

KEES TO LIFE

Innovative artist remains in shadows

The cutting edge — it's where everyone wants to be. It's where the action is. It's where the attention is. It's where things happen — creativity, expression, experimentation and the like.

If you're not on the edge, you get it.
If you're on the edge, you don't.

For as long as anyone can remember, the location of this imagined cultural edge has actually carried the geographic connotation that the idea implies. The edge is New York or California. And that's that.

In actuality, that was never just that. The edge so many people in the Midwest grow up hearing about and yearning for was here all along.

The edge was foreseen, developed and sharpened by a Nebraska man named Weldon Kees.

*"The porchlight coming on again,
Early November, the dead leaves.
Raked in piles, the wicker swing.
Creaking. Across the lots
a phonograph is playing Ja-Da"*

— An excerpt from Kees' poem "1926"

Everyone loves the hometown hero. They cheer him on and sometimes they don't know why. It's comforting to have a hero, especially one from your neck of the woods. Maybe the next hero will be you.

But how many really know the hero?

While many Nebraskans harbor a sense of pride that an artistic innovator like Weldon Kees is from their home state, few know and/or embrace his work.

He's easily overlooked, mostly because his art rarely deals with Nebraska or any of the themes associated with rural life and middle America. In fact, the aforementioned poem is one of only a few that offer a depiction of his hometown, Beatrice.

"I think he's very well-respected. How well-understood he is, is probably a different matter," said Nicholas Spencer, assistant professor of English at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. "I think here he's been lost in the shuffle a little bit, which to me makes Kees a lot more of an interesting character."

Born in 1914, Kees grew up in Beatrice and graduated from the University of Nebraska, now UNL, in 1935. His writings were published in the premier Midwest literary magazine, *The Prairie Schooner*.

Kees later moved both to New York and San Francisco, where he experimented in beat poetry and writing, abstract expressionist paintings, collages, films and even music. He literally ran the gamut of every artistic output of his time and is nevertheless overlooked for many of his contributions.

Not to say Kees has been completely ignored by Nebraskans or the rest of the world. He hasn't. He wrote several novels, published more than 40 short stories and wrote for a number of publications, including *Time Magazine* and *The New York Times*.

Back home, the Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery dedicated almost the entire fall 1998 semester to Kees' work, including sections specifically dedicated to his paintings, poetry, films and music.

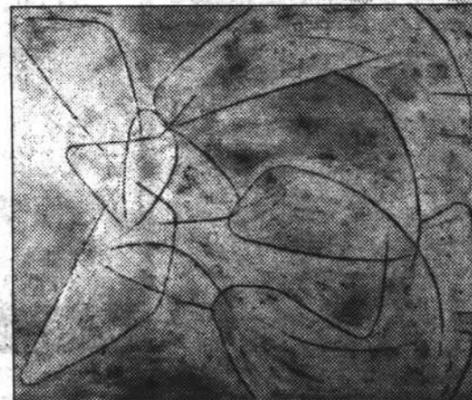
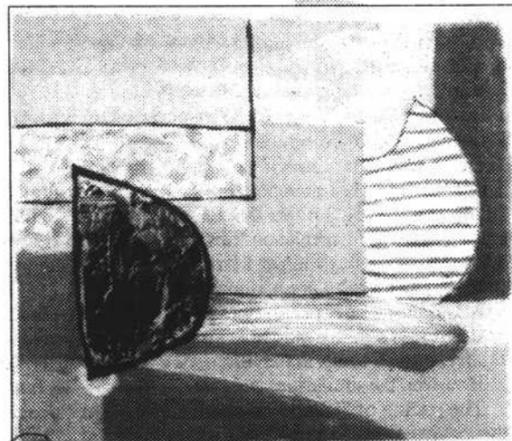
Still, there is something about Kees that's different from other Nebraska writers and artists. There are no UNL residence halls named after him, and his work, often dark and somewhat depressing, is simply hard for a lot of Nebraskans to swallow.

"I think a lot of local writers haven't taken up his lead," Spencer said. "But I think he's a great opportunity for us to reflect on the great culture in our region of life."

Despite the lack of study given to Kees, one can hardly deny his achievements.

*"The porchlight coming on again,
And climbed upon an antiseptic
stage.
A toothless lion suffered in his
cage,
Ignoring them. The men of
science sat."*

— An excerpt from Kees' poem "Report of the Meeting"



During the 1950s, the beat movement of San Francisco made people like Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsburg world-famous, or vice-versa. However, a name often overlooked, but definitely influential, is Nebraska native Weldon Kees.

Not only was Kees an important cog in the beat machine, in many ways he helped build it and was actually the featured reader when Kenneth Rexroth organized the first beat poetry reading almost 50 years ago.

"He had a really good instinct for things that were going to take place," Spencer said. "In his poetry, he talks about things that are happening, the way consumerism became more of a big deal."

"Ahead of his time? No question about it."

While most of Kees' peers were deeply involved in the avant-garde culturally-elite scene of post-WWII America, Kees saw something in pop culture the others didn't.

"I think he's one of the first people who took pop culture seriously," Spencer said. "Kees was doing this 20 years before Andy Warhol."

In 1955, Kees allegedly ended his life by jumping off the Golden Gate Bridge. His body, however, was never found. A sad, but fitting ending for an artist who, to this day, has yet to be fully discovered.

*"Pick up the pieces,
Throw them away, say amen,
Because like Humpty Dumpty,
I can't be put back together again."*

— An excerpt from Kees' song, "Pick Up The Pieces"

Editor's note: In this weekly series, we explore the lives and work of notable Nebraska artists from the 20th century.

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