to school with in Wichita, and Whalen, maybe Duncan, and a book I really liked: *The Hotel Wentley Poems* by John Weiners. He took me to all the spots, including the Hotel Wentley, which was in "Polk Gulch," Polk Street above Foster's Cafeteria aka Foster Foods. Dave wanted to go back to Wichita, where he was from, so we did and then back to San Francisco. I thought the Beats were pretty square at the time. I hadn't met Burroughs and Kerouac yet. Pam and I met Burroughs at his Duke St. pad in London in 1968 and the same year Kerouac at the William Buckley TV show. I liked Neal and Burroughs immensely and thought Kerouac had a great ear for jazz. Though to me he remained a somewhat square Republican as far as I got to know him, not that the two are coupled. Later the Beat's French translator, Claude Pelieu said my *Last of the Moccasins* was better than Kerouac's *Doctor Sax*, and others immediately took issue, so I had to read that book.

**And what did you make of Kerouac's *Dr Sax*?**

There was a literary difference. His book obeyed literary devices such as epiphany, alliteration, character development, etc. All the things one learns in an English department. He had a good ear for language, great jazz prosody in his poetry, I thought he was the best at reading to jazz, something a lot of others tried. I thought his prose imagery in that book sometimes tumbled into bathos (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bathos>). That's the only book of his I read. My book was quite different in that I had to invent the style: *Hobohebian Prose*, as well as the genre: *Thematic Text Montage*, to justify my writing.

*I was talking with Allen Ginsberg over kaffeeklatsch some time in the late 80's the first time I heard the mention of Charles Plymell. I was living in the mundane metropolis of Mobile, where Ginsberg had given a reading on the previous night. A poetry reading which resulted in horrifying the orthodox, causing some women from the Junior League to clutch their pearls, purse their lips and saunter straight out of the building in shock. It was also a reading which resulted in fast approval from my teen-aged cohorts sitting on the edge of their seats beside me. I don't know if their appreciation and fondness of the reading was based on the literary worth of Ginsberg's writing or if it was the mere fact his opening poem contained expletives which the kids all thought was cool. My take was that, "a four-letter word doesn't equal a poem; not by itself." That next day, Allen and I talked about writing in general. We both mentioned folks we thought were good writers and he told me many tales of times spent with his friends in the era of that time. As far as meeting Charles, we ran into one another via cyberspace and suddenly "we stole away to the dark end of the street; that's where we always meet." But unlike the James Carr song I am quoting, (Carr was a singer Charlie digs who was in prison where Neal Cassady once was, at San Quentin) Charlie and I have spent no face-to-face time together; Instead, we meet daily/nightly at the end of our virtual street. We spend hours talking under the lamp post of my computer desk about subjects as diverse and personal and engaging and as interesting as the world is wide. **Ginger Killian Eades***

**Hand On the Doorknob** was your latest anthology of writing I think? It was published a short while back now. Charley tell me about your

**work in that book....**

Yes, Water Row published it. And involves a section of dining and drinking with the Beats. Turns out it was the last time Ginsberg saw Kerouac and the last time Burroughs saw Ginsberg. There is some poetry in it from my other books, mainly *Forever Wider* and the elegy for my father that Allen said was one of the greatest elegies ever written. Turns out I wrote a poem to my father when I had a dream and he wrote one to his mother when he had a dream the same night. We discussed them after his reading at American University and the National Library where I introduced him. The other parts of the book are essays on printing the first Zap and some stories.

*CP's writing continues to evolve and defies neat categorization. His novel, *Last of the Moccasins*, is impressionistic yet trenchant. It is kaleidoscopic, but contains prescient portents. His recent work incorporates philosophical impulses and challenges facile prescriptions...If I were to choose one poem of CP's of which I am particularly fond, it would be "Charles Henri Ford's Last Prints" which was published in *Hand On The Doorknob*. **Laki Vazakas***

*(Charlie's writing is) like mercury on a warm glass.*

**Hammond Guthrie**

**Charley, tell me some more again about Ginsberg.....**

The most famous, the one who masterminded the Beat Generation. I knew him for several years in many different places. His ads still find their way to myspace! I met him up on Potrero Hill, San Francisco and he immediately tried to court me as if we were in a 1920's literary soiree. It was a bit odd. He asked me about my sexual experiences as if it were from a textbook. It reminded me of what Huncke must have gone through with Dr. Kinsey. I treated it with humor and felt like he was the inexperienced one but didn't tell him that. We walked up to Ferlinghetti's house and Larry was in bed, so we drank some wine in his bedroom while he and Allen talked literary business. After we left, Allen told me that he thought Ferlinghetti wasn't a very good poet. Then he came to the party that Glenn Todd has written about in detail. Soon after



he and Neal and Anne moved into the Gough St. flat and there began a lot of traffic. During that time on Gough St I met Mary Beach and Claude Pelieu and her children, Pam and Jeffrey. They had come from France at Ferlinghetti's invitation and were interested in my collage and translated many of the Beats. Huncke came to visit us in California with the introduction of Allen who was in Italy at the time. Back in New York years later through Allen I met Kerouac and Pam and I drank and ate with them the last time they saw each other. At Allen's farm I met Corso and others involved in the Beats.

**You became good friends with Neal Cassidy in San Francisco, didnt you?**

Neal and Allen moved into my flat on Gough Street ostensibly to prepare Neal's book, *The First Third*, for publication. When Ferlinghetti and Allen sat down with him, Neal was hopelessly Neal...I called him *The Fastest Word in the West*...and he rolled a cigar shaped Panama Red and began free association, so I said to them, "*why don't you just tape him and transcribe it?*", but they were steeped in a more academic approach. Neal told me he was always slighted by the famous writers as a kind of errand boy or driver and wasn't taken seriously, but I thought his words were as what I had seen of Kerouac. Of course it's a matter of taste and I'm probably biased, Neal and I came from similar region and background, not one of ward-head mentalities.

*I didn't know that much about the scene really but read Kerouac, Burroughs, Ginsberg and Bukowski and dug it much. I saw lots of parallels with the punk movement I was part of - more than the hippie scene. Mike Watt*

**Charles, what else do you recall of that time in San Francisco?**

The time was ripe for Ginsberg to re-enter the city that launched him to fame in the 50's over the word, "fuck." The backdrop for the Hippies was eastern religion of the new age. I remember going with Allen to explore various cults and sitting outside for a designated time until we were permitted to go in and join a rage. I left, of course. One of them was Scientology, which had tin cans attached to wires to transfer crude vibes.

Eastern religions had been something that intellectuals and artist sought out since the twenties and before, so I was unimpressed, but the droves of youngsters rebelling against their lifestyles were fresh blood for the Frisco vamps. They were more ignorant than the beats in that few had formal education, certainly no street smarts, so their fates were predicable. Allen told me than when he got out of college he got a job as a market researcher, and I could see how that benefited him in his ongoing career and his desire to be a leader.

*I suppose the first I heard of Charlie was via the booklet: So Who Owns Death TV? which included the work of Carl Weisner, Wlm. Burroughs and my friend (the late) Liam O'Gallagher among others. Back in the mid-60's in San Francisco when I met artists Mary Beach and Claude Pelieu who were then working with City Lights books to produce Beach Books, Texts, and Documents. I'm not really sure if the set (Beats) influenced general society, as 'they' didn't really want anything to do with 'us' - but certainly for those of 'us' (just-after-beats) who were coming up in SF shared their overwhelming sense of quirky alienation, as well as having a deeply rooted intellectual and spiritual curiosity, the Beats 'way' of approaching themselves and world around them was more*

*than influential, it was essential. Psychedelics did the rest.*

### **Hammond Guthrie**

*I was not very familiar with Beat literature before I met Huncke in New York. Shortly after getting to know Herbert, I met and befriended Gregory Corso, Marty Matz, Jack Micheline, Roger and Irvyne Richards, and many folks in this circle. Huncke helped me to look at the world in a new way. He had so much compassion and was exceptionally generous with his time and his stories. This is not to say that Herbert didn't bust my balls on occasion; it was, at times, an Unsentimental Education. My connections with all of these folks who were integral to the formation and evolution of the Beat movement had a tremendous influence on how I live. It's difficult to measure influence, but suffice it to state that I continue to take sustenance and inspiration from the work of my friends. I acknowledge the groundbreaking work of many of the Beat writers. But I'm wary of the on-going mythologizing of some of these artists, especially of Kerouac. This impulse has obscured the*

*accomplishments of many writers who helped the word evolve - Charley, Janine Pommy Vega and Alexander Trocchi, for example. Huncke, Corso and Marty Matz were all approachable, and to various degrees were in touch with their dark sides. I understand how their creativity was integral to the way they lived, and vice-versa. They were human. Laki Vazakas*

**Charley, I wanted to briefly talk about a particular aspect of the arts. Money. In recent years the arts have become more and more inundated with polluted funding streams from big business, as they slap their branding iron on the ass of writers, musicians and artists. Avenues of public funding have always been available to apply for as well. Charley, you had a bad connection some time ago with the National Endowment for the Arts, didnt you?**

The NEA has been a terrible thing in my life. I took Ginsberg to their offices when we lived in D.C. when he came to visit. He wooed them and they put someone with friends of lower eastside poets in power, many who had been here to Cherry Valley to see me. But they handed it (\$\$) to their other friends and couples like Allen & Peter netted about 40 grand. This when we had to sell our house here and move to D.C. to find jobs. When we were financially able to return here, I got a part-time job in a university as a tutor and saw a full professor and his wife who were millionaires groveling and slobbering in front of state grants people to the extent I never recovered from the scene. The NEA became safe academic types who are not poets, but they have to con kids into thinking they are so it continues in a vicious scam of departments to keep the fraud and Sallie Mae (student loans) going. I still receive books from poets inscribed to me as their great teacher and they list several grants and it's pretty easy to see who their friends were who gave it to them. I just wanted a fairer system about 30 years ago, but jealous poets, opportunists and arts systems and organisations invaded all federal, state and local programs to the extent it bred more like a pyramid scheme or scientology, etc. They changed the cultural landscape forever just like everything else in this country. They are they same ones who rant at Bush while they do the same thing and are comfortable in their ignorance and greed that brought down culture and a country.

**Money always changes people, sometimes to the extent that they cant recognise themselves or the smell of their own shit...**

I could get into several examples over the years, but it would take a book and it's not worth my time. In short, the state is right as always. I applied every year for 30 years and watched the generations receive money I had never dreamt of. I'd be lucky to see a thousand dollars after I quit working on the S.F. docks. Someone like Burroughs gave me things out of his generosity. Now, I just want to pay for my burial out in Indian country next to my mother, so I won't have to burden my wife and kids. After my union job, I made the wrong career choices. Even those who howled against the system enjoyed its fruits. I separated myself from it long ago. Elite professions provide little fellowship for mixed blood white trash, daring to call themselves poets. Some bust the game, like a Bukowski or a Jackson Pollock, but for every one of those case studies, there are thousand for the greed, avarice and status quo of the state that it supports. While toilets flush to the sound of tapping toes, the misery of the poor contributes to the phonies and liars. Or Rimbaud said it better: *while public funds evaporate in feasts of fraternity, a bell of rosy fire rings in the clouds*. Proof is easy. Maya Angelou, the hallmark verse queen and self acclaimed ex-whore used her talents when she saw suckers to become a multi-millionaire on the cover of Forbes magazine. She rode the system for all she's worth and like Cheney and Bush and Bubba Bill, her John ghost benefactors, she's well insulated against the truth. Clinton had her read for his inauguration! You can see the history of this country in the shit flushing down the toilet. I feel sorry for younger generations yearning to be free. Nothing like that great open slate of the Western Lands.

*My take is that I essentially agree with his take.* **Hammond Guthrie**

*He has deserved more recognition for decades, as well as some bread to help sustain him as he cuts through the veins of his life to pour the blood of a poet onto paper. If I were to implore CP to dress up in a monkey suit, or ask him to put on any other costume that one could pin a moniker on as the "latest and hippest fad," he would defer to his own faculties and gently tell me he couldn't fulfill my request and for me to lay off my morphine script cause it would be obvious I wasn't thinking clearly!! He*

*has no intentions of donning a robe of "appearance" to utter words eagerly awaited by those with money and power so he could fit into the tight box of some seem-scene. Charlie ain't no poser; he's no pawn. As a young man, rolling into dance halls across the tracks, he was hip before the word fell into nomenclature. Nobody had to tell CP what was hip. As a part of the marketing strategy of ANY "scene," you've got the man behind the man behind the man who doles out the dough for what that puppet-master believes is gonna be the next best thing on the street. I feel with respect to the NEA, they missed the boat. Charles' writing is exceptional and his work speaks for itself. Does it deserve NEA funding? Res ipsa loquitur. Power and politics should not dictate allocating funds to artists if it is contemporaneously concerned with its marketing strategy. Some writers rid themselves of a cumbersome integrity in order to fit nicely into that hand-crafted box. CP is loyal and faithful and sincere. But most importantly, he is "real." He would never amputate his integrity. **Ginger Killian Eades***

**Going back to early 1960`s and Gough Street then Charley, were you working then?**

Neal and I had regular jobs. I worked as a printer and Neal a tire changer. We had fun in the new age that swept the city, but we were older. Little things like dancing was something I didn't get into much. When Allen took the stage in Golden Gate Park, the well-documented be-in, dancing in a kind of Shiva contortion, I and those with me quickly blended in the crowd. Neal was also in Berkeley taunting the leaders of the famous free speech rally until someone asked who is that nut and Allen said he was just a crazy Zen Buddhist.

**And what about the marches and demonstrations. You must have been on some of them?**

Pam and I joined the march to People's Park. She was pregnant and I assessed the scene quickly and wanted to take her over to someone's house instead of demonstrating. The troops had lined up on both sides of the designated parade route and wouldn't let anyone go down a side street. I had to call the bluff of the young guardsman who quickly got my message and called his superior and let us go down a side street. The troops had lined the designated route with barbed wire, tanks and fixed

bayonets. The Berkeley “radicals” had made a deal prior to stay on certain streets. Neal was just out of San Quentin, and I had enough common sense from drifting about the country to know that the protesters were sitting ducks and it wasn’t a good move under any flag, another example of intellectual ignorance that could have gotten themselves killed, and did at Kent State. I knew better and had been down to the Peace and Freedom Party headquarters in San Francisco, which was across the hall from the Black Panther Party. I used to help them read propaganda pamphlets to sort out which ones were written by agents. I saw the Black Panthers as legitimate radicals willing to lay down their lives and demonstrated that by marching on the Reagan governor’s mansion armed with bullets draped over their backs. I returned to the parade and went down to ground zero where Gary Snyder (who reminded me of a boy scout) and other poets and the radical organizers were doing their theatrics. Of course they lost. My thoughts were re-enforced again when Pam and I were near the Chicago convention and decided not to go to ground zero.

**What happened on that particular one?**

Sure enough a young radical tore down the flag and all hell broke loose culminating in getting us Nixon in the white house. I don’t suppose the kid had the sense to detect that some of the older cops in the riot squad, or their superiors, may have been veterans of Omaha Beach, or Iwo Jima. Not a very sensitive tactic for the organizers either, who became stockbrokers in the new republican era. Neal was real. We were from that geography and time between St. Louis to Denver where one could tap into a real person.

**The real people can be hard to find.....**

After the end of flower power, I took Neal a new pair of driver’s gloves. He was on the Further Bus with Kesey, whom I had met before when Neal brought him to parties, and with Tom Wolfe, who seemed a nice guy. Neal was to prove himself again when inevitably the cops stopped the bus down south. Neal talked to the cops in such a way as they ended up liking him. It was kind of reminiscent of Boone Co. and the sheriffs and Hasil Adkins. It was more the culture of the ‘50’s where speed and a

line of talk saved the day.

**That`s a great way of putting it Charley. What was turning your ears at the time on the west coast?**

During that period in San Francisco and L.A., a lot was happening. New music was born e.g. The Doors and Janis Joplin. When we were printing Zap, someone we knew came running in saying there was a new group in town he was managing that he wanted us to meet. They had a strange name...Pink Floyd.

**Oh yeah..... Did they throw any bricks at the wall back then I wonder?**

Janis and Big Brother were playing the new hall on Fillmore and two complimentary tickets were left for us at City Lights. We were too stoned and involved in so much partying, we didn't make it a few blocks over to the Fillmore.

**And I know you have always been into real honky tonk country music and that you grew up with Woody Guthrie, what about other stuff though?**

The Beatles, Beach Boys, Bobby Dylan....Cash. As an old cowpoke would say: "Makes my ass wanna dip snuff!" So I listen to all music, but I'm very selective in what I like, and I admit that sometimes I miss a generation as I confessed in my "We Jam Econo" tribute I wrote on <http://www.hootpage.com/> Mike Watt's Hoot Page.

*Charley did write a beautiful essay on the We Jam Econo Minutemen documentary film. I felt very very honored. I've got two recordings of live readings by Charley I dig a lot - don't know the names of the poems. I've read both The Last of The Moccasins and Hand on The Doorknob which I love much. I would be up for doing anything and everything with Charley, it would be a mindblow for me! Mike Watt*

**That is a great piece on the film about Watt`s old band, The Minutemen. I have seen some photos of you with some other musicians that came out of that SST hardcore scene too Charley.....**

I met Grant Hart at Burroughs' funeral in Lawrence and was supposed to give him a ride to St. Louis for the Burial and Patti Smith's goodbye, but my friend overslept. Later we saw Grant again when he took us to Patti Smith's concert at the Bowery Ballroom in which he performed. It was in sight of the old Bowery loft we used to live in. Ferlinghetti came to read at a nearby university when Grant Hart and I went to the party afterwards and Grant sniffed his ass. Larry and the English professor were shocked as Grant said that dogs make friends that way. The kid at the university told me that Ferlinghetti said for him not to introduce him as a Beat, but as Doctor Ferlinghetti. Now that's worth getting a PhD for if nothing else! Thurston Moore asked me to read at a performance he was involved with in Montreal and then later in Northampton and again, recently with Grant Hart and Mike Watt. Recently, Thurston gave my son and me passes to Sonic Youth and Flaming Lips gigs. Then Grant Hart and I were invited to the festival in Northampton where Grant introduced me to Mike Watt. And so I went back to make up for what I missed in the 80's. Other than that, Kathleen Haskard, who I found in time/space.

*In November of 2007 I was asked by Thurston Moore to be part of a poetry reading and my old friend Grant Hart introduced me to Charley. That was the first I heard of him... he said very kind things to me about my poems. I konked at Thurston's and the next day he lent me his copy of *The Last of The Moccasins* and told me about his association with the beats. I read it on the flight home... and then read it again. I loved it!*

**Mike Watt**

*I first heard of CP from Herbert Huncke, whom I met in New York in the late 80s. Soon after meeting Huncke, I purchased a copy of his book "The Evening Sun Turned Crimson", which CP and his wife Pamela had published as a Cherry Valley Edition. I didn't actually meet CP until the summer of 1998, shortly before the Cherry Valley Arts Festival. CP's friend Janine Pommy Vega had suggested that I get in touch with CP regarding my documentary, "Huncke and Louis." I sent Charley a VHS of my work, and we had a few phone conversations. We met in Albany, New York at the local PBS affiliate's tv studio, where CP and Breath Hand were hyping the arts festival. **Laki Vazakas***



**You have also published work from some seminal authors from Huncke to WS Burroughs, tell me about the publishing Charley....**

We published a couple of Charles Henri Ford's books and he then wrote a diary which is a most interesting account of those he knew closing out the days of Surrealism pre WWII. We saw him again at Huncke's memorial at St. Mark's and I went to his collage opening as well as Gerard Malanga. He had stayed with us in Cherry Valley at a house in town which is now a restaurant. Burroughs also stayed with us there as well as Carl Solomon, Victor Bockris and others. During that time Huncke and Louis came up because we were publishing Huncke's first book. Allen insisted on contributing 600 bucks or so for his advance, which helped greatly because we thought Huncke was of great stature. Huncke visited us in Baltimore and Washington where we read together with Ray Bremser whom we also published. I had deep affection for Burroughs, who was always entertaining and receptive when we visited and he gave us his loft in NYC while he and James were abroad; to say nothing of his paintings and manuscripts he gave us. He was always generous and said he didn't consider himself a Beat. Unfortunately we had to sell his treasures as fast as he gave them, but he was like that with money himself.

**And did you hang out at the Chelsea Hotel Manhattan ever at all?**

Yeah, my mother-in-law, Mary Beach and her husband Claude Pelieu lived there. We were put up there for a couple of nights for the reading at The Bitter End. John Cassady, Neal's son, rehearsed there before the gig at the Bitter End. I used to drive a milk truck into the city and deliver cash to Herbert Huncke from his foreign publishers.

**Did you ever get involved with films and visual stuff over the years?**

Underground films were the rage. I remember taking Robert Frank on my motorcycle down to the S.F. premier of (Fellini's) 8 1/2. Flaming Creatures was playing in North Beach and there was a party for its opening. Someone sent a limo for Lew Welch and me. As a cab driver, he dug the ride. Stan Brackage, another kid from Kansas, came by the print

shop. I did two 8mm movies that were in Ann Arbor Film Festival, and Jonas Mekas at the New York Film co-op showed them until they wore out and notified me through Harry Smith that I had some money they earned! I didn't expect such attention and care! I made some collages and had a show at the Batman, a notorious gallery where Bruce Connor had shown after he came back from Mexico. Neal was at the Goldwater convention at the Cow Palace that night and came by my opening with straw hat and cane. It was a costume opening anyway.

*I've been casually shooting footage of CP since we met in 1998. This is both work and play. We've had some fun roadtripping--out to Kansas and in and around Cherry Valley. I cut together a short video that is on his MySpace page and is up on YouTube. I'd like to work with Charley to shape some of this material into a larger piece. We collaborated on an email dialogue that was published some years back in Night Magazine.*

**Laki Vazakas**

### **How did the Batman show go?**

I sold all my collages except a couple. The show was mentioned in Art in America. Billy Jharmark, the owner of Batman Gallery gave Pam and me his classic 1950 MGTD. We were leaving for Europe and sold it on the street for \$250! A book was later written about the Batman. I don't think it mentioned my show. There was a story about Billy Jharmark giving Michael McClure a wristwatch!

### **Nothing about that MG he gave you and Pam?**

These are but a few examples of my poor marketing skills. I began to think my marketing skills weren't up to par. It seemed to end when Neal came running into the Gough St. flat yelling, "Charley turn on the TV! Kennedy's been shot!" That Thanksgiving was gray. We had a big dinner and invited a stranger off the street. My sister and her husband Frank were there. Later he helped get me a job on the docks. Ginsberg's poem talks about me and some of my friends from Kansas who lived in the pad above that one called "The End Pad." It was a sign of the times for me. Certainly that fling with youth had ended.

## *Wilderness House Literary Review 3/2*

This interview was put together whilst I was traveling in the States and knocked into shape over the days of April and May '08. I had the fortune to be able to spend time with Charley's long time friend, the artist and film maker Robert Branaman when I was in LA. With thanks to Charley and Pam Plymell, Roxie Powell, Bob Branaman, Ginger Eades, Mike Watt, Hammond Guthrie and Laki Vazakas.

Charley and Pam's publishing company is [Cherry Valley Editions](#) and you can also read more at Charley's [myspace page](#).

Charles Plymell is still kicking against the pricks, writing and performing at spoken word gigs with musician and artist Grant Hart, Sonic Youth's Thurston Moore and the legendary Minutemen bassist Mike Watt. He will be reading at the [Sprachsatz Literary Festival](#) Innsbruck, Austria on 12-14 Sept and will be making further spoken word appearances, some with either one, some or all of the three men aforementioned in the USA later on this year.

This postscript was written by Glenn Todd, artist and writer who was deeply embedded in the Wichita Scene along with Charley Plymell, Robert Branaman, Bruce Connor, Michael McClure, Dave Haselwood and many more. [The Wichita Vortex website](#) is a good reference point.

### POSTSCRIPT

This is Charley, swinging. The time is spring-summer, this year, 1963. The place, Wichita, Kansas, where the golden wheat has just been harvested and the trees are bursting greenery touching tips over the center of the streets. Charley stands in a combination teenage twist and gay bar done up in coral walls lined with gilded store window manikins. He stands at the front of the dance floor before a juke box that has a waterfall behind it and light flowing down its sides, so that he appears to be coming from a neon grotto. His hair is falling over his forehead in a mass of curls, he is wearing dark glasses, a blue-and-silver sport shirt, a metallic gold tie, black tight pants slung low on his hips, and black-and-white saddle oxfords. One hip is slung outward. Up go the hands in the air.

TWIST!" shouts Charley.

Up his back runs a ripple like a snake moving, fast. His hips are inscribing a frenzied half-circle in the air. His head bounces and bobbles with jazz-drummer ecstasy. His arms flail, he's almost flying but his feet are planted in the floor, sucking up great electrical currents of earth vibrations.

"It's the vortex!" He shouts. "Can't you feel the forces! Pulling you in! It's twisting in twister land!"

Across the floor toward him dances his blonde college-girl goddess, and she's out of her mad gold pony-tailed head. She's all Charley could dream of exploding into, she's Miss Freeswinging Kansas, Caucasian aflame, descendant of hotblooded fairy-tale princesses, she moves with classic American grace, she's poised and pure and fashion-hip, she has round arms of love, ready to grab, she won't be brought down, and above the rock and roll, sweet cello strings play for all eternity in that gold head of hers.

They're back at the table where a crowd of us are sitting. They're arm in arm, together again, and I turn on to their beauty aglow with sex.

"This is where it all comes from!" Shouts Charley. "Can't you feel the vibrations? Man, there is so much energy here that you just get near it and floom! It's got you and swinging you someplace else."

This is Charley's hometown, the land that produced him, and he's back to turn everyone on and get recharged. Everywhere he goes crowds of youth follow him, turning *him* on. Now the brown-limbed teenagers in cutoff jeans and bouffant hair have taken the floor. Their bodies are strong, sunbeautied, and swimming-pool clean, they're eager-high on beer. They are dancing dances they all know, no one touching, boys with girls, girls with girls, boys with boys. All the steps are perfect and harmonious. They are all oh God so beautiful and I know we cannot lose, beyond all certitude of mind mankind will take the stars and crush time with these golden kids, born of our bodies and spirit.

Here Charley is big, here with youth. He is vibrant with sex that knows

no separation from love, and hope for and beware of the day its dancing force is turned on you, my friend. Crowds follow him, he is alive with scheme and dream, and he will make it happen *now*. Are you ready? He will, like the morning glory but more aware, unfold himself in the sunburst of today.

Crowds follow him, turned on. He's having a show of his collages at a weird place, the New Mission Care, in the skidrow-trainstation section of Wichita. Charley aggrandizing making bright the legend. Is it a game? How much is glory and how much is morning glory? (He quotes Cocteau: "All art is a card trick.") He has made the Wichita scene happen: bright-eyed campus beauties, long-haired students, careful college professors, waiting-in-limbo artists, shimmy-shake drag queens, long ago pillhead buddies, strange inhabitants of the outposts of Beatsville--all come to soak up Charley energy, to be angered, to be inspired, to lift him up or put him down, but always to be stirred.

Glenn Todd  
San Francisco, 1997

### **Charles Plymell**

#### **Books:**

- *Apocalypse Rose*, Dave Haselwood Books, San Francisco, CA, 1967.
- *Neon Poems*, Atom Mind Publications, Syracuse, NY, 1970.
- *The Last of the Moccasins*, City Lights Books, San Francisco, CA, 1971; Mother Road Publications, 1996.
- *Moccasins Ein Beat-Kaleidoskop*, Europaverlag, Vienna, Austria, 1980.
- *Over the Stage of Kansas*, Telephone Books, NYC, 1973.
- *The Trashing of America*, Kulchur Foundation, NYC, 1975.
- *Blue Orchid Numero Uno*, Telephone Books, 1977.
- *Panik in Dodge City*, Expanded Media Editions, Bonn, W. Germany, 1981.
- *Forever Wider, 1954-1984*, Scarecrow Press, Metuchen, NJ, 1985.
- *Was Poe Afraid?*, Boggs Publications, Arlington, VA, 1990.
- *Hand on the Doorknob*, Water Row Books, Sudbury, MA, 2000

**Anthologies:**

- Mark in Time, New Glide Publications, San Francisco, CA, 1971.
- And The Roses Race Around Her Name, Stonehill, NYC, 1975.
- Turpentin on the Rocks, Maro Verlag, Augsburg, W. Germany, 1978.
- A Quois Bon, Le Soleil Noir, Paris, France, 1978.
- Planet Detroit, Anthology of Urban Poetry, Detroit, MI, 1983.
- Second Coming Anthology, Second Coming Press, San Francisco, CA, 1984.
- The World, Crown Publishers, 1991.
- Editors' Choice III, The Spirit That Moves Us, New York, 1992.
- The Age of Koestler, The Spirit of the Wind Press, Kalamazoo, MI, 1995.

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