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The first memorial poetry reading dedicated to Morton Marcus features U.S. Poet Laureate Robert Hass

By Wallace Baine -- Santa Cruz Sentinel
Posted: 11/04/2010 04:59:25 PM PDT

These days, poetry doesn't have many prominent figures who could qualify for rock-star status. But 50 years ago, Allen Ginsberg certainly attained that status.

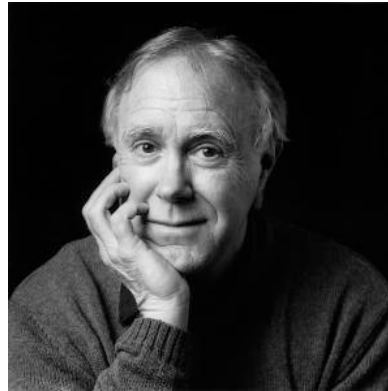
So, what does it say that Robert Hass, the former U.S. poet laureate, can draw so many parallels between Ginsberg and the late Santa Cruz poet Morton Marcus?

"It's an interesting thing about Mort," said Hass. "When I first met him (more than 40 years ago), he was already writing a kind of long-line poem. And like Ginsberg, he was somebody from New York who had come to San Francisco. They were both from a Russian/Jewish tradition, and they both had some of the same kinds of energy, particularly a kind of mixture of anger and sweetness."

Also, both men are the subject of posthumous attention - Ginsberg with the release of the new film "Howl," and Marcus, who is the subject of honor at the first ever Marcus Memorial Poetry Reading Saturday at Cabrillo College, featuring as the keynote speaker none other than Robert Haas.

Hass will share the stage with poets Joe Stroud, Stephen Kessler and Gary Young, each man a friend and colleague of Marcus. They will read from Marcus's body of work, most notably from his newly released final book of poems, "The Dark Figure in the Doorway: Last Poems."

The similarities between Marcus, who died last fall at the age of 73, and Ginsberg stop, however, with their work. Ginsberg was an icon of the Beat Generation, but Marcus comes from the same more



Former U.S. poet laureate Robert Hass will be featured at the Morton Marcus Memorial Poetry Reading Saturday. (Contributed Photo)

traditional arena as Hass. Both are part of the post-war flowering of California poets, writing with a particular West Coast aesthetic.

Besides serving two terms as U.S. poet laureate (1995-97), Hass won the National Book Award in 2007, and the Pulitzer Prize the following year, both for his book "Time and Materials." He's also received a MacArthur Fellowship "genius" grant, and has won the National Book Critics Circle Award twice. He now teaches at UC Berkeley.

As a Bay Area native, Hass was exposed early on to the Beat writers of San Francisco.

"I was a freshman in high school when they busted City Lights (bookstore) and put 'Howl' on trial (for obscenity)," he said. "We all went out and bought it, because we thought it was a lewd book. I discovered that it wasn't."

Hass found the Beats appealing, but he went on to graduate school at Stanford where Yvor Winters was king.

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"Winters was the most conservative of the new-critic generation poets," said Hass. "I didn't quite take to Winters, but I was in that atmosphere."

Hass said that he received his education in poetry "mainly from reading, partly from reading contemporary poetry and partly from reading old poetry. I was just as interested in reading John Donne as Ginsberg."

Hass said that he was inspired by Gary Snyder, who also had some experience with the Beats before developing his own distinctive voice as a poet. Snyder's work, said Hass, embodied for him a poetry of place.

"When I was growing up, I was reading writers like Ginsberg who wrote a lot about the New York City of his youth, and what (Robert) Lowell was writing about New England and what (William) Faulkner wrote about Yoknapatawpha County in Mississippi, and it seemed to me that the place where you lived could be a subject of your work."

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Snyder and the Beats came along at a time when California had yet to develop a substantial history of poetry. "If you looked at poets in California early on, there weren't many. You had Robinson Jeffers, working down in Big Sur, and Kenneth Rexroth in San Francisco. To grow up and live in California, I found that it was an incredibly beautiful place and one of the highly engineered landscapes in the world. I found that interesting."

Hass includes the work of Morton Marcus in that rich flowering of the California voice in poetry, pointing to Marcus's wide-ranging interests in international sources of inspiration.

"Part of California's regional identity is that it's cosmopolitan and international, with a strong influence from Asia."

Of Santa Cruz, Hass points to a number of well known names in poetry circles including Marcus, poet Adrienne Rich and publisher George Hitchcock.

"If you were going to make a literary map of America, there would be a bright spot on the map at Santa Cruz."

IF YOU GO

THE MORTON MARCUS MEMORIAL POETRY READING

Featuring: Robert Hass, Gary Young, Stephen Kessler, Joe Stroud

WHEN: 7:30 p.m. Saturday

WHERE: Cabrillo College Music Recital Hall, 6500 Soquel Drive, Aptos

TICKETS: Free admission with ticket, available at Cabrillo College Bookstore, UCSC McHenry Library, Bookshop Santa Cruz and Bookworks

DETAILS: www.cabrillovapa.com or 479-5744

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