

Bar, empty house in St. Pete evoke memories of Kerouac

fortmyers.floridaweekly.com/articles/bar-empty-house-in-st-pete-evoke-memories-of-kerouac/

By Florida Weekly Staff | on July 11, 2018

July 11, 2018



The Kerouac house in St. Petersburg. COURTESY PHOTO

ST. PETERSBURG – Art teacher Leo Johnson, 62, began a two-year hitchhiking odyssey around the country in 1972, right after his graduation from Bishop Verot High School in Fort Myers.

He was living the life of his hero, Jack Kerouac, who is best known as the writer of “On the Road,” an anthem of youthful exuberance, rebellion and wanderlust.

[FORT MYERS READERS: Sign up for Florida Weekly's Fort Myers email edition here.](#)

“There was something about the fuel behind Kerouac’s writing that made me really want to feel that,” Mr. Johnson said recently. “I wanted to see physically what the country looked like.”

Mr. Johnson’s journey began three years after Kerouac died at St. Anthony’s Hospital in St. Petersburg at the age of 47 from cirrhosis of the liver. He has now been dead more years than he lived, but the legend of the king of the Beat writers lives on.

A current exhibit at the Bob Rauschenberg Gallery on the campus of Florida SouthWestern State College in Fort Myers highlights that legend. The centerpiece of the exhibit, which closes on Aug. 18, is Kerouac's original 1951 manuscript, a 120-foot long paper scroll of "On the Road's" original manuscript. Kerouac typed it in a caffeine and Benzedrine frenzy at a rate of more than 100 words per minute on a 1928 Underwood Portable typewriter. He produced the book in 20 days.



The Flamingo bar, where the author reportedly had his last drink. COURTESY PHOTO

To find out more about Kerouac one may drive 125 miles north of the gallery, head over the Sunshine Skyway and into the heart of a residential St. Petersburg neighborhood on the city's west side, then right to 5169 10th Avenue North. The house where Kerouac spent the final three years of a life — fueled and then destroyed by drink — still stands, empty and quiet on a corner lot.

Two dead, leafless trees stand mute in the yard, perhaps symbolizing something about his early death and dissolute lifestyle. Then drive a couple miles east of the house, nearly to the northern edge of downtown St. Pete to a neighborhood place called the Flamingo Bar and he lives on, in a place where he drank in the 1960s.



Photos and news clippings about Jack Kerouac hang on the wall at the Flamingo bar. COURTESY PHOTO

Flamingo Bar patrons can pay tribute to the author with the house's Jack Kerouac Special. That's one shot and a small draft for \$2.50.

This is quite an enduring legacy for a man who died long before cellphones and the internet.

“On the Road” was published in 1957 but still resonates with readers such as Mr. Johnson, just as it did when he was attending Bishop Verot High School.

“The day after I graduated I got up and said, ‘Mom, I’m going on the road,’” said Mr. Johnson, who had previously agreed to the trip with his mother. “I was packed. Just packed a few shirts, jeans and she gave me a hundred bucks and said to keep in touch with me. I went all over the country.”

He didn’t pack any Kerouac books.

“I had already read them twice, or four or five times over,” Mr. Johnson said.

Kerouac’s impact in Leo Johnson’s life likely can’t be overstated.

“He’s like one of the deep-down heroes you never forget,” Mr. Johnson said. “He’s one of my heroes. I just can’t think of life without Kerouac and the fact that he allowed me the freedom to do that.”

While Kerouac is being remembered this summer on the campus of Florida Southwestern State College, he is always remembered up the road, in St. Pete

The house and bar

The Jack Kerouac legacy has inspired admirers to create the Friends of the Jack Kerouac House, which refers to the author as “St. Pete’s Literary Lion.” The organizers describe themselves on their website as “stewards of the Kerouac legacy in St. Pete.”

John Shen-Sampas owns the house, which is nestled in a nice middle-class neighborhood of well-maintained houses and yards. He resides in Greenwich, Conn. The organization once hoped to turn the house into a museum. That is no longer in the plans, according to Jessica Brasseur, a spokeswoman.

One of the charming legends about the house is that fans leave letters in the mailbox.

“There were many more letters left periodically in the mailbox, however, in recent years not as many,” Ms. Brassuer said in an email to Florida Weekly. “We think this might be attributed to lack of knowledge of the Kerouac House (something we are actively trying to turn around!)”

Florida Weekly recently stopped by the empty one-story Kerouac house and the Flamingo Bar. St. Petersburg writer and amateur city historian Jon Wilson agreed to meet one morning at the house but a relentless summer storm forced the meeting to a nearby Starbucks.

Mr. Wilson talked about Kerouac’s place in his city’s history.

“He’s become in recent years almost an iconic figure,” said Mr. Wilson, who is also a communications consultant for the Florida Humanities Council. “Iconic might be kind of a strong word but there are groups who have embraced him now more so than when he died. ...

A lot of people realize a spokesman for the Beat generation actually lived and died in St. Petersburg.”

Kerouac, who is most associated with hip places such as Greenwich Village, San Francisco and the road, embedded himself in a community then known as a retirement haven. He was the regular victim of mocking from late night TV comedian Johnny Carson.

Kerouac wrote two or three sports stories for a now-defunct newspaper called the St. Petersburg Evening Independent in 1965.

Mr. Wilson was then an intern at the paper but worked in a bureau and never met the author.

He said the paper sent Kerouac to a “couple of baseball games.”

Thomas Hallock, a professor of English on the University of South Florida’s St. Petersburg campus, knows the Kerouac legend. In 2007 he organized a marathon reading of “On the Road.” Different people took turns reading aloud portions of the book.

He pointed out that although he is a board member of the Friends of the Kerouac House, he is not an expert on the author.

“Kerouac is definitely larger than life in St. Pete,” said Mr. Hallock, who resides in the city. “He looms large in a city that increasingly defines itself through culture.

I think he does have special meaning here.”

Mr. Hallock also knows about the drinking that killed Mr. Kerouac at an age when he should have still been productive.

“His later years in St. Pete do not amount to the happiest years in his life,” Mr. Hallock said in an email to Florida Weekly. “He basically drank himself to death. I have trouble seeing much positive in the decline.”

The Flamingo Bar, which opened in 1924 and has a rich history, says on its website, “Legend has it, had his last drink here.” Baseball player Babe Ruth was also known to visit the Flamingo in the 1920s and 1930s.

Florida Weekly visited the bar on a recent Sunday, walking in from a steamy July afternoon into the coolness of a dark and welcoming watering hole.

A Jack Kerouac photo adorns the outside wall next to the sign about the house special of a shot and beer.

Inside there are more photos and newspaper clippings about the writer. A faint aroma of cigarette smoke fills the air. A sign notes that the Flamingo Bar “accepts cash only.”

Three men sitting at the end of the bar seemed more interested in baseball than literature.

A Houston Astros-Tampa Bay Rays game was on a flatscreen TV and when Houston's Evan Gattis clubbed a ball to left they knew what it meant.

"Uh-oh," said one man.

It was a home run and meant the home team was losing 1-0.

Rebellious writing

Mark Massaro, an adjunct English instructor at Florida Gulf Coast University, connected with Kerouac's literature as a teenager in Massachusetts.

"Here was a guy actually writing about familiar, but never discussed, events of wayward youth: drinking with friends late into the night, falling in passionate love with everything, ignoring moral responsibilities and consistently moving forward," Mr. Massaro wrote in an email to Florida Weekly.

Mr. Kerouac kick started writing and teaching careers for Mr. Massaro.

"Before reading his work, I assumed that literature was standard and predictable," Mr. Massaro wrote in his email. "I didn't know that writing could be rebellious."

Mr. Johnson still understands what grabbed him about "On the Road" and other Kerouac works.

"Just that full blown running around the room with your hair on fire, 150 miles per hour American spirit," Mr. Johnson said. "Just doing it to the max, just doing whatever you're doing to the max."

"He's quintessentially American," Mr. Johnson said. "He's what America is about — to get everything out of the moment." †

>> What: "Jack KEROUAC & Ed RUSCHA: On the Road" exhibit

>> Where: Bob Rauschenberg Gallery, Florida SouthWestern State College, 8099 College Parkway, Fort Myers

>> When: Through Aug. 18. Gallery hours are 10- a.m.-4 p.m. Mon.-Fri., 11 a.m.-3 p.m. Saturday. Closed Sunday and holidays

>> More information: 489-9313 or www.RauschenbergGallery.com
