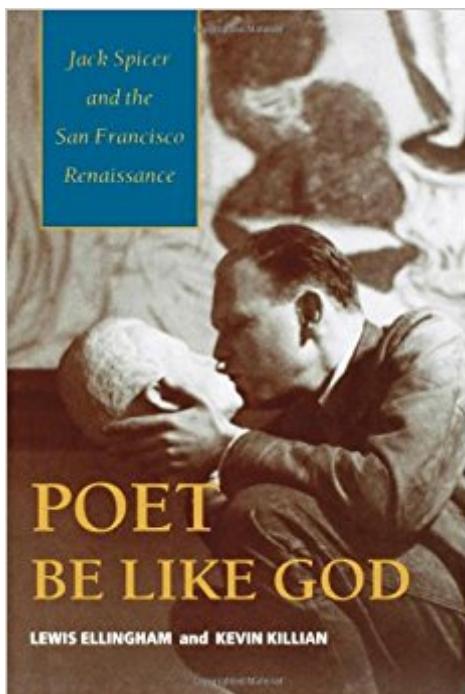


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Poet Be Like God: Jack Spicer And The San Francisco Renaissance



Synopsis

Jack Spicer, unlike his contemporaries Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac, and Gary Snyder, was a poet who disdained publishing and relished his role as a social outcast. He died in 1965 virtually unrecognized, yet in the following years his work and thought have attracted and intrigued an international audience. Now this comprehensive biography gives a pivotal poet his due. Based on interviews with scores of Spicer's contemporaries, *Poet Be Like God* details the most intimate aspects of Spicer's life—his family, his friends, his lovers—illuminating not only the man but also many of his poems. Such illumination extends also to the works of others whom Spicer came to know, including the writers Frank O'Hara, Robert Duncan, Denise Levertov, Helen Adam, Robin Blaser, Charles Olson, Philip K. Dick, Richard Brautigan, and Marianne Moore and the painters Jess, Fran Herndon, and Jay DeFeo. The resulting narrative, an engaging chronicle of the San Francisco Renaissance and the emergence of the North Beach gay scene during the 50s and 60s, will be indispensable reading for students of American literature and gay studies.

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Customer Reviews

From the time it first emerged as a renegade liberating voice in the early 1950s, beat writing changed the American social literary scene. Poets like Allen Ginsberg and Lawrence Ferlinghetti altered the sound of U.S. poetry while Jack Kerouac's bebop chant--particularly in his classic *On the Road*--literally changed how Americans spoke. The beats' fame became so great so quickly that their critics accused them of hypocrisy. Not so Jack Spicer; while Ginsberg and Kerouac were busy publishing and promoting their work, Spicer--whose original lyric voice and gay content still resonate

today--spent most of his time disdaining the publishing world and making enemies. In *Poet Be Like God*, journalist Lewis Ellingham and experimental novelist Kevin Killian have produced not only a fully realized portrait of Spicer, but a complexly woven historical and literary tapestry. Spicer emerges here as a brilliant, difficult, and largely unlikable man whose talent for writing matched his inability to function in the world. Ellingham and Killian are equally concerned with explicating the San Francisco renaissance and charting the emergence of North Beach as a gay neighborhood; *Poet Be Like God* thus rediscovers Jack Spicer for a new generation of readers and presents us with a unique and startling look at gay and literary history. --Michael Bronski

Beat insider Ellingham and novelist Killian (Shy, 1989, etc.) have here embraced a most resistant, though not unworthy, subject in poet Jack Spicer. Spicer catalyzed the development of the Beat Generation in 1950s San Francisco. Though few literary tales have been told more often (or more tediously) than those pertaining to the Beats, Spicer's own has been at best ill served, and at worst wholly ignored, by the prevailing mythologies of the time. The authors have thus been admirably careful to keep their focus on the enigmatic Spicer, whose life and verse grew progressively more estranged, indeed bitterly so, from those of his more visible peers. In following Spicer's California odyssey ending brutally in San Francisco, where he died from alcohol-induced liver failure in 1965, aged 40 Ellingham and Killian tread too lightly on their subject's more troublesome personality traits, e.g., his entrenched anti-Semitism and boorish bad will toward those poets daring enough to court his approval. This largesse would rankle less, however, had they not chosen to extend it to the poetry itself, which, while capable of startling effects and moving lyricism, frequently succumbs to the same narcissistic bloat that long ago rendered the Beat temperament clich. Instead, the authors have provided, albeit in impressive detail, a cosmology of poetic egotism, with Spicer's now the origin. Ultimately, Spicer's legacy, like that of any devalued artist, must endure the trial of rigorous critical appraisal. Despite the current academic fashion, literary resurrections of this sort cannot be taken on faith, but rather require a proof that the authors, true believers both, fail to supply in this otherwise well-researched and readable biography. (30 b&w photos) -- Copyright ©1998, Kirkus Associates, LP. All rights reserved.

I find that the Kirkus review available here does ill-service to this important biography of Jack Spicer. One would have no inkling, from reading this review, that Spicer's poetry is one of the most influential sources for postmodern poetry and poetics in the 1990s. It is not some recent academic fad to study Spicer; rather, Spicer has been a crucial poet for many younger writers for over three

decades. This biography, published at the same time with his collected lectures, should provide the opportunity for even more serious study of his work.

Poets in the 1950s and 1960s have been well served by some of their biographers, and in this thrilling critical treatment of Jack Spicer and the poets of the San Francisco Renaissance, Ellingham and Killian join the ranks of Peter Davison (The Fading Smile: Boston Poets from Lowell to Plath) and Bill Berkson and Joe LeSeur (Homage to Frank O'Hara) in magically capturing the soul of an important school in the poetic ferment of those years. The San Francisco circle around Spicer was intense, prolific and inspired, but they didn't get the publicity that the New York poets received or that the Beats had showered on them. Lack of media attention didn't stop them. They were dedicated to a pure vision of poetry as an almost religious vocation. On his hospital death bed in 1965 (he died at 40 from acute alcoholism), Spicer told friend Warren Tallman, "I was trapped inside my own vocabulary." His genius/mania to use that vocabulary in service of the Muse produced great work and reminded others of the seriousness of their purpose. Spicer, in all his contradictions and drives, leaps from these pages. The book as a whole bristles with the very energy it celebrates, both poetic and sexual (intrigue was in their blood), and is essential reading for all of us interested in the circles that nurture poetry in every creative center. As if that is not enough, the quotations from a vast number of interviews of the surviving participants make this a delicious oral history as well as a compendium of hair-raising gossip of the wild times in North Beach before tourists took it over from artists.

I have read Poet Be Like God, and I wish neither to rate it (but there's no option available that allows one to opt out of the rating game) nor review it, but to make a correction to the idiotic Kirkus review: Jack Spicer was NOT a "Beat" poet. There were a group of Beat poets in San Francisco in the late 1950s, early 1960s (e.g., Bob Kaufman), but Spicer wasn't one of them. His intentions in poetry were different from theirs; naturally, so was his aesthetic. Spicer was part of a triumvirate of poets that included Robert Duncan and Robin Blaser who met at the end of World War II in Berkeley, Ca., and were sometimes known as the Berkeley Renaissance group, or more simply, and more accurately, as part of the San Francisco poetry scene (which was part of the New American Poetry movement). That the Kirkus reviewer could make such an elementary and stupid mistake should be taken as a clear indicator of the idiocy of the rest of the Kirkus piece of schlock.

In "Poet Be Like God" on the poet Jack Spicer, ever thornily but true to his own unique and

innovative poetic vision, Kirkus yet again hits dead middle (with the emphasis on "dead") in displaying its tin ear and mean-spiritedness. Spicer, for all his personal flaws, was, and continues to be, an inspirational and influential poet to young and old writers and readers.

Spicer and Ginsberg influenced one another, as is clearly shown in this book. Ginsberg stole a lot of his ideas from Spicer, but he was still the greater poet because he touched upon the conversation of his times, while Spicer went whacko and had no real impact on his culture. Academics have taken up Spicer, but this has again had no echo at all in the popular culture. It's particularly interesting to study the automatic side of Spicer's poetics from surrealism forward -- the relinquishing of choice for a ouija board automaticism that resulted in odd nonsense that probably did not come from the dead, but resulted in an arcane verse that did indeed catalyze some of the lazier aspects of SF poetry but which was a dead end. Magisterial biography that brings to life a tormented alcoholic who was not even trying to be nice, or even well-dressed, enough, to enter into the public forum. His best work is the discussions he offered in *The House that Jack Built* -- astounding to see what he could do when he DID enter into the public conversation. Too often in his poetry he seems to be mumbling to himself. Poets need to reconnect to the real world -- because the world is real -- it has an ecology and texture, and the poets who got this will survive. Others form dead ends into their lost selves. Gnosticism is a dead end.

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