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Rob Epstein & Jeffrey Friedman

by Rachael Scott
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When Allen Ginsberg's first book of poetry Howl and Other Stories was published in 1956 it was considered revolutionary. His fans hailed it to be a masterpiece; his detractors condemned it as vulgar.

In Howl, Ginsberg goes into great detail about his drug taking, his stay in a psychiatric unit, his encounters with other counter-culturalists and his sex life. It was one of the first pieces of literature to talk openly and frankly about sexual practices between both gays and straights.

Sentences like: "Who let themselves be fucked in the ass by saintly motorcyclists, and screamed with joy" stuck two fingers up at the status quo and the establishment got upset. What was to be known as the Beat Generation had arrived and they were taking 1950s conservative America to task for crimes against liberalism.

In 1957 US customs seized copies of Howl en route from London to America and the book's publisher Lawrence Ferlinghetti of City Lights bookstore in San Francisco spent most of that summer sitting through an obscenity trial listening to lawyers and English professors arguing whether Howl had any literary merit.

The story of Howl's obscenity trial is told by Rob Epstein and Jeffrey Friedman in their new film of the same name starring James Franco as Ginsberg.

Epstein and Friedman have been making groundbreaking documentaries together since 1993. They are responsible for The Celluloid Closet, the film based on Vito Russo's book on the history of LGBT characters in motion pictures; the Oscar winning memorial to AIDS victims Common Threads: Stories from the Quilt and The Times of Harvey Milk, the definitive story of the murdered San Francisco counselor to be later re-imagined by Gus Van Sant and Sean Penn.

In Howl, the writer-directors have combined documentary with narrative and animation to illustrate Ginsberg's life and prose. It's both an entertaining, informative and enlightening venture. Rachael Scott met with the directors to discuss their work.

How did the idea for the film originate?

Jeffrey: When Allen wrote the poem. The poem became a cultural event and changed culture. Allen went on to have a life and a career, and his secretary of 30 years, who was also the administrator of his estate after Allen died and kept his legacy alive, wanted to do something for the 50th anniversary of Howl and he came to us with the project.

Rob: He came to us basically with the poem and asked us if we would be interested in doing some kind of commemorative film for the 50th anniversary. So no one had any notion of what a film like Howl might be and that's what really took time, coming up with the concepts to work through that approach.

"Howl itself was such a queer manifesto. That was something we didn't understand until we really got into the project and I don't think most people think of the poem in that way, but it is."

It's part documentary, part drama, part animation...

Jeffrey: Drama based on documentary text. It's 20 percent animated and maybe 60 percent acted and created. There's a little bit of archival, but it's very multi-genre because we wanted to do something that was adventurous at least because you had to do something like that to do justice to the story.

Isn't that a departure for you both because normally your films are much more

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straight documentary?

Rob: Well, we mix up the elements of the documentary certainly, but the documentaries are very narrative in their orientation and they're constructed as narratives, so in that sense this film is not dissimilar.

Jeffrey: Actually, our first film *Common Threads* had a lot of material and images that we shot. I think all of our films, especially that and *Paragraph 175*, had a lot of interesting images in the service of a narrative that's driven by storytelling so we've rested a lot of faith in that relationship – as a storyteller to an audience. If we have a strong story to tell, telling something meaningful and revealing something about themselves, then that's something an audience will respond to.

**Was James Franco your first choice to play Allen?**

Rob: He was and the idea for James came from Gus Van Sant, who read the script, really liked it and agreed to come on as executive producer. He suggested James. He was in San Francisco shooting *Milk* and because of my film *The Times of Harvey Milk* I had a [loose connection to that project](#).

[James read the script and we had a really good meeting. I found out that he was a student of literature and a fan of the Beat Generation since he was 14 and had a strong personal connection to the material. For a whole host of reasons he seemed like a good fit and, most importantly, we looked at all his work and became familiar with what a great actor he was, particularly when he did the James Dean story.](#)

He is a talented actor who I think often gets overlooked.

Jeffrey: [It's so easy to look at that James Dean performance and say, "Oh well he looked a lot like James Dean. It's easy." But when you really look at the performance, he changes his posture, he changes his way of speaking, there's so much emotional depth to every moment. It's a really strong performance.](#)

"I think *Howl's* literary value is backing down the boundary between literature and political and cultural activism. It's literature as engagement, that's what I see."

He seems unfazed by playing gay roles while many actors would be too frightened for their careers. Is playing gay still career suicide?

Rob and Jeffrey: No.

Rob: It's Oscar bait. We've gone in the other direction.

It's ironic, isn't it? Now you have straight actors wanting to play gay roles because they think it will give them kudos and maybe an Oscar nomination, and gay actors in Hollywood are too scared to come out of the closet to take the gay roles on offer.

Rob: I think most people working in the industry are just thinking about who is the best actor for the part. In terms of casting, I don't think people are thinking one way or the other.

**It must be very difficult for casting directors to cast a gay actor when hardly anyone is out of the closet in Hollywood. What do you think about the representation of gay men and lesbians on screen in 2010? And what do you think 'gay' cinema still has to achieve?**

Rob: I think in general we're in different and new territory from where we were when we made *The Celluloid Closet* in 1995. Audiences are smarter, more sophisticated and more involved, but so much of it is about the business of filmmaking and the economics, what movies are selling. So to that extent it dictates what movies get made.

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Jeffrey: There are a lot more interesting gay television characters. It seems that every serious television show will have some gay or queer angle, which has become part of the texture of the characters that are available to television writers.

Rob: *Glee* is a big hit in the States and the gay character is very important to that show.

Jeffrey: It's the gayest show ever.

So when you're thinking about future projects do you feel a responsibility to make a political statement about gay issues?

Rob: No. You feel a responsibility to what you see is the truth more than anything.

Jeffrey: And that's political.

Rob: That's political. Certainly we're analytical in our approach but it's not with a preset agenda. I think it's really about figuring out what we want to say and how we want to say it, which comes from the subject.

"I hate censorship. I hate it. Just on a gut level I don't like people telling me what I can hear and what I can't hear. Though there's valid discussion to be had about hate speech."

There was a lot of debate between the prosecution and defence about *Howl's* "literary value". What do you think its "literary value" is?

Jeffrey: I guess I think *Howl's* literary value is backing down the boundary between literature and political and cultural activism. It's literature as engagement, that's what I see.

Do you think censorship should be banned?

Jeffrey: I hate censorship. I hate it. Just on a gut level I don't like people telling me what I can hear and what I can't hear. Though there's valid discussion to be had about hate speech.

Censorship is thought control. It's saying you have the right to look at these things or see these things, but not these things. If you extrapolate from that, it's body control and I don't think we should be controlled.

What impact do you think Ginsberg, and the Beat Generation in general, had on gay rights and gay culture?

Rob: I think that people don't necessarily associate the Beats with anything gay, but in fact they were quite radical in that regard because it didn't matter. I mean the fact that, in 1955, Allen Ginsberg was completely out about his sexuality and he was able to confess his love and his feelings for his best friend Jack Kerouac and that Jack, in a sense, didn't miss a beat and wasn't put off by that. He encouraged Allen to become more of who he was as an artist and as a man. Today in 2010 we don't often find that as a reality.

But also to the degree that *Howl* itself was such a queer manifesto. That was something we didn't understand until we really got into the project and I don't think most people think of the poem in that way, but it is.

Jeffrey: Among other things - it's also radically anti-consumerist, anti-manifesto, anti-corporatist, but above all it's a celebration of life, of its suffering and glory.



I thought the animation in *Howl* was fantastic and I imagine you used that to get around the more sexually graphic elements of the poem...

Rob: That was a bi-product, really. The main reason we used it was to find a visual language to give the audience a visual cinematic experience with the film. So the fact we were able to have some sexual imagery was just a bi-product of that decision.

I see your next project is about Linda Lovelace. Will it be a straight biopic or will you mix it up with other styles in the same way you did with *Howl*?

Jeffrey: I guess thematically it's about the creation of a cultural artifact in a different sphere. *Howl* is about a poem that was called obscene and *Lovelace* is about the creation of a pornographic movie.

So presumably the film about Linda Lovelace will have considerable sexual content. Are you considering using animation again to portray it?

Rob: No, not at this point. It's not in the script. But, like *Howl*, it's really more of a story about the main character in *Lovelace* and more about her experience.

Jeffrey: I think for *Lovelace* we're going to want to find cinematic styles that fit that story because in *Howl* we looked at Beat films from the '50s for the flashback sequences; we looked at courtroom dramas for the obscenity trial. We had models for every element of

the film. We used Allen's photos as inspiration for scenes and we created some of the flash back scenes from situations and arrangements in photos between a couple of the characters. The framing of the shots is very much inspired by photos that Allen took. So I think stylistically we're looking for something that will express something essential about what the film is about. And I know we'll try to do the same thing with *Love/ace*.

Can you imagine that there will ever be a time when there's no need for gay film festivals or 'gay' films because gay people are adequately represented within mainstream society and culture?

Jeffrey: Yes, of course. We just want everyone to be whoever they want to be. My ideal world is the whole spectrum of sexuality.

Rob: By the same token, gay film festivals serve a function within the gay community and that's vital and important.

Jeffrey: Then the community becomes a market. That becomes both a good thing and a curse. It's something that has power, but it's also something that can be pandered to, manipulated, exploited - so it really needs to evolve. It's an evolutionary stage that we have to evolve out of.

[Read Our Review Of *Howl* »](#)

Click to find out what we thought of the film, including [image gallery](#), [verdict](#), [plot](#) and [queer ratings](#).

[Howl opens in UK cinemas on 25 February 2011.](#)

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