

A CONVERSATION WITH DAVID MELTZER

by Steven Gray

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SG: Hello David.

Meltzer: Hello.

SG: Can you hear me OK?

Meltzer: Let me get out of this particular space. Hold on, I'm hobbling. This is what I do.

SG: No problem.

Meltzer: I'm going outside.

SG: Is the sun out?

Meltzer: It's out, but it's having to work hard through gloomy clouds. Can you hear me?

SG: Yes I can. I've got you on speaker-phone and I have a little tape recorder here.

Meltzer: Ok.

SG: I picked up your book this morning at City Lights [*TWO-WAY MIRROR - A Poetry Notebook*]. I read most of it and I've been taking notes. I may run a few questions by you based on things I read in your book.

Meltzer: Alright. That seems fair enough.

SG: First, you originally published it in 1977.

Meltzer: 1977, yes. This is the new improved, amended edition.

SG: What were you doing back in '77?

Meltzer: Let me think. (laughs)

SG: I know, it was a while ago.

Meltzer: '77. I'm trying to think when I started teaching at New College when they began their poetics program. I'm bad with some dates and that's one of them. I was also teaching in a men's prison.

SG: Which one?

Meltzer: Vacaville, for about three years or more. Then Reagan, the governor then, started cutting back on any kind of education and so forth in the prison system.

SG: I remember that.

Meltzer: They began what they call double celling, with more than one person in a cell, then two or three and so on. It was difficult to maintain a program because you had to get funding from the Dept. of Corrections. It was the new austerity that Reagan brought in for social services.

SG: Reagan was a disaster for California. I was here then.

Meltzer: Yes, and then he took it further as he became president with his magic touch.

SG: Our "acting" president.

Meltzer: Yeah. Let me see. That was around the time we had three kids, who were young then. Now they're older.

SG: In '77, I was in North Beach. I knew Gregory Corso from the year before. I met him in Paris because of Nanos Valaoritis.

Meltzer: Oh yes.

SG: My professor at SF State, the Greek surrealist poet.

Meltzer: I know Nanos. He used to come to New College. The crediting agency sent people into the classes. I knew him earlier too from mutual friends in the literary community. Lovely man.

SG: He's still around, living in Greece.

Meltzer: I know he is, I recently heard from someone who had seen him. He is quite old.

SG: In his 90's.

Meltzer: Yeah. I gather he's still high-spirited.

SG: Yes he is.

Meltzer: That's reassuring you know.

SG: Ferlinghetti just turned 96 I believe.

Meltzer: It's hard to believe because when you hang out with him... He's handicapped now with vision problems and his mobility is limited. He was a big walker and bike rider and so forth. But yeah, this is hopeful for geezer poets.

SG: I've been wondering what it is about some of the older Beat writers, they just continue. I mean Gary Snyder is still with us.

Meltzer: Gary, that's right. He's getting kind frail. McClure had a fall recently. He's in his 80's.

SG: Diane di Prima.

Meltzer: Joanne Kyger turned 80. I don't know what you call them now. The Beat old folks. (laughing)

SG: Well you were doing something right. It's partly the mentality, and the meditation that many people did.

Meltzer: That's true. Gary and Joanne have been at it for decades now. Joanne is sort of like the Buddha of Bolinas. She is very much alert, alive, generous and sharp.

SG: Yes, she has a book out [*On Time*]. The sad thing for Beat writers like Gregory and Bob Kaufman is that they didn't last as long because they were drinking so much. Drugs and booze.

Meltzer: Right. They were trying to get out, I guess. I don't know. I knew Kaufman better than Corso, but I knew him when he was in North Beach in

the 50's before immigrating with his family to New York City. Then later, when they returned. I admired him despite himself. He cut through the grease.

SG: That's a phrase in your book that I like. You are all for intelligence and education, expanding the mind for doing what you said, cutting through the grease and writing better.

Meltzer: Yes.

SG: Some poets I've found are a bit anti-intellectual.

Meltzer: It was a complaint against the Beats often, but obviously that's not true. You wouldn't call Allen an anti-intellectual. Or someone like Robert Duncan, I wouldn't call him anti-intellectual at all. Forerunners like Rexroth were amazingly wide-read and thoughtful and political. Engaged I guess is the proper word. The world of literature, of U.S. politics and so forth.

SG: Is that a lost art these days? Do we still have that sort of mentality?

Meltzer: It's a different kind of mentality. I remember talking with Robert... and Rexroth was like that. They were huge readers, constantly, in all areas. To listen to people like that with incredibly expansive minds and continually making connections. Listening to them talk was a workout and a revelation.

SG: You had known Rexroth?

Meltzer: Yes. You should check out a book I did called *SF Beat: Talking With The Poets*. City Lights published it many years ago, and Rexroth is one of the subjects. Joanne [Kyger], Gary [Snyder]... you know the history has been simplified. They were engaged people, devoted to poetry, but also devoted to being in the world.

SG: I sometimes wonder about the arbitrary category of "Beat poet." They were quite different.

Meltzer: They were. So many arts are like resistance movements... but people tend to want things neatly entrapped.

SG: In your book you talk about the poem on the page. I was curious about that. Back in the 70s I was doing readings here in San Francisco at

Minnie's Can-Do Bar in the Fillmore - ruth weiss was running the reading - and the Old Spaghetti Factory [in North Beach].

Meltzer: Oh yes.

SG: An older poet came up to me afterwards and said you were out-acted but you weren't out-written.

Meltzer: Ha ha.

SG: You know what I mean? After a while I got away from the spoken word aspect. It took me years to come back to live performance. What do you think about the spoken word as live performance, is that important to a poem or not so much?

Meltzer: Oh of course it is. There is the silence of the page, and then hearing poets read or perform. I was in Brooklyn in 1957 when the long-playing record came out. First it was the 10-inch and then the 12-inch one. I remember getting a 12-inch LP called The Pleasure Dome, an anthology of poets, primarily American poets, with some exceptions, reading their poems and I remember listening to all kinds of interesting voices. From Marianne Moore to Ogden Nash, from T.S. Eliot to [William Carlos] Williams. Hearing the voice was quite an experience. The track that totally unwove my argyles was by Dylan Thomas. I couldn't believe what I was hearing. I didn't understand it, but his projection, his performance style, was a sonic revelation. Other poets - T.S. Eliot sounded like I thought he should. Williams was kind of disappointing. I don't know if that was post-stroke for him, sort of monotonous. I knew the poems he was reading. Poetry begins in the oral performance, and then with Gutenberg's device it became more and more removed from the air to the page. Then reading poetry became reading poetry, but not hearing it. One of the great things that people like Ginsberg did was the performance of poetry. Poetry in a language that was more charged, steeped in America, like Williams did, that distinctive break from trying to be Shelley or something like that in those forms, going into his own voice. It's interesting when you talk about poetry on the page... its a conundrum.

SG: I know what you mean.

Meltzer: Performance poetry, like hip hop, is a return to the oral tradition, the performative aspect of poetry in a community, it takes on a ritual aspect. So my ears are open. Like all poetic forms it has excess and cliches and so

forth, but its intention is direct communication through the use of voice. It's a form of singing almost. And you know we start out with lullabies.

SG: I notice you say in the book that songwriters are not poets.

Meltzer: Yeah, that's what I thought at the time. Even someone like Dylan, quite wonderful, like a lot of songwriters on the page it's not the same thing as hearing it. Musical arrangements and all that create their own unique experience or perception.

SG: It's often a letdown, the song lyrics on the page.

Meltzer: Yes. Dylan calls himself a songwriter, a song and dance man, and all of that. But I really appreciate the song lyric. I'm thinking of what they call the Great American Songbook, with lyrics written by Ira Gershwin, Cole Porter. Those things on the page, on their own, you don't need the voice, the band, the effects. Listening to the record or CD, what is it now, everything becomes more disassociated with new electronic outlets. The technology of printing changed the role of the song for generations. By the time the so-called Beat phenomenon happened, poetry had become American poetry. You have to make a distinction. There is American poetry and there is European, Latin American, African. In so many of those poets' work they are talking about "we", whereas Americans are talking about "me".

SG: You say African poets are less concerned with their inner nature or individuality in the way that poets in the United States are.

Meltzer: They are more community based. The vehicle for history... it reaffirms the unity of a group, it gives them something to internalize. It gives them a sense of distinction and difference.

SG: I wonder if that makes them less neurotic.

Meltzer: Well, it probably does. I'm not a shrink (laughing). It gives them a sense of certainty to assert ... their own specialness. Later on we're talking about 20th century European and African, Latin American, their approach is much different than the American style, until the advent of this resistance movement called Beat. "Howl" and Corso's poems take a bigger view of the reality of the world they are concerned with, resisting or embracing. I think that's why Ferlinghetti's work maintained its accessibility and popularity. He is a very sophisticated poet, but he

chooses to put it more in plain speech. Therefore it's more understood, not just by poetry fans and groupies.

SG: Going along with that, there was a section you had about grounding and grinding... where the poetic process is like grinding a lens. The language needs to be polished, edited. It sounds like you're all for that.

Meltzer: The nature of the muse to be grounded or to be in and looking out, or looking in because it is a vital component of realizing your work.

SG: Was it Ginsberg who said "First thought, best thought"?

Meltzer: Hold on a second (talking with Julie Rogers, his wife). She's getting me a pen. It's very useful. (pause)... I'm 78.

SG: Congratulations. I'm 62. I'm catching up to you.

Meltzer: You'll never catch up. (laughing)

SG: Are you still a musician? I know you were for quite a while.

Meltzer: I can't anymore because of arthritis. When you're playing what you hear, everything is working... to press down on the strings, guitar, keyboards.

SG: I play guitar.

Meltzer: What kind of guitar do you have?

SG: A steel-string acoustic-electric Takamine. I can plug it in or play acoustic. I often accompany poets.

Meltzer: You do? That's good. That's always an interesting dialogue when it works. It requires listening.

SG: Yes it does, for both parties.

Meltzer: Absolutely. It's a dialogue.

SG: I've done that now for a number of years. At the SF International Poetry Festival a few years ago I met an Egyptian poet, someone I didn't know existed an hour before [Yahia Lababidi]. We were onstage and I was

backing him up. He is from Cairo. It tells you the things we have in common with people that you wouldn't believe.

Meltzer: Oh no I believe it. I'm a believer. Wasn't that a Monkees' song?

SG: I think it was. You have a good memory.

Meltzer: Not that I watched the Monkees that much.

SG: I hope not.

Meltzer: That would be uncool. (laughing)

SG: They were kind of an artificial band.

Meltzer: They were. One of them, Mike Nesmith, was genuinely talented and went on as a solo artist to do a lot of interesting work. These are obscure facts like splinters that lodge in your mushy brain.

SG: I get that all the time. I wonder as writers if our memories are more acute or developed than other people because we're always trying to remember something.

Meltzer: I think so. When we open up the channels... it is a tragedy when poets get dementia or Alzheimer's, they lose that. It's important, because memory is the accumulation of being and it's layered. The older you get the more layers of memory you have. It's archeological.

SG: That's a good point.

Meltzer: It's like going on an archeological dig, so many decades after the fact. Then you locate it. It's surprising how much you remember.

SG: I know when I write and I'm trying to remember a conversation from two weeks or a week ago, and when you do that constantly you are exercising that memory muscle.

Meltzer: I'm sure there are technical terms for this, neuro something. Neuro mirrors. That's why in the oral tradition memory is so important and being able to deliver the old and new news was vital to people.

SG: To be telling things that one experienced as an individual, and to get around the mass media interpretation of history.

Meltzer: That's right. I don't want to sound like the codger that I probably am, but there is TMI which goes by quickly and is instantly replaced with something else. Data deluge. Did you hear anything on the radio, yeah, but I can't pinpoint it.

SG: It's scary, that process. Do you remember in the Bush administration, they had a concept called "the end of history", that this was the end of history?

Meltzer: That was a Japanese-American, Fukuyama, who wrote a book. Yes I do. I don't remember the concept, nobody asked me (laughing)... poets are great rememberers.

SG: Yes. And more and more that is not what the system wants.

Meltzer: You got that right. That's why there is so much information so you can forget while you're constantly staring into blinking lights... and they always change... grumble grumble.

SG: That's a good observation. It reminds me of when there is a big scandal in Washington and the president says, let's move on, let's not look back on that. Wait a minute. We're not stuck on a train. We can stop.

Meltzer: That's right. Stop and contemplate and try to get more information to give you more of a balanced insight towards what wasn't said.

SG: Yes.

Meltzer: But don't get me started. (laughing)

SG: I like the concept of "the long now."

Meltzer: What irritates me is the increasing inability for folks to contextualize things. It's not just one thing, it's a series of things simultaneously, a texture, of movement and events. So often when people write about the Beat movement, they don't get all of it because they don't bother with what a particular time is all about. It becomes this halcyon day with cliches of bongos, shades, Maynard G. Krebs... (laughing)... I wrote a work called *Beat Thing* which deals with that period, trying to put layers and layers of context. It didn't just land from above and was suddenly there. It was there for a reason, like everything is.

SG: You mention the cliches, the Maynard G. Krebs aspect, the trivializing...

Meltzer: It's very interesting with mass media, whenever there is an obvious resistance movement going on, the first thing you do is DE-FANG it and make it comical. When the Black Power movement was going on, the media tried to make it one-dimensional so it would be easy to take. The critique gets totally erased and all you have are these guys with tommy guns and afros looking cool and menacing. It is reiterating the racist implications that never left the U.S. and keep re-emerging in the same old way.

SG: I remember when I was in high school in LA in the late 60's, and the principal of our high school said we couldn't have long hair because it would remind people of Charles Manson.

Meltzer: Oh my god. What high school did you go to?

SG: Carson High. I did not like it. My father moved us there when I was 15.

Meltzer: Where are you from?

SG: California. I was born on the coast. We moved all over the country for a few years and ended up back in the San Joaquin Valley for a few years. And then LA. I've been in San Francisco since the early 70's.

Meltzer: You're a San Franciscan now.

SG: I think by this time. Rent control is a wonderful thing.

Meltzer: I went from the east coast to the west coast. I went to Fairfax High School.

SG: That has quite a reputation doesn't it?

Meltzer: In my memory bank it does. I was there in the early 60's. There were the residual effects of the cold war, so many of the students were kids of immigrants or first generation immigrants. They were often very left and I remember hootenannies, the songs... (laughing) I was raised in Brooklyn in a similar culture. Radicalism, utopian schemes and dreams.

SG: Speaking of that, there was a socialist movement in the early part of the 20th century in this country.

Meltzer: Sure was. Norman Thomas ran for president many times.

SG: Some of them were farmers in the Midwest.

Meltzer: That's right.

SG: Even to this day, North Dakota is the only state with a publicly-run bank.

Meltzer: That may very well be. That's a residue of that period. You should read, if you haven't read it, *A People's History of the United States* by Howard Zinn.

SG: I need to read more of that. I know it's good.

Meltzer: It fills you in on context. It's not just a heroic history of the winners, but an equally heroic history of the dreamers, resisters, and so forth. It's an important book, what with the mythography you get in school and which is reinforced in the media. There are other equally involving movements and thoughts and desires, so... I'm growing old... that's where memory sometimes can be very frustrating.

SG: Is it?

Meltzer: Yeah. I sort of sparked up when Occupy happened, and sparked down when it didn't happen. But even with the limited media time space it had some kind of impact on how people think.

SG: That's an important point you bring up, as we move on and get older and see things and are conscious of what's going on around us, at some point it can get a little depressing.

Meltzer: A little? (laughing)

SG: I was trying to be tactful. I know what you're saying and I wonder how people get through it. Especially if one has been around for 60, 70, 80 years. I look at my father, he's 87.

Meltzer: Good.

SG: He still plays 18 holes of golf.

Meltzer: That's good too. Good physical therapy.

SG: He never drank or smoked anything. What gets me, he has seen the Depression, World War II, the Korean war, the Vietnam war...

Meltzer: All the wars... continual war, the motivations of power... now the Middle Eastern wars.

SG: You remember the wonderful Dick Cheney. He actually said that we should get used to the idea of perpetual war.

Meltzer: He would say that. It's so like him. He's right out of Central Casting, with that constant curled upper lip, and yet he's like a demi-god of power.

SG: Unfortunately.

Meltzer: All of us let it happen in some way. I mean the 60's, it broke down, and everyone went back to school and became what they were resisting. It's a familiar story. Radical writers as they grew older turned to the right. I'm thinking, for instance, of John Dos Passos. *USA* was a marvelous book in the 30's.

SG: I heard a while back that John Steinbeck supported the war in Vietnam.

Meltzer: He probably did.

SG: That surprised me.

[Pause... talking to a friend..."Bless your heart..."]

Meltzer: My neighbor. We're in a two-floor apartment. That's our downstairs neighbor, he's involved with rare junk and antiques and things like that. He gave me an article on Les Paul's Les Paul, the Black Beauty it was called, selling at auction.

SG: Oh man, really?

Meltzer: He paid \$300,000 and it went to the guy who owns the Colts, who's a collector. Musicians can't afford it, but the collectors put it in glass cases and display it.

SG: They can't play guitar.

Meltzer: That's right. That strange lust for... they can afford it. \$300,000 - that would tide me over for a while.

SG: They're making a fetish out of that guitar.

Meltzer: It was the first solid-body electric guitar. Paul invented it among other things by the way, like multi-tracking. He certainly is an interesting American creator.

SG: Definitely. I used to play a copy of a Les Paul that a friend of mine had years ago, a flame top. It had the most beautiful sound.

Meltzer: Yeah, that's because of how he wired the pickups. He had a hollow body guitar, then decided to put the pickups in the guitar body. Like the Gibson ES 330... suddenly the sound changed and you could do more with it. You could sustain the notes, all of those things. I used to have a black Les Paul when I was in bands. It was great but it was heavy.

SG: I know what you mean.

Meltzer: You would do a gig, 3 or 4 hours, when you got offstage your shoulders were hurting. While you're onstage it's great because something happens when you're making music. But when you stop, the body suddenly cries foul.

SG: I've played guitars like that and you're right, they're heavy.

Meltzer: But they're great when you're playing them. You're making music and you're making it in the moment and that's always great.

SG: Do you remember a band called It's a Beautiful Day?

Meltzer: Sure I do. San Francisco band. The band I had was called Serpent Power and we recorded one album and a couple of others. It's a Beautiful Day, didn't they have a violin player?

SG: Yes they did.

Meltzer: Yeah, I remember. There were lots of interesting bands. I remember playing with a power trio, one of the only ones on the San Francisco scene. Blue Cheer.

SG: Oh, Blue Cheer. I remember them. "Summertime Blues".

Meltzer: That was it. We played with them a couple of times in Oakland. Those were the days before monitors, and these guys played the amps like Spinal Tap, they had them on 11 (laughing)... the loudest band I ever heard. The other time we played a gig at the Greek Theater. Your ears would bleed.

SG: That's kind of a power trip.

Meltzer: Well that's it. Guitar, bass and drums. They were all top volume. The lead singer and guitar player, there would be some stops in the middle of the song and it would be only his voice and he was screaming his head off and the tendons in his neck were bulging out and then bang... yeah. Oh well. The good old days.

SG: Who knows what happens with some of these people. I know a guy who used to be in Blue Cheer before they became a trio.

Meltzer: Really?

SG: Yeah, my friend Vale. He does RE/Search Publications in North Beach. They published *Modern Primitives* around 1991 and a lot of things since then. But back in the 60's he was on keyboards.

Meltzer: That's interesting. So if he left, they went to a trio.

SG: Well they kicked out a couple of guys.

Meltzer: Oh I see. What do they call it, personnel problems?

(laughing)

SG: If we're going to be a power trio, we have to get rid of these other guys.

Meltzer: That's logical, it wasn't emotional.

SG: Jimi Hendrix did okay with a trio.

Meltzer: Well he did. Blue Cheer was radical in the instrumentation for the other bands. You mentioned It's a Beautiful Day, and Jefferson Airplane, they had a whole different sound and were more associated with the Bay Area psychedelic era, but Blue Cheer, no way. Then Hendrix came a year or two later. I think he may have been in England at the time.

SG: He was. I saw him in '67.

Meltzer: Where?

SG: I was living in LA. It was in Long Beach Arena, something like that. That was when I realized that LA had something to offer.

(laughing)

Meltzer: I remember the jazz scene in LA during the 50's and 60's. The folk scene, folk rock scene. Buffalo Springfield, stuff like that. Jazz musicians had no audience, and clubs kept closing down.

SG: I used to go to the Lighthouse in Hermosa Beach.

Meltzer: I remember that, it was a frat boy place.

SG: It was good jazz.

Meltzer: There always had been. I remember that scene. All these college kids were getting shit-faced.

SG: I saw Sonny Rollins there, early 70's.

Meltzer: Oh yeah, great musician.

SG: Mose Allison.

Meltzer: Two sides of the coin. The steaming Sonny Rollins and laid-back southern Mose Allison.

SG: He was very laid back. Did you know George Herms?

Meltzer: I do. Very well.

SG: I really like his work. I wrote a poem about him. He was up here at City Lights last year.

Meltzer: I was there.

SG: That's right, I saw you there. He is still going.

Meltzer: Oh very much so. I've known him for half a century.

SG: Is that right?

Meltzer: He's something else. We're old... he's a couple years older than me.

SG: I get a little jealous of these guys who somehow found each other back then. They stood out more, or had to find someone of a similar mentality in a bleak cultural situation.

Meltzer: Don't romanticize. It's like Emily Dickinson said, "The soul selects her own society... carefully."

SG: Good quote.

Meltzer: We find each other all the time. I never worry about that. Look if we're in the arts, there's often so few to hang out with. When I was teaching I saw that. Not only to create but to hang out with others of like minds. Who were the Impressionists? Just a bunch of painters who hung out together. They had mutual sympathies for the work and for what they were up against.

SG: It's like the Surrealists. They were an odd group.

Meltzer: The Impressionists didn't know they were the Impressionists, they were just artists.

SG: How was it for you going to college and so forth? Did you do a lot of that ?

Meltzer: I was going to school during the war and post-war in Brooklyn. Back in junior high I took an IQ test and scored high. When you scored high they rushed you through so you could go to high school when you were 16. Then my folks moved to another part of New York, and the school system didn't honor that. I was put back a couple of years. Never finished high school. Then I came to LA and at Fairfax my English teacher said - I was 18 by then - you're pretty smart, you can write, why don't you take a test and see if you can get into LA City College. I took the test, but at that point I had already started meeting artists, like [Wallace] Berman, Herms, [Ed] Keinholz, and so forth. That was my school. I was always self-motivated with reading and writing, not very much arithmetic. I went to City College for a year, I worked during the day, and that didn't challenge me. Night school. I went to UCLA and lasted for a year. I had one wonderful professor, European fiction, but never finished. I was on my own at that

point. I never graduated from anything - junior high, high school, college. I have no letters after my name.

SG: Sometimes that can be a plus. Academia is known for being a graveyard for certain kinds of creativity, amongst writers.

Meltzer: Like I said, I was with my people as it were. My teachers, my mentors, were a small eccentric society in LA at that time. It exists today too, I know it does. I got my education richly, deeply and fully with artists and eccentrics. You really need the eccentric.

SG: I think you do. I don't want to romanticize back then, but maybe there was less of the mass media.

Meltzer: That's true. But there was television. Before television there was radio which was much more of an interactive thing. Television began the process of pacification, the passivity of just watching. Watching like you're shopping. By the time the computer became ubiquitous everything shifted again. Also biochemically in terms of contemplation, things like that. That's a McLuhanesque thing where each technology not only changes society but the human being, the experience of being human.

SG: It does. For better or worse.

Meltzer: A dichotomy... you have to figure out a way through the middle path.

SG: That reminds me of something I learned from a Tibetan Buddhist man who had a rug shop in my neighborhood. I live near Russian Hill. I would drop in once in a while. I was curious, because he was in exile. His country had been devastated by China as you know. As a Buddhist, it's not like he gave up the fight, but he didn't let it get to him. He maintained his inner equilibrium.

Meltzer: That's right. It's difficult to do in lots of circumstances. We over-react to things and then lose our balance. Where was the shop?

SG: On Polk Street near Broadway, in that area. I love the rugs from Tibet. I have an old rug from Afghanistan and the woven pattern is helicopters, machine guns, and hand grenades.

Meltzer: Oh my god.

SG: It's when the Soviets were fighting in Afghanistan.

Meltzer: Yes. That sounds very wild and surreal.

SG: It reminded me of the line about beating swords into plowshares.

Meltzer: Aha. (laughing)

SG: Turning weapons into rugs.

Meltzer: There is a desire to tell. That's a strong impulse in all of us. The survivors have to remember.

SG: I think for writers, and for most people, sometimes the best revenge, or the only revenge, is to observe, to be a witness.

Meltzer: And to write.

SG: Write it down.

Meltzer: Yeah. I was thinking of Steinbeck, his drift to the right. His son wrote something, he may have been in that war. I don't know. Steinbeck... we have to be grateful for what he did do.

SG: Oh yes. The whole arc of a person's life. You don't know where it's going to end up. I think Saul Bellow became conservative.

Meltzer: Him and Alan Bloom were buddies. And Bloom was a conservative educator who wrote a best-seller about the closing of the American mind which the conservatives creamed over.

SG: I remember that. The more I learn, getting older with experience and reading and so forth, the less likely I am to be conservative because I know more about how the system works. I know more about who is pulling the strings and the power structure.

Meltzer: That is so important.

SG: I know more about economics and how wars are started, how arbitrary the wars are most of the time.

Meltzer: And how inhumanly enacted. To keep realizing after so many decades that it's about real estate, resources and profit.

SG: That to me is not a conservative perspective. The older I get, to know those things, how could I be conservative?

Meltzer: It becomes a blindfold and that's what happens with a lot of left and right thinking.

SG: I think you're right. But you can find that certainty elsewhere. You can find it in nature for example.

Meltzer: Yes.

SG: If you're looking for constancy. I find it in rent control. (laughing) I was going to ask you one more question, then I'll let you go.

Meltzer: Ask me about the meaning of life.

SG: No, I'll leave that for later. I need a glass of wine for that anyway.

Meltzer: That's cool. Me too.

SG: Both of us.

Meltzer: A couple.

SG: You have a quote from Walt Whitman in your book. It says, "What is marvelous? what is unlikely? what is impossible or baseless or vague? after you have once just opened the space of a peach-pit and given audience to far and near and to the sunset and had all things enter with electric swiftness softly and duly without confusion or jostling or jam." That is a fascinating quote. It reminded me of the early 70's when I took psychedelic mushrooms...

Meltzer: Hold on a second, I have a call. It might be Julie.

SG: Ok.

Meltzer: No, Kaiser announcing one of my appointments. Back to Walt.

SG: I was in Hermosa Beach and walking along the beach on mushrooms. I was supposed to meet a girl, but an ex-Mexican revolutionary stopped me. He had turned into a Jesus freak. This was after they shot all those students in Mexico in '68. We had a discussion about religion and politics. By the

time we finished the girl was gone. I went to my old bread truck with a candle in back. I slowly tore apart a grapefruit by candlelight.

Meltzer: Ah. On mushrooms.

SG: Maybe you know what I'm talking about, that feeling. This quote reminded me of that.

Meltzer: I don't know if Walt took shrooms, but he was a natural psychedelic high. Whitman and his complete opposite, Emily Dickinson, were the foundation of what you could call American poetry. One was very extroverted and materialistic and spiritualistic and the other withdrawn, etc. Around that time American poets were still kowtowing to Mother Europe and England and the poetry reflected that. But Dickinson and Whitman laid the foundation for all that was to come. You can see Ginsberg in Walt. You can see someone like Robert Creeley in Dickinson.

SG: I never connected him to her, but I see your point. Short lines...

Meltzer: Very contracted and, of course, much different. He had a fully grown American speech, where she had Dickinson speech, unique in its mystery, in what was withheld. It was like haiku. It sneaks up on you. Whitman...

SG: His line about the peach pit, there is a certain pantheism to it.

Meltzer: Yes. Whitman was kind of broken-hearted. He wanted to be an American poet for all. His 1855 first edition of *Leaves of Grass* which was maybe 60 pages came literally out of nowhere. Whitman worked on newspapers and wrote traditional verse, and all of a sudden this work comes out which was like no other work in American literary history.

SG: When you read it now - if you look at other writing of that period, it's almost unreadable. The poetry is boring to me, stilted.

Meltzer: That was poetry with a capital P. Walt put it down to a small "p".

SG: The voice is modern. Half of that is just being clear and honest.

Meltzer: That's right. It could be spiritual, at the same time materialistic. His constant lists of things. It's interesting, which is a dumb word, what great poets do - they give you permission. Permission to do your work. You can read Whitman and it can get to you. It validates you, your sensibility, your sensitivity, your creative spirit.

- SG: That's a good way to look at it. It's like an energizer.
- Meltzer: It's an energizer bunny. (laughing) Keeps ticking, takes a licking and keeps on kicking.
- SG: Linguistic batteries. They can charge up anyone who comes in and reads it.
- Meltzer: It's important to get Whitman contextualized. There is a terrific work by David Reynolds called *Walt Whitman's America* [1996] which is a deep and valuable cultural history of Walt and his time and the things that attracted him, the things that he believed in. And he, along with American poets like Emerson and Thoreau, were the first recipients of new translations from Germany of Asian material, Chinese, that was translated into European languages, and believe me they got something from that. Transcendentalism owed something to the new translations of Asian work.
- SG: Emerson was reading that?
- Meltzer: Yes. Reading and taking it to heart. Because this is another way of seeing and being in the world.
- SG: I like knowing how these remote connections are made.
- Meltzer: That's really important. That's what I mean about context. Whitman didn't just emerge from space... he was as much a part of his time as we all are. These things were coming into American consciousness, these alternative therapies, phrenology, homeopathy, all these things were entering into the zeitgeist.
- SG: It reminds me of someone who wrote a book a while back about Jesus, and how between the ages of 18 and 30 he may have gone to India.
- Meltzer: This is possible as well. To try and get to the actual Jesus is difficult. Scholars are working hard on that, the actuality of the person. There are spiritual traditions of people who journey to the East.
- SG: There you go. It's plausible because he lived close to one of the trade routes, camel caravans, going back and forth between India and Palestine.

Meltzer: It's absolutely possible. And why not? When you read some of the Gnostic material, it has Eastern kinds of resonance. I remember the Dead Sea scrolls and Gnostic gospels were found around 1956 or so... in the turbulent postwar era. It became a new fascination... starting from the end of the 19th century and into the 20th. I remember reading about D.T. Suzuki, the Zen scholar who came to New York and taught at NYU or Columbia and attracted composers like John Cage, artists and eccentrics, because it offered an alternative way of being in the world.

SG: To get away from certain aspects of Christianity.

Meltzer: Christianity and the seeming erasure of Western civilization in the act of war, where you have the atomic bomb and you have the Holocaust. All of Western thinking was contradicted by these events that were done by thinking humans, sentient beings.

SG: Yes, exactly. I studied World War I and it's the same thing. The more you understand about World War I the less respect you have for the people involved. The Europeans were committing suicide, basically.

Meltzer: Well we did too. To this day many people can't tell you what it was actually all about. There is literature on it, but it's very elusive. After World War I you have extreme resistance movements like DADA, which wanted to do away with Western art in a sense, the war having betrayed the high values. The mystery... we're constantly trying to solve it or unpack it, make sense of it. Also the technology - it was the same thing in the Civil War, Whitman's Civil War. You had photography and could send pictures to the newspapers. This was already shaping information for people. And electricity. These technologies are partners with the human transformation, they are often allies and enemies. Machines, airplanes in World War I. Mustard gas, chemical warfare, all of these things. And yet they were still doing war like in days of yore. They would go out in a field outside of cities and there would be this huge shock when soldiers would go on leave back to London or Paris, as if nothing had happened. Then back to the trenches... with the new methodologies. Don't get me started...

SG: This has been a wonderful talk. I should probably let you go now. I've taken an hour and a half of your time.

Meltzer: You're suggesting it's time for my nap. (laughing)

SG: No. Maybe mine. I will see you on Wednesday at City Lights. And you're going on a tour, is that right?

Meltzer: A week or so after - to Ashland and Victoria, Washington. Julie and I, a couple of readings. Talks from the book. We're getting some of our output back, but poets don't make much money.

SG: I noticed that.

Meltzer: Poets and jazz musicians have a lot in common. For what they give, they don't get justifiable recompense. The readings, hanging out, when it's over it's like someone plugged the plug out.

SG: Very quiet all of a sudden.

Meltzer: Well you know as a performer, whether you're doing music or reading, you're on it and later you just want to crawl under the blankets and dream of paradise.

SG: The rock stars used to tear up their hotel rooms after a show.

Meltzer: That's right. I see pictures of the Stones, wow that's scary. (laughing). I mean Keith Richards... all of them, they don't need the money.

SG: I wonder if they get stuck in long-term contracts somehow, like they're obligated?

Meltzer: I don't think so. Jagger studied at the London School of Economics. I don't know them personally, but they have endured.

SG: You know Keith Richards had his blood changed a few times.

Meltzer: I remember that, because of his heroin addiction.

SG: That might have helped. He's like a vampire in that way.

Meltzer: He is. Did you read his autobiography?

SG: I want to, I read a little. Have you?

Meltzer: You should. For a guy who seemed out of it, he was very aware of what was going on, and he talks about music making. He's a musician at heart, not just a guy who specialized in debauchery. That just came with the territory. And Charlie Watts, the drummer, he came out of jazz.

SG: He is a jazz drummer, yes.

Meltzer: A good musician and he always looks bored. (laughing)

SG: He's just going along with it, but it's not his favorite thing.

Meltzer: Well he's getting the money. Like I said, these guys don't need the money so I wonder if there is a deeper desire to keep performing, as if that an anti-aging substance.

SG: I'm sure it is. Look at Bob Dylan. He's been on the road for decades.

Meltzer: He has been. I only have one complaint about Bobby. Get rid of that mustache. (laughing)

SG: I think he likes to think of himself as a riverboat gambler, a bit of a conman.

Meltzer: I remember meeting him when he did his first concert in the Bay Area.

SG: Oh yeah, really?

Meltzer: Yeah. I was in touch with him earlier. Being a neo-folkie I heard his first two albums and wrote him a letter and sent him a couple of my books. I remember distinctly when he came to town. My friend, another folk guy, Dino Valenti - who wound up working with Quicksilver...

SG: Great band.

Meltzer: Yeah. But at the time his tragedy was over "Let's Get Together" - he turned the royalties over to his agent because he got busted for pot, so he never saw the money the song kept generating. Anyway, we went to a motel off Van Ness Ave., a grungy motel, and he said I want you to meet Dylan, he's a friend of mine and he's pretty interesting. We get there, Dylan is sitting on the edge of the bed with take-out cartons on the floor and Dino says this is David Meltzer the guitarist, and Bob looks up and says, "Yeah, so?" (laughing). Then it dawns on him, "David Meltzer, you're a poet aren't you?" I said "Yes, that's right, I sent you some poems." Dino was surprised, he didn't know about this dual life, running hootenannies at the gallery, and so we talked. Later on, after the concert a bunch of us went to an apartment in the Fillmore area and he sang Masters of Deception, or Destruction...

SG: "Masters of War."

Meltzer: Yeah. He had just written it. I said "Wow that's a great song, you songwriters really have it." And he looked at me very serious and said, "Oh no, you poets have it."

SG: No kidding.

Meltzer: Yeah. That was a good memory.

SG: That's fortunate you were able to do that.

Meltzer: Yeah. That was a peripheral anecdote.

SG: Have you written a lot of this down somewhere, these anecdotes and memories?

Meltzer: No. I did write something which is going to be published, from 1965. I was writing about the transistor radio culture. It was a terrific period, we were hearing all kinds of music. The corporations hadn't bought up the stations, with a universal playlist. I have sections on Chuck Berry, the Beach Boys... the song publishing companies found out and wanted all this money. Nobody had any, so the book stayed in galleys. The second part of the book was about being in the music scene at that time. Folk-rock was turning into psychedelic. One of these days, it will happen.

SG: You have a lot of material it sounds like.

Meltzer: Well I'm old! (laughing)

SG: I try to tell my wife that, I've got papers all over the apartment.

Meltzer: I can dig it.

SG: She says it's too much clutter. I say it's literature, what am I supposed to do?

Meltzer: Fire...

SG: I had a fire here about 20 years ago.

Meltzer: ... the survivors of the Beat thing...

SG: We should respect their stories and write them down. There are younger generations and they don't know much about this.

Meltzer: They don't know their own history. When I was teaching at New College, a graduate program on poetics, each successive year they knew less and less. They were there to get the degree, an MFA, that was it. Everyone had their manuscript and would get their sheepskin. I was surprised, they weren't curious, they didn't want to know about the past and the fact they were part of a line, a history. It was the ahistorical nature of people I would confront. McClure said something when he was teaching at the California College of Arts. He taught some sort of McClureish course for years and years. But he said, "I can't do it anymore, the students don't know anything and they don't seem interested in it. They're not well read, and often they don't know what I'm talking about. I'll mention names and they look blankly at me." He got frustrated... but you should talk to him about it.

SG: I've had some brief conversations with him, but nothing prolonged, unfortunately. I'm friends with Jack Foley - he has a radio show on KPFA.

Meltzer: Jack and Adele were at an event at Pauline Kael's house in Berkeley which some people are trying to buy and turn into a cultural center. It has murals by Jess, Robert Duncan's life partner, a wonderful artist and collagist. Jack has an upbeat sense of the history.

SG: Oh yeah and he has written about it.

Meltzer: I like to talk to him about tap-dancing.

SG: I've always wanted taps.

Meltzer: You should talk to Jack.

SG: I just need to put taps on my shoes and look at a Fred Astaire movie and I've got it made.

Meltzer: Then you think you got it made. (laughing)

SG: What else do I need?

Meltzer: There was a movie with Gregory Hines about tapping. He had a lot of the older tap dancers from the vaudeville and stage days, it's a terrific movie. Hines died too young, very sad.

SG: How did he die?

Meltzer: It was unexpected, he wasn't that old. Hitting 60 or something like that. Immense talent, just like Savion Glover. He is still with us, experimenting with the form. I guess Jack's dad was a hooper and Jack does it too. We don't talk about poetry if we can help it.

SG: That reminds me, someone asked Gregory Corso what do you and Bob Kaufman talk about, expecting some kind of revelation. He just said, "Hi Bob... Hi Gregory... have a drink." He got me to buy the two of them screwdrivers at the Saloon at 10:30 in the morning.