

**BURROUGHS****QX Magazine: Chris Barber****www.chrisbarber.eu****QUEER WITH WORDS...****THE LIFE AND WORK OF WILLIAM BURROUGHS**

by Chris Barber

William Seward Burroughs is perhaps the finest and most innovative Queer writer of the century. A legend in his own lifetime, the counter-cultural influence of this “literary outlaw” extends far beyond the confines of Gay sub-culture. His contribution to literature compares with such giants as Joyce, Beckett, Hemingway and Celine - Norman Mailer famously referred to him as, “the only living writer who may conceivably be possessed by genius”. Tragically Burroughs died on 2nd August 1997. Aged 83, he remained an uncompromising, controversial and radical outsider to the end.

*Boys lounge in doorways. Audrey glimpses scenes that quicken his breath and send blood pounding to his groin... Boys are standing in front of peep shows some wearing the rainbow jock straps others in prep school clothes loincloths and jellabas... As he passes a booth he glimpses through parted curtains two boys sitting on a silk sofa both of them naked. Shifting his eyes he sees a boy slip his jockstrap down and step out of it without taking his eyes from the peep show... In front of him is a luminous screen. Smell of old pain, ether, bandages, sick fear in the waiting room.*

**THE WILD BOYS [Corgi, 1973]**

Burroughs was born in St. Louis on 5th February 1914. His grandfather had invented the Adding Machine, making his family modestly wealthy. William was afforded a small monthly allowance enabling him to travel. He graduated from Harvard and in 1939, settled in New York, attracted by its seedy Bohemian underworld. Jazz was chic at the time and in sleazy all-night jazz dives, the scene was kicking. Here Burroughs found excitement and friends among the low-life outsiders - thieves, rent-boys, prostitutes and junkies. He was not the only artist to find inspiration among these social outcasts and pale criminals...

**BEATNIKS**

Beat poet - Allen Ginsberg (HOWL) and novelist Jack Kerouac (ON THE ROAD) were two of the young, arty bohemians frequenting the Beat-Bop Jazz clubs. A clique developed around Burroughs, experimenting with heroin, opium, marijuana, avant-garde arts, psychoanalysis, travel and sexual promiscuity. They were known as the Beatniks - the first rebellious youth sub-culture. Like the Parisian Dandies a century before, or the Da-Da and Surrealist artists this century, Beatniks became a predatory elite which augmented a rich and diverse cultural renaissance. During the 1950's and '60's, they got trendy, grew long hair and became hippies. Burroughs, as ever, remained cynical and aloof from this trivial trend.

El Hombre Invisible (as Burroughs was later known) did not seek to attract attention through ostentatious or flashy sartorial expression. He favoured anonymity as a strategy, blending in with the crowd. Modelling himself on the FBI and secret agents, Burroughs wore cool suits, a Burberry style trench coat and his distinctive Fedora hat. This refusal to anchor his identity through a fashionable register of appearance, became his mark of distinction... An irony which did not escape him.

Ginsberg and Burroughs had a brief fling and remained lifelong friends. Burroughs became a heroin addict, a

habit he maintained for twenty years. Hard drugs and the behavioural patterns they induce are central themes in his books. His earliest two novels were written back-to-back and published under his pseudonym William Lee (in case of a moral and legal backlash). **JUNKY**, is a gritty masterpiece of modern realism and undercover journalism. **QUEER**, is a penetrating and frustrating look at the social and psychological dynamics of queer relationships.

## **WILLIAM TELL's JOAN**

Never settling for the rigid confines of place or identity, Burroughs shackled up with a woman - Joan Vollmer, spawned a brat and moved to New Orleans. Amidst the bohemian decadence of the French Quarter, Burroughs found fresh inspiration.

He began farming marijuana and going on shooting expeditions (he was always a gun enthusiast). But when Ginsberg was busted for drugs in New York, the police found incriminating letters from Burroughs. With the cops hot on his trail, he crossed the border from Texas into Mexico.

Joan was a Benzedrine addict. Like smack for Burroughs, it could be easily scored in Mexico. Old beat friends came to visit them. One evening in a drug stupor, Joan asked William to play their William Tell game. She stood at one end of the room and balanced a glass of whisky on her head. From the far corner, Burroughs aimed his gun and fired... Blood splashed across the wall as the unbroken glass smashed onto the floor. Joan lay dead. Burroughs (who later admitted they had never played the game before) was distraught. He contacted his solicitor and was released on bail. Unfortunately, his lawyer also had charges pending against him for murder. It was time to quit Mexico.

In Colombia and the Ecuadorian jungle, Burroughs explored the remains of Mayan civilisation. He was infatuated by their esoteric language carved in hieroglyphs. Further excitement was gained when he experimented with Yage, a plant with psychedelic qualities used in rituals by native shamen.

*An Indian boy with rose-colored flesh and delicate features stands in front of Audrey... 'You crazy or something walk around alone ? This bad place. This place of flesh plants'.*

*... 'You not careful you grow here. Look at that.' He points to a limp pink tube about two feet long growing from two purple mounds covered with fine red tendrils... The boy steps forward and rubs the tube which slowly stiffens into a phallus six feet high growing from two testicles... 'Now I make him spurt.'... He strips off his loin-cloth and steps onto the vegetable scrotum embracing the shaft. The red hairs twist around his legs reaching up to his loin and buttocks...*

*...Pearly lubricant pours from the head of the giant phallus and runs down the sides. The boy squirms against the shaft caressing the great pulsing head with both hands. There is a soft muffled sound, a groan of vegetable lust straining up from tumescent roots as the plant squirts ten feet in the air.*

## **THE WILD BOYS**

## **NAKED LUNCH**

In 1954, Burroughs arrived in Tangier. Seduced by the exoticism (and availability of Moroccan boys and cheap smack) he lived in the Kasbah for four years. During this period he began writing again. He was disgusted by the pretensions, exploitation and hypocrisy of the ex-patriot queens. They became negative characters and Tangier became "Interzone". He met Kiki - a young Spanish guy. A long term relationship developed. Kiki would represent a positive characterisation...

When Kerouac (now a successful novelist) and Ginsberg visited Burroughs, they were shocked to find his place littered with discarded pages of writing. Burroughs apologised gathering and trashing papers. Kerouac began reading in total amazement...

*So we... start for New Orleans past iridescent lakes and orange gas flares, and swamps and garbage heaps, alligators crawling around in broken bottles and tin cans, neon arabesques of motels, marooned pimps scream obscenities at passing cars from islands of rubbish...  
New Orleans is a dead museum.*

This work, he told Burroughs, would become the greatest book of the age...

*... Dead slot-machine country, south end of Texas, nigger-killing sheriffs look us over and check the car papers. Something falls off you when you cross the border into Mexico, and suddenly the landscape hits you straight with nothing between you and it...*

Kerouac delayed his return to the States to edit the manuscripts. He gave Burroughs a title - **NAKED LUNCH** ("A frozen moment when everyone sees what is on the end of every fork".)

*Remember the Bismark Archipelego. No overt homosexuality. A functioning police state needs no police. Homosexuality does not occur to anyone as conceivable behaviour... Homosexuality is a political crime... No society tolerates overt rejection of its basic tenets... You know the experiment with rats where they are subject to this electric shock and dropped in cold water if they so much as move at a female. So they all become fruit rats and that's the way it is with etiology. And shall such a rat squeak out, "I'm queah and I uuuuuuuuve it" or "Who cut yours off, you two-holed freak?" 'twere a square rat so to squeak.*

Pornography, violence, horror, hopelessness, disgust, degradation... Pop Science-Fiction... Classical allusion... Wicked satire... Cunning pathos... **NAKED LUNCH** has it all. Its formal structure overturns every rule and convention of narrative development... A savage journey which forces you to confront the darkest reaches of humanity... And question the whole notion of humanity... Without offering a return ticket... But ultimately leaving you with a supreme sense of liberation !

*DR. BENWAY: "... Did I ever tell you about the time I performed an appendectomy with a rusty sardine can ? And once I was caught short without instrument one and removed a uterine tumour with my teeth..."*

*DR. LIMPF: "The incision is ready doctor."*

*Dr. Benway forces the cup into the incision and works it up and down. Blood spurts all over the doctors, the nurse and the wall... The cup makes a horrible sucking sound.*

*NURSE: "I think she's gone doctor."*

*DR. BENWAY: "Well, it's all in a day's work." He walks across the room to the medicine cabinet... "Some fucking drug addict has cut my cocaine and Saniflush! Nurse! Send the boy to fill this RX on the double!"*

**NAKED LUNCH** [William Burroughs, 1959]

It was several years before Burroughs, then living in Paris, found a publisher (Olympia Press) willing to risk publication. In the US, two legal battles were fought following state bans.

The conservative literary establishment was shocked and critics berated the book. But their portals were under siege... A new generation of writers and critics stormed to defend the **NAKED LUNCH**.

## CUT-UPS

In Paris, Burroughs developed the subversive **CUT-UP** writing technique with Bryon Gysin.

*Writing is fifty years behind painting. I propose to apply the painters' techniques to writing; things as simple and immediate as collage or montage. Cut right through the pages of any book or newsprint... lengthwise, for example, and shuffle the columns of text. Put them together at hazard and read the newly constituted message. Do it for yourself. Use any system which suggests itself to you... You'll soon see that words don't belong to anyone.*

**THE THIRD MIND** by W.B. and BRION GYSIN [John Calder, 1979]

## SUBVERSIVE STRATEGIES

You ever feel paranoid..? Burroughs would say you are right to be paranoid. You may live like a “Johnson” (term derived from a New York criminal family who minded their own business, never squealed to cops and did not impose their morality on others)... But others do not. We exist in a culture which thrives upon control, social regulation and discipline. If it is not the God-squad, politicians and police regulating you, it is your next door neighbour. Ultimately, you can't even trust your “self”. The banter of capitalism, Political Correctness - the whole system of language in western culture is about the imposition of control. If the cops don't get you, when you're high on drugs and fucking on Hampstead Heath, your “friend” - who has just stopped taking drugs and wants to impose his newly discovered enlightenment, probably will get you.

If you survive this onslaught, you're left with a heavy drug habit and insatiable sexual desire to contend with !

From the outset Burroughs had seen himself as an agent, developing subversive strategies to counter the mechanisms of power and control.

*Consider the IS of identity. When I say to be me, to be you, to be myself, to be others - whatever I may be called upon to be or say that I am - I am not the verbal label “myself”. The word BE in English contains, as a virus contains, its precoded message of damage, the categorical imperative of a permanent condition. To be a body, to be nothing else, to stay a body... If you see the relation of the I to the body, as the relation of a pilot to his ship, you see the full crippling force of the reactive mind command to be a body.*

*... Whatever you may be, you are not the verbal labels in your passport any more than you are the word “self”.*

**ELECTRONIC REVOLUTION** [Expanded Media, 1970]

Burroughs lived in London in the '60's and remained a prolific writer until his death.

*Kiki blushes, but he must obey the rules of this game. He takes off his loincloth, smiling shyly to reveal lush purple-pink genitals, nuts tight, cock straining up, the flower smell of it fills the hold... An area is cleared and carefully measured off and the bets placed. Kiki bends over, hands on knees.... A powerful odour fills the hold, already heavy with the smells of opium, hashish, and salt water drying on young bodies. The reek from the pink coral container is a heavy sweet rotten musky smell like a perfumed corpse... The unguent glistens in the dim light of the hold, where red limbs stir lazily like fish in black water. Now the boy rubs the glowing unguent up Kiki's ass and Kiki writhes and bares his teeth as the other boy slides it in and they both light up and glow...*

**CITIES OF THE RED NIGHT** [Picadoc, 1982]