

PoetryReadingsInTheCellarKennethRexrothLawrenceFerlinghettiTextTVS

By Tim Van Schmidt

Poetry Readings in the Cellar

Kenneth Rexroth, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Cellar Jazz Quintet

What a couple of characters. I mean the seminal beat poets Kenneth Rexroth and Lawrence Ferlinghetti on this 1957 album of live recordings. On the outset, this is pretty serious stuff- words flowing in hypnotic waves of sound and meaning. But eventually both performers reveal a wryly clothed sense of humor that pokes fun at society at large and at themselves, the happily raving poets.

The serious part of the atmosphere is underscored by the contributions of the Cellar Jazz Quintet- sax, trumpet, piano, bass and drums- who accent the words without stepping on them. They add some bop jazz, but mostly abstract passages perhaps better described as chamber music. Nonetheless, the musical accompaniment adds color and flavor without being the main thing.

The main thing is these two guys rolling on and on with their sly verbiage. At first, both Rexroth and Ferlinghetti seem to be pretty serious orators, but by the end of all four pieces included on "Poetry Readings in the Cellar" the guys can't help but get funny. They make broad statements about mundane things, make joyful connections between images and words without worrying about their sense or logic. This must be delivered with a poker face, I imagine, but you can hear the audience in the background of these recordings chuckling when they get the jokes these guys are slinging inside their poetry.

Something else you can hear in the background is the occasional ping of the cash register since apparently business was being conducted as usual in the Cellar. Those little pings tell me that this recording is the real stuff- of the moment- and if that means letting a little commerce happen while the poets and musicians jam, then so be it.

Rexroth sounds like a dramatic radio reporter, with a strong delivery and a habit of spacing out his groupings of syllables by letting them trail off to nothing before starting the next phrase- like a guy trying to be understood over a PA system across a big crowd. He gets your attention even if you can't quite make out what he's actually saying.

Ferlinghetti sounds more like a guy you might meet in a bar and have a good time with despite being total strangers. He might even get a little annoying because the impression here is that he just loves to talk- whether it's spinning stories about junkmen on parade or occasionally observing the beauty of the moment.