

The Embodiment of Everything Beat

Herbert Hunke (1915-1996)

The beat generation shined the light on some of the most unique facets of society. While millions of people settled into the generic suburban lifestyle in the '50s, the 'beatniks' were the ones swimming against the tide of conformity. Beat poetry was the literary movement that symbolized the growing counterculture centered in America that would eventually spread to every community in the world. Herbert Hunke is the human representation of this rebellion from a cookie-cutter life. Close friends with renown beat poets like Allen Ginsberg; Hunke played an essential role in the beat generation.

Born January 9th, 1915, in Greenfield, Massachusetts, Hunke's upbringing played a key role in the revolutionary he would become. His family bounced around in his early life, first Detroit, followed by a permanent move to Chicago. His father, Herbert Huncke Sr. worked as a mechanic, while his mother was a stay at home mom with plenty of hobbies. The Hunke family lived in wealth in Chicago. However, the money that made the Hunke family thrive would be the greatest source of friction in his parents' marriage. By 1927 Hunke's parents were divorced but the lack of a stable home had already taken root. Hunke ran away to New York City. Although he never reached the city, the seeds of rebellion were clearly shown. Having dropped out of grade school, he possessed enough skills to be a successful member of mainstream society, but instead, he chased an enlightened lifestyle. He wandered the streets of Chicago spending the majority of his time with his girlfriend, Donna and her brother Johnny. His childhood with its lack of stability played a critical role in the movement he would be a part

of. His family reached the pinnacle of American life yet Herbert rejected it for the pleasures of life of culture.

After first leaving home in 1927, he was in and out of Chicago as he traversed America in the '30s. His wealth of experience would play the most critical role in his later life. After 10 years of bouncing city to city, he traveled to New York in 1939. On 42nd street, Hunke would find his first 'stable' home since he was twelve years old. The prostitution that was responsible for his income as a boy would become ever more successful on the streets of New York. Hunke explained some of the hardships of prostitution: "I succeeded in combining the two in a manner of being heterosexual today and homosexual the next—allowing neither to influence me more than the other." Quotes like that lead to many questions about his experience. To supplement his income, he resorted to thievery. However, his stealing habit was not limited to people he did not know for he stole from his closest friends many times. In world war 2 he served in United States Navy, but after his ship was shelled he discovered morphine. Drug abuse through his life would become an important aspect of Hunke's aura. Immediately following the war, Hunke forged friendships with some of the most well-known beat poets. Allen Ginsberg and Hunke lived together in New York for years. During this time together, Hunke coined the term beat poetry; a term that stood the test of time becoming the defining title of this generation of revolutionaries. Hunke's close relationships with key individuals in the beat generation would cement his role as a key figure in the revolution.

His incarceration for 10 years in the 1950s would replace years of creativity with another unique section in the life of Herbert Hunke. His life is complete with a full house of experience that surely was a large part of his intrigue to his friends. His 10 year prison sentence

led to his first time being clean of the drugs that controlled his life for his first 30 years.

Although Hunke was thought to be less of a writer than other beat poets, 10 years of work created while in prison is largely lost. It is unlikely that the lost stories would be responsible for a culture shift, but many would be a bridge into the intricate mind of Herbert Hunke. In the years following the 60's Hunke faded into relative obscurity. A few TV appearances kept him in the public eye but none of his pieces ever reached critically acclaimed success. It is an important message on how sometimes the most powerful stories cannot be told. I wouldn't call his life as a writer a failure; success is personal and I am sure that broad appeal was not one of Hunke's goals. Herbert Hunke would die in 1996 at the age of 81. Even at his old age Hunke still lived a life of intrigue; when he visited a clinic at the age of 81 he tested positive for a number of drugs including methadone and Valium. Hunke was not a well-known beat poet but he is a seamless example of someone who embodies what the beat generation was.

Complete records of Hunke's poems are not found on the internet but a few videos of him speaking his poems can be found on his blog. I found a poem entitled "Easter, 1961", and it takes you through a journey in the mind of Herbert Hunke. [Listen to Hunke's Poem "Easter 1961"](#). At times it seems as if his mind too full of thought to translate into words as it rambles on and on. His words are often hard to understand as it seems as if they are speaking generally and specifically in tandem. After decoding, I learned the poem is about a rambling experience about a time around Easter. It is likely that it is a combination of a number of different life experiences all jumbled into one day of the experience. The poem represents a collection of important moments in Hunke's life all collected into one poem and one experience.

In my research, I have been taken back by the sheer insanity of the life of Herbert Hunke. His life story is one that I would sit down and discuss from hours upon hours without tire. I get the feeling that Hunke would find solace in the positives of day to day life. He would never aspire to reach the heights of conformed society for he would rather find his own version of success. His laid back attitude leads me to imagine that he wouldn't believe too strongly about any topic. I feel that he would be willing to have a conversation and to understand your view. At different in his life, he explores many different perspectives. For example, when he was touring the country as a teenager he forced his way into a jazz performance, but he convinced the bouncer to listen to one more song before he was removed. Herbert valued others' opinions and perspectives highly. Herbert Hunke lived a life of pleasure and culture and he symbolized what the beat generation is all about. For all of his faults in his life, Herbert Hunke was a man of great experience and understanding.

Works Cited:

"Herbert E. Huncke." *Herbert E. Huncke*, <http://huncketeacompany.com/about>.

The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica. "Herbert Huncke." *Encyclopædia Britannica*, Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., 5 Dec. 2019, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Herbert-Huncke>.

Thomas, Robert Mcg. "Herbert Huncke, the Hipster Who Defined 'Beat,' Dies at 81." *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 9 Aug. 1996, <https://www.nytimes.com/1996/08/09/arts/herbert-huncke-the-hipster-who-defined-beat-dies-at-81.html>.