

# COMMENTARY

**C** The News-Gazette  
Sunday, May 27, 2012

Opinions Editor Jim Dey: 217-351-5369; jdey@news-gazette.com

## GUEST COMMENTARY

# Was the Greatest Generation 'beat'?

By **MIKE PEMBERTON**

The movie version of Jack Kerouac's novel "On the Road" debuted last week. As is sometimes the case when adapting a book, the movie is a disappointment. In part, from what I have culled from reviews, because it focuses on the Beats' hard partying, jazz loving, sexually open ways. But being "beat" was not simply a lifestyle. It was a perspective. As the movie synopsis puts it, a generational search for "It."

The original Beats, like Kerouac, Allan Ginsberg, William Burroughs and John Clellon Holmes, were born in the 1920s, grew up during the Great Depression and came of age with World War II. So did

my late parents, Jim and Betty Pemberton, a middle-class couple who settled in Bloomington-Normal, Ill., and raised five children. Despite the different ways of life, my folks and the Beats were part of what Tom Brokaw hailed as the "Greatest Generation." While Brokaw's label reflects their accomplishments, it does not capture their soul.

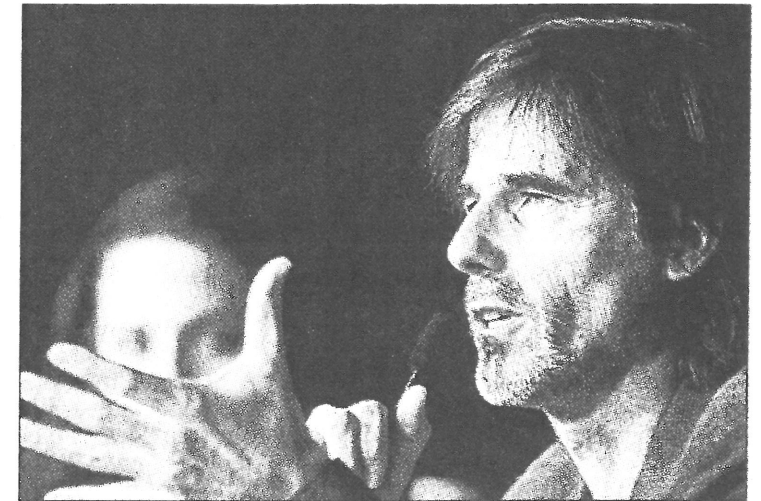
For me, that soul was "Beat."

In two essays, John Clellon Holmes identified common threads he believed ran through his contemporaries. While admitting that "any attempt to label an entire generation is unrewarding" Holmes nevertheless believes these Americans seem "to possess a uniform, general

quality which demands an adjective."

The term "beat" Holmes says "implies the feeling of having been used, of being raw," of being "undramatically pushed up against the wall of oneself," someone who "goes for broke and wagers the sum of his resources on a single number; and the young generation has done that continually from early youth." For this generation, Holmes states "how to live seems to them much more crucial than why."

Reasonable, considering the Beat Generation was the first in American history to face a combination of three sobering facts. They grew up in a world where an



Francois Mori/AP

Director Walter Salles speaks during a press conference for 'On the Road' on Wednesday at the Cannes Film Festival in Cannes, southern France.

Please see PEMBERTON, C-4