

THE VILLAGE TRIP

A New Annual Festival Celebrating the History and Heritage of
Greenwich Village

VILLAGE VOICES: A CELEBRATION OF EDNA ST VINCENT MILLAY AND JACK KEROUAC

Greenwich Village through the eyes of its two greatest poets,
with Lucy McDiarmid and David Amram.

World premiere performance by Kenneth Radnofsky and Yoshiko Kline of David Amram's
Greenwich Village Portraits, arranged for saxophone and piano
Jefferson Market Library, Saturday September 29, at 2pm

"My candle burns at both ends... It gives a lovely light," **Edna St Vincent Millay (1892-1950)** famously wrote in her poem "First Fig" (1920), three years before she became the first woman to win the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry. "First Fig" cemented Millay's reputation with the younger generation and came to symbolize not only her own life but Greenwich Village in general. A bohemian and a libertine, a New Woman and an It-Girl, she was named after St Vincent's Hospital where an uncle's life had been saved. Encouraged to write by her mother, she grew up in Maine with her two-sisters in a home where the abundance of books made up for the shortage of food.

After graduating from Vassar where she lived the sort of life that Mary McCarthy would fictionalise more than a half-century later in *The Group*, Millay moved to Greenwich Village. There she continued to write and publish poetry while also becoming active in theatre and politics: she joined the Provincetown Players, co-founded the Cherry Lane Playhouse, and supported Max Eastman and John Reed in their trial for sedition. Edna St Vincent Millay was a feminist for the flapper era and a lyric poet for the Jazz Age, writing in traditional poetic forms while living an unconventional life.

Holly Peppe, Millay's literary executor, describes her in her introduction to Professor Timothy F Jackson's *Selected Poems of Edna St Vincent Millay* (Yale, 2016) as "a woman of strong wit and will" and "the irreverent poetic voice of a disillusioned postwar generation staking its claim to personal freedom." Peppe believes that Millay's "radical revision of social and sexual protocols qualifies her as an early proponent for gender equality. Her prescient voice in American poetry and society urged women to take center stage in their own personal narratives."

Jack Kerouac (1922-1969) was hailed by Allen Ginsberg as the creator of "spontaneous bop prosody." It was Ginsberg who helped Kerouac publish his first novel, *The Town and the City* (1950). Kerouac reciprocated by giving Ginsberg the title for *Howl* (1955). The two men, along

with Peter Orlovsky and Lucien Carr, hung out together in Village dives, the San Remo on the corner of Bleecker and MacDougal a particular favourite. There they could watch “The goofy foolish/Human parade/Passing on Sunday”, as Kerouac wrote in “MacDougal Street Blues.” Ginsberg called them “the subterraneans,” which Kerouac would soon appropriate as the title for his 1958 novella which is set in the Village and in which Ginsberg, William Burroughs, Neal Cassady, Gregory Corso, Gore Vidal and other Remo regulars are easily identifiable.

Seen today as a quintessential beat, an off-the-cuff term he used in conversation with John Clellon Holmes, Kerouac was uncomfortable with the label and its negative connotations. He preferred *upbeat*, *on the beat* and *beatific*. The success of *On the Road* cast him in the roll of spokesman for the beat generation which he hated. “It is not my fault that certain so-called bohemian elements have found in my writings something to hang their peculiar beatnik theories on,” he said in a 1960 interview.

Thought of mostly as a novelist, Kerouac (who played piano by ear) wanted “to be considered as a jazz poet blowing a long blues in an afternoon jazz session on Sunday,” as he wrote in the introduction to *Mexico City Blues* (1959). And it was in Greenwich Village, at the Brata Art Gallery on East 10th Street, that Kerouac teamed up with multi-instrumentalist and composer David Amram for New York’s first jazz-poetry reading. They moved to the Circle in the Square on Sheridan Square (and later on Bleecker Street), where Kerouac would sing and riff while Amram played the horn. “He had a phenomenal ear,” Amram recalled a decade later. “It was like playing duets with a great musician.”

Kerouac also played at the Village Vanguard with musician and TV host Steve Allen, a collaboration which resulted in a trio of albums, *Poetry for the Beat Generation*.

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