

My night with the BEATNIKS

I ALWAYS take a sleeping bag to London—you never know when you might need it.

Only a few weeks ago on one of my periodic trips to town I was looking for somewhere to stay.

A girl with whom I was drinking in a Soho bar said: "Come on back to my place."

"Won't your landlady mind?" I asked.

She seemed vastly amused by this suggestion. Soon I was to find out why. . . .

At one in the morning we drove to a narrow road between Chelsea and World's End. We climbed three flights of uncarpeted stairs and went into an enormous L-shaped room.

From outside it sounded as if there was a party going on, but when we got inside I discovered that the music was being made by a long-haired Beatnik strumming a guitar.

About ten people were lying around on cushions or an massive camp beds, and one of them was reading aloud from a bulky manuscript. It seemed to be a kind of poetry without metres.

Whole floor

The girl (whom I will call Myra) told me that he had just completed a long poem "aiming at the overthrow of civilisation" and was reading it to flamenco music, which suited its mood.



by Colin Wilson

At present researching the craze
—for a new novel

hookah. For 10s. the beat can buy enough "tea" to get high.

It produces a sensation like rising up a narrow chimney and hovering high in the air. The body becomes heavy, and everything happens in slow motion.

The English beats are fond of preludin, the stimulant that has the opposite effect to marijuana.

These "slimming tablets" destroy the desire to eat and produce an extraordinary mental brilliance; many beat poets write their poetry with the use of preludin.

The result is work of great sensitivity and strangeness, but with no thought of coherency.

But beat philosophy is not merely drug-taking and sexual promiscuity. The founder of the beat generation in America was Jack Kerouac whose novel, *On the Road*, started it all. According to Kerouac, beat does not mean "down and out"; it's derived from "beatific" and refers to sainthood.

The beats are devoted to the

Eastern religion Zen, which believes that the way to achieve sainthood and "enlightenment" is to give the instinct full play.

At the moment there are four great centres of beat philosophy in England: Soho, Hampstead, Chelsea, and Oxford.

The beats from Oxford are likely to turn up in the rooms of their friends in London, and sleep the night on the floor or share marijuana cigarettes. And the Soho and Chelsea types often descend on Oxford.

The University authorities regard the whole movement without favour.

The beats have their own terminology. The males are known as beatniks, the females as beat-chiks. You call everybody "man," although the women are sometimes addressed as "kid."

There are two types of beatniks: The "wild cat" and the "cool cat." The beats I have described above are typical of the wild cat. They believe in complete self ex-

pression, in doing anything that comes into your head, from turning somersaults in the street to jiving to two different jazz records played at the same time.

The cool cat tends to spend his time alone.

He spends a great deal of time sitting cross-legged and staring at the wall as he tries to get the "true source of inspiration in himself.

He is a mystic whose creed is to "dig" everything, and he is likely to declare that a dustbin is just as beautiful as a treeful of birds

The beat philosophy is the leftover of the Angry Young Man craze of the 50's, of which (to our amazement) John Osborne and myself were regarded as the founder members.

But it is easier to be beats than to be "angry." To be angry you needed something to get excited about. To be beat you only need to sit back and drink your Spanish burgundy and call everybody "man."

I am told that most beatniks end by taking a regular job and getting married.

I give the whole craze another three years.

"aiming at the overthrow of civilisation" and was reading it, to flamenco music, which suited its mood.

I sat down and listened for half an hour, then whispered, "When does the party break up?"

"It doesn't," Myra said. "We all live here."

The next day I learned how a beat community was run. A dozen of them—eight men and four girls—had rented a whole floor of a house. The landlady lived in Kensington and didn't care what went on, so long as they didn't wreck the place.

They never slept until four in the morning, and they got up at midday. Then some of them went off to the Charing Cross-road to steal books; others to steal food from self-service stores.

Most of this food was thrown into one huge cooking pot and boiled into a stew. I watched it being made—bacon, apples, raisins, cheese, tins of sardines and tins of soup—I ate a basinful myself.

It was pretty horrible—mainly because someone had emptied in a whole bottle of lemon juice "to improve the flavour."

Music was played during all meals—either the guitar or a gramophone. The favourite records were Charlie Parker (the god of the beat generation) and the Modern Jazz Quartet. Cheap Spanish wine was drunk in quantity.

Underwear

No one had his own room—you slept anywhere you felt inclined. The girls, like everything else, were communal.

Although they were all vaguely attached to particular men, there was no dog-in-the-manger spirit, and they shared out their affections impartially.

There was always a casual influx of layabouts who needed somewhere to sleep, so the men usually outnumbered the women.

Myra was particularly popular, and she solved the problem in her own way by spending the first part of the night with one n. n., then moving on to another.

In spite of the complete lack of discipline, the place was cleaner than I expected. The bare floorboards were swept twice a day, and there was usually a clothes line of wet underwear stretched across the room.

The money obtained from the stolen books was spent on paying the rent (12 guineas a week) or on marijuana.

Marijuana is a non-habit-forming drug that looks like flakes or greeny-brown tea or coarse-grained pepper. If you have contacts you can buy it easily in Soho.

It is mixed with tobacco, rolled in brown cigar paper, and often passed from hand to hand like the pipe of a