

# WORKSHOPPING WITH BEAT GENERATION POET MICHAEL MCCLURE



Michael McClure (left) with his Beat Generation contemporaries, Bob Dylan (center) and Allen Ginsberg (right).

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After years of hanging with renowned musicians like Jim Morrison and Ray Manzarek of The Doors, Bob Dylan and Janis Joplin; famous writers including Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg and Diane di Prima; and even wild animals whom he read poetry to, the iconic Beat Generation poet Michael McClure strolls into the Clark County Library on a lovely Sunday afternoon.

The 83-year-old walks slowly and carefully with a cane on one side, and his wife, sculptor Amy Evans McClure, on the other. The theater applauds proudly as he crosses the stage to a desk and white board, ready to read and workshop poetry.

His soft-spoken voice reverberates through the microphone. “We read poetry to discover inspiration, not to discover stories or things like that,” McClure says. “When we find inspiration in a poem, it allows us to believe in our own inspiration and show us that our writing is inspiring.”



Beat Generation poet Michael McClure

He talks about his own inspiration, which he says was lit at 22 years old when he read at the famous Six Gallery reading that sparked the San Francisco Renaissance. His inspiration was furthered by experiments in yoga. McClure is often referred to as the “master of beast language,” a type of guttural, untranslatable tongue—and I understand why as he reads a few of his 99 tantras.

The audience is dead silent as McClure howls “Tantra 49” to us, his voice angelic, smooth and rhythmic. The sounds are raw and full of emotion, getting louder and more powerful as he reads; it matters not that they have no dictionary definition. He howls like a lion—the calmest and kindest lion you may ever meet, but a lion at that.

After finishing, he explains that his tantras begin with “baby tantras, like baby talk” and that “the poems grow up through the course.” “Tantra 49,” which he also read to lions at the San Francisco Zoo, contains eight straight lines of beast language at its end:

*“Grahhr! Grahhr! Grahhr! Grahhr. Grahhr.*

*Grahhr-grahhr! Grahhr. Grahhr. Grahhr.*

*Ghrhr! Grahhr! Ghrhr! Ghrhr. Grahhr.*

*Grahhr. Ghrhr. Grahhr. Ghrhr. Grahhr.*

*Grahhr. Grahhr. Gahr. Grahhr. Grahhr. Grahhr.*

*Grahhr. Grahhr. Grahhr. Ghrhr! Grahhr.*

*Grahhr. Ghrhr! Ghrhr. Ghrhr. Ghrhr.*

*Grahhr. Ghrhr! Grahhr. Ghrhr. Ghrhr.”*

“There are as many kinds of poetry as there are poets,” McClure tells us. “Look at the muscular ripple of the inspiration in that.”

He also reads “Rant,” a poem from *Revolutionary Letter #75* by di Prima, who he assures is “one of the greatest poets and possibly one of the most inspiring.” His voice once again transfixes us as he reads her powerful words:

*“... the ground of imagination is fearlessness*

*discourse is video tape of a movie of a shadow play*

*but the puppets are in your hand*

*your counters in a multidimensional chess*

*which is divination*

*& strategy*

*the war that matters is the war against the imagination*

*all other wars are subsumed in it.*

*the ultimate famine is the starvation of the imagination*

*it is death to be sure, but the undead*

*seek to inhabit someone else’s world ...”*

After the readings, we begin the poetry workshop by listing five “lovely things” and reading them to the room. We get through maybe 20 of the 50 or so in attendance, hearing “lovely things” such as “the feel of chocolate melting in your mouth” (this one was mine), “my cat’s soft fur,” “my mother’s eyes,” “the smell of Christmas in New York,” (McClure adds his own impromptu haiku here: “The rats scurry past the beautiful high heels”) and even “asparagus pee” and “the feel of mud in my toes,” to which McClure responds, “Sounds very childish. I approve. Wonderful.”

Feeling very positive and indeed inspired, we embark on a writing exercise called "the spyder." It's based off of Kerouac-ian techniques that describe tangible, vivid situations. We all begin with the line "Tyger, tyger burning bright," the first line of William Blake's *The Tyger*, and continue by writing 10 consecutive lines. After line 10, the poem reverses and repeats. Here is McClure's:

*"Tyger, tyger burning bright*

*Red fox running in a fallen apple  
orchard*

*Giraffe heads sticking from ice cream*

*A yard square bonsai of teeny flowers and skunky mint*

*Mother's fingertip soft on baby's forehead*

*Brahms' cello under the bed*

*Fat tortoise skateboarding on asphalt*

*Halo over stone*

*Earthworm*

*Thumbtack*

*Earthworm*

*Halo over stone*

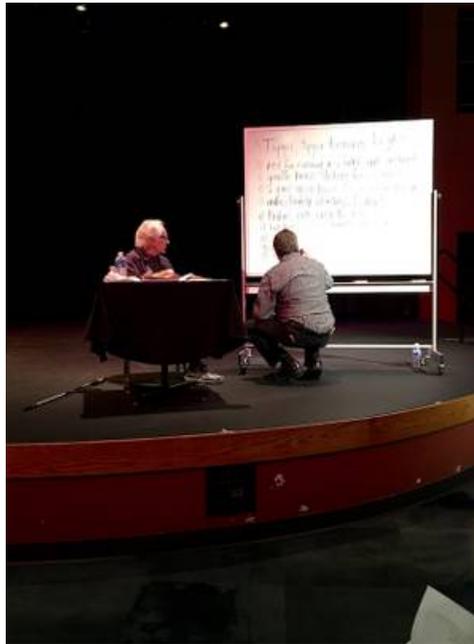


Photo: Rosalie Spear

Michael McClure leads a poetry workshop at the Clark County Library on May 1.

*Fat tortoise skateboarding on asphalt*

*Brahms' cello under the bed*

*Mother's fingertip soft on baby's forehead*

*A yard square bonsai of teeny flowers and skunky mint*

*Giraffe heads sticking from ice cream*

*Red fox running in a fallen apple orchard*

*Tyger, tyger burning bright"*

During the writing process, a balding man in the front row yells out, "Do you have to be high for this?" I rewrite my own poem three different ways to try to match the style, but I'm still not sure if I have it. I am grateful, however, for my excessive writings as McClure calls on several of us by name, including me, to engage in "a rainstorm of spyder conversation." We poets address each other and then read snippets—conversing in poem. The entire room begins to read their work aloud at once with direction from McClure, and our world transforms into one voice of melodious verse, the high and low vocal intonations providing variation to the unity.

As the workshop comes to a close, McClure suggests that we "take [our] spyders home on a leash."

The event is followed by a book signing, but I hop up onstage, heels and all, to meet him. I shake the hand of the poetry giant, having only ever spoken on the phone before, and I think about how many lives this hand has touched; how many poems and novels this hand has written; and the infinite stories this hand can tell.