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Film Review: Ferlinghetti: A Rebirth of Wonder

Loving documentary about one of the greatest, and still wonderfully extant, poetic and political forces of our time.
Feb 7, 2013

-By David Noh



For movie details, please [click here](#).

Ferlinghetti is a glowing account of the exemplary life of the ever-groundbreaking San Francisco poet and publisher Lawrence Ferlinghetti, who, at 93, still writes, paints and runs the legendary City Lights bookstore in San Francisco. Christopher Felver's documentary is awash in admiration of the artist—not one negative thing is broached about him—and if this is hagiography, then so be it, such is the man's sterling reputation as an independent-minded

pacifist and boon to countless others, both politically and artistically.

Ferlinghetti's difficult early years as a displaced child who once even served prison time for the theft of some pencils are covered and reveal a life which he himself describes as "Dickensian." He served in World War II, and seeing what went down at Nagasaki instantly made him a lifelong peacenik. He received a literary doctorate from the Sorbonne (and was eventually made a Commandeur of Arts and Letters in France), found a foothold in publishing and eventually opened his shop, which brought inexpensive, portable paperbacks to the reading public and became Ground Zero for the artistic ferment that was happening in San Francisco in the 1950s. It was there that a warrant was put out for his arrest for publishing Allen Ginsberg's poem "Howl," which had been deemed obscene; his victorious censorship battle waged thereafter freed up the release of other controversial works like *Lady Chatterley's Lover* and *Tropic of Capricorn*.

All the while, Ferlinghetti hung with Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac, William Burroughs and BFF George Whitman (who opened the like-minded Shakespeare and Company bookstore in Paris), wrote his distinctively accessible poems, and made paintings which further illustrated his favored themes of artistic freedom of expression and questioning of the status quo. His poetry collection *A Coney Island of the Mind* (1958) has sold over a million copies, making him, in the words of many of the vibrant interviewees assembled herein, the most popular poet of his time. Their number includes Amiri Baraka, Dennis Hopper, Kenneth Rexroth, Herb Gold, Michael McClure, Dave Eggers and other artistic lights.

Handsome and irascible as ever, Ferlinghetti here reads a lot of his work in a still stirringly impassioned voice, and continues his crusade of political protest, posting signs in his store like "The Middle East is Obama's Vietnam." One may have wished for more information about his personal life and intimate relationships, but such is the richness of his creative journey and Felver's coverage of it that you don't even realize this lack until long after seeing the film.



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