

# Barely Bearably Unbearable: Chronicles of an Irreverent or Irrelevant Writers Group

bart plantenga

**“They are anachronisms & they know it. This I think accounts for the shocking ferocity of their behavior.”**

• William Burroughs

**“Now that it’s time has come, it is only appropriate that The Unbearables, as this amorphous group of post-modern media casualties are known, get gone.**

**If you’re looking for a movement to attach yourself to, it’s too late, it’s already over.”**

• Mike Golden

• [bart plantenga](#)

[Disclaimer: This is not journalism, accuracy unverifiable]

Imagine a writer of self-confessed gift reading before an audience that includes a gaggle of his fellow Unbearables®. His story is amusing, moves logically from beginning to end. But not tonight. Eventually their patented interference tactics – interruption, laughter, catcalling, jokes, interrogation and amendments to the text, giddy with our own wit, forces the story to overheat, go multi-dimensional, hypertextual, so that by story’s end it has morphed into a wildly complex other molecule. Imagine a BeeGees song morphing into an Ornette Coleman composition. The audience, not privy to their tactics [to outwit boredom], is amused/confused.

The legendary/imaginary writing group, The Unbearables® [aka The Unbearable Beatniks of Lite Beer, etc.], sometimes called the most significant writing group since the Beats, at other times the most ridiculous group of poseurs *ever*, existed for some time after it’s inception in somewhere early 1986 at Tin Pan Alley [TPA], an off-Broadway bar in the heart of sold-out New York. The exact dates of the group’s lifespan are conveniently shrouded in mystery or amnesia. Some believe that, like the Yeti, they still exist.



The not-yet group was in the beginning nothing but a troika, a three stooges – [Mike Golden](#), [Ron Kolm](#) and myself. As self-acknowledged, under-valued authors of immeasurable value, we groused and drank – humility and pride grinding it out right there, beerhead to beerhead. We met to stave off withering cynicism, finding solace in medium-priced beers at TPA and in each other. What had

we done wrong, where had the zeitgeist buried us? Near the dogbones and rejection slip shredder?

Anyway, we three snarly atomic particles miraculously glommed connective spiritus and became a molecule of some consequent indifference. We became the Beer Mystics we did not yet know we were. Our minds, however, began to drift, eyes fixed on the lovely bartender, ears listening to – YES! – Flipper’s “Sex bomb” on a real juke, followed by Bertolt Brecht, *himself* snarling through his

“Die Moritat von Mackie Messer” and, over the next few months, we were joined by [Max Blagg](#), [Peter Lamborn Wilson](#) and [Matty Jankowski](#) – many more others were to follow ...



Author reading under partial ceiling,  
accompanied by the Bass Boys

The first TPA reading, with Ron Kolm, Max Blagg and myself, hosted by WFMU's Wildgirl in March 1987, was portentously rambunctious. You must understand: TPA was a total anomaly – imagine a pirate ship docked in a gated-community yacht marina – Broadway souring daily under the duress of vulture capitalism. Nothing *real* left standing. Everything reinvented as monetized, simulated reality = today's Disney Time Square.

It was not the first reading I'd done with a hole in the ceiling from which rainwater dripped into a bucket to create a beat [ABC NO RIO, 1980]. But this was extreme: a good dramatic one-quarter of the entire drop ceiling had plunged to the floor only days earlier.

I read from the earliest version of novel [BEER MYSTIC](#), having invited musician-friends [Dave Mandl](#) and [Al Margolis](#) to join me on bass to provide thumpy, moody backdrops. Instead, they showed up with a suitcase of noisemakers and

toy instruments and so we converted this hole-in-ceiling place into something magical – if only for a few minutes.

It was to be the first of many legendary, shambolic, harebrained readings, events, and gatherings to follow in the intervening 30 years at venues like Life Cafe, Fez Under Time Cafe, Ward-Nast Gallery, NoBar, Cedar Tavern, Rudy's, Nuyorican, Downtown Beirut, NYU, Ear Inn, Miladys, Shandon Star, Cedar Tavern, Right Bank, Tower Records, Bowery Poetry Center, St. Mark's, Max Fish, Savoy, etc. Is it mere coincidence that most of these venues are now extinct? Was it our reverse-Midas touch or the full-on chicanery of smiling corporatist gentrification? Likely the latter.

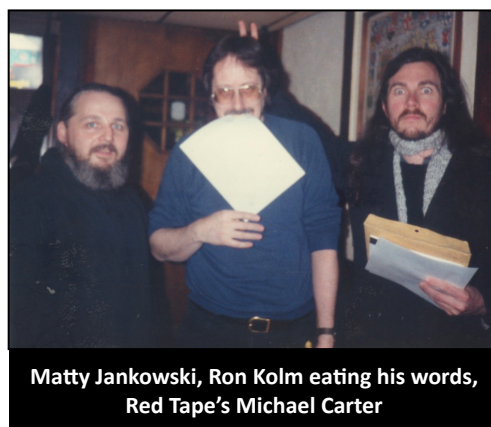
Our original intent was there was no intent: we drifted together via urges, geo-poetic signals, meeting in dives near to where Ron Kolm worked in bookstores.

Early activities were modestly dedicated to drinking, kvetching, fantasizing, sharing manuscripts – the dynamics of human relationships, “beyond mere comraderie.” Meanwhile, standard readings-for-reading's-sake began to feel ... formulaic, underwhelming, futile – few listened – readings had become fast food. By the mid-90s, poetry was *the* lifestyle trend [after cigar bars]. Poets appeared on MTV, the covers of glossies, and NA/AA counselors recommended poetry as a way to overcome addiction. Slams gained brand-name status – a sure sign of its evisceration. Think Blockbuster, Enron, Borders, SlamPoetry.

We were not-quite-stand-up-not-quite-acrobat beer mystics rehearsing our Rodney Dangerfield skits until one day ... we discovered inspiration in “[Poetic Terrorism](#)” by Hakim Bey in [TAZ](#) – “Art as crime, crime as art” – which espoused a mutant manifesto of post-Situationist, Dadaistic-hedonistic, Groucho Marxism and confronted the lethargic status quo, alienated by and from its own desires. Call it fun with an edge or delousing the collective unconscious or, as founder Ron Kolm once described it: “Killing off daddy.”

We morphed into “a group of irreverent poets and writers whose aim was to topple pedestals,” as Carol Wierzbicki remembers, “and challenge hidebound attitudes about what ‘literature’ should be.” Yes, we set out to change our underwear, our fortunes, the course of literary history.

Recruitment was simple: you write? You’ll buy us a round? You can get us a reading at fill in the blank? Then you’re in! As early joiner and *Rant* editor, Alfred Vitale admits, it was “a great model, for me, of social organizing.” Soon entire new flanks were absorbed: Jim Feast, Joe Maynard, Jose Padua, Michael Randall, Michael Carter, David Ulin, Carl



Matty Jankowski, Ron Kolm eating his words, Red Tape’s Michael Carter

Watson, Hal Sirowitz, Christian X. Hunter, Sparrow, Steve Dalachinsky, Shalom, Rob Hardin, Thad Rutkowski, including the first women: Jill Rapaport, Deborah Pintonelli, Tsauroh Litsky, Bonny Finberg, Sharon Mesmer, Susan Scutti, among *many* others [2008 NYC Department of Cultural Affairs figures show that 18% of ALL NY-area writers self-identified as Unbearables]. The women were our equal betters and could swab the deck – with our long-maned heads, that is – and could drink us under ... how many tables are there in McManus?

It’s a testament to the freshness of our market expansion growth model that within a few years of inception we’d flourished from 3 to 6 to 15 to 40 – to several hundred by 2008. But, like Kmart’s



Deborah Pintonelli & Jose Padua discuss gender relations & getting along.

backstory, overexpansion exhausted spirit. Some, in efforts to save face, claimed they didn’t even know they’d *become* members of a club they didn’t even know *existed*. By the mid-2000s, many had cut ties, *seldom* admitted membership, grew tired of the Unbearable-related joke-myths, but paradoxically, this led to a desperate upsurge in membership applications [go figure].

There are countless Unbearable TAZ-inspired serious-humorous events that were often instigated by Alfred Vitale and Jim Feast, although they may differ per Unbearable mind, but most lists would include the Brooklyn Bridge Reading, Bukowski-Madonna, *New Yorker* Translations and its HQ protests against UNfree verse and swimming pool poetry, Initiation Rites of New Members,

Crimes of the Beats readings-protest, Fez Under Time Cafe series, Deconstructing the Ivory Tower of Babble at the New School, and the countless assembling gatherings at the Cedar and elsewhere, where we’d set up an assemblyline to put together erratically brilliant, stapled *Unbearables Assembling Magazine* with themes like “My Part-Time Job,” “Fabulous Underachievers” and Sparrow’s *Big Fish*, which assembled the first disassembled-translated-recumbobulated *New Yorker* poems, which inspired the *New Yorker* protests. As Ron reminds: “We’d pick dates that had meaning for other things in the culture, and try to co-opt them. We did our *New Yorker* protests every December 7th, a la Pearl Harbor.” Wierzbicki and Vitale reminded me of the Seance and the scurrilous Dead Presidents and Impeachment Readings – *and* Vitale’s baby, the de/re/construction of the beloved-hated *Chicago Manual of Style*. But there are countless other “what-about-that-reading” readings as well.

The first fractures of qualm probably occurred one evening in 1994 at the Shandon Star, long-term seedy, broken-chair, midtown dive-HQ; an old sailor behind the counter serving up grey, exhausted meat-with-a-mind-of-its-own and a jukebox that randomly played tunes to perk consumption. The



group portrait session for our *Daily News* profile, the headline of which called us “The Unmentionables,” attracted many fresh faces, all jockeying for prime face time. This precipitated inevitable cynicism among the Unbearable hardcore.

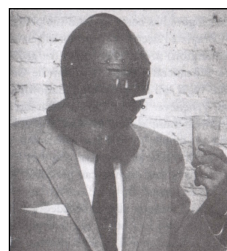
Innocent intuition was seemingly being subsumed by a hyperawareness that was steering our activities into the common ground of the deceived gaze. Vitale describes it as: “A tipping away from the literally defined, ‘unbearable’ characteristic of the group. I thought, ‘when did we become bearable?’ No longer marginal, no long incubators for my own ideas about who I was” – absorbed by the very spectacle we’d been so good at dodging. Vitale remembers that it “felt like a band I used to be in but now I wasn’t and they got a bunch of other musicians who are also good but are not me.”

Three factions emerged – drinkers, readers, rabble rousers. None were *contra* any of the others, *but* you could feel a rising level of irritation. This led to the stressful “Hanging Sausage Summit” of 1995 [aka “Night of the Gleaming Cleavers”], in Katz’s Deli on E. Houston. It is amazing that no one reached for a sharp, shiny meat cleaver to make a point – except for the fact that most of us are pacifists.

The drinkers preferred to enjoy the imbibing company of others; the readers chose to do readings to call attention to their work – and why not. The rabble rousers wanted to continue to create enlivening instants of fun – if we are not to get too pretentious – to be *up* inside the uprising. As Hakim Bey noted: the insurrectionists would partake of the uprising’s “festive aspects” a culture “removed and hidden from the would-be managers of our leisure.”

The rabble rousers, equipped with unreasonable ambitions, imagined empowerment within their grasp, at least the power to take back fun from the grand monetizers. Informed as much by Kesey’s Merry Pranksters or the Groucho-Marxist Fluxists as the Situationists with their prophetic visions of our current malaise, they [and Bey] noticed that the Spectacle’s colonization of life was not quite sewn up. We were going to misdirect the misdirections of the eternal misdirectors, discover islands of authenticity – Temporary Autonomous Zones – and then extrapolate them. Such a moment occurred for both me and Vitale during the Seance, when “the energy in the room was crazy ... and we all were ... antsy with some kind of energy and hooting and howling.”

Rollo Whitehead[e], the purported pseudo-meta founder of the Unbearables, may have never existed, although he is referred to in numerous cultural artifacts: in a Trocchi book, shared absinthe with Breton, authored a book credited to B. Traven, wrote lyrics for Tim Buckley’s Lorca album. Jim Feast claims he met him in an LES laundromat and noted he was “unremarkable” in every way. Did he blow the whistle on the CIA’s Backyard Marimba program which overthrew Guatemala’s Leftist president in 1954? Did he flee in the 1970s to Bouregreg, using a map supplied by Hakim Bey, dying there under mysterious circumstances, stateless? Did he never actually exist except as the beneficiary of an immense hoax.



Only known photo of Whitehead

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L: Carol Wierzbicki, C.F. Roberts & an intrepid reporter in front of *New Yorker* HQ on 42<sup>nd</sup> Street;  
R: Jim Feast, Alfred Vitale & Sparrow convince the receptionist of our added-value



The two protests at the *New Yorker* on, at that time, W. 42<sup>nd</sup> St., represented that magical confluence of effective action and buffoonish absurdity [a la the Yippies, I suppose]. At the first demonstration, we picketed with signs that read FREE VERSE NOW! While some called in a play-by-play to my on-air WFMU radio show. “But,” as Vitale remembers, “we were escorted away by security” and withdrew to beneath the CUNY Grad Center walkway.

The second protest we managed to infiltrate their offices, chanting absurd micro-haikus of indignant protest and reading manifestos in reception and leaving copies of our zines behind. We were listened to or at least tolerated. However, during a later private phone call one of us negotiated a poem deal in the *New Yorker* in exchange for abandoning our demands. Exhilarating and illuminating, but, ultimately, it did not lead to a paradigm shift, no redistribution of wealth, no upturn in *New Yorker* poetry acceptances among Unbearables.

Meanwhile, Kolm remembers another highlight: picketing the commodification of the “Beats at NYU, and at their Town Hall event. We did our Unbearables walking tour on the other side of the street from the Beats, which was funny as we ended up on 6th Avenue in front of David Amram’s apartment – he came out and spoke to us. That was were I saw Ugly George walking up the street, and I ran after him, rolled up my T-shirt and cupped my tits and asked him how much he liked them. He screamed and ran uptown.”

During the conference, speaker Jan Kerouac joined the Unbearable picket line as did Gregory Corso, both apparently agreeing with our premise that the Beats had sold out.

“Diane DiPrima,” Kolm recalls, “also joined for a bit. And yes, Gerald Nicosia.” This inspired an incendiary reading and eventually the [\*Crimes of the Beats\*](#) anthology, and ultimately, as Kolm remembers, “NYU cancelled their Beats event after our protests.”

**CRIMES OF THE BEATS**

performed by the **UNBEARABLES**

**CAFE NO BAR**

432 East 9th Street (between 1st & A)

Thursday May 20, 7pm

donation & BYOB & proper attire required

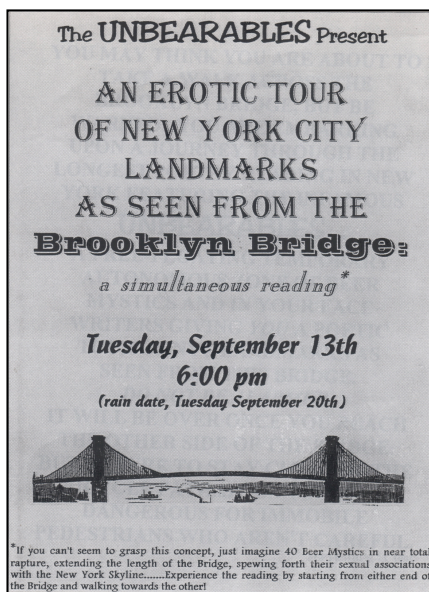
1. Jim Feast = drama re: Rollo Whitehead
2. Mike Golden = On The Road written in 1 sitting?
3. Sharon Mesmer = The Beats & their moms
4. Peter L. Wilson = Silly oriental religions
5. Jose Padua = On the Fugs & Tuli Kupferberg
6. Ron Kolm = Ginsberg as businessman
7. Sparrow = Neal Cassady in song
8. Carol Wierzbicki = Beatnik cuisine
9. Tsaurah Litsky = Beatnik sexism
10. Carl Watson = Spontaneous prose
11. Jill Rapaport = Burroughs shoots Joan
12. Christian X. Hunter & Wanda Phipps = Interview with Hettie Jones
13. Dave Mandl = Beat music, bongos etc.
14. Michael Randall = Beat video
15. bart plantenga = *Weekly World News* on the Beats
16. Patricia Landrum = Token Beat poem
17. Liza Bear = Beats effect on England
18. Michael Carter = The Corso Beat
19. Matty Jankowski & Ralph Ackerman = Docu-niks
20. & other UNBEATable surprises

Does anyone along this trajectory remember ridiculously minimal payment schemes. I remember winning second prize at a Nuyorican slam, losing in part because I had “played” a woman on my lap like a squeezebox – over shouts of “SEXIST!” – while she read one of my poems. I won \$5, which covered about one-quarter of my drink purchases for the evening. I also remember a reading I organized at CB’s Gallery where we’d split the door 50-50. So, 44 customers x \$5 = \$220 ÷ 2 = \$110 for the 5 poets. *Except* they’d neglected to inform us about the doorman, sound guy and bartender’s cuts. We were left with \$25 to split between the five of us ... We’re not economists, but we can do the math of indentured servitude, a system grooming writers to accept the bare bottom.

I also remember mid-90s venues like the No Bar instituting pay-to-play policies, charging bands and poets \$5 and a 2-drink minimum to perform. In a micro-macro way, did we not declaim poetic denunciations, crash-and-trash the No Bar, and cause some annoying disquiet there? Isn’t that legitimate proletariat protest?

As Vitale notes, these events, despite ourselves, were exhilarating and validating – words DO sometimes have effect. Maybe not seismic but at least there were quivers of media rumblings.

The first Brooklyn Bridge Reading [1993–2001] was, for me, our most-holy trippindicular-wowsome spectacle, weaving geography, panorama, vision, insanity, and architecture into wordsmithery.



Imagine 43 writers spanning the Bridge, converting into temporary autonomy that which is said to be owned by the City, merchandisers, and tourists. We were heard and seen declaiming, serenading, ululating and yelling poetic words during afternoon rush hour, assuming bardly bedlamite poses, bellowing to heroically slay automotive cacophonies. I opted for haiku flashcards and a Bazooka Joe look as my voice undoubtedly would have been swallowed by the

Bridge's "long, tired sounds, fog-insulated noises" [Hart Crane].

The paradox of our tenuous balance of, on the one hand, self-denigration where we beat culture to the punch and occupy our own disparagement, and, on the other, the temptation to believe our own hype is best illustrated by our very own spook-in-our-midst moment.

Henry, looking like your normal wan desk jockey, showed up at the Shandon Star from some point unknown, maybe Europe – the stories were vague. He had heard about us, attended some events, NOT a journalist or writer – just a fan, delighted by our buffoonery including cringe-worthy jokes and throwing paper wads and empty beer cans. Or so the yarn was woven. He also fondly quoted the mischievous Marxist, Norman O. Brown – "Meaning is not in things but in between them" – in our midst and nothing works better on Unbearables than flattery [of whatever authenticity], a better elixir than both beer or sexual favors. Yes, his flattery turned us into happy puppies on our backs having our bellies rubbed. But then he began asking questions and more questions and suddenly it was one too many.

You could feel the pride welling up inside us pressing up against the organs that produce doubt, self-loathing and shame.

He homed in on politics, details of our lives, future events, and most specifically, the work and life of Hakim Bey. The questions dug deeper and deeper until one day I asked Feast and Kolm if they thought he might be an infiltrator, a mole from some 3-letter acronymed federal surveillance agency.

No – ridiculous [self-deprecating laughter]. Are we *worthy* of official paranoia? It was that classic serious/ridiculous split – that amorphous, undefined quality – that we were always interrogating.

Yes – his line of questioning DID indeed arouse suspicion and discomfort – maybe we *were* worthy of shadowing. We should consider the possibility, I suggested. But eventually he wafted off into

some indeterminate amnesia, leaving us on our tightrope until this very day suspended between humility and hubris – you balance them and you gain Feng Shui of the soul.

And in the new Millennium? The Unbearables, who do not exist and have already died a thousand deaths, still manage to periodically overcome that state of being not enough remembered to even be forgotten – news today is cat litter tomorrow. They still produce periodic memorable events like the publication of their sixth anthology, [\*The Unbearables, From Somewhere to Nowhere: The End of the American Dream\*](#) [Autonomedia, 2017]. Not to disprove our demise but to show that we have become attractive self-enamored avatars of ourselves, hovering over society like a cloud of horseflies over a cow plop, periodically rebooting culture, surviving on feces, rumor, suspicion, like mosses surviving on thin air.

The Unbearables remind me of the old *Laugh-In* TV comedy program, especially the set – it's all quiet when suddenly a door pops open on the [Joke Wall](#) and Goldie Hawn guffawingly announces:



The 2 Jims: Fleming & Feast

"The spectacle is the guardian of sleep – or is it sheep?" Meanwhile, Henry Gibson reads glibly: "Poetry Prize: Every commodity fights for its own rise, cannot acknowledge others' pies, stomps around like it's the only wise guy – like our troops in My Lai."

Dedicated to [Autonomedia](#) rascal, [Jim Fleming](#), publisher of so many of our books and anthologies.

### Selected references

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