

CITY LIGHT  
Lawrence Ferlinghetti at 90

by Steve Redhead



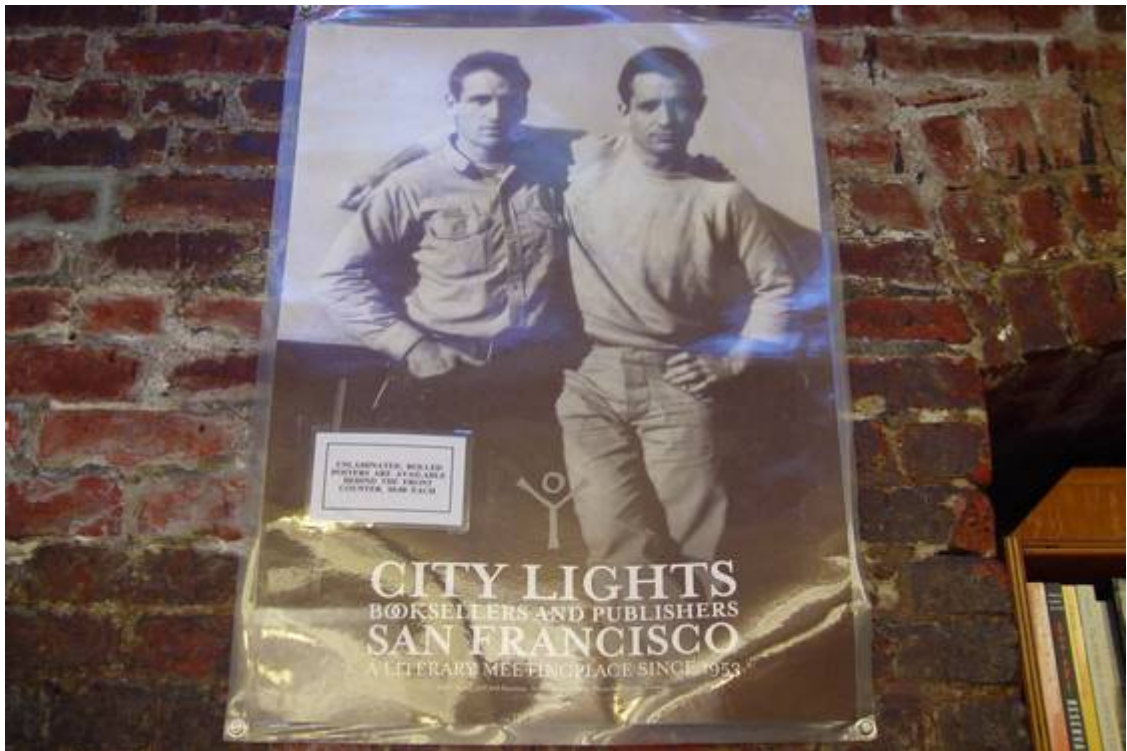
Professor of Sport and Media Cultures at the University of Brighton in the UK, Steve Redhead is Head of the Research Student Division in the Chelsea School where he directs research into Mobile Accelerated Nonpostmodern Culture (MANC). He is the author, or editor, of fourteen books including *The Jean Baudrillard Reader* (Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh and Columbia University Press, NY, 2008), *Paul Virilio: Theorist For An Accelerated Culture* (Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh and University of Toronto Press, Toronto and Buffalo, 2004), *The Paul Virilio Reader* (Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh and Columbia University Press, NY, 2004) and *Repetitive Beat Generation* (Edinburgh, 2000). He is editor of Berg's *Subcultural Style* book series.



Lawrence Ferlinghetti, poet, painter, publisher and book shop owner, is now 90 years old. In March 2009 he passed that impressive landmark, eventually outliving virtually all the other Beats.



Harold Norse (born Harold Rosen), another resident of San Francisco, died at age 92 in June 2009 leaving Lawrence Ferlinghetti as Beat's oldest man standing. Only Gary Snyder, at ten years younger, rivals Ferlinghetti for the title of 'last Beat Poet'.



He is the 21<sup>st</sup> century Beat Poet laureate, outlasting William Burroughs, Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, Gregory Corso, and all. In 1998-9 Ferlinghetti was made the first poet laureate of San Francisco. He was 80 years old at the time.



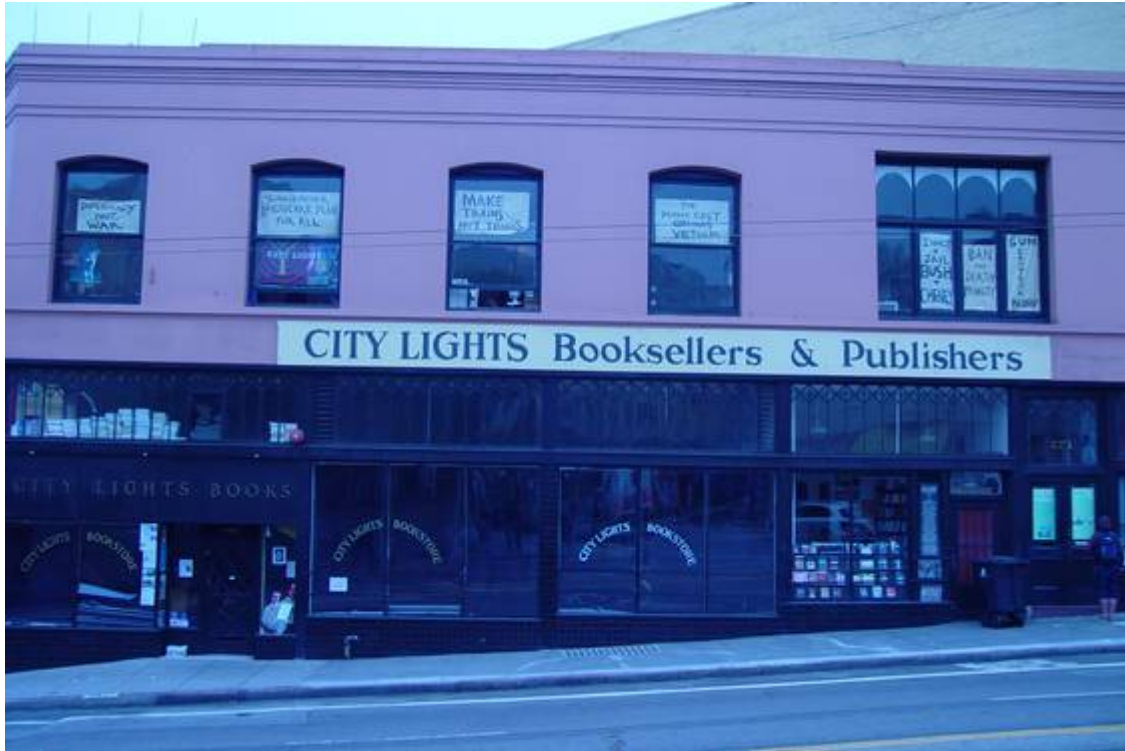
Lawrence Ferlinghetti was born in Yonkers, New York on March 24, 1919. His mother was French-Portuguese and his father Italian. Ferlinghetti studied for a BA in Journalism at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. He was awarded his degree in 1941. He also wrote sport journalism for a time. He later produced one of the best sport poems of all time, 'Baseball Canto'. After Pearl Harbour Ferlinghetti joined the US navy and participated in World War 2. A lifelong dedication to pacifism, and 'Buddhist socialism' was the result. He is postmodernist not postmodernist, to quote his own words.



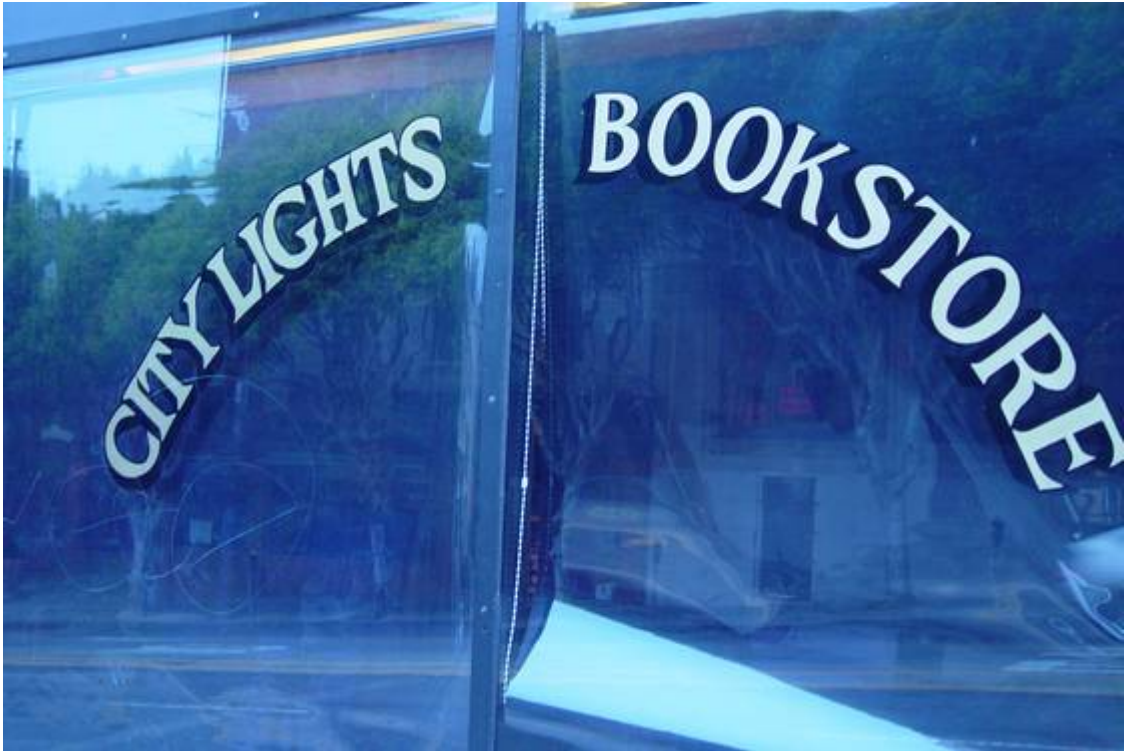
After taking an MA at Columbia University in New York in 1947 he went to Paris to study for a doctorate at the University of the Sorbonne between 1947 and 1951 on 'The City as Symbol in Modern Poetry: In Search of A Metropolitan Tradition'.



After completion of his PhD, he went to Fog City, San Francisco on the West Coast of the USA in the early 1950s. San Francisco, for many, was the real home of the Beats despite New York being the birthplace of the Beats. It was in San Francisco in 1953 that Ferlinghetti famously opened the first all paperback bookshop in the USA – called City Lights. The name came from a literary magazine entitled City Lights.



He also, in 1956, set up City Lights publishing company. Within a short time the fourth City Lights publication in the Pocket Poets series, Allen Ginsberg's *Howl*, was seized on obscenity grounds by police and Lawrence Ferlinghetti was prosecuted.



Both City Lights Bookstore and City Lights Publisher still exist today. He still reads occasionally at City Lights. On February 13<sup>th</sup>, 2009, in the final month of his 89<sup>th</sup> year, he read from his own prose book 'Poetry As Insurgent Art'. Ferlinghetti fans can download the intimate reading at 'Live From City Lights' podcasts. Lawrence Ferlinghetti readings at a variety of venues are widely available on the internet.



Some 52 years on from his acquittal in the trial over City Lights' publication of Allen Ginsberg's *Howl*, Lawrence Ferlinghetti is still going strong.

## **Acknowledgement**

All photos by Tara Brabazon, Professor of Media, University of Brighton.

## **Further Reading**

Cherkovski, Neeli *Ferlinghetti: A Biography* (Doubleday, Garden City NJ, 1979)

David Meltzer (ed) *San Francisco Beat: Talking With Poets* (City Lights Books, San Francisco, 2001) pp 68-106.

Bill Morgan *The Beat Generation in San Francisco*, with Introduction by Lawrence Ferlinghetti (City Lights Books, San Francisco, 2003)

Barry Silesky *Ferlinghetti: The Artist In His Time* (Warner Books, New York, 1990)